

**Theatre as Alternative Historical Narrative. A study of
three plays: *Ubu and the Truth Commission,*
*Copenhagen and Ghetto***

by

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Declaration

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Abstract

In this thesis I examine the way in which fictionalised and dramatised narratives in theatre have the potential to create significant alternative narratives that can potentially be regarded as a crucial part of history writing. This is done through a critical analysis of three historically orientated dramatic texts, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* by Jane Taylor (1998), *Copenhagen* by Michael Frayn (1998) and *Ghetto* by Joshua Sobol (1984). I investigate how these playwrights narrativised history by fictionalising and dramatising events and people of historical importance, and how each of these plays individually contributes to the debate on narrative in historiographical discourse.

Drawing on Hayden White's theory on the poetic and narrative nature of history writing, as represented by his definitive work, *Metahistory*, I explore different theories and works on the philosophy of history to determine the precise nature of narrative itself as well as the historical work. Chapter Two is therefore an exploration of White's philosophy on the 'historical imagination' as he describes his theory on the narrative and poetic nature of the historical document. In addition, this chapter provides an introduction to narrative in a theatrical text. This is done in order to examine how we can apply White's theory to investigate narrative in theatre that focuses on historical events for the purpose of possibly including the dramatic narrative in the broader discourse on narrative in history writing. In this I highlight the theatrical narrative as a specific practice of language beginning with an interlude on representation in theatre. This is applied as the basis for examining the three texts in subsequent chapters.

There are both general and more specific advantages in pursuing these arguments. Firstly, it may generate an understanding of some of the broad claims and problems bearing on the impact that literary theory is said to have on a subject which is not normally considered to fall within its domain, namely history writing. The work of Hayden White has been singled out to represent these claims, as he challenges the traditional distinction between history and literature. As a result, we are made aware of those arguments which set out to show that there are aspects of historical writing which are often ignored or

which we generally overlook. An example of such an aspect that serve as the focus of this study is the narrative in historical explanation, representing the “ineluctably poetic nature of the historical work” (White 1983:xi).

As such theatre can be an important tool in the process of constructing memory and alternative narratives, arguing that these narrativised histories could provide a “counter-memory to the dominant narrative of the official histories” (Hutchison 1999:3). The theatrical texts singled out demonstrate that these alternative narratives in the theatrical texts function as a discourse of multi-levelled stories that engage with the complexities of the society and the complexities present in the context of the plays, making a contribution to the practice of historiography itself.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention.

(Catherine Morland on history in *Northanger Abbey* by Jane Austen)

1.1 Introduction

This thesis explores the extent to which fictionalised and dramatised narratives in theatre have the potential to create significant alternative narratives that can potentially be regarded as a crucial part of history writing. This is done through a critical analysis of three historically orientated dramatic texts, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* by Jane Taylor (1998), *Copenhagen* by Michael Frayn (1998) and *Ghetto* by Joshua Sobol (1984). I aim to investigate how these playwrights narrativised history by fictionalising and dramatising events and people of historical importance, and how each of these plays individually contributes to the debate on historiographical discourse as narrative. Yvette Hutchison points out that

Memory and history are important because they define how we identify and understand ourselves, as individuals and as nations, in the present and thus in the future. This is true of individuals and nations. In this sense, how these ‘memories’ are constructed and reconstructed is crucial to who we are (1999:10).

Bearing this in mind, this thesis aims to demonstrate that theatre can be an important tool in the process of constructing memory and alternative narratives, arguing that these narrativised histories could provide a “counter-memory to the dominant narrative of the official histories” (Hutchison 1999:3). I hope to demonstrate that these alternative narratives in the theatrical texts I’ve chosen function as a discourse of multi-levelled stories that engage with the complexities of society and the complexities present in the context of the plays, making a contribution to the practice of historiography itself.

1.2 Background on Narrative

The concept of narrative clearly forms one of the focal areas of this study, and it is therefore important to start with an exploration of narrative and how it is understood. In *On Stories* Richard Kearney tells us:

“Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating. More so, in fact, for while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition *human*. This was recognised from the very beginnings of Western civilisation. Hesiod tells us how the founding myths were invented to explain how the world came to be and how we came to be in it” (Kearney 2002:3).

Gaillard and Reis go even further: “There would be no concept that is not the consequence of some mini-tale, no thought that is not in debt to narration” (1980:139). People told stories to explain themselves to themselves and to others. Aristotle came up with a philosophical slant on this when he wrote in the *Poetics* that the art of storytelling – “defined as the dramatic imitating and plotting of human action” – is what gives us a “*shareable world*” (Kearney 2002:3). Addressing issues concerning the nature of narrative therefore invites discussion on the nature of culture and, ultimately, on the very nature of the human condition.

When someone asks you to define yourself, you tell your story. So that which defines the history of the world, also defines our individual history. You tell your story constructed from memories of the past and your sense of what the future holds for you. You form a picture of your life based on where you come from and where you intend to go. Through this process of creating a beginning, middle and end for your own life story, you create a *narrative identity*. “This is what the German philosopher Dilthey called the coming-together-of-a-life, meaning the act of coordinating an existence which would otherwise be scattered over time. In this way, storytelling may be said to *humanise* time by transforming it from an impersonal passing of fragmented moments into a pattern, a plot, a *mythos*” (Kearney 2002:4).

Stories told in order to explain the self to the self and to others created myths and allowed for random events to be transported into a story and thus made *memorable* over time.

Richard Kearney explains this in *On Stories*:

This becoming historical involves a transition from the flux of events into a meaningful social or political community – what Aristotle and the Greeks called a *polis*. Without this transition from nature to narrative, from time suffered to time enacted and enunciated, it is debatable whether a merely biological life (*zoe*) could ever be considered a truly human one (*bios*). As the twentieth-century thinker Hannah Arendt argued: “The chief characteristic of the specifically human life... is that it is always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story... It is of this life, *bios*, as distinguished from mere *zoe*, that Aristotle said that it ‘somehow is a kind of action (*praxis*)’” (2002:3-4).

This mythical narrative transformed into two different genres: historical and fictional. The historical narrative used an adaptation of the traditional myth with a greater concern for the reality of the events described, thereby steering towards describing the natural instead of the supernatural. Those first historians strove to depict events in a narrative told in ‘real’ time, apparently narrating events as they actually happened. “At the level of collective humanity, it gave birth to history in the general sense, understood as the narrative recounting of empirical events (*res gestae*)” (Kearney 2002:9).

The fictional genre also branched off from the traditional mythical narrative by portraying people and events according to some idealistic view of that which is regarded as beautiful and good. This was especially evident in the romantic narrative, where rhetorical devices (such as metaphor, allegory, hyperbole) had the purpose of giving a certain fullness of meaning to the events.

What both *historical* and *fictional* narratives have in common is a *mimetic* function. From Aristotle to Auerbach, it has been recognised that this involves far more than a mere mirroring of reality. When Aristotle defines *mimesis* in his *Poetics* as the ‘imitation of an action’, he means a creative redescription of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold. As such *mimesis* is essentially tied to *mythos* taken as the transformative plotting of scattered events into a new paradigm (what Paul Ricoeur calls the “synthesis of the heterogeneous”). It has little or nothing to do with the old naturalist conviction that art simply holds a mirror up to nature (Kearney 2002:10).

Narrative therefore fits a double-bill: that of *mimesis – mythos*. This allows for the establishment of a way of inhabiting the world in a manner that essentially comes from the imagination. It is in this that we find the chance to view the world from a different perspective. And it is in this opportunity to view the world differently that we can find the possibility of *catharsis*. As the narrative imagination makes it possible for us to feel empathy for the characters in a story, it also allows a critical aesthetic distance from the ‘the hidden cause of things’ (Kearney 2002:13), thereby opening up a range of narrative possibilities and interpretations of events and characters portrayed. Therein lies the very precarious balance between feeling empathy and detachment at the same time, and this creates a kind of double vision that is crucial to see beyond the self to other ways of being.

According to Aristotle, this cathartic force belonged to the fictive and poetic narratives, claiming that they alone corresponded to some kind of ‘universal’ force of existence, not like the historical work that told specific facts. In his book *On Stories* Kearney proposes some kind of “interweaving” between fiction and history (2002:13). One of his main preoccupations in the book is to explore various examples of such interweaving, and to unravel some of the more intriguing enigmas which result, such as alternative narratives created by an aesthetic treatment of the past in for example theatre, the historical novel and films. In light of these various explorations of narrative, sometimes probing the very limits of the sayable, he concludes that narrative *matters*. Whether as story or history or a mixture of both (for example, testimony), the power of narrativity makes a crucial difference to our lives. Indeed, he goes as far as to argue, rephrasing Socrates, that theunnarrated life is not worth living.

Hayden White, philosopher of history and advocate for the historical work “as a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse” (1983:ix), explained that narrative as the schema of articulation “organising human activity which sets it up as meaningful” (Gaillard and Reis 1980:139) would lead us to view the narrative as a metacode. It is not just one code among many others that cultures can employ to bestow meaning on experiences. It suggests that narrative forms the foundation for transmitting

“transcultural messages” (White 1980:2) about the shared nature of our reality. Roland Barthes explains that in the space between our direct experiences in the world and the language that is used to relay our experiences, narrative “*ceaselessly substitutes meaning* for the straightforward copy of the events recounted” (in White 1980:2; my italics). This could indicate that, hypothetically speaking, an exclusion of the narrative capacity in writing about reality translates into a lack or rejection of meaning itself. White tells us that when we investigate the issue of the *kind of meaning* that is lacking, the narrative present in historical writing will provide us with insight, since it is in this form of literature that we find a primary example of how the imperatives of the real, and the inevitable influences of the imagination of the writer take form.

My selection of three plays that are historically orientated leads me to an acknowledgement of the relevant tendencies within the historiographical discourse. Most relevant to this study is the discourse on the nature and form of the narrative within historical work, and this discourse is generally carried on from the point of view of historians as well as literary theorists. Some of the main concepts invoked are fact in relation to fiction and objectivity, and empiricism in relation to creative storytelling. In all three texts selected for this study so-called ‘empirically verifiable facts’ are used as a starting point by the playwrights and then receive a theatrical treatment by being fictionalised and dramatised. The use of these empirically verifiable facts alerts the audience to the ‘illusion of authentic truth’ of that which is told on stage. In order to analyse this theatrical treatment and how this creates the significant alternative narrative mentioned above, it is important to investigate the nature of the narrative in historical works versus narrative in fictional works.

1.3 History and narrative

Johan Degenaar states in his article “Historical discourse as fact-bound fiction” (1986:72) that (wrong) assumptions exist that we can find the ‘truth’ behind events because language mirrors the world, or that it could provide a mirror to the world, if only we were only to find the right language to describe events. According to White, this assumption –

amongst other things – “ignores the irony of language which obscures while it reveals” (in Degenaar 1986:2). Language acts as the common denominator when we consider disciplines such as philosophy, historiography, reporting and literature – despite their differences – and also brings the notion of rhetoric into the picture. In his definitive work on the ‘historical imagination’, *Metahistory* (first published in 1973), White worked with great tenacity to convince historians of the close relationship between history, philosophy and linguistics – causing some to object that he was restricting history to the ambiguous field of poetry.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge precisely this poetical sphere – “the word ‘poetical’ should be understood in the original sense of *poeisis*, which simply means making or producing something” (Rüsen 1987:87). In fact, no historian can ignore the point that there is a certain amount of creative processing that takes place in the human mind occupied in historical thinking. Narration is the mechanism that enables this process and ‘history’ – or to be more precise ‘a history’ – is the outcome of this. Few historians today would claim that they write *the truth* about the past. Alun Munslow states that we cannot simply criticise historical empiricism, but we have to ask the following question:

...can professional historians be relied upon to reconstruct and explain the past objectively by inferring the ‘facts’ from the evidence, and who, after all the hard work of research, will then write up their conclusions unproblematically for everyone to read? (1991:1)

Over the last few decades we have seen a growing acknowledgement of the influence of linguistics and narrativism on historiography. The radical ideas that followed the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ in historiography brought with them the realisation in the social sciences that reality ‘outside’ or ‘behind’ the language constructions that constitute our knowledge is inaccessible except through language (Van Zyl 1997:35; my translation). According to M.C. Lemon, history can legitimately be defined “as the narrative interpretation and explanation of human agency and intention” (in Munslow 1991:4). This view regards history as a class of literature; the historian produces a textual, literary

artefact concerned with that unpredictable thing called human intention, and therefore implies that the writer had to use his or her imagination to account for this. It is logical to say that ‘history’ does not come into existence for the reader until the historian documents it in the form of a narrative. But what precisely constitutes narrative in history? Alan Munsow answers:

When we explain in history we place its contents as events in a sequential order, a process usually described as the telling of a story. No matter how extensive are the analytical apparatuses borrowed from the social sciences and brought to bear on the past, history’s power to explain resides in its fundamental narrative form (1991:2).

But why is this *power to explain* so important? Kearney refers to White regarding this question:

White basically argues that because all narrated history is inevitably mediated by linguistic processes of emplotment, explication and ideology, we are somehow obliged to embrace an ‘irreducible relativism of knowledge’. And tracing the evolution of the relativist-idealistic philosophy of history – from Hegel, through Nietzsche, to Croce, Gentile and beyond – White concludes that historiography culminates today in a sophisticated version of the ‘Ironic condition’. The best we can do is trade in historical truth for pragmatic ‘effectiveness’. A historical account is right if it *works* (2002:145).

White tells us that histories (and philosophies of history as well) combine a certain amount of ‘data’, theoretical concepts for ‘explaining’ these data, and a narrative structure for their presentation as an icon of sets of events presumed to have occurred in times past. In addition, he maintains, they contain a deep structural content which is generally poetic (i.e. in general terms ‘fictional’ and ‘creative’), and therefore specifically linguistic in nature, and which serves as the precritically accepted paradigm of what a distinctively ‘historical’ explanation should be. This paradigm functions as the ‘metahistorical’ element in all historical works that are more comprehensive in scope than the archive or the chronicle (1983:ix).

There are modern historiographers who refuse narrative in certain historiographical works, possibly feeling that the meaning of the events that they deal with does not suit

representation in the narrative mode. They do not tell a story about the past with a clear beginning, middle and end. They clearly did not impose upon the events the form that we would normally associate with storytelling. They did not *impose the form of a story*, as we can observe in ‘traditional’ historical documents such as chronicles or annals. This allows for a distinction between historical discourse that narrates, on the one hand, and a discourse that narrativises, on the other; “between a discourse that openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it and a discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself *as a story*” (White 1980:3).

In this thesis I will not cover all the differences between literary fictions such as the novel and historical works. Rather than tracing all the theoretical arguments for a narrativisation of history, the theory of history put forward by White is presented as a concrete illustration of such an argument. White (1982:23) does admit to the possibility of knowledge in the field of history, culture and society, but views the concept of objectivity as outdated. When we consider history as part of art and literature, we are confronted with a different sort of knowledge. A ‘fact’ in itself is an empty sign that gains form and meaning in the context of the historical narrative, and this narrative is subordinate to language and not solely to the past.

Acknowledging history as literary artefact enables historians to be conscious of aesthetic and ethical precognitive suppositions in their discourse, and simultaneously the irony present in language. According to White (1980), the focus on narrativity in the representation of real events comes from the ideologically driven desire to give to a reconstruction of life an integrity and fullness that can only be fictional, precisely in the sense that it is a reconstruction. The world does not present itself as a story already narrativised with a beginning, middle or end. White prefers a semiotic approach to historiography and text study where trustworthiness, honesty, objectivity and authenticity are not the main focus, but rather the ideological process whereby different types of meaning are produced and reproduced:

by the establishment of a mental set towards the world in which certain sign systems are privileged as necessary, even natural, ways of recognizing a ‘meaning’ in things and others are suppressed, ignored, or hidden in the very process of representing a world to consciousness (White in Van Zyl 1997:36).

One need not follow the intricacies of White’s theory or operate on all the levels proposed by him in order to grasp the point he is making, namely,

that historical discourse has a rich texture; that it is closely linked with the possibilities of language and with literary tropes or figurative uses of words; that historical disputes tend to turn, not on facts, but on the meaning of facts; and that there are various interpretative strategies by means of which this meaning is constituted (Degenaar 1986:71).

Viewing history as a literary artefact does not mean that the writing of history has become degraded to flights of fantasy or to propaganda. It highlights the power of the imagination to describe a set of events. This liberates the historian from the illusion that an absolute or objective view of history is possible. Historians are not obligated to report their truths about the real world in narrative form; they may choose other, non-narrative, even anti-narrative modes of representation, “such as the meditation, the anatomy, or the epitome” (White 1980:2).

Historians who normally reject the idea that *the form* in which their research is written up *creates historical meaning* do so on the assumption that the language used to write about the past can correspond to the past as a narrative. This view is contested by White and other philosophers of history, such as Louis Mink and Ricoeur, who believe that we do not live our life as a story, but that when we reproduce history in writing, we need to *reproduce it in a narrative form*. White elaborated on his description of the historical work as a narrative prose discourse by saying that it “purports to be a *model, or icon*, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*” (1983:2, my italics).

Finally, the defining point of interest when we study the relationship between history and literature seems to be the point of referentiality. Referentiality here refers to the

authenticity with which the narrative portrays what really happened. Deconstructionist history questions the traditional assumptions of empiricism couched as factualism, disinterested analysis, objectivity, truth, and the continuing divisions between history, ideology, fiction and perspective. Instead, this discourse accepts that language constitutes history's content as well as the concepts and categories deployed to order and explain historical evidence through our linguistic powers. This discourse makes an appeal to historians and others concerned with rethinking and representing the past to consider the *undercurrents of values and ethics in their own writing*.

This undercurrent is certainly present in an aesthetic treatment of a real past as we observe it in the arts, and specifically in the theatre. When we investigate the nature of historical writing and those works of pure fiction, the playwright dramatising history occupies an area between these two genres. Alternatively, one could also state that in contrast to works that are purely fictional, the historical work relies on a number of symbols that refer to a certain ascertainable historical event. From that angle, the representation of the past as found in theatre that dramatises history is both referential and non-referential. The notion of referential versus non-referential, specifically in literature and theatre, directs this study towards briefly investigating the concept of representation, as will be done in Chapter Two.

The debate regarding the literary status of historical writing forms the background and context for this study. We now turn to a more detailed outline of specific subject matter and the problematic I wish to address.

1.4 Statement of the problem

In this thesis I consider the relationship between narrative in theatre that focuses on historical events and people, and the narrative discourse in history writing, focusing on three theatrical texts: *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, *Copenhagen* and *Ghetto*. This study concentrates on the published texts, specifically the fictionalised and dramatised treatment of the real events in the theatrical narratives, arguing that these narrativised

histories could provide a counter-memory to the dominant narrative of the official histories. I am interested in the way the texts engage in the creation of a multiple, or “thickened narrative” (Burke 1991) that acknowledges the complexities of society and history (I will elaborate on the concept of a thickened narrative below under the section ‘Terminology’). If we propose to acknowledge the narrative in history writing as literary artefact and that theatre focusing on historical events produces a narrativised history, we have enough reason to take the historical narrative in theatre seriously as part of historical discourse. In this study I will therefore propose that theatre can seek to translate the memory of the event into an accessible idiom without betraying the event itself.

Bearing this in mind, this thesis ultimately aims to explore the following question: *in what manner* does the dramatic narrative address the historical complexities of the contexts of the plays? Furthermore, does this create an alternative narrative that should be taken seriously as history writing? A brief explanation of the terminology used in this study, namely ‘fictionalised’, ‘dramatised’, ‘thickened narrative’ and ‘counter-memory’, is necessary.

1.5 Terminology

Throughout this study I will argue a case for the notion of memory and history as constructs, and therefore the concepts of ‘fictionalising’ and ‘dramatising’ require clarification as they refer directly to the way in which narrative in theatre focusing on history contributes to this notion. This in turn is important for answering the question of whether the alternative narrative presented by the specific theatrical text should be taken seriously as history writing, since it influences our *perception and understanding* of the events, thereby constructing memory and ultimately history.

1.5.1 Fictionalising and dramatising

For the purpose of this study, the term ‘fictionalising’ describes the process whereby the dramatist ‘creates’ or imagines his characters, their interaction with other characters

(essentially in dialogue), their surroundings and, crucially, the historical contexts and the ideological ‘slanting’ of the play. They are firmly placed within a historical context, but the dramatist writes them to life according to his own creative and subjective vision. I employ the term ‘dramatising’ in the sense that the dramatist inevitably highlights or downplays certain events, characters and key moments based on his perception of what would serve the dramatic structure and flow of the play. The dramatic structure would include the plot, the development of the characters and the dramatic setting – the imagined space and action on stage. In the case of the three plays that I have selected to study, we are confronted with historical figures (*Ghetto* and *Copenhagen*) and with witness testimonies delivered before a Truth Commission (*Ubu and the Truth Commission*). The dramatists have used these historical figures and actual witness accounts, and placed them within a dramatic context that emphasises their historical significance. However, the *dramatic context* of their historical significance is clearly a fictional *re-imagination*, a *representation* by a playwright, done so for dramatic effect in order for a dramatic performance to be possible.

1.5.2 Thickened narrative

Michael Godby (1998:106) writes that, according to Peter Burke, there is a clear trend among historians to present the past as a narrative fragment. This narrative fragment is then situated in historical structures of the social or economic institutions, frameworks or modes of thought within which it takes place. To describe this process Burke has coined the term ‘thickened narrative’, thereby evoking the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz who used the term ‘thick description’ to describe his own method of conducting ethnography. In anthropology and other fields, the term ‘a thick description’ describes the process whereby human behaviour is depicted in a manner that not only explains the behaviour, but also the context so that it becomes more meaningful to an outsider. In his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) Geertz describes his own methodology and since then, social sciences and other fields have adopted the term and the methodology, specifically literary criticism known as New Historicism.

In Geertz's essay, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture", (Geertz 1973:3-30) he explains that he adopted the term from philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Ryle pointed out the meaning of actions and events change as the context changes. Geertz argues that all human behaviour is constituted by context and that we therefore need to distinguish between a *thin description*, which describes only the action or the event itself, and a *thick description*, which explains the context of those actions or events within a society.

Burke encourages historians to write 'social dramas' that can bring social structures and the undercurrents present in societies to the surface. He acknowledges that the techniques employed by historians to 'thicken' narrative in this manner come from literature. "Thus historians have begun to use the literary device of multiple narratives to render the complexity and contradiction of historical experience and so signal that history is not simply what happened, but a particular view of what happened" (Godby 1998:106).

I employ the term 'thickened narrative' for my study of the three theatrical texts to mean the process whereby they assimilate Burke's concept of the thickened narrative seamlessly as the subject remains historical events, *but not for the sake of merely documenting history as empirically verifiable fact*, but rather for the sake of appropriating the various social complexities present in the contextual frameworks of the subject matter. This appropriation provides the (sometimes crucial) dramatic conflict and flow resulting in various perspectives and ultimately interpretations.

1.5.3 Counter-memory

French historian Phillippe Ariès says that "history deals with the horizon between the known and the unknown. It is memory that lures us to this horizon" (Hutton in Hutchison 1999:10).

Memory is a dynamic and active process that falls prey to many "interferences" (Hutchison 1999:11). These 'interferences' may affect memory, and thus history, and

include the context of an event as opposed to the context in which it is being reconstructed; and naturally, the lapse in time between events and its representation thereof. The time lapse is important to what and how things are remembered and forgotten. Derrida wrote in “Signature, Event, Context” that

Memory consists only in the power of reminding ourselves of the signs of our ideas, or the circumstances which accompanied them; and this capacity occurs only by virtue of the *analogy of signs* that we have chosen, and by virtue of the order that we have put between our ideas; the objects that we wish to retrace have to do with several of our present needs (1982:314).

Memory is therefore a construct that serves ‘our present needs’. Nietzsche argued that “everything that exists, no matter what its origin, is periodically reinterpreted by those in power in terms of fresh intentions” (1956:20). This is telling of the importance of an awareness of the context of the reconstruction of memories. Foucault wrote in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: “The truth of the past and the *manner* in which it is being recounted and reworked, should alert us to the operation of regimes of truth, regimes that determine for us what may count as truth and as falsity” (Foucault 1972:132; my italics). Foucault’s statement highlights the role of the artist in providing social diagnoses and alerting us to the operation of regimes of truth in coming to terms with the past and present. In recent years we seem to have moved further from a collective memory to an individuation of memories. Accordingly, the role of the artist has also changed from that of a kind of “priest” into something like an “archaeologist of the soul” uncovering lost or hidden meanings (Fox in Hutchison 1999:16).

It was in light of these hidden meanings that Foucault introduced the idea of counter-memory in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*; this counter-memory is not necessarily the most ‘accurate’ version of history, but it also does not strive to be so. He wrote that history must,

record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history – in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence,

not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles (1977:139-140).

Theatre potentially has an important role to play in the ‘recording of the singularity of events’ and here Alan Read makes a link between the social and public role that theatre can play in its aesthetic capacity to offer alternative narratives:

Theatre after all contributes to an idea of social or public good the best organisation of which should be the central debate of a public politics. Theatre’s narratives, however disjunct through aesthetic experiment, always offer alternative realities and insights to the everyday (1993:6).

Read’s main point is that theatre, through its very nature as a fictionalised and dramatised genre, almost always offers alternative realities, and “If these stories are told, the individual and society has alternatives with which he or she can evaluate his or her past and so transform, grow and change” (Hutchison 1999:255). This assists societies in moving forward into a future with a clear understanding of their past, and how this past has shaped them. Hutchison focuses on Walcott and his view that the ability to make and remake one’s history through imagination, and thus literature, is what gives hope, as the self can be redefined and remade (1999:18). The dramatist always displays a creative subjectivity in many directions through his imaginative recounting and representation of the events. He orders and interprets events, and this is important to what and how things are remembered and forgotten. Clearly a dramatic text cannot contain or incorporate all the historical material relevant to the events, as well as the various ways this material has been read. His task as an artist is to offer some imaginatively coherent vision of the experience he is addressing. And that task necessarily requires him to select, omit and invent. This has an influence on us as readers of the play as we absorb different meanings into our sense of self, thereby activating the (re)construction of memories and thus history.

We now turn to a brief description of the benefits of an examination of these issues.

1.6 Importance of the study

Why examine the relation between history, narrative and theatre? What can we hope to achieve by investigating arguments which draw these disciplines closer together?

There are both general and more specific advantages in pursuing these arguments. Firstly, it may generate an understanding of some of the broad claims and problems bearing on the impact that literary theory is said to have on a subject which is not normally considered to fall within its domain. The work of Hayden White has been singled out to represent these claims, as he challenges the traditional distinction between history and literature. As a result, we are made aware of those arguments which set out to show that there are aspects of historical writing which are often ignored or which we generally overlook. An example of such an aspect that will also serve as the focus of this study is the narrative in historical explanation, representing the “ineluctably poetic nature of the historical work” (White 1983:xi).

This study also aims to investigate certain specific issues: how the fictionalised and dramatised narratives found in the individual texts function as alternative narratives and counter-memories that should be taken seriously as part of history writing. Finally, it is my aim to explore how this alternative, historical narrative created in the three texts chosen potentially challenge official histories and could therefore possibly contribute to some level of social change, or at least dialectic engagement.

