





**Re-placing memories:  
time, space and cultural expression in Ivan Vladislavić's fiction**

by

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**Abstract: Re-Placing Memories: Time, Space and Cultural Expression in Ivan Vladislavić's Fiction**

Ivan Vladislavić's fiction shows a preoccupation with the South African past in terms of both time and space and with the influence of ideology on the interpretation of the past and of cultural artefacts such as cityscapes, buildings, monuments, photographs, and fine art within the South African context. No study has yet considered Vladislavić's entire oeuvre in terms of the interaction between time and space and their particular manifestation in concrete cultural expressions that generate meaning that can only be recognized over time and within the limits of different perspectives. In order to situate his work within such a paradigm, this thesis discusses various theories on the representation of time and space and their application and argues that Vladislavić represents concrete reality and abstract ideas about the past and ideologies in an interrelated manner, in order to illuminate the ways in which concrete reality influences perceptions of the past and its associated ideologies, but also how past and ideology, in turn, influence how concrete reality is perceived. His fiction can thus be described as exploring the complex dynamic between concrete and abstract.

Perspective plays an important role in his fiction in terms of both his representation of concrete (city and artefacts) and abstract reality (past and ideology). Characters' perspectives come into play as they negotiate, create and interpret concrete and abstract reality, and in the light of how they 'see' the world, their identities are shaped. Vladislavić shows that perspective is inevitably blurred with ideological prejudice. He does so, in such a way, that a reader is often led to reconsider her/his own way of perceiving both concrete and abstract.

Cultural artefacts, in particular, mediate perceptions of time and of place; they are (in)formed by ideology and also have singular signifying possibilities and limitations. By drawing attention to his own expression in language, by creating seemingly random lists, or focusing on the multiple meanings of a word in a playful manner, Vladislavić shows that, like artefacts, language too is a medium for mediation that is subject to and formative of ideology.

**Key words:** Ivan Vladislavić, South African postcolonial fiction, time, space, place, memory, history, heritage, cultural expression, cultural artefacts, language, perspective

## **Opsomming: In die Plek van Herinnering: Tyd, Ruimte en Kulturele Uitdrukking in Ivan Vladislavić se Fiksie**

Ivan Vladislavić fokus in sy fiksie op die Suid-Afrikaanse verlede met klem op die verhouding tussen dié verlede en sowel tydsverloop as ruimte. Hy ontgin die invloed van ideologie op die interpretasie van die verlede deur middel van kulturele artefakte, soos stadskappe, geboue, monumente, foto's en beeldende kunste binne die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks. Daar het tot dusver nog geen studie verskyn wat Vladislavić se hele oeuvre in terme van die interaksie tussen tyd en ruimte verken nie, en ook nie een wat navors hoe tyd en ruimte manifesteer in konkrete kulturele produkte, wat betekenis genereer wat slegs met die verloop van tyd herkenbaar word binne die grense van bepaalde perspektiewe nie. Ten einde sy werk binne so 'n raamwerk te plaas, bespreek hierdie proefskrif verskeie teorieë oor die representasie van tyd en ruimte en die toepassing daarvan in Vladislavić se werk. Daar word geargumenteer dat Vladislavić konkrete realiteit en abstrakte idees oor die verlede en oor ideologie op 'n geïntegreerde manier voorstel om uit te wys hoe konkrete realiteit persepsies van die verlede en geassosieerde ideologieë beïnvloed, en terselfdertyd ook hoe die verlede en ideologieë op hulle beurt konkrete realiteit beïnvloed. 'n Mens kan dus tereg sê dat sy werk die komplekse dinamika tussen die konkrete en die abstrakte ondersoek.

Perspektief speel 'n belangrike rol in Vladislavić se voorstelling van sowel die konkrete (die stad en kulturele artefakte) as die abstrakte (die verlede en ideologie). Perspektief kom in sy werk aan die bod wanneer karakters konkrete en abstrakte realiteit onderhandel, skep en interpreter. In die lig van hoe die karakters die wêreld 'sien', word hulle identiteite gevorm. Vladislavić toon dat perspektief noodwendig deur ideologiese vooroordeel verwing word. Hy doen dit op so 'n wyse dat die leser gereeld gelei word om haar/sy eie manier van sien in heroorweging te neem.

Dit is veral kulturele artefakte wat persepsies van tyd en ruimte medieer. Hulle word gevorm deur ideologie en het spesifieke betekenismoontlikhede en -beperkinge. Deur aandag te toe te spits op uitdrukking deur taal, deur byvoorbeeld oënskynlik lukraak objekte op te noem, of deur speels die aandag te vestig op die meervoudige betekenis van 'n woord, toon Vladislavić dat taal, soos kulturele artefakte, ook bloot 'n medium vir mediëring is, wat ondergeskik is aan ideologie en tog vormend daarvan is.

**Sleuteltermes:** Ivan Vladislavić, Suid Afrikaanse postkoloniale fiksie, tyd, ruimte, plek, herinnering, geskiedenis, erfenis, kulturele uitdrukking, kulturele artefakte, taal, perspektief



## **Chapter 1**

### **Contextualisation and Introduction**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

This thesis investigates Ivan Vladislavić's literary representation of the dynamic between abstract qualities such as time and ideology and their concrete manifestations in places and cultural artefacts that invite different interpretations, dependent on perspective. The author evidences a preoccupation with the past and its influence on the present in terms of the ideological traces captured and articulated in particular places and cultural artefacts such as monuments, statues and photographs, since these artefacts fulfil an important role in the generation of meaning and identity formation in his fiction.

Vladislavić's fiction interrogates the uniquely South African context and specifically focuses on perceptions of place, past and ideology in terms of the dynamics of change. His mild and humorous satire serves both as a critique and corrective of inherent flaws in all societies and individuals. With a blend of realism and irony, Vladislavić's fiction captures the changes wrought in contemporary South African society and politics and exposes the various ideological stances by presenting atypical perspectives on change, artefacts, place, time and ideology. His humorous depictions encourage readers to reconsider their own perspectives on change and consequently reassess their own identities. In addition, he exposes the traces of ideology and history inscribed on particular places to illustrate how meaning is generated or shaped through human interaction with time and place.

As a formerly colonised country, South Africa provides a versatile writer such as Vladislavić with a colourful historical backdrop of racial intolerance, political instability and change. His quiet but insistent voice represents contemporary South African socio-political reality as a palimpsest of contrasting contexts wrought over time by successive generations and political regimes. He captures the dynamic quality of change – be it cultural, political or social – by representing the constantly shifting geographical, cultural and political boundaries expressed in the architecture of buildings and other cultural artefacts and by exposing various ideological nuances embedded in these artefacts. He works within a postcolonial paradigm and his most important techniques depend on the conventions of contrast, juxtaposition and irony to interpret and translate the

validity of various perspectives. These literary conventions enable him to juxtapose a variety of different ideological stances and to reflect on their relevance within a specific political climate. As such, his fiction celebrates change as a positive process and questions fixed perceptions and assumptions of place, past and identity.

Several critics, such as Thurman (2007:69 & 2011:55) and Barris (2010:283) have said, after the fact, that Vladislavić's fiction marks a new departure in South African English fiction; his fiction is indeed unique, especially in its preoccupation with language games (that Wood [2001] and Helgesson [2004] explore) and his experiments with different perspectives, which present readers with alternative ways to approach the South African postcolonial situation. He explores perspective through well thought out and slightly off-beat characters, who are often social misfits (Tearle, Budlender, Hauptfleisch), outsiders (Majara, Budlender), strange visionaries (Niewenhuizen), mundane middle-class characters (Mr and Mrs Malgas) or children ("The Tuba", "Courage"; "The Prime Minister is Dead"). In several texts, Vladislavić creates characters that stir ambivalence in readers: Majara (in "Curiouser") and Tearle (in *The Restless Supermarket*) are irksome, but not entirely unlikable characters; through such characters and their uncomfortable perspectives, Vladislavić challenges readers' views on the changing South African context in order to suggest and explore different ways of looking at and understanding the changing country. Yet, it is difficult to categorise his fiction, as his *oeuvre* exhibits diversity in terms of mode of expression and genre, and it represents various voices and points of view on the changing South African context, often in a quirky and humorous way, juxtaposing divergent 'truths', perspectives and consequently realities. The multitude of voices and views placed alongside one another impart to Vladislavić's fiction a postmodern quality, but, as Warnes (2000) and Helgesson (2004) show, his postmodern leanings are not expressed at the expense of social consciousness, since his use of irony and humour, as well as the polyvalent qualities of memory in his work, clearly expose ideology and hypocrisy.

Vladislavić is interested in concrete reality<sup>1</sup> and specifically in cities and cultural artefacts, including fine arts, which he also explores in his non-fictional writing. His fiction indicates that concrete, tangible reality does not exist independently of abstract conceptions of memory, history, ideology and identity formation, but that these conceptions are translated into physical

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word 'concrete' in this thesis to refer to tangible, material reality and to distinguish that which one perceives through the senses from abstract, intangible conceptions of reality, such as ideology.

reality. This implies a complex dynamic between concrete and abstract and also between (concrete) representation and (abstract) meaning generation. In the final analysis, Vladislavić indicates that both concrete and abstract become meaningful in the eye of the beholder. Through irony, juxtaposition and other language conventions, his fiction elucidates the multiple meanings that artefacts and places can convey for different individuals, when viewed from different perspectives, and subverts the idea that a single grand narrative<sup>2</sup> can explain them all. He juxtaposes different perspectives in order to relate the past to the present; he also uses history and memories to serve as a frame of reference in the construction of a new future that will advocate tolerance and acknowledge the value of multiple perspectives on the past.

As Vladislavić's *oeuvre* reveals a very strong awareness of the South African context that forms its backdrop, this chapter introduces the political and historical background against which his work was produced and to which it alludes. This brief review focuses on the contextual information referred to and contained in Vladislavić's short stories and novels. In addition to sketching the backdrop, the chapter also introduces the thesis, theoretical frame and methodology for this study.

## **1.2 The South African Historical Context: Colonisation, Place and Difference**

Richard Cavell (1995:1) argues that the enterprise of colonialism has a fundamentally spatial aspect in terms of the seizing of territories, the mapping of sites, the framing of landscapes, the construction of buildings, the displacement of peoples. In addition to its spatial aspect, colonisation, by its nature, also implies boundaries, as Newman (2007:32) contends: "borders reflect the nature of power relations and the ability of one group to determine, superimpose and perpetuate lines of separation, or to remove them, contingent upon the political environment at any given time." Such power relations characterise South African history in which space and movement have been regulated, for most of its past, in accordance with unjust power distribution systems.

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<sup>2</sup> Lyotard (1984) defined postmodernism by distinguishing between grand and little narratives. Grand narratives are the overarching frameworks that justify and give meaning to human endeavour and include frameworks like Christianity and Marxism. In contrast, little narratives present local and individual accounts and do not purport to explain everything. Postmodern culture favours little narratives over grand narratives.

Colonialism, apartheid and segregation in South Africa are usually associated with the National Party's rule from 1948 to the early nineties, but they were instituted much earlier. Colonisation of indigenous peoples in this country was imposed as soon as the Dutch arrived. Between 1652 and 1780 the Khoikhoi, who moved into South Africa around 1000 BCE, were colonised in the northern and eastern Cape, while the first pass laws, aimed at regulating the movement of people, were enforced as early as 1760 (Worden, 1994:xi).

The Afrikaner colonisation of the country and of native inhabitants was made more complex by the fact that it competed with British attempts to colonise the same place. Many of the early segregationist policies and laws can be attributed to British colonisers, who, with their colonial pass laws, laid the foundation for apartheid (SAHO, 2009). Sir Theophilus Shepstone, for example, introduced a segregated administration of local black inhabitants in Natal during 1846. Giliomee (2003:xv) also points out that it was the British who defeated African resistance in the Eastern half of the country in the 1870s and 1880s. British interest in South Africa was intensified by the discovery of diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1886 and so were British attempts at colonising the country. The British conquered the Cape, which was initially a Dutch colony, in 1795 and again in 1806 (Giliomee, 2003:xiv).

British colonisation can be linked directly to the emergence of Afrikaner nationalism. In 1838, some Afrikaner families set out on what became known as the 'Great Trek' from the Cape Colony to the interior of the country in resistance to their subjugation to British rule at the Cape. Afrikaner resistance culminated in two wars (1880 – 1881 and 1899 – 1902) against the British that provided the impetus for the development of an Afrikaner nationalism. The Afrikaners wanted to establish themselves as distinctly different from the British, and consequently, also different from other races. White South Africans were divided along language lines: on one side of the divide was the Dutch/Afrikaans group and on the other the English-speaking white people who were better educated, better skilled and spoke the language of industry and commerce (Giliomee, 2003:xv). A significant expression of the emerging nationalism was the decision to establish Afrikaans as an official language, alongside Dutch and English, in 1924 (Giliomee, 2003:376). Giliomee (2003:356) points out that this was an important move towards making Afrikaner culture more exclusive. The Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking white communities have moved closer together, but, as recently as 1996, English-speaking households in South Africa were still economically better off than their Afrikaans-speaking



counterparts (Giliomee, 2003:661) and hence an economic boundary between the two communities were intact until recently.

On the political front, a large number of segregationist policies were instituted to control and regulate state administration, labour, trade union membership and land ownership during the 1930s, and they were gradually tightened during the worldwide depression at that time to preserve sparse resources for whites only. These policies functioned to cement the boundaries between different races.

On its centenary, in 1938, a number of Afrikaner men, women and children participated in a re-enactment of the Great Trek. This event culminated in the laying of the foundation stone of the ultimate icon of Afrikaner nationalism, namely the Voortrekker Monument (Coombes, 2006:25-26; see Appendix 1). As part of the procession, the Voortrekker Youth Movement, called *Voortrekkers*,<sup>3</sup> lit flaming torches carried in relays all the way from the Cape to the Transvaal along the route of the Trek. Coombes (2006:26) views this spectacle as “a calculated attempt to invent a coherent Afrikaner identity.” She also draws parallels between the language used at this time and that employed by National Socialists in Germany and specifically by the Nazis at the Nuremburg stadium. The Voortrekker Monument, which was inaugurated on 16 December 1948, reveals German influences in its fort-like structure. As an icon, the monument, which can be seen as a natural consequence of an emerging sense of nationalism that reinforced its ideological roots at the cost of inclusivity, was celebrated by many Afrikaners at the time. Vladislavić subverts the idea of monolithic, stagnant monuments and statues in several texts, and alludes to the Voortrekker Monument in “We Came to the Monument”.

In the 1940s, white politics was dominated by the United Party (UP), which emphasised South Africa's relations with England, the South African Party (SAP), which was more liberal and advocated inclusivity and the National Party (NP), which propagated Afrikaner nationalism and exclusivity. The UP rapidly lost popularity and the white community was divided once more along language lines. The English speakers in the country tended to support Jan Smuts of the SAP, whereas Afrikaans speakers voted for the NP. The latter won the elections in 1948 with a slender majority (Worden, 1994:97) and inherited a country that was already divided by race,

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<sup>3</sup> The *Voortrekkers* were a highly propagandistic and exclusive club, where children were dressed in military uniforms and took part in activities that would foster a sense of Afrikaner nationalism. Until fairly recently, this movement was only for white children.

language and class boundaries. Hendrik Verwoerd, who had previously served as Minister of Native Affairs, became Prime Minister in 1958. He is generally seen as the architect of apartheid and became infamous for defending apartheid when British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan criticised the regime openly in his well-known 'winds of change' speech in Cape Town in 1960 (Coombes, 2006:222). Verwoerd based his defence of the regime on the notion that apartheid was misunderstood and in actual fact aimed at the "preservation of each racial group as a separate entity, with its culture intact" (Coombes, 2006:224). In the 1960s, several places, such as schools and parks, were named after him; most notable of these is Verwoerdburg, an affluent suburb to the south of Pretoria, which has since been re-named 'Centurion'. In 1966, Verwoerd was assassinated in a parliamentary chamber by a temporary messenger, Demetrio Tsafendas, a Mozambican of mixed racial descent (Arnold, 2005:336). This was the second attempt to assassinate him. Verwoerd's demise and burial as well as Tsafendas feature in Vladislavić's "The Prime Minister is Dead" and "Tsafendas's Diary".

Oppressed people responded to the apartheid regime by means of strikes and rebellions of various kinds. Black resistance was formalised for the first time in the formation of the African People's Organisation in 1902; it was followed by the African Native National Congress (ANC; later the adjective 'Native' was dropped), established in 1912 and the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) in 1943. In 1955 the National Congress of the People adopted the Freedom Charter, in 1969 the Pan African Congress (PAC) was formed, while 1961 saw the establishment of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the ANC's military wing. Each of these groups can be regarded as an expression of black resistance against white minority rule. These political factions are indicative of hardened resistance and, as Vladislavić's fiction testifies, created racial boundaries that are still evident today.

The National Party responded to black resistance with the imposition of segregationist laws that were intended to entrench the apartheid regime: laws specifically associated with the apartheid regime, such as the *Immorality Act*, the *Population Registration Act*,<sup>4</sup> the *Bantu Authority Act*, the *Bantu Education Act* and the *Suppression of Communism Act*, among others, appeared on the law books in the 1950s (Worden, 1994:159-164). Even though living spaces had been regulated by the *Natives Land Act* of 1913, which forbade the purchase or lease of land by black

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<sup>4</sup> The *Population Registration Act* enforced the classification of people into four racial categories, namely, white, coloured, 'Asiatic' (Indian) and native (later referred to as 'Bantu'), creating not merely one, but four boundaries (Worden, 1994:95-96). This Act underpinned several others, such as the *Immorality Act*, and inhibited interracial contact.

people outside designated areas known as reserves (Worden, 1994:49) and by the *Native Trust and Land Act* (1936), the *Group Areas Act* of 1950 “extended the principle of separate racial residential areas on a comprehensive and compulsory basis” (Worden, 1994:96) and explains how black people became disempowered and lost their sense of belonging, which fostered a feeling of rootlessness. The ruling party also responded to black resistance by banning, in the 1960s, the ANC and the PAC and anything that it interpreted as “communist activity”.

However, the most detrimental Act to be instituted was the *Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act* in 1959 which created eight (later ten) “Bantu Homelands” (Worden, 1994:110). In 1970, all black people were pronounced to have lost their South African nationalities, and consequently also their representation by white people in parliament (Giliomee, 2003:520); they were subsequently considered to be citizens of the homelands. This was done not only to divide and rule, but more importantly to placate the international community. The government claimed that in the homelands, black people would possess the same rights and freedoms that the white community enjoyed. This hyperreal legal fiction of course did not correspond to reality, as it implied that more than 70 per cent of the population lived in roughly 13 per cent of the country (Oakes, 1988:264). Furthermore, all industries and riches were located in the white areas. For obvious reasons, no other country bought into the idea; hence, international pressure continued to escalate. The homeland policy hardened the boundaries between the living spaces of white and black. Black people, who constituted a large part of the work force, were obliged to carry passes to gain access to the white areas for the purpose of obtaining work. Late evenings they had to go back to their houses in the black areas. Traces of this separatist arrangement are still evident in South Africa today, as many areas can still be designated as white areas and black ones, especially in towns and rural areas. Cities exhibit greater integration in this respect, because even though the legislation was altered in the early nineties, real change takes longer to come about and is more prone to happen in densely populated and affluent cities. Hillbrow was one of the first suburbs that became racially integrated when black people started to live there illegally in the 1970s and the police turned a blind eye. Aubrey Tearle, the protagonist of Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket*, lives in Hillbrow, a setting that accentuates the changes in the country.

Black people resisted the government’s severe policies by means of demonstrations. On 21 March 1960, people demonstrated against the pass laws in many parts of South Africa (Arnold, 2005:50): police fired shots into crowds at Sharpeville and Langa. In the confrontation at

Sharpeville, 69 people were killed while 182 were wounded (Arnold, 2005:50). According to Arnold (2005:50), “Verwoerd commended the police for the courageous and efficient way they handled the situation”. Another important anti-apartheid demonstration was the Soweto uprising on 16 June 1976. During this revolt a boy named Hector Pieterse was shot dead by police. A photograph of a man carrying his limp body with his sister in the background is etched in the minds and memories of many South Africans. The image is still used on Youth Day celebrations that commemorate the event each year on 16 June (see Appendix 2). This photograph is one of the focal motifs in Vladislavić’s short story “The WHITES ONLY Bench”. Resistance did not stem only from the black community: several white activists, especially artists, also protested against apartheid. Ingrid Jonker, Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton, Andre le Toit, better known as Koos Kombuis, KOOS and Johannes Kerkorrel are a few of the white voices who attacked the apartheid regime. Breyten Breytenbach<sup>5</sup> was jailed for his allegiance to the ‘struggle’.

As a result of apartheid, South Africa became more and more isolated from the West and indeed from the rest of the world as sanctions against the country were intensified. The country reacted to international pressure by withdrawing from the Commonwealth and forming the Republic of South Africa in 1961. The first world, especially Britain, imposed sanctions on South Africa during the 1980s to force the government to put a stop to apartheid, but the regime clung relentlessly to its policies and way of management. The sanctions resulted in dire implications for the South African economy. Despite being one of the most mineral-rich countries in the world, South Africa still has a third-world economy and consequently significant boundaries between rich and poor.

During the 1980s several so-called ‘states of emergency’ were announced as resistance to apartheid became more and more forceful. One of the last aggressive apartheid Prime Ministers was PW Botha, a comical figure also known as the Groot Krokodil (the Great/Big Crocodile) who was frequently depicted in cartoons with a huge forefinger, because of his habit of wagging his forefinger paternalistically when he spoke. Vladislavić’s early fiction sometimes refers to states of emergency (“The Firedogs”; “When My Hands Burst into Flames”; *The Folly*) while his short story “The Box” features a character, Quentin, who plucks the Prime Minister from the TV and keeps him in a cage in the kitchen. This Prime Minister reminds one of PW Botha. The pressure

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<sup>5</sup> Breytenbach was part of a group called “Die Sestigters”, a loose grouping of Afrikaans Modernist writers, many of whom wrote politically committed literature. Some of the others were Jan Rabie, Peter Blum, Etienne Leroux, Ingrid Jonker, André Brink, Adam Small and Bartho Smit. (For more information, see Cloete et al. [1980].)

from within and outside South Africa became too much for him and in 1989 he handed over his cabinet to the more liberal-minded FW de Klerk.

De Klerk commenced a process of reform. On 17 March 1992 he held a referendum where white people in the country were asked whether they wanted a reformed and democratic South Africa. An overwhelming majority voted 'Yes'. This was a major step towards the political transformation of 1994 and the first real attempt at political change in the country. After the referendum, De Klerk initiated discussions with the ANC and other political parties.

Formal 'peace talks' and discourse on the transformation of South Africa which had begun in the 1980s culminated in the establishment of CODESA (Convention for a Democratic South Africa) that ran from 1990-1993. CODESA was a forum where the parameters of the 'new South Africa' were determined. Vladislavić's *The Folly* can be read as an allegory, or even parody, of CODESA. The 1994 elections led to a 'government of national unity', with an interim democratic constitution that was gradually refined and rewritten; in 1996 it was accepted and inaugurated as South Africa's first democratic constitution. Fagan (1998:250) contends that, whereas constitutions are usually forward-looking in their attempt to guide the future of governments, the South African constitution is drawn up in such a way that it deliberately "attempts constantly to remind the interpreter of the constitution of the unequal society that forms its backdrop."

The year 1994 was arguably one of the most important years in South African history, as it constitutes the boundary between a white minority-ruled apartheid state and a constitutional democracy under the African National Congress. Even though 1994 marks this transition, the boundary between the two regimes stretches over a much longer period, because inequality has a long history and takes time to eradicate.

After the 1994 elections, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, commencing in April 1996, provided a forum where people could speak about the atrocities of the past in a sympathetic environment. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of the Anglican Church presided over the hearings. The TRC was an important forum that allowed both sides of the political divide to confront the past and so bring about a bloodless revolution. In addition to its significant political function, it also brought into being a new cultural memory and created the opportunity for previously voiceless South Africans to rewrite their own history and to tell their stories, as Kossew (2010:571) and others suggest. Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela

(2007) remind us of the importance of telling or narrating traumatic memories for healing to occur. Even though many recent critics are sceptical about a too facile link between memory, truth, healing and reconciliation (an issue that will be discussed in Chapter 2), the TRC had a significant social and cultural impact, because it was generally accepted that apartheid should be *remembered*, in order to avoid its recurrence. Black (2008:8) rightly asserts that “[w]hether hailed as miraculous or condemned as unjust, the TRC reflected the call for spiritual, legal and historical transformation in the aftermath of mass violence.” The Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, the restoration of The Slave House in Cape Town and the declaration of Robben Island as a national monument are only a few of many conscious attempts to contain the memory. Ironically, some of the initial criticism against the TRC was that it ran the risk of fostering national amnesia (see for example De Kok, 1998:71). As apartheid and segregation were and are still visible in particular places, architecture and city planning, several attempts have been made to neutralise and reconfigure such localities, by reappropriating them. Vladislavić’s fiction is often concerned with or set in contentious places; he refers to the TRC and issues of remembering and forgetting in “The Firedogs”.

Several restitution policies were put in place after 1994 to address the inequity of the past. Land reforms and affirmative action are two of the most prevalent. As the terms suggest, the former aims to return land, confiscated during the apartheid era, to the original black owners, while the latter is intended to empower black people economically by giving them preferential treatment in job applications when their qualifications merit such an appointment. Those who benefit from this are not only black, but also the so-called ‘previously disadvantaged’ and include women, homosexual and disabled people. Needless to say, this policy places white, heterosexual males, who are the newly disenfranchised group in the new South Africa, in an uncomfortable position. The position of Afrikaans-speaking males is even more controversial in this regard, as they are more closely associated with the apartheid regime. It is important to note that the new government, in an attempt to create equality, was obliged to categorise people along new lines and, ironically, in an attempt to erase old boundaries, new ones were then created in lieu of old ones. Affirmative action is still endorsed seventeen years after the 1994 elections and the situation begs the question: is it really an effective restitution policy, if so many citizens still live in poverty? These are some of the issues that Vladislavić addresses in *The Exploded View*, specifically in “Afritude Sauce”.

Another new boundary that came into being as a result of affirmative action is that of a black middle class. The divide between rich and poor in South Africa is still vast and even though more people are benefiting from access to basic services, many still go hungry. One could argue that where economic boundaries that separate rich from poor are intact, people merely find themselves on other sides of the divide, since the new dispensation has come into being. The situation is complex. Many of the restitution policies, such as affirmative action, do not benefit the poorest of the poor, who are mainly black, but instead advantage the middle class. Consequently, if the restitution policies are not reviewed and adapted, change will not happen for the people who truly need it. The experience of living in this country that is divided in so many ways is something that Vladislavić explores in *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys: Joburg and What-What* (henceforth: *Portrait with Keys*).

In the new dispensation, previous apartheid symbols, such as monuments and statues, have to be reconsidered. Vladislavić (2006:127), reflecting on his writing of the short story “Propaganda by Monuments”, mentions that “[i]n the early nineties, before the first democratic government had even been elected, South Africans were already debating the place of the dirty past in the brighter future.” On the subject of old monuments in new contexts and dispensations, Coombes remarks in her book, significantly called *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (2006):

although in practice some monuments dedicated to the memory and legacy of apartheid have been destroyed (certainly the fate of most statues of Hendrik Verwoerd, the man considered to be the main architect of apartheid), many of those most symbolically laden are still intact, including the Voortrekker and the Taalmonument (Afrikaans Language Monument) (Coombes, 2006:22).<sup>6</sup>

The demolition of monuments is always accompanied by fierce resistance and emotions. The seeming randomness relating to decisions about which monuments stay and which go, to which Coombes alludes in the quotation above, underlines Marschall’s statement that monuments “go largely unnoticed for decades, but as soon as they are threatened by removal or alteration, they can become rallying points for a defensive community who appear to associate very specific

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<sup>6</sup> In an interesting article in *Mail & Guardian* on the removal and alleged “disappearance” of a bust of Hendrik Verwoerd that had stood outside the Meyerton Municipal offices for 28 years, Sean O’Toole (2011) quotes several passages from Vladislavić’s short stories (see Appendix 3). The article indicates not only the importance that public signifiers still hold in the minds of those that love and hate them, but also the extent to which Vladislavić has become an important voice to articulate these concerns.

values with them” (Marschall, 2004:39). Warnes (2000:86) astutely comments that “dismantling monuments is always an ambivalent gesture” and that “any ‘unmaking’ of history is also a ‘making’ of history”. Vladislavić explores the meanings captured in and attributed to monuments and statues in stories like “We Came to the Monument”, “Courage” and “Propaganda by Monuments”, among others. He writes, in an essay published in the catalogue of *Tapestries*, an exhibition by William Kentridge, that “[i]n times of social transformation, the revision of history and the reshaping of the physical world go together” and goes as far as speculating that “[p]eople may feel the loss of symbols more acutely than the loss of direct political power or economic status” (Vladislavić, 2008:100-101).

In a theoretical exposition of the significance of monuments in South Africa, Marschall (2004:36) argues that apartheid monuments have suffered one of two fates: some, like the proposed Heroes Monument,<sup>7</sup> could be relocated whereas others are “re-contextualised” by either renaming or “re-interpreting” them.

The contents of museums also needed to change in the new dispensation. Davidson (1998:145) points out that “[m]useums, like memory, mediate the past, present and future” and unlike personal memory, they “give material form to authorised versions of the past, which in time becomes institutionalized as public memory.” She observes that this process involves both remembering and forgetting (Davidson, 1998:145) and concludes that “[m]useums hold and shape memories, but cannot contain them” (Davidson, 1998:160). Many critics from a variety of fields investigate the role of mediation of the past. Deacon (1998) and Robins (1998), for example, consider the politics of remembering that relate to Robben Island and the South African museum respectively. The ways in which South Africans remember and reappropriate concrete reality in the post-apartheid era are complex issues that, perhaps predictably, attracted a great deal of theoretical investigation after the political revolution of 1994. Vladislavić explores the politics of remembering with the aid of historical artefacts in, among other stories, “The WHITES ONLY Bench”.

The years spanning the first phase of South Africa’s democracy were interesting times indeed. Nelson Mandela, affectionately called “Madiba”, was president of the country from 1994-1999.

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<sup>7</sup> “Heroes Monument” is based on a suggestion made by B Kearney in 2000 that apartheid monuments be moved to Botha’s Park in Durban (Marschall, 2004:36). Of course, as Marschall points out, certain monuments are simply too big to be relocated.



His vision of the new South Africa was marked by inclusivity and hope, a vision best described in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's phrase: a 'rainbow nation'. Thabo Mbeki, who succeeded Mandela in 1999, focused his attention on the idea of an 'African renaissance' as a spur for the development of the people and the economy. South African people, and especially those on the far right and far left, gradually became dissatisfied with his government, which seemed to tolerate corruption and nepotism, and this dissatisfaction, coupled with Mbeki's controversial stance on HIV/AIDS, led to a split in the ANC in 2008, when angry ANC members forced Mbeki to resign. Mosiuoa Lekota founded a new party, called The Congress of the People (COPE), which was at least indicative of widespread dissatisfaction with ANC government at that time. In its early days, the party claimed to be a purified ANC that drew on the old values of the struggle and specifically on the mindset of the National Congress of the People that adopted the Freedom Charter in 1955, from which it also takes its name. However, despite initial optimism, the party did not become a major contender in parliament, as in-fighting between the two leaders, Lekota and Shilowa, dashed the hopes for a strong opposition party so that the ANC remains a monolithic party with no real competition.

Today, seventeen years after 1994, South Africans are still acutely aware of the political changes that the transition of government has brought about as various interpretations of the past are still being negotiated in, for instance, the constant name changes of towns, cities, streets, parks and the like. South Africa was and still is a highly divided country. Even though the country has come a long way towards becoming a more integrated society, it could be argued that 1994 merely realigned segregating boundaries, or as Goodman (2006:32) puts it, "the site of struggle has merely shifted in our post-1994." Divisions of all types can be regarded as boundaries, but the most distinctive boundaries would be conceptual by nature, because these reflect ideological and political differences that inform and relate to perspective and identity formation.

This dynamic and constantly changing political context provides the backdrop for and is reflected in the cities which Vladislavić creates in his fiction. His *oeuvre* consists of eight texts published between 1989 and 2011 and thus straddles South Africa's Rubicon year of 1994; they are *Missing Persons* (1989; a collection of short stories), *The Folly* (1993), *Propaganda by Monuments* (1996; another collection of short stories), *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), *The Exploded View* (2004), *Portrait with Keys* (2006), *Double Negative* (2010) and *The Loss Library and Other Unfinished Stories* (2011). Vladislavić depicts the various ways in which individuals

from different backgrounds respond to the changes in the country during a state of transition and explores how places and artefacts act as points of orientation and reorientation during such times. Memory, in his fiction, is almost always linked to place and especially to the city, which, with its architecture and cultural artefacts, acts as a repository of history, memory and ideology that are continually (re)interpreted by a variety of characters.

### **1.3 Memory and Place**

Critical discourse on memory usually follows two broad trains of thought. Firstly, a common perception exists that history shapes individuals' identities and their experiences of the present. For example, Marais (2002:111) observes, with reference to Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*, how the "meta-irony" of the novel reveals that "the past is not closed but part of an incomplete present which, as it moves into the future, becomes all the more inconclusive" and consequently that "[a]partheid is thus not simply a problem of the past: it is a possible present and future". Underlying these comments is an assumption that the past spills into the present and the future and that it can have a profound effect on both. Warnes (1999) also proceeds from this assumption in his article on Vladislavić's *Propaganda by Monuments* when he uses the term "postapartheid' deliberately" (Warnes, 1999:68) to indicate that "both past and future are implied in the very construction of a term used to apply to conditions that characterize the present" (Warnes, 1999:85). The same notion regarding the impact of memory and the past on the present also underpins Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela's (2007) consideration of the effects of past trauma, which resulted from atrocities committed under the apartheid government, on present experiences of a changing South Africa. They too are of the opinion that the past influences the experience of the present.

A second train of thought on memory, which severely complicates the first, is advocated mostly by cognitive psychologists and held by poststructuralists, who contend that memory is never merely recalled, but always actively constructed as, for example, Connerton (1989) showed more than two decades ago. Memory, according to this view, is thus not a fixed phenomenon, but rather determined by and subject to present circumstances, like ideology and context, that influence how the past is recalled. This view of memory as a fiction-like construct also underlies Pierre Nora's influential article "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*" (1989). As a writer, Vladislavić is acutely conscious of the validity of both views, the tension that exists

between them and of the challenge they pose not only for re-presentations of the past, but also for representing the impact of history and memory on identity formation.

Despite these different views on memory, scholars generally agree that the past exists for us only in mediated form, because people reconstruct the past by interpreting cultural artefacts such as statues, monuments, photos and history books. These reconstructions are by their nature fictional and do not accurately recall 'the truth' of the past. This means that history and memory, which many (of especially the first school of theorists on memory discussed above) deem formative of our present, are mediated and subjective constructs, implying that identity is subjective and at least partially based on fictitious ideas, which have far-reaching implications for the way we see ourselves and others.

Memory, as a reconfigured version of the past, is intrinsically linked to place, as Bachelard (1964) and others have shown. Whereas past occurrences cannot be accurately or objectively recalled, the places in which past occurrences happened, continue to exist and people continuously interpret and reinterpret them. Paul Ricoeur (2006:151) describes the city as a type of palimpsest, when he asserts that "[a] city brings together in the same space different ages, offering to our gaze a sedimented history of tastes and cultural forms". Places, such as cities, change and continue to evolve as memories are recalled and reconstructed with reference to place. Space and place, as important theorists like Foucault (1970, 1972 & 1986) and Lefebvre (1991a & 1991b) have shown, are always linked to power relations that are crystallised in ideology and inscribed on space and place. In South Africa, virtually no place is devoid of historical and political connotations as a result of the *Group Areas Act* (41/1950). Places in South Africa have a history of their own and citizens continually reinterpret these places and their histories. The controversy regarding apartheid statues such as that of Jan van Riebeeck in Cape Town and JG Strijdom in Pretoria is proof of this. These, which were emblematic of the previous regime's history and ideology, assert their supremacy by their public location, and simultaneously evoke the absence of similar statues erected in honour of 'other' histories. Because it is imprinted on particular places, the South African past is still tangible in the present. All South Africans over the age of seventeen have lived in and experienced both political regimes. Their identities are characterised by hybridity and liminality, not only because of the fact that they are continually confronted in the present with their past, but also because the political boundary crossing of 1994 impacted on economic, social and cultural terrains of life and created new boundaries. Therefore, most South Africans' identities are characterised by a

double hybridity as they still carry traces of the divisions of the past in the present while simultaneously participating in newly formed boundaries of the present, which influence how they remember.

Identity and perspective are, among other things, determined by one's relation to physical and conceptual boundaries and, in turn, impact on how one perceives the latter. The cities that Vladislavić creates in his fiction are adorned with many signs and symbols of the past; hence they set up a dialogue between present and past and the perspectives and identities that characters bring to these places. Vladislavić demonstrates that change is inevitable and that perspective brings reality into being.

#### **1.4 Vladislavić's Place in South African Literature**

South Africa's tumultuous past has informed much of the fiction of local writers. In fact, most literature of note written since the 1980s has referred in some way to South Africa's political history, and Vladislavić's work is no exception. Fiction, which reconfigures aspects of the past into narratives, helps readers to understand and deal with their past, to see familiar or at least recognisable events in a different light and from a different perspective; consequently, it influences their experience and perceptions of the present. Conversely, writers' present circumstances and world views influence and guide their reconstruction of the past in narrative form. There is thus a dynamic between present ideology and how the past is conceptualised while, in turn, conceptions of the past affect people's perspectives on and experiences of the present. South Africa's politicised literary history is proof of this. For example, Nadine Gordimer envisages political role reversal, and consequent boundary crossing, in *July's People* (1981) to illustrate how the loss of power affects white characters – a fear experienced by many white people during the states of emergency instituted during the apartheid years. By representing the South African racial situation in a fictional setting, the novel enables people to address their fears, by gaining perspective. Previously, Alan Paton in *Too Late the Phalarope* (1955) also addressed boundary crossings demarcated by physical streets or landmarks that divided the town of Venterspan into segregated areas for white and black people during the apartheid regime.

