



*“Fortuna”:  
neither programme nor chance in the making of images*

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"Fortuna": neither programme nor chance in the making  
of images

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## Introduction

I am an artist living and working in South Africa. I have mainly worked with static, two dimensional images, but have, over the last few years, been working on a series of short films — which I term "*drawings for projection*". Their starting point is the drawings I have been making and the film began simply as a record of these drawings coming into being (and at times disappearing). They have since become films in their own right. I will show one of these films, MINE, a five minute film made in 1991. It is the second in the chronology of the series, though the most recently completed.

## Film MINE, *Summary*

**Disclaimer.** I am not a theoretician. The observation I have to offer about the film and the origin of the images in it are made after the event, an attempt to reconstruct processes. The observations are limited, I am talking about my specific way of working and make no claim as to the general applicability of the processes I describe, although I am of course interested in the extent to which these processes are common or usual.

### Stone Age film Making

The technique I use to make these films is very primitive. Traditional animation uses thousands of different drawings filmed in succession to make the film. This generally means that a team of animators have to work on it, and flowing from this it means that the film has to be worked out fully in advance. Key images are drawn by the main animator and in between stages are completed by subordinate draughtsmen. Still other people do inking and colouring. The technique I use is to have a sheet of paper stuck up on the studio wall, and half way across the room, my camera, usually an old Bolex. A drawing is started on the paper, I walk across to the camera, shoot one or two frames, walk back to the paper, continue and change the drawing (marginally), walk back to the camera, walk back to the paper, to the camera, and so on. So that each *sequence* as opposed to each *frame* of the film is a single drawing. In all there may be twenty drawings to a film rather than the thousands one expects. It is more like making a drawing than making a film (albeit a grey, battered and rubbed about drawing). Once the film in the camera is processed, the completion of the film, editing, adding sound, music, and so on proceeds like any other.

### What the Technique allows

As I mentioned I started filming drawings as a way of recording the history of the drawings. Often I found, I find, that a drawing which starts well, or with some interest in its first impulse, becomes too cautious, too overworked, too tame, as the work progresses. (The ways in which a drawing can die on you are depressingly numerous). A film of the drawing holds each moment. And of course often as a drawing proceeds, interest shifts from what was originally central to something that initially appeared incidental. Filming enables me to follow this process of vision and revision as it happens. This erasing of charcoal, an imperfect activity, always leaves a grey smudge on the paper. So filming not only records the changes in the drawing but reveals too the history of those changes, as each erasure leaves a snail trail of what has been.

## How the film came to be what it is

The drawings are all made in charcoal. Directly because that is the medium I was using when I started filming the drawings (Though the same process can be followed, of course, with an oil painting). But the ease with which charcoal can be erased, with an eraser, with a cloth, even with a breath, makes it particularly suited to this process. And of course the rough monochromatic drawings refer back to early monochromatic movie making. I am not blind to the nostalgia inherent in this. The nature of this nostalgia, for a period in which political image making seemed so much less fraught is meat for another discussion. Here I would just note, as it refers to other points I want to make, the way in which different elements, different causes and impulses come together to make a final meaning. The contingent fact of using charcoal, the contingent fact of the imperfection of the erasure, the shakiness of the camera all produce a film which has a very specific nature, and for which I have to take responsibility, but which was not consciously, deliberately or rationally planned.

What I want to talk about now is how the film came to be just as it is, where some of the specific images come from.

When I set out to make this film, my determination was a) that it would have a woman protagonist and b) it would not involve Soho Eckstein the mine-owner in it and the central character in the other three films. I had an image of “Liberty at the Barricades”, another of a dancing woman clothed in newspapers. I was determined to have a clear storyboard before commencing on the film.

For two weeks I looked into space and brooded. I drew Liberty at the Barricades. Got nowhere and then conceded. I would allow myself to start with Soho, the war-horse from the other films. He would make a short entrance before his daughter, Liberty Eckstein, took over — In the end she did not get a look in. I had to relinquish my determination and find a gentle entrance to the film.