Bearing these remarks in mind, I will now present an introductory outline of the contents of this study and the specific approach followed.

1.7 Outline and method

The approach in this study is the critical exposition of a small selection of authors on history and the philosophy of history, and applying this to my investigation of the narratives found in the theatrical texts.

The following section of Chapter One will provide an outline of the three plays. In my study of the narrative in the individual plays, certain specific matters and themes will be of importance, and this outline will highlight these matters. This will serve as a preliminary indication of their link to the broad discourse on narrative in history writing as each illustrates specific issues across the broad scope of this discourse.

Chapter Two starts off with a description of the “historical imagination” as White (1983:ix) describes it. Chapter Two then presents an overview of the concept of narrative in theatre. My aim is to provide some insight into the process the playwright embarks on when narrativising history through fictionalisation and dramatisation. This will be followed by a brief description of the origins of a kind of theatre that focuses on historical events, focusing in particular on Piscator’s documentary theatre and Brecht’s epic theatre.

Chapters Three, Four and Five will present the analyses of the three plays within the framework of their historical origins and the dramatic treatment of that history.

1.8 The plays

1. *UBU AND THE TRUTH COMMISSION*

Chapter Three is an analysis of Jane Taylor’s *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (first performed in 1997), directed by William Kentridge, whose director’s notes in the printed text were also studied for this thesis. The play is an exploration of the complexities the relationship, and the precarious balance, between power, knowledge and justice. Taylor’s play is a reworking of Alfred Jarry’s subversive play *Ubu Roi* (1896). The South African play was staged as a multimedia production using puppets, animation and human actors. The text combines the ridiculous and the farcical of the original *Ubu* with the horrifying soberness of the witness testimonies delivered before South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) during 1996.

The workings of the TRC were mainly perceived by the public through the media, and various images and themes in the play allude to this process and the influence it had on the work of the Commission and the general perception of the Commission. The play is based on witness accounts and other atrocities that surfaced throughout the Commission's work. During the TRC hearings the writer and journalist, Antjie Krog, worked as a special SABC radio reporter on the Commission's work, and she did the initial research on which the play is based. The play is a "valuable recreation of the theatricality of the TRC hearings" (Malherbe 2002:10). The importance of this play is situated in the theatricality of the representation that alludes to the theatricality of the hearings and the consequences of that.

The central character of the play, Pa Ubu, is an apartheid perpetrator preparing to appear before the TRC. The play focuses on the misdeeds of his past, his relationship with his wife, his henchman and his superiors, and ultimately he becomes a symbol of everything that was wrong with South Africa under apartheid rule. He also comes to represent the post-1994 situation in this country and all the drama and complexity of the coming into being of the rainbow nation.

The play focuses strongly on the reconstruction and representation (also translation and thereby interpretation) of the memories and testimonies of the perpetrators and the witnesses – making powerful statements about the notions of memory, truth and history as constructs. These notions form one of the primary themes in the play as it became clear throughout the TRC process that these constructs contributed to the fragility of the reconciliation originally promised by the TRC and the memory-work done by this Commission.

Chapter Three will therefore begin with an exploration of the debate around the TRC and its memory-work, forming the foundation for an examination of the place of a literary and theatrical narrative in this specific debate.

2. COPENHAGEN

“A curious sort of diary memory is” – these words are attributed to Niels Bohr in Michael Frayn’s play *Copenhagen* (1998:6). The play takes as its starting point an historical event – the visit by the German physicist Werner Heisenberg¹ to his friend, Danish physicist, Niels Bohr,² in 1941 during World War II. The two physicists, who had collaborated for so long on the development of quantum theory,³ were now on opposite sides ideologically. Bohr was half-Jewish and a citizen of occupied Denmark. Heisenberg was a professor at Leipzig in Germany but, unknown to Bohr; he had become head of the Nazi regime’s project to harness atomic energy. Both men were under surveillance. The reasons for Heisenberg’s visit and what was said at the meeting are still unclear, but what is clear is that their relationship deteriorated dramatically after that night. In the play we find an exploration of a number of issues: various reasons for the visit, whether it was possible for the events to have taken a different direction, and whether this might have had an influence on the outcome of the World War.

Frayn addresses these issues dramatically in a number of ways: the space of the play is situated in the afterlife, and we are presented with three ghosts (Heisenberg, Bohr and his wife, Margrethe) who recall from memory the events of that night, and from the start they have access to all the evidence, both their own experiences and others’ various interpretations of the events they are investigating. They are trying, long after the fact, to make sense of the moral significance of their actions.

To explore these different possible moral implications, Frayn presents different scenarios for the conversation, and we see the same scene of Heisenberg showing up at Bohr’s front door repeatedly, but followed by different sets of dialogue between the two men.

¹ German physicist, 1901-1976. Collaborated with Niels Bohr between 1922 and 1927 on a consistent theory for the physics of subatomic particles. Formulated the Uncertainty Principle in 1927. Awarded Nobel Prize for Physics in 1932.

² Danish physicist, 1885-1962. Developed the theory of complementarity. Awarded Nobel Prize for Physics in 1922.

³ Theory of subatomic particles, light, etc. in which both energy and matter exist only in discrete packets or quanta, meaning that a change in the energy of a particle can only take place by emitting or absorbing a quantum of energy.

These conversations represent various historical theories and speculations regarding the two scientists and their individual involvement in the development of the first atomic bomb.

Chapter Four therefore provides a brief exposition of De Certeau's ideas of history in everyday life, and his view that we find the past in areas of society that we do not normally regard as part of history. This is done in order to investigate the play's contribution to the specific discourse around the nature of historiography as an exact science, a literary artefact, or both.

Finally, then, this play demonstrates that there is no one satisfactory explanation for events and human actions, but that there are many, each one established by the nature of the enquiry. The narrativised history in this play reminds us of this uncertainty and the complexities produced by the human element present in the past and specifically a re-telling and a representation of that history.

3. GHETTO

'No theatre in a graveyard!' These were the words painted on the theatre building in the Vilna ghetto by the ghetto underground movement. In Chapter Five I will briefly discuss the 1984 play, *Ghetto*, by Israeli dramatist Joshua Sobol. This musical drama follows a theatre company in the Vilna ghetto during its World War II Nazi occupation. The play was inspired by an actual historical theatre which operated in the Jewish ghetto from 1941 until 1943. Performing musical concerts, poetry, cabarets and original theatrical works, the Vilna ghetto theatre troupe had their debut in January 1942; four months after the Jews of Vilna had been forced into the ghetto. *Ghetto* chronicles both the theatre's work and the dispute over its existence: whether it lulled the Jewish population into a false sense of well-being or functioned as a site of cultural survival and resistance.

The play takes as its basis the Yiddish diary of ghetto librarian Herman Kruk: "Diary of the Wilner Ghetto". The diary records a horrible reality in real time. Sobol writes that

this book revolutionised his vision of the Holocaust, for the diary “suggests a vision of a society very busy with living, and not preparing to die”, producing a “demystified gaze on reality” that “compels you to change all your opinions and prejudices about a reality that has been otherwise mythified” (2000:2).

In the introduction to the play Sobol explains his use of historical and documentary sources to represent the historical background. Apart from Kruk’s diary, the play is also based on Sobol’s reading of the diaries of other Vilna victims. It is also in this introduction that we find Sobol’s first reference to the ‘vitality’ present in the ghetto that seems to be a characteristic of Jewish culture. This forms one of the larger discourses in the play, and much of my discussion of the play will centre on the way Sobol dramatises this vitality and the moral dilemmas that stemmed from it.

Sobol writes that

Living in Israel today is to experience the post-destruction of Jewish life in Europe. The most dramatic part is that you cannot reconstruct what has been destroyed. It’s impossible to reconstruct an individual or a people or a language or a culture from piles of toothbrushes, hair, clothes, shoes and suitcases. Impossible. It’s also almost impossible to think about, let alone express, our experience, and certainly wrong to try to do it in an *ordained manner* (Sobol 2000:1, my italics).

Sobol’s comment on the impossibility of reconstructing what has been destroyed in an ordained manner is specifically explored in my study of the *theatricality* of Sobol’s play which is essentially a memory play that functions as a play within a play. As Heisserer explains, “Sobol’s *Ghetto* honoured with distinction what is the implicit but elusive mandate of Holocaust art, namely, the imagistic recreation of a history whose reality some claim exceeds our capacity to imagine it” (1986:478).

In my analysis of this text I will look at how the theatrical narrative engages with the complexities surrounding the historical events and characters that form the background of this Holocaust play, but also engages in the complexities surrounding a representation of

the Holocaust in history. This will be done by paying specific attention to the themes of this play as well as observing key pieces of dialogue.

1.9 Conclusion

A study of this kind is circumscribed by various factors, specifically the limited scope possible in a single study. The plays that I refer to in this study are all published texts and the analyses centre on the texts rather than on performances of the plays. Chapter One has attempted to situate the body of this work in the context of the general discourse regarding the narrative nature of the historical document. I have singled out specific elements in the dramatic narrative, namely fictionalisation and dramatisation to delineate the broad problematic of this work – ‘fictional’ narratives and their bearing on historical writing. Such a focus has as its task the mapping of an area of discussion encompassing the ideas of memory and history as a construct, and the complexities present in society and history that the dramatic narrative has the potential to engage with – potentially creating counter-memories to challenge official histories.

Dennis Walder says that the force of theatre “in the context of historical complexity and difference” lies in its ability to “cross the boundaries of text, performer and audience in order to reach completion ... making it the cultural form which addresses the present more directly than any other” (in Hutchison 1999:7).

CHAPTER TWO: HAYDEN WHITE AND *METAHISTORY* – A THEORETICAL BASIS FOR DISCUSSING NARRATIVE IN THEATRE

Art...teaches us to convey a larger sense by simpler symbols.

(Emerson in Jones 1941:23)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to elaborate on Hayden White's philosophy on the 'historical imagination' as he describes his theory on the narrative and poetic nature of the historical document. In addition, this chapter aims to provide an introduction to narrative in a theatrical text. This is done in order to examine how we can apply White's theory to investigate narrative in theatre focusing on historical events for the purpose of possibly including the dramatic narrative in the broader discourse on narrative in history writing.

I will discuss the theatrical narrative as a specific practice of language beginning with an interlude on representation in theatre. This will be applied as the basis for examining the three texts in subsequent chapters. I will briefly examine the roots of the kind of theatre that is concerned with historical events in documentary theatre and the development of this genre by Piscator, as well as the influences from Brecht's epic theatre.

2.2 Historical consciousness – a system of mental operations

Chapter One situates the body of this work in the context of the general discourse on the narrative nature of the historical document, and in this chapter I will focus on Hayden White's theory. In *Metahistory* (1983) White comes to the conclusion that there is little difference in the quality of the *truthfulness* produced by the novel or history. In *Metahistory* he associates himself with the problematic of 'historical consciousness' as proposed by Heidegger, Sartre, Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault, who pointed out the fictional nature of historical reconstructions and questioned historians' claims that their

discipline was a science. Before we get to White, I propose to consider a description of historical narration by Rüsen as a background to White's theory. Rüsen provides us with a description of historical narration as a system of mental operations that constitute the field of historical consciousness. The following three qualities and their relationship (as defined by Rüsen 1987:88-89) serve as the theoretical argument to describe the distinctive nature of historical narration.

1. An historical narrative is tied to the medium of memory. It mobilises the experience of past time, which is engraved in the archives of memory, so that the experience of present time becomes understandable and the expectation of future time is possible.
2. An historical narrative organises the internal unity of these three dimensions of time (past, present and future) by a concept of continuity. This concept adjusts the real experience of time to human intentions and expectations. By doing so, it makes the experience of the past become relevant for present life and influences the shaping of the future.
3. An historical narrative serves to establish the identity of its author and listeners. This function determines whether the concept of continuity is plausible or not. This concept of continuity must be capable of convincing the listeners of their own permanence and stability in the temporal change of their world and of themselves. This concept of continuity also makes it possible for the listener to identify those areas of uncertainty and complexity needed to engage with history in a mature and significant manner.

These qualities emphasise historical narration as a form of the way we can orientate our lives today in the greater scheme of time: this is done by the mobilising of memory, thereby stabilising identity. Hayden White's theory on the historical imagination ties into this; a basic summary of his theories on metahistory may be helpful at this point.

2.3 White and metahistory

Firstly, White's (1983:i) definition of a historical work: a verbal structure in the form of narrative discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them. This definition integrates the following theses: 1. the object of the historical work consists of structures and processes; 2. the historical work is a form of narrative discourse; 3. the narrative explains structures and processes by representing them; 4. in order to represent them, it introduces a model or an icon.

This model or icon, which we can also call the image or metaphor, plays a crucial part in historical narrative, because it tells us how events should be interpreted. In White's own words: "As a symbolic structure, the historical narrative does not reproduce the events it describes; it tells us in what directions to think about the events with different emotional valences" (1980:5). Because of this, he refers to historical works as "translations of fact into fictions" (in Degenaar 1986:70). White is, however, not trying to deny the distinction between good and bad historiography, and he introduces the following as criteria: "responsibility to the rules of evidence, the relative fullness of narrative detail, and logical consistency" (in Degenaar 1986:70). When we apply these criteria to the translation of fact into fiction, we become aware that the historian uses language in such a way that he constructs a narrative; therefore he cannot deny the metahistorical nature of his work. Writing history involves the historian in a system of images, metaphors and values that bring with them explicit and latent meanings. White maintains that there can be no ordinary history without a metahistory which presupposes interpretative strategies, and therefore this system refers to all kinds of history (for example, chronicles and a 'proper', narrativised history).

Up to this point I have mainly made mention of the metaphor in narrative, but White's theory of metahistory is far more complex. For the purpose of this study, we need not go into the intricacies of his argument. But since his theory underlies what will be used as

the concrete illustration of the theoretical arguments for a literary interpretation of historical writing, I think a summary of this aspect of his theory may also be useful.

According to him, all discourses make use of tropes or literary figures: “Tropics is the process by which all discourse constitutes its objects” (in Degenaar 1986:71). The theory of discourse as a ‘mediative enterprise’ corresponds to the views discussed in the previous chapter according to which all facts are mediated facts. White tells us that the historical thinker chooses conceptual strategies by which to explain or represent his data. On this level the historian performs an “essentially *poetic* act, in which he *prefigures* the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories he will use to explain ‘what was *really* happening’ in it” (White 1983:x). This act of prefiguration can take on a number of forms, distinguished by the linguistic modes (tropes of poetic language) in which they are cast. The ‘master tropes’ are metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. This becomes the basis for White’s metahistorical analysis of historical discourse in terms of “webs of commitments which the historian makes in the course of his interpretation on the aesthetic, cognitive, and ethical levels” (in Degenaar 1986:71).

The aesthetic dimension consists in the historian’s choice of a narrative structure (romance, comedy, tragedy, satire); on the cognitive level we have the historian’s choice of an explanatory paradigm (idiographic, organicist, contextualist); and in the ethical dimension one finds the choice of a strategy with ideological implications (anarchist, conservative, radical, liberal). A specific combination of these modes comprises what White calls the historiographical ‘style’ of a particular historian or philosopher of history.

In the narrativising discourse, the absence of any clues as to the narrator “turns out to be a particular form of fiction, the result of what may be called the referential illusion, where the historian tries to give the impression that the referent is speaking for itself” (Barthes 1970:149). This leads us to conclude that the discourse of history can be presented through a number of different modes, but cannot claim scientific status. I will now elaborate on this theory, starting with White’s position on narrative as such.

2.3.1 White on Narrative

For this study I follow the line of argument proposed by White to the effect that the true nature of historical writing can only be understood when it is not seen as an objectifying, empiricist field of study tied to fact, but as the creation and imposition by the historian of a particular narrative form on the past, acknowledging the essentially poetic nature of history writing.

So natural is the impulse to narrate, so inevitable is the form of narrative for any report of the way things really happened, that narrativity could appear problematical only in a culture in which it was absent – absent or, as in some domains of contemporary Western intellectual and artistic culture, programmatically refused (White 1980:1).

This comment recalls White's statement that narrative could be viewed as a kind of metacode, a "human universal" (White 1980:2) that forms a foundation that reaches beyond the borders of culture to carry messages about the nature of our shared reality. We sometimes struggle to make sense of those thought patterns that are prominent in a certain culture, but we find it easier to understand a story that comes from another culture – no matter how strange we may find that culture. Narrative might well be considered as a solution to the problem of how to translate *what we intrinsically understand and know* into *what we tell*. According to Ricoeur (1980:3), "it is not experience but narrative which enables us to give configuration to life". In the field of history philosophy, narrativism has led to the view that "an event is historical to the extent that it can figure in a narrative grasped as a whole" (Ricoeur 1980:3).

It is important to clarify the 'poetic nature' that White refers to. According to Kearney White identifies the rationale behind the commingling of history and fiction well when he describes 'story' as a process of "selection and arrangement of data from the *unprocessed historical record* in the interest of rendering the record more comprehensible to an *audience of a particular kind*" (in Kearney 2002:85). The chronicle reports on a sequence of events as they seemingly happened, whereas a 'story' (the poetic nature referred to)

contributes a notion of perspective and purpose that is absent in the chronological historical work.

The transmutation of chronicle into story occurs when some events are characterised as inaugural, others as transitional and others again as terminal. The plot turns the ‘and then and then and then’ of mere sequential events into a recounting according to some *design*, however fantastical it may be (Kearney 2002:85).

Roland Barthes also draws a connection between history writing and the rhetorical in his book *Image, Music and Text* (1970:145-155), where he questions the divide between historical and fictional discourses on linguistic grounds. White shares Barthes’ opinion that there is no language, genre or discipline that is transparent with regards to reality. We cannot find the truth behind events in history writing simply because language mirrors the world, or that it would do so if only we were able to find the right language.

In the case of historical representations, where events are clearly identified as ‘real’ rather than ‘imaginary’, it is only logical to ask the question: what are the mechanics and implications of imposing a narrative, creating a ‘story’ out of these events? And more importantly, why is the acknowledgement of the narrative and poetic nature of history of importance? It is these questions that I shall attempt to address below.

2.3.2 Mechanics and importance of narrative in history writing (history as an act of language)

In a fictional discourse the content is mainly imagined events, and therefore the writing process and the creative narrative that stems from this poses few problems regarding the origin of the story (unless, of course, it was written to create problems). We assume it to be natural for imaginary events to speak for themselves, whereas we accept that real events do not speak – they must just be. White tells us that the past does not come in a pre-packaged structure that conforms to some pre-existing narrative – this is imposed by the historian. In history writing, the historian cannot invent the past – and therefore he has to ‘conform’ to what really happened. Thus the meaning of history as a story comes

from a plot which is imposed or – as White insists, invented – as much as found by the historian. The acknowledgement of this emplotment invented by the historian alerts us to the fact that history or a historical account is merely some version of the event, and this is important in our understanding of how that event shaped us in the past, and therefore also shapes our future. Munslow sums it up:

The argument runs that just as there are no grounds for believing that an empiricist methodology can guarantee an understanding of the past as it actually was, neither is there a discoverable *original* emplotment. However, the self-reflexive and self-conscious historian may argue that it is possible to offer an interpretation that, although not claiming to be *the* true narrative, is nevertheless a plausible and therefore quite acceptable rendering of it (1991:11).

This issue also emerges in historical novels. André P. Brink's novels, *Houd-den-Bek* (1982) and *Inteendeel* (1993) deal with the concepts of the illusion of truth, and the conventions of realism in the first case, and with postmodern views about rhetorical conventions in the second case. He says the following about the nature of history and fiction:

We now accept that history ‘as such’ is simply (or, in the fashionable phrase, ‘always already’) inaccessible: our only grasp of Waterloo is attained through what has been written about it. ‘Waterloo’ is an act of language. And in the process of textualising the event it is also narrativised: that is, the representation of history repeats, in almost every detail, the processes of fiction. In this activity, in other words, history, memory, and language intersect so precisely as to be almost indistinguishable: the ‘origins’ of history, as recovered through memory, are encoded in language, and each of these three moments becomes a condition for the others (Brink 1998:32).

Brink's comment on Waterloo being an act of language reminds us that we can never access history in terms of the events themselves: history does not come into being for the reader until the historian documents it in the form of a narrative. This indicates that history itself is therefore essentially a kind of literature. The idea of history as a kind of literature is summarized by White's statement that “historical explanation displays a definite aesthetic dimension through emplotment” (Botha 1992:43). Historical facts and events do not explain themselves. They can only be made intelligible through the telling

of a story that attaches meaning to them. The power of the narrativised history lies in its ability to give events a role to play in a story with a plot, thereby making sense of the event. “The ideas of beginning, middle and end are not taken from experience: they are not traits of real action but effects of poetic ordering” (Carr in Degenaar 1986:69). This process of poetic ordering enables the historian to tell different stories depending on his perspective and the plot he has chosen and whereby different sign systems or images are privileged. The manner in which facts or events are made part of the historical narrative will depend on the nature of the story that is told. “It differs from idealism in the sense that while idealism emphasises the power of the mind to recollect the past, narrativism emphasises the power of narrative to make sense of an event by incorporating the event in a story with a plot” (Degenaar 1986:69).

Acknowledging the narrative nature of history writing not only allows us to make sense of the event, but also gives us the opportunity to view that specific account as a singular perspective on the events. This opens up the possibility of rejecting or accepting that account, thereby asking for a self-reflexive approach to history and also influencing our interpretation of the event and ourselves. This allows for a true understanding of the purpose of history writing as a discourse in general – a process needed for a true understanding of the how and why counter-memories can challenge official histories.

2.3.3 History as self-reflexive, interdisciplinary construct as opposed to explanatory science

White maintains that “the most difficult task which the current generation of historians will be called upon to perform is to expose the historically conditioned character of the historical discipline” (1982:32). During a traditional, official process of national remembrance we find that specific structures (archives, museums, statues, public holidays, names of towns, airports and streets) are set up for a nation ‘to commemorate’ those people and events deemed important by some. Kundera reminds us at the start of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1981) that the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting. The undertaking of formulating an official history,

and thus a public memory “reflects the dominant sense of the ‘history’, and often tells one more about the time in which it is written/constructed than about the period to which it is referring” (Hutchison 1999:14). In this respect, Foucault makes a case for a self-reflexive use of history. He comments: “recourse to history … is meaningful to the extent that history serves to show how that-which-is has not always been; i.e. that the things which seem most evident to us are always formed in the confluence of encounters and chances” (in Hutchison 1999:32).

White’s interdisciplinary approach allows him to devise interpretive methods derived from literary criticism to address those areas in historiography that he feels need attention. The postmodern acknowledgment of both art and science as constructs within human discourse allows for a basis to analyse the similarities as well as the differences between artistic and scientific discourse. This acknowledgement has freed the historian from conditioned ideas of such as romanticism and objectivity. Foucault points out that Nietzsche asked for an understanding of ‘effective’ history, characterised by its “affirmation of knowledge as perspective” (1977:156). The historian needs to realise that the significance of historical facts are not given, but are constructed through the applied paradigm and in terms of the kind of questions asked by the enquirer – reflecting certain values. The historical data have to be interpreted in order for the events to gain meaning and significance. This act of interpretation functions within certain parameters and paradigms that includes metaphors, icons, images and values that stem from the historian’s understanding of the events. White also refers to a “‘governing metaphor’ which functions as a heuristic principle in weighing the historical evidence” (in Degenaar 1986:70). White states:

We should no longer naively “correspond” to some pre-existent body of “raw facts”. For we should recognise that what constitutes the facts themselves is the problem that the historian, like the artist, has tried to solve in the choice of the metaphor by which he orders his world, past, present, and future (1983:20).

The writing of history can assert its claim to scientific explanation only by appropriating the elements of language and rhetoric that allow for arguments by probability to pass for

scientific explanation. Michel de Certeau invokes, for example, the category of argument by omission, known as enthymeme. De Certeau's aim is not to disregard knowledge and understanding in the name of historical science, but rather to demonstrate the pointlessness of ignoring those elements of language, rhetoric and representation that are essential to that which he calls the fiction of science: "Historiographical discourse is, in itself, the struggle of reason with time, but of reason which does not renounce what it is as yet incapable of comprehending, a reason which is, in its fundamental workings, *ethical*" (1986:220).

Finally, then, I propose that not only should we acknowledge the importance of the narrative in history writing, but that this theory allows for the inclusion of a literary and theatrical narrative focusing on history in the broader historiographical discourse. Literature can explore the idea of self-reflexive history through a critical reflection on official documentation of history, thereby not only explaining the status quo, but suggesting alternative narratives that could possibly prompt social change. "Fiction gives eyes to the horrified narrator", as Paul Ricoeur rightly notes (in Kearny 2002:62), "eyes to see and to weep".

Memory has the power of sharing knowledge and illustrating images that brings home the destruction of evil and the value of goodness. Therefore empathy forms an important function of narrative memory – and this empathy is not always escapism. Kant tells us in his account of 'representative thinking' in the Third Critique, that this empathy is a way of identifying with as many fellow humans as possible – actors and sufferers alike – in order to participate in a common moral sense (*sensus communis*). In this manner, narrative imagination can assist what we might call a *quasi-universalisation* of remembrance, where our own memories – personal and communal – can be exchanged with other of very different times and places, where the familiar and the foreign can change hands (Kearny 2002:62).

The plays selected for this study focus on events that have a historical bearing, centred on characters that are based on people whom we can identify as historical figures. This is important to remember, since the contextual background provides an already familiar socio-political frame of reference for the plays that influences the audience's interaction with the characters and the events on stage, thereby influencing the understanding and

perception of these characters and events – subsequently constructing memory and ultimately history.

The representation of historical events through the dramatic narrative (the context in which it is being reconstructed) shifts the focus of memory from the public domain to a private one, captured by the dramatist – revealing a world ruled by human passions such as longing, desire and our basic needs. In order to fully grasp my proposition to include the dramatic narrative in theatre focusing on history in the metahistoric discourse, it is important to investigate the relationship of representation and narrative in theatre.

2.4 Representation and theatre

In a world where the relationship between memory, history and individual narratives has become gradually more complex, it often happens that “history gives way to a remembered world in which time has stopped and the past has absorbed the present” (Green in Hutchison 1999:13). Theatre can play a very important role in potentially unlocking this remembered world to contemporary discourses by representing that past and demonstrating the complexities surrounding our knowledge of an historical event and the meaning of reproducing it in any manner – and therefore an introduction to the notion of representation in theatre is necessary.

Richard Rorty tells us: “To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations” (in Culler 1983:151-152). Culler elaborates on Rorty’s statement on the link between knowledge and representation in “On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism”:

Reality is the presence behind representations, what accurate representations are representations of, and philosophy is above all a theory of representations. A theory of representation that seeks to establish foundations must take as given, must assume the presence of that which accurate representations represent. There is thus always a question whether any supposed given may not in fact be a construct or product, dependent, for example, on the theory which it purports to

support. Moreover, the characteristic problem of theories of truth or knowledge is why we should believe that we have more certain knowledge of the conditions of truth or of knowledge than we do of a particular truth (1983:152).