More recently, JM Coetzee dealt with the post-revolution situation on South African farms in *Disgrace* (2000). Coetzee subverts the traditional farm novel to create a site of conflict in lieu of

the pastoral tranquillity usually associated with land. The novel expresses the new relations between races and the violence that has recently been associated with such farms. Smit (2005) shows how *Disgrace* subverts the idyllic and pastoral traditions associated with the conventional farm novel that used to be seen as a realistic depiction of the South African farm. *Disgrace* is an appropriate vehicle for providing perspective on the post-revolution history of South Africa in the present reality where many farmers are faced with violence and uncertainty due to land reform claims.

Murray locates Vladislavić's fiction within the South African literary landscape and contends that his work is "affiliated at once with the old and the new" (Murray, 2009:138), by which she means that his work is on a par with that of older and established writers, such as Coetzee, Gordimer, Brink and Breytenbach, but also in line with newer developments, such as those by Mda, Van Niekerk and Van Heerden. She explains his versatility by stating that

[s]uch unsettled positionings, premised on varied literary co-ordinates, are suggestive of Vladislavić's writerly range, and also imply that this author's determinedly experimental literariness continues to mark his stylistic distinction from any imagined creative norm, and indeed hints at the awkward problematics not only of generic definition but of canonical categorisation.

In addition to the categories that Murray mentions, Vladislavić also follows in a tradition of city writers, such as Phaswane Mpe (e.g. *Welcome to our Hillbrow*), Stephen Watson (e.g. *In this City*), Sello Duiker (e.g. *Thirteen Cents*) and Zoë Wicomb (e.g. *Lost in Cape Town*). He engages with the city and – recently – with what he calls the "peri-urban" (Vladislavić, 2008:105) lifestyle of city dwellers. In his fiction, concrete reality, ideology, past and perspective are in constant dialogue. Unlike most other South African authors, he uses the city not only as a metaphor and as a binary opposite of 'rural space'. Instead, most of his fiction presents the city, in the first instance, in a concrete sense. His fiction is, for the most part, set in Pretoria, the old Verwoerdburg and Johannesburg, especially the older parts of the city, with several allusions to Hillbrow, one of the first 'grey' areas (meaning an area inhabited by a mixed ethnic population) in South Africa.

Vladislavić portrays the city as a place that accommodates or 'houses' different people's interpretations of and perspectives on past and present ideologies. In so doing, his fiction subverts the notion that one account of the past is more valid than another. History is shown to be just another version of memory; hence the city and its constituent parts are portrayed as

places that hold memories, histories and ideologies which contribute meaning to the present. Furthermore, his fiction reconstructs the past, by reappropriating place, to indicate that the past can only be reconfigured and reconstructed in terms of what current ideology allows. His fiction reveals that ideology is the main determinant of the way that past and present are conceptualised, but also that concrete reality, place, the city and artefacts shape ideology and identity. Put differently, his work shows that the present creates and shapes the past as much as vice versa. The past and ideology are inscribed on the city; they change the face of the city, but the city simultaneously shapes perspectives on the past and ideology.

### **1.5 Vladislavić's Representations of the South African Reality**

Vladislavić's fiction can be regarded as a barometer of the changes in the country between 1989 and 2011. In his early works, *Missing Persons* (1989) and *The Folly* (1993), there are references to bomb threats and states of emergency. *Propaganda by Monuments* and *The Restless Supermarket* draw explicitly on the South African political context of the time just before and just after apartheid's demise. *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys* deal with life in current South Africa while *Double Negative* draws on both the pre- and post-apartheid contexts as it traces a character's development through both epochs. His most recent book, *The Loss Library and Other Unfinished Stories*, comprises of unfinished work written throughout his writing career and the texts therein share thematic concerns with their finished and published counterparts. All his works foreground the intersections of place and time through distinctive perspectives.

*Missing Persons*, Vladislavić's debut collection of short stories, comprises fragmented and surrealistic narratives. Most of the stories relate intimate tales and narrations of memories plotted against subtle references to bomb threats, national instability and violence. Most of these stories are set in the Johannesburg area (specifically Hillbrow), Pretoria and in the old Verwoerdburg. The stories foreground perspective by presenting narrators and characters who are children ("The Prime Minister is Dead"; "Tsafendas's Diary") and mad or unstable ("Journal of a Wall"; "The Terminal Bar"); one story, "We came to the Monument", is partially narrated by a statue.

*Missing Persons* was followed by an allegorical novel, *The Folly*, which narrates the planning and 'construction' of an imaginary or invisible house. The 'building' of the house could be read

as an allegory of the building of the new South Africa. In typical allegorical style, the setting is simultaneously in South Africa but not in South Africa. There are however a number of references to well-known places such as the Helpmekaar Centre (Vladislavić, 1993:25), which could be an allusion to a centre of the same name in Johannesburg. The novel contains several suggestive references to significant dividing structures, such as a window and a prefabricated concrete wall; the latter separates the invisible house from the neighbouring one. These boundary structures are motifs that foreground perspective as the novel's main thematic concern, specifically in terms of seeing and not seeing, understanding and not understanding.

After *The Folly*, Vladislavić published another collection of short stories called *Propaganda by Monuments* with fairly realistic (albeit unlikely) short stories. These stories are realistic in the sense that they convey a sense of verisimilitude in terms of time and place, they also contain less surrealism than his previous work. In several of these stories he explicitly explores the dynamics of interpretation in the changing South African context by illustrating how grand narratives become inscribed on statues ("Propaganda by Monuments" and "Courage"), photographs, benches ("WHITES ONLY bench") and even language ("Alphabets for Surplus People") and how these artefacts gain new and additional meanings when individuals decode and interpret them. As such, the collection focuses strongly on how one sees and conceptualises, that is, it concentrates on perspective. On the whole, *Propaganda by Monuments* can be said to explore signification, as several stories in the volume deal playfully with the gap between signifier and signified. The stories use motifs such as monuments, statues, photographs and other such signifiers to explore the link between cultural artefacts and the narratives that are created around them. In doing so, Vladislavić also examines the decoding and encoding of meaning, specifically in relation to history and ideology. Gaylard (2005:129) writes that the motifs which Vladislavić uses create unity and coherence in his short story collections and that these motifs "centre around a satirical understanding of power." Furthermore, Gaylard (2005:129) is of the opinion that "[m]onumentalism pervades not only the material, as in a central character/narrator, architecture, design, space, place, sculpture; but also certain attitudes, tones and especially words."

In 2001, Vladislavić published a novel called *The Restless Supermarket*, which consists of three sections of which the first and last are realistic depictions of the Hillbrow of the late eighties and early nineties, and the second is a story within the story (which is to say, a story that the protagonist of the framing narrative writes) that is, again, simplistically put, unrealistic, and could

be described as postmodern allegory. The novel centres on the experiences of Aubrey Tearle, a man dead set against change, in an altering South Africa shortly before the 1994 elections. Besides its exploration of change, the novel also explores the limits or boundaries of language and perspective.

*The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys* are located somewhere in between the genres of novel and short story. *The Exploded View* comprises four interlinked longer short stories. These are realistic and deal with personal relations against the changing face of the city in the new South African dispensation. They are all set in and around the Johannesburg area, especially on the periphery of the city, and even though the storylines are divergent, they share the same places, which creates the idea of a complex and dynamic city. As Helgesson (2006:30) observes, there are numerous links between the narratives, even though they do not share even minor characters. The city affects the four protagonists from different social classes and backgrounds, in different ways and, as Graham (2006:54) asserts, “each character’s perspective allows us to see different facets of the complex cultural and material processes that make everyday life in the city possible.” *The Exploded View* emphasises, as Van Zyl (2006a:76) notes, the role of technology in the framing of perspective.

*Portrait with Keys* consists of 138 short (½ – 3 page) vignettes that are also realistic and often read as autobiographical. Goodman (2011:285) writes that *Portrait with Keys* is “coruscatingly unclassifiable” as it could be seen as fiction, non-fiction, faction, whimsical realism or even “urban terrorism.” Lenta (2009:117) calls *Portrait with Keys* “an experiment with genre” and categorizes it as literary non-fiction (Lenta, 2009:119). The vignettes relate more personal experiences of living in the changing older parts of Johannesburg and thus complicate perspective by blurring the lines between author, implied author, focaliser and narrator. Goodman (2011:280) points out that the structure and arrangement of the novel foreground perspective, as “Vladislavić redraws boundaries by depicting Johannesburg in a fragmented and unconventional way, suggesting that there are many ways of seeing it, many possible ways of mapping this, or indeed any, city.” The novel is divided into two sections, the first relating the narrator’s experiences before he leaves the country for one year and the second his experiences upon his return. Should one choose not to read it from cover to cover, Vladislavić provides long, moderate and short “itineraries” (Vladislavić, 2006:205) at the back of the book as alternative walks or routes or reading-pathways through the novel. Goodman (2011:276) observes that “Vladislavić’s text offers a gentle meander from the past to the present of the city



of Johannesburg.” The itineraries equate walking and reading, and as such, allow the reader to read through Johannesburg.

*Double Negative* is a bildungsroman that retrospectively traces three stages in the life of a man who becomes a photographer. The novel forms part of a bigger artefact, *TJ Double Negative* which was published as part of a box set (for lack of a better word). The box is square and contains a smaller box that slides out of the outer box; in the smaller box the normal-paperback-sized novel fits. The outer box also contains *TJ*, a bigger book of photographs by David Goldblatt that takes its name from the black-and-white cover photograph featuring a man and a woman holding an old car bumper with a TJ number plate. The entire artefact is almost sculptural. In an interview at the launch of *TJ Double Negative* (6 November, 2010) Vladislavić and Goldblatt explained that even though they were frequently in contact with one another, the two parts of the artefact developed independently.<sup>8</sup> (Goldblatt’s contribution is partly retrospective.) Yet, the packaging as well as a common interest in photographic representations of the city and its people, which both parts explore thematically, engage the parts in an interesting dialogue with one another. As *TJ* presents photographs and *Double Negative* presents a photographer, the viewer/reader is made aware of the presence of perspective on the one hand, but also of the representations of reality on the other.

On 11 December 2011, shortly after this thesis had been submitted for examination, Vladislavić launched his most recent book, *The Loss Library and Other Unfinished Stories*. Many of these incomplete stories, such as “Frieze”, “Gravity Addict” and “Dictionary Birds” share the same thematic concerns as his other texts and also use similar motifs. In this collection, each unfinished story is followed by a description of what the author was thinking about while writing the fragment and reasons as to why he did not complete the story. I think of this as the opposite of an *ars poetica*: it is not a consideration of the art of writing, but rather of the art of ‘not writing’.

As the above overview suggests, Vladislavić’s *oeuvre*, which draws strongly on South African spatial and political reality, evolved from surreal and highly humorous fiction in the first works to more realistic, sober depictions of South Africa in the last ones. He is a satirist and his irony and

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<sup>8</sup> Vladislavić also collaborated with artist, Joachim Schönefeldt and writer and academic, Andries Oliphant in the exhibition *The Model Men* (2004), for which Schönefeldt created images; Vladislavić wrote short stories about the images (which became the text of *The Exploded View*) and Oliphant “responded to both sets of work in terms of his own aesthetic and academic training” (Anderson, 2011:247). Here too, the parts developed independently (Anderson, 2011:247).

playful portrayal of life in South Africa, especially in his early works, are comparable to those of Herman Charles Bosman, in their humorous depiction of the everyday.

## 1.6 Literature Survey

Vladislavić's work focuses on the spatial, historical and political reality of contemporary South Africa. He depicts politically incorrect perspectives on changes in the country and juxtaposes such views with their politically correct counterparts without privileging one over the other, enabling readers to weigh the value of both views and consequently reassess their own perspectives. His eight fictional texts were published in 1989, 1993, 1996, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2010 and 2011 and initially did not receive much attention. The first critical works to appear on his fiction were fairly diverse. *The Restless Supermarket* and *The Exploded View* received most critical attention. The most significant and comprehensive publications on Vladislavić's work are a special edition of the journal *scrutiny2*, published in 2006, that was devoted to his work and *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić*, the first book to appear on Vladislavić's work. The latter, published in August 2011, is edited by Gerald Gaylard and consists of a collection of critical assessments of Vladislavić's work: some of the contributions were previously published elsewhere, while others were written specifically for the book; hence it includes some of the first as well as of the most recent criticism on Vladislavić's work.

The first trope to become apparent in criticism was a concern with Vladislavić's use of language and especially with the language and word games that the author plays. Wood (2001) was one of the first critics to comment on the importance of "play" and humour in Vladislavić's short stories. Another critic who contemplated aspects of language usage in his fiction is Gaylard (2005) who analyses Vladislavić's entire *oeuvre* up to *The Restless Supermarket* and shows how Vladislavić's satire subverts and deconstructs notions of power, history, nation, city and self. The concern with Vladislavić's use of language continues into later criticism, as can be seen in an article by Thurman (2007), who uses Vladislavić's language, and specifically his propensity to list random objects, as a springboard to consider the role of art, against the backdrop of the writings on aesthetics and economics by Adorno, Benjamin, Dewey and Jameson. Two of the most influential and most quoted articles to appear on Vladislavić's use of language are Helgesson's and Marais's assessments of the author's work. In "Minor Disorders': Ivan Vladislavić and the Devolution of South African English" (2004), Helgesson argues that Vladislavić challenges English as an ideal order by focusing on "the materiality of the sign".

Marais (2002 & 2003) discusses the reader's uncomfortable identification with the protagonist, Aubrey Tearle, in *The Restless Supermarket*, by investigating Vladislavić's use of irony and meta-irony. He also examines the ways in which the novel explores and articulates the limits of language by undermining the reader's yearning for closure through the tropes of death and the image of the restless supermarket. Vladislavić is indeed a master of words, often treating words as objects, and thereby foregrounding language. The arguments presented by these critics are useful in this study, as I investigate mediation of the past and ideology through cultural artefacts and language in Vladislavić's fiction. Two other articles on language in Vladislavić's work include one by Peters (2009) on the subversive power of the typographical errors in the second (2006) edition of *The Restless Supermarket* and one by Hall (2006), who reiterates Marais's (2003) and Helgesson's (2004) arguments.

Another important, but smaller, focus in the early days of criticism was the relationship between ideology and the representation of the past in Vladislavić's fiction, an aspect of his work that still attracts attention. Warnes (2000) touches on a fundamental aspect of Vladislavić's work when he says that the author investigates how monuments become invested with meaning in the first place, and he also explores Vladislavić's representation of the role of commercialisation of memory in depth. Young (2001) explores the ways in which characters in Vladislavić's fiction represent the past and perceptively states that by "focusing on the ideological constructedness of all representations of reality, Ivan Vladislavić's *Propaganda by Monuments* problematises any overarching attempts [to describe or prescribe] the nature of South African society after 1994" (Young, 2001:38). I share these two critics' theoretical premises and draw on their findings when I discuss the ideological underpinnings of cultural artefacts in Vladislavić's work. In a different vein, but also fitting into this cluster of criticism, is an article by Popescu (2011[2003]) in which she discusses the short story "Propaganda by Monuments" with reference to the concept of translation, in the broadest sense of the term.

Early articles outside of these two tropes are ones by Gräbe (1995), Wenzel (2006) and Van Zyl (2006b). Drawing on Njabulo Ndebele's critical work, Gräbe (1995) traces changes in South African fiction after apartheid by looking at, among other texts, *The Folly* and concludes that the focus has shifted from "the struggle" to "the ordinary" (Gräbe, 1995:36). Along the same lines, Poyner (2008) has more recently argued that the dichotomy between the apartheid/struggle/public domain and the ordinary/personal/private domain needs reformulation since South African authors effectively use the latter as a corrective for the former. Around

fifteen years after Gräbe's article, Barris (2010) took issue with it, calling her assessment of *The Folly* as an unambiguous political allegory "a substantial misreading" (Barris, 2010:288). However, Barris also misconstrues certain concepts. For example, in an argument as to why Vladislavić's fiction is not magic realist – a statement with which I agree – he holds that "Vladislavić's fantastical distortions of the mundane have, without exceptions, no supernatural provenance. Indeed they are countermiraculous, offered as absurdist deviations from the mundane, and are unrelated to mythic, precapitalist or pretechnological belief systems" (Barris, 2010:285). This is simply not true of *The Folly*, which, as I show in Chapter 5, can be read as an allegory, even parody, of religion.

With reference to Bachelard's work on the symbolism of houses, Wenzel (2006) studies *The Folly* and reflects on the ways in which the novel foregrounds the role of the imagination through the narration of the construction of an invisible house. In quite a different vein, Van Zyl (2006b) uses "Villa Toscana" from *The Exploded View* as a vehicle to illuminate Foucault's concept of "homo calculator". Vladislavić's strong focus on space, especially the city, and the South African history which has been mapped onto place did not feature as the central focus in the early assessments of his work.

The focus in criticism shifted from language to issues relating to spatiality in Vladislavić's fiction when, as mentioned, in 2006 a special edition of the journal, *scrutiny2*, was devoted to his work. Graham (2006:48) writes in an article in this journal that "[c]ritics of Vladislavić's early fiction tended towards dehistoricized readings focusing on the author's clear preoccupation with words and word games". He calls these critics' failure to engage with Vladislavić's concern with physical and social space a "blind spot" (Graham, 2006:49) and an "oversight" (Graham, 2006:50). His judgement of the early criticism may be slightly harsh, but physical space is indeed not the focus of early critics' assessments. The special edition of *scrutiny2* changed the face of criticism on Vladislavić, not only thematically, but also by moving the author's work into the mainstream.

Articles in this edition deal mainly with *The Exploded View*. The editors, Gaylard and Titlestad, provide an overview of Vladislavić's fiction and are correct when they observe that Vladislavić's texts elicit different responses from readers (Gaylard & Titlestad, 2006:5). With reference to *The Exploded View*, Titlestad and Kissack (2006) investigate each of the four protagonists' attempts and limitations to make sense of the transformed South Africa by engaging with what I will call

cultural artefacts, and which they term signs and material objects. Helgesson (2006) traces the tradition, prevalent in the 1950s, of separating Johannesburg from Africa, and aligning the city with America instead. He argues that *The Exploded View* emphasises the fluidity of identity in such a way that old categories (such as race), which directed both the separation of Johannesburg from Africa and newer policies such as national unity, are continuously in a crisis; hence “‘Africanness’ is evoked [in *The Exploded View*] as an itinerant form of becoming rather than a static term in a binary opposition” (Helgesson, 2006:27). In his reading of *The Exploded View*, Goodman (2006) connects Foucault’s idea of heterotopias with Derridean *différance*, within a postcolonial framework, and argues that “space is a construct underpinned by social and economic ideologies” (Goodman, 2006:36) that manifests in the novel in the places which Vladislavić creates. Graham proposes a “spatial-materialist” reading of *The Exploded View* and suggests that Vladislavić’s word games and puzzles should be viewed “as part of a larger attempt to map the labyrinthine geographies of the post-apartheid city” (Graham, 2006:48). Interestingly, he perceives an analogy between William Kentridge’s animation technique called “imperfect erasure” and Vladislavić’s rendition of Johannesburg. This observation is significant, because perspective in Vladislavić’s fiction is often acutely visual.

Most of the articles published in the 2006 *scrutiny2* deal with aspects of spatiality, often with its link with identity/subjectivity, in *The Exploded View*, albeit from different theoretical perspectives and serving different ends. Another trope that is important for this study emerges in this edition, namely a discussion of the role of art in Vladislavić’s fiction. Gaylard (2006) considers Vladislavić’s rendition of subjectivity in post-apartheid society by investigating the role of art in “Curiouser” (in *The Exploded View*) and analysing Majara’s sculptures and installations. He concludes that art has the ability both to play a social role and to celebrate the individual. This “metafictional examination of art ignites” questions relating to an individual subject’s role in a “context of expanding freedom”. He concludes that Vladislavić emphasises the social responsibility of the artist. Van Zyl (2006a) investigates Vladislavić’s rendition, in *The Exploded View*, of problems relating to representation in the new South Africa and the semiotic processes involved in making sense of this context, in order to comment on, among other things, the limitations of “signs and signifiatory practices in South Africa” (Van Zyl, 2006a:75). She concludes that “Vladislavić keeps questions of signification or knowledge close to those of lived experience” (Van Zyl, 2006a:84).

Criticism on Vladislavić's use of, and engagement with, art has become an important focus point after this special edition. Thurman's article, mentioned earlier, is a thorough exposition of the theories relating to art and its place in society as articulated by Adorno, Benjamin, Dewey and Jameson, which he applies to Vladislavić's own creative output and the author's role as writer in the South African context. He concludes that "Vladislavić's fiction, thick with brand names of consumer culture [...] articulates an aversion to the pervasive commerce that masks political and economic injustice" (Thurman, 2007:82-83). The most extreme assessment of Vladislavić's use of art in his fiction is Murray's "On Ivan Vladislavić on Willem Boshoff<sup>9</sup> on Conceptual Art" (2008) in which she argues that Willem Boshoff is "a visual artist who is fundamentally a writer", whereas Vladislavić, "working in prose, is himself a conceptual artist" (Murray, 2008:16). She shows that art and language are two different ways of mediating experience and that Boshoff's and Vladislavić's interests are rather similar. Kossew (2010) is interested in the role of monuments as "indices for processes of remembering and forgetting that accompany 'regime change'" in Vladislavić's fiction (Kossew, 2010:571). The articles on Vladislavić's use of fine arts in his work, and those that investigate Vladislavić's work as art, have been valuable for this study as they led me to understand the author's engagement with art(efacts) and language as tools for mediation.

Spatiality, however, remains a major focus in criticism / scholarly work on Vladislavić's fiction. Goodman (2011:277), for example, investigates Vladislavić's representation, in *Portrait with Keys*, of the city as a place that contains change, stating that the text focuses on "the failure of the previously comfortably familiar urban landscape of Johannesburg to retain its form and its power to reassure." Poyner (2011) considers the notion of privacy in the context of apartheid social engineering and argues that Vladislavić's representation of the city in *Portrait with Keys* reveals the ideology underlying it. Gaylard (2011c) examines Vladislavić's rendition of nature and ecology in the postcolonial city. This is an unconventional approach, as a reader hardly notices any concern with nature in a first reading of the novel and Vladislavić writes of Johannesburgers in the novel that "[n]ature is for other people, in other places" (Vladislavić, 2006:94). Gaylard (2011c:288), however, traces the "surprise cameo appearances" of nature in *Portrait with Keys*, showing how Vladislavić creates empathy for both the people and the natural environment that the city exploits. Nuttall (2011) investigates the relationship between the

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<sup>9</sup> Vladislavić wrote books and essays on a number of South African artists. Murray refers here to Vladislavić's book *Willem Boshoff* (2005).

surface of Johannesburg as depicted in *Portrait with Keys* and what lies underneath that surface.

Identity is often a concern in the context of considerations on space. Webb (2006), in an MA study, investigates “whiteness” in Vladislavić’s fiction, in the changing South African context that the author depicts. Manase explores the relation between the changing city and identity formation in Vladislavić’s “The WHITES ONLY bench” and *The Restless Supermarket*, concluding that the experience and interpretation of South African space “will always be ambivalent and contradictory” (Manase, 2009:56). Graham (2008) discusses Vladislavić’s depiction of Johannesburg in *Portrait with Keys* and the relation between this space and identity formation and, in response to the theory put forward in *Johannesburg: An Elusive Metropolis* (2004, edited by Mbembe and Nuttall) that Johannesburg is an aesthetic project rather than merely a space of division, he argues that Johannesburg is simultaneously such a project and a space.

Although along very different lines, both Lenta (2009) and Black (2008) are interested in Vladislavić’s fiction in the context of violence. Lenta explores Vladislavić’s representation of crime, violence and anxiety in the city described in *Portrait with Keys*, reiterating Vladislavić’s concept that crime in Johannesburg is an “everyday abnormality”, with the intention of commenting on Vladislavić’s ethical and political concerns. Black is also intrigued by “how Vladislavić imagines the complex ethical dramas that emerge within constructed objects and built space” (Black, 2008:7), but she asks broader questions relating to “the ethics of writing after mass violence” (Black, 2007:7).

The relationship between memory and place in Vladislavić’s fiction is still relatively underexplored. Goodman’s and Gaylard’s articles (2011 & 2011c) mentioned above fill this gap to some extent. In an MA study, Pretorius Wright (2010) develops, from an investigation of Vladislavić’s use of language, space and monuments, a reading strategy that she applies to totalising narratives relating to Constitution Hill. With reference to *The Restless Supermarket* and three stories from *Propaganda by Monuments*, she accurately points out that Vladislavić “shows an awareness of the difficulties of attempting to produce an authentic, shared history common to all South Africans” (Pretorius Wright, 2010:11). An insightful examination of the role of memory and place in Vladislavić’s writing is Graham’s article, “Memory, Memorialization and the Transformation of Johannesburg: Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket* and

*Propaganda by Monuments*" (2007). He discusses the short stories "Courage", "WHITES ONLY bench" and "Propaganda by Monuments" as well as the novel *The Restless Supermarket*, asserting that Vladislavić's fiction

shows how memory and consciousness are mapped onto space and place in the aftermath of apartheid and explores the spatio-temporal implications of post-modern urban palimpsests for the inscription of memory and identity (Graham, 2007:70).

Although Graham's article is accurate in terms of its assessment of Vladislavić's work, it is limited in terms of the number of texts that the author considers. This thesis builds upon Graham's and other existing research on time and place in Vladislavić's work in order to illuminate the latter's foregrounding of the manner in which South African time and place are fused in and articulated through cultural artefacts, and the extent to which perspective and identity are (in)formed with reference to past, present, place and ideology.

In a nutshell, criticism of Vladislavić's work can be assigned to four main categories: articles dealing with language, others that focus on spatiality in his work, a third group dealing with representation and ideology, and lastly, articles that explore the role of art in his fiction. Articles outside the tropes identified above include one by Murray (2009) in which she locates Vladislavić's fiction within the South African literary landscape, and Barris (2010) who explores similarities between JM Coetzee's early fiction and Vladislavić's *oeuvre* and evaluates their respective receptions in differing contexts. Personally, I perceive few similarities between the two authors, and am not convinced by Barris's article. Also writing outside of the trodden path of criticism on Vladislavić is Clarkson (2007) who writes on notions of communality in South African fiction, investigating authors' use of the pronoun "we" and taking her cue and title from Aubrey Tearle's "Who are 'we'? Don't make me laugh" (Vladislavić, 2001:6) in *The Restless Supermarket*. Gender and sexuality are not an overt focus in Vladislavić's fiction; hence, few critics concern themselves with his depiction of these. Gaylard (2011b) considers this neglected aspect of Vladislavić's fiction in *The Folly*, arguing that the text can be seen as a satire of the macho homosocial dynamics that kept apartheid afloat. Marais (2011) explores connections and patterns between short stories in *Missing Persons* and the extent to which this first volume of stories anticipates and reveals concerns that become more pronounced in Vladislavić's later writing while Thurman (2011), focusing on "The Prime Minister is Dead" and "Tsafendas's Diary" from *Missing Persons*, explores Vladislavić's position as a writer.



My approach differs from existing criticism in two ways: one is in scope and the other relates to my concern with the dynamic between concrete reality and abstract concepts like the past and ideology, as well as with the role that perspective plays in bringing both abstract and concrete into being, in relation to one another.

### **1.7 Research Questions**

Within the context discussed above, the following questions arise:

- 1 How does Vladislavić represent the dynamic between the South African past and the present in his fiction?
- 2 What is the relationship between present and past contexts, cultural artefacts, and identity formation in Vladislavić's fiction?
- 3 How does Vladislavić use memory and perspective to interpret the past and comment on boundaries existing in South African society?
- 4 How are change and identity formation represented in Vladislavić's fiction within the South African postcolonial context?

### **1.8 Aims**

In this thesis, I therefore aim to determine

- 1 how Vladislavić represents the dynamic between the South African past and the present in his fiction
- 2 the relationship between present and past contexts, cultural artefacts, and identity formation in Vladislavić's fiction
- 3 how Vladislavić uses memory and perspective to interpret the past and comment on boundaries existing in South African society
- 4 how change and identity formation are represented in Vladislavić's fiction within the South African postcolonial context.

## **1.9 Thesis Statement**

It is argued that Vladislavić's fiction interrogates the South African context in order to foreground the role of perspective in the construal of time and place. His fiction illustrates how ideology informs interpretations of the past and the present, and assesses the relevance of ideology for identity formation in the present South African society and political dispensation. The concept of change (boundary crossings) forms an important catalyst in this scenario as he illustrates how ideology and the past are inscribed on and associated with particular places and how identity formation is shaped through human engagement with concrete reality (city and cultural artefacts) and with abstract phenomena (time and ideology). He does so by presenting various atypical perspectives on place, time and ideology in such a way that the text leads a reader to reconsider her/his own perspective.

It is also argued that Vladislavić's fiction articulates the relations between the past, ideology, place and perspective through the examination and analysis of cultural artefacts, such as those mentioned. By means of irony, juxtaposition and other literary devices, his fiction elucidates the multiple meanings that these cultural artefacts can have when viewed from different perspectives and subverts the concept that a single grand narrative can explain them all. In doing so, his fiction highlights the important role that perspective plays in the generation of meaning.

## **1.10 Theoretical Framework and Method**

The historical context of South Africa, the role of colonisation and the apartheid ideology, the conflict between various ethnic groups, the struggle for power and the reality of globalisation have all contributed towards a complex social scenario that Vladislavić explores with diplomacy and finesse. No study has yet considered Vladislavić's entire *oeuvre* in the light of the context of the South African social and political reality in which it was produced. The seminal roles of time, place and ideology as well as the complexity of cultural relations in South Africa call for methods of analysis that would consider existing issues in the criticism on Vladislavić's work, but also allow for an investigation of the social and political boundaries that demarcate two very different subsequent political dispensations. Several issues need to be taken into account within a broad spectrum of influences such as the paradigms of postmodernism and postcolonialism, the

concepts of time and place, the presence of physical, cultural and conceptual boundaries and characters' and readers' subsequent adjustment of perspective.

This thesis refers to theories relating to the representation of the past in literature, drawing specifically on the notion that memory is always underpinned by ideology and actively constructed in relation to the context in which it is recalled. In this regard, the thesis draws on concepts expressed by Klein, Rigney, Huyssens, Coombes, Ricoeur, Nora and others.

Cognisance should be taken of a colonial heritage that created boundaries in South Africa. Consequently, the postcolonial paradigm that forms the backdrop to Vladislavić's work needs to be briefly highlighted in order to conceptualise pertinent ideas of space and place as expressed, for example, by postcolonial critics Nuttall and Coetzee (1998) who reflect on the postcolonial contention of multiple points of view, as well as the concepts regarding space and place expressed by theoreticians such as Lefebvre. More recent notions on space and time, such those expressed by De Lange et al. (2008), will also be taken into consideration in this regard.

Vladislavić creates complex contexts: times and places are intricately bound together in his work. For its discussion of boundaries within changing contexts, this thesis takes its cue from Schimanski and Wolfe's *Border Poetics De-Limited* (2007).<sup>10</sup> These authors acknowledge that boundaries are "zones of instability in which ethical, political, cultural and national questions are negotiated" (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2007:9) and maintain that identity is unthinkable without borders and border processes (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2007:12), which include border crossings, border negotiations and representations and border experiences. Border poetics is therefore an apt framework for an assessment of Vladislavić's work, as it provides analytical tools to study identity formation with reference to boundary processes in literature.

As this study specifically investigates how cultural artefacts in distinctly South African contexts articulate and express ideology and conceptions of the past and place in terms of the dynamics of change and boundary crossings, I employ analytical terms/tools from the field of semiotics, not only for interpretation of the cultural artefacts in Vladislavić's fiction, but also for the

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<sup>10</sup> Whereas Schimanski and Wolfe (2007) use the term *border poetics*, I prefer to speak of *boundaries* rather than *borders* as the former also carries the meaning of a "notional line marking the limits of an area, territory etc." (RDOCW:165; my emphasis).

conscious consideration and interpretation of the language through which the cultural artefacts are re-presented.

On the topic of representation, signification and semiotics, it is important to note that recent debates in the field of fine arts have focused on the role, function and ideologies underlying public art in changing contexts. Andreas Huyssens (2003) is an important writer in this debate who reflects on the issue of the signification of cultural artefacts such as monuments, statues and public art in changing contexts in various places around the world. Annie Coombes (2006) investigates similar issues specifically in South Africa. The thesis will, where applicable, refer to and draw on the above-mentioned critics' work with regard to the topic of signification and representation in public places.

Lastly, this thesis uses David Herman's functional approach to perspective that recognises both the concrete aspects, such as physical place, that impact on perspective as well as abstract aspects, such as ideology, that feed into a person's conceptualisation of a story world.

### **1.11 Choice of Texts**

Virtually all of Vladislavić's fiction can be analysed in terms of the fusion of concrete reality and abstract conceptions of the past, ideology and identity formation, and almost all of his works foreground perspective in some way. However, I chose texts that best illustrate the dynamics between abstract and concrete, between representation and meaning generation and selected texts narrated from and focalised through significant perspectives.

### **1.12 Chapter Division**

This thesis investigates Vladislavić's portrayal of the dynamic between abstract phenomena (such as the past and ideology) and concrete reality (as found in the city and in cultural artefacts). This dynamic is best explained when considering how abstract conceptions are represented in such reality and how meaning is generated when characters are confronted with this reality. The study begins by introducing the abstract phenomena. I thus move from a discussion of ideology and time to concrete reality and finally to perspective, where – as Vladislavić's fiction shows – all things are, in the final analysis, concretized.

In Chapter 2, I offer a theoretical exposition of key terms and theories necessary for the analysis of Vladislavić's texts; I explain specifically, with reference to relevant theorists, the notions of ideology, the past, history, cultural and personal memory, heritage, boundaries, space, place, cultural artefacts, perspective and identity.

Chapter 3 investigates Vladislavić's representation of how concrete reality changes as a result of ideology, conceptions of the past and perspective and conversely of how concrete reality impacts on conceptions of past and ideology. It does so with reference to Alibia in *The Restless Supermarket*, the Silk City and the so-called 'tomasons' of access in *Portrait with Keys*, "Curiouser" in *The Exploded View* and "Propaganda by Monuments" in the volume of the same title.

Chapter 4 examines Vladislavić's depiction of the interaction between concrete and abstract when characters specifically try to manipulate or encode concrete reality to reflect the past or a particular ideology. It discusses Alibia in *The Restless Supermarket*, "The Firedogs", "The WHITES ONLY Bench" and "Courage" in *Propaganda by Monuments* and shows how perspective determines the way in which reality is conceptualised.

In Chapter 5 analyses of *The Folly*, "The Tuba" from *Propaganda by Monuments* and "The Prime Minister is Dead" from *Missing Persons* are undertaken to demonstrate that, in Vladislavić's fiction, abstract and concrete impact one another and both are brought into being by perspective.

In conclusion, Chapter 6 relates Vladislavić's use of cultural artefacts to his use of language in the context of time and place, demonstrating that both language and artefacts are mediations of real experience and both are subject to ideology and perspective.



## Chapter 2

### Theoretical Exposition: The Abstract and the Concrete

#### 2.1 Introduction

Vladislavić's fiction illustrates how abstract aspects of human experience, such as perceptions of time, space and ideology, are captured in concrete, physical reality and how physical reality informs perceptions of the past and identity. He creates complex contexts in his fiction where previous ideologies shimmer through in present contexts – contexts that are palimpsests revealing the intersections and the layering of past and present, time and place. Abstract and concrete in his fiction influence one another. The characters in his fiction engage with the past through their experiences of the city, architecture and cultural artefacts, which, in turn, shape their identities and affect their perceptions of the past. Vladislavić is interested in the ideological underpinnings of characters' endeavours to make sense of both concrete and abstract. They interpret and represent the complex contexts that he creates, and in the acts of encoding/creation and decoding/interpretation, his characters reveal their ideological biases and (lack of) perspective or vision that affect their identity formation processes. By foregrounding the ways in which characters see and interpret these contexts, Vladislavić reflects on different perspectives on the same reality; he demonstrates that whereas abstract manifests in concrete and the latter impacts on abstract, both are, ultimately, concretised in the eye of the beholder.

This chapter constitutes a theoretical exposition of the key terms and theories used in the analysis of Vladislavić's texts. The main concepts to be defined and discussed in this chapter relate to notions of time and place. Because ideology underlies such notions as well as identity formation and interpretation, it will be discussed first. I will then proceed to delineate conceptions of time (and specifically of history, types of memory and heritage) and conceptions of space and place, including boundaries in the light of the ideologies that underpin them. The chapter also introduces concepts and theories relating to identity and perspective in the interpretation of past and present contexts and cultural artefacts. These concepts will be discussed in terms of abstract ideas and their concrete implementation. In addition, the chapter briefly discusses semiotic processes relating to the interpretation of particular cultural artefacts such as architecture, monuments and statues, fine art and photographs.

As Vladislavić predominantly alludes to recognisable South African contexts, both in terms of time and place, examples will be taken from South African social life to illustrate the types of environments that he creates and to introduce the theoretical concepts implemented in this study.

## **2.2 The Dynamic Interrelatedness of Time and Space**

Even though Vladislavić's fiction explores the dynamic between abstract concepts and concrete places and cultural artefacts, it is necessary to point out that the distinction between time and space is an artificial one associated with modernist and postmodern paradigms. As Smethurst (2000:31&33) points out, modernism was concerned with (the representation of) time, while postmodernism is concerned with space. Thacker (2003:2-3) and Huyssen (2003:11-12) also maintain this division. Although modernism and postmodernism respectively explore the link between time and identity and the link between space and identity, more and more scholars, including important geographers, such as Harvey (1989), Lefebvre (1991a:21-24) and Massey (1992), advocate that time and space are interrelated and should not be studied separately. De Lange et al. (2008:xiv) also point to the fact that the two concepts are interrelated. There is thus currently a move away from the distinction between time and space. May and Thrift (2001) as well as Smelthurst (2000) ground their understanding of the interrelatedness of time and space in Bakhtin's concept of chronotopes. Bakhtin (1937:84) explains that

in the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.