Which in this case is the drawing of the cross section of the earth, a geological landscape. This was the first day’s work, the landscape and the mine lift ascending the shaft. The lift ascending was done largely to feel I had a good first day’s work. I could get several seconds of screen time from that lift — which is very easy to do It is just a black square rubbed out and repeated a few millimetres higher. This I think is important. The thought was not, what is clearest, best way of showing miners getting to the surface, but rather how can I feel that the film (the making of it) is underway. (This measured in seconds acclined [?] this obsessive project makes one into a miser of frames filmed and seconds completed, — It takes the assistance of a profligate editor who abandons metres of film to the floor of the editing room to keep this tightfistedness in check.)

So there is an impurity in the impulse behind the first image. But which I think neither validate nor invalidates the image. All strategies for conjuring images can only be assessed after the event.

{The pure light of inspiration, for me, is always to be treated with caution. Things which leap out as “good ideas” are often best left at that. It is in the physical act of their coming into being, and in the form they finally achieve that they have to show their worth, and often things which start rather in the alleys and sluices of the mind, hold their own in the end. }

## Crowd

This is all by way of explanation of the opening of the film with the lift cage and the crowd emerging. This crowd merits a word. Their origin has a huge amount to do with the particular technique I use. In a film using actors one would need a huge budget, thousands of extras, helicopters, an elephantine crew and a military administration to capture the huge crowds emerging from the ground. With this charcoal technique, each person is rendered with a single

mark on the paper. As more marks are added so the crowd emerges. The crowds draw themselves. It is far easier to draw a crowd of thousands than to show a flicker of doubt passing over one person's face.

What we have here then is not a search for cheap seconds, but an openness to what the technique makes possible. Already something other than a planned story is being followed. These crowds have featured in all four films, in the others as more directly political crowds. It may be of interest to note (and here I do not know how to apportion responsibility) that these images of crowds emerged in my work in 1989, the year of the start of the political thaw in South Africa when for the first time in my memory huge political processions surged through the streets.

In *Mine* the crowds emerge as the next logical step of the black square reaching the surface of the drawing.

## Earthquake

The next thing that happens is that there is a sort of earth-quake and Soho Eckstein, the protagonist, turns over in his bed — the landscape becomes his blanket. His entry is a *deus-ex-machina* to end the sequence of the crowd emerging — how long would they emerge for, where would they go? But what this formal solution did was to set the stage for the film. Here we must distinguish between my needs as a maker of the film, and the needs of the viewer of the film, who needs riddles or answers for the story to proceed.

We now have a film with the miners on one hand, and Soho Eckstein on the other.

## Cigar smoke

At about this point — three days into the drawing of the film (and each of these films is a three or four month project) I started gathering other material for the mine sequence of the film. I still thought there would be an opening to the film — Liberty Eckstein was still waiting rather forlornly in the wings. I was uncertain how to get Soho out of his bed into his office (his usual locale in the other films). To fill the time Soho smokes his cigar. First it turned into a bell which he rings. But this was a dead end. I do use it in the film, but it does nothing to alter Soho and did not help me, in making the film to advance it.

## Caffetiere

The next thing I worked on was the caffetiere. It is not the next image in the film but the next drawing. The second half of the making of the film consists of filling out the shapes and structures that have emerged. Making linking sequences, working backwards and forwards.

The caffetiere in the film is a drawing of the caffetiere that was in my studio that morning. It could as easily have been a teapot. And it was only when the plunger was half way down, in the activity of drawing, erasing it, repositioning it a few millimetres lower each time that I saw, I knew, I realised (I cannot pin an exact word on it) that it would go through the tray, through the bed and become the mine shaft. The sensation was more of discovery than invention. There was no feeling of what a good idea I had had, rather relief at not having overlooked what was in front of me, and a sense of being really stupid not to have realised earlier what had to happen.