This theory of representation brings us to the problematic of representing the past in an aesthetic genre – theatre – normally associated with non-referential symbols. The past exists only in a few traces, as well as in the historian’s narrative – we cannot access it directly as an event; we can only encounter it in a narrative that fulfils a dual function “as both a surrogate for the past and as a medium of exchange in our active engagement with it” (Munslow 1991:5).

In the first place, we can conclude that events only have ‘meaning’ because they destroy themselves the moment they happen, they gain ‘meaning’ through the traces they leave behind, but to leave traces, they need to cease to exist or implode so to speak. Therefore, from a historical perspective, an event is a producer of traces. For that reason, one cannot stake a claim as to the importance of the event over its traces which are signified by the meaning found in the re-imagining, re-writing, re-enactment of these traces. The aesthetic reproductions of these traces on a stage are of no lesser value in the process of creating meaning than the event itself *or the historian’s account of it*. Ideas about history, the arts and ultimately the world are always conditioned through context, and context implies the existence of traces, in other words the production of traces through past events that ceased to exist. In theatre the narrative provides us with the context through which we are conditioned to engage with the dramatic text.

The meaning that we find in studying plays such as *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, *Copenhagen* and *Ghetto* is that they were written in order to be recreated, re-enacted, to produce meaning at the exact moment when they are performed, whilst at the same time drawing on ‘traces’ from another dimension – the historical account and people that they are based on. We can indeed, and most importantly for this study, find the possibility of understanding in a new light what happened in the shared reality of those events. The plays are not mere secondary copies of the real events, but have the potential to give new meaning to those events. This happens because the structure of that event, namely a

production of traces that bear signification, is exactly that which makes it possible to write a theatrical text, to re-enact events of historical importance on a stage. Condillac tells us that “to trace” means “to express”, “to represent”, “to recall”, “to make present” (Derrida 1982:313). It is exactly in this that theatre’s importance in the process of creating alternative narratives is highlighted, through its unique potential to bring those traces of the event to the foreground by expressing, representing, recalling and making present the traces of those events of historical importance. This is done through a process of fictionalisation and dramatisation which are the two essential characteristics of the dramatic narrative. We now turn to a more detailed description of this narrative.

2.5 Narrative in theatre

Theatre presents narrative and language in a number of ways. First: the stage displays the relationship between that which is said, the actors uttering it, and the playwright who wrote their lines. Second: this relationship determines these utterances in relation to the microcosm, the fictional world created and visualised by the dramatist. And third: stage discourse places these events in contrast to the ‘real world’ taking into consideration the temporal and spatial context of the world outside the theatre of a given theatrical production.

As mentioned previously, my focus in this study is the written text. This allows me to focus on the ‘intended meaning’ created by the playwright, without the additional elements evoked by the interpretation of the director, the actors and the stage design. Furthermore, it provides insight into the playwright’s ideas regarding stage directions that the performance does not always reveal – and this can potentially prove crucial for an examination of the narrative in theatre.

Roman Ingarden introduced the distinction between ‘high text’ and ‘ancillary text’ (Wallis and Shepherd 1998:9) and this distinction seems to be helpful here. Under ‘high text’ we understand the written text and under ‘ancillary text’ the performance. Under the written text we need to include the acting and stage (director’s) notes which is

characterised by a greater degree of indeterminacy, and is written with the implied performance in mind. Therefore, we can make a further distinction between the primary text which is the dialogue (and the characters, action and plot which flow from this), and secondary text consisting of the title, stage directions, prefaces, the *dramatis personae*, postscripts, etc.

For my study of the texts, I will focus on the dialogue in the texts and the various meanings, hidden agendas, actions and historical references referred to through the dialogue; therefore it is necessary to briefly examine the speech act as it operates in theatre. This leads us back to Plato's third book of *The Republic* in which he draws a line between 'report' and 'representation' (Pfister 1988:2) – a line that rests upon whether it is the poet himself who is speaking, or the characters who are in fact given the opportunity to speak. This distinction has its basis in the unique speech situation found in theatre "as the communicative relationship between the author and receiver" (Pfister 1988:2). What happens on stage is written to be heard and seen by an audience, and even simpler than that: what is said and seen on stage is *designed* to be heard and seen by the audience. When one character says something to another character, he or she sends a message – about themselves, their desires or an event – to the other character who in turn receives this message. But this onstage communication can also be seen as another message, one being sent from the stage to the audience (the same message about character, action and circumstance), but always a slightly different message than the one being sent between character and character.

This is where the narrative in the theatrical text and the narrative in the historical document as proposed by White can potentially overlap in nature – especially when we consider the message received by the reader of both texts. Mick Short (in Pfister 1988:3), refers to this as the message that is sent from the author to the audience. "And always implicit, though often explicit, in all dialogue, is that second line of communication we have noted between stage and auditorium" (Wallis and Shepherd 1998:38). The historically orientated nature of the plays selected for this study illustrates the significance of the place of utterance in shaping the meaning of what is said. All speech

is contaminated by constraints: geographical, political, situational, cultural and so forth. These constraints act as inhibiting or explanatory elements of reference. Since the playscript precedes performance, it is language that creates and focuses space in the theatre; reference and space are thus shown to be closely linked. Richard Drain says, “However transient it is, theatrical art is based on the use of space, on expression in space...”(1995:267). Speech acts in the theatrical discourse are in fact subordinate to reference. By placing a sentence in a specific context, the speech act gives it concrete reality in the specific context of a reading of the play. Meaning is therefore contingent on contextualisation. As Culler tells us: “In the Saussurian perspective meaning is the product of a linguistic system” (1983:110). The linguistic systems that can be identified as the ‘style’ of the historian as White clearly explains in *Metahistory* or the fictionalised and dramatised account by the dramatist, allows us to view the meaning created by both under the same ‘poetic’ microscope.

This concept of meaning as a product of a specific linguistic system is essential to the analysis of signifying processes in theatre, but a few observations must be made about the theory that underlies it. First, we must examine the precise nature of dialogue and of reference in the dramatic discourse. Discourse in drama is represented discourse, not ordinary discourse. Dialogue in theatre is feigned, an imitation of real dialogue. The players’ lines are utterances borrowed from a super-speaker (the playwright) who assigns cues to virtual characters. At this point I would like to introduce a comment by Hugh Kenner (writing about Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*) on discourse in theatre as represented discourse: it is quite lengthy, but I feel it necessary to provide insight into how dialogue in a theatrical texts operates:

The drama is a ritual enacted in an enclosed space into which fifty or more people are staring. [...] The space into which they are staring is characterised in some way: for instance, *A country road. A tree. Evening.* ‘Evening’ means that the illumination on stage is not much brighter than in the auditorium. ‘A country road’ means that there is no set to look at. As for the tree, an apologetic thing tentatively identified as a leafless weeping willow, it serves chiefly to denote the spot, like the intersection (coordinates O, O) of the Cartesian axes. “You’re sure it was here?” “What?” “That we were to wait.” “He said by the tree.” If it accretes meaning of an anomalous sort in the course of the evening, reminding us,

when the two tramps stand beneath it with a rope, of ampler beams which once suspended the Saviour and two thieves, or again of the fatal tree in Eden (and the garden has, sure enough, vanished), or even of the flowering staff in *Tannhäuser*, it does this not by being explicated but simply by its insistent continual presence during which, as adjacent events diffract the bleak light, we begin to entertain mild hallucinations about it. Only in a theatre can we be made to look at a mock tree for that length of time. Drama is distinguished from all other forms of art by its control over the *time* spent by the spectator in the presence of its significant elements (Kenner 1961:133-134).

Waiting for Godot has been termed an ‘anti-play’, which underlines its reduced ‘dramatic’ qualities: its lack of plot and logical movement (from exposition through turning point to catastrophe). But the language of this play probably makes more allusions to the theatre than any other Beckett play. In *Waiting for Godot* the total impact of the play is multi-vocal, and Beckett’s verbal art embodies precise images of action and a far-reaching vision of human existence. The characters are there, immediate, in their role as speakers – in narrative texts the dialogue is one way of presenting information, whereas in drama it is the basic form of presentation; the dialogue is in fact spoken action – in Pirandello’s words “*azione parlata*” (Pfister 1988:6).

Dramatic dialogue is an utterance of execution – the execution of action – a promise, a revelation, a threat. It is then clear that performative speech is always present in dramatic dialogue. In *How to do things with words* J.L. Austin wrote “There is something which is at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering” (1962:6). Austin starts by distinguishing between two sorts of utterances. First there are constative utterances, which is like making statements, and secondly, performative utterances that consists of commands, requests and vows, for example, which is like performing an action. When Shakespeare’s King Lear says: ‘This coronet part between you’, he is using a metaphoric coronet to indicate the redistribution of power, but he is referring to an actual object. The dramatic problem is that Lear is commanding (performatively) either that which cannot be done, or that which would constitute a very destructive act. The question now arises: would it make sense to state that constative utterances have the function of relaying information to the audience, and performative utterances have the function of furthering the action? This would make it easier, but unfortunately, it is not quite true. First, we

should consider that a statement of fact could change the situation by furthering the action. Second, a performative utterance might be delivered in the apparent form of a constative.

In his analysis of the description of the primary features of the performative and the various forms it can take, Austin comes to a surprising conclusion by collapsing these distinctions in his book. His work evolved towards the idea that we should think of every utterance – every speech act – as consisting of three subsidiary kinds of act: LOCUTIONARY ACT (uttering something meaningful); ILLLOCUTIONARY ACT (the acts performed IN saying something) and PERLOCUTIONARY ACT (effects produced on the hearer BY saying it).

This allows for a more particular description of the speech act. When Lear says: ‘Here I disclaim all paternal care’, the illocutionary act is one of disclaiming. But the perlocutionary force produced by his utterance is to banish Cordelia. Illocutionary acts can have a different force *according to the circumstance of their utterance*. Wallis and Shepherd provide us with the following example to clarify the issue (1998:60):

When the main character in *The Dutchess of Malfi* (John Webster, 1614) tells her steward Antonio: ‘Raise yourself’ the illocutionary force of those words is exquisitely ambiguous. They are in the act of gently seducing one another. He has lower-class rank but she, according to convention, has the lower rank in gender. She is both commanding him, and inviting him to stand as her equal. The delicious ‘wobble’ of that moment does two important things. It expresses a beautiful balance in their relationship; and it suggests that they are performing a dangerous balancing act from which they might fall. In addition, the fact that she has already called him her ‘upright treasurer’ makes her command easily taken as a sexual pun. As well as the wobble around status, there is one around chastity and sexual directness. The attention to the illocutionary force has helped us to pinpoint and describe this small but important moment in the play’s design.

To explain illocutionary force is to embrace the conventions that enable us to perform various illocutionary acts: what one has to do in order to promise, to threaten. As Austin tells us, “a good many other things have as a general rule to be right and to go off right if we are to be said to have happily brought off our action” (1962:114). To know what

these other things refer to, we may hope to discover them by examining those cases in which something *did go wrong*. Something cannot be a performative unless it can go wrong. So for a performative to operate properly, Austin tells us:

There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further, the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked. The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and completely (1962:14-15).

It is clear that as a speech-act, the dramatic speech constitutes its own particular speech situation. In a narrative text, the fictional speech situation can be constituted by the narrator's report, where the dramatic dialogue is confined to that specific situation. "If dialogue has to arise out of a situation, it has to lead to a situation, to another one, certainly. Dramatic dialogue occasions forms of action and endurance, a new situation, out of which a new dialogue arises, etc." (Friedrich Dürrenmatt in Pfister 1988:6).

In this study it is of cardinal importance to account for the way that empathy, sympathy or objectivity is scripted to happen, how the dramatic text positions the various characters before the audience. It is clear that we can identify certain characters as stereotypes or archetypes, and this involves creating a feeling of sympathy or empathy, types are characters created to install a feeling of sympathy that can be more objectifying than a feeling of empathy. In the dramatic text the characters feature as one of the most crucial elements that can give insight into 'the message' and the meaning that is created by the dramatist and mediated through the dialogue delivered by the characters. Wallis and Shepherd summarise this idea:

The dialogue in front of us is busy doing a lot more than telling a story. It is, as we have said, creating images, movement, a stage world; and at the same time it is addressing itself to the audience, telling them how to watch, alerting them to significances, making them feel comfortable or making them feel worried that nothing is quite what it seems (1998:2).

Most plays begin with some sort of exposition: We find that pieces of information about the time and place of the dramatic setting are strewn throughout the play, but it is customary for audiences to be informed about the here and the now at the beginning of the play. When this exposition is presented by a character it provides insight into the particular situation and previous actions that had an influence on the here and the now, but it also provides insight into the perspective of the specific character delivering the exposition. In the case of withheld exposition, as with anticipated action (he says he will come back and haunt her: we wait in suspense to see how, when and if he will do so) this creates suspense, and both are the creations of the dialogue. The organisation of the dialogue with regards to what the audience knows is a crucial part of how plays operate in general, and are designed to operate. This leads us to the concept of the time-space scale as an inherent part of plot. In the narrative world of the novel, it is the function of the fictional narrator to set out these barometers of the fictional world associated with the narrative. This allows a certain variability of the time-space scale and can be cause for all kinds of restructuring within this time-space relationship (e.g. achronology). However, in most dramatic texts the narrator is usually absent. In the dramatic text the time-space scale is set out by the implied author (the characters and their dialogue) in the structure of the individual scenes (with their individual time-space scale) in the context of the whole play. In the dramatic text the structuring of time and space within individual scenic units drives the plot and therefore the fictional world. We are once again reminded of White's insistence on the aesthetic dimension through emplotment in historiography.

In some instances it is obvious that the main function of the stage persons (characters) is to serve the plot. Even when this is not wholly the case, the functioning of the plot can be seen as ‘calling up’ the need for characters. Pfister goes on to say that characters drive the plot through actions and events. He defines an action as “something which changes the situation” and an event as “things said and done in a play which do not change the situation” (1988:70). Most things that happen on stage in most plays can be thought of as having degrees of either event or action. We might even think of an action as a special kind of event. An event is anything that happens; actions are events that change the situation. Through the plot we see a degree of elaboration that sets up events and

scenography to give an indication of the basic concerns of the play and the way in which the play persuades us to accept it as a way of looking at the world. “A particular shape of plot or arrangement of plots is arguably always meaningful in itself, and certainly contributes significantly to what this particular act of storytelling comes to mean to its audience” (Wallis and Shepherd 1998:84). This provides us with groundwork to build thematic, moralistic, ethical or critical arguments.

It is clear then that dialogue, character and plot as elements of the dramatic text are co-dependent, and more importantly, that the playwright creates action through dialogue. Action (usually) leads to more action and so we as the reader should always be alert to the precise references and representations that the dialogue creates as ‘meaning’ and the particular ‘message’ of the play is inscribed in the spoken words designed to be heard by the audience, but not always by all or any of the characters. I will use the qualities of these elements as described in this section as the basis for analysing the fictionalised and dramatised events and characters in the plays.

It is therefore evident that when we study the written text (primary and secondary) and specifically dialogue in a dramatic text, there are a myriad of hidden, implied and implicit messages that we need to take into account to determine the fictionalisation and dramatisation and thus the narrative created in the dramatic text. This allows for a clear understanding of the poetic nature of the narrative created, and only then we can begin to understand the alternative narrative created.

Essentially the plays selected for this study can be described as ‘documentary theatre’, but as I will demonstrate in the next section, this term strongly alludes to the ancillary text, and therefore a performance. And since I do not focus on the performances of these texts, but more on the nature of the narrative as a fictionalised and dramatised construct in the written text, it will not be possible to link them directly to this term. However, all three texts are firmly rooted in this genre, and an acknowledgement of this influence and the groundbreaking work done by Piscator and Brecht in this genre, is necessary. Therefore the term ‘documentary theatre’ cannot be ignored in this study.

2.6 Documentary theatre

A term generally used to describe theatre concerned with history is ‘documentary theatre’. Heinrich Kipphardt explains in the introduction to his documentary play, *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (1967:5) that this “is a play for the theatre, not an assemblage of documentary material”. It was his intention to present a *version* of the events surrounding J. R. Oppenheimer that could be *staged*, without disregard for the real events.

The power of documentary theatre lies in its ability to “address key questions of the time in theatre through images and through interpretation” (Barton in Feijen 1991:8; my translation). Documentary theatre normally has as its goal the judgment of historical events in a new and critical manner in the present, a manner that is relevant for the present. But closer to the issue, documentary materials are presented in such a way that the hegemonic ideas and images of the events are put up for discussion. As Johnston tells us, it is

the relationship between the historical record and a fictional interpretation of historical events based upon a judicious selection of material from that record, some imaginative additions, and a creative patterning of the combination that adds up to some significant totality as theatre (2001:1).

Piscator’s theatre techniques of the 1920s, such as the extensive use of picture and film projections from 1925 on as well as complex scaffold stages, had an extensive influence on European and American production methods during the rest of the century. His dramaturgy of contrasts led to sharp political-satirical effects and anticipated the commentary techniques of epic theatre. In the Federal Republic of Germany Piscator’s interventionist theatre model experienced a late second zenith. Several productions trying to come to terms with the German’s Nazi past and on other timely issues made Piscator the inspirer of a mnemonic and documentary theatre from 1963 on.

The end of the nineteenth century saw a growing realism in the representation of everyday life in theatre. This had a restricting effect on the topics chosen for theatrical

productions, since it was easier to build a drawing room than a castle in the woods, but the significance of these restrictions found their way into areas apart from just set building. To make that which happened on stage seem even more realistic, the very nature of the fact that it was theatre had to be disguised. The audience was granted a ‘slice of life’ by viewing the play from the perspective of the missing fourth wall of the set. Of course, this was not real life, but this was about making the audience believe the illusion of reality – hence the name of this kind of theatre: illusionary theatre. This type of theatre set out to state that, through creating the illusion of reality it could provide insight into the real world.

According to Piscator (1978), the First World War led him to the conclusion that this type of theatre was completely isolated from hard reality. Piscator’s communist inclinations brought him to seriously consider how to create theatre that could effectively influence the political and social situation of the day. He felt he could not preach revolution through theatre that was set in a living room. Piscator had his sights set on a type of theatre that would give way to a German revolution. Such a theatre would have to meet two fundamental requirements. First, the communist message had to be delivered in a clear and convincing manner. Secondly, that which was presented on stage had to be done in such a way that the audience immediately saw the connection between that which is presented and the real world. This meant that whatever was done on stage had to be drawn directly from reality, and that which was going on in the real world at that very moment. To do this, he employed all the modern techniques available to him – film, sound, projections. Piscator quoted Paul Klee: “The purpose of art is not to portray the visible, but to make visible” (in Styan 1981c:177). Piscator wanted to present reality by using a montage of reality. The spectator had to be completely absorbed by the dramatic world that was structured according to a Marxist vision. “Commentary, placards, selective spot-lighting, film, – any device should be at the disposal of the stage when it was to be used to exhibit a social document” (Styan 1981c:177).

Piscator’s ideas about theatre lead to a whole new direction in theatre: the documentary theatre. This term was used to describe his play *Trotz Alledem!* (1926). It was not the

first play that Piscator presented which involved the use of authentic documents (film, photographs and newspaper articles, for example) in the staging of the play; he did it before in *Fahnen en Revue Roter Rummel* (both from 1924). This was, however, the first play where this was wholly the case. With the use of authentic documents as theatrical tool or material, Piscator came to be seen as the father of documentary theatre – this was born from a deeply felt frustration about traditional theatre that failed to present the real world in theatre. He was not alone, though. From 1924 to 1929 Germany saw a wave of documentary plays – and again, thirty years later, from 1963 to 1970, a second wave of documentary theatre followed. It is important to note that Piscator himself was involved with this second wave through his directing of the documentary plays of Rolf Hochhuth (*Der Stellvertreter*, 1963), Heinrich Kipphardt (*In der Sache J. Robert Oppenheimer*, 1964) and Peter Weiss (*Die Ermittlung*, 1965).

In his article titled “The Political Aesthetics of Holocaust Literature: Peter Weiss's the Investigation and Its Critics” (1998:43) Robert Cohen writes:

In the mid- 1990s a critic referred to *The Investigation (Die Ermittlung*, 1965), Peter Weiss's play about Auschwitz and Nazi mass extermination, as one of those rare literary works able to overcome the "confusion, silence, and despair" produced by the "naked testimony" of witnesses at Holocaust trials. Lawrence Langer, whose words are quoted here, should know. He himself had for a few days attended the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial which lasted from the end of 1963 through the summer of 1965 and on which *The Investigation* is based. In his article Langer holds that "Weiss lowers the barriers of the unimaginable" and "gradually narrows the space separating the imagination from the camp." The play, in Langer's congenial interpretation, crosses a border which prevailing views on representations of the Holocaust consider to be nearly impassable: it allows the imagination to be "drawn into the landscape of Auschwitz," it transforms the "literal truth" of the witnesses' testimonies into the "imagined truth of Auschwitz."

If we trace the historical milieu of these two waves of documentary theatre, then it becomes apparent that both coincided with periods of political turmoil. As Brian Barton states in his book, *Das Dokumentartheater*: “certain social and political questions of the moment were experienced as too complex or too overwhelming to receive fictive treatment or to be portrayed through fictive characters in theatre as well” (Feijen 1991:5,

my translation). The first wave coincided with the turmoil of the Weimar Republic, where conservatives and democrats, as well as different communist groups were involved in a struggle for power and trust, and the Nazis were on the rise. The second wave was the result of a change of consciousness in Germany after World War II. The economic restructuring of Germany during the 1950s led to a government and a social climate where critical public discussions over the country's Nazi past were frowned upon. This in turn had the effect that the war was a preferred topic for the documentary theatre of the time. Robert MacDonald writes in the preface to Hochhuth's *The Representative* (English translation for *Stellvertreter*) that the play takes one of the "most momentous and agonising crises of history, and by fixing it firmly in time and space, brings home to us its most profound and lasting implications" (Hochhuth 1963:xi). The subject of this play is the Pope Pius XII's failure to condemn Hitler and the slaughter of Jewish people, even while he had extensive evidence about the concentration camps.

Although Bertolt Brecht's first plays were written in Germany during the 1920s, he was not widely known until much later. Eventually his theories of stage presentation exerted more influence on the course of mid-century theatre in the West than did those of any other individual. This was largely because he proposed the major alternative to the Stanislavsky-oriented realism that dominated acting and the 'well-made play' construction that dominated playwriting.

Brecht's earliest work was heavily influenced by German Expressionism, but it was his preoccupation with Marxism and the idea that man and society could be intellectually analyzed that led him to develop his theory of "epic theatre." Brecht believed that theatre should appeal not to the spectator's feelings but to his reason. While still providing entertainment, it should be strongly didactic and capable of provoking social change. In the realistic theatre of illusion, he argued, the spectator tended to identify with the characters on stage and become emotionally involved with them rather than being stirred to think about his own life. To encourage the audience to adopt a more critical attitude to what was happening on stage, Brecht developed his *Verfremdungseffekt* ("alienation effect" – i.e. the use of anti-illusory techniques to remind the spectators that they are in a

theatre watching an enactment of reality instead of reality itself). Such techniques included flooding the stage with harsh white light, regardless of where the action was taking place, and leaving the stage lamps in full view of the audience; making use of minimal props and ‘indicative’ scenery; intentionally interrupting the action at key junctures with songs in order to drive home an important point or message; and projecting explanatory captions onto a screen or employing placards. From his actors Brecht demanded not realism and identification with the role, but an objective style of playing, to become in a sense detached observers.

Certainly Brecht’s attack on the illusive theatre influenced, directly or indirectly, the theatre of every Western country. In Britain the effect became evident in the work of such playwrights as John Arden and Edward Bond, and in some of the bare-stage productions by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Western theatre in the 20th century, however, has proved to be a cross-fertilization of many styles (Brecht himself acknowledged a debt to traditional Oriental theatre) and by the 1950s other approaches were gaining influence.

Brecht claimed that Piscator created theatre that used visual spectacle to involve the working force emotionally – but that did not lead to true political emancipation or action. Piscator relied heavily on illusion, and that had a paralysing effect on the spectator. It leads to passivity. Brecht thought that true political theatre should ‘wake up’ the audience by making them see and hear. The audience should be distanced from what they saw on stage. His epic theatre was self-reflective and not about the ‘telling of a story’ and forced the spectator to take part actively by becoming aware of their own part in society and the possible change that their own actions can give birth to. The premise was to bring the spectator into contact with his world – to confront that world – in order to bring him to insight into his political reality and make him realise that actual involvement in the class fight and the revolution was necessary. The following quote from Oscar G. Brockett about Brecht’s epic theatre, highlights the influences and importance of history in theatre.

Brecht called his work *epic* theatre to distinguish it from the *dramatic* theatre against which he was in revolt. He stated that the old theatre has outlived its

usefulness since it reduces the spectator to a role of complete passivity. In it, according to Brecht, events are presented as fixed and unchangeable, since even historical subjects are treated in present-day terms; this approach encourages the audience to believe that things have always been the same. Furthermore, realistic staging gives the action an air of stability which contributes to the idea that an entrenched position cannot be altered. The spectator, therefore, can only watch in a hypnotised and uncritical way; his senses are lulled, and he cannot participate ‘productively’ in the theatrical event. [...] Brecht envisioned a new theatre in which the spectator would become a vital part. [...] In describing his ideal theatre, Brecht used three key terms: *historification*, *alienation*, and *epic*.

Unlike the Realists, Brecht thought that the theatre should not treat contemporary subject matter in a lifelike manner. Rather, the theatre should “make strange” the actions it presents. One avenue to strangeness lies in *historification*, which ordinarily means using material drawn from other times or places. But contrary to old theatrical practices, which depict historical material in today’s pattern, Brecht argued that the dramatist should emphasise ‘pastness’ – the removal of events from the past. The playwright should make the spectator feel that, if he had been living under the conditions shown in the play, he would have taken some positive action. The audience should then go on to see that, since things have changed, it is possible to make desirable social reforms in the present (Brockett 1964:334-335).

Despite the fact that documentary theatre is based on historical research, it remains essentially a subjective form (the dramatist is essentially working with an aesthetic medium, which means that the historical research will be fictionalised and dramatised) – however, in the case of documentary theatre, this subjectivity is consciously on display rather than disguised. By using freely accessible sources, the spectator is given the opportunity to trace and investigate the extent of the author’s subjectivity, whereby the notion of ‘pure’ history that is removed from the author’s perspective on the events is further subverted. The line between the objective subject matter and the subjective dramatist’s opinion cannot be obscured in documentary theatre. The critical spectator must always be able to see that line clearly to make him aware that what they are observing is a particular view of the events. The author cannot introduce a documentary film in a scene as objective research material.

As mentioned above, it is clear that my theories on the narrative in theatre that focuses on history are firmly rooted in the ideas and practices of both Piscator and Brecht, because of their striving to (potentially) challenge the status quo and offer alternative narratives as a specific practice of theatre.