In order not to privilege the one over the other, I will use the term 'context' to move beyond the dichotomy of time and space to a more comprehensive understanding of the unity/fusion of the two which is inseparable from an understanding of ideologies such as postcolonialism and consumerism that are closely associated with time and space. However, for analytical purposes, I will introduce them separately.



### 2.3 By Way of Introduction: South African Palimpsests of Ideology, Past, Place and Perspective

Space is traditionally viewed as the clear canvas, abstract openness, whereas place is associated with the intimate and with specificity. Space becomes place when it is imbued with meaning. As Lefebvre (1991:154) contends, space is never empty, but always “embodies a meaning”. More specifically, people make space into place when they make the space meaningful. When space is delineated by boundaries – abstract or concrete – it also becomes place, which is linked to the idea of belonging. In the words of Tim Cresswell (2009:8), “places have spaces between them”. Place is thus associated with belonging and memory and it holds significance for the people that inhabit it.<sup>1</sup>

The complexity of the South African socio-political context is best understood in terms of boundaries, which are usually thought of as separating lines, physical barriers between things. Geographical features such as mountain ranges and rivers often constitute the boundaries between different pieces of land, while hedges and fences serve this purpose in residential areas. At present in South Africa, electrified barbed wire demarcates chunks of land, indicating ownership; hence boundaries are usually regarded as synonymous with power, ownership and division. In contrast to this view, Schimanski and Wolfe (2007:13) remind us that boundaries are not *lines*, but rather spaces or zones and that they are not only objects of division, but also contact zones. In this sense, boundaries are like membranes: even though they constitute barriers, they allow some contact.

In modern societies, boundaries are not always physical in nature; they are often intangible and imagined social constructs that indicate conceptual divisions, such as economic and racial boundaries between classes and ethnic groups. Whether physical or conceptual, boundaries are often created by humans and can therefore be seen as artefacts, as Castillo (2007:115) suggests. Gorling (2007:149) also underscores the concept that “[b]orders are always social products” and argues that “every place that becomes a border is marked by two different logics: a binary and a rhythmic logic” and that “transgressions of boundaries weaken the binary logic

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<sup>1</sup> Space and place differ from landscape in that the latter, according to Cresswell (2009:10), “is an intensely visual idea” because most conceptions of landscape suggest a viewer outside of it. In this lies the most important difference between place and landscape: “Places are very much things to be inside of” (Cresswell, 2009:10), whereas “[w]e do not live in landscapes – we look at them” (Cresswell, 2009:11). Vladislavić is ultimately concerned with how people engage with places and how their singular perspectives influence this engagement with particular places.

and actualize the rhythmic logic at the same time” (Gorling, 2007:149). This suggests that the more a boundary is negotiated or transgressed, the more dynamic and interesting a place it becomes. In *The Restless Supermarket*, Vladislavić creates such a dynamic boundary zone in the setting of Hillbrow, where social, racial, ethnic, ideological and political boundaries are re-negotiated. Dynamic boundaries again evoke the image of a membrane that shrinks and expands; due to transgressions and negotiations they become places in which meaning is created. As boundaries are prerequisites for categorisation, they are important ‘places’ for identity formation. Shimanski and Wolfe (2007:18) maintain that, in a postcolonial context, every person is a border subject “in the sense that all of our identities are related to the internal and external borders of identity, and indeed, to the topographical borders which now run both between and through nations.”

Chapter 1 indicated that divisions mark the past and present South African contexts, not only spatially, but more significantly, various conceptual boundaries in South Africa that were formed on account of ideological beliefs led to cultural, racial, social and economic boundaries that caused more fundamental separation between people and, although divisions may have become less visible in physical terms, they still influence social dynamics in South Africa today. A dynamic interaction exists between conceptual and physical boundaries, as notions regarding segregation led to actual divisions in the form of city planning and social engineering while these divisions (concretized in, for example, parks and beaches for whites only) led to the way people saw and thought about the divisions and themselves. In this sense, the South African context provides a clear example of how boundaries can be said to influence identity formation. Much as women were relegated to a specific place in pre-modern patriarchal societies, black people in apartheid South Africa had a specific ‘location’, which exhibited both physical and conceptual qualities. After 1994, some of the boundaries have shifted or have been replaced by new ones: significantly, boundary elimination also became boundary formation. For example, divisions between rich and poor still exist, but various people now find themselves on different sides of the divides from those they occupied previously; also, whereas race lines previously demarcated rich and poor in South Africa, the rich/poor boundary is currently related to class structures. South Africa is still a divided country and the conceptual boundaries have both spatial and temporal significance. Goodman (2006:36) writes that Vladislavić’s *The Exploded View* “highlights the new boundaries constantly being established within South Africa”. What is important is that, in South Africa, new boundaries sometimes replace old ones and sometimes exist alongside them. I thus prefer to speak of a palimpsest of boundaries, because divisions of

the past are still evident in the divisions of the new South Africa and one cannot speak of the new divisions without referring to the previous ones. The word palimpsest used to refer to “parchment or other writing from which the original writing has been effaced and other material written in its place” (Scott, 1965:205). The original writing would be visible through the new. This is an apt image to describe the sorts of contexts that Vladislavić creates, in which the past is visible in the present and often contained in architecture and cultural artefacts. Huyssen (2003:7) applies the term “palimpsest” in this sense when he acknowledges that it is a literary term, but convincingly argues that the term can “be fruitfully used to discuss configurations of urban spaces and their unfolding in time”.<sup>2</sup> This is an important point, as place and time develop concurrently and in relation with one another, not separately. Human beings encounter abstract and concrete, temporal and physical boundaries, simultaneously.

As space and time are interrelated, it is important to acknowledge that spatial/physical boundaries possess temporal qualities. Huyssen (2003:1) claims that “temporal boundaries have weakened”, explaining that in the same way that communication and transportation caused the experiential dimension of space to shrink, modern media, like photographs, film and the internet, have brought the past into the present in ways that were unimaginable earlier. Hence, modernity confronts us frequently with the past in the present. This is particularly true of South Africa, as apartheid left numerous concrete and abstract marks of division on a variety of places, in fact; it is as though the divisions and boundaries are inscribed in certain places.

Church Square, in the city centre of Pretoria, for example, is currently a busy thoroughfare for buses and taxis. It accommodates several formal and informal businesses aimed at the black middle-class market. It is indeed mostly black people who frequent the Square. Yet, it is an area where black people were not supposed to loiter in the 1980s and earlier. The statue of Paul Kruger still stands there in the park. Both park and statue used to be symbols of white, and specifically of Afrikaner, power and dominance, but the old symbolism is obliterated by the social dynamic of the Square. The apartheid regime is still evident in the Square, in the fibre of the place, even though it seems to hold no grip on the current Square-goers.

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<sup>2</sup> Cultural geographers often use the idea of a palimpsest to describe how human engagement with place leaves traces over a period. Crang (1998:22-23), for example, describes how a landscape can become “a bank of cultural memories.”

Similarly, the Union Buildings in Pretoria are still the official residence of the government in power and also served as the venue for the inauguration of all the recent presidents. The buildings, now used by the new, predominantly black ANC leadership in the country, were commissioned by Jan Smuts and Louis Botha and designed by Herbert Baker, all of whom are associated with the previous political regime (albeit different factions within it) in South Africa. Again, the traces of the past are evident in the buildings and the atmosphere of the place. When Thabo Mbeki was inaugurated in 1999, the statues of Louis Botha and Barry Hertzog were fenced off and covered in black sacking (Warnes, 2000:68). Some claimed that this was done to protect them from vandalism; others said it was to remove them from sight. Whatever the reason, it is clear that the traces that political regimes leave on the land are not easily erased. The case of the two statues makes it clear that one does not even need the visual artefact or object to be reminded of the past. In fact, I would imagine that the veiled statues, the constructed/artificial 'absence' of the two symbols of apartheid would have attracted more attention than the statues would have. The point is that even though the social reality of a place changes, its history glimmers through in stone and architecture and aura. Vladislavić engages with this aspect of change, as will be demonstrated.

New boundaries of the new South African context are superimposed onto earlier boundaries still evident in the country, creating a palimpsest that is revealed when cultural artefacts are encoded and decoded. Public sculpture and other cultural artefacts from apartheid South Africa become markers of conceptual boundaries and these artefacts gain and lose meaning each time they are interpreted. Each interpretation is of course also dependent on the context of the interpreter and her/his knowledge of the past contexts to which the cultural artefact alludes. The many facets of boundaries are revealed in the interpretation of artefacts, and different interpretations yield insight into differing perspectives. Annie Coombes (2006), Sabine Marschall (2004 & 2010), Zayd Minty (2006), Albert Grundlingh (2001) and other writers on public art have considered how earlier South African public signifiers have been (re)interpreted in the new South Africa.

The Voortrekker Monument (Appendix 1) in Pretoria, like all monuments, is situated in a space where its presence dominates and divides the land. This particular monument is also bounded by a circular wall; it is built on a hill in a former white area and is associated with white, Afrikaner culture and specifically with the Great Trek. It is one of the most prominent symbols of Afrikaner nationalism – an ideology that is characterised (like all other ideologies) by exclusivity, based on

conceptual boundaries that the previous regime endorsed. The Voortrekker Monument is not only indicative of white supremacist thinking and ideology, but also of an era of division: it therefore also points to a temporal boundary – a time gone by. Inside the Monument are friezes depicting aspects of the Great Trek and of the Battle of Blood River.<sup>3</sup> An interpretation of these friezes situates the interpreter in relation to racial, cultural and language boundaries, when she/he identifies with or dissociates from historical divisions, in this case with/from boundaries associated with apartheid history. More importantly, one's overall view of the Monument depends on one's relation to such boundaries.

Tokyo Sexwale, the former premier of Gauteng, visited the Monument and offered an interpretation of it that went against the grain of the official interpretation, saying that the monument testifies to the bravery of the Zulu impis (see Coombes, 2006:35-36). Sexwale's interpretation could be perceived as a conciliatory gesture as it justifies the existence of the monument by attributing to it a different meaning that, for a brief moment, locates the monument as a communal symbol. The monument is no longer in a 'white area'. With time, some of the boundaries have shifted, but the monument still bears testimony to the ways in which the abstract, the past and ideology, are manifested in tangible cultural artefacts and buildings; the different readings which the monument elicits show that the final concretisation of a cultural artefact's meaning occurs as a result of the perspective of the interpreter. Tokyo Sexwale clearly positions himself in relation to the racial boundaries of the past, but also in relation to the boundaries created by the new dispensation. In his interpretation of a very monoreferential monument, he frames his identity as a person open to forgiveness and reconciliation – values endorsed by the first democratic regime's 'rainbow nation' ideology. In the context of the Voortrekker Monument, Sexwale also evidences a lot of creativity. Two aspects relating to this example are of importance for this study: firstly, in the interpretation of a cultural artefact, he frames his own identity and, secondly, in the process, the monument gains a new meaning as a result of his perspective. His little narrative briefly neutralises a highly problematic monument and grand narrative. Vladislavić's fiction frequently also makes these two points, most acutely in the short story "Propaganda by Monuments". Graham (2006:52-53) writes that the "simultaneous palimpsestic and amnesic qualities of postmodern/post-apartheid architecture

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<sup>3</sup> The Great Trek is described briefly in Chapter 1. During the Battle of Blood River (16 December, 1838) the Afrikaners, or *Voortrekkers*, made a pact with God: if He granted them victory over the Zulu impis on that day, they would forever commemorate the day – 16 December – in His honour. They forgot for a few years, but 16 December became a religious public holiday in 1865 (Ehlers, 2006:5), known as 'The Day of the Vow' and was celebrated up to the end of the previous regime.

and design pose unique difficulties to any attempt to represent or ‘map’ urban and peri-urban spaces”; indeed, architecture and design conflate and condense past and present, while interpreters forget aspects of both contexts, so that as a result the ‘truth’ of the place is obliterated. I will refer to these examples and especially to the implications of Sexwale’s re-interpretation as I subsequently elucidate concepts relating to time and space.

In construing a cultural artefact such as the Voortrekker Monument, an interpreter stands in relation to and negotiates several boundaries including language, racial and cultural ones as well as other less obvious boundaries. Temporal and spatial boundaries also come into play in the interpretation of the cultural artefact, as was observed above. Sexwale’s interpretation of the Voortrekker Monument illustrates Schimanski and Wolfe’s (2007:18) claim that “people often live in a repeated narrative of failed or successful border-crossing, and dwell in the shadow of the larger historical narratives of border formation.”

Within the complex South African context, South Africans frame their identities. Boundaries are important in shaping identity, as they are prerequisites for categories, even if these categories are unstable (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2007:13). Human beings tend to establish their own identities in comparison with or opposition to other people, or ‘the other’. Through boundary processes, such as boundary crossings and boundary negotiations, identity is formed. In the example above, Tokyo Sexwale frames his identity by negotiating past and present boundaries in the light of the signifying potential of an apartheid artefact. Schimanski and Wolfe (2007:11) assert that “[w]e are always situated in relation to [a] border”. It would perhaps be more accurate to say – especially in the case of South Africa – that we are always situated in relation to a great number of physical and abstract boundaries. Castillo (2007:117), writing about immigration, reminds us how displacement across a seemingly arbitrary line can pose a “fundamental challenge to identity”. South Africans do not necessarily cross physical boundaries, but are in constant relation to conceptual ones represented by, among other things, monuments, architecture and the remnants of the social engineering that characterised the apartheid era. As many South African monuments were erected during a former political dispensation, they become markers of ideological boundaries that have become obsolete in the meantime and their signification becomes more complex as a result of the lapsed time. Vladislavić is one of several writers who attempt to represent the South African palimpsest.

The discussion of physical and conceptual boundaries above made clear that ideology underlies conceptions of the past and of place. Ideology also informs identity and perspective, which, in turn, affect memory. Billig (1997:60) writes that memory is “ideologically determined, for the collective processes which enable memorization to occur will themselves be part of wider ideological patterns.” In the examples of Church Square, the Union Buildings and the Voortrekker Monument, the physical place, interpreters’ perspectives, official history and ideologies create a complex web or palimpsest from which memory is generated. Ideology and history are embedded in the tangible, physical buildings and architecture and, when the political and ideological context changed, the meaning of the structures also altered. In order to understand the dynamics of this change in meaning, it is necessary to pause and investigate the concept of ideology. Ideology can indeed be interpreted as a system of boundaries and can broadly be described as a system that keeps power relations static in a society. The effects that ideology “exerts on the understanding of the human world” include, according to Ricoeur (2006:82), the distortion of reality and the legitimation of the system of power.

Bennett and Royle (1995) explain that ideology is usually perceived in three ways: In Marxist terms, ideology is merely a false consciousness, a system of representations and ideas that blind people to their real economic and class situations, a concept developed extensively by Louis Althusser (1971[1969]). Marxists are of the opinion that ideology is a false consciousness that naturalises current states of affairs (see Bradford, 1996:573). When viewed from a “traditional, non-Marxist” perspective, such as a liberal, pluralist or humanist perspective, ideology also presents a “distortion” (Bennett & Royle, 1995:131), as it is regarded by these thinkers as “a set of political theories which override any sensible or objective analysis of social relations” (Bennett & Royle, 1995:131). Lastly, from a poststructuralist point of view, “the notion of ideology is fundamentally suspect, since it appears to rely on a classical opposition of true and false, of reality and false consciousness, which such critics would question” (Bennett & Royle, 1995:132). For poststructuralists, ideology “appears too easily as a master term for totalizing readings” (Bennett & Royle, 1995:132).

All three schools of thought on ideology define the term as a system of thought that allows reality to be perceived in a certain way; it allows certain aspects of reality to filter through and others to reside in ‘blind spots’. I do not endorse one specific concept of ideology, although I do find my own sentiments closer to those of Marxists, but use the term in a generic sense to refer to a system of thought that exists to maintain existing power relations. People are usually

oblivious of their ideological convictions: they do not consciously know that the 'truth' they see in front of them is constructed, but tend to think of it as natural. Ricoeur (2006:82) summarises this feature of ideology, stating: "[ideology] remains hidden [...] it is unacknowledged; it masks itself by inverting itself, denouncing its adversaries in the field of competition between ideologies, for it is always the other who stoops to ideology." Young (2001:41) succinctly states that "the real can only be that experienced by a single individual, while claims to a universal, consensual reality belong ultimately to the province of ideology." Furthermore, media, architecture, conceptions of time and place and fine art are informed by and in turn inform ideology. Vladislavić's fiction displays a consciousness of the ideological underpinnings of various types of art and cultural expression.

It is commonly accepted that groups create ideology and that ideology in turn creates its subjects. Bennett and Royle (1995:132) point out that the implications of this fact "are enormous because it means that 'ideology' goes to the heart of personal identity." In the light of this, Vladislavić's fiction suggests that the current South African context produces interesting subjects and ways of looking.

For the purposes of this thesis, ideology will be defined as the frame or lens through which people collectively perceive the world and their place in it, at a specific time and place. The lens is largely unquestioned, because, as suggested above, ideology creates 'blind spots', aspects of reality that people are *unaware of not* seeing. A frame or lens suggests that vision is limited and that what is seen is not objective reality, but rather a view that is subconsciously selected according to relevant power structures. Politics and economics are the main factors in determining ideology, but others such as gender and age also play a role in determining what people see – and do not see. Whereas ideology is a broad concept that underlies groups' conception of past and place, I will use the term 'perspective' to refer to an individual or singular way of seeing that is also underpinned by ideology.

Vladislavić often explores ways of viewing the South African context, showing that there are different ways of seeing it. He enquires into these ways of viewing at the level of underlying ideologies and individual perspectives, focusing on how the world comes into being as a result of a character's physical place or situatedness in space and time and as a result of one's situatedness in ideology and discourse. Put differently, the world comes into being through one's relation to the world in both concrete and abstract terms.



Political ideology dictates which ways of seeing the world are acceptable, or in current discourse, politically correct, and which are not. It also has ways of rewarding 'acceptable' / 'politically correct' behaviour and ways of punishing deviant behaviour. Tokyo Sexwale's interpretation of the Voortrekker Monument is in line with the prevailing ideology at the time of his interpretation, as the ideology dictated reconciliation and inclusion. His interpretation is politically correct, whereas the monument, as a symbol, in the new dispensation is politically incorrect.

Ideologies are inevitably part of society and serve to entrench and to control power. Thompson (1990:6-7) asserts that ideology concerns the interrelation of meaning and power, arguing that the "concept of ideology can be used to refer to the ways in which meaning serves [...] to establish and sustain relations of power which are systematically asymmetrical [... i]deology is meaning in service of power." If this statement is applied to the public places and public art discussed above, it becomes clear that not only meaning, but also memory stands in the service of ideology and, in fact, ideology informs what is remembered and what is forgotten. Billig (1997:60) goes as far as averring that "[i]deology itself will be a form of social memory, in as much as it constitutes what collectively is remembered and also what is forgotten or what aspects of society's history continue to be commemorated and what are relegated to the unread archives." Because time and place are interrelated, ideology permeates perspectives on both.

## **2.4 Time: History and Memory**

Huyssen (2003:1) writes that "historical memory is not what it used to be", explaining that the past used to be more stable than it is today. For quite some time, scholars have been trying to account for the changes to which Huyssen alludes. This section briefly defines key concepts, traces and contextualises recent discourse on memory, discusses the relation between present and past, points to the fictionality of memory and history and illuminates the link between memory and identity formation.

Since the turn of the previous century and especially since the 1960s, interest in memory, as a scholarly discipline, has burgeoned. Klein (2000:127) writes that "[o]ur scholarly fascination with things memorable is quite new." Reasons for the upsurge of work on memory include suggestions that the current preoccupation with the past results from feelings of trauma and loss

in the twenty-first century (Rigney, 2004:363); the crisis of historicism<sup>4</sup> (Klein, 2000:127&143); present-day acceptance of the 'other' (Rigney, 2004:364) and the fact that memory acts as a corrective to history 'proper' (Klein, 2000:143; Rigney, 2004:365). Memory has recently also become popular in academic and popular discourse due to ideological shifts that are closely linked to the consequences of the diaspora, colonisation, migration and globalisation. The new fascination with memory is particularly prevalent in contemporary South African postcolonial and postmodern literature of atonement and self-confrontation.

A deep-rooted conception exists that memory and history are pitted against each other. Pierre Nora articulates the distinction between the two concepts in "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*" (1989). In the words of Rigney (2000:365), the distinction entails that memory is "originary, spontaneous, authentic, and characteristic of premodern communitarian societies"; whereas history is "derivative, analytical, official, and hence alienated from popular feeling". In the wake of Nora's distinction, interest in memory, which used to be considered as a "dubious source for the verification of historical facts" (Klein, 2000:130), has flourished, since it presents small truths, personalised little narratives against the grand narrative that is 'history proper'. Memory has become a gateway for 'other' histories. The conception that there had always been history, or a broad structure of historical facts, and that memory consists of inane and worthless tales plotted against the broad structure, is no longer valid. Klein (2000:128) points out that "the declaration that history and memory are not really opposites has become one of the clichés of our new memory discourse." By this he means that memory is no longer considered inferior to history: both versions of the past are now regarded as valid.

Several recent scholars, including Rigney (2004) and Klein (2000) quoted above, are critical and suspicious of the wave of memory works that have appeared in the last half of the previous century and specifically since the 1980s. They are in particular suspicious of uncritical claims that memory is, by its nature, truer or purer than history, as though memory is untouched by ideology and bias and that it somehow 'redeems' the past from history. John (2000:45) for example warns of the dangers, academic and otherwise, of the over-enthusiasm for memory (in

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<sup>4</sup> According to Megill (1997:416), the crisis of historicism can briefly be summarised as the concern, expressed by several German intellectuals, such as Heidegger and Dilthey, "with the allegedly damaging effects of an excessive preoccupation with the methods and objects of historical research." He proceeds to explain that the two effects usually emphasised in this context are a relativism destructive of absolute or at least prevailing values and "a focus on the past destructive of commitment to the tasks of the present" (Megill, 1997:416). The crisis led to a reconsideration of methodologies in historical research.

the South African context in particular). He is specifically critical of the truth claims associated with memory discourse (John, 2000:45) and with the uncritical acceptance which Afrikaans literary critics seem to express that memory and testimony can bring about healing and reconciliation. He also warns against the simplistic way in which individual memory is transferred to a collective level (John, 2000:50) and against the fact that while memory discourse, by its nature, is an interdisciplinary phenomenon, literary scholars appropriate concepts and methodologies from other fields in a random manner (John, 2000:50).

The shift from a focus on history to a focus on memory is an important one. Previously, history books were considered truthful accounts of the past, and, for a brief period after Nora's influential article, memory was thought to be a more pure, primal account of the past, untainted by official ideology. Today literary critics and historians appear to hold a more balanced view of accounts of the past. Both history and memory are versions of the past, both contain aspects of fiction, and hence bias – and neither can be regarded as absolute and accurate portrayals of the past. The memory/history debate becomes even more complex when the boundaries between the two accounts are blurred, as often happens in a postmodern paradigm. It is easy to object to ideological intent or content in the case of a history book, but how is one to assess the importance of 'historical accuracy', 'truthfulness' or an ideological agenda in the case of a film or graphic novel that uses history as a backdrop to a fictional story? This debate will be addressed in the discussion of memory and history as fiction. Suffice it to say at this point that both memory and history are accounts of the past and both are steeped in ideology.

In Vladislavić's fiction, the past is re-created in the moment of interpretation, and specifically in the moment of encoding and decoding cultural artefacts. The moment of interpretation is very important, because in this moment/instance history and memory are equated and both are subject to an individual perspective, as was evident in the way in which the history of Blood River was altered in the moment of Tokyo Sexwale's interpretation. Vladislavić's characters also re-interpret and, in the process, change well-known historical events and cultural artefacts when they encode or decode them. Two implications follow: firstly, the histories and memories in his work are shown to be fictional and subject to perspective while secondly, the context – the time and place and associated ideologies – in which interpretation occurs is fundamental for the construction and understanding of the reconstructed past and of cultural artefacts. In order to discuss these aspects of history and memory in Vladislavić's fiction, it is necessary to define

and clarify the terms that will be used for analysis and to indicate their methodological significance.

The terms *past*, *history*, *personal* and *cultural memory* and *heritage* will be defined as follows: the term *past* is used in its most straightforward dictionary denotation as referring to actual bygone time. As the reality and truth of the past cannot be recalled accurately, the past exists for us only in mediated form. *Past* refers to the actual events that history and memory aim to record. For this reason, the past exists outside of representation; when the past is represented, the representation is history or memory or heritage.

The term *history* will be used to refer to generally accepted and formal mediations of the past, the official documentation of the past. Historiographers frequently claim some degree of objectivity. History is usually found in textbooks and associated with fact. Despite the fact that history represents an official account of past events, it cannot be equated with 'truth'; it is an interpretation of the past and usually conveys at least one group's collective understanding of the past. History involves an official or authorised record, which encodes and commemorates the past in an official fashion in various media such as history books, monuments and statues.

*Memory*, in this thesis, denotes a subjective and selective account of past events. Memory is tainted not only by selectivity, but also by imagination and the contexts in which it is recalled.<sup>5</sup> Memory is the reconstructions/recollections/reconfigurations of the past, usually in the minds of people, rather than contained in a document. Should memory be contained in a document, it would be an *unofficial* record or document. Whereas history is the grand narrative of the past, memory is an individual recollection of past events in a little narrative. History, being documented, changes less often than memory, because whereas it takes time to rewrite a history book, a person may recall her/his own past differently each time she/he re-interprets a personal photograph or souvenir. It is also important to remember that recalling the past is an emotional process. Dismantling statues or rewriting history books, even placing a ban on popular 'struggle' songs, is met with fierce emotion from both oppressed and oppressor. Altering official history takes time. Also, as explained in Chapter 1, neuroscientists have proved that memory is never merely recalled, but always actively constructed: in other words, even when people do not actively attempt to alter their memories, they invariably forget aspects, or invent aspects, or even splice different memories together. Ricoeur (2006:142) explains that memory

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur (2006) traces the complex process whereby memory becomes history.

is internal while history is external, as history is written down or documented. Memory can be either individual and personal, or where there is convergence/agreement among individuals it could be cultural. I agree with Rigney, who prefers the term *cultural memory* to *collective* and *social memory*. She prefers cultural memory because it

foregrounds what Paul Connerton (1989:39) has called 'those acts of transfer that make remembering in common possible' and this opens the way for analysis of the artifacts and cultural processes through which shared memories are shaped and disseminated in the modern age (Rigney, 2004:365).

The term *cultural memory* implies that memory formation is a cultural process. As such, it is multifaceted and – like culture – continually changing. The changes occur, among other things, through repeated encoding and decoding of past events, cultural artefacts and records. The term also emphasises the role that culture and hence identity play in the formation of memory. As memory formation is a cultural process, it involves communication, which Rigney (2000:367) acknowledges when she asserts that "[t]he recognition that cultural memories are the product of specific acts of communication [...] leads to the recognition that cultural memories have their own histories and continue to evolve."

Cultural memory differs from history in that it is not contained in an *official* document, but exists either in unofficial documents or in the minds of people of a cultural community and hence often finds its way into literary texts, urban legends or other popular-cultural expressions such as websites or films. Therefore, a monument and a brass plaque affixed to a statue explaining the statue's meaning are, to my mind, history, whereas an individual's or community's decoding and interpretation when they look at a monument or statue constitutes memory, especially when their understanding of the structure deviates from the official account. This notion would imply that history is static in nature while memory is dynamic as it constantly changes and adapts. Marschall (2004:33 & 34) mentions, for example, several instances where brown and black communities advocate very particular interpretations of apartheid statues that challenge official history. Their interpretations will constitute cultural memory, rather than history. Vladislavić explores the tension between cultural memory and official history in the short stories "Courage" and "Propaganda by Monuments".

Rigney (2004:366) also points out that the study of cultural memory "focuses attention on the multiple ways in which images of the past are communicated and shared among members of a

community through public acts of remembrance and through publicly accessible media which are sometimes commercially driven.” This approach to memory not only entails that memory is continually brought into being in the present, but also considers the ways in which memories are mediated through the (re)interpretation of various media, including cultural artefacts. This is an apt approach to investigate Vladislavić’s fiction, which often explores characters’ engagement with the past through various media, such as newspapers (which are often the first locus of history), sculpture and public art. When I employ the term memory in this thesis, I refer to both personal and cultural memory.

*Heritage*, according to Johnson (2005:316), is the politicisation of culture where cultural forms are mobilised for ideological purposes. Most current ideologies are driven by capital. Consumer interest often drives heritage and the latter often manifests as a simulacrum of ‘real’ history. Today, Robben Island, for example, is a heritage site. One can pay to be ferried over to the island, to experience what it is like to live there, but as the experience is advertised and sold as an adventure, the sadness and loneliness that the island represented for so many political prisoners are lost. The tourists are removed from the experience of the prisoners, even though they engage with the very same place and structures as the prisoners did – the place and structures are meant to remind and commemorate, but also to make money. The experience is a superficial capital-driven ‘adventure’ aimed at entertaining rather than informing. This sector of the heritage market now refers to *infotainment* or *edutainment* to emphasise the ‘fun’ component of being informed. The adventure experience becomes the preferred experience: it becomes hyperreal. Marschall (2004:36) also alludes to the link between heritage (especially monuments) and mass media, suggesting that they signify in similar ways. Vladislavić often illustrates, in for example “The WHITES ONLY Bench”, that the heritage industry depletes and deprives ‘historical’ experiences and cultural artefacts of meaning. In this industry, concrete reality, such as art and architecture, is manipulated to make money under the guise of representing the past. Baines (2003:3), too, holds this view, stating that heritage projects “construct simplistic, sanitized versions of the past that amount to mythicisation [... and] seek to validate or confer legitimacy on politically correct versions of the past.” Not only political factors play a role in the heritage industry’s construction of the past, but also commodity culture. Warnes (2000:84) describes commodification as the process whereby, for example, experience, memory, imagination, or even history itself, become reified, packaged and marketed for consumption. The past in the heritage industry is often commodified.

In postmodern culture the distinction between history and heritage dissolves. Both are regarded as accounts of the past, but they serve different functions. The purpose of the heritage industry is to make money and to make history easily consumable. In their introduction to *Negotiating the Past*, Nuttall and Coetzee (1998:10) write that the heritage industry has become commodified and that “the struggle against apartheid is being seen as the most significant and attractive lens through which to view the past.” I am of the opinion that it is also currently the most lucrative lens through which to view the past. According to Johnson (2005:316), heritage tourism can be regarded as “‘prefiguratively’ postmodern because it has long privileged the visual, the performative and the spectacular for popular consumption”. Infotainment is often geared towards the visual and the easily consumed. Baudrillard (1992) is correct when he asserts that one of the phenomena that bring about forgetting is the “advancement of spectacle”. The heritage industry is bent on causing people to forget very particular aspects – politically incorrect and unpleasant ones – of history and aspects that cannot be translated into ‘fun’. In the process, history becomes a black and white business, with no grey areas; a story of the evil oppressor and the poor, unfortunate, but always good oppressed, that leaves little room for nuances. What is at stake in the heritage industry is no longer a yearning for truthful recording or accuracy, but rather for entertainment and consumer interests. This is not to say that heritage is not also underpinned by ideology, quite the opposite; but the link between ideology and heritage is often hidden behind a veil of entertainment, hence less obvious than the link between history and ideology. The heritage industry provides simulacra of the past; it offers preferred histories, because it makes history easy and accessible, by turning a blind eye to its complexities.

History, personal and cultural memory and heritage are moulds in which the past is shaped and are linked to place. Ricoeur (2006:148) asserts that “corporeal and environmental spatiality is inherent to the evocation of memory”. He thus considers space and context as fundamental to the construction of memory. He explains that “[t]he memory of having inhabited some house in some town” is an intimate one and one that is easily shared. Bachelard (1969) also investigates the link between place, in particular the house, and memory.<sup>6</sup> I would therefore argue that place is important in how individual memory becomes cultural memory (because ‘they were there too’). People recall the places that they frequented and with these, the persons they encountered. The value that graduates attach to their Alma Maters is a case in point . The term

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<sup>6</sup> Bachelard (1969:xxxii) calls the study of how space becomes place in the context of the house *topoanalysis*.

Alma Mater is a personification of a place that people communally tend to remember with fondness. Vladislavić's fiction frequently deals with places remembered and revisited.

#### **2.4.1 The Past in Service of the Present: Remembering and Forgetting what Ideology Dictates**

Memory, which comes into being as a result of change, forms part of human experience; it captures an individual's or group's sense of the past and invokes past contexts, while it is imprinted on physical places. When evoked in the present, memory is modified by the needs of the present, which exists in a dynamic relationship with the past. Consequently, the past is shaped in the light of the present that acquires meaning in the light of the past. Simply put, we remember what needs to be remembered in the present and we forget what needs to be forgotten. Forgetting is the flipside of memory.

Forgetting is part of remembering, but this does not mean that what is remembered is true. Rigney (2004:381) observes that "it is important to recognize that certain things are remembered not because they are true of the past [...] but because they are somehow meaningful in the present" and that "'authenticity' may not always be meaningful to memorial dynamics". In this regard, she draws on Ankersmit's argument, stating that "the value of history may lie not just in 'telling it as it was' [Ankersmit, 1994:179], but in its offering images of the past for ethical and aesthetic contemplation" (Rigney, 2004:381-382). Not only forgetting, but also modification of the past, influence remembering. Marschall (2004:33) points out that monuments can be reinterpreted to suit the needs of the present. Again, this statement can be confirmed and illustrated with reference to the South African situation: in the aftermath of apartheid, attempts were made to reappropriate the Voortrekker Monument and the Afrikaans Language Monument (*Taalmonument*; see Appendix 4) in the new dispensation and to render them 'harmless' and even politically inclusive. Coombes (2006:47 & 51) points out that in any such attempt amnesia, not only appropriation, would play an important part. With reference to the Afrikaans Language Monument, she goes as far as saying that reconciliation requires "amnesia, rather than a constructive engagement with the past" (Coombes, 2006:47). When the Afrikaans Language Monument was created, the aim was exclusion. To reappropriate it, as anything but exclusive, requires imagination and fiction.



Ideology underlies and informs history, memory and identity. Rigney (2004:382) quotes Renan (1887:284-285) when the latter claims that national identity is based on collectively remembering certain matters and forgetting others. This applies to the South African situation. In the apartheid regime, as in several other oppressive political regimes (such as in Latin America where the Catholic Church played a major role), religion and ideology went hand in hand.<sup>7</sup> Several aspects of apartheid were premised on Christian precepts. This could only have happened if either aspects of Christianity or aspects of apartheid history had conveniently been forgotten. Similarly, today aspects of basic honesty and integrity are forgotten in the name of restitution and *ubuntu*. This is evident in the tolerance for nepotism and corruption in the current South African government. The history of the struggle is not only acutely remembered, but foregrounded, often at the expense of other histories, which are 'forgotten', or at least not spoken about. Many corrupt ministers are portrayed as martyrs, or even present themselves as such, and, in the light of the fact that they were 'struggle heroes', they are forgiven many misdeeds. With reference to slavery in the Cape, Ward and Worden (1998) also point to the ideology underlying and determining what is remembered in South Africa and what is forgotten. Ricoeur (2006:80) argues that both memory and forgetting are manipulated by those in power and terms this the "abuse" of memory and forgetting. These examples all illustrate that ideology plays a determining role in the construction of memory. One can go as far as suggesting that, when the past is mediated, through acts of remembering and forgetting, ideology is the main determining factor for what is remembered and what is forgotten; this has obvious implications for identity formation.

Rigney (2004:380) points out that what is remembered is something memorable, not necessarily something true, and that "both memory loss and forgetting are part of the evolution of cultural memory" (Rigney, 2004: 388). Coombes (2006:1) also plays upon this aspect of remembering when she uses the title "Making History Memorable" for the introductory chapter to her book called *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*, suggesting that history is manipulable. Currently in South Africa, the 'struggle' history is the memorable and preferred history, since it is politically correct, whereas the history of white colonisation that includes the Great Trek is considered politically incorrect, unless it is used in

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<sup>7</sup> The link between religion and nationalism is expressed explicitly and almost arrogantly in *Die Vlaglied* (anthem for the national flag), one of several "flag songs" of apartheid South Africa, which sports the lines "Ons nasie se grondbrief van eiendomsland, uitgegee op gesag van die Hoogste se hand" (Langenhoven, 2002:8), which loosely translates to "Our nation's constitution of property right, granted on authority of the Highest's hand." The melodramatic music of the song underscores the presumptuousness of the sentiment.

the context of restitution. The history of white colonisation in South Africa used to be a heroic frontier narrative -- now it is the story of oppression. In the early nineties, history as a school subject was discontinued and the curricula were rewritten before the subject was reintroduced in schools. History in South Africa, as elsewhere, is still unstable and in the process of being (re)negotiated.

What is recalled and what is forgotten is informed by and stands in the service of present ideology. Coplan (2000:137) is right when he asserts that “history gives meaning to the present as much as the present reconstitutes the nature of the past.” A dynamic relationship exists between the present and the past. People like to believe that their past, or more accurately their history, is formative of who and what they are, of their identities. However, where we are in the present, our present contexts and the presiding ideologies of our time determine what we remember and what we forget. Memory and history are unstable – they may change as our present circumstances do.

#### **2.4.2 Memory and History as Fiction**

As both memory and history involve narration, both can, to an extent, be perceived as fictional because both entail the ordering and selecting of events. Again, the title of a book by Nuttall and Coetzee, namely *Negotiating the Past: the Making of Memory in South Africa*, attests to the fact, suggesting that the past is negotiated and memory constructed or made. Memory and history are fictional, because that is all they can be: the past exists only in representation. In a chapter entitled “Memory and Imagination”, Ricoeur (2004:11) explains Plato’s conceptions of the “copies” that we make of the past and writes that “we have been forced ‘to agree unwillingly that that which is not in a way is’”. The implication of this remark is that the past, which is beyond representation, is paradoxically brought into the present through representation. Yet our records of the past, be they memory or history, are all that we have of the past, or as Ricoeur (2006:147) puts it, “we have nothing better than testimony”. We cannot go back and re-experience the past; therefore, we are obliged to rely on mediation, which necessarily implies distance from the actual historical event. Any representation of the past negotiates, fictionalises and adds the mediator’s/writer’s/artist’s own perspective on events. The more the mediation, the greater the distance. It is also in the nature of memory to function by association: an object may remind one of another object, which reminds one of an event. This chain of association and memory also creates distance between a past object or event and the person remembering it.