I am not claiming the moment or image as a particularly potent one, but what does fascinate me is to know where that image came from. It was not planned. I could not have predicted it at the start of the day. It was not an answer to a question I had posed to myself — “what is a domestic object that has affinities to a mine lift?” What was going on while I was in the kitchen preparing something to drink? Was there some part of me saying “Not the tea, there, you fool, the coffee, not espresso, the caffetiere, you daft. Trust me. I know what I'm doing.” If I'd had tea that morning would the impasse of Soho in bed have continued?

(There is a whole question of “found” images and objects, the way many artists surround themselves with images, objects, photos to act as talismans in the “finding” of images I can’t begin to talk about but which occupies some of the same field I think).

## Fortuna

To summarize so far. I have mentioned three things, the landscape with the black block of the mine lift moving through it, which we could categorise as an image of inauthentic origin, the crowd emerging, an image thrown up by the technique and the coffee plunger lift shaft, an image thrown up by incidental circumstances. Each of these images and material central to the film, at its very heart. None of them came about through a plan, a programme, a storyboard, neither obviously did they come about through sheer chance. “Fortuna” is the general term I use for this range of agencies, something other than cold statistical chance, and something too outside the range of rational control.

## Rest of the film

The rest of the film emerged fairly directly. Once I had the mine shaft there were all the images to imbed in the rock. The men trapped underground, the showers. These images, and the sleepers were first done to accompany the shaft, and only while drawing them I thought of using them twice — above ground and then in the rocks. The image of the North Atlantic slave ship was thrown up by the plan of the mine shafts. And there is the similarity between these slave diagrams and the serried ranks of people covered in West Africa granary doors. and the superficial similarity between a lamp on a miner’s helmet and the crown on Ife sculptures of kings suggested the range of things being mimed.

The provenance of all the images is not interesting. I think, I used the first few images just to show the sort of processes in use.

It is a rather arcane way of working and of course a large amount of images that throw themselves up this way have to be discarded. For me this process has emerged out of necessity. Ideas, images come so grudgingly that I need all the aids, stratagems and incantations I can find.

Some people have an ability to sit on their own and follow through a coherent line of thought on their own. They start with a vague impulse and emerge with a concrete plan. This capacity eludes me. When sitting contemplating I either go round in tight circles or slip into neutral and vegetate. An activity is essential for me. It is only when physically engaged on a drawing that ideas start to emerge. There is a combination between drawing and seeing, between making and assessing that provokes a part of my mind that otherwise is closed off.

In the sphere of words it takes a concrete act of either talking or writing for this process to happen. There are several similarities between the processes of speech and that of making images I have been describing.

First in the similarity one can detect between making a drawing which has been planned in advance, following a programme and performing a speech (rather like this one that has been written in advance). I would suggest that in ordinary conversation this way of arriving at the words spoken is rare. Only occasionally do we test a sentence in our heads before speaking. Generally, and here the process I have described and the nature of the speech get closer, there is an impulse and knowledge of the general direction we want to go in. But then there is a reliance on habit, experience and unconscious parts of the brain for a sentence to emerge that is formally connected and gets to the destination you had anticipated. One does not regard this as strange (no more than one regards as strange the tongue’s ability to manoeuvre round the mouth while talking or eating without getting torn to shreds by the teeth. It is only when one bites one’s tongue and tries to control its location that one realises how much we rely on these directing, controlling and inventive parts of the brain that are generally sealed off from us).

And allied to this process, in use all the time, in which one's brain is going backwards and forwards along the sentences, checking, getting them in line before the light of day, in which one's brain is far ahead of one's plodding consciousness, allied to this process are the occurrences when not only do thoughts emerge as grammatically saying what you intended, but in the very activity of speaking, generated by the act itself, new connections and thoughts emerge. And that, rather like the example of the coffee plunger I gave, new destinations are reached.

I think the process I have described is neither unfamiliar or surprising, but I would emphasise how central rather than occasional it is and at any rate in my way of working, and suggest too that this reliance on "fortuna" in the making of images or texts mirrors some of the ways we exist in the world even outside the realm of images and texts.