2.7 Conclusion

It is often said in criticism of theatre that as an institution it remains essentially and inherently artificial and that this is not reconcilable with the notion of authenticity needed for the documentation of history. Theatre that focuses on a historical event relies on the historical ‘reworking’ of that event which has been documented by some source and is then fictionalised and dramatised for the purposes of telling a dramatically interesting story. It needs to be artificial and dramatic, otherwise it could not belong to the theatrical genre – i.e. true, authentic, raw documentary material alone is not fit for the theatre; it has to be transformed into a ‘document of art’, an artwork first. The plays selected belong first and foremost to the dramatic genre, to theatre – an art form. The dramatist knows that what is presented on stage is not an authentic, raw historical document, but a fictionalised and dramatised version. As an artwork, it stands as a ‘former authentic document’ now placed within a world of art where it gains new meaning. Even though it is not possible to put something ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ on stage, it is possible to put something on stage that clearly and deliberately refers to this ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ event. This resonates with the words of White at the beginning of this chapter: “As a symbolic structure, the historical narrative does not reproduce the events it describes; it tells us in what directions to think about the events with different emotional valences” (1980:5). This eliminates any doubt as to the political power of theatre versus the political power of the historical document.

History – especially periods in history such as South Africa’s apartheid era, the development and the use of the first atomic bomb, and the Holocaust – sometimes exceed

our ability to imagine it, let alone the various complexities that constitute the events. As Njabulo Ndebele writes in *Negotiating the Past*:

Is it not that we often think of stories as imaginary events which we may call tales, fiction, fables, or legends: stories as narratives of one kind or another? Yet, the testimonies we continue to hear at TRC hearings are the recall of memory. What is being remembered actually happened. If today they sound like imaginary events it is because, as we shall recall, the horror of day-to-day life under apartheid often outdid the efforts of the imagination to reduce it to metaphor (1998:19).

The narrative in the theatrical texts studied is created through a fictionalised and dramatised account of these events that alludes strongly to the often incomprehensible complexities present in the contexts of the plays. The proposed (by the dramatic text) physical enactment of these events confronts us with the specific people and the day-to-day realities behind these events as the symbolic, contextualising production of traces on a stage enables us to access the past in a ‘direct’ manner. This is a key concept in the process whereby the playwright narrates to uncover lost or latent meanings, silences and gaps. Theatre does not aim at banishing ‘incompleteness’, but engages in demonstrating complexity in the contexts of the events, and the various individual narratives that underlie this complexity.

The subjective, aesthetic treatment of the past through art and literature can provide an alternative, less hegemonic exploration of history. “The artist is consciously formulating, and thus also interpreting, events and this sense h/she is actively involved in shaping public memory and opinion” (Hutchison 1999:46). Through this formulation and interpretation, the playwright can demonstrate the status quo and simultaneously challenge official histories, and provides insight and understanding that might not necessarily be provided by a historical document that claims objectivity and empiricism. Erika Fischer-Lichte tells us in her *Semiotik des Theaters* (1983): “The task of the dramatist as theatre historian is to define as well as reconstruct the norm” (in Van der Zalm 1999:37, my translation).

The metaphorical discourse for the interpretation of historical events as proposed by White's *Metahistory* reminds us that theatre definitively contributes to the historiographical debate in its fictional and dramatic status. In theatre, the narrative as the 'style' and 'intent' of the dramatist is literally displayed and performed. Troping as mediating enterprise is a quintessential part of the theatrical text, and allows for the creation and interpretation of events and ideas on different levels. The poetic ordering of events through emplotment in theatre enables the playwright to tell an alternative story through a privileging of various sign systems and images. The way in which the events become part of the narrative is clearly part of the story the playwright wants to tell, whereby the official expectations and versions of history can be challenged, creating a myriad of equally important narratives. The plays (perhaps even more significantly) also document their contemporary contexts.

To conclude, this chapter aimed to elaborate on White's theory of the narrative and poetic nature of the historical document, and how we can apply his theory to include a narrativisation of history in theatre in the historiographical discourse. I attempted to establish the distinctive nature of representation and narrative in theatre. This will be used to analyse the playwright's fictional and dramatic reworking of the historical events and the complex backgrounds of the plays. This in turn will bring us closer to an understanding of the alternative narratives created through the plays that can possibly be seen as counter-memories challenging official accounts of history.

CHAPTER THREE: *UBU AND THE TRUTH COMMISSION AS ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE*

He finds a fresh sheet of paper. He lays it out on the table before him and writes these words with his pen. It was. It will never be again. Remember.

(Paul Auster 1989:172)

3.1 Introduction

Chapter Two explored Hayden White's theory on the narrative and poetic nature of historical works, and how this can be applied to include the narrative in the theatrical text focusing on historical events in the historiographical discourse.

In this chapter I will discuss Jane Taylor's play *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, linking the theatrical narrative in this play to the debate surrounding the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and its memory work. I will pay specific attention to the processes of the Commission, specifically the use of verbal testimonies and therefore memories to construct history. I will discuss how this has seemingly complicated the notions of 'reconciliation' and 'truth' as set out by the Commission at the start of its work. I will look at the concept of the TRC's final Report as 'official history', and also the seeming need for a literary discourse in the whole debate surrounding the workings of the Commission.

In the final section of this chapter I will look at how these issues found their way into the narrative of the play. In order to do this, I will focus on some crucial dialogue and stage directions to examine the dramatised and fictionalised account by the dramatist of the TRC and its workings. The secondary text (stage directions as well as the author's, director's and puppeteer's notes) of *Ubu* goes to great lengths to explain the mood of the music, the movements, the precise nature of the drawings and the animation. This is supported by a variety of photographs (in the particular copy used for this study).

Finally, in this chapter I hope to establish that in the light of the theory of a narrative in history writing, this play is an alternative narrative that can potentially make a valuable contribution towards making sense of the Commission's work and South Africa's apartheid past – not as a mere fictional account of the events, but as a historical document that engages with the complexities surrounding the TRC.

3.2 Background of the play

Ubu and the Truth Commission is based on the actual witness testimonies of the victims and perpetrators of South Africa's apartheid regime before the TRC. Jane Taylor explains her inspiration for writing this play:

What has engaged me as I have followed the Commission, is the way in which individual narratives come to stand for the larger national narrative. The stories of personal grief, loss, triumph and violation now stand as an account of South Africa's recent past. History and autobiography merge. This marks a significant shift, because in the past decades of popular resistance, personal suffering was eclipsed – subordinated to a larger project of mass liberation. Now, however, we hear in individual testimony the very private patterns of language and thought that structure memory and mourning. *Ubu and the Truth Commission* uses these circumstances as a starting point (Taylor 1998:ii).

Individual narratives as representatives of a larger narrative is of great importance in my analysis of this play specifically regarding the importance of a greater understanding of our past in South Africa for the purpose of 'nation-building'. Edward Said proposed that we view the concept of a 'nation' as an ambivalent, ideological structure, or a cultural representation. He proclaimed that 'nations are narrations', in other words also constructions (in Bhabha 1990:6).

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. Man, Gentlemen, does not improvise. The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice and devotion. [...] The Spartan song – 'We are what you

were; we will be what you are' – is, in its simplicity, the abridged hymn of every *patrie* (Ernest Renan 1990:19).

To provide a clearer understanding of why it is important to explore the work of the TRC as mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, I believe a brief introduction to the background of the play as a basis for the further analysis of these issues is necessary.

Ubu and the Truth Commission was written by Jane Taylor, workshopped and produced in collaboration with William Kentridge and the Handspring Puppet Company. The production was presented as a multi-media creation using puppetry, animation and human actors. The first performance was presented at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg in 1997. William Kentridge's alternation between drawing and theatre seems to have found a resolution in a number of very commanding theatre productions, particularly *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. The production of *Ubu* uses a combination of actors, puppets and puppeteers, "which may be seen as extension of Kentridge's interest in collage structure, producing a kind of total artwork of extraordinary power and complexity" (Godby 1999:82). As Michael Godby puts it:

Kentridge's concern at the moment, indeed the concern of every thinking South African, is the experience of negotiating the legacy of Apartheid, a process that is associated publicly with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was established as part of South Africa's transition to democracy to examine human rights abuses in the apartheid era. Kentridge's decision to use theatre in *Ubu* to explore issues of confession and reconciliation over South Africa's violent history created a dramatic space in which more complex issues could be aired. (1999:82-83).

Like many other South African artists, Kentridge found himself intrigued by the process of delivering testimony by victim and perpetrator alike and the evidence that mounted through these testimonies "The fortunate grafting of these two themes provided on the one hand, a new kingdom of unimaginable evil for Ubu and, on the other, a dramatic structure that could both resist the inevitable satiety with accounts of violence and permit arbitrary shifts within elements of the play, that is between perpetrators and victims, actors and puppets, and actuality on stage and a distinct level of reality in the narrative on

film” (Godby 1999:83). The decision to use puppets in the place of real actors to portray the victims forms a crucial element of the structural concerns of the play.

This device separated the testimony from the victims, who, of course, continued their lives independent of the play; and it permitted an exceptional poignancy in the theatre both because the voices were, in a sense, disembodied and because the puppets could be brought into new, dramatic relationships with the actors on the stage, especially the fictive representation of their persecutor, Ubu himself (Godby 1999:83).

It was Kentridge himself who noted that the play was never intended to compete with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But, in attempting to make sense of memory, rather than be the memory, as he put it, or in providing a reflection on the debate, rather than being the debate, the play uses the dramatic spaces of theatre to extraordinarily powerful effect.

The origin of our work is very different [to that of the ‘theatre’ of the Commission] and even if in the end it links directly to the Commission, this is secondary rather than primary. Our theatre is a reflection on the debate rather than the debate itself. It tries to make sense of the memory rather than be the memory (Kentridge in Taylor 1998:ix).

Taylor’s main character Pa Ubu is strongly tied to the character in Alfred Jarry’s subversive play *Ubu Roi* (1896). Jarry’s text follows the criminal, despotic, political and military acts of Ubu and his wife, who are trying to achieve absolute power. He is a kind of ignorant infant – personified by his toilet brush sceptre. Taylor explains Jarry’s character: “While Ubu may be relentless in his political aspirations, and brutal in his personal relations, he apparently has no measurable effect upon those who inhabit the farcical world which he creates around himself” (1998:iii). In his infantile state of mind there is no concept of consequence and he is free to act on his most basic needs and desires. Laurent Dévèze writes that Jarry’s Ubu has become the most effective emblem of the potentates of the 20th century. “Ubu is the seamy side of the tyrant’s rational discourse. He is the worst possible news for a tyranny: a transparent tyrant. His despotic face does not bother to appear to be different from what it is” (in Doepel 1997:i).

Pa Ubu, as the reincarnation of Alfred Jarry's burlesque character, depicts the white, dominant male in the TRC discourse in the shape of the perpetrator. He learns that he should make a 'full disclosure' in order to obtain amnesty, but his full disclosure takes the form of a rehearsed speech, 'performed' for the benefit of the Commission. It is clearly not a heartfelt confession that comes from a deep rooted need to tell the truth. His version of the truth offered by his full disclosure becomes another lie told for the benefit of others, and indeed himself. The Commission's invitation extended to Pa Ubu to tell the truth then in fact contributes to the fragile nature of the concepts of truth and reconciliation in the context of the TRC. He is stating his case in contrast to the individual narratives of the witnesses telling their stories as representatives of the 'innocent' and the victim, based on their own constructed memories of the events. His concept of truth, embodied in his rehearsal of his plea for amnesty, his so-called 'full disclosure', is revealing of those that he represents and their motives and memories. These issues are magnified by the theatrical text, creating a 'thickened narrative' that explores the complexities of the South African society and the processes of the TRC.

Lisa Malherbe writes:

A trademark of Truth and Reconciliation literature certainly is the kind of challenge that *Ubu and the Truth Commission* poses to the audience. If the audience can be challenged into social awareness through the complication of the 'theatre' of the TRC, then [the] definition of Truth and Reconciliation literature as a "[relocation of] individual and private experiences" rings true (2002:18).

The theatrical text in this case reminds us that there is no clear pattern that can be followed when trying to make sense of the outcomes of the TRC process, there is no single 'official' history or 'unofficial' history that should receive preferential treatment. "The audience is encouraged to draw the final conclusions from subjective narratives, and in so doing construct their personal versions of history" (Malherbe 2002:47). In *Ubu and the Truth Commission* we see an engagement with the complex issues around the notions of truth and the subsequent reconciliation that was expected to flow from the 'complete knowledge of the past' in the TRC and its memory-work.

The TRC's workings in the shape of the testimonies presented to the Commission, was presented to the wider public through the media, and with regards to this the multi-media nature of *Ubu and the Truth Commission* is of specific importance. The audience experiences the theatricality of the TRC hearings, and strong references are made about the public nature of the hearings as the play becomes an emulation of the way the public perceived the workings of the TRC – reported versions of horrifying deeds.

We now turn to an investigation of the TRC, its memory work and the documenting of this by the Commission.

3.3 Memory and History as constructs: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

3.3.1 The idea behind the TRC: An accountability model and redemptive platform

The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995 created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission “as part of [the] bridge-building process...to lead the nation away from a deeply divided past to a future founded on the recognitions of human rights and democracy.”⁴ Accordingly, the South African Parliament charged the TRC with the overarching mission of promoting national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past. In the light of the TRC’s mandate and the spirit of the epilogue to the South African interim Constitution, which foreshadowed the concept of individual amnesty, section 17 of the Act created a Committee on Amnesty within the TRC. The section placed the decision whether to grant individual amnesty to the perpetrators of human rights abuses under apartheid exclusively in the Committee’s hands. Individual amnesty could be granted only to a person who made a full disclosure of all the relevant facts relating to acts associated with a political objective. Applicants failing to meet the requirements for amnesty would be liable to criminal prosecution.

⁴ THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF SOUTH AFRICA REPORT, ch. 4 (1999) [hereinafter TRC REPORT].

The TRC in South Africa dealt with personal memories through the narratives delivered before a panel of commissioners, an audience of victims and perpetrators, and a nation divided. This process lead to a debate around the meaning of history as a construct based on individual testimonies, social reconstruction based on the unveiling of different ‘truths’ to create a total knowledge and understanding of the past; and the contribution of a literary narrative within this debate. The foundation of such a debate is summed up in the book *Hope and Memory* by Tzvetan Todorov:

To put the past in the service of the present is an act. To judge such an act, we require it to have more than a truth of correspondence (as for historical facts) and a truth of unveiling (as for historical interpretation), for we must evaluate it in terms of good and evil, that is to say, by political and moral criteria. It is obvious that not all uses of the past are good, and no less obvious that the same past event can give rise to very different lessons (2000:134).

The TRC in South Africa took the form of public hearings – a platform for ‘redemptive’ stories and an opportunity for healing for victims. This was a constructed wholeness, a ‘production’ of memories, through which certain versions of the past were remembered. As Adam and Adam write in “The Politics of Memory in Divided Societies” in the book *After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*,

Human memory is never a collection of fixed, stored data that can be downloaded or accumulated for later use. Social conditions determine what is remembered and how these events are recalled. Interests shape individual as well as collective memory, and memory, therefore, amounts to a contingent social construction (2000:32).

The TRC was a forum for the reliving and recording of memories that were fed back into the public consciousness, a process through which the public consciousness changes. The work of the TRC was “not that far removed from the ‘interpretation of dreams’” (Norval 1999:500). The interpretation of dreams places them in a different context where their meaning can become clear. Wittgenstein said that “in a sense the dreamer re-dreams his dream in surroundings such that its aspect changes” (in Norval 1999:500). Forgotten stories and ‘lost’ personal accounts were presented and then

documented for the purposes of continuity and unity. In this context a sense of healing for the individual could equal healing for the nation.

Whilst it is obvious that reconciliation cannot be achieved by force, and certainly not because of enforced structures established by politicians, it is equally clear that it was crucial for the attempts at reconciliation in South Africa to have taken place in public.

Furthermore, prosecution would not clearly conform to the policies of the transitional agreement. The TRC's prime objective of reconciliation would not have been effectively furthered by a prosecutorial system. The aim was not simply to obtain a conviction or acquittal but to develop a comprehensive understanding of the past, and to reach a reconciliatory point between the perpetrators and the victims, individually and collectively. A genuine sense of remorse and regretful acknowledgment of atrocious crimes would be lost in the formality of a courtroom. The policymakers anticipated that, on the whole, hearing the perpetrator admit responsibility to the victim himself, and not by judicial declaration, would do more for closure and understanding than the imposition of responsibility upon a person or group by a governmental official (McGregor 2001:35).

The TRC's forums, and its subsequent activities, made a great contribution towards the creation of a shared public space where the voices of different individuals and communities were made audible – however haunting those testimonies might have been. There are those who feel that the rehashing of the past, as was done before the TRC, only complicated the road to reconciliation, but most involved in the reporting of the TRC's workings and its memory work would claim that it functioned in the service of reconciliation. Memory work is therefore both retrospective and prospective: the past is remembered and dealt with so as to enable us to live in the present and possibly to create a future. Admittedly, the South African accountability model may not have fulfilled its potential.

However, the key lesson of the South African experience is that while the negotiators concerned need discretion in devising a model of accountability that will be most likely to ensure a smooth transition to democracy, once such a model has been determined, the rule of law and other important democratic principles such as checks and balances, separation of powers, and equality and fairness

before the law must be stringently and transparently adhered to if the transitional society is to evolve into a stable democracy (McGregor 2001:45).

South Africa certainly aimed at that goal and, while mistakes were made in the process, future transitional states can learn important lessons by looking to South Africa's successes and failures in fashioning their own accountability model. The process of the TRC has made way for renewed reflection and scrutiny of the past in an effort to imagine alternative futures.

The character of the Commission and its processes were articulated around the focal points of justice, reconciliation and truth. We are today witnessing a struggle around the meaning that was generated by these focal points. I will investigate the contours of this struggle, as it is played out in intellectual debate and in the literature that came after the TRC process. Aletta Norval writes that we can discern the following lines of separation in this debate:

One is the separation between those who insist on reading the workings of the TRC through the tropes of truth, and those who focus on the role of narrative, those who emphasise authenticity rather than invention and construction; and those who see the work of the TRC in the service of national unity and homogeneity, rather than diversity and heterogeneity (1999:503-504).

3.3.2 The Focal Points: justice, reconciliation and truth

Underlying much of the writing on memory and reconciliation is the assumption that a confrontation with 'what really happened' will effect change in and of itself. The idea that a complete knowledge will lead to a change in attitude undermines the extent to which the interpretation of factual information is dependant on various frames of reference. Change happens when the frames of reference is altered, not through an appeal to reality as something that exists in its own right. As Du Toit writes, "Nothing like the final truth exists, as truth is contextual, contingent and historical. It is precisely the apartheid regime's appeal to truth which made it such a dangerous ideology" (1996:119).

This prompts the question: did this emphasis on the ‘truth’ contribute to promoting national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past, as the TRC’s mission clearly states. It was the TRC’s mandate to contribute to the production of a context within which South Africa may begin to construct a “universe of comprehensibility” (Asmal, Asmal and Roberts in Norval 1999:509). Certain factions see reconciliation in this particular sense as a process of acknowledgement of opposite worldviews, and thereby creating a universe that would allow mutual understanding to emerge. For others, the emphasis on a singular framework is clearly necessary and, taking into consideration the divided society created by apartheid, it would indeed not be reasonable to dismiss it altogether. The failure and success of the Commission to achieve its goals is represented by the two following opinions:

In the chapter by Colin Bundy, “The Beast of the Past: History and the TRC”, in *After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa* he writes:

It goes without saying that the TRC was charged with writing an official history. It was required to establish as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of the gross human rights violations that were committed between 1 March 1960 and 6 December 1993, including the antecedents, circumstances, factors and contexts of such violations, as well as the perspectives of the victims and the motives and perspectives of the persons responsible for committing these violations. This was an exceptionally demanding brief. The call for a catalogue of violations was complicated by the requirement also to grapple with causes, contexts, antecedents and motives. And, clearly, some of the authors of the Report recognised the epistemological and methodological issues inherent in the brief. [...] Ultimately, I believe that, although the TRC wrestled with its brief, it failed to get a proper grip on it, let alone pin it to the floor (2000:13).

In the same book Charles Villa-Vicencio ‘responded’ to Bundy in a chapter called, “On the Limitations of Academic History: The Quest for Truth Demands Both More and Less”:

As an academic critique of the published report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, his [Bundy’s] paper is difficult to fault. However, by way of a rejoinder, I think he is wrong in suggesting that the Commission was charged with

‘writing an official history’. The Commission saw itself as offering no more than a historical comment from its perspective on a given period of history. To have dared more would have been most arrogant. And, even then, the voice or perspective of the Commission was rarely a single, homogeneous one. The Chairperson’s Foreword to the Report stresses the inescapable perspective of those involved in the Commission, while calling on others to challenge critique and correct its limitations (2000:22).

And then he goes on to say:

At the heart of the debate on the Commission is, of course, the question of the complex relationship between truth and fiction. Albert Camus defined truth as being ‘as mysterious as it is inaccessible’ and yet, he insisted, worth ‘being fought for eternally’. Its discovery involves a long and slow process, to which the Commission could make no more than a preliminary contribution (2000:22-23).

Considering the comments and White’s theory in Chapter Two concerning the poetic and narrative nature of the historical document, and the production of ‘a history’ that results from this, we need to be reminded that everything (truth, meaning and the historical document) depends on precisely how “such a historical comment from its perspective on a given period of history” is constructed and presented. True reconciliation would allow South African citizens to arrive, for the first time, at a difficult but shared interaction. Considering this, reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa requires not an easy homogeneity, but a troubled, unrelenting and problematic negotiation. This is made clear by Homi Bhabha in his book *Nation and Narration*:

The locality of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as ‘other’ in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside / inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new ‘people’ in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning, and inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political power and cultural authority in what Derrida describes as the ‘irreducible excess of the syntactic over the semantic (1990:4).

In writing that deals with the subject of historical construction and memory work, the term ‘dealing with the past’ often appears. However, what does it mean to ‘deal with the past’? Du Toit suggests that dealing with the past is “a historical act of

interpretation” (1996:121), whether we are dealing with personal or national history. It is through this activity, this memory-work as an act of interpretation, that we reshape and redefine our communities, our histories, and ourselves. However, what form should this memory-work take?

3.3.3 Documenting the TRC

3.3.3.1 Oral testimonies and The Report

The discussion of reconciliation and memory-work prompts an examination of the way the oral testimonies were treated and finally documented as part of the TRC’s Report. The TRC and the Report that it had to produce had the mandate of writing an ‘official history’. It was charged with painting a full picture of the exact scope and the nature of the gross human rights violations that were committed between 1 March 1960 and 6 December 1993. This Report had to include the surrounding events, the qualifications of these acts of violence, as well as the victim’s perspective and the perpetrator’s justifications for the purpose of promoting national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past.

This was an incredibly difficult, almost impossibly so, demand. This was a call for a ‘list’ of violations that would read like a chronicle, but it also had to make sense of the circumstances, the contexts and the motivations behind these actions. Clearly, no easy task. As Deborah Posel remarked,

there can’t be many official state commissions which ponder the question of the possibility of objective knowledge, explore the meaning of ‘truth’, invoke historical sociologist Max Weber as a methodological role-model, and render their research process as a ‘dialectical encounter’ with disparate sets of data (in Bundy 2000:13).

It would seem that the TRC grappled over how the brief should be interpreted, and it lead to a Report that is at most a *structurally fragmented* historical account. This happened because of the TRC’s desire to serve as an empirical, objective source that would be seen

as credible and authentic. This gave way to a series of truth claims in the Report: “a factual or forensic truth – ‘factual, corroborated...accurate...reliable [impartial objective]’ – personal or narrative truth, social or ‘dialogue’ truth, and healing or restorative truth” (Bundy 2000:14). These truth claims become problematic when we view how those claims were applied in the writing of the Report. Wilson explains that “Truth shrank from a single, emancipatory Truth to smaller, multiple truths and in the final Report, there were only four fragmented types of truth remaining” (2001:36). The Commission’s role as mediator for national reconciliation served the personal, social and healing truths, and gave victims and perpetrators the opportunity to listen to each other. However, in the written narrative that was supposed to document these truths – the Report – a conservative, positivist attitude was adopted concerning its findings and its historical perceptions. It presented itself as an objective document that can provide insight into the human rights violations as empirical, impartial findings of what happened in the past. Villa-Vicencio makes an argument for another interpretation of the Commission’s work and the Report:

The Commission made an initial attempt to address the questions of motives and perspectives in the final volume of the Report. However, a lot more work needs to be done. History suggests that evil and the capacity for evil is no respecter of tribe, nation or race. The identification of the social, material and psychological sources that provide the fertile ground for perpetration still needs to be addressed. [...] I refer again to Garton Ash, who suggests that in theatre are three ways of dealing with past atrocities: trials, purges and history lessons. Each requires a different kind of truth. ‘I personally believe the third path, that of history lessons, is the most promising,’ he writes. And yet, as suggested earlier, it may take poets, artists and creative writers of fiction to complete the task (2000:31).

This leads us to examine another major critique against the Report – the concept of “completeness” that it set out to achieve (Bundy 2000:14). The Commission was under an obligation to listen to statements from anyone who wanted to make one; this had the potential of creating detailed, inclusive, multi-vocal accounts of past events. However, the notion of reconciliation meant that the Report which was to act as point of written closure for a divided nation, focused on a single, national narrative – an overview, which would serve the idea of a shared history, a communal goal of understanding others and

their actions. This became manifested as an “awkward methodological straddle” (Bundy 2000:14).

It appears that the TRC’s role in providing historical explanation was an attempt at ‘explaining’ apartheid, to link the social and economic order to the atrocities committed under the banner of apartheid. However, the Report fails to utilise existing research, does not theorise nor adequately conceptualise the apartheid state, and ultimately explains apartheid as a consequence of racism – a tautology that fails to explore the connections between racism and other social divides (Bundy 2000:17).

As mentioned, this sprang from the TRC’s need to establish a platform for nation building, rather than to a commitment to the endorsement of multiple narratives. The Report itself refers to this by using the ‘healing’ metaphor. Archbishop Desmond Tutu (chairperson of the TRC) highlighted the risk in not trying to create healing through the work of the Commission: “You just cannot have a total blanket amnesty. Just to say, all right man, all is forgiven is not enough. It appears as if the government in fact is scared that it is going to open a can of worms. But I mean that can of worms is going to haunt us” (in McGregor 2001:35).

Any critical engagement with the Report of the TRC prompts an investigation into the concept of ‘lived experience’ as put forward by oral testimony, and why the nature of the oral testimony has complicated the findings of the Report. Concerning the oral testimony Villa-Vicencio tells us that Pamela Reynolds

...reminds us that it is ‘raw memory’ which emerges in testimony. Memory gives expression to the inability of language to articulate what needs to be said. It is incomplete. Its very incompleteness is what cries out to be heard. There is also the testimony of silence. There is body language. There is fear, anger and confusion. There is a struggle between telling what happened and explaining it away. It takes time to unpack, understand and do justice to testimony (2000:23).