Huyssen (2003:19) argues that “once we acknowledge the constitutive gap between reality and its representation in language or image, we must in principle be open to many different possibilities of representing the real and its memories”. Importantly, he points out that “the semiotic gap cannot be closed by any orthodoxy of representation” (Huyssen, 2003:19). By this, he means that a history book is not a representation of history which is superior to a film or a comic book. Postmodern culture denies the hierarchical relationship between so-called ‘authoritative’ sources and popular cultural representations, such as the heritage industry’s souvenirs. Both the history book and the comic strip are mediations of the past, although the different modes of expression serve different purposes and both are grounded in ideology. I mentioned above that several recent scholars are sceptical of the ‘truth’ claims of the new wave of memory discourse. What is important here is not that one is more correct, accurate or truthful than the other, but rather that there are a myriad voices re-creating the past and that they differ in terms of the functions they perform. Whether the recreation of the past is in the realm of history proper, or part of cultural expression, there is no absolute truth, there are only voices.

In making sense of the past, both history and memory may deviate from fact, because historiography, like memory, relies on selection and interpretation that are grounded in ideology. As Rigney (2004:363) asserts, “[t]here [is] a widespread recognition that historiography is, among other things, a literary practice in that it uses verbal art and discursive procedures to make sense of the past”. That history is fictional, and as Coplan (2000:124) shows even requires certain myths, is no longer contested, but a problematic situation arises when history is associated with fact, or at least with ‘truth’, because the ‘truth’ serves present needs and is therefore inevitably ideologically tainted. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s* attempt to recall ‘truth’ is a case in point. The name of the commission suggests a link between truth and reconciliation, which is, as John (2000) points out, problematic.

In his assessment of their underlying assumptions, John (2000:50) points to the similarities between the TRC and recent Afrikaans literary critical practice. He asserts that the faith which both place in the therapeutic power of memory discourse rests on an unstable foundation.<sup>8</sup> The assumption that memory can somehow ‘heal’ is closely related to the truth claims attributed to memory and history. The idea exists that if the truth is revealed, there will be some automatic

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<sup>8</sup> In addition, he points out that, in the case of literature, this notion is also premised on a misconception of the nature and dynamics of literature (John, 2000:50).

relief. Ingrid de Kok warns almost poetically that “[t]he task of memory should [...] not be to reconstitute and make whole, a whole which needs to lie about the fracture” (Nuttall & Coetzee, 1998:5).

When the past is translated into history and memory, it gains a fictional quality because it is mediated through and represented in various media. We remember because we look at photographs and monuments, and read newspaper articles, stories and books; we construct narratives of the past with reference to certain artefacts and media. Rigney (2004:367) cites a poignant example: she claims that we all have some memories of what it was like being in the trenches during World War I, even though none of us have actually experienced this. We possess this memory because of films and books, cultural artefacts that remind us of the historical event. She astutely points out that the longer the lapse of time between events and those who recall them through artefacts, the greater the degree of mediation in the transfer of memories (Rigney, 2004:376). This reference to mediation raises an interesting question about the difference between a memory stemming from real experience and a mediated one. Engaging with the mediation (a film or a book about the War) is certainly preferable to undergoing the actual experience, even if it were possible, and hence such mediations constitute hyperrealities, preferred ‘copies’. Similarly, one could question whether actual travel is preferable to watching the travel channel on television. Huyssen (2003:17) points out that media influence the ways in which we recall the past. This is the case because the encoder mediating the message is influenced by her/his own subjectivity and by ideological and contextual factors, as is of course, the interpreter, while each medium has unique signifying possibilities and limitations.

The cultural artefacts that facilitate remembering and especially those in the public domain, such as statues and monuments commissioned by governments to commemorate past events, are emblems or markers of ideology. Many of these have been commissioned and constructed specifically to remind the public of past political leaders and, as such, bring together notions of the past and interpretations of the present. Such cultural artefacts advocate a version of the past fashionable at the time of their creation. Huyssen (2003:28) concedes that memory practices in South Africa have a very clear political focus. One would be justified in asking whose interest current South African history is serving, and to what end the current South African historical narratives are being re-constructed.

Memory is not only mediated through external objects, but also by other people's recollections. Drawing on Assman's and Assman's work, Rigney (2004:366) alleges that "the memories of individuals tend to look for confirmation and interpretation within a 'social framework'". In other words, individual memories are mediated by others' memories. For this reason, Rigney (2004:367) claims that '[c]ultural memory [...] is arguably always vicarious in the sense that it involves memories of other people's lives that have been mediated by texts and images". Memory is thus a complex activity that involves external factors and interpersonal communication, and it is also linked to place. Shared spaces and shared experiences feed into cultural memory, as Coombes (2006:8) acknowledges:

all memory is unavoidably borne out of individual subjective experience and shaped by collective consciousness and shared social processes so that any understanding of the representation of remembrances and of the past more generally must necessarily take into account both contexts.

The TRC was an attempt at a unified history and cultural memory in the name of nation-building. Such a memory can only come into being if the nuances and specificities of individual memories are 'forgotten' or denied. Individual memories were moulded into a national and new ideological agenda. In South Africa, post-apartheid ideology shapes current memories, which implies that there is a focus on the history of the struggle and that the role of white people in the struggle is often overlooked. The memory and history that come into being in this way are simplistic binaries and lack nuances as they become a history based on oppositional thinking – not unlike apartheid history and ideology – where good and bad are too easily distinguishable. The TRC advocated inclusivity, even for those who were regarded as having been 'bad' in the past, and it placed a great deal of emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation. However, in order to be forgiven or to 'qualify' for forgiveness in the framework of the new ideology, one was required to subscribe to the new inclusive ideology. Forgiveness and reconciliation are positive and good virtues, but they should be viewed as part of an ideology and a conscious attempt to alter a previous ideology. Not all actions can and should be forgiven, and, certainly, not all deeds should be reconciled. Should people, for example be forgiven for having believed the 'truth' that a previous regime propagated? These mechanisms/dynamics are not unique to rainbow nation ideology, but characterise virtually all ideologies.

Even though its intention was good, the TRC did not exist outside of ideology, as it mediated and reshaped the South African past, from a particular political and ideological position.

Mediation is a complex process that involves some shared and some individualised processes that are linked to context and ideology. Through mediation, the past is endowed with fictional qualities when it is translated into memory and history. Popescu (2011:134) points out that mediation may *change* history when she perceptively observes that “[t]oday it seems a cliché to say that an event or a historical figure changes and takes on different faces while travelling through time according to the narrative structures in which it is enmeshed.”

One important aspect of mediation that needs to be kept in mind is the commodification of the past. Current ideology is based on and linked to consumerism in a way that it never was previously. This aspect links directly with issues of heritage and the dissolving boundary between history and heritage. Huyssen (2003:14) explains that, since the 1970s, nostalgia has been mass-marketed and argues convincingly that there is no pure space outside commodity culture (Huyssen, 2003:19). The implication of his observation is that commodity culture and heritage are valid forms of remembering, even if these modes of remembering constitute hyperrealities: an experience of the past that is *more* real. As I have pointed out, the functions of the mediations differ. When recalling the past, we can never get away from mediation and the ‘consumer lens’ is currently a preferred way – at least in the heritage industry – of looking at the past. Huyssen (2003:15) suggests that we are currently experiencing a “culture of memory”, as we are bombarded with the past, and he contends that the renewed interest in the past can be attributed to the fact that “the past is selling better than the future” (Huyssen, 2003:20). The effect of this culture of memory is evident in the millions of look-alike curios sold at every heritage site and museum. One can ‘buy the experience’ while one experience becomes very much like the next one, because the heritage industry empties the experience of its specificities and its real historical value by creating a homogeneity of experiences. Heritage is a mediation of history aimed at fun, entertainment and commerce, rather than seriousness and information. This industry often employs the language of advertising when ‘selling’ history and Vladislavić often employs the language of advertising in an ironic manner, most notably in *The Restless Supermarket*.

Much has been written on the intricate relationship between memory, ideology and identity: Ricoeur (2006:80-86), for example, refers to the link between memory and identity and the effect of what he calls the “abuse of memory and forgetting” on identity formation, while Klein (2001) gives a broad overview of the origins of the ‘new’ memory discourse and concludes that there is a definitive link between the new memory discourse and post-1960s identity politics.

The fictions with which we explain or construct our pasts play an important part in how we see ourselves and in how we construct our identities. Warnes (2000:85), too, contends that history and memory are crucial to the construction of a sense of identity for South Africa after apartheid. The shift from a focus on historical fact and accuracy to one of identity is succinctly summarised by Baudrillard (1992), who asserts that the glory of history has been lost, explaining that “[w]hat we are after is no longer glory, but identity” – no longer an “illusion”, but instead “an accumulation of evidence”. Writers on the topic of ideology have demonstrated how ideology creates its own subjects and how it is therefore fundamental to identity formation. In the discussion above, I have shown how ideology informs memory: this supports the argument that there is an intricate relation between ideology, memory and identity and that each of these impacts on the others.

## **2.5 Space and Place**

The relationship between ideology, memory and identity, explored above, is made even more complex by the fact that these elements stand in a dynamic relationship to space and place. Several postcolonial writers, such as Cavell (1995:1), recognise the link between colonialism, space and place. Vladislavić is a city writer in a post-apartheid context: he is interested in the extent to which cities represent the dynamic synergy of societies. Even in his most abstract stories (such as “When My Hands Burst into Flames” and “Missing Persons”) the city is rendered realistically. For him, the city poses a microcosm of spatial ‘colonisation’ or appropriation that is determined by the dynamics of the city, its population and the relevant social politics that ultimately also affect identity formation.

Memorial consciousness is always spatially situated. That is to say, memory is mapped onto place and, as memory and ideology inform one another, place becomes a marker of both. Johnson (2005:321) writes that memory is not only a recollection of times past, but also of spaces past. We do not merely recall past events, but also the places in which they occurred. Bachelard (1969:9) quite aptly points out that “the more securely [memories] are fixed in space, the sounder they are”. This suggests that the stronger the link between memory and place, the more comprehensively and clearly we remember.

Places in which past events occurred continue to exist: they evolve and exert an influence on how people remember past events. Ricoeur (2006:146) suggests that historical time and

geographical space cannot be articulated separately from one another. Similarly, the place in which people find themselves when they recall past events also plays a part in constructing the memory. Klein (2004:130) acknowledges that it is a “truism that social environment shapes how and what we remember”, which suggests that the context in which we remember plays a role in the construction of memory. Consequently, there are two places that can play a role in how we remember: the changing place in which the event occurred or with which we associate a remembered person or event and the place from which we do the remembering – so to speak.

As place is space made meaningful, terms like memory, identity and culture are therefore used in connection with place, rather than space. A place, according to Cresswell (2009:11), is a rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment. Lefebvre also asserts that space, which is analogous with place as defined above, is socially produced, but in turn, space also influences society, suggesting that an interaction exists between spaces and the people who use them.

Needless to say, if place is associated with identity and culture and memory, it is intrinsically linked to ideology. Cresswell (2009:12) defines place as “space invested with meaning in the context of power” which implies that power structures and ideology grant meaning to places. A significant way in which space is converted into place in the context of power is through architecture. Poyner (2011:313) reminds us that “[d]espite the widely held belief that architects simply institute plans, architecture, like space is ideological.” In similar vein, Coombes (2006:20) rightly points out that it is easier to change concrete (meaning the cement-based building material) than to change reality, which explains why political regimes frequently communicate their ideologies through architecture, rather than through real engagement with people. It is easier to alter the names of streets and parks and to demolish buildings associated with previous regimes, than to bring about real changes in the lives of poor or oppressed people. These symbolic changes frequently cost quite a lot of taxpayers’ money – money that could have been used strategically to bring about real change. Architecture is thus often symbolic of power structures, as the discussion of the Union Buildings at the beginning of this chapter indicated. More importantly, architecture is often not only a symbol of power, but also acts as an instrument of ideology.

Buildings form a boundary between inside and outside, between private and public. As such, a building becomes a place of interaction between the private and the public. Buildings are thus



dynamic sites where identity, place and ideology converge. Yet buildings do not exist on their own, they exist in even more complex settings, namely in cities, where city planning often reflects ideological agendas. In South Africa (as Chapter 1 indicated), the apartheid government segregated people spatially; the remnants of that city planning and social engineering are still evident today, 17 years after the demise of apartheid. Ricoeur (2006:150) equates narrated time and constructed space, saying that “each new building is inscribed in urban space like a narrative within a setting of intertextuality.” This image of intertextuality alludes to a complex palimpsest where an element of one building is repeated in the next; where one wall is reminiscent of another. Ricoeur (2006:150) adds that “constructed space consists in a system of sites for the major interactions of life”.

In this regard, Lefebvre’s conception of social space is relevant as it alludes to the complex and dynamic nature of intersecting spaces and places. He emphasises that places do not exist in a vacuum. Thacker (2003:18) describes Lefebvre’s notion of space as “inherently composite, mingling heterogeneous spaces together in one physical location”; such spaces reveal “hypercomplexity” (Lefebvre, 1991b:88), implying that one location can convey several meanings and that within that space several smaller spaces intersect, interpenetrate or sometimes appear to be in conflict. Thacker (2003:18) infers that Lefebvre’s local space – which may be equated with *place* as explained above – “is not eradicated by a larger regional, national or global space, but enters into a complex relationship with these spaces.”

Edward Soja (1989:23-4) elaborates on Lefebvre’s conception of social space, commenting that space of this kind is dialectically related to history and time (Thacker, 2003:5). The Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, for example, is modelled on the Volkerschlachtdenkmal in Leipzig, Germany. As such, the Voortrekker Monument stands in an intertextual, or rather interarchitectural, relationship with the Volkerschlachtdenkmal and the ideology and history that the German monument represents, but in South Africa it is also situated on a hill and thereby enters into a dialogue with the surrounding landscape that it seems to colonise and subdue. Furthermore, the Voortrekker Monument’s intermedial relationship with other places alters over time as its own meaning and character change. Consequently, it is not only in dialogue with the German monument and the South African landscape, but also, in a more comprehensive sense, with other contexts such as the pre- and post-apartheid ones. Similarly, any place that existed in the apartheid era and continues to exist now is likely to be hypercomplex and in continuous dialogue with other contexts. Vladislavić fruitfully uses hypercomplex settings in his fiction.

Lefebvre (1991b) distinguishes three aspects of social space, namely spatial practices or experienced space, representations of space and representational space. Thacker (2003:20) summarises spatial practices or experienced space as “what people do in spaces”, meaning how they produce space through everyday activities. Representations of space are official accounts of space, such as those found on maps, which Thacker (2003:20) explains “are linked to official relations of production and order; this is space as *perceived* by planners, architects and governments, and is the dominant space in any society” (emphasis in original). Since representations of space are linked to the official view of space, they are also linked to official ideology, as Lefebvre (1991b:42) notes. Representational space is official space as “imagined” by artists and writers (Thacker, 2003:20). It frequently subverts or contradicts representations of space and often has emotional value; it is, Lefebvre says, “fluid and dynamic”, and as such, it “immediately implies time” (Lefebvre, 1991b:42). *The Exploded View* investigates the tension between representations of contexts (in the form of statistics, city planning maps, sculpture and signage) and the actual contexts in which people live as well as the ways in which representations fail to capture reality and lived experience; in Lefebvre’s terms: representations of space and representational space fail to capture spatial practices.

There is an analogy between these three conceptions of space (spatial practices, representations of space and representational space) and the definitions I chose to denote time gone by (past, history and memory). The ‘past’, as used above, is comparable to ‘spatial practices’ as defined by Lefebvre, in that both terms denote the actual time and space of experience. ‘History’ resembles ‘representations of space’ in that both denote official conceptions and records of time and space whereas ‘representations of space bear’ a resemblance to ‘memory’ in that they indicate personal assessments of time and space respectively.

### **2.5.1 Place, Identity and Ideology**

Ricoeur (2006:151-152) points out that “[i]t is on the scale of urbanism that we best catch sight of the work of time and space.” The representational spaces in Vladislavić’s fiction are mostly depictions/representations of the cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria. Changes in them can be seen as symbolic of changes in the country as a whole. In this sense, the representational spaces function as metonyms for the country in Vladislavić’s texts. Ricoeur (2006:151) aptly

captures the disparate experiences of the inhabitants of a city when he explains, “[t]he city gives rise to [...] complex passions [...] inasmuch as it offers a space for displacement, gathering, and taking a distance. There we may feel astray, rootless, lost while its public spaces, its named spaces invite commemorations and ritualised gatherings.” Place is associated with belonging and hence with identity. As noted, identity, ideology and memory are closely linked and place adds another facet to this dynamic. Lefebvre (1991b:44) enquires, “[w]hat is an ideology without a space to which it refers?”, which is to say that ideology is articulated in relation to place, and place immediately implies identity because people turn space into place by investing in it emotionally. The changes in South Africa have left many with a sense of dislocation. Vladislavić’s hypercomplex cityscapes provide a place where dislocation and belonging are juxtaposed and explored.

Vest Hansen (2007:186) shows, with reference to Sophie Calle’s site-specific public artworks,<sup>9</sup> how people invest emotionally in a city. This implies that the same place may become invested with many different stories and memories that are not accounted for in official perceptions of space, or in Lefebvre’s terms representations of space. Calle explains that the public spaces become invested with the private through daily human practices that “mark the boundaries and ruptures [...] of private and public space” (Vest Hansen, 2007:185). A space like a city is hypercomplex and dynamic, since it invites and accommodates many meanings. Within this hypercomplex place, streets act as boundaries that superimpose a grid onto the city and give it meaning by ordering and naming. As De Certeau (1999:132) explains: streets hierarchise and semantically order the city.

The complex arrangement or grid of most large cities is not the only definitive feature of South African cities such as Johannesburg or Pretoria, because they also encompass a variety of peripheral places called peri-urban areas. In his essay on William Kentridge’s *Tapestries*, Vladislavić (2008:105) explains that “[p]eri-urban’ is a term with a peculiarly South African currency”. He explains that it refers to “ill-defined, in-between zones where the city gives way to farm or countryside, not least because they used to serve as buffers or transitions between the white city and the black township” (Vladislavić, 2008:105). The peri-urban is thus a liminal zone towards the edge of the city – part of the city, yet separate from it. Today many city dwellers opt to live in peri-urban areas, away from the buzz of the city. Many new townhouse complexes are

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<sup>9</sup> Vladislavić also refers to Calle’s work in *Portrait with Keys, Passage 13* (2006:30-31). I discuss the passage briefly in Chapter 4.

located on the peri-urban outskirts of the city, which necessitates much driving. Vladislavić explores the dynamics brought about by these changes in his later texts, especially in *The Exploded View*.

The private or personal places in cities consist mostly of houses and apartments that are related to and indicative of the lifestyles and cultural expressions of their inhabitants, and also reflect their identities. Bachelard (1969:xxxiii) interprets the house as a tool for the analysis of the human soul and perceives a very pertinent link between memory and the house. In *Poetics of Space*, he expresses the opinion that memory has more to do with space than with time as one does not recall duration when recalling past events (Bachelard, 1969:9), but visualises the place where an event happened or people lived. This is a significant observation, because it implies that recalling the past has more to do with place than with time. In the rest of his *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard (1969) proceeds to analyse, in detail, the symbolism of each specific area of the house, such as the cellar, corners and even drawers. In the process, he establishes a link between the façades and interiors of houses and identity. In *The Folly*, Vladislavić uses the image of a house as a central motif, although, as I argue in Chapter 5, he uses it to refer to political ideology, rather than to the psyche.

## **2.6 Crystallising Time and Place: Cultural Expression and Cultural Artefacts**

The concepts explained and discussed above are aspects of human existence: perceptions of ideology, time, place and identity permeate everyday experience in an interrelated manner. Although I introduced the concepts separately, they are interrelated and experienced simultaneously, as a complex and almost inextricable web. The complexity and interrelatedness of these abstract concepts become evident when people express themselves in the creation or interpretation of cultural artefacts. Products of cultural expression include both tangible (curios, photographs) and intangible products (music); Vladislavić uses both in his fiction. The focus in this thesis falls mainly on tangible cultural artefacts, although I refer to their intangible counterparts where relevant.

The discussion above indicated how aspects of human experience are concretised in place, but they are often also manifest in cultural artefacts. The term 'artefact' stems from Latin: *arte* from *ars*, meaning 'art' and *fact* from *facere*, meaning 'to make'. An artefact is a human-made object – a product of human art and artistry. Artefacts thus testify to human investment and innovation,

and, hence, contribute towards identity formation. I use the term 'cultural' artefacts to denote that the objects are bound to and informed by culture in the sense that they originated within a particular context, within a particular time, place and community. Cultural artefacts are thus human-made objects and include architecture, monuments, statues, literature, photographs and souvenirs that represent or act as carriers and markers of culture. As the preceding discussion of time and space foreshadows, I am particularly interested in how cultural artefacts function in boundary zones, and specifically, in cultural artefacts that bridge different contexts.

Vladislavić uses – among others – the cultural artefacts listed above as motifs in his fiction.<sup>10</sup> He investigates them from two angles: that of the maker and that of the interpreter. Both the encoding and the decoding of artefacts impact on identity formation, as Coombes (2006:9) notes when she claims that the “act of making and objects themselves can become an insurance against forgetting and thus against the loss of personhood through reinstating – particularly in the case of whimsical manufacturers – the capacity for fantasy.” Her remark implies that people invest emotionally in the artefacts they create, so that these become mnemonics or objects, which act as reminders insuring against forgetting. Huyssen (2003:9) likewise asserts that creating cultural artefacts helps people break out of traumatic repetition. Creating an artefact and encoding meaning in it thus results in psychological benefits, which positively affect identity formation. Decoding artefacts, as the Tokyo Sexwale example illustrated, also frames identity in relation to certain boundaries, such as those established by ideology, but also by time and place. Cultural artefacts are complex signifiers, which allude to signifieds in light of the creators' or interpreters' perceptions of their past and their ideologies.

Castillo (2007:117) discusses the role of what she calls “border objects” in the context of immigration. She describes these as objects that immigrants choose to bring with them to the new country or that they collect in the new context to remind them of home and to reaffirm their identities. Even though these objects are not necessarily artefacts in the sense that they are made by human artistry (they may be mass-produced or items collected from a natural environment), they share qualities with what I call “cultural artefacts”. Border objects, like cultural artefacts, are carriers/markers of culture that extend across different contexts, across time and place. Castillo asserts that such objects form a symbolic bridge between the new

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that Vladislavić is interested not only in cultural artefacts, in the narrow aesthetic sense of the word, but also in the signifying possibilities of a wide variety of artefacts and randomly-found objects, such as lost mail in *Double Negative*.

context and the homeland. She reiterates De Certeau's apt words that these objects "both travel and stay at home" (Castillo, 2007:124). The objects that immigrants, people who cross physical boundaries, choose to bring with them to the new homeland "become metonyms of all that has been abandoned and must be preserved" (Castillo, 2007:123). Cultural artefacts, like border objects, convey the context in which they were created into the new context where they are reinterpreted. Both cultural artefacts and border objects cross a temporal (and sometimes physical) boundary into the present time and place, and, in the process gain new significance.

In the new context, the objects become markers of ethnic identity and cultural authenticity because the object "reminds and provokes stories" (Castillo, 2007:123), which Castillo (2007:134) regards as one of the objects' main functions. Discussing souvenirs, Stewart (1993:150) also maintains that the distance between the original context and the new context of the souvenir "must be restored through narrative and/or reverie." The stories told about the objects and their interpretations link them to identity formation. Indeed, in the stories, the objects' meanings are continuously re-created. The same is true of cultural artefacts: they take the original context into the new context, which is usually the context in which they are interpreted. Cultural artefacts not only tell stories about their past, but also about their new context.

Similar to the situation of the cultural artefact maker who invests aspects of her/his identity in the making of the artefact, the storyteller also frames her/his identity in the explaining and narrating of the significance of the cultural artefact. Again, Sexwale's re-telling of the Voortrekker Monument's history is applicable. Castillo (2007:130-131) mentions two important qualities of border objects that are also applicable to cultural artefacts: the "object will always be allusive, will always encode both a surplus of meaning that can never be fully revealed, along with a lack of objective signification that requires the storyteller to place it in the context of cultural identity". This implies that cultural artefacts catalyse stories: the object or artefact suggests something about its context of origin, of its maker, but because it merely *suggests*, the cultural artefact only comes into its own, is only meaningful, when it is interpreted, when it gains a story. The dynamic between concrete cultural artefact and abstract memory and ideology is evident: the concrete object suggests abstract connotations, and in the light of these, it becomes meaningful. In this way, the object links the storyteller to memory (Castillo, 2007:31) and to a different context. Similarly, cultural artefacts, such as monuments, sculpture, photographs, are endowed with new meanings each time they are interpreted. Each new

interpretation bears traces of the context in which it was created and the context in which it is being interpreted. The cultural artefacts therefore become palimpsests of different contexts.

Cultural artefacts transmit meaning across conceptual boundaries. In fact, as Rigney (2004:368) points out, “memories are dependent on their being recalled in various media by later generations who find them meaningful in the nonce”. Media, such as newspapers, books, digital media and television, are forms of cultural expression. We reconstruct memories and narratives around such cultural artefacts. De Certeau (1999:108) writes that “objects and words have hollow places in which the past sleeps.” Hall (1998:199) too is of the opinion that “[m]emory may reside in the mind as the sum of recollections of the past, but recollection depends critically on the material world.” I have reservations about the extent to which memory “depends *critically* on the material world” (my emphasis), because as Vladislavić often shows in his fiction, there is no *direct* link between the physical artefact, the material world and the memory created, but cultural artefacts do encode and recall the past. The veiled statues at Mbeki’s inauguration are a point in case. However, in the creation of a story that explains the cultural artefact, there is plenty of room for interpretation: between signifier or cultural artefact, and signified or meaning, there is an unstable and arbitrary link. Cultural artefacts that encode history (monuments and statues) or memory (souvenirs and photographs) or both merely catalyse stories, presenting a myriad of ‘truths’ and not one ultimate truth.

Cultural artefacts communicate and transfer information across contexts, usually through stories about them. Rigney (2004) focuses on the role of literary texts (which are cultural artefacts) in the creation of memories. “Literary texts”, she claims, and I would argue also other cultural artefacts, “are active ingredients in an ongoing cultural process”. She advocates an approach to cultural memory that allows one to investigate the mediation of memories in various public spheres which creates a paradigm for the “study of the role of communication in the shaping and transfer of memories between individuals and groups” (Rigney, 2004:366). Such an approach is therefore also an apt method for the study of how cultural artefacts contain, carry and create meaning, because it also allows one to ask questions such as “what semiotic processes are involved when memories are shared among contemporaries and across generations? And to what extent does this sharing also involve the loss and transformation of information?” (Rigney, 2004:366). These questions are exceedingly relevant for the study of cultural artefacts in postcolonial boundary contexts – in order to establish how they preserve, lose and change information when they signify over time and within different contexts. The

answers to these questions lie in ideology, as ideology determines what is remembered and transferred, what is forgotten and how one 'sees'.

I will briefly discuss some of the cultural artefacts that Vladislavić uses as motifs in his fiction, namely monuments and statues, fine art, photographs and souvenirs. Each of these can be interpreted as a concretisation of an abstract concept, like memory or ideology. Vladislavić uses many more cultural artefacts that will be discussed in the relevant chapters.

Monuments and statues are cultural artefacts erected to remind people of the past and to commemorate it. As Kossew (2010:571) asserts, "history, memory and national identities [...] coalesce around monuments." These cultural artefacts are often associated with the official record of an event and therefore act as records pertaining to history rather than cultural memory. As their function is so specific, the iconography of monuments and statues is to a large extent standardised. Monuments are usually fort-like, wall-like or phallic structures, whereas statues are usually realistic in their portrayal/depiction of historical subjects. They can be said to have a simple mimesis. Both monuments and statues are very specifically linked to ideology and usually catalyse memory within a very particular political framework; they are meant to cross temporal boundaries, to convey ideology and history from one generation to the next and to preserve that history for future generations. For this reason, many people assume that the meanings of monuments and statues are fixed. However, Marschall (2004) applies semiotics and poststructuralism to show that the meaning of even the most authentic apartheid monuments is unstable. This is partly true because meaning is often determined by context (Marschall, 2004:35), which implies two relevant contexts to consider when thinking about monuments and statues: the context of the origin of the structure and the context within/from which it is interpreted. Monuments and statues retain their original meaning across the temporal boundary into the context within which they are interpreted and their meanings are modified by their new context, even if they remain in the same place. Grundlingh (2001:104) explains how context impacted on the meaning of the Voortrekker Monument, commenting that it used to be a symbol of Afrikaner power, but, in its new context, in the new political dispensation, it has become a monument to what black people in South Africa had to endure. He also explains that in its new context the monument becomes a heritage site, rather than a historical site, and that its heritage status is beneficial for the monument (Grundlingh, 2001:108). He accurately observes that the "world around the monument is never fixed" (Grundlingh, 2001:98) and as a result, the meaning of a monument is never fixed. His poststructuralist interpretation of the



monument differs significantly from Sexwale's reconciliatory one. Kossew (2010:572) makes the same point as Grundlingh when she writes that monuments are useful "indices" for the construction and reconstruction of national histories that accompany power shifts.

A second reason why the meanings of monuments and statues are never fixed is that they invite and accommodate a number of readings and interpretations. Monuments are visual mnemonics, yet as Marschall (2004:35) indicates, "memory is never recalled, but always actively constructed"; therefore they are constructed in a way that suits the needs of the present (Marschall, 2004:33). I have argued that this is true of Church Square and other ideologically-laden places in South Africa. Coombes (2006:12) reiterates this concept when she writes that the significance of monuments "is constantly being reinvented but always and necessarily in dialogue with their past." Marschall (2004:34) even goes as far as contending that monuments possess no meaning at all, but that their meaning is determined by consensus. This is a typical poststructuralist approach to meaning generation, one that reads against the grain of contemporary grand narratives, such as nation building and national unity; it is also one that Vladislavić explores in his fiction. Both critic and author indicate that the consensus which determines the meaning of a statue or monument is decided by the ruling ideology. Vladislavić also suggests that individual perspective plays a determining role in the concretisation of abstract concepts.

Because monuments are open to different interpretations, there is often an attempt to 'fix' their intended meanings or interpretations by providing plaques or information booklets or some other means of information. The more abstract a monument, the more interpretations it invites. Plaques might appear to decode meaning, but they actually encode and fix it, as Marschall (2004:36) shows. Today, many monuments' websites fulfil this function. For example, the Afrikaans Language Monument's official web<sup>11</sup> is a definitive attempt to make the monument seem inclusive. It explains that the three columns to the left, or west symbolise the "enlightened West", whereas the three semi-spheres to the right represent "magical Africa" (a phrase that may have been borrowed from NP van Wyk Louw). Both the columns and the semi-spheres flow into curves that form a bridge on which the main hyperbola – representing the Afrikaans language – rests. The Malay language is said to be represented by a "low wall" in the middle. The website suggests that Afrikaans is an amalgamation of all these languages and cultures

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<sup>11</sup> The official web address is [www.museums.org.za/TaalMon/](http://www.museums.org.za/TaalMon/). All quotations in this paragraph are taken from this site.

and that by implication it is not an exclusive language and culture. Simultaneously, the page seems blind and deaf to the obvious hierarchical and patronising attitude communicated not only by the structure, but also by the language (of the website) that explains the symbolism. Not only are columns associated with male power and spheres with feminine form and experience, but the patronising use of adjectives (“enlightened”, “magical” and “low”) also suggests a very specific hierarchical order that is partly expressed in gender (-insensitive) terms. The pronouns “our” and “we” in the context of the place of Afrikaner culture in the current South African environment also create a sense of exclusivity. The explanation attempts to fix the meaning of a highly contested monument in politically-correct terms. The content aims to achieve a sense of inclusivity – it attempts to negotiate and cross the boundary between two very divergent contexts. In the process, the Afrikaner Language Monument and its history are democratised and – I would argue – this is not in line with the intent of the designers of the original monument.

Sometimes a museum adjacent to a monument or statue attempts to fix its meaning. Creswell (2009:3-5) explains that “[t]he museum is an attempt to produce a ‘place of memory’”, but museums can decontextualise memories by placing cultural artefacts in a seemingly neutral environment. By doing so, they render the objects harmless. Medieval instruments of torture, for example, appear harmless in a museum, whereas they may communicate quite a different message if found in another place, such as someone’s house or in a dungeon. Castillo (2007:131) also suggests that the value of objects in museums lies elsewhere, implying that cultural artefacts in museums also cross boundaries from their original contexts, which gave them their meaning, to the seemingly sterile and static environment of the museum. When cultural artefacts are relocated to a museum, they are decontextualised; Johnson (2005:317) writes that objects in museums are “de-territorialised” and “re-territorialised”. In the relocation, objects are removed from their “original material social relations” and placed in new “institutions and hierarchies” (Johnson, 2005:317). They are often taken from a dynamic and interactive context and placed in a stagnant one: museum-goers read and interpret them in relation to the rest of the display, rather than in relation to their original and intended contexts. For this reason, museums can be seen as simulacra – they purport to provide ‘the real thing’ or the experience of ‘the real’, but what is presented is a simulation of ‘the real’, a slice of reality that stopped being real the moment that the object or cultural artefact was taken out of its authentic context. Also, museums often recreate cultural artefacts when the original has been lost or destroyed, in which case, museum visitors are presented and confronted with copies without an original, so that their experience is hyperreal: they look at cultural artefacts that are more real than the real

thing. Furthermore, museums are frequently state-funded and hence have to operate within the state's political and ideological agenda. Davidson (1998) demonstrates how new political imperatives impact on displays in state-funded national museums, which, because they receive such funding, must tell the official history, the politically-correct tale. For this reason, museums are associated with history, even heritage, rather than with memory.

Monuments are places of memory: they attempt to preserve the past for future generations. They are stagnant signifiers in changing contexts. The past that they encode necessarily changes in accordance with present needs and ideology. That is to say, the past alters if ideology shifts. Monuments are fixed in particular places, but place, like the past, is continuously reinterpreted and, as both place and time impact on meaning, the monuments' and statues' meanings change if their contexts change. They become places where the boundaries between the ideologies of different subsequent contexts are negotiated, and loci for symbolic transactions and negotiation. Because their meanings are not fixed, they provide several answers to questions such as whose memory is this? Whose place is it? Whose power does it articulate? Because they invite many answers to these questions, their meanings are never fixed. Vladislavić grapples with such questions in "We Came to the Monument", "The WHITES ONLY Bench", *Portrait with Keys* and other texts.

Works of art, such as sculpture, art photography and installations, are also cultural artefacts that contain meaning. They impart material/concrete manifestation to an idea or concept. Unlike monuments and statues, works of fine art are usually not official encodings of history, but are rather associated with cultural and personal expression and memory and as such, they exhibit a more complex mimesis than monuments and statues do.<sup>12</sup> The meaning of fine arts is created somewhere between the artist's intention and the viewer's interpretation (Stokstad, 2007:3), which implies that meaning comes into being between encoding and decoding, as both activities bring ideologically informed meaning to the cultural artefact; both are also linked to identity formation. Unlike with monuments and statues, one usually assumes that artworks can encompass more than one meaning and that any one interpretation is usually not definitive; this is especially true in a postmodern paradigm, where there is no hierarchy of perspectives. The

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that the distinction here is not absolute: not all monuments are propagandistic carriers of ideology and not all fine arts are subversive 'other' histories. In the apartheid context, many creators of fine art and performance artists produced work in service of this ideology. Similarly, several recent conceptual artists such as Willem Boshoff and Johan van der Merwe create huge open-air monument-like artworks that are not propagandistic signifiers.

fact that there are many genres in the fine arts and that the field as a whole is wide and diverse makes it difficult to generalise, but fine art differs from monuments and statues in important respects. Artworks are usually more individualised and intimate than monuments and statues, usually exhibited indoors, rather than outdoors, and there is often state funding for monuments and statues, whereas artists normally have to fund their own work. Like monuments and statues, the meaning of artworks also evolves over time, as Stokstad (2007:4) reminds us. Fine art is a means of communication informed by ideology, but more subtly so than in the case of monuments and statues.

Artworks are usually exhibited in an art gallery, where patrons can buy them and then exhibit them in their homes or offices. The gallery space is unobtrusive, usually rendered in such a way that attention is focused on the art rather than on the space; the walls are usually white, or at least mono-coloured and (movable) spotlights provide focused lighting where desired. The gallery remains a space until an exhibition converts it into a place.

Some artists are interested in working outside the confines of the gallery, and in the 1960s and 1970s the idea of working outside a gallery became so popular that many artists began to produce artworks that were specifically intended not to be exhibited indoors (Richards, 2002:34; Lucie-Smith, 2001:10). These works are often conceptual in nature and several terms exist to describe this type of art, including public art, site-specific art, land art and off-site art. As such artworks usually enter into a dialogue with the setting in which they are placed, I prefer the term site-specific art. This type of art blurs the boundary between art, architecture, monuments and public art, even though it is usually closer to the realm of fine art; it expresses the postmodernist tendency for intermediality.<sup>13</sup>

Photographs are cultural artefacts that convey history or memory since they are associated with both official and unofficial recording of the past. They are curious cultural artefacts in that they foster an assumption of realism and a simplistic mimesis. Viewers often assume that the photograph portrays reality simply because they assume that photographs do not lie. This naïve view disregards the fact that photographers make choices as they select and often set up a specific composition; they limit the spatial parameters and frame of the photograph and they

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<sup>13</sup> 'Intermedial' implies that an object is translated from one medium to another, for example, a book is translated into a film while, in the case of Vladislavić's work, an artwork is rendered or described in prose (like the "Wall of Jeff" in *Portrait with Keys*), or a curio is translated/transformed into a sculpture (as is the case in "Curiouser" in *The Exploded View*).

choose a specific moment to document. Thus, they make decisions regarding the place and the time they record. While looking at a photograph, a viewer is not aware of what they do not see. Photographs have specific boundaries or frames; they show only a selected part of the reality they capture and can exclude a great deal. In addition, the fact that technology allows one to manipulate photographs after they have been taken implies that, contrary to popular perception, photographs are not to be trusted. Photographs are indeed deceptive cultural artefacts that cover up as they purport to reveal.