Contemporary history writing acknowledges that the dominant narrative is often not supported by the ‘ordinary voice’. However, it is important to acknowledge that placing those ‘ordinary voices’ at the centre of the historical document as representative of those

hidden from history previously could lead to a further perpetuation of their status as separate, special and marginalised. Njabulo Ndebele, as advocate for realist writing in history, argues that we need to draw a distinction between the stories we tell and the ‘recall of memory’. The former refers to imaginary events, while the latter refers to reality and what actually happened. The recall of memory he proposes stands to “guarantee us occasions for some serious moments of reflection” (1998:19). Consequently, memories have restorative value. His emphasis on the need to retain a distinction between ‘stories’ and ‘narratives of memory’, however, stands in sharp contrast to those commentators who have sought to question the immediate accessibility of the ordinary and the given. Ndebele does not question the need to account for events. His remarks do however steer us in the direction of paying careful attention to the framing of such events and the power relations inherent in this framing. In short, the truth of the past, and the manner in which it is being recounted and reworked, should alert us to the operation of regimes of truth, regimes that determine for us what may count as truth and as falsity. This does not deny that certain facts are ascertainable and beyond question, as any respectable historian will readily admit – for example the National Party did come into power in 1948, the Sharpeville shootings did take place in 1960, the Soweto demonstrations did take place as anti-Afrikaans protests in 1976, and so on. But the facts do not speak for themselves. In other words, ‘information’ as obtained through memories and testimonies is not ‘knowledge’ – it can however contribute greatly to an understanding of the “intimate relations between truth, power and knowledge” as Norval explains:

It is not, therefore, the case that the truth telling has led to a simple ‘pluralization’ of truth, or a production of many, but equally valid, truths. It has had one important effect, one that we will do well to remember: it has unveiled the intimate relations between truth, power and knowledge, and it has disabused us of naïve beliefs in their transparency (Norval 1999:516).

It is clear then that the task of memory (as represented in the TRC Report) is to reconstitute turbulence and fragmentation. This focuses the debate on the notion of how the literary narrative and specifically the theatrical narrative can contribute to exploring alternative narratives. Njabulo Ndebele is a lone voice in the desert crying out for

reflecting on the past in realistic writing. He does make a valid point about the correspondences between memory and the process of reflection inherent in the structure of narrative:

...time seems to have rescued the imagination. Time has given the recall of memory the power of reflection associated with narrative. Isn't it that there is something inherently reflective about memory, as there is about narrative? [...] Hopefully it is this reflective capacity, experienced as a shared social consciousness, that will be that lasting legacy of the stories of the TRC (Ndebele 1998:20).

As Du Toit remarks, "It is not only what we remember, but also how we remember, how we interact with memory that co-determines our identity" (1996:124). This brings us to the notion of a fictional portrayal of the TRC.

3.3.3.2 Fictional portrayal of the TRC

It is clear that the Report produced by the TRC adopted those strategies of explaining and representing associated with narrative as proposed by White. However, certain aims set out by the Report did not fulfil the anticipated outcomes of such a historical narrative. This is where I make a case for the narrative, fictional portrayal.

Antjie Krog's book *Country of my Skull* (2002) deals with the daily operations of the TRC and provides an insider's account (she attended the hearings as an SABC radio reporter). The narrative in Krog's book is a combination of first-hand experiences, the use of transcripts and reconstructions, and a strong fictional and poetic element. Krog succeeds in portraying the difficult personal negotiations that were played out between perpetrators and survivors, between perpetrators and their families, amongst families of survivors and the members of the TRC. Krog reminds us that "Telling is...never neutral, and the selection and ordering try to determine the interpretation" (2002:113). A short extract from Krog's account of a testimony alludes to this (2002:73):

It was different before. Victims told their stories to the Truth Commission. In another hall, at another time, ... perpetrators explained their deeds. But the amnesty hearing of police captain Jeffrey Benzien seizes the heart of truth and reconciliation – the victim face to face with the perpetrator... Never before had the double-edged relationship between torturer and the tortured been depicted as graphically as it was that week in the small, stuffy hall of the Truth Commission.

Krog brings up the issue of the importance of a narrative structure present in the documentation of history:

Narrative understanding is our most primitive form of explanation. We make sense of things by fitting them into stories. When events fall into a pattern that we can describe in a way that is satisfying as narrative then we think we have some grasp of why they occurred. Nations tell stories of their past in terms of which they try to shape their futures (anonymous quote in Krog 2002:196-197).

White, Derrida and Foucault emphasise the notion of memory as a particular way of opening up the silences and gaps so that alternative narratives are not produced simply by subverting existing narratives. “Simply to replace a patriarchic discourse with a matriarchic approach still respects the patterns and the model that informed the original narrative” (Brink 1998:33). As Brink explains in “Stories of history: Reimagining the past in post-apartheid narrative”:

One might even say that unless the enquiries of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) are extended, complicated, and intensified in the imaginings of literature, society cannot sufficiently come to terms with its past to face the future (1998:30).

The events as they happened were not inherently responsible for the present – a particular perspective on what happened fashions our perception of history in the current context. Even more explicitly, it is the way in which we appropriate language to describe the past that constitutes the way we deal with it (this, in any case, is the notion that is supported by White and Derrida). De Certeau embraces the rhetoric that is present in history: he understands ‘historiography’ as a symbiotic merging of ‘history’ and ‘writing’ because it

[...] carries, inscribed in its very name the paradox – and the quasi-oxymoron – of the interrelating of the two antinomous terms: the real and the discourse.

Historiography's task is to articulate these two terms and, where such an articulation cannot be formulated, to operate as if it had articulated them (in Logan 1980:4)

As memory is constructed it serves a very particular function serves a particular function in the process of an imagined retelling and reworking of history.

Even so, it is a sobering thought that all the sets of relations invoked so far – public / personal, history / story, facts / fiction – are ultimately predicated on memory. The individual constitutes and invents her / himself through the constant editing and re-editing of memory; the confluence of innumerable records and recordings of memories determines the publicly sanctioned account, which debouches into history; facts, as a Kantian *Ding an sich*, remain forever inaccessible except through our versions of them – and these versions are dependent on memory (as the testimonies in front of the TRC demonstrate with great dramatic impact). And the workings of the imagination are at the very least inspired by memory (Brink 1998:30-31).

The dramatic narrative in *Ubu and the Truth Commission* allows the reader to compare a specific version of the truth with other equally valid truths, contributing to the notion of a thickened narrative. This is made possible by theatre's explicit references to its status as subjective and aesthetic – facts are not only reworked and adapted, but now belong to a completely new symbolic world where the context of the events change and allows for the creation of a new meaning.

3.4 *Ubu and the Truth Commission* and the alternative narrative created by this play

3.4.1 Summary

A brief summary of the play will provide an insight into the various narratives in the play. This will be followed by a look at how key pieces of dialogue and stage directions dramatise and fictionalise the TRC and its workings to establish a dramatic narrative.

The play is centred on the characters of Pa and Ma Ubu – clear reincarnations of the original Ubu, signified by the animated, traditional Ubu mannekin with his spiral belly

and pointy head. Other characters (all puppets) include the witnesses, and the vulture that takes on the function of a kind of Greek chorus. Then there is Brutus, the three-headed dog that acts as Pa Ubu's henchmen, Niles the crocodile – Ma Ubu's handbag and Pa's paper shredder.

As the title suggests, the play has Ubu as its central protagonist, and the Commission is set against this individual. The play consists of five acts with Act One taking place in the Ubu household. Pa Ubu affirms his status as the chauvinistic, white male perpetrator as we witness his interaction with Ma Ubu and his commanding of the three-headed dog Brutus (his henchmen) to accompany him on a killing spree. Act Two brings on the first of the TRC witnesses as Pa Ubu takes a shower with the caption on the screen 'Bloodbath'. Next Pa Ubu talks to Niles the crocodile puppet where he hears about the TRC. According to Niles this Commission will determine Truths, Distortions and Proportions – setting the tone for Pa Ubu's interaction with the Commission in later scenes. Act Three opens with Ma Ubu speaking to Niles where she discovers Pa Ubu's secrets as she unpacks the contents of Niles' stomach. As she spreads out the pieces of evidence and documents of Pa Ubu's political-criminal activities, images fill the screen of torture, murder and clandestine operations. At the end of this sequence Pa Ubu comes on stage and tells his version of what happened. Act Four starts with Pa Ubu sleeping and dreaming. In his dream he hears another witness telling his story. Ma Ubu appears on the screen, and we now see her speaking to the media exposing Pa Ubu. At the end of this act, we see Pa Ubu being haunted by a big shadow figure resembling the Ubu from Jarry's production.

Finally he rehearses his speech for the Commission with the dogs by his side. Their belief in their indestructibility is apparent, but Pa Ubu sells them out by planting evidence on them. In the last act of the play a judge sentences Brutus, but Pa Ubu decides to hang them himself for fear of their incriminating testimonies. Pa Ubu makes his appearance before the Commission as the caption on screen reads 'Ubu Tells The Truth'. The play ends with Pa and Ma Ubu setting off to sail away as the all-seeing eye on the screen turns into a sunset. The plot of this play becomes a micro cosmos of South African society just

before and during the TRC: the white male committing crimes of war set against the innocent victims of an entire regime, the oppressed who also fought a violent battle in the name of freedom fighting, the ‘innocent’ wife sitting at home pleading ignorance, the foot soldiers who were tried and sentenced for the orders they followed, and the big bosses who refused to tell the whole truth.

I will now look at some of the dialogue and stage directions that supports this summary of the play and serves as a clear indication of how the narrative in the theatrical text engages with the TRC and its work.

3.4.2 The theatrical narrative

The opening sequence starts with a puppet on stage, making soup accompanied by tender music. He is doing this for several minutes, cutting his vegetables, stirring, salting. He tastes the soup, and suddenly, the scene changes, starting with an abrupt change of music – from quiet, to cartoonish.

ACT I Scene 2

Set in the Ubu home... As Pa Ubu strides on stage, he kicks over the soup-maker, with no evident sense of what he has done. The puppet drops, and is carried off by one of the two puppeteers. The other puppeteer is transformed into Ma Ubu, who proceeds with the scene. Pa Ubu strikes a pose, holding his injured foot, as if he has stubbed it on a stone.

PA UBU: Pschitt!!

MA UBU: OOOH! What a nasty word. Pa Ubu, you’re a dirty old man.

PA UBU: (*Holding his foot, which has been hurt by the kick*). And bugger, and damn!

Our favourite foot has taken a mortal blow, because our wife cannot keep the house clean. I’m dying!

MA UBU: Your trotters can’t kill you, unless that’s where you keep your brains!

(Taylor 1998:1-3)

This excerpt demonstrates Pa Ubu’s childlike denial of his own part in the hurting of his foot, but also demonstrates the typical Ubuesque characteristic of shifting the blame to Ma Ubu. This little scene constitutes the opening lines of the play, and it contextualises the Taylor Ubu within the burlesque, farcical world of Jarry’s Ubu, and right away, we

are confronted with Pa Ubu as a blame shifting, infantile, self-loving (“our *favourite* foot”) bully who is crippled by something in his own home. The world that Pa Ubu has created for himself, his home, is now a place full of danger to him. The references to Pa Ubu as male patriarch (he talks of “our wife”) are immediate. The language in this case immediately creates and focuses the dramatic space. Pa Ubu refers to himself in the plural forms of ‘us’ and ‘we’. This emphasises his status as farcical character, as representative of a larger group, but also his inflated sense of self-worth as dominant male. It also points to a disjuncture in the soul of Pa Ubu, a kind of separation from his actions and their consequences. Taylor remarks that she observed the same thing at the TRC hearings,

Over the past eighteen months of listening to the disjuncture between the testimony of those looking for amnesty and those seeking reparation, it has been chilling to note the frequency with which an act of astonishing cruelty has been undertaken, as it were, negligently, with no sense of the impact of such actions on other human lives; when confronted with the families of victims or survivors, those perpetrators who seem to have some capacity for remorse, appear to be shocked at observing, as if from the outside, the effect of their behaviour. Others simply show no response at all, so profound is the denial, or the failure of moral imagination (1998:iv).

This quote from the preface to the published version of the play gives great insight into the context of the Ubu character and his fictionalised world. The sequence mentioned above is important since it shows Taylor’s idea of Ubu as a figure of authority in the present, not as an archaic, theatrical character from a past revolution. This forces the reader to question Pa Ubu as power figure and dominant male, and the structures that he creates to enforce power, knowledge and in fact meaning. This would also serve as a direct reference to the Truth Commission, and Ubu’s manipulation of their goals – ‘truth’ and ‘reconciliation’ through reconstructing memories. The concept of memory work is beautifully illustrated in the play by a number of dream sequences.

ACT IV Scene 1

Pa Ubu curls up in a foetal position. He takes out his music box which, as he turns the handle, plays ‘Nkosi Sikelele i’. As Pa Ubu goes to sleep, he dreams. On the screen, a

drawing of an upraised arm, wearing a tutu at mid-arm. This revolves like a toy-ballet-dancer in time to the music box. As Pa goes to sleep, he dreams.

(Taylor 1998:47)

Pa Ubu's foetal position draws on images of him as infant and also denotes his vulnerability. In contrast to the waltz, and the cartoonish music associated with the Ubu character, we now hear 'Nkosi Sikelele'i', the national anthem previously associated with the oppressed. The playing of this music indicates that the memories and testimonies of the victims infiltrated his dreams and in fact his existence. The puppet that is delivering his testimony before the Commission whilst Ubu is sleeping, also demonstrates this. The individual narrative of the victim is now emerging in the memory work of the perpetrator, and vice versa. This overlapping of individual narratives could not possibly be portrayed by the TRC's Report. The theatrical text magnifies this process and also the dilemma of documenting the oral testimonies as the authentic voice of truth.

I have already made numerous references to the theatricality of the public nature of the Commission's hearings. The Commission moved from town to town, setting up their stage in different school halls and churches. The theatrical nature of the hearings became the ingredients that set up *Ubu and the Truth Commission* as a kind of meta-text where the theatrical elements of the Commission is magnified and explored to make further sense of the debate that arose from the workings of the TRC. The following extracts from the play demonstrates the way that the secondary text, i.e. the stage directions and the screen on which the animations is projected, contributes to the notion of the theatricality of the TRC as perceived through the media.

ACT I Scene 3

At the back of the stage is a large projection screen. Images of various kinds are projected onto this surface, and the performers at times interact with and at times seem oblivious to the visual field which is behind them. In the opening sequence, several of the major motifs are introduced: the Ubu mannequin, the camera tripod, and the all-seeing eye.

(Taylor 1998:1-3)

ACT IV Scene 2

The dream is orchestrated by the Tripod puppet, who slips in and out of Ubu costume. The dream begins with the Tripod skipping with a rope across the screen. At one point,

the skipping rope becomes a noose, and the tripod swings like a lasso. Cut to image of the three-headed dog in three leashes which lead off-screen.

(Taylor 1998:47)

Here we can identify the image of the Ubu mannequin with the perpetrator, the camera tripod with the role of the media, and the all-seeing eye with the notion of the ‘Great Truth’. The eye as representative of the truth means that Ubu’s precise actions in the play come to stand for a larger narrative. The tripod that is hung from the skipping rope points to the way the commission’s work was conducted and portrayed through the media (the so-called objective newshound, but the tripod is also on trial here), and how the granting of amnesty was a ‘small consolation price’ considering the public demand and sphere of the perpetrator’s remorse. They would be granted amnesty, but they had to make a very public and full disclosure. Finally, in a later scene, the dogs hang from the lasso. This was certainly the case with the TRC hearings – we saw the foot soldiers coming forward, confessing their crimes, while the Commission struggled to get the leaders of the old National Party to do the same. The henchmen effectively became the old regime’s scapegoats. This once again raises issues of ‘individual truth’ versus a ‘collective truth’ and the implications of this for the commission’s goal of reconciliation. The camera with the tripod features as a part-human part-machine figure in the animation which is projected onto the screen. In this context the tripod, the television and the all-seeing Eye of the Great Truth all serve as contextualising elements that reminds us of that the notions of truth and reconciliation in this context were fragile constructs.

Niles, the puppet crocodile has a body that is made from an old briefcase and functions as one of Pa Ubu’s hiding places for the evidence of his evil deeds. He tells Ubu about the Truth Commission and specifically the amnesty committee, but here Niles instructs Ubu to make sure that he provides a full disclosure. The ‘Proportions’ refer to the seriousness, the extent of his crimes, whether these crimes can be justified as a politically motivated acts, or one of pure maliciousness. This points to Ubu’s lack of genuine repentance and remorse, he only wants to pre-empt the actions of the Commission. Later on in the play, there is focus on Ubu’s rehearsal of his speech before the commission, which demonstrates the hypocrisy and general distortions of truth found in the confessions of

some of the perpetrators. In this scene, the all-seeing eye of the truth is also focused on the media, implicating the media in these distortions of truth.

ACT II Scene 2

PA UBU: Oh, Niles, such a vision I had. I saw the Great Truth approaching, a rope in its hand. It demanded I speak of the truth of our land.

NILES: Well, as I understand things, you have a choice. You can take your chances, keep silent, and wait and see if the law comes after you. But once they have unmasked you, you'll have to face the music. My advice would be to pre-empt it all. I hear there is to be a Commission to determine Truths, Distortions and Proportions.

PA UBU: I've heard of Truths, and know Distortions, but what are these Proportions you talk about?

NILES: An inquiry is to be conducted by great and blameless mathematicians who measure what is done, and why and how. They can beyond all ambiguity indicate when a vile act had a political purpose.

PA UBU: And if they so resolve?

NILES: Then they can and must absolve. But a full disclosure is what they demand. If they should find any dirt under your fingernails after you have had a complete manicure, they will chop off your hands.

PA UBU: So – a full disclosure?

(Taylor 1998:17)

In the dramatic text there have been painstaking attempts to address issues of history, biography and socio-political implications in a dramatic manner. Antjie Krog was involved in the initial workshops for *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, but withdrew because of her close involvement in the TRC; however, the witness testimonies used in *Ubu* can be found in her documentation in *Country of my Skull*. In an article in *The Star* by Adrienne Sichel, Kentridge is quoted as saying that when they decided to use the TRC as a point of departure it was difficult

to appreciate how extraordinary this all is, from the middle. That sense of what was hidden, was only half-known, suddenly being made clear is extraordinary. We picked up tendencies in the air and exaggerated them but the reality is turning out to be even more outrageous (in Doepel 1997:27).

These painstaking attempts at presenting that which points at a shared reality and a communal sense of baggage is exaggerated in the dramatic discourse through the use of

the puppets. William Kentridge decided to use puppets, instead of live actors, to depict the witnesses. This creates a world on stage that is “capable of transformation, contradiction in which the rules of logic (and morality) exist only to be swept aside” (Kentridge in Doepe1 1997:28).

Niles’s wooden head and canvas tail were made from a World War II leather and canvas kitbag that once belonged to puppeteer Basil Jones’s father. The three-headed dog, Brutus, is a small leather briefcase that was given to Sydney Kentridge (William’s father) by Bram Fischer after he used it for the Rivonia Treason Trial. Here personal biography and political history merge in a form that is all too real to see. Kentridge explains in Sichel’s article that the testimonies before the TRC was initially centred on that of the victims, but gradually changed when the perpetrators in truly Ubuesque fashion started to deliver their personal accounts of the atrocities they committed.

The scene where Ubu takes a shower (Taylor 1998:9-11) becomes an act of cleansing on a more profound level. As he cleanses himself, he washes off dismembered body parts that disappear down the plughole; Rory Doepe1 explains the function of the water image in this scene.

One senses, [that water] can function as life enhancing, evoking the freeing of libidinous energy, but it could also overwhelm, become a deluge, that floods and destroys. It could equally cleanse and thus imply the necessity of cleansing; simultaneously denoting the Ubu in self as well as a process of transformation (1997:14).

The shower cubicle in *Ubu and the Truth Commission* also doubles as the translator’s booth at the hearings, making it a space of ‘cleansing’ – in the literal sense of the term ‘racial cleansing’, but also a space where the truth can cleanse one from the sins of the past.

The following is an extract from *In the Heart of the Whore* by Jacques Pauw, a journalist who once worked for the Afrikaans liberal newspaper, *Vrye Weekblad*. The book is an exposé on the workings of the South African Police death squads, as told to Pauw by Dirk

Coetzee, former security policeman, who acted as the commander of one of the Police Death squads – a counter-insurgency unit based at Vlakplaas, a secret police farm just outside Pretoria.

The bodies were loaded into a Land Rover and transported to a clearing in the bush. Shallow graves were dug and lined with plastic. The bodies, as many as seven at a time, were put in the graves, covered with branches, doused with petrol and set alight. As soon as the bodies were burnt beyond recognition, the graves were covered with soil (Pauw 1991:36).

These acts find a harrowing place in the following speech act from Pa Ubu that provides us with the final catharsis; finally the suspense created by the anticipated action of Pa Ubu's confession is relieved.

ACT V Scene 4

PA UBU: I stand before you without shame or arrogance. I am not a monster. I am an honest citizen, and would never break the law. Like all of you, I eat, and sleep, and dream dreams. These vile stories, they sicken me. When I am told of what happened here, I cannot believe it. These things, they were done by those above me; those below me; those beside me. I too have been betrayed! I knew nothing.

Pa Ubu finally, in frustration, seizes a microphone in his hand. He now makes a very still and formal statement, the one which we have heard him rehearse earlier.

PA UBU: There's only one thing I will have to live with until the day I die – it's the corpses that I will have to drag with me to the grave, of the people I have killed. Remorse, I can assure you, a lot, a hell of a lot.

(Taylor 1998:67-69)

At this point we see that Pa Ubu's words are not really of remorse; he is speaking here quite literally of the burden of the corpses that he has to drag to the grave. The memories of that will haunt him. He plays to the Commission, attempting to please them. The Commission is personified by the microphones, the media. The microphones are avoiding him, and he realizes that he will have to oblige by the rules of their game – seeming remorseful is better than keeping quiet, or taking a stand to defend your actions.

Anthony Holiday stresses the fact that public utterances do not provide us with a definite guarantee that the conditions for sincerity have been met (1998:45). Here Pa Ubu's dialogue makes a powerful allusion to the notions of truth and reconciliation in this process of making a full disclosure. Ubu question how a country can survive if it does not reward what he knows is done in secret, is a deliberate reference to those leaders of the apartheid regime who claimed that they had no idea of the vast scope of human rights violations committed in their name. They claimed that they did not order the killings to take place, and it was left to the foot soldiers, the henchman, the *askaris*, to apologise for a system that they did not install, but indeed only upheld. This does not diminish their guilt or excuse their actions, but it is a very important part of the TRC and the way it functioned. As Kentridge writes in his Director's Note:

Therein lies the central irony of the Commission. As people give more and more evidence of the things they have done they get closer and closer to amnesty and it gets more and more intolerable that these people should be given amnesty (Taylor 1998:viii).

"Kentridge's art stresses the importance of remembering and takes a stance against the risk of lapsing into amnesia and disavowal of historical memory, as well as of psychic removal, characteristic of society after traumatic events" (Krauss 2000:27). Access to these things has become incredibly complex. If it is Kentridge himself who cautions: "You cannot face the rock head-on; the rock always wins," (in Krauss 2000:27), this is because in the age of spectacle and mass culture, it is short of impossible for the memory of apartheid itself not be spectacularised – as the broadcasts of the sessions of the TRC nightly on national television proved.

Much of the information that most of us receive on the TRC is communicated via the media, between commercial slots, sit-coms, magazine programmes, and so forth. We are called upon to respond with outrage, sympathy, or wonder, within a context that inculcates bewilderment and dislocation (Taylor 1998:v).

To counter this and to call upon the audience to respond with outrage, sympathy, or wonder, Kentridge has opted for the use of puppets. "Kentridge's use of a combination [of animation, puppets and human actors] which may be seen as an extension of

Kentridge's interest in the collage structure, [this combination] produces a kind of total artwork of extraordinary power and complexity" (Godby 1999:82). Kentridge explains this in his director's note:

There seemed to be an awkwardness in getting an actor to play the witnesses – the audience being caught halfway between having to believe in the actor for the sake of the story, and also not believe in the actor for the sake of the actual witness who existed out there but was not the actor (Taylor 1998:xi).

Kentridge told Geoff Davis and Anne Fuchs in a personal interview in 1992 that the break from naturalism is important in terms of scale and the creation of a different meaning of complexity that cannot be achieved by using an actor. They serve as mediators for telling the horrifying stories in a way that eliminates the audience's empathy with the actor, but enables the audience to sympathise from a more objective distance with the story that is told. To substantiate this, I quote from one of witness testimonies:

ACT II Scene 1

WITNESS: I said to myself, no matter what they have done to my child, I can identify him because of the mark on his chin. I went to the morgue. There I saw my child. I saw the mark on his chin. But I said to him, this is not my child. This is not my child. This is not my child.

(Taylor 1998:13)

The story is told by a puppet, with a translator translating from the African language to English. This testimony could not carry the weight it does, if it were not for a 'dead' puppet speaking these lines of painful memory and terrible suffering. The puppet's animated status as a wooden thing magnifies and exaggerates the fact that these lines are in fact the true testimony of a victim that was transcribed by the TRC.

I would like to comment that Pa Ubu is a stereotype of the white male perpetrator, but not all white males fall into this category and not all the perpetrators testifying before the Commission did not show genuine remorse. A last extract from the play gives us insight into the future of Pa Ubu's stereotypical character in the new South Africa:

ACT V Scene 4

PA UBU'S HYMN: How dark is my day at noon, Oh God. How unjust the sins that I bear. Despite all the dangerous paths that I trod. To save my own people despair.

Throughout the hymn, there are images from the evidence sequence on stage. [As Pa Ubu sings his hymn, the screen is filled with images from archival film documenting a spontaneous public celebration following the unbanning of the ANC].

As his hymn concludes, the full-bodied voice of a massed chorus singing 'Nkosi' swells and fills the auditorium, and crowds are projected on the screen. Pa Ubu finally freezes, unable to compete with the masses projected around him in image and song. He is wheeled off stage on his lectern, as if he is a statue being removed.

Lights out.

(Taylor 1998:71)

Pa Ubu's singing is drowned out by the crowd's song, and he himself is taken offstage like a statue, an archaic symbol of the old order that is now replaced with a new order where personal freedom and identities prevail. However, the last word belongs to the vulture: "My slice of old cheese and your loaf of fresh bread will make a tolerable meal" (Taylor 1998:73). The Commission's memory-work, the notions of truth and reconciliation are summed up in this line, which can undoubtedly be seen as the message and the meaning of the play: even a half-hearted attempt at telling the truth, combined with the willingness of the previously oppressed to reconcile, is better than nothing at all.

In *Ubu and the Truth Commission* we see individual narratives as representatives of a larger narrative – as clear reference to the way the TRC adopted personal testimonies and narratives in their Report. This was done in the service of a greater understanding of our past in South Africa for the purpose of 'nation-building'. This is a reminder of Edward Said's words noted at the beginning of this chapter that a nation is "an ambivalent, ideological structure, or a cultural representation". He proclaimed that "nations are narrations", in other words also constructions – I believe *Ubu and the Truth Commission* makes a great contribution towards our understanding of our new nation.

3.5 Conclusion

The TRC set out to *promote* reconciliation through revealing the truth. This ‘truth’ was constructed through the individual narratives of victims and perpetrators. In this chapter I explored the workings of the TRC and the debate surrounding the focal points of justice, reconciliation, memory and truth. As demonstrated through my discussion of these issues, these notions form an integral part of the dramatic narrative in *Ubu and the Truth Commission* through a clear process of fictionalisation and dramatisation. In the dramatic text it is clear that Ubu as perpetrator might not take responsibility for reconciliation on himself, but a version of a ‘truth’ was produced by his testimony, one that was not heard before. The nature of memory is a conflict between remembering events as they happened and qualifying them and therefore the history constructed through testimonies cannot serve as a ‘total knowledge’ of the past. Instead the testimonies contribute to a constructed memory and therefore constructed history.

Ubu and the Truth Commission is an example of how the fictionalised and dramatised narrative in theatre creates an alternative historical narrative that contributes to the debate surrounding the TRC and its work. In my analysis of the play I have demonstrated how the dramatic narrative in this play can be viewed as an alternative narrative to the official documents. I therefore propose that in light of White’s theory of the poetic nature of the historical document, this dramatic narrative should be viewed as a valuable contribution to the historical discourse. The dramatist’s role in *Ubu* then becomes one of making sense out of the chaos of tragic events, to tell stories, stories about characters in history in complex and dramatic contexts. I would like to quote Yvette Hutchison again, since her point summarises the notion of the role of the dramatist: “If these stories are told, the individual and society have alternatives with which he or she can evaluate his or her past and so transform, grow and change” (1999:255).

Ubu and the Truth Commission creates that alternative narrative which allows the individual and society to evaluate their past, and so transform, grow and change.

CHAPTER FOUR: *COPENHAGEN* AS ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE

We do not play on graves

We do not play on graves
Because there isn't room;
Besides, it isn't even,
It slants, and people come

And put a flower on it,
And hang their faces so,
We're fearing that their hearts will drop
And crush our pretty play.

And so we move as far
As enemies away,
Just looking round to see how far
It is, occasionally

(Emily Dickinson)

4.1 Introduction

Chapters Two considered Hayden White's theory on *Metahistory* and subsequently Chapter Three analysed the play *Ubu and the Truth Commission* in the light of this theory in order to establish it as alternative narrative that can potentially contribute to a greater understanding of the historical events that it is based on.

In this chapter I will analyse Michael Frayn's play *Copenhagen* (1998). I will focus on the theatrical narrative from the perspective of the theory on the nature of historical writing as poetic narrative. I will argue that the fictionalised and dramatised events in *Copenhagen* form a crucial alternative narrative that allows for the understanding of those events in a different light. This creates a new meaning of those events that can potentially challenge the official narratives.

In this, I take my cue from De Certeau's studies of everyday life, and specifically his view that the past is present in those areas of society where we least expect it. This resonates with Foucault's ideas raised in Chapter Two around a counter-memory that searches for history in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history – in sentiments, love, conscience and instincts. In this chapter I will examine the extent to which Michael Frayn has explored De Certeau's ideas of the dual status of the writing of history – as a claim to verifiable truth (science) and as a specific practice of language (fiction). In order to fully understand why De Certeau's ideas are of importance, a background to the play is necessary.

4.2 Background of the play

Frayn's play focuses on the emotional and existential consequences of the atomic research done by two scientists, Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr. *Copenhagen* revolves around these two men and Bohr's wife, Magrethe. The plot is based on the actual secret meeting between Heisenberg and Bohr in 1941. And through the narrative different scenarios are presented for the content of the conversations that took place during that meeting.

Together Heisenberg and Bohr had worked on developing the Uncertainty Principle in 1921, which changed the world of quantum physics forever. However, at the time of their meeting World War Two was well underway. Bohr was Jewish and their meeting was heavy with mutual suspicion. The reasons for Heisenberg's visit and what was said at this meeting are still not clear, but we do know that their relationship changed dramatically after that. The fictional world of the play is the afterlife, where the three characters meet as ghosts to recall from memory their own versions of what happened that night. Frayn explains the fictional and dramatic re-imaginings present in the play and how these narrative elements draw on the nature of the atomic discoveries of the two scientists:

This is where my play departs from the historical record, by supposing that at some later time, when everyone involved had become spirits of the past themselves, they argued the question out further, until they had achieved a little more understanding of what was going on, just as they had done so many times when they were alive with the intractable difficulties presented by the internal workings of the atom (Frayn 1998:95).

The scope of the fictionalised and dramatised narrative elements in the play becomes clear after a reading of Michael Frayn's postscript and post-postscript to the published play. These postscripts explain in detail the lengths and depth of his research into historical reference works, interviews, biographies, autobiographies and the scientific principles underlying Heisenberg's and Bohr's work. To form a clearer understanding of the way the work of these two scientists influenced the dramatic narrative in the play, we must first try to define the concepts of the Uncertainty Principle (Heisenberg's discovery) and Complementarity (Bohr's discovery). This will also clarify the extent to which we can draw correlations between this play and the discourse on the scientific nature of the historical work (since the dramatic narrative itself contributes to a re-evaluation of the role and objective claims of science as a whole). Fritjof Capra, author of *The Turning Point*, writes in the preface:

The exploration of the atomic and subatomic world brought them [scientists] in contact with a strange and unexpected reality that seemed to defy any coherent description. In their struggle to grasp their new reality, scientists became painfully aware that their basic concepts, their language, and their whole way of thinking were inadequate to describe atomic phenomena. Their problems were not merely intellectual but amounted to an intense emotional and, one could say, even existential crisis (1983:xvii).

Since I am not a scientist, I rely on the description of quantum theory as explained by Capra. The experimental investigation of atoms at the beginning of the twentieth century yielded sensational and rather unexpected results. Atoms turned out to consist of vast regions of space in which extremely small particles – the electrons – moved around the nucleus. Later, it became clear that even the subatomic particles, the electrons and the protons and neutrons in the nucleus, were nothing like the solid objects of classical physics. These subatomic units are abstract entities; depending on how we look at them,

they appear sometimes as particles and sometimes as waves; this dual nature is evident in light, which can take the form of electromagnetic waves or particles. This dual nature of matter and light is very strange and it seems impossible to accept that something can be, at the same time, a particle, an entity confined to a very small volume, and a wave, which is spread out over a large region of space.

This situation seemed hopelessly paradoxical until it was realised that the terms ‘particle’ and ‘wave’ refer to classical concepts that are not fully adequate to describe atomic phenomena. An electron is neither a particle nor a wave, but it may show particle-like aspects in some situations and wave-like aspects in others. While it acts like a particle, it is capable of developing its wave nature at the expense of its particle nature, and vice versa, thus undergoing continual transformations from particle to wave and from wave to particle. This means that neither the electron nor any other atomic ‘object’ has any intrinsic properties independent of its environment. The properties it shows (particle-like or wave-like) will depend on the experimental situation, that is, on the apparatus it is forced to interact with.

It was Heisenberg’s great achievement to express the limitations of classical concepts in a precise mathematical form, which is known as the Uncertainty Principle. This consists of a set of mathematical relations that determine the extent to which classical concepts can be applied to atomic phenomena; these relations stake out the limits of human imagination in the atomic world. Whenever we use classical terms – particle, wave, position, velocity – to describe atomic phenomena, we find that there are pairs of concepts, or aspects, which are interrelated and cannot be defined simultaneously in a precise way. The more we emphasise one aspect in our description, the more the other aspect becomes uncertain, and the precise relation between the two is indicated by the Uncertainty Principle.

For a better understanding of this relation between two pairs of classical concepts, Niels Bohr introduced the notion of Complementarity. He considered the particle picture and the wave picture as two complementary descriptions of the same reality, each of them

only partly correct and having a limited range of application. Both pictures are needed to give a full account of the reality, and both are to be applied within the limitations set by the Uncertainty Principle. The resolution of the particle / wave paradox forced scientists to accept an aspect of reality that called into question the very foundation of the mechanistic worldview – the concept of the reality of matter. We can never predict an atomic event with certainty; we can only predict the likelihood of its happening.

To sum up: one cannot precisely and simultaneously measure both the position and velocity of an object. If one is unable to identify positively a particle and unable to be sure what will become of it in the future, one cannot say whether or not it is obeying the law of cause and effect. The breakdown of this law at the level of particles thus casts doubt on a principle that has been intuitively accepted for thousands of years – that every effect must have a cause. An element of genuine unpredictability is thus an integral part of nature. Heisenberg's own words are revealing in this context:

In the experiments about atomic events we have to do with things and facts, with phenomena that are just as real as any phenomena in daily life. But the atoms or the elementary particles themselves are not as real; they form a world of potentialities or possibilities rather than one of things or facts (Davies & Gribbin 1991:21).

Bohr expressed it thus: “Physics is not about how the world *is*; it is about what we can *say* about the world” (Davies & Gribbin 1991:21). In addition to politics and history, *Copenhagen* addresses the uncertainty surrounding the science of quantum mechanics. In the play there are numerous references to the nature of the atom and the Uncertainty Principle and the role of mathematics and language in developing new concepts. The two scientists disagreed on a number of issues, but they did make tremendous progress in scientific terms, as the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics proves. The play is not so much about atomic science itself, but focuses on how the scientific ideas represented in the dramatic text can help us to understand the manifold possibilities that life and human action hold. This is a reminder that memory and history are constructs that undergo constant transformation. *Copenhagen* tells us that making sense of the past is difficult, and that human motives are even more difficult to determine. Frayn

compares the difficulty of understanding human actions with the difficulty of simultaneously measuring the movement and speed of subatomic particles, the basis of the Uncertainty Principle. The dramatic narrative (specifically the fictional setting and the play within the play) is used to illustrate the uncertainties that form the basis of the play.

There has been much research on the topic of the play, specifically concerning the notions of how big a part their involvement (specifically Heisenberg's involvement with Hitler's programme for developing the atomic bomb) played in the discussions that took place at their meeting in 1941. Frayn has constructed the dialogue around these speculations and the fictionalised memories of the characters. In Chapter Two I explained memory and history as constructs. In *Copenhagen* we witness a deliberate embracing of these ideas around memory and history as constructs as a comment on the nature of science; the parallels that we can draw between the Uncertainty Principle and the life of the historical figures that are dramatised and fictionalised. Frayn's postscript tells us that history is not what happens when it happens, but that which seems to have happened when people look back at it:

The great challenge facing the storyteller and the historian alike is to get inside people's heads, to stand where they stood and see the world as they saw it, to make some informed estimate of their motives and intentions – and this is precisely where recorded and recordable history cannot reach. Even when all the external evidence has been mastered, the only way into the protagonist's heads is through the imagination. This indeed is the substance of the play (Frayn 1998:97)

This alludes to the fact that history is an 'experiment' – that reality is in fact not something that exists entirely of its own accord, but that the human, narrative element in the retelling of history, changes the outcome and creates a new meaning. It is important to reveal, and to acknowledge this process, in order to establish the historical work as subjective, alternative narrative, not a total history that links itself to a concept of supreme knowledge.

It is known that Heisenberg did raise the issue of work that was being done to create an atomic bomb. In the play this particular issue raises (amongst others) the question of the morality of scientists working on atomic energy that produced a weapon of mass destruction. As Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the Manhattan Project, said some years later: “It is my judgment in these things that when you see something technically sweet you go ahead and do it and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success. That’s the way it was with the atom bomb” (in Todorov 2003:234). Todorov goes on to explain:

Instrumental thinking, nicely illustrated by Oppenheimer’s words, makes the following sequence inevitable: if it can be made, it must be made; and if it’s been made, it must be used. Ultimate ends – the reason for doing things – are never questioned. Technology seems to make the decision for us; we do what technology makes possible instead of using technology to do what we think useful (2003:234).

Some historians speculate that, according to Heisenberg, he claimed the German scientists working for Hitler did not want to develop an atomic bomb. They knew it was possible, but for moral reasons they focused their research on a reactor. In the play Heisenberg describes the horror felt by these scientists when they learned of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Heisenberg further maintains that he only gave the Nazis enough signs of progress to ensure that they did not hand the project over to someone who might have succeeded. One of the possible motives for the visit in the play is that Heisenberg wanted an agreement with the team working at Los Alamos⁵ to exaggerate the difficulties in producing an atomic bomb, thereby convincing authorities on both sides not to continue the project.

Placing elements of a real past within a fictional work reminds us of the complexities of social reality and of the subjective nature of an aesthetic treatment of real events, and especially the possible concept of ‘incompleteness’ that may arise from an aesthetic treatment. Incompleteness in this sense could be seen in opposition to the notion of a

⁵ A city of 70 000 people created in the New Mexico desert as the base of the 'Manhattan Project' to build atomic bombs. An international team of scientists worked there under the direction of Robert Oppenheimer of the University of California.

finalising argument that would allude to an empirical conclusion that could be drawn from the events and the interpretation drawn on by the representation. In *Copenhagen* there is certainly no easy closure; this ‘openness’ is indeed an important structural and thematic element in the dramatic plot of the play. A narrower presentation of the events could lead to narrow conclusions. However, non-closure in this text should not be mistaken for aporia and silences concerning the extreme uncertainty of the events or the outcome of the events, but rather signifies an involvement that engages in the complexities of the events.

Bearing all these remarks in mind regarding the background of the play (scientific and historical), I believe a summary of the discourse on history as science or as literature is necessary. I hope to establish a link between this discourse and the narrative in the dramatic text.

4.3 History as science or literature

One specific quality of the narrative in the kind of theatre that focuses on history is that it resists the discourse that views history as an objective or disinterested science. The problem with maintaining distinctions between discourses of science and fiction shows the extent to which claims associated with historical science, in terms of understanding the past ‘as it really was’, are grounded in an assumption that what is not false is true. De Certeau regards the abstract views of history and fiction as a shared set of values, since the qualification of history as science and literature as fiction is valid only because of a double displacement. In this double displacement a concept is seen as authentic or real by pointing to an error and at the same time, “enforcing a belief in something real through a denunciation of the false” (de Certeau 1986:201). Fiction is considered defective because of a lack of reference systems, to which history can supposedly stake a claim.

Those who argue the case for history as science regard fiction as the definition of exactly that which history is not – it judges fiction as the ‘other’ discourse in a gesture that diverts similar judgment by casting it elsewhere. It is, however, not a case of fiction

lacking the referential systems that science alone can possess; fiction refers to reality, but does so in a manner that is different from the referential system as applied by science.

In Chapter Two I focused on the historical work as verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse and specifically on Hayden's White theory that opts for semiotic approach where trustworthiness, honesty and objectivity are not the focus, but rather the ideological process whereby different types of meaning are produced and reproduced. In *Metahistory* White states:

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by "finding", "identifying", or "uncovering" the stories that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between "history" and "fiction" resides in the fact that the historian "finds" his stories, whereas the fiction writer "invents" his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which "invention" also plays a part in the historian's operations. The same event can serve as a different kind of element of many different historical stories, depending on the role it is assigned in a specific motivic characterisation of the set to which it belongs (1983:6-7).

Carr places the historian in the sphere of generalisation where he is concerned with relations between the unique and the general, and he quotes Marx in order to "put the matter in the right perspective":

Events strikingly similar, but occurring in a different historical milieu, lead to completely dissimilar results. By studying each of these evolutions separately and then comparing them, it is easy to find the key to understanding of this phenomenon; but it is never possible to arrive at this understanding by using the *passe-partout* of some historical-philosophical theory whose great virtue is to stand above history (1987:65; my emphasis).

I do not agree with Carr, and I am not suggesting that with historical understanding comes the need to repudiate objectivity. Rather, objectivity should appear in various forms inside a bigger scheme, ranging from the encounter with historical time that Sartre calls *embarquement*, to the various practices of collective memory found in structures of ethnicity, religion and patriotism. Objectivity in relation to involvement is therefore not a matter of maintaining disinterest, but an awareness that

understanding devolves as much from the multiple and often contradictory concerns the historian brings to his or her inquiry as from some transcendental truth fixed in space and time (Ungar 1992:65).

It might be more useful, as Lynn Hunt has suggested, thinking of history more as an “ethical and political practice” than as an “epistemology with a clear ontological status” (in Ungar 1992:65). The concepts of ‘ethical’ and ‘political’ separate themselves from empiricism, where the ultimate goal is closure and total knowledge. This is what Hunt has referred to as the ongoing friction between stories that have been told and those that will possibly be told. Friedländer termed this friction an ‘aesthetic frisson’ present in the desire to establish some kind of exorcism (as would be the case in the representation of Nazism in word and image).

This frisson falls somewhere between an individual response to the tension between a collective memory that subsumes discrete events within unchanging mythic models of interpretation and a conventional consciousness of the past based on a perception of change, with a corresponding need to interpret diverse events in the context of their temporal setting: When historical consciousness tends toward a static, monumental representation of the past, we stand at the gates of collective memory (Ungar 1992:65).

I will now investigate how Michael Frayn linked his narrative in *Copenhagen* to the historical references available and the historical discourse that forms the background of this study through a fictionalisation and dramatisation of these elements. I hope to establish that the dramatic narrative created can form an alternative narrative that has the potential to present the events in a new light, possibly allowing for a new understanding of these events. This will be done by analyzing key pieces of dialogue.

4.4 *Copenhagen* and the alternative narrative created by this play

In the previous section I provided a summary of the distinction between history as science and history as fiction, and I will now look at how the narrative in *Copenhagen* not only addresses the historical events but also this specific distinction in historiographic discourse.

In my analysis of *Copenhagen* I will draw on Michael Frayn's postscript to investigate the extent of his historical research and the way in which this research found its way into the dramatic narrative.⁶ The main area of this analysis will be the dialogue, specifically considering the fact that there are references to secondary text (stage directions etc.) available to the reader.

Firstly, there is no 'traditional' exposition indicating the *dramatis personae*, their age, their costumes or the time and place. This immediately prompts the reader to focus on the implicit stage directions inherent in the dialogue. The first paragraph of the postscript is an acknowledgment by Frayn that readers of the play would be interested in how much is fiction and how much is history. He affirms what we already know: Heisenberg did meet with Bohr in 1941. They probably had dinner, and then the two men most likely went for a stroll to escape possible microphones. Although there is no clear outline of the exact order of events that night, we could safely assume this. Where there is a discrepancy present in the play's structure, this is because the people involved demonstrated the same ambiguity in their recollections of the events. There has been intense speculation around the precise motives of Heisenberg's need to meet with Bohr. Heisenberg tried to establish some kind of agreed version of the events. He did return to Bohr's house in 1947 in an attempt to reconcile with Bohr, but it seems that their relationship had shattered beyond repair and, as Heisenberg himself stated in his memoirs, "we both came to feel that it would be better to stop disturbing the spirits of the past" (Frayn 1998:95).

Frayn tells us of the dialogue available in Heisenberg's memoirs, but that Heisenberg freely reinvented it and in his own defence appealed to Thucydides, who wrote in his preface to the *History of the Peloponnesian War* that he documented speeches, using the circumstances surrounding them as reference point for the train of thought that would have guided the actual wording. The dialogue in *Copenhagen* reflects speeches and

⁶ Anyone interested in doing further reading, or researching the works cited and studied by Frayn, can refer to list of references in Frayn, M. 1998. *Copenhagen*. London: Methuen Drama: 130-132.

conversations that must surely have taken place in some form or the other. This is where the imagination of the dramatist provides us with the motives and intentions of the characters – in an attempt to get inside the head of the historical figure.

4.4.1 The theatrical narrative

I quote the opening lines of the play in order to demonstrate how Frayn's use of dialogue provides us with the exposition that contributes to our initial reaction to the characters, and also sets up the first frames of reference for the audience:

ACT I

Margrethe: But why?

Bohr: You're still thinking about it?

Margrethe: Why did he come to Copenhagen?

Bohr: Does it matter, my love, now we're all three of us dead and gone?

Margrethe: Some questions remain long after their owners have died. Lingering like ghosts. Looking for the answers they never found in life.

Bohr: Some questions have no answers to find.

Margrethe: Why did he come? What was he trying to tell you?

Bohr: He did explain later.

Margrethe: He explained over and over again. Each time he explained it became more obscure.

Bohr: It was probably very simple, when you come right down to it: he wanted to have a talk.

Margrethe: A talk? To the enemy? In the middle of the war?

Bohr: Margrethe, my love, we were scarcely the enemy.

Margrethe: It was 1941!

Bohr: Heisenberg was one of our oldest friends.

Margrethe: Heisenberg was German. We were Danes. We were under German occupation.

Bohr: It put us in a difficult position, certainly.

Margrethe: I've never seen you as angry with anyone as you were with Heisenberg that night.

Bohr: Not to disagree, but I believe I remained remarkably calm.

Margrethe: I know when you're angry.

Bohr: It was as difficult for him as it was for us.

Margrethe: So why did he do it? Now no one can be hurt, now no one can be betrayed.

Bohr: I doubt if he ever really knew himself.

Margrethe: And he wasn't a friend. Not after that visit. That was the end of the famous friendship between Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg.

Heisenberg: Now we're all dead and gone, yes, and there are only two things the world remembers about me. One is the uncertainty principle, and the other is my mysterious visit to Niels Bohr in Copenhagen in 1941. Everyone understands uncertainty. Or thinks he does. No one understands my trip to Copenhagen. Time and time again I've explained it. To Bohr himself, and Margrethe. To interrogators and intelligence officers, to journalists and historians. The more I've explained, the deeper the uncertainty has become. Well, I shall be happy to make one more attempt. Now we're all dead and gone. Now no one can be hurt, now no one can be betrayed.

(Frays 1998:3-4)

This excerpt demonstrates a number of elements of the dramatised and fictionalised dramatic narrative, and allows us to come to certain conclusions as to how the dialogue shapes the dramatic space of utterance and subsequently the meaning of what is said. Immediately Margrethe is confirmed as the character that will drive the plot; she will involve the audience in the emotional rhythm of the play, and she acts on behalf of the audience, asking the questions that set up the elaboration of events. She gives us an indication of the basic concern of the play: 'Why?' Her antagonism fuels the subjective needs of the audience, and when we encounter Heisenberg in the play, there is already an attitude of suspicion towards him. I paid some attention to the scientific background of the two men, and their contributions to the world of quantum physics and Bohr talks about this in this initial piece of dialogue above. Bohr comes across as a sympathetic, supportive type of character who does not wish to speak ill of his old friend. Heisenberg appears as the uncertain one, in his own character, but also through the perceptions of others: "The more I've explained, the deeper the uncertainty has become." The dialogue also constructs the parameters of the fictional world – the afterlife, and as Margrethe says, no one can be "betrayed here"; the audience is involved in the cut and thrust of the action and events on stage because we willingly suspend our disbelief and accept that some version of the truth (at least) will feature.

Furthermore, the dialogue informs us of the historical background, the time of the meeting, 1941, and the fact that Heisenberg was German, and Bohr and his wife, Danish, immediately alluding to the political constraints on their relationship and that of the real world outside the fictional world. Margrethe also sets up for us Bohr's frame of mind at

the time when she tells us that she has never seen her husband as angry as he was that night. She also constructs the interaction between the two men, and their following conversation by stating that no matter how many times Heisenberg tried to explain his motivations for his visit, each time it became more uncertain – a parallel for Heisenberg’s work with the uncertainty principle – where the limits of human imagination in the atomic world, was the focus.

Frayn states he is fully aware of the fact that he was not the first to draw parallels between Heisenberg’s scientific work and his life. David Cassidy’s *Uncertainty* and Thomas Powers’ *Heisenberg’s War* formed an integral part of Frayn’s research. Cassidy focuses on Heisenberg’s activities during the Third Reich and during World War II:

It is as if, for some, the intense emotions unleashed by the unspeakable horrors of that war and regime have combined with the many ambiguities, dualities, and compromises of Heisenberg’s life and actions to make Heisenberg himself subject to a type of uncertainty principle... (Cassidy in Frayn 1998:97-98).

Powers investigates Heisenberg’s reserve about deliberating on his role in the failure of the German bomb programme and states that it was the foundation for incredible uncertainty. Frayn points out that Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle was a precise and technical measurement; it did not suggest that everything about atoms and subparticles was unknown. What it did prove was that the uncertainty relationship was constructed as a formula and therefore the notion of uncertainty was always present as a scientific measurement – this uncertainty element, not the unknowable, is the structural frame of reference for the characters and the plot in *Copenhagen*. This uncertainty is present in all human thought and interaction; we cannot determine thoughts and action in precise terms. As Frayn explains, “What the uncertainty of thoughts does have in common with the uncertainty of particles is that the difficulty is not just a practical one, but a systematic limitation which cannot even in theory be circumvented” (1998:99). Observation is always limited by these systems and we cannot claim objectivity in our ideas, statements and the way we perceive others. This forms a crucial part of the dialogue, the action and the plot in the play. However, the idea of uncertainty does play on the possible notion of

certainty and in Heisenberg's original paper he raises certain issues with the translation from the German. In his conclusion he opts for the word *Unbestimmtheit*, which roughly translates as indeterminacy, or 'undeterminedness'.

This is where *Copenhagen* as a play contributes to the discourse on history as science or as fiction. Frayn went to great lengths to understand the scientific and historical background of his characters, but their intentions and actions cannot possibly be determined by adopting a scientific approach. The indeterminacy present in the quantum world demonstrates that scientific outcomes are subjective – the outcome depends on the experimental situation, that is, on the apparatus it is forced to interact with. This would seem to support the notion that history as a referential science is also subject to the limitations and the context of its retelling.

I want to emphasize at this point that this is where the theatrical text so important since it, quite transparently so, can present us with ideas on indeterminacy and the way that has an influence on how we perceive the historical meeting between Bohr and Heisenberg, and indeed the characters themselves. The plot and structure of the individual scenes (three times we see Heisenberg arriving at Bohr's doorstep, and each time the conversation takes another direction, all based on the speculation pertinent to Frayn's research) and the space of the fictional world, which immediately points to the notion of 'openness'. The scientific principle of uncertainty or indeterminacy acts as a reference point for the different scenarios sketched by the playwright. As I mentioned earlier, this so-called 'incompleteness' that may be raised as a criticism against a subjective, aesthetic treatment of the past, in this case indicates a profound involvement with the complexities of the events and the historical people involved.

In the following extract from the dialogue, we see how Frayn depicts his historical research and the indeterminacy of human perception, which influences the construction of science and truth. We hear the dialogue after Heisenberg explains the shock and terror he felt after hearing about Hiroshima.

ACT I

Margrethe: Because it had been done? Or because it wasn't you who'd done it?

Heisenberg: Both. Both. Otto Hahn wants to kill himself, because it was he who discovered fission, and he can see the blood on his hands. Gerlach, our old Government administrator, also wants to die, because his hands are shamefully clean. You've done it, though. You've built the bomb.

Bohr: Yes.

Heisenberg: And you've used it on a living target.

Bohr: On a living target.

Margrethe: You're not suggesting that Niels did anything wrong in working at Los Alamos?

Heisenberg: Of course not. Bohr has never done anything wrong.

Margrethe: The decision had been taken long before Niels arrived. The bomb would have been built whether Niels had gone or not.

Bohr: In any case, my part was very small.

Heisenberg: Oppenheimer described you as the team's father-confessor.

Bohr: It seems to be my role in life.

Heisenberg: He said you made a great contribution.