Susan Sontag (1977) points out that tourists often focus too much on taking photographs instead of enjoying the actual experience. In fact, she sees photography as “one of the principal devices for experiencing something” (Sontag, 1977:184) and suggests that this is the case because photographs “give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal” and “help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure” (Sontag, 1977:183). Because photographs create the illusion of reality and because they often guide behaviour (people travel not to experience, but to find the best shot), they easily become hyperrealities. Photographs become more real than the real thing; the photograph/record becomes more important than, and preferable to, the actual experience. As a result, photographs often distance the viewer from the real experience (as is sometimes the case with events such as weddings) before the actual event is experienced. Sontag (1977:183) accurately states that cameras certify experience, they make the experience real and they convert the experience into a souvenir. Even though they deceive, photographs are cultural artefacts that connect us with the contexts of their origins.

The word ‘souvenir’ means ‘remember’ in French. Souvenirs are associated with the heritage industry and are manufactured specifically to remind one of a past context or experience. They do not purport to be authentic historical artefacts, but they do provide a tangible mnemonic of an experience or place. One can buy little Voortrekker Monuments or one can purchase beaded or embroidered ones to hang on a wall or on a key ring. I once visited the Sterkfontein Caves where I was able to buy souvenirs, T-shirts, of another set of caves, the Sudwana Caves, in the curio shop, as well as curios from other heritage sites. Souvenirs prove that ‘you were there’, more than reminding one of the history attached to the specific site and what the site represents, which causes them to be part of the heritage industry and consumer culture. Even though people sometimes treasure their souvenirs, most people buy them, knowing that they will throw them away in the near future. Souvenirs are thus disposable cultural artefacts.

Vladislavić often makes use of souvenirs as motifs in his fiction, terming them differently: in “Curiouser” and “The Firedogs” he uses the word “curio”, in “The WHITES ONLY Bench” he writes of “mementoes”, while in *The Restless Supermarket*, he employs “souvenirs”, “memorabilia”, “keepsake”, “curio” and, most colourfully, “rememorableabilia” (Vladislavić, 2001:251), when Bogey, who still learns English, refers to them. But by (buy!) any other name, souvenirs are fairly insignificant cultural artefacts that get people to part with their money. Still, they are objects about which stories may be told and around which the past may be reconstructed. Because they ‘prove’ ‘that one was there’, they tend to have ‘local flavour’; in France, one can purchase little Eiffel Towers, castanets in Spain, whisky hipflasks in Scotland, while in South Africa beadwork and carved wooden sculptures are popular. Souvenirs and their part in the heritage industry as consumer culture will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 3.

Vladislavić uses many more cultural artefacts than the ones discussed here. The significance of other types of artefacts will be discussed in the analyses where appropriate.

## **2.7 Language**

All cultural artefacts communicate, even insignificant ones such as souvenirs; they relate abstract information about their original context and about the context in which they are interpreted. They are signifiers alluding to signifieds that are complex webs of meaning. The cultural artefacts to be discussed in this thesis are not statues, monuments, fine art, photographs and literature per se, but rather literary representations of them. The thesis will investigate how cultural artefacts are rendered in literature, and specifically in language in Vladislavić’s fiction, investigating the layered, intermedial representation, where art and artefacts, constructed of wood or bronze, are represented in words and language and prose. Language is also a medium, a means of mediation; like cultural artefacts, it is a means of communication that shares many of their trappings. Like cultural artefacts, words have original contexts and Vladislavić sometimes explores etymologies. His writing exposes an awareness of the arbitrariness and limits of language, demonstrating that language, like all forms of cultural expression, is limited by boundaries created by and, in turn, maintaining ideology. Terry Eagleton (1983:23-24) identifies the inherent ideological trait of language and literature when he asserts about Victorian society:

[a]s religion progressively ceases to provide the social 'cement', affective values and basic mythologies by which a socially turbulent class-society can be welded together, 'English' is constructed as a subject to carry this ideological burden from the Victorian period onwards.

Language conveys and is informed by ideology and bound by context; it can also create and cross boundaries. Vladislavić, who is an editor by profession, is very aware of the limits within which language communicates. He also views the written word in a very peculiar way, saying in an interview that his editing experience has made him see language in the same way that an artist sees negative space (Warnes, 2011:109). As such, he perceives language in the same manner that a sculptor would view a block of wood, and as Helgesson (2004) maintains, he engages with the "materiality of this sign". He chooses and 'crafts' his words and puns very carefully. His humorous and apt choice of first names (such as Niewenhuizen, Strickland, MT Wessels and others) attests to the fact.

Vladislavić draws attention to his medium, language, through various literary conventions such as contrast, irony, allegory, lists and word play, and in the process, leads readers to become aware of the ideologies underlying language. His preoccupation with the creation, demolition and interpretation of cultural artefacts may be read as metafictional. Vladislavić not only literally exposes ideological flaws in language and society, but proposes to resolve these issues by means of fiction and the imagination. In fact, he applies metalanguage in the creation of metafiction.

Furthermore, he writes in diverse genres and styles: he has written longer and shorter short stories, novels and vignettes; his work also encompasses surrealism (*Missing Persons*), allegory (*The Folly*), postmodern allegory (the middle section of *The Restless Supermarket*), realism (*The Exploded View*), even autobiography (*Portrait with Keys*), while it is sometimes deadpan serious and sometimes humorous. By working across the boundaries of (sub)genres and modes of expression, Vladislavić not only tests the boundaries of genres, but also precludes critics from categorising and defining his style and his work, placing him within a postmodern paradigm.

In addition to his skill as a 'sculptor of words', Vladislavić is also interested in and reveals an informed awareness of movements in contemporary South African fine and conceptual arts, as his essays and books on prominent South African artists such as William Kentridge and Willem

Boshoff indicate. This awareness is also evident in his collaboration with South African fine artists: *The Exploded View* is the result of his collaboration with artist Joachim Schönfeldt in *The Model Men* exhibition and *Double Negative* is the fruit of his collaboration with fine-art photographer David Goldblatt in the publication of *TJ Double Negative*. Murray (2008) recently argued that Vladislavić is a conceptual artist creating with words, rather than a writer writing about art. I find this an astute observation. Vladislavić evidences an acute awareness of the medium that he uses by often playing with words. His writing about art – both real and fictional – creates intermediality. He uses one sign system, namely language, in fiction, to reflect on other types of sign systems such as art, architecture and photography, highlighting the similarity between different signifiers (language, art) and their signifieds.

I will refer to his use of language where appropriate in the analyses, and pick up the argument on metafiction in Chapter 6 where it will be discussed in the light of the findings on the function of cultural artefacts in changing contexts. I will indicate similarities between Vladislavić's use of language and of cultural artefacts, specifically the fact that both language and other forms of cultural expression are mediations of actual experience and that both fall short of capturing it.

Even though his work is so diverse, one factor in Vladislavić's fiction remains constant, namely a preoccupation with perspective. He often explores the ways in which abstract concepts (memory and ideology) manifest in concrete phenomena (place and cultural artefacts) as well as how concrete reality, in turn, shapes ideas, with the intention of showing that final concretisation and meaning generation occurs in the eye of the beholder. Vladislavić aims to expose inherent bias in perspective, but he also implies that such human weaknesses make life in South Africa interesting, that bias should be acknowledged and countered by creating distance and using informed opinions. Awareness of the ideological subtext would resolve many social and political issues, but it needs to be created on a subtle level of critique, which is furnished by cultural expression and in particular by fiction.

## **2.8 Perspective**

The preceding discussion concerned the dynamic between abstract concepts, such as history, memory and ideology, and concrete places and cultural artefacts, that Vladislavić's fiction elucidates. He often illustrates how abstract and concrete impact on one another: history, memory and ideology are etched/imprinted onto concrete places and cultural artefacts, which in



turn shape conceptions of abstract phenomena like the past and ideology. As such, concrete phenomena become markers of change and symbols of history, memory and ideology, but individual perspective plays an important role in how meaning is generated.

Narratologists expend vast amounts of energy defining and categorising all types of perspective, focalisation and points of view. Several articles on the topic commence with an exposition of the difference between Gérard Genette's (1980) and Mieke Bal's (1997) conceptions of focalisation. I was unable to find a ready-made definition for perspective as I wish to use it to discuss Vladislavić's fiction; hence, I draw on a number of critics' ideas, and especially on David Herman's, to define and describe my use of the term 'perspective' as I interpret it in Vladislavić's fiction. In fact, if I were to allude to the type of perspective that he endorses, I would refer to *Gulliver's Travels* (1985[1726]), in which Swift exaggerates perspective in order to underline the significance of the relation between the viewing subject and the object scrutinised, as well as to underline the more subtle relations between the two, such as the relevance of distance and the quality of social behaviour and appearances.

In contrast to classical narrative theories that tend towards classification and creation of a taxonomy, Herman (2009) proposes a functional approach to perspective and focalisation based on the insights obtained from cognitive linguists. He prefers the term *conceptualisation* to *focalisation* (Herman, 2009:128), which suggests a move away from merely seeing (or as the narratologists would say: "who sees?" / "who is looking?") to comprehending or understanding the fictional world, so that perspective may "[take] its place among a wider array of construal operations – ways of organizing and making sense of domains of experience – that are anchored in humans' embodied existence" (Herman, 2009:119). What I find useful in his approach is his emphasis on "embodied existence", by which he means physical location in place and time, on the one hand, but also an understanding and experience in the conceptualisation of a fictional world. Herman (2009:122) explains that "narrative perspective is best understood as a reflex of the mind or minds conceptualising scenes within storyworlds."

Where the situatedness in a particular context is concerned, the link between perspective and identity is important. Gaylard (2006) traces the development of postmodern subjectivity via Marxism and existentialism and explains that the postmodern subject embraces many of the values of humanist individualism, but differs from the latter in its emphasis on the influence of context on the individual and "the extent to which [an individual] can resist those contexts and

be truly individual” (Gaylard, 2006:63-64). Significantly, he asserts that “individuality and subjectivity in postmodernism are always changing and dynamic and dialectically related to the hegemonic power of the herd, the social” (Gaylard, 2006:64). Gaylard clarifies the link between subjectivity/identity and context in postmodernism, focusing on hegemonic power. Because perspective emanates from an individual, context is equally important for how one sees. I am of opinion that not only the ideological or hegemonic power context is important in this regard, but also the physical context – the time and place – from which an individual sees.

Herman remarks on the lack of consensus among narratologists with regard to terminology, pointing to the confusion it causes, but also argues how standard narratological approaches foreclose certain aspects of perspective for text analysts (Herman, 2009:129-130). Such aspects include foreground and background relations; the level of granularity and abstraction; issues of selection, “which concerns the scope of a predication, meaning how much of the scene that one is construing is included in the conceptualization” (Herman, 2009:129); motility; the direction of viewing or “sighting” in a particular direction (spatially and temporally) from an established perspective point” (Herman, 2009:130). Even though standard narratological approaches may lead an analyst to arrive at some of the same conclusions, Herman’s approach yields an understanding of how one *conceptualises* a story world as he advocates a shift from focalisation to conceptualisation – not merely seeing, but understanding.

Furthermore, Herman (2009:134) distinguishes his approach from classical approaches endorsed by narratologists such as Bal and Genette, summarising the results of his approach when compared to the classical approach as revealing “stylistic texture”, “spatio-temporal configuration of storyworlds [and] the representation of consciousness, and narrative thematic”. He illustrates his approach with reference to literary texts and to a graphic novel, indicating that the approach is applicable to both text-based narratives and to narratives which depend on both visual and textual information. Vladislavić often presents readers with visual signifiers, such as statues and photographs, to consider by describing them in detail and using them as motifs. Even though Vladislavić’s works are texts, they reveal a preoccupation with the visual and he frequently suggests links between how characters see cultural artefacts or places and how they see the world. For this reason, Herman’s approach is particularly useful, because Vladislavić distinguishes between observing, or looking in a cursory and uninvolved way that does not take specific notice of something or someone, and ‘seeing’ in the sense of understanding and gaining insight.

In English, as in several Western languages, 'to see' is often used also to denote 'to understand'. Vladislavić explores seeing in both senses. For the purposes of this thesis, I will employ the term 'perspective' to denote seeing and conceptualising from a particular place and time, but also with the understanding that what is seen and understood is seen and understood from an ideological and contextual vantage point. Not only the physical vantage point, but also the frame of reference and knowledge of past contexts, inform perspective. Perspective, in this thesis, thus denotes a more comprehensive understanding of focalisation.

The terms 'narrator' and 'focaliser', I employ in the most straightforward narratological sense of denoting 'who speaks' and 'who sees'.

## **2.9 Conclusion**

Vladislavić's fiction is concerned with ways in which concrete reality and abstract conceptions of past, ideology and identity modulate human experience and perspective. This chapter explored how human orientation in time and space affects life experience and how the interaction with context contributes towards identity formation. Vladislavić illustrates the complex dynamic between the past and the present that affects the ways in which people remember and view the world. Using Lefebvre's categorisation of social space, analogies were drawn between official renditions of time and place (history and representations of space), unofficial conceptions of time and place (memory and representational space) and actual experienced time and place (past and productions of space).

The presence of boundaries, both physical and conceptual, is acknowledged as an important theoretical premise for the discussion of specific places and cultural artefacts in Vladislavić's fiction. However, as the latter intimates, boundaries are also associated with expansion and transcendence; they can be compared to membranes which function as barriers that allow for some contact and interaction. The concept of boundaries can be applied to South African society in which the superimposition of divisions resulted in a palimpsest of physical and conceptual boundaries that directly relate to identity formation.

History, memory and heritage were argued to be different renditions of the past, all of which are fictional in nature. Recollections of the past serve and influence present ideologies, which

determine how the past is rendered. History and memory have been discussed to expose their part in the creation of present ideologies. Identity is partially dependent on how one sees the past while the past is recalled within the limits of what present ideology allows. Conceptions of the past, underpinned by ideology, are relevant to and contribute towards identity formation. Consequently, perspective features as an important directive toward interpretation, whether of the past, the present or for predictions of the future. Vladislavić's fiction illustrates that there is an intricate relationship between the past, ideology, place and perspective, and it confirms the importance of the relationship between memories, histories and identities that are intimately connected with space and place. In his fiction, cities articulate the interrelation of place, time and identity in their hypercomplex and dynamic nature.

Like cities and buildings, cultural artefacts are concrete manifestations of abstract ideas that conflate and crystallise place and time. Different cultural artefacts are associated with different types of representations of time and place: maps, monuments and history books are usually associated with the official documentation or preservation of time and place. Photographs, sculpture, literature and souvenirs are associated with both official and unofficial recollections of time and space, even though they are closer to memory, heritage and representational space, because they entail creative reconstructions of the past, rather than "official" preservation and documentation. Through the encoding and decoding of cultural artefacts, characters frame their identities and articulate their perspectives.

This chapter argued that both the original context of a cultural artefact and the context of interpretation are significant for how we understand the meanings of cultural artefacts. It also reflected briefly on the mimesis and semiotics of specific cultural artefacts that Vladislavić uses as motifs in his fiction, such as monuments, statues, photographs and souvenirs, acknowledging that these cultural artefacts are literary representations, meaning that they are created in language which is itself enabled and limited by ideological and contextual factors. Final concretisation of time, place and ideology occurs when concrete phenomena are created or interpreted from a particular perspective – which is determined by one's physical embodiment in time and place and one's location within ideological and historical contexts.

## Chapter 3

### Memory, Place and Perspective in Vladislavić's Fiction

#### 3.1 Introduction

Throughout his *oeuvre*, Vladislavić explores the dynamic between time and place, especially investigating how social and political changes over time affect physical places and cultural artefacts, which in turn influence perceptions. He depicts ways in which architecture, place(s) and cultural artefacts, like public art and works of art, assume meaning to become repositories of the past and of ideologies and consequently become markers of change. Vladislavić's fiction is also preoccupied with examining how concrete, physical reality influences memory and contributes towards the formation of individual identity.

The motifs that he uses, such as décor, curios and statues, record and contain the past and illustrate how ideology and change are inscribed on architecture, public art and the fine arts, which in turn influence how people see themselves and their pasts. Identity formation, in his fiction, is often a consequence of the encoding and decoding of cultural artefacts. Vladislavić employs idiosyncratic focalisers and narrators, often ones with strange and atypical ways of looking at the world, to foreground the pivotal role of perspective in interpretation and the generation of meaning in relation to both concrete and abstract reality.

The texts under discussion in this chapter reveal the interrelatedness of time and place as they present complex contexts in which characters make sense of their identities in relation to their surroundings. This chapter considers the role and meaning of the city and architecture in *The Restless Supermarket*; the Chinese silk city and the so-called "tomasons' of access" (Passages 131 and 136 respectively) in *Portrait with Keys*; it also investigates and defines the role of fine art, specifically sculpture, in "Curiouser" and public art, specifically statues, in "Propaganda by Monuments". Each of these texts deals with change and the ways in which the past and ideology are inscribed on physical places and cultural artefacts. In each case, the cultural artefacts and places become palimpsests that reinscribe their previous contexts and associations within the present context; they become markers of history, memory and ideology that testify to the interrelatedness of time and place.

### 3.2 Resistance to Change: Alibia and the Silk City

The setting for *The Restless Supermarket* is the rapidly-changing suburb of Hillbrow in Johannesburg during the four years after the unbanning of the ANC leading up to the country's political transition. The changes in the city are foregrounded through the novel's narrator-focaliser, Aubrey Tearle, a traditionalist at heart, who abhors change. By focalising through his eyes, the present and past are sharply juxtaposed to emphasise change. Tearle's highly critical nature and resistance to change lead him to perceive change in a negative light, instead of regarding it in terms of progress. Through irony, and what Marais (2002) calls meta-irony, Vladislavić counteracts the negativity which Tearle's view causes, demonstrating that change is not only inevitable, but also necessary. Due to Tearle's ultra-critical, first-person narration, the reader is constantly aware of the lens/filter through which she/he is led to look at a changing Hillbrow. Tearle is a highly complex character, narrator and focaliser, who does not fade into the background, but invites the reader to explore Hillbrow from a very rigid and subjective perspective. Narration and focalisation thus foreground perspective in the novel.

Tearle sees correspondences between everything: objects and artefacts in the city and changes in the Café Europa become, in his mind, metonyms for changes in the country. He also exposes his bias and feeling of reduced social stature by assuming a superior attitude towards other characters and objecting to any form of change. For example, when Errol, one of a new group of Café patrons to whom Tearle derisively refers as the "newcomers" (Vladislavić, 2001:136), vandalises the Santarama Miniland, which is a miniature representation of Johannesburg, by breaking off and stealing the diminutive version of the Hillbrow Tower, Tearle thinks to himself: "The city belonged to these Goliaths now, the country belonged to them" (Vladislavić, 2001:121). From Tearle's perspective, it is not merely a cultural artefact that Errol vandalises, nor merely a representation of the city, but it becomes the city and the country: consequently, Errol's vandalism – as far as Tearle is concerned – is an offence against Johannesburg and against the country.

In a similar fashion, as noted, the Café Europa becomes – from Tearle's perspective – a microcosm of the city and the country, and he perceives the changes in the Café as indicative of changes on a larger scale. Tearle initially chooses the Café because of its European ambience (Vladislavić, 2001:16). Gaylard (2005:143) points out that Tearle's experience of the Café and the "perfect café society" is a utopian dream. Webb (2006:37) likewise deduces that the "Café

Europa serves as a fictional palimpsest of Europe which is essential for Tearle's construction of self". By "Europe" she means that Tearle perceives in the place an "old, almost Victorian Europeanness" (Webb, 2006:37). As the Café gradually evolves into a mid-city pool-tabled gambling joint, Tearle regards it as his duty to warn the Café management against changes, stating that the Café will attract "the wrong crowd" (Vladislavić, 2001:175), which reveals, among other things, his class bias. Some of the changes to which he objects include the replacement of Mevrouw Bonsma's live piano music with televisions, the introduction of gambling machines, or the "one-armed bandits" (Vladislavić, 2001:159), and pool tables (Vladislavić, 2001:175). When the Café acquires a Jacuzzi, Tearle, who is prone to exaggerate, thinks, "the place was becoming a fully-fledged bordello" (Vladislavić, 2001:175). Furthermore, the Café, like the Johannesburg Zoo and The Restless Supermarket, stays open 24 hours a day (Vladislavić, 2001:156). Tearle, like a "latter-day Canute"<sup>1</sup> (Vladislavić, 2001:129), tries to stop these changes, pondering that the "Café Europa had once been a haven in the urban jungle, now the jungle was here too, on our side of the pale" (Vladislavić, 2001:269). Tearle uses the word "pale" here in the sense of "a bounded or enclosed area" (RDCOW, 2004:1096), but it also carries the meaning of "pallid" or "fair", which may have race associations. When Tearle warns Mrs Mavrokordatos, the manager, of the dangers of change, she tells him "[y]ou have to change with the times, or you get left behind" (Vladislavić, 2001:131) and Tearle significantly thinks "[a]nd if you're left behind, is that such a bad thing? Is the past such a terrible *place* to be?" (Vladislavić, 2001:132; my emphasis). Here, Tearle equates time and place, emphasising their interrelatedness and his yearning for a past context. The whole of Hillbrow is changing and, for him, the past is a place preferable to the altering present.

Tearle's perception of the Café as a metonym for changes in the country is evoked again when he watches the CODESA proceedings on television in the Café Europa. He thinks to himself:

I have a high regard for furniture and its place in the scheme of things. But the negotiators, as the talkers were called, were obsessed with it. Specifically with the table. With the comings and goings around it – no one cared a fig for its shape – with coming to it, sitting around it, laying things upon it, leaving it in a huff. They had a thing about the chair too: occupying it, addressing it, rotating it. And then the window! I made a vow: if one more person opens a window of opportunity, I'll heave a brick through it (Vladislavić, 2001:178).

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<sup>1</sup> Knut (Canute) was a semi-legendary Danish king of England famous for tirelessly attempting to stop the rising tide of the sea.

Tearle focuses on objects rather than people, because he feels threatened by change as an unknown force which would compel him to leave his comfort zone; he perceives a link between the figurative use of furniture in the political discourse of CODESA and the literal furniture in the Café, and observes that “[t]he New Management, not to be outdone, started tinkering with the furnishings. Our décor declined relentlessly” (Vladislavić, 2001:178). Tearle also objects to the football posters on the walls, oilskin tablecloths and plastic upholstery. The extract above reveals another important link that Tearle constantly makes, namely between language and physical reality. In the same way that Tearle relates microcosm to macrocosm and small changes to profound ones, he also observes a link between the deterioration in language standards and that of all others, musing that

[s]tandards of proofreading have been declining steadily since the nineteen-sixties, when the permissive attitude to life first gained ground, and so have standards of morality, conduct in public life, personal hygiene and medical care, the standard of living and so on. All these are symptoms of a more general malaise (Vladislavić, 2001:81).

In Tearle’s mind, connections exist between all things – abstract and concrete – and everything is connected to language. For him, not only is the whole of tangible reality related to language, but abstract things are as well. In the example above, he creates an analogy, albeit slightly tongue-in-cheek, between the political changes in the country expressed in the CODESA discourse and the deterioration of décor in the Café. From his narrow-minded perspective and false sense of superiority, he perceives change as negative and describes those in the Café as “indecent” (Vladislavić, 2001:178).

Another significant object that captures Tearle’s perspective on change is the shopping trolley. When Tearle ponders that “[t]hese scavengers [the hobos] have turned the trolley into a symbol of want rather than plenty” (Vladislavić, 2001:116), he associates it with a much larger political and social context. The shopping trolley itself has not altered, but it becomes a marker or symbol of change. In apartheid South Africa, the trolley used to be associated – in middle-class white families – with abundance linked to new groceries. The habit of pilfering trolleys, to use as wheelbarrows, is a fairly new one, associated with poverty and recycling, since many poor people use the trolleys to cart objects around that can be recycled for money. Tearle disdainfully refers to them as the “collectors of old iron and empties” (Vladislavić, 2001:116). This habit would have been frowned upon twenty years ago, but the trolley’s association with affluence has since been replaced by associations with poverty and recycling. As an everyday occurrence



in contemporary South Africa, the shopping trolley becomes a metonym of change – its meaning alters in the new context, even if the object itself does not change. The concrete object captures and contains abstract meaning and becomes a symbol of change.

The most important metonym for change in the novel is the phone directory. Tearle used to be a proofreader of the Johannesburg telephone directories: several critics, including Webb (2006:36), remark that Tearle's identity is almost entirely framed by his former profession and by language. His experience as a proofreader enables him to pick up demographic and migratory information from the directory. He remarks that "[s]ometimes I saw the tracks of vast processes, generations on the march from poverty to wealth, *Völkerwanderungs*, exoduses, archaeological flows" (Vladislavić, 2001:128). When used in this way, the telephone directory can, in Lefebvre's terms, be interpreted as a representation of space, an official representation of demography and place. The movements that Tearle observes are again, from his perspective, indicative not merely of small or isolated occurrences, but rather of changes on a larger scale. He ponders:

In the twilight of my career, some intriguing trends became apparent in the Book,<sup>2</sup> signs of momentous change that lay in store for the city and the country, glimmering between the lines, if one had the eyes to see them, before they became visible to the world (Vladislavić, 2001:128).

His acute knowledge of demographic shifts appears ironic considering the fact that he does not know where Soweto is, but has to rely on the night watchman, Gideon's, directions (Vladislavić, 2001:90). For Tearle, who sees a link between everything, the phone directory becomes a metonym of the city and the country. The phone directory is a representation of reality in language: again, from Tearle's perspective, language, small-scale and bigger-scale migrations are related in the sense that change in the country and the city becomes visible in physical objects such as the trolley and the telephone directory, which can also be regarded as social barometers.

The phone directory mediates his experience of Hillbrow. With a sense of discomfort, Tearle notices the rapidly increasing number of names that are classified under "M" in the telephone directory (Vladislavić, 2001:129): indicative of social change in the city. As many African

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<sup>2</sup> Tearle's ironic reference to 'the Book' alludes to the Bible and indicates his devotion to his profession. He explains while considering the relative merit of different types of books that "[e]ven the Bible, that perennial best-seller, needs qualifying as the Good Book; but the Book, plain and simple, is the telephone directory, and that's all there is to it" (Vladislavić, 2001:97). By this he intends to prove conclusively that the latter is the ultimate book.

surnames start with the letter M, and since changes in the country place black people in a better financial position, more of them are able to afford telephones and permanent homes, as their addresses indicate. The country's political and temporal boundary crossing becomes evident in a physical object, the phone directory. Tearle observes that more and more of the newcomers live in Hillbrow and views this social shift as indicative of changes not only in the city, but also in the country. He also immediately perceives such results as negative, because it implies breaking the law, the *Group Areas Act*, then still in force. When he claims that he and the other tenants of Lenmar Mansions, where he lives, are fortunate because the proprietor, "Mrs Manashevit, who like [him]self would have been a great champion of freedom of movement in an ideal world, was disinclined to break the law" (Vladislavić, 2001:130), he ostensibly bases his objection to the social change not on racism, but on abiding by the law. However, his perspective appears racist, which could cause a reader, especially one in the new ideological paradigm, to feel uncomfortable.

Tearle is particularly intrigued when, in the phone directory, he finds a person with the surname Merope living in Hillbrow. He dials the number to ascertain his suspicion that it belongs to a black resident; the next morning, he actually visits High Point Centre to make sure that there are black people living in the building, in what was then still officially a white suburb. He learns about changes in his immediate environment not in real life and in the city, but rather via the phone directory, the textual representation. Put differently, he learns about the place where he lives, not from his own spatial practices, but rather from official representations of space. As Graham (2007:78) perceptively remarks, *The Restless Supermarket* "reveals the complex ways in which memory and consciousness are mapped onto space and place [and one can add 'onto cultural artefacts'] in the aftermath of apartheid." Tearle notices the changes both in big enterprises and structures, such as the fact that "[m]en's outfitters are folding up and chicken grillers hatching" (Vladislavić, 2001:51), and in the smaller aspects that he interprets as symbolic of more profound changes.

Being a man of habit, Tearle believes in the rules and regulations that order society; he is a supporter of boundaries, hierarchies and structures that, to him, prevent 'chaos' in society. Amid the country's boundary crossing and all the changes in Hillbrow, one item stays constant and unchanged: the mural in the Café Europa that Tearle calls Alibia. Tearle loves this artefact

precisely because it does not change.<sup>3</sup> Walls are usually regarded as boundaries and Alibia, the mural on a wall, may be seen as masking a boundary. In the same way that Tearle fails to fathom or directly ignores the social implications of “abiding by the law”, he ignores the reality of the wall as a boundary and focuses on the surface, the mural. Tearle loves the mural, because he likes boundaries to stay in their proper places. Graham (2006:86) astutely observes that Tearle’s “anxiety stems from a general collapse of spatial divides”. This anxiety of Tearle’s is also evident in his remark about the collapse of the Berlin wall: “I was as glad as anyone to see the Iron Curtain fall [...] One hoped this German business didn’t lead to a licentious collapsing of borders everywhere” (Vladislavić, 2001:159). His affinity for walls is also evident in his choice of accommodation. He chooses a flat in Lenmar Mansions partly because it has “proper walls” (Vladislavić, 2001:26). There is an analogy evident between Tearle’s affinity for strong walls and boundaries and his acute awareness of the rules of language: language is a system bounded by rules of grammar, spelling and syntax; in the same way that walls in their proper places make Tearle feel comfortable, language rules also do so: he is happiest within familiar and defined boundaries.

Tearle also has another connection with Alibia: a spotlight in the Café causes his head to cast a shadow on the wall and, to his surprise, Tearle finds that the shape of his oddly wrought head, with its five bluish excrescences (Vladislavić, 2001:20), matches the hill in the mural perfectly. He remarks: “I knew my dome’s shape exactly, and strange to say, it matched the hill that beetled over Alibia. Indeed, that hill might have been a study of my head, cast into relief against a permanent sunset” (Vladislavić, 2001:21). A permanent sunset is of course impossible and paradoxical. Part of the allure of sunsets is their transience. The image reflects, on the one hand, the impossibility of the world Tearle imagines in Alibia, but, on the other and because it is linked to his head, it also suggests that Tearle and people of his *mindset* are fading, like sunsets. He calls the hill in Alibia his personal Golgotha (Vladislavić, 2001:20) and it quite literally becomes a place where he ‘fits in’.<sup>4</sup> The composition of the proper noun ‘Hill-brow’ gains a new meaning in the light of Tearle’s discovery of the connection between his brow or head and the Alibian hill. Furthermore, Tearle internalises this image to make Alibia a place in his

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<sup>3</sup> One is reminded of Holden Caulfield in JD Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), who loves the museum because it does not change. Tearle, however, is not a teenager confronted with an existential crisis or with adolescence.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to a student, René Jordaan, for this insight.

head to which he can, and does occasionally, escape.<sup>5</sup> It is an ideal escape for him – Helgesson (2004:784) calls it “Tearle’s dreamland” – because, unlike his reality, it does not alter. In real-life Hillbrow, Tearle notices that change is imprinted on everything and he observes that there is something new every week (Vladislavić, 2001:51). Helgesson (2006:28) refers to Hillbrow as “the mutating urban centre of Aubrey Tearle’s world.” In contrast to the continually-evolving Hillbrow, Alibia never changes. Tearle even thinks during and after the disastrous farewell party which he derisively calls the “goodbye bash” that, in Alibia, “this evening had not yet begun” (Vladislavić, 2001:258; see also 299). In Alibia, the sad memories of that evening do not exist, because, in his imagination, it is still morning there. The changes, which are all interconnected in Tearle’s mind, do not affect Alibia. From Tearle’s perspective, Alibia, like an inverted metaphor, becomes everything the city is not.

Tearle’s perception of Alibia can be compared to the emperor Yang-Ti’s love for his city, described in *Portrait with Keys*. In Passage 136, Vladislavić describes another character who prefers his surroundings, in representation at least, to remain unchanged. Yang-Ti’s beloved city, Lo-Yang, was captured in a painting on silk that he took with him on his travels (Vladislavić, 2006:190). The painting of the city Lo-Yang was “two thousand paces long” and would be spanned in an “immense circle, like a laager” (Vladislavić, 2006:190) so that the emperor could rest within. The painting is a simulation of his real Lo-Yang: the representation of the city becomes a place where the emperor “dwelt, suspended in space and time” (Vladislavić, 2006:190), because “[e]ven in the desert, Yang-Ti kept his city with him, believing that it was unbecoming for an emperor to live like a vagabond in the wilderness. He would not countenance a change of scenery” (Vladislavić, 2006:190). Vladislavić then proceeds to quote Victor Segalen,<sup>6</sup> who said that Yang-Ti “disliked to contemplate the world in any other way but at its centre.” This quotation underscores the fact that one’s perspective determines what one sees. The emperor views the world from “the centre” and this determines his disposition towards it.

The similarities between Yang-Ti and Tearle are clear: Both dislike change and both use representations of cities, paintings of sorts that ostensibly imply permanence, to deny change

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<sup>5</sup> Although I agree with Gaylard (2005:143) that Tearle’s experience of the Café and the “perfect café society” is an utopian dream and hence an escape, I believe that Alibia poses a more fundamental escape for Tearle.

<sup>6</sup> Victor Segalin was a French doctor, explorer and writer who lived from 1878 – 1919. This quotation is taken from *Paintings* (1991:141), which was first published in French, in 1916.

and both prefer to look upon change from a very particular perspective: Yang-Ti from “the centre” and Tearle, unwittingly, from a centre that has shifted. Their attitudes also reflect a refusal to accept life as a dynamic process of change and growth. Tearle, however, is not an emperor. Unlike Yang-Ti, he wields no power to deal with or to counter change in his real-world Hillbrow. When the new management starts to revamp everything in the Café, Tearle says “God forbid a stone should be left unturned. The New Management embarked upon its alterations, knocking down walls and blinding windows. I had the devil’s job saving Alibia” (Vladislavić, 2001:175). However, the fact that Alibia is not demolished can be attributed rather to luck and coincidence than to his exertion of influence or power. Both Alibia and the silk city are representational spaces, cultural artefacts that enable Tearle and Yang-Ti to escape real change. Alibia is even more removed from reality than Yang-Ti’s painting, as it is not a representation of any real place; it is just an imaginary one.

Tearle’s use of Alibia as the setting for the story of the Proofreader’s Derby indicates his yearning for stability and retention of the status quo. The narrative of “The Proofreader’s Derby” (the corrected version) constitutes the second part of the novel. It forms a story within a story interspersed with all the errors, or rather “*corrigenda*”<sup>7</sup> (Vladislavić, 2001:61), that Tearle collected throughout his career. In this interesting section, which can be described as postmodern allegory, social order proceeds from linguistic order. In Alibia normal laws of physics do not apply and signifier-signified relations are inverted: language determines and constructs the world, as signifier determines signified; maps determine space; full stops bring about gravity and inclusion in the phone directory ensures existence. Significantly, the first sign of unrest in the Alibia of the Proofreader’s Derby, which is a fictional place that Tearle creates to satisfy his yearning for stability, is an “outbreak” of errors in the phone directory (Vladislavić, 2001:196). The word “outbreak” is significant in this regard: Tearle probably chooses it for its associations with infections or diseases, but it may also allude to life with its unpredictability and implicit dynamic. Everything in Alibia is indeed textual and once the proofreaders fix all the errors, reality becomes stabilised once more. In Alibia language really matters, because once the proofreaders correct all the records, spatial production can continue as normal. Peters (2009:48) perceptively asserts that “‘The Proofreader’s Derby’ makes literal the connection Tearle draws between life and text.”

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<sup>7</sup> *Corrigenda* is Latin for “that which must be corrected”. Tearle’s use of the term indicates that in his framework, there is no room for errors.

In the story of the Proofreader's Derby, the protagonist, Aubrey Fluxman, who is Aubrey Tearle's wish-fulfilment alter-ego, helps to save Alibia by fixing the city's records. In contrast to Tearle, Fluxman has a head full of hair and is quite social. Graham (2007:88) suggests that Fluxman fixes the city in both senses of the word: by repairing it and pinning it down in place. In this sense, Fluxman in Alibia is powerful in much the same way as Yang Ti, since both can counteract change.

Therefore, the place, Alibia of the Proofreader's Derby, accords Tearle some imaginary power. Not only is Tearle strongly identified with Fluxman, the hero, but he is also in a position to create a counter-image of the city – power granted to him by fiction-writing, by the creation of an artefact. Graham (2008:336) even suggests that Tearle creates Alibia “with the intention of purging the inner city of its disorders” and so, Alibia becomes everything that the city is not – an inverted metaphor of the city. Tearle is able to re-establish the boundaries in Alibia that cease to exist when maps and language become chaotic. The Alibia of the Proofreader's Derby inverts the dynamic that Tearle perceives between city, language and change. From his perspective, the last-mentioned is negative: because he perceives everything to be connected, he views the changes that he observes in Hillbrow as impacting negatively on the city and on language. In stark contrast, language in Alibia can reverse shifts and ‘correct’ or ‘fix’ the city, because the city is constructed through language; therefore change, in Alibia, is reversible and also brought about through language.

However, Tearle's efforts to resist and counter change only serve to convince the reader of the futility of such an exercise and underline the inevitability of change. As focaliser, narrator and protagonist, Tearle is a complex lens through which changes in the city are revealed to the reader. His subjective, biased perspective on change exposes the futility of attempting to counteract it. It is highly ironic that while Tearle tries to correct everything and edify everybody, he ends up showering the city with errors when his uncorrected versions of the Proofreader's Derby are dispersed by natural elements, namely gravity and the wind, on the night that the Café closes down.