Bohr: Spiritual, possibly. Not practical.

Heisenberg: Fermi says it was you who worked out how to trigger the Nagasaki bomb.

Bohr: I put forward an idea.

Margrethe: You're not implying that there's anything that *Niels* needs to explain or defend?

Heisenberg: No one has ever expected him to explain or defend anything. He's a profoundly good man.

Bohr: It's not a question of goodness. I was spared the decision.

(Frayn 1998:46-47)

The following becomes clear from the dialogue and the characterisation that the dialogue creates: Bohr as the righteous man, the man who pleaded with Churchill and Roosevelt for a system of multinational control of atomic energy, is under scrutiny. He is, however, not scrutinised by Heisenberg, but by the receiver of the text. Heisenberg provides us with the historical references to make sense of Bohr's actions and to judge or pardon him. The reader is made aware of the belief system in the characters that we can use as a model for interpreting the characters and their actions.

The Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics has been challenged by some, as Frayn points out, especially by Einstein and Gell-Mann. However, Gell-Mann's view, which he refers to as alternative 'histories' or 'narratives', is most certainly founded in the same anthropocentric foundations of Bohr's work, "since histories and narratives are

not freestanding elements of the universe, but human constructs as subjective and as restricted in their viewpoint as the act of observation” (Frayn 1998:102). Frayn concludes that the interpretation of these principles based on the ideas proposed by Bohr and Heisenberg, and those who challenge them, provides extreme challenges to the logic of our everyday experience, as the following piece of dialogue suggests:

ACT TWO

Heisenberg: No, but I show him the strangest truth about the universe that any of us has stumbled on since relativity – that you can never know everything about the whereabouts of a particle, or anything else, even Bohr now, as he prowls up and down in the room in that maddening way of his, because we can’t observe it without introducing some new element into the situation, a molecule of water vapour for it to hit, or a piece of light – things which have an energy of their own, and which therefore have an effect on what they hit. A small one, admittedly, in the case of Bohr...

Bohr: Yes, if you know where I am with the kind of accuracy we’re talking about when we’re dealing with particles, you can still measure my velocity to within – what...?

Heisenberg: Something like a billionth of a billionth of a kilometre per second. The theoretical point remains, though, that you have no absolutely determinate situation in the world, which among other things lays waste to the idea of causality, the whole foundation of science – because if you don’t know how things are today you certainly can’t know how they’re going to be tomorrow. I shatter the objective universe around you – and all you can say is that there’s an error in the formulation!

Bohr: There is!

Margrethe: Tea, anyone? Cake?

(Frayn 1998:67-68)

Margrethe’s abrupt interruption brings us back to the corporal world in other words, the atomic level where there is much less uncertainty in the world of physics. She reminds the reader of the human element present in these discussions between Heisenberg and Bohr, and it brings us to the characterisation of the real people. Frayn explains that Bohr, for example, was as famous for his inarticulacy and inaudibility as he was for his good-natured personality. Schrödinger described him as talking

for minutes almost in a dreamlike, visionary and really quite unclear manner, partly because he is so full of consideration and constantly hesitates – fearing that the other might take a statement of his [Bohr’s] point of view as an insufficient appreciation of the other’s... (in Frayn 1998:103).

Frayn's Bohr is presented as coherent and articulate. In the characterisation of Bohr, we have a perfect example of how the playwright utilises his dramatic licence to dramatise the character, showing a disregard for Hegel's advice to lay bare "the core and significance" of a historical event by freeing it from the "adventitious contingencies and irrelevant accessories of the event" (1975:33). It is clear that the raw facts are hardly theatre or even theatrical. They need to be fictionalised and dramatised into a form that can be put on stage and carries a message. The character of Margrethe is a little bit more difficult to comment on. It is clear from Frayn's research that she was as loved as Bohr was and that she has had no scientific training. Her character therefore serves the plot in that she drives a lot of the interaction between Heisenberg and Bohr through her constant reminders that they should speak in plain language. She also assists the reader by asking the questions the audience or receiver of the text cannot. It is also known that she was never as impressed by Heisenberg as Bohr was, and she was genuinely upset by his visit in 1941. This is quite evident when we look at her dialogue and the characterisation that flows from this. She indeed treats Heisenberg like an insolent child. But it is Heisenberg that Frayn focuses most of his attention on in his research and his postscript.

"The problem with Heisenberg is his elusiveness and ambiguity, which is of course what the play is attempting to elucidate" (Frayn 1998:104). There is, however, agreement on the fact that he was very quick of mind. Max Born, his mentor at one point, called it "his unbelievable quickness and precision of understanding" (in Frayn 1998:104). In contrast to this Gamow claimed that "Probably [Bohr's] most characteristic property was the slowness of his thinking and comprehension" (in Frayn 1998:104). It is widely known, as evident from the historical research that Frayn conducted, that Heisenberg appealed to everyone at first with his eagerness and his ability to befriend people easily. He had various apprentice-mentor relationships and Jeremy Bernstein noted that "he had the first truly quantum-mechanical mind – the ability to take the leap beyond the classical visualising pictures into the abstract, all-but-impossible-to-visualise world of the subatomic" (in Frayn 1998:105).

ACT I

Margrethe: I never entirely liked him, you know. Perhaps I can say that to you now.
Bohr: Oh yes, you did. When he was first here in the twenties? Of course you did. On

the beach at Tisvilde with us and the boys? He was one of the family.

Margrethe: Something alien about him, even then.

Bohr: So quick and eager.

Margrethe: Too quick. Too eager.

Bohr: Those bright watchful eyes.

Margrethe: Too bright. Too watchful.

Bohr: Well, he was a very great physicist. I never changed my mind about that.

(Frayn 1998:4-5)

This scene is particularly interesting, because we can directly draw a line here between Frayn's research and the way he has narrativised it dramatically. Bohr instructs the audience on the quickness of Heisenberg's mind, while Margrethe comes to represent Heisenberg's critics. She refers to his eagerness as a negative quality. In Frayn's postscript he refers to a remark by Born about Heisenberg's 'clear bright eyes'. The dialogue therefore becomes essential in constructing the historical references that for the audience become the discourse and the thematic elements that they interact with. This excerpt also establishes the relationship between Heisenberg and Bohr, when Bohr refers to Heisenberg as one of the family. When Bohr informs us that he never changed his mind about Heisenberg's performance as a scientist, it sets up another subjective framework the audience can use to create their own subjective view of the interaction between the characters. Any scientific discussions between Heisenberg and Bohr further on in the play will, at least in some respects, be viewed in the light of this statement by Bohr (who has already been set up as the more 'objective', 'sympathetic' character).

It is also clear from Frayn's research that Margrethe never warmed to Heisenberg (as is clearly demonstrated by the previous piece of dialogue) and that his relationship with Bohr was rather more formal than intimate, although Bohr took on a fatherly role in his attitude towards Heisenberg. There is a lot of disagreement and controversy in the work of the biographers who tried to determine the extent of Heisenberg's involvement in Hitler's programme for building the atomic bomb. Frayn studied David Irving's interview with him for Irving's book *The Virus House*. It seems that in Heisenberg's later years he was perceived as hard-headed, harsh, arrogant and self-involved. Fraser, a

British intelligence officer who escorted Heisenberg to Copenhagen in 1947, told Irving that

The whole story [...] is a typical Heisenberg fabrication – maybe a bit brighter than a thousand others, but like them all a product of his *Blut und Boden* guilt complex, which he rationalises that quickly that the stories become *for him* the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Pitiful, in a man of his mental stature (in Frayn 1998:107).

The contempt for Heisenberg continues, as Frayn demonstrates through his research. One historian claimed that Heisenberg failed to build the bomb, in spite of his Nazi loyalties, because of his arrogance. Another matter that is explored in the play, is Albert Speer's comment that he hoped that Heisenberg was not going to claim that he tried, as a matter of principle, to sabotage Hitler's bomb programme by asking for minimal government funding (in Frayn 1998:108). Frayn deals with this topic in the play and it seems that, according to Gitta Sereny's book, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth*, Heisenberg indeed claimed that he was trying to do just that. In his memoirs Speer does refer to the fact that he was astonished by the small amount of funding required by Heisenberg.

There are no other records of this claim by Heisenberg and Frayn acts as the historiographer who connects the dots – as one of the explanations behind Heisenberg's visit. Frayn suggests that Heisenberg wanted to question Bohr on the moral implications of working on such a bomb, without the intent of using it. Sereny also points to the reason behind Heisenberg's visit as an attempt to invite Bohr to join the German bomb programme. There are a number of records contesting this idea and, as Frayn stresses, the idea that Heisenberg would try to bring someone of Jewish descent into what can be seen as "the most secret research programme in Nazi Germany is frankly preposterous" (Frayn 1998:109). There seems to be a great amount of disagreement and controversy about, and in, the works of the biographers and historians who have tried to determine the reasons for Heisenberg's visit.

The theatrical text can present these disagreements and controversies through the structure of the narrative – with each of the three scenarios representing another theory.

Copenhagen therefore serves as an alternative narrative through its combination of the facts and the historical research and theories as presented by Sereny, Rose, Irving and others, with the imagined turn of events as portrayed by the dramatist. This allows for an understanding of these events in a different light – alluding to the fact that no single interpretation should be favoured in the name of ‘scientific’ explanation. As Frayn himself explains:

The play is not an attempt to adjudicate between these differing views of Heisenberg’s personality, or these differing accounts of his activities. [...] The evidence is confused and contradictory, and making any sense of it involves balancing probabilities and possibilities almost as indeterminable as Heisenberg found events inside the atom (1998:112).

There is a small amount of direct evidence, but some significant indirect evidence, that Heisenberg might have failed with the German bomb programme out of ignorance, but there is an opposing view to the effect that he did understand the relevant physics, but that he concealed this knowledge. Frayn goes on at great length about the research on this last matter, some drawing on the transcripts of the Farm Hall Papers. A key question that researchers were hoping to answer by studying these documents was whether Heisenberg really had no idea of the critical mass needed for the nuclear explosion, or as some believe, he did not understand the difference between a nuclear reactor and a bomb. There are a number of references made to this in the play. The concept of the Farm Hall Papers is of specific interest here, and I quote from Frayn’s postscript:

At the end of the war troops of the Alsos mission made their way through what was left of the German front line and located the remains of the German reactor at Haigerloch, with the intention of finally reassuring themselves that Germany would not be able to spring some terrible nuclear surprise at the last moment. They also seized the team of scientists themselves making a special armed sortie to Urfeld, in Bavaria, to collect Heisenberg from his home. [...] The scientists were abstracted secretly, from under the noses of the French, and brought back to Britain, where they were held, under wartime laws and without anyone’s knowledge, in a former Intelligence safe house – Farm Hall, near Cambridge (Frayn 1998:116).

They were there for six months and, although they were treated as guests, their conversations were being bugged by hidden microphones. The transcripts from these conversations are known as the Farm Hall papers, and were made publicly available by the British Government in 1992. From these transcripts we learn a number of things. One was that the Germans did not think further than a reactor; they were not at all eager to explore the possibility of weapons. In addition, in the conversations following the news of the Hiroshima bomb, they (especially Heisenberg) seem genuinely stunned at the shocking reports they heard on the radio. The following piece of dialogue demonstrates the controversy around the time Heisenberg spent at Farm Hall.

ACT II

Margrethe: He said that you didn't understand the crucial difference between a reactor and a bomb.

Heisenberg: I understood it very clearly. I simply didn't tell the others.

Margrethe: Ah.

Heisenberg: I understood, though.

Margrethe: But secretly.

Heisenberg: You can check if you don't believe me.

Margrethe: There's evidence, for once?

Heisenberg: It was all most carefully recorded.

Margrethe: Witnesses, even?

Heisenberg: Unimpeachable witnesses.

Margrethe: Who wrote it down?

Heisenberg: Who recorded and transcribed it.

Margrethe: Even though you didn't tell anyone?

Heisenberg: I told one person. I told Otto Hahn. That terrible night at Farm Hall, after we'd heard the news. Somewhere in the small hours, after everyone had finally gone to bed, and we were alone together. I gave him a reasonably good account of how the bomb had worked.

Margrethe: After the event.

(Frays 1998:80-81)

This piece of dialogue is important in so far as it demonstrates the emphasis placed on historical record as evidence of the truth, but Margrethe's remark that it was 'after the event' reminds us of the influence of human perception on the nature of historical documentation, and how evidence and witnesses are only a part of the construction of a version of the truth. Once again, we are reminded of the power of the theatrical narrative in illuminating the context of the reworking of the past, the stage, which is built on

certain conventions and constantly alludes to a subjective version of the events as seen through the eyes of the playwright. Frayn does dwell on the difference between the reactor and the bomb, and whether Heisenberg understood the difference in his mathematical calculations, as well as the different opinions on this matter as reflected by the numerous reference works that he studied. After this, he explains that one of the forms of indeterminacy that the play touches on is that of human memory or at any rate “the indeterminability of the historical record” (1998:124).

ACT I

Bohr: Yes, why did he do it?

Heisenberg: September, 1941. For years I had it down in my memory as October.

Margrethe: September. The end of September.

Bohr: A curious sort of diary memory is.

Heisenberg: You open the pages, and all the neat headings and tidy jottings dissolve around you.

Bohr: You step through the pages into the months and days themselves.

Margrethe: The past becomes the present inside your head.

(Frayn 1998:6)

4.5 Conclusion

Foucault stated that “What is found at the historical beginnings of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity” (1977:142). Memory is a construct that is used in turn to construct history; therefore, the context of its re-enactment is crucially important. ‘Traditional’ historical documents such as archives and chronicles could not possibly provide us this referential framework of uncertainty, and indeed the ‘untrustworthiness’ of the recall of memory. It is not possible, since the focus of such ‘traditional’ historical documents is the pursuit of empiric data collecting. If Bohr struggles to remember the correct date, we need to ask the question: what other crucially important details of the event did he also forget? The past becomes the present, in the sense that Derrida explains the function of memory as consisting of the power of reminding us of the signs of our ideas, or the circumstances that accompanied them (see Chapter Two). The ordering and interpreting of memories and ideas has to do with several of our present needs. In the final scene of the play we read:

ACT II

Bohr: When no more decision, great or small, are ever made again. When there's no more uncertainty, because there's no more knowledge.

Margrethe: And when all our eyes are closed, when even the ghosts have gone, what will be left of our beloved world? Our ruined and dishonoured and beloved world?

Heisenberg: But in the meanwhile, in this most precious meanwhile, there it is. The trees in Faelled Park. Gammertingen and Biberach and Mindelheim. Our children and our children's' children. Preserved, just possibly, by that one short moment in Copenhagen. By some event that will never be quite located or defined. By that final core of uncertainty at the heart of things.

(Frayn 1998:94).

Heisenberg himself tells us that there is no more uncertainty, because there is no appeal to knowledge. "All we possess is the present, and the present endlessly dissolves into the past" (Frayn 1998:86). Here we again find reason to doubt Heisenberg and his dialogue in the play and this doubt makes us understand that history is a construct, a construct that is best served by the literary narrative. "Margrethe slips into history even as I turn back to Bohr" (Frayn 1998:86). Bohr reminds us that the alternative narrative constructed through theatre has the power to create new meaning and understanding of the events, "Let's suppose for a moment that I don't go flying off into the night. Let's see what happens if instead I remember the paternal role I'm supposed to play. If I stop, and control my anger, and turn to him. And ask him why?" (Frayn 1998:89).

Copenhagen tries to address some of the questions raised by this uncertainty as perceived through human memory, and we are reminded of Condillac's definition of tracing in the sense that it expresses, recalls, represents and makes present (see Chapter Two). In Frayn's theatrical narrative no final conclusion is offered. Instead, it constructs the multiple, thickened narrative that allows the audience to come to their own subjective understanding of the events and the people in order to view these historical traces in a new light. "If, if, if... The line of ifs is a long one. It remains just possible, though. The effects of real enthusiasm and real determination are incalculable. In the realm of the just possible they are sometimes decisive" (Frayn 1998:129).

There is no sense of ‘closedness’ that can be affixed to human experience, and therefore the openness of the structural elements in *Copenhagen* not only sets up the fictional, dramatic world that the characters interact with, but also a macrocosm of the real world that acts as constraining and explanatory contextual reference points. This is crucial for our understanding of one of the discursive frames of the play – history as science or as narrative. A legitimising of origin to serve some kind of objective struggle for meaning is not possible in this theatrical narrative.

History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of origin (Foucault 1977:145).

CHAPTER FIVE: GHETTO AS ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE

Destroy its books, its culture, and its history. Then have someone write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.

(Kundera 1981:159)

5.1 Introduction

In previous chapters I explored theories around the past and history as a production of memories that leads us to conclude that as such memory and history are constructs. This has certain implications on how we view the documentation of that history. In the light of this, I analysed Hayden White's theories as proposed by him in *Metahistory* on the historical imagination and his call for historical writing through a narrative, poetic structure. I focused on the theatrical narrative as presented by the fictionalised and dramatised elements found in two plays that have their roots in historical events – *Ubu and the Truth Commission* and *Copenhagen*. I examined how the theatrical narratives can be viewed as alternative narratives that can potentially challenge official histories. In my analyses of these two plays I aimed at exploring how they potentially allow the receiver of the text to view events in a new light and find historical meaning in texts and literature that we normally regard as outside the scope of history.

In this chapter I will focus on Joshua Sobol's 1984 play *Ghetto*. In my analysis of this text I will look at how the theatrical narrative engages with the complexities surrounding the historical events and characters that form the background of this Holocaust play, but also engages in the complexities surrounding a representation of the Holocaust in history. This will be done by paying specific attention to the themes of this play as well as observing key pieces of dialogue. In order for us to gain a sense of the context of these concepts that the theatrical narrative evokes, I provide an introduction to the background of the play and the complexities of a representation of the Holocaust.

5.2 Background of the play

The main focus of my analysis of Sobol's text will be the alternative narrative created by his representation of the community and the vitality of those living in the Vilna ghetto within the context of that part of history which has been mythified almost to the point of desensitising one, namely the Holocaust. It was the philosopher Adorno who said that after the camps there could be no more art: "After Auschwitz who can write poetry?" (in Kearney 2002:68). This statement by Adorno addresses a crucial philosophical point in the discourse surrounding a literary and aesthetic representation of the Holocaust. Concerning a literary narrative which has its founding moment in the reconstruction of memories and testimonies (such as the diary by librarian Herman Kruk which forms the basis of Sobol's text); Richard Kearney makes the following point:

There is, I suggest, a delicate balance between the need (a) to use narrative imagination to revisit trauma and allow for a healing-mourning process and (b) to respect the unspeakable evil of that trauma. This immediately raises crucial issues about how to commemorate the Shoah without betraying it. How to represent without distorting? How, in dealing with the politics of memory, do we obviate the iniquity of oblivion on the one hand, and what Levi calls the facility of compulsory public distress on the other? The Holocaust, it seems true to say, has suffered from both *under-remembrance* and *over-remembrance*. The challenge is to remember in the right way. In view of such scruples, Stephen Feinstein concludes his essay on *Witness and Legacy*, a major multi-media exhibition of Holocaust images, with a plea for the continuation of narrative memory: 'There is more and more of a burden and an increasing urgency to tell the story. The generation of witnesses is passing. All that will be left is the legacy. Throughout history, art has been a means of such telling. Within the realm of art, the Holocaust era may just be emerging' (Kearney 2002:50).

Decades after the Holocaust we struggle to make sense of the events surrounding the German death camps and, even more, to understand how art is possible *under such circumstances*; and after the fact, we ask how it is possible to make art *about* the events of the Holocaust. As mentioned above, Sobol's play takes as its basis the Yiddish diary of ghetto librarian Herman Kruk: "Diary of the Wilner Ghetto". This diary records a horrible reality in real time, as the following excerpt demonstrates (this is also the last diary entry by Kruk on July 14 1943):

And the Ghetto Industry is Expanding

What is happening here is not only amazing but truly insensate. Here we stand awaiting the angel of death and at the same time we stand in the ‘alien’ shop, whetting the knife aimed at our throat. While we wait for the slaughterer, we are expanding our Ghetto Industry... (in Sobol 1989:xxi).

Ghetto is situated in Vilna, which was the capital city of Lithuania, a country that was first taken over by Poland and then Russia. The city was one of the most important Jewish religious centres, where the Babylonian *Talmud* had been published. As Yitzhak Arad tells us in the Foreword to *Ghetto in Flames*: “From the end of the fifteenth century a large and flourishing community existed in Vilna. The large number of rabbinic scholars, writers, and centres of learning and Torah studies in Vilna assured the city a central place in the cultural life of Lithuanian Jewry. In the Jewish world at large Vilna was known as ‘Jerusalem of Lithuania’ (in Sobol 1998:xii). In the period between the two world wars Vilna was ruled by Poland, and they followed a policy of ‘Polonization’ by manoeuvring the Jews out of their strong economic position. “In contrast to the economic decline of Vilna Jewry, a lively and flourishing cultural life developed. Zionist, religious, and Yiddish groups were active in preserving the Jewish character of the community and in fostering Jewish consciousness through the network of educational and cultural establishments” (Arad in Sobol 1989:xii).

After the German attack on Poland in 1939, Lithuania was divided between Germany and Russia. However, after the German assault on the Soviet Union, Lithuania was occupied by Nazi Germany and besieged by German troops. The city of Vilna had approximately 580 streets and the Jewish community, who made up more than one third of the general population, were forced into a ghetto consisting of 17 streets at first and then later only 7. They were treated abominably and living conditions were atrocious – there was no food, no clothes, women were forbidden to fall pregnant, even flowers were forbidden. The smallest ‘offence’ was severely punished. Arad tells us that Vilna was a microcosm of the Holocaust:

In this cruel reality, Vilna Jewry struggled to survive and seek rescue. The daily struggle was for life itself, to survive in the face of hunger and disease. Jewish Vilna embodied the majority of hardships and torment that European Jewry at large underwent during the Holocaust, and its responses sum up most of the options that were available to the Jews during this tragic epoch. Vilna Jewry was a microcosm of the fate of all Jewish communities in Eastern Europe (Arad in Sobol 1989:xiv).

Nevertheless, even under these circumstances and with limited living space, they managed to find a place for a theatre building where full productions were staged. On the surface *Ghetto* tells the story of the theatre troupe which performed in this theatre. The play is narrated by old Srulik, the only surviving member of the ghetto theatre company. He sits in a Tel Aviv library and tries to recall from memory the last performance delivered by his troupe. This final performance evoked by Srulik is actually the history of this company involving a number of acts from their repertoire. Sobol used the original ghetto songs performed by the troupe.

Ghetto tells the story of an unknown aspect of Jewish life during the Holocaust, when genocide and the daily threat of extinction were challenged by the theatre in the Vilna ghetto community. Sobol speaks of the notion of the ‘vitality’ present in Jewish life that forms one of the larger discourses (in fact it becomes the discursive frame) in this play:

Reading the annals of the Vilna ghetto, the victim’s diaries, and the survivors’ memories, delving into the daily trivia of life in the ghetto, one is struck by and marvels at the vitality and zest for life bursting forth in the ghetto. Without this burst of vitality, it would be impossible to imagine the survival-victory of the defenceless who managed to keep their life force and human image even when facing their fully armed tormentors and murderers. To the mystery of this vitality, I owe the play (Sobol in Feldman 1989:165).

Apart from Kruk’s diary, the play is also based on Sobol’s reading of the diaries of other Vilna victims, but Sobol writes that Kruk’s diary revolutionised his vision of the Holocaust, for the diary “suggests a vision of a society very busy with living, and not preparing to die”, producing a “demystified gaze on reality” that “compels you to change all your opinions and prejudices about a reality that has been otherwise mythified” (2000:2).

Some in the ghetto said it was not right to make theatre in what was, sooner or later, a slaughterhouse: ‘No theatre in the graveyard’. But because it looks these contradictions full in the face, because it makes you jump from chorus-girls and comedians to deportations and death-camps, *Ghetto* is a more devastating account of the European Jewish Holocaust than most simplified narratives, memorializing the killing, mourning the victims, but not evoking the lives and vitality of those that were killed (Kustow 2002:5).

Kustow’s crucial statement about *Ghetto* being a more devastating account than other simplified narratives is crucial for our understanding of the alternative historical narrative created by the fictionalised and dramatised version of the events in this play. The play not only engages with the complexities surrounding the historical characters and the events (as my analysis of the play will demonstrate), but also engages in the complexities surrounding a representation of the Holocaust in history. It is the combination of these two levels of engagement that makes it possible for us to say that *Ghetto* can potentially create the counter-memories needed to challenge official documentations of the Holocaust in order to gain a new or different understanding of this period in the world’s history. I will argue that *Ghetto* is not simply a reproduction of some extra-textual ‘reality’, an attempt to show the origin and the horror of the historical events; it functions as an alternative narrative to ‘traditional’ historical accounts of the Holocaust. Claude Lanzmann objects very strongly to a narrative account of the Holocaust:

The Holocaust is first and foremost unique in that it builds around itself, in a circle of flames, the limit not to be crossed, because a certain absolute of horror is incomunicable: to pretend crossing it is to become guilty of the most serious transgression. Fiction is transgression; I feel deeply that there is a prohibition of representation (in Kearney 2002:52).

According to Kearney some films on the Holocaust (such as Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*) dramatise the Holocaust in order to involve the spectator emotionally in an “illustrated *Shoah*” – *Shoah* is the name of Lanzmann’s eight hour documentary on the Holocaust (Kearney 2002:52). Lanzmann refuses Spielberg’s dramatisation and claims that Spielberg puts images where there are none in *Shoah* and he concludes that ““images kill imagination”” (in Kearney 2002:52). Lanzmann feels that the narrative representation

trivialises the unique character of the Holocaust. “There is, as Lanzmann admits, ‘no possibility of crying’ [in his film]. By refusing the temptation of a redemptive or reconciliatory conclusion – like that of Schindler’s List – Lanzmann opts for a form of narrative memory which testifies, first and last, to the need to remember our own forgetfulness” (Kearney 2002:53).

Lanzmann’s plea for reminding us of our own forgetfulness makes a very powerful statement towards the function of representations of the Holocaust. I will argue that it is precisely in this context that Sobol’s text makes a very valuable contribution to Holocaust literature through its dramatisation and fictionalisation of the vitality of those living under these horrible circumstances – those people trying to maintain their cultural dignity and their sense of humanity through their theatrical imaginations. This play indeed confronts us with an otherwise incomprehensible narrative on the true tragedy behind the Holocaust: a vision of the vitality and life force behind those human lives lost. As Heisserer explains, “Sobol’s *Ghetto* honoured with distinction what is the implicit but elusive mandate of Holocaust art, namely, the imagistic recreation of a history whose reality some claim exceeds our capacity to imagine it” (1986:478).

Ghetto is an imagistic reconstruction of an element of the Holocaust that forces us to reconsider that which most historical Holocaust documents cannot provide: a complex and thickened narrative that in some way alludes to the sheer absurdity of a theatre in the ghetto, but also the sheer absurdity of their daily lives and the struggle to overcome the daily threat of extinction. This text functions as a narrativisation of a history that is incredibly complex and that possibly exceeds our abilities to imagine it, and therefore needs to be told in a manner that is not hedged in and constrained by any notions of normality or reality. Sobol writes that

Living in Israel today is to experience the post-destruction of Jewish life in Europe. The most dramatic part is that you cannot reconstruct what has been destroyed. It’s impossible to reconstruct an individual or a people or a language or a culture from piles of toothbrushes, hair, clothes, shoes and suitcases. Impossible. It’s also almost impossible to think about, let alone express, our

experience, and certainly wrong to try to do it in an *ordained manner* (Sobol 2000:1, my italics).

Sobol's comment on the impossibility of reconstructing the experience of the Holocaust in any ordained manner gains specific meaning through my exploration of the *theatricality* of Sobol's play. The play which is based on the theatrical acts and songs of a theatre troupe that did exist and at some point did perform and sing the text and songs that Sobol uses, not only gives us a historical account of the actual performances of the troupe, but also provides an expressionistic vision of the nightmarish reality of ghetto life.

Before I get to my analysis of the narrative in *Ghetto*, I believe a brief summary of those issues in the historical discourse on the narrative and poetic nature of historical writing that form the background of this study is necessary.

5.3 History and narrative (and the paradox of testimony)

MacDonald writes in the preface to Hochhuth's *The Representative* that “[history] is the instrument by which each generation comes to terms with its past” (1963:x).

Ghetto is primarily a memory play and Srulik, the sole survivor of the ghetto theatre company, recalls from memory the final performance of his troupe in an interview. In his attempt to trace the steps of his company's last performance, the internal play he evokes is actually a history of his company's work involving original ghetto songs and plays. The play's allusions to the theatricality of the events (the performances of the ghetto theatre troupe) are constructed through the very theatrical elements (narrative constructed through fictionalisation and dramatisation) that form the focus of this study. I've discussed memory as a construct in this study already, and that the history that results from this constructed memory is another construct – contributing to the idea that we can find an important alternative historical narrative in a literary representation of individual memories. *Ghetto* is based on the testimonies and diaries of the Vilna victims. Kearney makes a crucial point about the fragility of memories and particularly the memories of victims in his chapter called “The Paradox of Testimony” in *On Stories*:

It is clear that the history of victims calls for a mode of remembering other than the ritualistic commemoration of heroes and gods. There is a crucial difference between the ‘little narratives’ of the vanquished and the ‘Grand Narratives’ of the victors. But moralists of narrative memory sometimes fail, it seems to me, to appreciate fully that reminiscence of suffering has just as much need to be *felt* as commemoration of glory. Historical horror requires to be served by an aesthetic (*aesthesia* – sensation) quite as powerful and moving as that of historical triumph – perhaps even *more* powerful if it is to compete for the attention of the public at large (2002:61).

White’s theories in *Metahistory* lead us to conclude that history can be seen as the relation between a place, the analytical procedures of the historian and the construction of a narrative text. In this process witnesses and their testimonies become accomplices of the historian and his analytical procedures, and here history is not a mere substitute for social praxis, but in de Certeau’s words, “its fragile witness and necessary critique” (in Read 1993:231). For de Certeau historical works participate in the movement through which a society transforms its relation to reality, or a shared reality, by changing the ‘natural’ into the utilitarian, or into the aesthetic. I again refer to Hutchison, who tells us “Memory is a dynamic and active process that falls prey to many ‘interferences’” (1999:11). These ‘interferences’ affect memory, and thus history, and include the context of the event in the first place and the context of its reconstruction. This is of specific importance, since the time lapse between the event and its re-enactment is a reminder of the words of Jacques Derrida in “Signature, Event, Context” that

Memory consists only in the power of reminding ourselves of the signs of our ideas, or the circumstances which accompanied them; and this capacity occurs only by virtue of the *analogy of signs* that we have chosen, and by virtue of the order that we have put between our ideas; the objects that we wish to retrace have to do with several of our present needs (1982:314).

In the case of Sobol’s play the witness testimonies are found in the diaries of the victims, and here the context of their reconstruction is of crucial importance. As Kearney tells us: “Sometimes an ethics of memory is obliged to resort to aesthetics of storytelling. Viewers need not only to be made intellectually aware of the horrors of history; they also

need to experience the horror of that suffering as if they were actually there" (2002:62). And he quotes Ricoeur:

Fiction gives eyes to the horrified narrator. Eyes to see and to weep. The present state of literature on the Holocaust provides ample proof of this...One counts the cadavers or one tells the story of the victims'. Memory can both inform and illustrate; and part of this illustration is the narrative use of images to *strike* us – in the sense of striking home the horror of evil or the charisma of good (in Kearney 2002:62).

This is where the notions of catharsis and empathy are germane – the theatrical narrative in *Ghetto* can provide the catharsis needed for younger generations who, without this representation of the horror, could not possibly imagine the events without sacrificing its unique character of unspeakable horror. As Kearney tells us: "we are faced, in sum, with a double duty – to narrate the event and yet to respect its inevitable difference from other events" (2002:68). In *Ghetto*'s case the focus, however, does not fall only on the unspeakable horror, but also on the barely imaginable vitality in the Jewish community, perhaps indicating a narrative remembrance that not only represents the past as it was, but reinvents it as it might have been. And therein lies the crucial alternative narrative needed for a process of generating counter-memories that can challenge official histories.

As one Polish Jewish survivor put in his book, *Music of Another World*: This cannot be described, for there are no words for it...how can one describe things that cannot be described, for which there are no words? But words must be found...and so every author uses words that 'did not exist' but that were within his scale of possibilities and within his knowledge of the facts. Thus contradictions were unavoidable (Kearney 2002:64).

Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* deals with the events that followed the 1968 Soviet overthrow of Czechoslovakia's liberal government headed by Alexander Dubcek. Kundera shows the "extent to which forgetting promotes practices that seek to legitimise social and political orders as well as those that invoke the past for aesthetic ends" (Ungar 1992:64). Kundera's book deals with a new regime that tried to create the illusion of a 'new' memory through an appeal to a certain political present retrieved from a symbolic past. This retrieval happens through a process of 'forgetting' – which means

to erase, to extract, or to silence – that which contributed in the past to a legitimising of origin. As Carroll reminds us, ‘history’ here is the difference between the “lost, ideal origin” and the “representations” which supplement its absence (1980:210). This is illustrative of regimes where a process of legitimising social and political order no longer functions as a choice between adversarial accounts, but rather of a regime that revises the past according to the structures on which it founded its own claim to legitimacy. As Ungar explains, this leads to simulated claims of legitimacy, since the origins to which it aspires are appropriated only to serve the needs of the current regime.

In the following section I will briefly investigate how Sobol’s theatrical text addresses the complexities surrounding the historical characters and events that form the background of this play, as well as complexities surrounding the narrative representation of the Holocaust. In order to do this I will examine the fictionalised and dramatised elements of the play as observed in the themes foregrounded by the playwright as well as key pieces of dialogue.

5.4 *Ghetto* and the alternative narrative created by the play

Sobol strived to maintain authenticity by naming the characters of the play after the historical figures that the play is based on: Jacob Gens is the head of the ghetto *Judenrat* and the initiator of the theatre. Herman Kruk is the librarian who objects to the theatrical activities. Then there is Kittel, the Nazi overseer, presumably a cultured artist, and his ‘double’, the scholarly Dr Paul (according to the text, they should be played by the same actor). There are also an old and a young Srulik, the director of the theatre, and the ‘narrator’ whose memory has preserved the scenes shown on the stage. The character of Hayyah is also based on a historical figure – in 1943 the Jewish singer, Ljuba Levicka, was executed after being caught with smuggled food. This incident constitutes the second scene and indeed the catalytic moment of the play. After Kittel traps Hayyah with a bag of beans under her dress, he instructs her (and the rest of the theatre company) to come up with a play that is worth more than 50 grams of beans. Theatre in this context refers to one of the means of livelihood (in a chillingly literal sense) of the Jewish

community, and Kittel's instruction that they must produce a work of art that is worth more than the bag of beans highlights the fact that their lives (as Jews) were worth nothing more.

A number of issues are theatrically foregrounded in the play. Prominent among these is the conflict between Gens and Kruk. Gens demonstrates a willingness to sacrifice some of the population in order to prolong the life of the ghetto's remaining inhabitants. This included his own involvement in choosing those to be executed in the neighbouring woods of Ponar. He also assisted in making the German industries (washing and repairing of military uniforms) in the ghetto as economically viable as possible. In contrast, Kruk attempts to apply the ancient lesson of Maimonides, maintaining that if necessary all must be sacrificed to save the life of a single Jew (Heisserer 1986:447). Kruk thereby refuses to accept the authority of the *Judenrat*, and finds his support in the underground resistance movement in the ghetto. *Ghetto* addresses issues of integrity, courage and moral choice in both Gens and Kruk. Sobol is suggesting that these men had to face profoundly complex choices.

I believe a summary of the thematic elements foregrounded by Sobol will provide an insight into the fictionalised and dramatised narrative and how this constitutes the alternative narrative.

5.4.1 Summary of thematic and metaphorical elements

In *Ghetto* Sobol makes strong use of a non-verbal element of the narrative in theatre: costume. In this play the clothes are used as substitute for humans. They indicate a change of identity when the Jewish people put on Russian military uniforms and in the final scene, we see the costumes feature as 'puppets', used as entertainment for Kittel. The Nazi officer then proceeds to shoot at the clothes, while they are feeding on his 'gift', a pot of jam. The audience is left to wonder whether Kittel has shot the 'costumes', and if they are still trapped in the sphere of the 'make believe'. When the curtain falls on the stage in the imagined ghetto theatre (as part of the fictional world visualised by the

playwright, and dramatically contextualised in the space through the narration of Srulik), will this horror end? Or has Kittel stepped out of the fictional world, and ‘really’ killed the players of the Vilna ghetto theatre? Finally it seems that Kittel has killed the actors and the spectacle comes to an abrupt end.

Technically, the ending of this play resembles that of Luigi Pirandello’s *Enrico IV* (1923), where it is not clear – at least for a moment – whether the final murder is part of the hero’s masquerade or not. (This is a resemblance pointed out in Feldman 1989:168). Has the ‘mad’ hero killed his imaginary Peter Damian, the rival of Henry the Fourth, the eleventh-century German Emperor? Alternatively, has he knowingly and ‘sanely’ murdered Belcredi, the contemporary Italian gentleman, his ex-friend and competitor, who was responsible for this ‘fall’ and the ensuing bout of madness? This momentary double-take clinches Pirandello’s epistemological questioning of the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, the sane and the make believe, the world as action and the world as language. In *Ghetto*, however, the Pirandellian ending has a different function. “Paradoxically, it is the fleeting hesitation between theatrical illusion and theatrical truth that renders this play *emotionally effective*” (Feldman 1989:167).

In this case, the costumes become a metaphor for life itself as well as livelihood in the sense that one of the biggest factories in the Ghetto was a washing and repair factory for military uniforms – run and maintained by the Jewish community. Kruk recorded the following in his diary:

December 14 [1942]

Ghetto Industry

As indicated previously, we are constantly moving in the direction of establishing a great industrial centre in the Ghetto. To be sure, it is not so much we as it is the Germans who are pushing us in that direction. They want Jewish productivity to become a source of exploitation for their military purposes

(in Sobol 1989:xix)

The dramatisation of these elements acts as a strong reminder that the thickened narrative created by this can simply not be reproduced by the historical chronicle or the archive. The link here is made between the ‘usefulness’ of their lives in terms of producing the

military uniforms – if they were no longer useful, they were discarded as Kittel does with the costumes and in essence the ‘actors’ when he shoots the costumes. Sobol makes a very powerful link between the vitality and life force of the Jews and their usefulness.

Part Two begins with the following stage directions:

Prologue

Members of the company form a human chain. They throw German uniforms from one to another and pile them on a huge heap. As they work they sing ‘Yiddishe Brigades’
(Sobol 1989:32)

Although this clothing belonged to the dead and the wounded, and invokes haunting images of death (and the above-mentioned idea of changing identity), the laundering and mending of clothing was the livelihood that the ghetto depended on, and the clothes therefore become an important symbol of life and hope. In Scene Ten Weiskopf offers the acting troupe a neatly stacked pile of mended and laundered uniforms and clothes as costumes for their plays, and his monologue here is telling of the metaphoric power of the costumes in the play:

Scene Ten

Weiskopf: Ties from Warsaw. Polish uniforms, who needs one? Uniforms of heroes.

Bayonets in hand, on horseback, they charged German tanks. It didn’t do the uniforms much good. Peppered with bullet holes. My women sewed them up. Is there even a spot of blood? German uniforms, all ranks, we’ve got them. We make no distinctions. Everyone gets treated the same. Into the laundry! You should visit our laundry. You’ll come up with a show. In our cauldron are human dramas. The fires in the ovens roar! The air weeps tears of soap and chlorine. Everything comes out in the wash – the mud, the blood, the oil! The sewage boils in black and crimson streams. And then on to the sewing workshop. Clothing, we’ve got plenty. Yes, clothing’s one commodity that’s not in short supply.

(Sobol 1989:23)

The costumes in this scene come to represent the dispensability of human life during the Holocaust as they are washed and mended without any regard for the person who wore it before, but they also represent the possibility of ‘life’ for the actors as they create new plays and characters out of the pile of clothes, and thereby sustain their livelihood – the theatre. The clothing come to represent the possibility of a new beginning for the theatre

troupe, a reference to the vitality of the Jewish community as represented by the theatre. This creates the thickened narrative that forms the alternative narrative in this play, namely “a more devastating account of the Holocaust than most simplified narratives, memorializing the killing, mourning the victims, but not evoking the lives and vitality of those that were killed” as Kustow puts it (2002:5).

The character of the SS officer Kittel provides us with the most striking thematic image of the play. Kittel was brought to the ghetto presumably to liquidate the ghetto, since he had a reputation for doing this. In the play Kittel quickly develops a fascination with the ghetto theatre troupe, since he considered himself to be an artist. He is particularly fond of jazz; this was forbidden as culturally contaminating by the Nazis. As Heisserer tells us: “It is the image of Kittel with his saxophone, singing, dancing, and playing Gershwin’s *Swanee* with the ghetto actors and musicians that constitutes the most powerful visual scene in the production” (1986:478). This image (constructed by the primary and secondary text in the stage directions) is of great importance, for we see Kittel “not as a scrupulous officious artisan, but rather a zealous liquidation specialist” (Heisserer 1986:478), whose approach toward atrocity resembled the jazz he was so fond of: “freeform, improvisational and highly spirited” (Heisserer 1986:478). It seems that one of the primary thematic focuses – the complex nature of the choices facing the Jews in the ghetto environment, and their struggle to maintain their integrity, their ‘soul’, and their lives, is powerfully alluded to by the image of Kittel in his black S.S. uniform – saxophone in the one hand, machine gun in the other.

On the one hand, *Ghetto* was, to the best of my knowledge, the first Israeli play to set its plot in the time and place of the Holocaust itself. As is well known, most Israeli ‘Holocaust plays’ were set in post-World War II Europe or Israel, focusing on the relationship between survivors and ‘natives’. As such, they dramatised a typical Israeli dilemma, namely the conflict between ‘Jew’ and ‘Israeli’. (Feldman 1989:168)

In contrast, Sobol’s was the first attempt to present on the stage the trauma itself: he dared to imagine that which we often view as the epitome of all evil – the character of the Nazi officer. Kittel was documented in the ghetto annals as both a cultured artist and a

villainous anti-Semite. Sobol's characterisation of Kittel, achieved by dialogue and his interaction with other characters, is no doubt part of Sobol's ideological message. Moreover, the 'vitality' of the defenceless victims that suffered under Kittel as representative of the Nazi regime, becomes the object of admiration as I will demonstrate in the next section with an excerpt from the dialogue of the play.

5.4.2 The theatrical narrative through dialogue

We can analyse representation in theatrical texts in terms of the relationship between what is said by the actor and therefore by the playwright; these utterances function in relation to a microcosm, the fictional world created and made visual by the dramatist, and finally, the temporal and spatial context of the world outside of a given theatrical text. In his story of the Vilna theatre Sobol has created a historical narrative by fictionalising and dramatising actual characters and events through using his extensive documentary research as a base. If we study the chronology of events (in Sobol 1989:vii) of the Vilna ghetto we find that practically all the action and characters in the play are based on real historical people and events.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I focus on the fictionalised and dramatised accounts of these events and characters in order for us to determine the alternative narrative created, and this narrative focuses on the vitality of the Jewish community – that vision of a society very much living and not preparing to die. The chronicle of events read like a history lesson without providing any indication of the human intention and action behind them. The following piece of dialogue is telling of the moral choices of the Jews in the ghetto, and the life force of the Jewish spirit that they wanted to protect:

Scene 12

Gens: They still don't see what's being done to them. Listen! There is another kind of resistance. Not fighting, not the forest, not even joining the underground here in this ghetto. OK, pretend you don't know what goes on. You're all mixed up in it. I know everything! No! Real resistance is deeper. And harder. And it has to be done!

You asked me a question. 'Why don't I go to the forest?' I'll tell you. The Germans want to destroy us. Physically yes, but worse than that, spiritually.

They want to cut out our souls. Can we resist? They've conquered all Europe. Can we fight them? Only on the spiritual level. 'Neither by might, nor by power, but by our spirit, saith the Lord!' Do you hear? That insulin. Let me tell you about it. Jews have always suffered, always. Never like this. They want to kill us all. Listen: all. They won't. No, no, they're going to lose this war. But when they've retreated, gone, what state will our souls be in? Pure, Jewish, healthy? Or riddled with their fatal disease? We must build a wall round our souls. In this spiritual ghetto we'll protect who? You don't know? The strong. That's what that insulin means. Protect the strong! In body, in spirit. Do you see what we've come to? Selection! That's it. The sick, the weak, the hopeless – what else can we do? (*He drinks*). Will our grandchildren understand why we did it? Will they justify us in their songs, in their plays? Who cares! We must save what we can. So I won't go to the forest. My work is here. I want theatre. And lectures. Education. Intellectual activities. I must save as many Jews as I can! (*He drinks*).
(Sobol 1989:31)

Gens does not address this speech to Kruk directly; his monologue is indeed directed at Kruk's objections to the actions and choices made by Gens. There is a double-edged sword evident here. Gens does what he can to save lives, but that is only his secondary priority. He wants, primarily, to conserve the 'Jewish spirit'. If the extent of the extreme danger in losing the Jewish spirit is not immediately apparent, that is because it is embedded in the terms 'spirituality' vs. 'fatal disease'. Here we see how the spoken words of the character constructs that character as a subjective / objective entity the reader can interact with; identifying with or scrutinising the character. We do know, of course, that the Jewish spirit Gens valorises is contrasted to weapons and fighting, sabotage and underground activity; but there is still uncertainty about its true nature. We take our cue in understanding what it is that Gens wants to preserve, from Kittel's references to Weiskopf's tailor's repair shop.

Scene Nine

Kittel: So I slither in her. Life! Feverish, frantic! There's such beauty, such goodness in that. Can't you see it? No. People who garden in paradise forget the deserts elsewhere. Your shops! Your theatres! Exhibitions! Concerts! Cabaret! Your sense of style! You're run out of luxuries. What do you do! Shred beetroot, call it caviar. The champagne's exhausted? Don't fret. Try a glass of sauerkraut brine. I love it! Your resilience! It's insane!

(Sobol 1989:20)

Kittel is extremely enthusiastic in his appraisal of the Jewish spirit; this is evident from his use of the words, ‘resilience’, ‘life!’, ‘beauty’ and ‘goodness’. In the context of Sobol’s play it is therefore the Jewish ‘life instinct’ that Kittel wants, and Gens strives, to maintain. And it is the German ‘death instinct’ that Gens wants to prevent.

Kittel-Paul, the double-faced Nazi, represents the German death sickness. He is also envious of the Jewish life force, which is embodied for him in Herman Kruk, the librarian. Kruk goes on to admit later that he was misjudging in his opposing the theatre – “the theatre is part of our struggle to keep our human image” (in Feldman 1989:171). Then there are the ambiguities present in the character of Gens. On the one hand, his collaboration with the Nazis is presented as a heroic attempt, however tragic the moral choices that his actions imply.

Scene Sixteen

Kruk: They made the selection. Four hundred and ten old and sick Jews were lined up in the square. An old man recited a prayer for the dead. Everyone started crying. Some of the Jewish police who had made the selection broke down and wept.

Gens: Herman Kruk is an honest man. And a brave one. Who among us dare to say what he says, even wants to hear the things he dares to talk about? Almost no one. But there are more than a few of us who inside feel as he feels. More than a few of you consider me a traitor. And you’re wondering how it is that I’m still here among you with your innocent, your unsullied souls. I, Jacob Gens, who gives orders to blow up the hideouts you prepare. The same Jacob Gens who puzzles out way after way to save the lives of Jews.

I calculate in Jewish blood not Jewish dignity. The Germans want a thousand Jews. I hand them over. If I don’t, they’ll come here and take them by force. And then they won’t take a thousand. They’ll take thousands. And thousands. I will stand trial! I’ll tell them: what I did was done to save Jews, as many as possible, to lead them to freedom. To do this I had no choice but to lead some to death.

(Sobol 1989:48)

Kruk records a joke in his diary to characterise the kind of humour that was developed in the Vilna ghetto. In the play this joke is told by Weisskopf to Kittel: one Jew asks another what’s the difference between a partial liquidation and total liquidation. The other Jew answers: ‘If they liquidate 50 000 Jews and not me, that is partial liquidation. If they liquidate me that is total liquidation’ (Sobol 1989:20). Sobol writes that this joke

reminded him to go all the way, to write in that spirit which can send a shiver down your backbone, which is the authentic spirit of Judaism (2000:4).

5.5 Conclusion

In *Ghetto* we find that the primary text and the way it is supported and constructed through the play within a play, and the metaphoric use of language and images provide us with a crucially important alternative narrative to other Holocaust historical documents. It provides us with a view of the vitality of the life in the ghetto, presenting us with a different perspective on the tragedy behind these events: the heartbreaking loss of the lives of these men and women represented in Sobol's play – men and women of great moral courage and action under very trying circumstances.

Ghetto is therefore not simply a reproduction of some extra-textual 'reality', an attempt to show the horror of the origin of the historical events: it is an alternative narrative of a history that engages with the complexity of the historical events and characters that it is based on as well as the complexity surrounding the representation of the Holocaust in history. It is the combination of these two levels of engagement that makes it possible for us to say that *Ghetto* can potentially create the counter-memories needed to challenge official documentations of the Holocaust in order to gain a new or different understanding of this period in the world's history – narrative remembrance that not only represents the past as it was but reinvents it as it might have been. *Ghetto* engages with the memories of the survivors and the deeds of the perpetrators in a far more complex way than the mere documenting of these events can ever do. After the camps, there must be art.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

“There will always be someone there to say, ‘tell me a story’, and someone there to respond. Were this not so, we would no longer be human” (Kearney 2002:156).

In this thesis I aimed to establish the nature of the narrative in history writing in the light of Hayden White’s theories as delineated in his work on the historical imagination, *Metahistory*. White prompted me to investigate the nature of narrative writing. I established frames of reference for ideas about historical events, specifically the idea that the past can never be accessed in terms of the events itself, but only through the memories and traces of those events. History comes to life as soon as the historian documents it in the form of a narrative.

Once we understand the frames of reference that govern our ideas about history and the specific historical events, we can embark on a journey of understanding the various equally important narratives and alternative narratives that shape counter-memories which can in turn potentially challenge official narratives.

In theatre that focuses on events of historical significance (as is the case with the three plays I analysed, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, *Copenhagen* and *Ghetto*), it is not the dramatist’s concern to present the people or the events involved in a supposedly objective ‘historically correct’ way. We are reminded that the dramatist will always be concerned with the drama and the conflict. In my study of the theatrical texts I focused on the processes of fictionalisation and dramatisation as the way in which the dramatist writes narrative.

In all three plays we can observe the following: historical data are hardly ever ready to be used as is in a theatrical text... The data need to take on a re-imagined form that would be dramatically engaging for the audience. I mentioned the criticism of theatre regarding its artificiality, which cannot be reconciled with the authenticity needed for the documentation of history. This artificiality is based on the fact that we do see a far more

dramatic treatment of the historical evidence than in other art forms. I explored the parameters of this dramatic treatment in my analysis of the individual plays.

I pointed to historical narration as a system of mental operations that constitutes the field of historical consciousness (as defined by Rüsen in Chapter Two). In the context of this historical consciousness, historical narration is tied to the medium of memory. Memory mobilises the experience of past time so that the experience of present time becomes understandable, and the expectation of future time is possible. The narrative organises the internal unity of these three temporal dimensions and connects the real experience of time to intentions and expectations. The aesthetic can make the past relevant for present life and inform our shaping of the future.

I made numerous references to memory as a dynamic and active process that falls prey to much interference, and pointed out how such interference influences memory and therefore history. One of the elements that I discussed in my analysis of the three plays was the context of the event in the first place, and the context of its reconstruction. I examined how narrative in theatre operates, and how this enables the dramatist to use the given ‘facts’ and the socio-political contexts in order to fictionalise and dramatise events of historical importance. Not only does theatre contribute to the debate on the narrative nature of historiography, but it also creates the crucial, alternative narrative that can challenge official histories whereby a new meaning and the possibility of seeing events in a different light is created. It is not possible to put something ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ on stage, but it is possible to put something on stage that refers to this ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ event as is the case with the narrative historical document. Therefore we cannot make a distinction between the value of the meaning created by the theatrical text that is historically orientated or the historical narrative.

In theatre the re-enactment of history is not only a secondary copy of the real event – it can indeed create the possibility of viewing the events in a different light, because it creates meaning at the moment of its re-enactment, a process of tracing events whereby the theatre makes present the events. This highlights theatre’s importance in the process

of creating localised, alternative narratives. No other art form or literary genre can bring the traces of events to the foreground, to the immediate realm of human perception, in quite the same way as theatre does by expressing, representing, recalling and making present.

An aesthetic treatment implies a profound involvement with the complexities of the events and the people involved. Hutchison presents the idea that the artist is consciously formulating, and thus also interpreting, events and in this sense he or she is actively involved in shaping public memory and opinion.

I, therefore, contend that the three theatrical texts studied here should not only be regarded as narrative accounts of the respective events in a dramatic manner, but also as historical documents that alert us to the complexities found in the respective societies and the historical background of the events that are dramatised and fictionalised – and ultimately they also alert us to the very nature of constructing historical narrative.

I want to conclude with a quotation from the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka. In his *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, Patočka writes that history provides us with a ‘proper meaning’ in compliance with the Socratic dictum on the ‘examined life’, which gives courage for a life lived in the atmosphere of the problematic.

The possibility of a *metanoeisis* [access to meaning which requires a conversion, but in a philosophical sense rather than the religious] of historic proportions depends essentially on this: is that part of humanity which is capable of understanding what was and is the point of history, which is at the same time ever more driven by the entire positioning of present day humanity at the peak of technoscience to accept responsibility for meaninglessness, also capable of the discipline and self-denial demanded by a stance of uprootedness in which alone a meaningfulness, both absolute and accessible to humans, because it is problematic, might be realised? (1996:xiv).

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