### **3.3 Redundancy and Changes in the City: The ‘Tomasons of Access’**

Although the Café is “trashed” (Vladislavić, 2001:299) on the night of the goodbye bash, the mural of Alibia remains unscathed and unchanged. For the most part, however, walls and

architecture in Vladislavić's *oeuvre* are not like Alibia. In *Portrait with Keys*, several walls and other architectural structures are altered as history, memory and ideology rub off on them and they become markers or symbols of change. Goodman (2011) investigates *Portrait with Keys*, focusing on Vladislavić's representation of the city as a place that contains such changes and the narrator's sense of loss when he encounters aspects of the city. He writes that "artefacts – both public and private – disappoint their promise of a solid foundation for the present by instead highlighting the evasiveness of the past" (Goodman, 2011:281). In Vladislavić's rendition of Johannesburg, the city itself becomes a place where past and present are juxtaposed and where each context is interpreted in terms of the other.

With reference to the narrator and the narrator's context in the novel, Lenta (2009:122) comments:

[a]lthough *Portrait with Keys* is to some extent autobiographical [...] it does not explore the autobiographical self in depth. The focus is on the social spaces and the happenings of Vladislavić's daily life, on the observer of urban codes and sign-systems documenting the cultural community to which he belongs, including his interactions with the characters that inhabit his neighbourhood. [...] Vladislavić [...] is interested in the ways in which mutations of environment play out in the enunciation of everyday subjects and in their relations with each other. In *Portrait with Keys*, this interest extends to the constitution of his own subjectivity and identity *through* the environment (my emphasis).

Lenta reflects here on Vladislavić's depiction of the link between environment and identity formation and on the impact of "mutations" or change on both. The "autobiographical self" in *Portrait with Keys* is a flâneur,<sup>8</sup> who, unlike Tearle and Yang-Ti, engages with change, rather than attempts to reverse it. In the process, as Lenta argues, his identity is created in relation to, or through, his environment and "his semiological gaze is inflected by issues of race, class and personal identity" (Lenta, 2009:130). The effect of context on identity formation is a theme that runs through most of Vladislavić's fiction. *The Restless Supermarket* and *Portrait with Keys* present vastly different perspectives on change and on the city. The flâneur-narrator-focaliser in *Portrait with Keys* perceives a much more dynamic city than Tearle does, showing that that which is seen relates to the act of looking, who is looking and why, rather than to the inherent

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<sup>8</sup> Goodman (2011:285) likewise refers to the narrator of *Portrait with Keys* as a flâneur, but distinguishes him from the traditional nineteenth-century Parisian flâneur, correctly stating that Vladislavić's flâneur "is lacking in the sense of entitlement of the flâneur – the lazy confidence which bespeaks control"; instead Vladislavić's stroller has a "solitary and isolated stance as part of his partially wilfully marginalized position, and this lends an eccentric and evasive flavour to his narrative" (Goodman, 2011:283).

features of the city of Johannesburg, in this case. Tearle and the narrator-focaliser of *Portrait with Keys* look at the same city, but notice different things; hence, both identities are framed differently in relation to the identical place.

The entire *Portrait with Keys* bears witness to the concept that the city and its architecture become repositories of the past and bearers of ideology; palimpsests in which old and new are visible, or, as Poyner (2011:316) puts it: "*Portrait [with Keys]* explores the capacity of memory to materialize through 'concrete' experience". An example of Vladislavić's concern with the interrelationship between place, ideology, identity, perspective and change is explored in the description of "tomasons of access" in Passage 131 of the novel. In this case, the architecture in Johannesburg serves as an example of how history, ideology, as well as cultural and personal memories are inscribed on and contained within the walls of the city. Graham (2008:335) acknowledges the complex implications of this fact when he writes that in Vladislavić's mind "it is necessary to recognise the new ways in which people are making use of the 'old' city, [while] the memory of that city, with its separations and inequalities encoded within its very fabric still has a significant bearing on the present."

Passage 131 starts with the words "Johannesburg is a frontier city, a place of contested boundaries" (Vladislavić, 2006:185): although this is said within the context of securing one's property, it also applies to architecture's ability to contain the past and to mirror change. Lenta (2009:119) captures the dynamic nature of this on-going process of change when he claims that "[e]ngagement with [the narrator's/Vladislavić's] environment takes place, for the most part, not from the vantage point of distant reflection, but at the level of its ongoing emergence." This is to say that the novel is intimately concerned with spatial practices from the perspective of a flâneur, who engages with his context, and, as Lenta also suggests, he engages with time *and* place.

The narrator-focaliser describes the present reality of South African society when he refers to his suburb where the "[w]alls replace fences, high walls replace low ones, even the highest walls acquire electrified wires and spikes" (Vladislavić, 2006:185). The contrast between rich and poor is also defined in terms of walls: in the wealthier suburbs, people knock down the old structures before building the new ones, but in poorer and older parts of the city, people make do with what they have and so "the walls tend to grow by increments" (Vladislavić, 2006:185). One is likely to find that "[a] stone wall is heightened with prefab panels, a prefab wall is



heightened with steel palisades, the palisades are topped with razor wire. Wooden pickets on top of brick, ornate wrought-iron panels on top of plaster, blade wire on top of split poles” (Vladislavić, 2006:185). The walls thus become palimpsests that reflect different phases and contexts and their associated ideologies; they are documents or records of changes in the neighbourhood – changes that mark most South African cities, where the inner city deteriorates from the centre outward. Whereas the original low walls are indicative of safer and perhaps more affluent times when it was not necessary to secure one’s property and when the appearance of the wall was more important than keeping unwanted people out, the walls change and become higher as their context alters while, as the neighbourhood becomes poorer, the walls become less appealing. The narrator concedes that these “piggyback walls” – his own included – are nearly always ugly. Lenta (2009:127) specifically investigates Vladislavić’s representation of crime in *Portrait with Keys* as well as the concomitant anxiety and states that “Vladislavić’s neighbourhood is saturated with signs of crime, especially theft”; Lenta refers to the brass objects removed from letterboxes and walls. However, these missing brass objects as well as the “piggyback walls” testify not only to crime, but also to change, as the walls record the suburb’s past.

Within this shifting environment, the narrator-focaliser asserts that the “tomason of access is our speciality” (Vladislavić, 2006:185). ‘Tomason’ is a term coined by conceptual artist Genpei Akasegawa to “describe a purposeless object found on a city street” (Vladislavić, 2006:175; Passage 123). Significantly, Vladislavić describes tomasons as “creatures of the boundary, they gravitate to walls and fences, to entrances and exits” (Vladislavić, 2006:176). In view of the fact that architecture is an expression of ideology, the tendency of tomasons to affix themselves to walls and fences is important, as they too become markers of ideology. By using a visual artist’s term, Vladislavić foregrounds visual, physical aspects of the city. The narrator in *Portrait with Keys* proceeds to emphasise the link between tomasons and perspective by stating that tomasons “cast the world in a different light” (Vladislavić, 2006:176).

A tomason *of access* is therefore a purposeless object relating to the provision or denial of access. Examples mentioned in the passage include “vanished gateways” (Vladislavić, 2006:185) and metal hinges (Vladislavić, 2006:186) as well as some boundaries of the city that used to be traversable and have since become closed and inaccessible. These tomasons of access leave traces when the architecture or boundaries alter. Because metal hinges are difficult and expensive to remove, they are often left in walls, thereby providing a reminder of

where a gate used to be. The “vanished gateways” are manifest in remnants of previous urban design such as “[a] garden path [that] leads to a fence rather than a gate, a doorstep [that] juts from the foot of a solid wall. Often, the addition of a security fence or a wall has put the letterbox beyond reach of the postman” (Vladislavić, 2006:185). In these examples, the tomosons of access symbolise the closing of places that once provided access, places that enabled boundary crossings; they record how the context – time and place – has changed and how social changes have impacted and still impact on architecture.

Walls are usually considered to be strong, unchanging, permanent structures, but those described in Passage 131 are palimpsests that reflect change and are likely to alter again as they record and contain aspects of the past. Graham (2008:339) suggests that the walls in *Portrait with Keys* “refer most powerfully to the fixing of mindsets [...] as much as to physical barriers.” He thus perceives ideology, or world views, as being inscribed on the walls. This concept is also illustrated in *The Folly*, where the prefabricated concrete wall that demarcates the boundary between the two plots of ground serves as both a physical and a conceptual division. In both texts, Vladislavić depicts the intricate dynamic between ideology, history, memory and tangible place, or, as Lenta (2009:122) acutely observes: “Vladislavić interweaves spaces and memory.” The height and condition of the walls described in Passage 131, their physical and concrete appearance, reflect the state of crime and the economic situation of the communities, so that through the tomosons of access, a past context and a different way of life are inscribed on architecture and in particular on walls that graphically testify to change. The abstract (the past and ideology) therefore manifests in the concrete, in the walls, which impact on the narrator-focaliser’s identity formation, among other things by symbolising the restrictive boundaries encountered on all levels of society.

Gaylard (2011c:289) writes of another wall in *Portrait with Keys*: “Vladislavić suggests that despite historical change and the fickleness of fashion, the past never goes away completely”. In the same fashion that architecture and walls in the city can record and document history and change, fine arts objects can also record shifts, as the next analysis will illustrate. In “Curiouser”, Vladislavić shows how such objects can become palimpsests in which more than one context can be preserved.

### 3.4 The Contexts Contained in Sculpture: “Curiouser”

South Africa altered dramatically after 1994 and several changes have become manifest in cities and in urban planning. *The Exploded View* (2004) presents four stories set against some of the changes in the Gauteng province. Several places are mentioned in more than one story, linking the stories to suggest a complex urban space in which events in the four narratives could occur simultaneously. The complexity of the story world, which mirrors real social relations in current Johannesburg, is evident from critical responses to the text. Webb (2006:47), for example, perceptively comments that “the stories seem to suggest an incomplete transformation [...] in South Africa”, whereas Graham (2006:59) asserts that “[r]ead together, the stories in *The exploded view* paint a portrait of Johannesburg as containing unfathomably complex interactions between fixed spaces [...] movements [...] and the mechanisms that both facilitate and regulate those movements.” The synergy between the four narratives is succinctly summarised by Morphet (2006:88) as follows:

The four stories of *The exploded view* are parts of a single novel; each one pointing from a marginal situation towards the same centre. The centre is never given explicit definition but it registers as a force shaping each of the micro-worlds in which the characters endeavour to keep their balance in the surges of a changing world.

The complexity of the city is important, because it is in this almost schizophrenic place that Simeon Majara, the protagonist of the third story, “Curiouser”, frames his identity.

“Curiouser” is the third of four interlinked short stories in *The Exploded View* and features a black South African artist, Simeon Majara, who hosts a braai party to celebrate the closing of his recent successful exhibition, entitled *Curiouser*. Through omniscient third-person narration the story relates the events of the evening with several flashbacks to the thoughts that went through Majara’s head as he worked on *Curiouser* and on other previous exhibitions. The flashbacks afford the reader insight into Majara’s conception and creation processes and reveal how the artworks come to represent, combine and preserve two contexts. The artworks made for the *Curiouser* exhibition derive meanings specifically as a result of the particular contexts to which they allude.

This story presents cultural artefacts that investigate the porous boundary, or membrane, between aesthetic and economic values that are attributed to cultural artefacts; it addresses, in

particular, the boundary between the appreciation of fine art artefacts and their acquisition as investments. Like Tearle, the artist-protagonist, Majara, is an ambivalent character who elicits different responses from readers. As Gaylard and Titlestad (2006:5) remark:

readers tend to regard Majara as either a typically pretentious con-man selling his hyped cut-'n'-paste pastiches as postmodern art to equally pretentious well-heeled customers, or as a trickster who uses the material at hand to craft interesting challenges to contemporary South African culture.

I am in agreement with the first of these interpretations for reasons that will become evident in the analysis. The character seems to me to be more of an opportunistic entrepreneur than an artist, which, in today's consumer culture, probably amounts to a 'successful artist'. However one chooses to interpret him, he seems to represent the superficial, capitalist spirit of modern society.

The artworks for *Curiouser* consist mainly of dissected and reconfigured curios.<sup>9</sup> The idea came to Majara when he designed the interior of Bra Zama's Eatery in Germiston, a key place in the second story in *The Exploded View*, namely "Afritude Sauce". This design opportunity intrigued him as it implied "the possibility of erasing another line between his art and his livelihood" (Vladislavić, 2004:106) and he admits that the idea "appealed precisely because it was so corny" (Vladislavić, 2004:106). He decides to use African masks for the Eatery, thinking that this would allow him to seize

the obvious trappings of the tourist experience and trusting that in the end he would be able to turn them inside out, double them back on themselves, so that they meant something else. That was one of his things. 'Recharging the drained object with meaning' (Vladislavić, 2004:106-107).

He thus exploits the heritage industry as a source for his fine arts, by converting ubiquitous and meaningless heritage objects into sculpture and installation art. The heritage industry often exploits people for their labour and cultural memory for economic gain and even though Majara is an irksome character, he should be given credit for choosing to exploit an exploitative sector of the economy. As Gaylard (2006:68) perceptively suggest, Majara wrestles "with the question of how an artist can use the mass-produced to represent the individual and unique." After

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<sup>9</sup> In Vladislavić's most recent novel *Double Negative*, Majara features once more and here he takes this technique even further. One of the characters explains that for his exhibition *Curious Restitution*, Majara "grinds curios into sawdust and reconstitutes the dust as wooden blocks" from which he makes abstract assemblages (Vladislavić, 2010:158).

having negotiated with a Malawian man named Roger, who has a stall at the Bruma flea market, he buys six crates of masks for the job. When Majara opens the fourth crate, he discovers that it contains carved animals, not masks, and thinks of them as “an African menagerie” (Vladislavić, 2004:135). After the Eatery “potboiler” (Vladislavić, 2004:107), Majara uses the left-over curios to create artworks for his exhibition, *Curiouser*, which turns out to be another money spinner.

He not only transforms the curios into artworks, but also alters the cultural artefacts’ meaning, and in the process, also the contexts within which they are intended to signify. This transformation entails several boundary crossings, most importantly of the boundary between high and low art and consequently of class and economic boundaries. The cultural artefacts – the curios and the artworks – signify in relation to their respective contexts and places, so that both artefacts’ meanings are influenced and to an extent determined by their respective contexts. Furthermore, the artworks obtain a complex signification *because* of their past (as curios), and they generate meaning in the light of that past. In much the same way as the walls in *Portrait with Keys* conflate past and present, these artworks too become palimpsests that contain both past and present. Furthermore, the artworks continue to signify the associations one might have with the curios and are critical of the boundary between the context of the curio and the context of the artworks.

The curios described in the story are familiar to most South Africans: the wooden masks and chunky animals are ubiquitous, especially near tourist attractions/places, and are probably the major trademark of the South African heritage industry. The familiar long-necked giraffes, sturdy hippos and mock-mysterious masks are mostly associated with three interrelated contexts.

Firstly, as a tourist souvenir, the curios perform the function of reminding tourists of their experiences in South Africa, when the tourists are back at home. As Stewart (2001:136) remarks, the souvenir exists as a “sample of the now-distanced experience” and as an object “removed from its context in order to serve as a trace of it” (Stewart, 2001:150). In this sense, souvenirs are reminders of the South African context in other contexts and, as such, they enact a simple mimesis: they signify and recall ‘The African Experience’. The curios thus mediate tourists’ experiences and are associated with colonialist views of adventure and wildlife, especially of the ‘big five’, while the masks are reminders of, and associated with, primitive, perhaps even ‘savage’, people. Together the animals and masks allude to an image of Africa that is primitive and mysterious and they therefore signify an idealised image of wild and dark

Africa. Gaylard (2006:71) also perceives this exploitation when he comments that “Africa is seen by the tourist market as a continent of nature and animals [...] outside of modernity and civilisation, and as archaic tribal tradition” and asserts that Majara’s art “[reinscribes] the meaning of Africa today” (Gaylard, 2006:71).

Secondly, the curios are associated with the lower end of the economy as their quantity and ubiquity make them fairly cheap. Still, the curios represent/signify the only means of income for many poor people, as the crafters are mostly poor black people from rural villages. Although identical curios are sold at exorbitant prices in curio shops as well as at the flea markets in the big cities, one finds the biggest concentration of carved wooden animals and African masks at the roadsides near the gates of almost every game reserve in the country. At roadsides, sellers and buyer are willing to haggle about the price, because it is accepted that a buyer can obtain a better price, if she/he spends a little more effort and time negotiating with the seller. It is significant that Majara finds Roger the Malawian at Bruma Lake, a fairly affluent part of Johannesburg, where the curios are bound to be more expensive. Still, as curios are markers of poor, rural places where time moves slowly, there is a definite link between the places where the curios are sold and their economic value.

Lastly, within the South African context, the curios are often associated with illegal imports and immigrants. The people who sell curios next to the roads are often not South African citizens, and are often assumed to be illegal immigrants. The curios in the story are associated with unlawful activities: when Majara is asked how he got hold of so many curios, the artist confesses that “[i]t’s a whole big secret international network, passing mainly through backdoors and legal loopholes” (Vladislavić, 2004:127) and also speculates that the curios “[have] obviously fallen off the back of a truck” (Vladislavić, 2004:130). In the course of the night he wonders to himself “[c]ould the masks have been stolen?” (Vladislavić, 2004:133). As illicit artefacts, curios are associated with clandestine geographical boundary crossings and hence become timeless markers of the ‘mysterious, exotic other’ spaces in Africa.

To summarise: The curios are associated with three contexts: the heritage/tourist industry where they signify the idea of ‘exotic Africa’, the lower-end economy where they signify a means of survival and thirdly, the context of illegal trade where they are symbols of desperation

and of illegal boundary crossings.<sup>10</sup> The ones described in “Curiouser” are specifically associated with idealised South African place and time; as uncomplicated cultural artefacts they continue to signify more or less the same meanings regardless of the context in which they are interpreted. In the South African context, these curios are primarily associated with the roadside, as Titlestad and Kissack (2006:16) also suggest. Majara regards the masks as a major African trademark and describes them as

[t]he face of Africa [...] one made familiar by ethnographic museums, and galleries of modern art, B-grade movies and souvenir shops. Everywhere you went in Johannesburg, wooden faces looked up at you from the pavement at the hawkers’ stalls, a running catalogue of expressions (Vladislavić, 2004:102).

The ubiquitous curios have an uncomplicated mimesis and signification. By using curios made by others as raw material for his artworks, Majara appropriates them for a different context. Much like Andy Warhol’s washing powder boxes, Majara’s transformation of curio into artwork modifies the cultural artefacts’ meaning and also their place, as they are moved from the roadside to the gallery. Yet, as the new artworks still carry traces and associations of the curio, they also allude to the curio context. In the gallery, the new cultural artefact or artwork becomes a palimpsest in which the old cultural artefact and its context are still visible, even though they have crossed the high-art / low-art and corresponding economic boundaries.

The physical appearance of the artworks and Majara’s creative process are described in fragments throughout the story. Majara, reflecting on his process, describes the first artworks thus:

The first small pieces were simply animal figures sawn into chunks and displayed like butcher’s carcasses on marble chopping boards. Then came a series of rhinos and elephants sliced into cross sections a centimetre thick, vertically or horizontally, and reassembled with variable spaces between the sections, so that parts of their bodies were unnaturally elongated or thickened. They were like distorted reflections in a hall of mirrors (Vladislavić, 2004:137).

When visualising these artworks in my mind’s eye, I see them as revealing and foregrounding their medium, because the negative spaces between the chunks of wood would enable one to

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<sup>10</sup> For an interesting discussion of the relationship between colonialism and the souvenir, see Freeland (2003:48-54). I do not explore the link here, as the souvenirs in “Curiouser”, even though the curios do comment on South Africa’s dual economy, are not bought by first-world tourists, but rather by an artist.

see the unvarnished wood on the inside. This would make the animals, which once looked sturdy and strong, fragile and ephemeral. Wood is a durable medium, but less so than, for example, bronze or pewter. With the insides exposed, the curios would no longer signify the strength associated with African wildlife, but would seem frail in comparison. They would deconstruct the association with fierce and strong wildlife and thereby negate the main signification of curios. Therefore, the transformation from curio to artwork changes and deconstructs the meaning of the former.

In addition, the curios would lose their quality of timelessness as they would signify at least two time frames or contexts: that of the curios and initial crafters on the one hand and that of the reconfiguration and the artist, Majara, on the other. They would draw attention to the process of creation in both contexts and as such, they become self-reflexive, with regard to both their medium and their creation. The exposed insides of the animals also signify fragility, and, by association, the vulnerability of their makers, but they also allude to the second creation, namely to Majara's intervention and to his context. Perhaps, with their broken bodies and through their association with illegal trade, the dissected animals also comment on illegal poaching.<sup>11</sup>

The new cultural artefacts acquire new and original significance/meaning and they signify in a different place: in the transformation from curio to artwork, Majara transposes the cultural artefacts from the stalls near the roadside and flea markets to the gallery space. Curios would generally not be exhibited in a fine arts gallery: mere placement in a gallery already suggests elaborate boundary crossings that impact on the signification of the cultural artefacts. The place attributes new meaning to the cultural artefacts, by elevating them from roadside to gallery, as the artefacts/artworks in an art gallery are assumed to have a more complex and layered meaning than something exhibited on the side of the road. This is of course not to say that everything exhibited in a gallery is profoundly meaningful, but its being exhibited in a gallery already gives it a certain meaning. The reconfigured curios may be seen as a vehicle for the artist, Majara, to consider the nature of art and interrogate issues such as 'What is the boundary between art and craft?' Gaylard (2006:71) reads the artworks as "lampooning the pretentiousness and snobbery that attaches to much 'installation art' and the art world which pays exorbitant prices for flimsy gimmicks."

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<sup>11</sup> Van Zyl (2006:80-81), in an article on *The Exploded View's* depiction of the politics of discourse networks related to representation in the new South Africa, remarks insightfully that the sculptures break three codes, namely that of the biology textbook, those of curios and those of the natural history museum.



The dynamics of the busy roadside space are vastly different from those of the gallery. Not only is it quieter, but the gallery is also a contained space, created for the exhibition of the artworks; it is a space designed to focus attention on the artworks and not on the space itself, and in addition, it is a space only available for a short time – the duration of the exhibition. This temporal aspect of the gallery space foregrounds the value of the artworks. Unlike the ubiquitous curios, they are rare and not eternally available. Like the curios, the artworks in the gallery are exhibited to be sold, but because the gallery space is only available for a short stretch of time, the urgency to sell is greater – and there is no haggling! The gallery is part of the formal economy that operates on supply and demand, whereas the roadside forms part of the informal economy. The necessary price difference between the two kinds of cultural artefacts articulates and foregrounds the differences between the two contexts and specifically their respective economic associations. Through the transformation, the context of the artworks and the context of the curios converge so that the artworks become palimpsests of past and present. The second set of artworks that Majara creates are also palimpsests, for the same reason. Thinking back on the creation process, Majara relates that

[l]ater, after he acquired the bandsaw, which allowed for thinner cross sections and more precise cuts, he could graft the parts of the different animals into new species, the head of a lion, the horns of a buffalo, the legs of a hippopotamus, exquisite corpses, many-headed monsters for a contemporary bestiary. The pieces were presented in glass display cases with mock scientific seriousness, as if they were taxidermic specimens (Vladislavić, 2004:137).

This passage indicates that tools contribute a great deal towards the creative process and expression. Majara's first artworks, and consequently his artistic expression, were limited by the tools he had available, but after he acquires the bandsaw, he is able to produce artworks that transgress the boundaries of species and can enter the realm of fantasy. These works, which playfully interrogate the boundary between art and science, involve an element of *ostranenie*: the animals are made strange and appreciated anew. The appreciation and interpretation of the new creations are, however, dependent on the acknowledgement that the original artefacts, the curios, are unimaginative, familiar, realistic and monoreferential when compared to the new ones. The new artworks acquire meaning/significance because they evoke the curios and the places from which the curios originated, as a viewer is reminded of the past of the cultural artefacts and of their transformation. As the curios are still recognisable in the new artworks, the

spectator is once more confronted with a palimpsest of two very different contexts contained in the works.

The difference between the two contexts is succinctly articulated in the spatial dimensions of the last two works described in the story, namely the “Baloney” sculptures and the main piece of the exhibition, “Crazy Paving”. These artworks consist of cross-sectioned curio-animals: the “Baloney” sculptures “were spread out flat like pieces from a puzzle, in sequence from horn to hoof” (Vladislavić, 2004:138), while “Crazy Paving” was displayed laying flat on the gallery floor. Majara thinks to himself, “[t]hey were beautiful, everyone said so” (Vladislavić, 2004:138). These artworks are reconfigured in such a fashion that they take up a lot more space than the curios did. “Crazy Paving”, which consists of cross sections of twenty different species of animals, covers nearly fifty square metres of floor space (Vladislavić, 2004:138). The curios are reconfigured into new spatial dimensions, creating artworks that confront one with a daunting and overwhelming display. The vast space that these works occupy is in stark contrast to the cramped place where curios are sold on the roadside and at flea markets in stalls where thousands of curios are often crammed into small places.

The spatial configurations of the artworks again highlight the difference in the economic contexts of the artist and the crafters. A guest, critical of the economic imbalances contained in the works, tells Majara, “I’d buy one of those ‘Baloney’ things if I could afford to, I’ve got just the wall for it” (Vladislavić, 2004:146). This statement seems to be a critique directed at the South African art world in which Vladislavić specifically criticises the tendency of artists to speak on behalf of the poor and the suffering. Most South Africans can afford curios, but this woman cannot afford the curios reconfigured into artworks. Furthermore, unlike many of the crafters, she at least has a wall. The complex nature of the boundary between rich and poor in South Africa is highlighted when one considers the size of the artwork. If she has “just the wall for it”, she probably lives in a big house. Furthermore, it would seem as though Majara asks exorbitant prices for his works. The conversation between artist and guest reveals the boundaries between poor, middle-class and rich sentiments. Here the contexts of the two cultural artefacts are juxtaposed to reveal the nuanced nature of inequality in the country.

The new meanings of the artworks are superimposed onto the curios, thereby illuminating the boundary between low and high art. Morphet (2006:89) describes the sculptures as “an uneasy mix of sophisticated control over dangerous material and a superficial rearrangement of

surfaces.” As artworks, they represent both contexts and could therefore be perceived as hybrid cultural artefacts or palimpsests which reflect on the difference and sameness of the two worlds that they straddle. This boundary space between the two contexts is highlighted by the fact that Majara draws inspiration for his ‘high art’ from concepts such as “grace” (Vladislavić, 2004:119) and “passion” (Vladislavić, 2004:140) which he paradoxically draws from a low form of pop media: “The Oprah Winfrey Show”. Gaylard (2006:70), in my view correctly, interprets Majara’s use of ideas from the Oprah show as testimony to his dishonesty, saying that it shows that “all art is plagiarism and that it preys upon relics and realia in a greedy and dissimulating fashion”. Helgesson (2006:34-35) also considers Majara’s references to the Oprah show, observing that he finds it hard to read Majara’s references to “grace” as ironic, interpreting this reference to grace as a factor that redeems the novel from pessimism. I disagree. Because Majara cunningly plays to an audience in order to make money, I doubt that his allusions to grace are supposed to be interpreted as sincere. As Graham (2006:49-50) remarks: “Vladislavić’s fiction [...] is highly attuned to questions of cultural production and identity formation *within* the material conditions, physical spaces, and continuing inequities of South African society” (emphasis in original). The transformed curios not only cross the boundary between low and high art, but also economic and class boundaries to which the story refers explicitly, as characters discuss the economic implications of the reconfigured curios at length.

When one of the guests at Majara’s party confronts him about the difference between his earnings and those of the original crafters, Majara dismisses her concern, claiming that this is a typical “contemporary art as quackery discussion” (Vladislavić, 2004:146) and responds:

The curio is in one system and the art work in another. If you move an object from one system into another, by the sweat of your brow, you change its purpose and therefore its value. There is no point in comparing the systems unless you want to understand the transmutation (Vladislavić, 2004:146).

One would think that the transmutation is the point of the artworks. Helgesson (2006:31) perceptively interprets the passage above as proof that “art is more, not less implicated in the circulation of goods and wealth than the production of curios.” Majara seems to want to ignore the fact that his artworks carry their past associations and contexts/places with them, conveniently ‘forgetting’ that his artworks derive meaning from their past. Yet the woman’s question seems justified and Majara’s reaction seems almost vehement – indicating some

measure of guilt. Majara obviously feels uneasy about the comparison, especially when the woman

dropped her hand onto the mask and ran the tip of her middle finger along the ridged surface of its lips. In this tender gesture a human being became visible, a man with a chisel and mallet [...]. By invoking the makers, the hands and eyes behind these things, she was changing them subtly, and it irritated him [Majara]. He had become used to thinking of them as a single element, as raw material, and it suited him (Vladislavić, 2004:144).

Majara feels annoyed when the curios are taken to represent anything but inanimate objects, or, as he calls them, “raw material”. He prefers a distance between the world of the curio and his own. For the same reason he insists on referring to the crafters who made the curios as “craftsmen”, not artists (Vladislavić, 2004:145). By doing so, he asserts the boundary and distance between himself and the crafters, a boundary which his artworks ironically interrogate and bridge. This is also ironic in view of the fact that his art depends on and derives meaning from the curios and their associations with their respective places of origin.

When the cultural artefacts cross the boundary between low and high art, they become more valuable and hence more expensive. Yet the hybrid objects not only retain the curio associations, but more specifically, they signify because of their past associations: their economic value increases because of their interrupted past. The cultural artefacts that used to signify an uncomplicated and idealised image of Africa acquire a more complex message/meaning because of their hybridity. As Titlestad and Kissack (2006:16) note, the artworks “are (re)contextualized in combinations and contexts that draw attention to the system in which they originally acquired meaning and the new combinational possibilities the installations elicit”.

It is also noteworthy that whereas the artworks draw on the meaninglessness of the curios for their own meaning and are inspired by popular media, the story emphasises the haphazardness and unintentionality of Majara’s creative process. Several passages in the text suggest that the meaning and signification of the artworks are accidental. We are told that Majara “*found himself cutting them [the curios] into pieces. Perhaps it was the smell of sawdust in the air from the savaged masks that set him off, and the proximity of saws*” (Vladislavić, 2004:136; my italics). This offers insight into the creative process that seems to happen unintentionally; it would seem that he did not start with a specific plan. He acknowledges that “[i]t was always easy afterwards

to find the motives and themes, to sniff out the references to this art work and that style, but at the time it felt to him like nothing but a mechanical compulsion, a tirelessly repeated dismemberment” (Vladislavić, 2004:137). This unintentionality also characterises some of his earlier exhibitions, such as the *Genocide II* exhibition: here Majara uses dust as a medium and found that the “gallery was saturated with [dust], quite *unintentionally*” (Vladislavić, 2004:104; my emphasis). Even though the haphazard method may be part of the creative process, it does seem a facile way of creating artworks that are supposed to be, and are interpreted as, profound statements about inequality.

In the light of the stark differences between Majara and the curio crafters, one would want to believe that more thought went into the planning of the artworks, but his accidental success creates the difference between artist and crafter. The haphazardness gives the differences between artist and crafters a sad and sharp edge in the light of South Africa’s dual economy. As Thurman (2007) remarks (in a different context) “works of art are also subject to commodification” and “the artist hoping to sell his/her work for financial gain is complicit in social, economic and political processes.” Therefore, when Titlestad and Kissack (2006:22) claim that “[t]he cognitive and discursive mapping of the work’s meaning comes later, and is not the work of the practitioner as much as it is the work of the voyeur theorists who interpret it”, I would tend to disagree. I would argue that when this artist uses the works of the crafters in order to enrich himself by commenting on social inequality, he should be more actively planning and considering the messages or meanings that his art conveys. Not to do so would place him in the position of an amoral, unethical exploiter. The narrative makes it clear that the artist prefers not to think too closely about what his works are communicating. He desires a distance or boundary between his context and that of the crafters, preferring not to think about the differences in too much depth, even when his works communicate the very messages that make him uncomfortable; even if the artworks derive their meaning from a past and a context that make him uneasy. His lack of social responsibility is also evident in his stealing plaster bandages from an abandoned clinic in Nyanza, Rwanda, to create shrouds for one of his exhibitions.

However, it is necessary to separate artist and artwork and to acknowledge that the artworks are original; they testify to the artist’s creativity and they communicate in new and interesting ways. Nonetheless, Vladislavić creates interesting, even profound artworks through (the hands) of an artist who leaves one feeling uncomfortable. Van Zyl (2006:81) writes of the artist that “[t]here is much in Simeon that responds to the call of stereotype, much that makes the adoption

of the role of enfant terrible too close for comfort to the real thing” (she refers here specifically to Majara’s affinity for guns). Majara, like Tearle, in *The Restless Supermarket*, and even Niewenhuizen from *The Folly*, is a complex character; he is able to create multifaceted artworks seemingly without grasping their full meaning and implications. His fair share of luck and opportunism, coupled with his hypocrisy and lack of social responsibility, cause him to be irksome at best.

Part of the reader’s discomfort with the character arises because it seems as though Majara did not put much more thought into his creations than the crafters did into making the curios. However, his accidentally-successful artworks place him in a much better socio-economic position than the crafters – Helgesson (2006:34) calls him “the socially and economically most successful of the characters” in *The Exploded View*. Majara’s off-hand dismissal of the contexts that his work captures and represents creates an uncomfortable feeling, both in the characters attending his party and in the reader. Even though Majara does not think much, he causes others to think, and this makes him a successful artist.

In addition to the discomfort that his modus operandi induces, his “tirelessly repeated dismemberment” (Vladislavić, 2004:137) testifies to aggression and even cruelty. Goodman (2006:42) argues that Majara’s methods “also induce discomfort” because his “mutilation” of masks and animals intertextually allude to the treatment of slaves both in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and “The Heart of Darkness” as well as to the treatment of Jews in Nazi concentration camps. The aggression and cruelty that underlie Majara’s actions produce a sense of unease in the reader with regard to Majara’s true intentions, his work and lifestyle. This feeling is intensified, when his living and economic conditions are compared to those of the crafters. Majara lives in Greenside, an affluent and safe suburb of Johannesburg, which is situated in the older part of the city, bounded by a golf course on one side and Jan van Riebeeck Park on the other. Significantly, it is from this comfortable space that Majara creates artworks which reflect on the hardships that poor people suffer. His previous exhibitions dealt with war-stricken territories such as Rwanda and with violence. The contrast between his own living conditions and those of the people he represents in his work causes suspicions about his motives. Although Majara did visit some of the places that he represents in his art, we are told that “he *had done* the major concentration camps in his backyard” (Vladislavić, 2004:105; my emphasis) and he had travelled further afield as well. The off-hand “had done” in the quotation places Majara in the position of a prying tourist and a voyeur. It may very well be that Vladislavić

is criticising the art establishment that is either unaware of or ignores the contextual difference between its members' own lives and those of their subjects. Gaylard (2006:72) comments perceptively that because Majara buys those crates cheaply and possibly illegally, he "is complicit in the exploitation of Africa and its art, even though he is trying to counter that exploitation."

The artworks that Majara creates are hybrid cultural artefacts, palimpsests, that illuminate the boundary between the curio context and the much more glamorous art context; they specifically point to the boundary between high and low art and the economic implications associated with both. When a cultural artefact changes context, it retains qualities of both the original and the new contexts, merging, but also juxtaposing the two contexts. "Curiouser" illustrates how art can invoke one context in another and how the resultant palimpsest imbues the cultural artefact with meaning even if the artist does not realise it, or prefers to ignore it. The artworks in this story become meaningful in the gallery context because of their past context as curios.

In the same way that Majara uses curios to make artworks, Vladislavić employs language to 'make' both curios and artworks. Majara's creation of artworks mirrors Vladislavić's creation of the text and can thus be read as metafictional. The artworks are wrought not only in wood and glue, but also, on another level, in language: in the final instance they only exist in language. This double / layered signification is analogous to the manner in which the artworks re-articulate the curios' signification. Language in the story is foregrounded by Majara's repeated consideration and playing around with various exhibition titles; for example, the reader is told:

*Bullet-in*. He had arrived at this after a little improvisation. *Bulletin*, *Bullet(in)*, *Bullet●in*. It was compulsive. Take the last show: *CurioUSER*, *CURIOuser*, *[curio]user*, *Curio\_user*, *Curio>>>user*. He had been through countless variations, riddled with characters from the little-used ranges of the keyboard. In the end: *Curiouser*. Plain and simple (Vladislavić, 2004:213).

Majara creates exhibition titles using words in the same way he uses curios, namely by chopping them up and reconfiguring them into new combinations that retain their previous meanings, whilst alluding to new ones. By depicting him doing so, Vladislavić creates an analogy between words and cultural artefacts, which implies that language too is "raw material" for creation. The equation of words and raw material is something that Vladislavić also explores in "Journal of a Wall" (*Missing Persons*), in which the narrator neurotically records his neighbour's wall-building endeavour "brick for word, word for brick" (Vladislavić, 1989:34). In the

exhibition title *Curiouser*, for example, one is reminded not only of the curio, but also of the user, an association which may critique consumerism. Majara may playfully be referring to himself as he is a user of curios, especially in the light of the fact that curios are, for the most part, really useless: even the carved wooden kitchen utensils that South African crafters make are for display, rather than use. The exhibition title reminds some of the guests at the party of Alice's words, "curiouser and curiouser", in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Vladislavić, 2004:142; Carroll, 2006:24), as the word "curiouser", like the sculptures, has many connotations and meanings. This makes a reader aware of the signifying potential of words and artworks, because not one of these associations excludes any of the others, so that the word connotes a myriad of things. The same is true of *Bullet-in*. Abstract ideas are crystallised and concretised in concrete cultural artefacts and in words. The pun contained in the title "Baloney" sculptures may be seen as mocking the buyer, because the word could refer to a type of meat, but in the first instance refers to nonsense. Words, like curios, are "raw material" that can be used for creative activities.

That both words and cultural artefacts can be used to express ideas also applies to the context in which *The Exploded View* was written. The text originated when artist Joachim Schönfeldt created images, "designed to provoke writing" (Anderson, 2011:247) for an exhibition, entitled *The Model Men*, and asked Vladislavić to write about the images. *The Exploded View*, which was the result of Vladislavić's contribution to the exhibition, thus has its roots in visual "raw material" that Vladislavić adapted to a new context.

"Curiouser" explores the transformation of cultural artefacts. The artefacts physically change, (actively) encoding and (passively) recording the differences between two contexts. Majara, much like Tearle, activates a reader's own bias and prejudice and presents a perspective that challenges, even irks, the reader.

In the next analysis, I consider two unchanged cultural artefacts, namely two statues situated in particular contexts, in order to explore the relation between public art and its context.



### 3.5 The Contexts of Public Art: “Propaganda by Monuments”

The short story, “Propaganda by Monuments”, explores the signifying possibilities of public art in relation to particular contexts. By relating two different post-revolution<sup>12</sup> countries, Vladislavić illustrates that cultural artefacts, such as statues, gain meaning on account of their ideological and socio-political contexts; consequently, if they are taken out of these contexts or if their contexts change, their meanings also do. He considers the role of public art, specifically statues of political leaders, in contexts where the ideologies they represented had become obsolete. The focal artefacts in the story are a head of the Soviet leader, Lenin, and a bust of JG Strijdom, a leader considered one of the architects of the apartheid regime. Both sculptures are propagandistic pieces of public art, indicative of very specific histories and ideologies. The story illustrates how statues depend on their context for meaning and that, even though they remain in the same physical place, their meanings/significations shift when their ideological and political contexts change. Their new contexts, brought about by ideological shifts, cause the statues of former political leaders to become ‘out of place’. Vladislavić explores not only the physical reality of the statues, but also their temporal and ideological significance and how they too can become palimpsests of different contexts.

“Propaganda by Monuments” relates the story of a self-made man named Boniface Khumalo who lives in Atteridgeville, near Pretoria. The story is set in 1992, a very interesting period in South Africa: two years prior to South Africa’s first democratic election, a time when apartheid was no longer really enforced and the political climate was changing. It was a time of excitement and anticipation, but also of uncertainty.

Khumalo is a taverner and taxi driver, who identifies with the freedom movement in the country, describing himself in writing as “I am very much struggle” (Vladislavić, 1996:23). On the day that Nelson Mandela walks free, Khumalo decides to revamp his tavern, called the Boniface Tavern, and to change the name of the establishment. Khumalo considers several historical leaders, but reminds himself that “in this capricious epoch how could you tell who would be popular in the new year? The old guard was getting on. The way of all flesh was fleeting, whereas décor had to last” (Vladislavić, 1996:33). The ironic juxtaposition of the evanescence of political regimes and the permanence of material artefacts and consumer goods (décor) is here subtly expressed

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<sup>12</sup> The Soviet and South African revolutions were very different. I therefore use “post-revolution” here rather loosely to refer to two countries after significant political transformation.

in capitalist terms: in Khumalo's opinion, décor is expensive and therefore has to be durable. He considers calling his business "The Richelieu" and "The Napoleon" (Vladislavić, 1996:33), but eventually decides to change it to the V.I. Lenin pub and grill (Vladislavić, 1996:32). As this change coincides with Mandela's release, Khumalo's personal life mirrors, on a smaller scale, the public and political changes in the country. Simultaneously, the anti-apartheid struggle leaders are placed in the same conceptual context as the French and Soviet leaders whose names he considers for his tavern, which indicates the similarity and universality of ideological processes in totalitarian states, an issue that Vladislavić comprehensively explores in *The Folly*. Khumalo decides on the name for the establishment after he has read an article in the *Pretoria News* on the former Soviet republics' plans to take down 62 of the 68 statues of Lenin (Vladislavić, 1996:33). He writes to "The Ministir of Foreign Affairs" in the former Soviet republics (Vladislavić, 1996:16) to purchase a statue of Lenin for his new establishment's décor. His letter is passed into the hands of a very excited junior translator, Pavel Grekov, who replies to inform Khumalo that he thinks the request will succeed – even though it is not his decision to make – and that one of the biggest of all the Lenin statues will be made available to Khumalo. Grekov goes to look at the toppling of a huge head of Lenin, which is ironically located in a cul-de-sac in Bulkin Street. In order to imagine and comprehend the measurements of the statue promised to him, Khumalo visits Strijdom Square to compare the measurements of the Lenin statue described in Grekov's letter to those of the JG Strijdom statue in the Square, to gain a sense of its proportions. Strijdom was an advocate of apartheid and Prime Minister of the Union from 1954-1959. By using the Strijdom statue as a point of orientation to measure the size of the Lenin statue, the two public artworks and their respective contexts are brought into relation with one another; one statue, quite literally, becomes a measure of the other.

The almost antistrophical structure of the story further emphasises the similarities between the two post-revolution societies: Parts I and V, entitled "Grekov" and "Khumalo" respectively, relate the two protagonists' perspectives of their changing political contexts and their own positions within them. The first also relates Grekov's experiences as he goes to watch the Lenin statue fall, while the last traces Khumalo's visit to the Strijdom statue. Parts II and IV comprise the letters that they write to one another about the Lenin statue, but also about themselves and their personal lives within their respective post-revolution contexts. These sections are entitled "Khumalo to the Ministir" and "Christov to Khumalo". Christov is a member of the Foreign Economic Relations and the formal correspondent. However, the letter that Khumalo receives "had been so ruthlessly invaded and occupied by the translator" (Vladislavić, 1996:37), Grekov,

that Khumalo does not think of it as Christov's letter. Popescu (2011:124) characterises Grekov as a "(mis)translator" and "the embodiment of all the objections post-structuralists could bring to an idealised image of a translator." Both these letters are in broken English: Khumalo's in a variant of broken South African English and Grekov's in broken Russian English. Wood (2001:30) regards the latter as carnivalesque, stating that "the capricious vitality of Grekov's expressions turns standardised formulas of conventional utterance into a prodigal display of the hilarious and the fanciful." The letters are humorous and particularly revealing about the translator as intermediary. The middle part, Part III, is an extract adapted from Lunacharski's "Lenin and Art". The original that Vladislavić modified is an official exposition of Lunacharski's and Lenin's views on the nature and function of statues and public art; it is also the source for the introduction of the Soviet "Propaganda by Monuments", thus a historical document associated with official history. This part is a document outlining the specific historical context of the Soviet monuments. The historical document is transformed into art by its insertion into the short story, almost as the curios in "Curiouser" are transformed into art by their placement in an art gallery.<sup>13</sup> Even though a large part of the narrative is devoted to explicating the Soviet context, the structure of the story invites the reader to relate the changing Soviet Union context to the changing South African one. This impression is supported by other symbols and likenesses also intended to create an analogy between the two contexts.

The statues of Lenin and Strijdom are intimately connected to their respective ideologies – apartheid and communism – both of which have become redundant in South Africa and the former Soviet republics. As a result, the statues are also linked to specific countries, specific geographic places, where the statues acquire new meanings when the politics and ideologies of the countries evolve. Therefore, within their new ideological, post-revolution contexts, these statues signify differently; they become markers of former repressive societies, thereby becoming obsolete and out of place, even in the places where they were erected, as they cross temporal and ideological boundaries.

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<sup>13</sup> Critics, such as Helgesson (2004:782), Clarkson (2006:106) and Murray (2008) comment on the quality of Vladislavić's work that resembles Duchamp's found objects / ready-mades. In an essay entitled "X Marks the Spot" (2006), Vladislavić explains how he came across, or found, a Soviet journal called *International Literature* which contained the Lunacharski article. He states that he was drawn to the article "because it had to do with monuments" (Vladislavić, 2006:127-128). (Arnason [1985:309-314] provides a concise overview of Duchamp's career and contribution to modern art.)

With reference to a WHITES ONLY bench in Vladislavić's short story "The WHITES ONLY Bench", Young makes a statement that is applicable to the statues in "Propaganda by Monuments". In "The WHITES ONLY Bench", museum staff create a fake WHITES ONLY bench for the museum, which raises the issue of authenticity. Young explains that after the demise of apartheid, all authentic WHITES ONLY benches lost their meaning; consequently, there are no authentic benches anywhere. She perceptively remarks that that "the 'real' bench was only a [real] WHITES ONLY bench for as long as its legitimising ideology lasted, after which nothing dependent upon apartheid hegemony could purport to be 'authentic'" (Young, 2001:41). The benches ceased to be original, or real, when apartheid ceased to exist. She holds that "as representations and tools of an ideology, even the most concrete 'givens' are fictions in themselves" (Young, 2001:41). I concur with Young that this enables Vladislavić to problematise any representation of the real.

Both the Lenin and the Strijdom statues can, by the same logic, be said to signify their intended meanings only within their original historical contexts. After the demise of communism and apartheid, their function and signification change dramatically as they no longer reinforce or propagate particular ideologies, but rather become markers of redundant and past/historical ideologies. As has been suggested, what is important here is that the statues' meanings shift when their political and ideological contexts change, even if they stay in the identical place.

Grekov and Khumalo, however, envision the relocation of the Lenin statue, which would entail physical/geographical re-location and boundary crossing. This repositioning implies that the statue will become a commodity, and, in its new place, a parody of political ideology and propagandistic public art, even if political parody is not what Khumalo and Grekov have in mind. Its new 'location', Atteridgeville, South Africa, will impact on the statue's meaning, just as the new former-Soviet-Republic context affected the statue's meaning. In both instances, in South Africa and in the former Soviet republics, the shift in context would effect a shift in the statue's meaning. In this respect, Warnes (2000:75) asserts that "Propaganda by Monuments' focuses on the termination of Soviet communism and apartheid, and as these fixing, unifying metanarratives are dismantled, the polysemic properties of signifiers become clear in a way that makes evident the provisionality of fixed meanings and interpretations."

The 'polysemic properties' of statues, their arbitrariness, were, ironically, aspects that the Soviet leaders attempted to counter. Part III of the story ("Lunacharski and Lenin [an off-cut]") sketches

the context in which the Lenin statue and others like it were designed, built and erected in the Soviet Union. In other words, it explicates the context within which the Lenin statue was *intended* to signify. Part III makes it clear that the rulers of the time, Lenin and Lunacharski, were of the opinion that the simpler the mimesis, the more functional the statue. The Soviets were very careful not to confuse the masses, who had to buy into the ideology, with anything abstract or ambiguous as “Lunacharski knew only too well that experimental work would be incomprehensible to the illiterate masses” (Vladislavić, 1996:25) and also that “it is important that these works should be intelligible to the masses, that they should catch the eye” (Vladislavić, 1996:26). The message is clear: statues and monuments created for Lenin’s vision of ‘propaganda by monuments’ should be monoreferential and not polysemic. The statues should be copies, so to speak, of the revolutionaries and should evoke or conjure up, in the minds of the masses, the leaders of the revolution in an unambiguous fashion. In the light of this view of public art, it is ironic that Lenin approved a statue of Marx, even though he did not think the statue was a good likeness of Marx (Vladislavić, 1996:28), “Lunacharski was asked to tell the artists to make the ‘hair more nearly right” (Vladislavić, 1996:28) and the torso was also wrong. Underlying the Soviets’ view of public art is an assumption of uncomplicated mimesis as well as a denial of the fact that art may invite multiple interpretations and that meaning may change over time. The leaders’ aim was to communicate – through the cultural artefacts, the statues – a universal truth, which, of course is not universal, but contextual. Since the story relates the Soviet and South African contexts, the same may be said of apartheid artefacts and in particular of the Strijdom statue.

Vladislavić graphically illustrates the impossibility of ascribing only one meaning to a statue, as the Soviets intended, by meticulously describing what Grekov sees as he approaches the head of Lenin in Bulkin Street. Grekov’s walk around the statue and the description of his consciousness as he proceeds highlight not only the significance of context, but more importantly also the role of perspective in the generation of meaning. A substantial part of the story is devoted to showing how Grekov’s physical location in place influences what he sees. Grekov observes that “[t]he eyes in the head of Lenin looked straight at [him]” (Vladislavić, 1996:17). As he walks around the statue, the head keeps on changing, but the eyes remain steadfastly on him. When Grekov sees that workers are already standing on the statue to affix the apparatuses (notably called “eyes”) that are used to topple the statue, he crosses to the opposite pavement, significantly “enjoying the progressive revelation of detail” (Vladislavić, 1996:17). Warnes (2000:74) regards this toppling as a “symbolic ‘decapitation’, replete with

revolutionary irony” and interprets the transfer of power from Lenin to the workmen as carnivalesque (Warnes, 2000:74).

Perspective is foregrounded by the fact that what Grekov sees is clearly determined by his specific place and the angle from which he watches. The language facilitates this: if one analyses it carefully, it becomes apparent that the sentences are formulated to indicate that the *statue* changes, not specifically the angle. The active verbs that describe the transformation, “the progressive revelation of detail”, relate to the statue, not to Grekov who circles it:

Naturally, the stone head *loomed* larger the closer he got. The features, at first indistinct, now *clarified themselves*. The eyes *were still looking* straight at him, even though he had changed pavements. On a smaller scale this phenomenon might have qualified as a miracle; on this scale it was undoubtedly a question of perspective (Vladislavić, 1996:17; my italics).

Monuments and statues, like walls, are usually regarded as fixed and stable signifiers. Here the statue is anthropomorphised and it alters; it clarifies its features, it looks and it looms. The sentence construction creates the impression that it is the signifier which shifts, not the vantage point or perspective. The signifier seems to re-create itself with every step that Grekov takes; the face changes as he walks around it and foregrounds the role that perspective and physical place play in determining what is seen.

Grekov then considers the eyes of the Lenin statue, remarking that “[t]hey were kindly eyes, if not quite grandfatherly, then more than avuncular” (Vladislavić, 1996:17-18). However, as Grekov’s vantage point changes and as the mouth of the statue comes into focus, “the whole face changed, it became severe and irritable, it took on the cross expression of a bachelor uncle who didn’t like children. And then, quite unaccountably, as he came closer still, the face foreshortened into friendliness again” (Vladislavić, 1996:18). Although Grekov is confronted with the same face or signifier, he interprets it differently, depending on the angle, his perspective and his position in relation to the cultural artefact. The angle determines what he sees. In contrast to the Soviets’ intention of ascribing a specific meaning to the statue, Vladislavić makes clear that a number of variables determine what one notices: the most important is perspective, as the many references to eyes in the story indicate.

A little later, when the head has been safely secured on the back of a lorry, Grekov notices that the head was positioned to look backwards, “but whether by accident or design Grekov could

not tell” (Vladislavić, 1996:20). Again, the statue’s eyes capture Grekov’s attention: “the eyes gazed back unflinchingly”. The anthropomorphised eyes that are in actual fact as blind as the ideology the statue represents, ironically gaze back. The stern facial expression of the statue entices Grekov to react: “there was such a forbidding set to the bottom lip that Grekov took his hands out of his pockets and stood up” (Vladislavić, 1996:20). The statue has a physical effect on Grekov, because he had been conditioned to treat it with respect under the previous political and ideological regime. Even in the post-communist context, the statue continues to affect Grekov, who momentarily seems to forget that the statue’s meaning altered when the political regime did, showing that, like the curio-artworks in “Curiouser”, the statue retains its original meaning even when that meaning significantly alters in and as a result of the new context. Grekov’s behaviour in relation to the statue also attests to the thorough conditioning that ideology cultivates. Growing up in the Soviet Union cultivated submissive behaviour in Grekov, and momentarily he is once more blinded by the fact that he is merely looking at a statue, so that he reverts to behaviour learnt under the previous regime. It is almost as if the eyes induce in him a panoptic anxiety. When the lorry turned at the end of the street, the “stony gaze” (Vladislavić, 1996:20) was broken at last.

This passage presents a moving statue, subverting the notion that statues are immovable cultural artefacts. Whereas the statue has been – up to this moment – a point of orientation that alters while Grekov walks around it, the statue now moves, while Grekov remains still, an inversion that accords physical manifestation to the ideological shift. Grekov, standing still, watches how the huge ‘immovable’ symbol of communism moves away on the back of a lorry. The statue’s ‘movements’ and the anthropomorphisms that describe the statue invert/subvert the idea that statues are fixed and monoreferential – a notion that Vladislavić frequently explores.<sup>14</sup> Changing, moving signifiers, in his fiction, reveal one of the flaws of propagandistic, presumably stagnant public art, namely that the statues continue to proclaim ‘the only truth’ irrespective of context, and, as shown here, of personal perspective. In “Propaganda by Monuments”, not only the statue’s meaning, but also its appearance and place shift, showing that even though they were intended to refer to one truth or one history, they necessarily invite different interpretations. The aim of the Soviets’ monument project was to create statues and monuments for ideological purposes. Vladislavić indicates that even in one context and in the

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<sup>14</sup> In the short story “The Firedogs” Vladislavić presents kinetic sculptures and in “When We Came to the Monument” a walking, thinking statue.

eyes of one beholder the statue / signifier alters; perspective, in a particular context, determines what is seen.

What Grekov experiences on a small scale, when he walks around the statue, is also relevant to the larger Soviet context. When Soviet ideology was abandoned and the context shifted, the statue's signification also did. The statue, having become obsolete, records the change: it becomes a point of orientation in a changing context. Where it used to be a symbol of communism, it now becomes a symbol of an oppressive regime; hence it must be demolished. Whether in post-revolution Russia – in the same place – or in Atteridgeville, South Africa, Lenin is equally out of place. The statue becomes redundant in any context except the one in which it was intended to signify.

The reader gets a glimpse of how the Lenin statue would signify in the South African context. Khumalo wants the Marxist signifier, initially erected to *remind* the “illiterate” (Vladislavić, 1996:25&26) masses of the Soviet revolution, for capitalistic purposes. Reading the *Pretoria News* article, he thinks that he “could make use of a couple [of Lenin statues him]self, to string coloured lights from” (Vladislavić, 1996:34). He is furthermore of the opinion that the new Lenin statue will be a suitable addition to the statues he had already bought for the tavern's revamping from Hyperplant in Benoni. Before he decided on a name for the pub, he had purchased two disarmed goddesses, several cement amphorae with seraphim and cherubim, some caryatids and atlantes as well as a bench with mermaid armrests, and left them in the backyard to age (Vladislavić, 1996:33). The aging is probably supposed to make the statues look more authentic. Obviously, certain boundaries are lost on Khumalo. Unknowingly, he transgresses not only the boundaries of taste, but also relates the memory of Lenin to the meaningless, kitsch garden statuary. From Khumalo's uninformed perspective, the political leader would fit in nicely with the artificial context he is creating; it would complement his new place.

Amid the garden statuary, the Lenin statue will lose its original function, while its original meaning will be significantly modified. As Khumalo is ignorant of the Soviet context, the intended meaning of the Lenin statue is lost on him. Khumalo, however, has a plan. He muses that “Atteridgeville needs a tourist attraction [...] something with historical value” (Vladislavić, 1996:37). What exactly Khumalo fathoms this “historical value” would be, in relation to Lenin in the context of Atteridgeville, remains unsaid. It is possible that the huge and important head conveys, for Khumalo, some aura of history or authority. Warnes (2000:74) suggests that



“Vladislavić plays with the conceptual and historical significance of the event by transforming an icon so [...] invested with Marxist-Leninist significance into an item of exchange, an object of petty capitalism’s desire for newness.” While considering possible sponsorships and places for the statue, Khumalo thinks to himself that “it would be a pity to give it away, when I’ve gone to the effort to get hold of it” (Vladislavić, 1996:37), which leads Warnes (2000:76-78) to hint at the new ideologies, namely capitalism and consumerism, underlying Khumalo’s self-interest, stating that Vladislavić critiques, through Khumalo’s yearning (expressed in his letter) for leisure, the notion “that the termination of apartheid will result in a ‘freedom’ to pursue exclusively individualistic goals” (Warnes, 2000:78). Warnes’ statement is important for two reasons: it shows how ideology is always relevant, even directly after the demise of a grand narrative such as apartheid, but it also hints at a shift from the struggle for the greater good of many people to the focus on individualism that Khumalo embodies. In this respect, Khumalo could be seen as illustrative of a whole generation of South Africans, who benefit from the changes in the country, but who are not concerned about giving back.

In Khumalo’s mind, the statue could function either as a public signifier with “historical value” for the community, or as a personal signifier and décor for himself. Khumalo’s perspective on the function of the Lenin head in either context reiterates the fact that the Lenin statue can only signify its intended meaning in its intended context, whereas even in that intended context, the statue’s meaning is subject to the viewer’s perspective, as Grekov’s walk indicates. Vladislavić illustrates that a number of variables impact on meaning formation, of which the most important is perspective. Ultimately, art, even propagandistic public sculpture, is open to a variety of interpretations that are based on individuals’ perspectives, frames of reference and the places where the signifiers are located. By linking the statues, Vladislavić suggests that this is true of all statues, and in particular of the JG Strijdom statue in South Africa.

When Khumalo visits Strijdom Square to compare the two statues, he realises that the statue of Lenin promised to him is three times bigger than the Strijdom head and that he will be faced with some spatial constraints at his tavern, if he accepts the statue. As was the case with the Lenin statue that Grekov beheld, the Strijdom statue also changes as Khumalo looks at it. This time it is not only Khumalo’s physical vantage point that ‘changes’ the statue, but also his impressions from previous visits as he compares what he sees on this occasion to what he had seen previously. There is thus a modification in perspective effected by both place and time. In Khumalo’s mind, Strijdom’s face “had never borne the serene, far-sighted expression he saw on

it now, as the bronze head came into view over the islands of greenery. Rather, it had a look of stupefied terror” (Vladislavić, 1996:36). Again, the story indicates that statues are not monoreferential, but that their meanings can shift as a result of context: the Lenin head changes for Grekov because of his physical vantage point, and the Strijdom statue changes for Khumalo on account of spatial and temporal variables. In both cases, and by implication in all post-revolution countries everywhere, the meaning of cultural artefacts is determined by perspective and context. The analogy of statues whose meaning alters connects the Soviet and South African contexts. As Graham (2007:73) points out, “[u]nder both apartheid and Soviet communism, the states attempted not only to engineer particular versions of history to suit their own agendas, but also to freeze those collective memories in space through, for example, enormous monuments”. Vladislavić’s moving and changing statues render these states’ projects ironic, depicting how both the Lenin and Strijdom statues’ meanings alter, but also how they record change, even if they do not physically themselves alter. They become markers of ideological shifts.

The Strijdom statue has an Afrikaans inscription, which is the official exposition of what the statue represents. The inscription fixes the statue’s meaning by encoding it in “salt-and-pepper stone” (Vladislavić, 1996:37), simultaneously inscribing its origins and determining its interpretation, encoding *and* decoding the statue’s meaning. As such, the aim of the inscription is to limit the statue’s signifying potential. Since the statue and the official inscription tell the ‘one’ official truth, they are associated with history. Khumalo had previously never bothered to read the details on the pedestal (Vladislavić, 1996:36). Furthermore, his Afrikaans has never been very good and consequently he could not decode and interpret the inscription (Vladislavić, 2006:37). For very practical reasons, the inscription thus fails to fix meaning, while the language of the official inscription creates a boundary. However, Khumalo knows Strijdom not from the official record, but from a different context: namely from a Sesotho struggle song. The lyrics of the song are translated as “Give way, Strijdom! If you don’t this car, this car which has no wheels, will ride over you!” (Vladislavić, 1994:36). The official historical record, contained in the official inscription, and the cultural memory captured in the struggle song represent two different conceptual and ideological contexts: the official one is linked to Afrikaner nationalist ideology and the other to the struggle context. Khumalo knows Strijdom from the latter, not from the official one; as a result his understanding of the meaning of the statue exemplifies the tension between cultural memory and history. The context within which he assesses and interprets the cultural artefact determines the statue’s meaning. This, perhaps, is why he has always thought

that Strijdom displayed a look of stupefied terror, because he thought Strijdom had been afraid of the car with no wheels. Graham (2007:75) remarks on the irony, saying that: “the state’s monumental constructions of history give way in national memory to the taunts and mockery of resistance culture.” I agree with Graham that Khumalo’s indifference to “Strijdom’s place in history reveals the utter failure of the monument to enshrine the former prime minister’s memory in glory for posterity” (Graham, 2007:74). Still, the fact that a statue no longer signifies its intended meaning does not mean that it now signifies nothing. Its signification and meaning are reassessed in the light of the new context and the old signifier becomes a point of orientation in a rapidly changing South Africa.

The two protagonists’ assessments of the Lenin and Strijdom statues respectively indicate that perspective and context determine how one sees and interprets cultural artefacts. Abstract meanings relating to ideology and history are contained in the concrete signifiers, but it is ultimately in each interpreter’s perspective that the final meaning is created. Grekov’s and Khumalo’s perspectives of the two statues give, in the final instance, meaning to the Lenin head and the Strijdom bust, to a greater degree than the ideology that led to their creation. Both protagonists’ identities are framed/constructed in relation to the statues. Firstly, Grekov, having been conditioned to respect, almost fear, the Lenin regime, jumps to attention when the statue looks at him. His identity is thus bound to a previous ideological regime and way of thinking. In the new regime, his identity is also constructed through his role as translator for the government. Khumalo who, in writing, describes himself as “very much struggle” (Vladislavić, 1996:23), ironically does not know who Strijdom is. This renders him as being something of a bandwagon struggler. His identity is also framed by his professions in the new regime. He seems able to recognise and seize opportunities that the changing context generates.<sup>15</sup> Both Grekov’s and Khumalo’s identities are rendered in relation to the historic artefacts that they decode and interpret from their own singular perspectives, but also in relation to their contexts and their perceptions of what the statues represent.

From the reader’s perspective, the statues become markers of change; however, for these cultural artefacts to be recognised as such, the interpreter must be familiar with the context in which they were intended to signify, or else the statues could mean anything. In this short story,

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<sup>15</sup> Vladislavić often presents characters able to creatively cause changing contexts to work to their advantage: Bogey in *The Restless Supermarket*, Niewenhuizen in *The Folly* and Kumbuza in “Courage” are but a few.

Vladislavić demonstrates that the opposite is also true, namely that cultural artefacts and one's understanding and interpretation of them can influence how one perceives context. Two cultural artefacts in the story, namely the postage stamp on Khumalo's letter and the Strijdom statue, illustrate this very well.

Grekov spends some time looking at the three postage stamps on the envelope of Khumalo's letter and describes the first one thus: "the largest, apparently the most valuable, depicted a pastoral scene with herd of fattened sheep and cattle grazing on fertile steppes" (Vladislavić, 1996:15). Later, when he writes to Khumalo, he asks, "What is doing in the Transvaal? Do the cows and sheep graze on the veldt nearby free from harm?" assuming that the stamp represents/depicts Khumalo's home context, which Grekov supposes is a rural environment (Vladislavić, 1996:30). It is probable that he makes this assumption because he has no other reference material relating to South Africa. Both Pretoria and Atteridgeville are cities where one seldom sees cows or sheep, while the stamp was not necessarily designed to represent any specific context. The old Transvaal was farming ground for maize; the Free State was associated with sheep farming. Even though it is quite possible that there were cows and sheep grazing in the Transvaal, this cultural artefact, the stamp, subconsciously colours Grekov's perspective of Khumalo's home context.

More profoundly, the Strijdom statue influences Khumalo's perspective of his own context. The story ends with the words:

The sun was shining through the finely veined bronze ears of Johannes Gerhardus Strijdom.

Khumalo went and stood at a distance, upwind of the stinking Freedom Symbol, with his eyes half-closed, squinting. And after a while he began to see how, but not necessarily why, the impossible came to pass (Vladislavić, 1996:38).

On one level the last sentence could be read as referring to the Strijdom statue's dome that defies "the laws of architecture, and therefore of nature" (Vladislavić, 1996:35), because smaller models of the dome kept falling over.<sup>16</sup> Warnes (2000:79) notes the irony of this fact when he says "apartheid iconography does not respect the laws of nature." On another level, the last sentence could refer to the apartheid context in which Khumalo grew up. It could indicate that

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<sup>16</sup> The dome eventually did collapse. In 2001, five years after this story was published, it ironically disintegrated on the date Republic Day used to be celebrated, namely 31 May.

Khumalo was suddenly able to see how, but not why, the apartheid regime did not, like the dome, collapse. The statue affords him insight, which is not relayed to the reader, to understand his past context. Even though the reader is not informed about this insight, the cultural artefact partially clarifies an unnatural context for Khumalo; it puts the context into perspective for him.

“Propaganda by Monuments” underscores the similarity of the South African and Soviet contexts, showing how contexts and their associated ideologies endow cultural artefacts with meaning, but also how cultural artefacts endow contexts with meaning. As mentioned, the story illustrates that post-revolution countries are the same with regard to the erection of statues in the name of ideology and demonstrates that context determines the meaning of such artefacts. As Coombes (2006:20) duly points out, post-revolution monuments are not a uniquely South African phenomenon. The role of context is illustrated most clearly through the Lenin statue, which was seen in Moscow, in the Soviet Union, as the statue of a hero, a leader and a revolutionary. In the former Soviet republics, however, the statue is perceived as redundant and indicative of an oppressive regime. In the same physical place, it therefore possesses two different meanings in the two different time frames. In South Africa, amid the garden kitsch, the statue signifies a very different meaning as it becomes a capitalist novelty. In each different context, the same statue conveys different meanings. Statues and monuments signify their intended meaning only in their intended contexts, and this intended meaning is in the final instance contained in the perspective of the viewer. If a political or ideological context ceases, meaning changes. This is the case for both the Strijdom and Lenin statues. Warnes (2000:86) is accurate when he asserts that “the actual events of the past [...] exist outside of the narrative mediations perpetuated upon it, and history cannot be changed by eradicating its traces and artifacts.”

Just as context contributes to the meaning of cultural artefacts, the latter influence perspective on context. This is evident in Grekov’s assumption that the postage stamp sports a likeness of Khumalo’s context and, more profoundly, by Khumalo’s sudden insight into apartheid South Africa while looking at the Strijdom statue. “Propaganda by Monuments” reflects on the dynamics between cultural artefact and context and indicates that statues are not as lasting and permanent as people often think; that art is open to various interpretations which depend on context and perspective and that cultural artefacts, such as public art, record and retain history and memory, which shift in differing contexts. Because statues often serve as a point of

orientation during times of change, they influence how we assess and interpret present and past contexts.

### 3.6 Conclusion

In an interview with Warnes (2000:278-279), Vladislavić said that “What the project [the editing of *blank\_\_\_: Architecture, Apartheid and After*] confirmed for me, is that the actual physical structures of apartheid are going to be difficult if not impossible to erase and that we’re going to be living within those structures for a very long time”. Here, he engages with the tension between abstract and concrete manifestations of ideology: the country is changing in terms of how people are treated, yet the physical structures of apartheid remain. This concern is often articulated in his fiction.

In this chapter, I investigated Vladislavić’s depiction of the interrelatedness of abstract and concrete, and specifically the dynamic between the past, ideology, places and cultural artefacts. I argued that he often explores the ways in which past and ideology impact on and change concrete reality, and specifically cultural artefacts and the city; but also how concrete reality influences interpretations of the past and ways of seeing the world. Characters in his fiction often frame their identities in relation to such artefacts as well as in relation to place. I also argued that cities, architecture, public and fine arts become repositories of ideology, history and memory, and that the past, ideology and change are inscribed on places. As such, places and concrete objects become points of orientation in change.

Vladislavić makes use of cultural artefacts and places that change, such as the piggyback walls in *Portrait with Keys* and the cityscape in *The Restless Supermarket*, *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys* as well as cultural artefacts that do not, such as the shopping trolley in *The Restless Supermarket* and the statues in “Propaganda by Monuments”. Both changing and unchanging cultural artefacts and places can become points of orientation in a period of change since all of them carry aspects of their old contexts into the new context within which they are interpreted. Two marked exceptions are Tearle’s Alibia in the Café Europa and Yang-Ti’s silk city. By means of these two cultural artefacts, Tearle and Yang-Ti attempt to freeze time and deny change, but enable Vladislavić to show that change is inevitable.

Tearle's imaginary city of Alibia in the Proofreader's Derby is particularly interesting in this regard. Here, Tearle goes beyond endeavouring to solidify time and resist change. In this place, Tearle can reverse it through language. However, Alibia is merely a utopian dream, an inverted metaphor for the city. Through Alibia, and Tearle's attachment to it, Vladislavić shows that language and reality do alter.

In all the texts discussed, cultural artefacts and places become meaningful, because they become palimpsests in which both old and new are evident. Aubrey Tearle, the interpreters at Majara's party and the flâneur, Vladislavić, in *Portrait with Keys*, interpret the histories contained in architecture and cultural artefacts. Their own individual perspectives determine what they see; as a result their identities are constructed in a dynamic relationship with the artefacts they interpret and the places they frequent. In all these texts, Vladislavić explores and criticises the commodification of art for economic and ideological purposes. Vladislavić also shows that cultural artefacts can influence perspectives of contexts and consequently that abstract and concrete influence one another.

Whereas this chapter investigated Vladislavić's depiction of the natural convergence of place and time and their effect on each other, the following one investigates the role of perspective in cases where places and cultural artefacts have been created or manipulated to record and commemorate history; it thus deals with an artificial, constructed rather than natural, connection between concrete and abstract. This chapter focused on how concrete reality is shaped in the light of the past and ideology, whereas the next chapter concentrates on the abstract, on how past and ideology are inscribed and re-created, encoded and decoded.





## Chapter 4

### Memory, Meaning and Perspective in Vladislavić's Fiction

#### 4.1 Introduction

This study examines Vladislavić's representation of the intricate dynamic between past and ideology on the one hand, and concrete reality in the form of place and cultural artefacts, on the other. For this purpose, Chapter 2 defined the terminology necessary to analyse the ways in which abstract aspects of human experience, such as ideology, memory and history, impact on concrete reality, specifically on place and cultural artefacts, as well as vice versa, and how interaction with context shapes identity. It was emphasised that Vladislavić's fiction focuses on perspective as a tool to interpret and understand abstract and concrete aspects of the complex South African context: he illustrates how it affects the country's multicultural inhabitants and their respective identities. His fiction indicates how both abstract and concrete become meaningful in the eye of the beholder, and that perspective depends on the interpreter's physical and historical distance in terms of time and place. Chapter 3 investigated the interrelatedness of abstract and concrete in Vladislavić's fiction, by focusing on the role of the city and cultural artefacts in his work. The emphasis was placed on change and resistance to change, as well as the significance of context in the interpretation of events, places and cultural artefacts. It was argued that Vladislavić depicts how the past and ideology affect and even alter physical reality, and that, when the tangible is decoded or interpreted, meaning is generated in the final instance as a result of different perspectives brought into play by a variety of characters whose identities are constructed in a dynamic relationship with past, place and cultural artefacts.

Whereas the previous chapter investigated the interrelatedness of abstract and concrete as a normal and natural process, this chapter is concerned with texts in which characters specifically try to encode the abstract into the concrete; that is, it illustrates how, for them, the past and its associated ideologies inform concrete reality and how ideology is expressed and the past recalled, in the light of such reality. In Vladislavić's fiction, history, memory and ideology

attribute meaning to cultural artefacts, but he also suggests how the latter are also bearers that encode the recalled past (memories and histories).<sup>1</sup>

In Vladislavić's fiction, characters' recollections of the past often make cultural artefacts meaningful and such artefacts frequently conjure up the past contexts in which they were created or to which they allude. Perspective and context inform both aspects of this dynamic: that is to say, they affect both memory and meaning. His fiction also juxtaposes different frames of reference, such as past and present perceptions, in order to foreground the significance of perspective in the interpretation of both these time frames. By means of this strategy, he indicates that the link between memory and cultural artefacts is a tenuous one that is subject to the needs of the present ideology, the context of interpretation and perspective.

The interplay between concrete cultural artefact and recalled past exists and functions within a second dynamic, that between present and past. This chapter also explores how present ideology influences the creation of memory or history and how the reconstructed past can affect the present. It thus investigates a complex web in which cultural artefacts evoke memory, the latter informs the interpretation of cultural artefacts and places while present ideology dictates how the past is recalled so that memory and history influence the present and specifically identity formation in the present.

These dynamics are explored in four texts: the unstable link between an cultural artefact and the recalled past is introduced with reference to Alibia in *The Restless Supermarket* and is investigated in depth in "The Firedogs" and "The WHITES ONLY Bench", whereas the dynamic between past and present is explored with reference to "Courage", in which a statue, based on ideological principles, contradicts the original intention of and inspiration for the artwork. In all these texts, Vladislavić shows that there is no direct or necessary link between a cultural artefact (signifier) and the past recalled (signified), but that present context and perspective determine memory, history and the meaning of cultural artefacts. Furthermore, the past is recalled within the limits that present ideology allows; this version of the past can influence identity formation in the present.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter deals with both history and memory and uses the umbrella term *recalled past* to denote any official or unofficial representation of the past.

Furthermore, the chapter investigates an issue that Vladislavić's fiction recurrently addresses, namely the way in which the relation between cultural artefact/signifier and signified/recalled past is exploited for commercial gain in current consumer culture. Commodification of the past, which is mainly associated with the heritage industry (cf. Chapter 2), involves both the link between cultural artefact and past – as this link is frequently manipulated for commercial gain in present-day consumer culture – and the dynamic between past and present, as the former is exploited to serve the interests of the latter.

The chapter aims to cast light on the dynamic relationship between cultural artefact, past and present in Vladislavić's fiction and on the role of context and perspective in the recreation of the past and memory. Ultimately, the chapter aims to elucidate Vladislavić's representation of mediations of the past.

#### **4.2 Cultural Artefacts and Memory: Alibia**

Alibia, the mural in the Café Europa in *The Restless Supermarket*, illustrates the unstable link between cultural artefact and memory as it evokes different interpretations and memories from different viewers. Aubrey Tearle observes that

A Slav would feel just as at home there as a Dutchman. It was a perfect alibi, a generous elsewhere in which the immigrant might find the landmark he had left behind. I had seen pointed out St Peter's and St Paul's, the Aegean and the Baltic. A receptionist at the German Consulate had shown us a bridge over the Neckar, and once an engineer from Mostar [...] had pinpointed the very house in which he had been born. His poor mother still lived there with mortar-bombs raining down all around her (Vladislavić, 2001:19).

In addition to the interpretations above, Floyd, one of the 'new-crowd' frequenters of the Café, thinks it is a rendition of Cape Town and Khayelitsha (Vladislavić, 2001:253), while Alibia reminds Merle of Nice, France (Vladislavić, 2001:74).

Alibia is nothing more than décor, yet it accommodates all these interpretations and facilitates each of these memories. It is important to note that, as a signifier, Alibia refers to nothing. It is an artist's impression, an *imaginary* city that has no real signified, but it becomes meaningful to each of the interpreters – in the act of interpreting – when it becomes Nice or Cape Town et cetera. As Graham (2007:92) succinctly states: "Vladislavić confirms [the] tendency of memory and representation to transform its subject." Alibia is transformed and gains meaning for each

interpreter due to, and in the light of, personal and cultural memory, national identity and frame of reference. Therefore, the German and the Dutchman can recall lived experiences in the imaginary city so that their respective perspectives, which are the sum of their memories, identities and frames of reference, affect their interpretation of the mural. As a cultural artefact, Alibia catalyses each of these interpretations, makes clear that memory is not dependent on 'truthful' encoding or documentation, and consequently proves that the link between concrete cultural artefact and memory is an unstable and tenuous one. However, Alibia also facilitates memory because the interpreters remember places as they recognise in Alibia something familiar. Their own perspectives and past contexts lead them to recognise in Alibia something of their own pasts.

The interplay between cultural artefact and memory is clear: the artefact, Alibia, is imbued with meaning because of memory, and memories are created because of the cultural artefact, even though Alibia is a signifier without a 'real' signified. In both aspects of this dynamic interrelationship, perspective plays a role. The fact that Alibia has no real referent, that it is not a representation of any specific place, is unimportant for both meaning and memory. It becomes a place that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere.

The notion that memories are evoked by and constructed around cultural artefacts that bear no direct or obvious relation to the past which is recalled, is a theme that Vladislavić explores in several texts. In this chapter, I consider Vladislavić's treatment of the dynamic between material reality, in the form of places and cultural artefacts, on the one hand, and meaning and memory on the other. I chose for this purpose "The Firedogs", which deals with sculpture, personal memory and context, indicating how memory, present and past contexts and perspective affect the interpretation of cultural artefacts; "The WHITES ONLY Bench" that explores the (in)significance of the authenticity of museum artefacts that are intended to remind the visitor of the past, cultural memory and history, in the context of the heritage industry and "Courage", which deals with public art, cultural and personal memories and commodification, as it interrogates the effect a statue can have on the present by presenting a highly problematic statue intended to symbolise 'courage' for generations to come.

### 4.3 Meaning in the Light of Memory: Interpreting Cultural Artefacts in “The Firedogs”

“The Firedogs” tells the story of narrator and protagonist, Duncan, who reminisces about his past after receiving hand-made firedog sculptures from a former partner, Lydia. Duncan’s personal memory, which forms the bulk of the story, is contextualised within and framed by a specific South African setting described at the beginning and conclusion of the story as well as by Duncan’s cultural memory of the South African political context, specifically of the TRC. The juxtapositioning of personal and cultural memory opens the possibility of drawing analogies between them. The story therefore considers, in addition to the way that memories influence personal interpretation of concrete reality, also the fashion in which the memories impact on the understanding of the present, in a general sense.

Duncan receives a parcel from the post office; when he opens it in the kitchen at home, the South African context is evoked by a random glance at a newspaper underneath the cat’s tray, which reveals the caption: “MEMBERS OF THE TRUTH COMMISSION ANNOUNCED” (Vladislavić, 1996:174). This caption reminds him of the article that he had read the previous day about one of the members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC),<sup>2</sup> a priest, whose hands had been blown off by a parcel bomb (Vladislavić, 1996:174). This association sets a whole chain of memories in motion. Firstly, afraid to open the parcel, Duncan thinks back to the 1980s when bomb threats and explosions were common occurrences in South Africa and when, for fear of bombs, he was scared of walking too close to public rubbish bins.<sup>3</sup> This memory in turn triggers a personal memory about his former partner, Lydia, who still humoured his paranoia about the bins, but drew the line when he became scared of parcel and letter bombs (Vladislavić, 1996:175). His memory then turns very personal and he recalls how their relationship soured; with these thoughts in mind, he opens the parcel to find the two sculptures that Lydia had mailed him. From the political context, Duncan reverts to his personal memories and his present perceptions about his relationship with Lydia, by recalling the events they had shared. There is thus a long chain of emotions, associations and memories.

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<sup>2</sup> The newspaper article concerns the TRC. The TRC, as explained in Chapter 1, was a forum where both perpetrator and victim could speak about their experiences of the past. Not only did it perform a significant political function, but it also facilitated the creation of a new South African cultural memory.

<sup>3</sup> During the states of emergency in the 1980s, bombs were frequently planted in rubbish bins in busy public areas.

His personal memories stir uncomfortable emotions in him. The two sculptures that he receives are firedogs shaped like devils; the package also includes a card that reads: "I hope they remind you of the old days" (Vladislavić, 1996:183), indicating that these cultural artefacts were meant to facilitate his memory. He interprets the two new devil sculptures and their companion pieces – angels – that Lydia had made when she was still living with him. It becomes evident that both sets of sculptures (the devils and the angels) gain additional meaning because of his personal memory of the context in which the cultural artefacts were created and his past relationship with Lydia. Duncan's memories therefore influence his interpretation of the cultural artefacts and, as such, the story concerns the manner in which memory and perspective influence perception and interpretation of cultural artefacts in the present. Again, the dynamic between cultural artefact and memory is evident: the firedogs remind Duncan of his past, and in the light of his recollection, the cultural artefacts become meaningful. The following analysis specifically concerns the second part of this dynamic, the process whereby concrete cultural artefacts take on meaning as a result of memory.

The firedogs are identical, nine or ten inches long and made of cast iron. Each devil has a dog on a leash. When Duncan removes the first of the sculptures from the box, he "recognize[s] the hand of the sculptor at once" (Vladislavić, 1996:176) and realises that she "was having a little joke at [his] expense" (Vladislavić, 1996:176). During their time together, Lydia had frequently accused him of being too literal and dull, whereas she saw herself and her friends as liberated and artistic. Because the firedogs are both sculptures *and* functional firedogs, each with a dog of its own, Lydia is commenting on what she perceives as one of Duncan's flaws, namely that he is too literal. He considers this and thinks: "But then it was a private joke, just between the two of us, and it was almost touching that she felt the need after all this time" (Vladislavić, 1996:176). However, on closer scrutiny, he concludes that the firedogs are "uglier, coarser, cheaper; poor relations" (Vladislavić, 1996:179) when compared to the angels. Duncan's very first assessment and interpretation of the firedogs are carried out in the light of his memory of the past; already his recollection influences and informs his interpretation. It becomes clear that he feels ambivalent about the two firedogs, about the cultural artefacts.

"The Firedogs", like "Curiouser" (cf. Chapter 3), investigates art, particularly sculpture, as a signifying cultural artefact, but unlike "Curiouser", it investigates art not from the perspective of the artist, but from that of the viewer and interpreter. Instead of following the train of thought of the artist, the reader now follows the train of thought of the interpreter, who interprets in the light

of his memory. The story explores decoding, rather than encoding: by introducing two distinct interpretations of the same cultural artefact, it grapples with the signifying possibilities of art.

At the conclusion of the story, Duncan uses the same newspaper, which initially triggered his memory, to start a fire in the hearth, using the new firelogs. He is again reminded of the article about the TRC and thinks to himself:

The very idea [of the TRC] filled me with dread. Not because I personally had anything to hide, but because the exercise was bound to be so repetitive. They would be digging over our sorry history, dragging things to the surface, corpses, crimes, injustices, everything that had been buried and could stay that way as far as I was concerned. Why was everyone so obsessed with the past? Why did time pass in the first place if not to conceal from us our own unpleasantness? Now the scar tissue would be torn off in the name of healing and the guilty secrets excised and hauled out into the light. We would have to go over it again, the killing the stealing the lying, the whole list of broken commandments (Vladislavić, 1996:186).

Duncan here reflects on the TRC and on the South African situation, specifically on the country's relation to its past. Because he feels uncomfortable with the past, he believes that it is unnecessary to remember it; as far as he is concerned, the past should be forgotten. Ironically, Duncan's thoughts about the country's relationship with its past follow directly after he has reminisced in some depth about his own past. The juxtaposition of his own past and the South African past leads the reader to connect these personal and cultural memories and, more importantly, guides her/him to ponder the correlation between reconciliation and forgiveness on a national scale and a personal, intimate level. In a highly symbolic act, Duncan burns, in the same fire, the newspaper and the firelogs – the cultural artefacts that triggered a cultural and a personal memory. Tellingly, their burning does not eradicate the memory, showing that memory is not dependent on artefacts; it is a complex process and its link with tangible reality is tenuous. One can remember without concrete material artefacts. As 'material proof' is frequently equated with 'reality' and with 'truth', this action also casts a sceptical glance at the facile equation of 'truth' and 'reconciliation' and implies that the two do not go hand in hand; they do not presuppose one another.

The story relates how first Duncan and then his new partner, Annie, decode and interpret the two devil sculptures in the present. Both interpretations are influenced by perspective. Duncan's interpretation is coloured by ambivalent, largely bitter memories of Lydia and her shallow,

irritating friends, but Annie's is not, as she is unaware of the past to which the sculptures allude. Her interpretation stands within a different context and frame of reference. In the discussion that follows, I investigate how memory resuscitates the signifying possibility of the artworks/cultural artefacts and then return to Duncan's comments on the TRC and South African history with a view to examining Vladislavić's depiction of the tenuous link between memory and concrete reality and pointing out analogies between personal and cultural memory.

Lydia mails the firedogs from Paris, which implies that these artefacts cross a physical/geographical boundary, but the temporal boundaries to which they allude are more significant. Since she made the two firedog sculptures as companion pieces to angels that she had created for the hearth in the house, when she had still lived there with Duncan approximately ten years earlier, the devils remind Duncan not only of his past, but also of the angels that Lydia had previously sculpted. The devils thus initiate a long chain of memories and associations with other past objects, events and people. Angels and devils are universal signifiers which transcend place and time. Duncan recalls that "[a]ngels were all the rage at the time, thanks to some film" (Vladislavić, 1996:180) and, as he prepares the first fire of the season to initiate the new firedogs, he cynically thinks that "[i]t was to be expected [...] after the commercial success of the heavenly host, that devils would come back into fashion too" (Vladislavić, 1996:181). Both angels and devils go in and out of popular fashion. As such, they are common and empty signifiers, pointing to little more than a popular fashion trend, as Duncan intimates when he explains that at that time one could find angels on wrapping paper and bathroom decorations (Vladislavić, 1996:180). Still, when Duncan encouraged Lydia to take the angels with her when she moved out, she refused, saying that they were "site-specific" (Vladislavić, 1996:178), meaning they are context-bound. This implies that these specific angels, and by implication also the devils, do not transcend space or context. They are bound to a specific place, in this case the hearth in their home, because Lydia created them after Duncan had mentioned that the platforms on either side of their hearth needed to be occupied (Vladislavić, 1996:176-177). Lydia explained that they were made to echo the arc of the fireplace (Vladislavić, 1996:177) and her explanation induced Duncan to refer to them playfully as "archangels" (Vladislavić, 1996:181). The devils thus remind Duncan of the angels and of several conversations between himself and his partner.

While making the first fire of the season, after receiving the devils (the narrative present), the angels remind Duncan of his past. The universal symbols become domesticated in that they are



not only site-specific, but Duncan also associates very specific personal things with them. Not only do their “well-rounded rumps” remind him of Lydia (Vladislavić, 1996:178), but he also recognises her friends among them: he recognises “that sculptor guy Barry” in what he calls “archangel Barry” and Justin, a member of Lydia’s circle of friends who irritated Duncan intensely, in “archangel Justin” (Vladislavić, 1996:181). The angels become symbolic of their relationship and their past together; the memory imbues the cultural artefacts with meaning and as Duncan thinks back about the context of the angel sculptures, they become markers of change.

The angels also illuminate Duncan’s and Lydia’s personalities and respective perspectives on art. Duncan makes several subtly belittling comments about the angels, so that reading between the lines, it is quite evident that he never thought much of Lydia’s artistic abilities. So much so that when she first showed him and her friends the angels, he mistook them for fairies and, when his mistake was corrected, he described them as a “squirming mass of angel-flesh” (Vladislavić, 1996:180), adding that they are “clinging to one another like soccer players after one of them has scored a goal” (Vladislavić, 1996:180). He perceives the two angels that support the structure as “anchormen in an acrobatic team” (Vladislavić, 1996:180).

Duncan is cynical about what Lydia calls ‘art’ and after her know-it-all friends start pointing out that the angels reveal allusions to the township style and the Très quattroceto angels, Duncan, with a hint of sarcasm, ponders: “[p]ersonally, I thought they were too well-fed to be angelic, like art-school types got up as saints” (Vladislavić 1996:181). Whether they have artistic merit or not, to Duncan the angels symbolise the emptiness and pretentiousness of Lydia and her arty friends. Sour memories flow into his reading of the angels. His interpretation of the cultural artefacts derives from his experience of and perspective on past events and people, but it also illustrates his sound common sense and practical bent of mind when he refuses to see art where he perceives artifice. Duncan detects artifice in Lydia’s choice of subject matter: the fact that Lydia chose to use pop signifiers yet call them art influences Duncan’s opinion that she is pretentious and not particularly original or good at what she does. The fact that Duncan thinks little of Lydia’s artistic abilities and creativity suggests that the cultural artefacts are not in themselves meaningful. Instead, they gain meaning mostly because of his memory.

It is highly significant that Lydia made the firedogs to remind Duncan of “the old days” (Vladislavić, 1996:183). They were made to facilitate memory by crossing a temporal boundary.

Like the angels, the devils become a vehicle that transports Duncan back to his past with Lydia and brings mixed emotions to his mind. The devils remind him of the angels, not only because they were made by the same hands, but also because devils are usually seen as the antithesis of angels. The devils therefore evoke a complex web of good and bad memories that recall his relationship with Lydia. This web of memories associated with the angels, in turn, gives the devils meaning. Both sets of cultural artefacts remind him of their (his and Lydia's) differences and how much her friends annoyed him. The concrete artefacts do not only facilitate memory, but they also acquire meaning as a result of Duncan's memories. Instead of signifying nothing but a fashion trend, the devils and angels point to a specific time in Duncan's life. For the same reason, the devils cannot remind Annie of "the old days", as she has no knowledge of this past context.

Duncan decides "to renounce them [the devils], to deny their origins" (Vladislavić, 1996:182), because he does not want to explain to his new partner, Annie, about Lydia. He decides not to let Annie in on their real origin and thereby forecloses their past context for her, telling her that he picked them up in a second-hand shop (Vladislavić, 1996:182) in Queen Street (Vladislavić, 1996:185). By doing so, he gives them a new past – a shorter and unproblematic one. As a result, Annie's interpretation of and perspective on the sculptures are very different from Duncan's. She describes them as "cute" (Vladislavić, 1996:185) and adds "[h]ow odd, they actually look just like you. Is that why you bought them?" Duncan thinks to himself "who was I to argue?" and thereby confirms Annie's reading of the sculptures. Few artists would appreciate their work being called "cute". The word implies that the artwork is insignificant, easily forgotten, harmless and without much value. Annie's lack of knowledge of the devils' past renders them virtually meaningless for her. She has no memory to bring to them. Whereas Majara, in "Curiouser", elevates curios by converting them into artworks, Duncan 'devalues' his 'artworks' and calls them curios for Annie's sake. He makes their presence easier, more comfortable. Without their past, the devils are uncomplicated, "cute" signifiers.

Duncan's and Annie's respective interpretations underline the importance of the role of perspective and the knowledge of past contexts in the creation of meaning. For Duncan the artefacts have a past and a context and, as a result, they represent, from his perspective, the "melodramatics" (Vladislavić, 2004:103) of Lydia and her friends. To him, the concrete cultural artefacts have meaning – even if it is an unpleasant one – and they bring before his mind's eye an entire past context and community. From Annie's perspective, the cultural artefacts are cute,

like curios, and they remind her of Duncan: that is the aggregate of meaning that they hold for her; they are unable to stir any uncomfortable emotions in her. Due to their different perspectives, the same cultural artefacts acquire very different meanings.

There is a third perspective to be considered: Lydia's. She writes in the card which accompanies the firedogs that she hopes the devils will remind Duncan of the old days (Vladislavić, 1996:183). This testifies to the fact that she has more fond and pleasant memories than Duncan of their time together. Not only do the sculptures elicit dissimilar interpretations in the light of different memories, but, significantly, "The Firedogs" also suggest that people remember differently.

These perspectives on the cultural artefacts are juxtaposed and brought into relation with the South African context that frames the story. While lighting the fire with the newspaper containing the TRC report, Duncan is again reminded of the past political context that frames the story; he ponders on the value of "digging over our sorry history", asking "[w]hy did time pass in the first place if not to conceal from us our own unpleasantness?" (Vladislavić, 2004:186). He holds the same opinion about personal and cultural memories, namely that they are best forgotten. His view on memory is foregrounded when Duncan thinks that "[m]ercifully, the explosive mechanism of Lydia's departure has vanished almost entirely from my memory" (Vladislavić, 1996:183). The word "explosive" sits uncomfortably with the sentiment expressed in the sentence and indicates that he is not quite at ease with his past; the word "explosive" ironically undercuts his expressed sentiment. This implies that ignoring and 'forgetting' do not assist in dealing with the past, which is true of both personal as well as cultural memory. Although he refuses to acknowledge it, Duncan is hurt by his past, but refuses to admit it to himself. Lydia has indeed not "vanished" from his memory, much as the South African past will not vanish if ignored. Yet, when thinking about the TRC, he expresses a yearning that the past should be left alone, because delving into it would be unpleasant. As such, the story suggests an answer to the question: is it better to try to forget the past and thereby render the past meaningless, easier to handle? Or is it better to understand the past and thereby gain a sense of a meaningful, albeit a sad, history?

Duncan wants to make history easy. He desires to forget. By saying that our history "had been buried and could stay that way as far as [he] was concerned" he creates an analogy with the past of the firedogs. For Annie, Duncan "renounces" the firedogs and "denies their origins"

(Vladislavić, 1996:182). By not “digging up” their past, he makes it easier to handle, but, in the process, they become meaningless and worthless. The fact that Duncan is able to conjure up an entire past world while contemplating the cultural artefacts and thereby read them as meaningful objects suggests that remembering gives meaning to the present. His complex understanding of the artefacts is juxtaposed with Annie’s easy one. This story implies that a country without knowledge of its past has a meaningless present, just as the firedogs are meaningless objects without their specific contexts.

What distinguishes the sculptures from curios is the fact that they have a nuanced past. Their past elevates them beyond “cute” superficiality, because it is their past and Duncan’s memories of it that imbue the artefacts with meaning. As in “Curiouser”, the cultural artefacts in “The Firedogs” evoke a different context within the situation in which they are interpreted. The contexts that they evoke cause them to be meaningful.

Both “Curiouser” and “The Firedogs” present artefacts with histories: cultural artefacts that cross temporal and spatial boundaries and generate meaning in the process. They also present protagonists who do not want to be reminded of nor reflect too intensely on the past. In “Curiouser”, Majara prefers not to think too hard about the people who made the curios he uses for his artworks. Instead, he prefers to regard the curios as raw material. Similarly, Duncan in “The Firedogs” spends a day reminiscing about the past conjured up by Lydia’s firedog-devils, but decides to renounce their past, because it is easier. Both stories indicate that when artefacts are interpreted in terms of their past, they gain additional meaning, which can make them meaningful in the present. This is the case even if recalling the past is painful and uncomfortable.

The cultural artefacts in “The Firedogs” are not in themselves meaningful; if they were, Annie and Duncan may have interpreted them in a similar way. Instead, Duncan’s memory and Annie’s lack of memory are juxtaposed and inform their different interpretations of the cultural artefacts. I am reminded of Khumalo’s lack of knowledge of what the Lenin head represents (cf. Chapter 3), which facilitates his reappropriation of the political signifier. The beginning and conclusion of “The Firedogs” suggest that the same applies to the South African past and cultural memory. One’s knowledge of the South African past will influence one’s experience of and perspective on phenomena in the present.

Both *Alibia* and “The Firedogs” indicate that people with different perspectives and dissimilar memories interpret the same cultural artefact differently, which indicates that the same physical artefact can allude to dissimilar abstract meanings. In “The WHITES ONLY Bench” Vladislavić also interrogates the dynamic between cultural artefacts and memory, focusing on how artefacts contain and encode meaning. While “The Firedogs” depicts how cultural artefacts are interpreted and gain meaning in the light of memory, “The WHITES ONLY Bench” elucidates the processes whereby memory originates from and because of a cultural artefact. To be more precise, “The Firedogs” explores the move from memory to cultural artefact, whereas “The WHITES ONLY Bench” investigates the move from cultural artefact to memory. The beginning and conclusion of “The Firedogs” suggest that Vladislavić perceives an analogy between personal and cultural memory. Whereas the examples of *Alibia* and the sculptures in “The Firedogs” concern primarily personal memories, “The WHITES ONLY Bench” is concerned with cultural artefacts relating to history and cultural memory. In this text, Vladislavić specifically interrogates the issue of the authenticity of cultural artefacts that signify across time and explores how authenticity influences the relation between artefact/signifier and signified past.

#### **4.4 From Cultural Artefact to Memory: “The WHITES ONLY Bench”**

Vladislavić had written and published “The WHITES ONLY Bench” (1996) before there was an actual Apartheid Museum in South Africa. Talks about such a museum had already begun in about 1995, but it only opened during 2001, in Johannesburg. “The WHITES ONLY Bench” is therefore a story that presents a number of cultural artefacts in a fictional apartheid museum. The most important of these include a replica of a WHITES ONLY bench, a presumably authentic EUROPEANS ONLY bench, election posters from bygone years, numerous mementoes, the famous photograph of Hector Pieterse<sup>4</sup> (see Appendix 2), various newspapers, a ‘do-not-sit-on-this-bench’ sign (for the EUROPEANS ONLY bench) and a photograph of Mrs Coretta King<sup>5</sup> posing on the fake WHITES ONLY bench. The cultural artefacts in the museum are intended to remind the public of apartheid history, in the same way that the firedogs were intended to remind Duncan of “the old days”. The items in the museum are often presented in an embedded manner that draws attention to the process of mediation:

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<sup>4</sup> The boy’s surname is spelled differently in various sources. In this short story, Vladislavić uses ‘Peterson’, and explains how the real surname, “Pietersen” became “Peterson” (Vladislavić, 1996:61). Unless I am quoting from the text, I will use “Pieterse” which seems to be the spelling most authoritative sources, including South African History Online (SAHO), endorse.

<sup>5</sup> Mrs Coretta Scott King, widow of Martin Luther King, was an important figure in the African American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

for instance, the museum exhibits a bench in a photograph in a newspaper, all of which are, of course, represented in the fictional world of the short story. The story thus offers layers of embedded representation: each layer creates distance between the actual past event and its representation in the media, while each is also indicative of different mediations and interpretations of and perspectives on the event and cultural artefact. Every new level of representation implies another mediation. As Chapter 2 pointed out, the more numerous the levels of representation or embeddedness, the greater the mediation and the distance between the actual past event and the interpreter.

The museum in this short story is described as part of the heritage industry. Chapter 2 explored both the role of museums and the nature of this industry and pointed out that museums often try to fix the past in accordance with what current ideology dictates. Furthermore, museums are artificial spaces that decontextualise cultural artefacts from the past under the guise of preserving them. As a result, museums often deny the dynamic relationship between past and present, between cultural artefact and context. The heritage industry also tends to commodify the past and manipulates the unstable link between cultural artefacts and the past for monetary gain.

This story focuses on the (in)significance of the authenticity of cultural artefacts in the politics of remembering. In particular, it addresses the equation of authenticity and truth as well as the commercialisation of cultural artefacts that represent the past. By rendering the museum part of the heritage industry, “The WHITES ONLY Bench” scrutinises some of the flaws of that industry. One of the most important questions this story asks is whether museums preserve artefacts or ideas – concrete or abstract. As was the case with the artefacts discussed above, “The WHITES ONLY Bench” illuminates the relation between (in-authentic) cultural artefacts and past contexts. It is noteworthy that photographs feature as central and important cultural artefacts in this story which investigates the concept of authenticity, because photographs convey an assumption of truthfulness and uncomplicated mimesis. “The WHITES ONLY Bench” not only illuminates the choices that photographers make, but also the choices of people such as newspaper editors who select photographs for publication. The selection process deconstructs several assumptions about photography.

Through first-person narration, the actions of a group of artists/crafters, who work hard to finish the museum in time for the opening, are recounted. The story is rich in intrigue, but the narrative

foregrounds two events. Firstly, the new director, Strickland, objects to Charmaine's recreation of a WHITES ONLY bench, insisting that museum staff should obtain the real, authentic artefact. She calls a meeting to discuss several museum artefacts. As such, the story presents several arguments to support both sides of the authenticity debate – which in essence is a debate on whether museums preserve ideas or artefacts – as well as other issues relating to museum artefacts. Strickland is able to find a EUROPEANS ONLY bench (Vladislavić, 1996:63), which is in the possession of the Municipal Bus Drivers' Association (MBDA) and its members are willing to part with the artefact, provided that the museum replaces their bench. A reporter takes several photographs of this exchange for the newspapers. Strickland orders Charmaine to get rid of “the fake” (Vladislavić, 1996:64), but Charmaine puts her almost-finished bench in the storeroom where she occasionally works on it. Eventually, it ends up in the garden of the museum underneath a kaffirboom,<sup>6</sup> where passers-by and museum patrons often sit on it. It thus remains a useful cultural artefact.

The other event foregrounded in the story is a discussion, at the same meeting, about the famous photograph of Hector Pieteron. The discussion serves as a good example of the construction of memory around a cultural artefact, illuminating the function of cultural artefacts in memory construction.

The bench episode commences when Strickland enters the workshop for the first time and sees Charmaine recreating a WHITES ONLY bench, which brings to the fore the issue of the authenticity of cultural artefacts in museums. Significantly, Charmaine has just finished painting the letters “WHI” on the WHITES ONLY bench (Vladislavić, 1996:54). The first part of the word “white” sounds like “why?” In the light of the rest of the stories in the collection, *Propaganda by Monuments*, the “why?” could be seen as questioning not only authenticity, but also history, heritage or the entire apartheid system. The word also evokes the ending of the short story, “Propaganda by Monuments” (cf. Chapter 3), which relates that “[Khumalo] came to see how, but not necessarily *why*, the impossible came to pass” (Vladislavić, 1996:38; my italics). He could see the machinations of apartheid, but not the reason. In a similar fashion, “The WHITES ONLY Bench” questions the reasoning underlying apartheid, the current heritage industry and perhaps the issue of authenticity.

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<sup>6</sup> Kaffirboom is the colloquial term for a coral tree.

The authenticity debate revolves around the bench as cultural artefact and symbol. Warnes (2000:82) observes that Charmaine is literally *making* history, because she creates, in post-apartheid times, an apartheid artefact. This has obvious implications for the extent to which apartheid can be regarded as something of the past. Charmaine's intention, however, is to preserve the memory, to create not merely a physical cultural artefact, but to encode the past ideology associated with it. Warnes (2000:81) explains that

Charmaine's position seems to be derived from Fredric Jameson's assertion that access to history is always textual and mediated, and artifacts from the past therefore signify through their implication in webs of (prior) constructed meaning [...] it is not the physical bench itself that is important, but rather the significance with which it was invested by apartheid.

This statement correctly emphasises that all representations of the past are mediated; in this case, the past is mediated by a cultural artefact created in the present. Warnes (2000:82) proceeds to explain that Charmaine's point is "that the museum's task is the preservation of meaning, rather than the preservation of specific artifacts, and that substitution made between signifiers does not necessarily result in a loss of meaning." This is an important point as it indicates once more the tenuous link between concrete cultural artefact and abstract memory and implies that any artefact may allude to the past, even one made in the present. I agree with Kosew (2010:577) who writes in this regard that "manufacturing of the past exposes the process whereby everyday objects can become imbued with historical significance." Any object – such as a WHITES ONLY bench or a mural such as Alibia – can remind one of the past; this particular object is more complex than Alibia as it recalls not only a place, but an unjust past ideology. It is this important point that Strickland fails to understand when, at the meeting, she calls the recreation of benches not only "an appalling waste of time and money" (Vladislavić, 1996:59), but dishonest as well. By focusing on the concrete cultural artefact rather than on its representation, she misses several important points that are illuminated by the ensuing discussion at the meeting.

Warnes (2000:82) explains that "the historical meaning ascribed to the bench as the product of the signifier's (the bench's) relationship with what it signifies (petty apartheid) is not inherent but is contingent on the imposition of a system of laws." When Strickland "wants to allow only one possible relationship between signifier and signified" (Warnes, 2000:82), she thus wishes to impose limits on what passes as apartheid history and what does not, categorising in much the same way as the apartheid government did. This type of thinking also reminds one of what



Lenin tried to do in the Soviet Union, as described in “Propaganda by Monuments”. The relationship between signifier and signified is determined by ideology as Young (2001) perceptively points out:

[i]n foregrounding the marginal perspective, Vladislavić reveals an acute awareness of the ideological power of representation of reality emanating from the so-called ‘centre’. At the same time, through the narrators’ self-conscious struggles to give expression to their own ideas, Vladislavić cautions against a too-easy glorification of the ‘truth’ of the marginal perspective which ignores its own particular, often masked, ideological location (Young, 2001:38).

While discussing reasons why the museum should exhibit only authentic cultural artefacts, Strickland makes two interesting language errors. Vladislavić is a successful, even renowned, language editor by occupation and these errors are evidently in the story for a reason. Firstly, in the workshop, she says that “[t]his is a museum, not a high-school operetta. It is our historical duty to be authentic” (Vladislavić, 1996:56). What she means to say is rather that ‘it is our duty to be historically accurate’ or just that ‘it is our duty to be authentic’. Obviously, the “our” in the sentence refers to the museum staff, but her language slip points to the binary thinking that underlies racism: ‘our historical duty’ versus ‘their historical duty’. The sentence may be read as referring to a past of divisions – a historical ‘our’. If interpreted as such, one could ask who the people are whose historical duty it is to be authentic. This question links with my argument above, namely that Strickland’s approach to preserving the past is analogous to the methods of the apartheid government. Her language slip may indicate that she thinks in terms of binaries. The words “our [...] duty” may in this light also be read as referring to or validating an exclusive ideology.

At the staff meeting, Strickland commits a second error, this time a tautology, when she asserts that it troubles her that the “workshop personnel are busily recreating beautiful replicas of apartheid memorabilia, when the ugly originals could be ours for the asking” (Vladislavić, 1996:58-9). Here she obviously does not mean that staff members are recreating replicas of apartheid memorabilia, but rather that they are recreating apartheid artefacts. As replicas are by nature re-creations, the staff will not be recreating replicas, but rather creating replicas or recreating cultural artefacts. Since the creation of memorabilia is a characteristic of the heritage industry, her language slip here contradicts the sentiment of her sentence, which makes it clear that Strickland wishes to maintain a boundary that the postmodern context renders obsolete, namely, the distinction between ‘real’ history, which is associated with authentic artefacts (that

Strickland equates with 'truth'), and popular culture in which people are satisfied with copies. Chapter 2 indicated that postmodern culture denies hierarchies of representation, that what is important is not the authority or authenticity of the representation, but rather its function. Within the context of the museum, the function of the bench is merely to remind visitors of an unjust system.

In addition to its symbolic meaning, the bench also has a practical use which the narrator recognises when he juxtaposes practicality and historical significance, saying that "[i]t was a beautiful bench – as an object, I mean, rather than a symbol of injustice" (Vladislavić, 1996:54-55). He describes it thus:

The bench looked well used, which is often a sign that a thing has been loved. But when you looked closer [...] you saw that all these signs of wear and tear were no more than skin-deep. Charmaine had applied all of them in the workshop. The bruised hollows on the seat, where the surface had been abraded by decades of white thighs and buttocks, were really patches of brown and purple paint. The flashes of raw metal on the armrests, where the paint had been worn away by countless white palms and elbows, turned out to be mere discs of silver paint themselves. Charmaine had even smeared the city's grimy shadows into the grain (Vladislavić, 1996:55).

The idea of a useful object, rather than a historical novelty, is one that Vladislavić often foregrounds. Charmaine's useful cultural artefact is juxtaposed with museum artefacts which have no practical function. One is reminded of the fire dogs that are both useful *and* signifying artefacts. In "The WHITES ONLY Bench", Vladislavić juxtaposes both benches' (lack of) practical function and their ideological function, foregrounding the latter.

Strickland's suggestion to advertise for a bench sets in motion a thought-provoking discussion about the role and nature of cultural artefacts in museums. Significantly, the cultural artefact used as an example is the famous Hector Pieterse photograph. Most people in South Africa are familiar with the 8x10 image that depicts a young man, Mbuyisa Makhubu, running while carrying Hector Pieterse's limp body in his arms. Next to Makhubu is Pieterse's sister, Antoinette (whom Reddy calls "Margot also known as Tiny" [Vladislavić, 1996:61]), whose face is contorted with panic, shock, disbelief. The context in which the photograph was taken is equally well known: it was taken on 16 June 1976 during the Soweto uprising. The photograph is still exhibited on Youth Day each year during the official celebrations. Reddy, another museum employee, contextualises the photograph by pointing out several facts about its

creation as well as some inconsistencies that have been ignored in the past. By illuminating the context of the photo, Reddy aims to persuade Strickland that placing an advertisement for a real bench would not be a good idea. In the process, he touches upon important aspects of 'historic' artefacts and their function in the construction of memory. By placing the photograph in a specific context, Reddy makes clear that the cultural artefact is a record of a specific time and place: it was taken at 10h15 on the dot by Sam Nzima (Vladislavić, 1996:61). Young (2000:43) points out that Reddy and the narrator interpret the photograph by historicising, rather than moralising it, which "subject[s] it to unusual scrutiny which lays bare the factors influencing the photographic evidence." This implies that the Hector Pieterse photograph can be treated as a mediated memory, instead of with the reverence with which it is usually viewed.

The contextual information that Reddy provides about the origins of the photograph foregrounds the fact that it is not the cultural artefact that is important, but rather what it represents. He makes some important remarks about context, the selection of material and inaccuracies with regard to the name of Hector Pieterse and his role as icon for posterity. Firstly, Reddy points out that the famous photograph is number three in a series of six photographs, a fact known to few people. This implies that someone made a selection: choosing which one of the six photographs was best for the purpose of telling the story of 16 June 1976. The *chosen* photograph that appeared in several newspapers the next day, became the record of the day, the evidence of history. The choices that an editor, a sub-editor or a journalist made point to the fact that the event is mediated in the retelling. Mediation is evident on all levels of representation: Nzima made choices when he took the photograph, after which the newspaper also made decisions. These influence how the event is recalled, indicating that the processes of creating memories and meaning around a cultural artefact are complex.

Reddy also points out that the boy's real name was Zolile Hector Pieterse, even though most people think that his surname is "Pieterse". According to Reddy, "[w]e struck out the 'i' and put it to rout in the alphabet of the oppressor. We bore the hero's body from the uneven field of battle and anointed it with English" (Vladislavić, 1996:61). Hector Pieterse, who became a symbol of freedom and epitomises the liberation struggle, is ironically remembered by the wrong name.<sup>7</sup> In between the lines Reddy, and the story, enquire whether this inaccuracy interferes

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<sup>7</sup> According to Davie (2006), the boy's real surname was Pitso. The family had it changed to Pieterse in order to pass as brown, because brown people had more rights than black people under the apartheid regime.

with the validity of the memory and the legacy. The answer is obviously no. The exact name, or the nomenclature, does not matter; by implication the authenticity of the bench also does not. What the boy and the bench represent is what counts. Furthermore, whereas most South Africans have heard of Hector Pietersen, the names of Antoinette and Makhubu are not captured in cultural memory. Reddy rightly points out that “the living are seldom as famous as the dead” (Vladislavić, 1996:61). This brings to mind Rigney’s assertion that what is remembered is usually something memorable (cf. Chapter 2), rather than something true. The story makes clear that memory is a selective process.

Furthermore, Reddy relates that Hector Pietersen was the first of 700 to die in the Soweto uprising. The boy thus became a symbol for a much larger group of freedom fighters. Again, a choice was made: the media chose Pietersen as icon of the struggle. This could have been for a variety of reasons which included the fact that he was so very young when he died. However, one should not rule out the possibility that he became an icon because there was such intense and heart-rending footage of his death available. Pietersen may have become an icon because of a cultural artefact – a photograph taken after he was shot. According to Davie (2006), not Pietersen, but a boy named Hastings Ndlovu, was the first to die that day. If this is correct, then Reddy’s story too is an inaccurate memory built around a cultural artefact. Moreover, whether Pietersen died first is not the question; the issue is obviously much larger.

Reddy proceeds to point to another possible inaccuracy: the tombstone on Pietersen’s grave indicates that he was thirteen when he died. Reddy remarks that the boy seems younger, but states that it is impossible to verify, as there are no other pictures available for comparison with the series. It is clear once more that the memory-construction process is based not on fact, but rather on perspective and interpretation. The inaccuracies that result because of interpretation and perspective do not make the memory less important. The focus should fall on the memory and the legacy, rather than on the object; it should be on the abstract, not the concrete. While Reddy is talking, the narrator looks closely at the hands and shadows in the photograph and thinks “[t]hese hands are still moving. They still speak to me” (Vladislavić, 1996:61). The mere fact that people make mistakes when they interpret cultural artefacts does not cause the artefact to be worthless; nor does it make the memory unimportant.

The contribution that Reddy makes towards the debate illustrates that historical accuracy is not only fairly unimportant, but often also very difficult to prove or verify and definitely not dependent

upon a cultural artefact. Significantly, while reflecting on the age of Pietersen, Reddy asks “Or is it just the angle [of the photograph that makes Pietersen look so young]?” (Vladislavić, 1996:61). The composition that the photographer chose is foregrounded by this rhetorical question. The “angle” or perspective from which both photographer and viewer scrutinise something determines to a large degree what is seen: perspective is pivotal in creating meaning. This fact is illustrated in “Propaganda by Monuments” when the head of Lenin changes as Grekov circles it. The rhetorical question also reflects on the nature of photography and its use for purposes of documentation and shows that it is not a credible medium.

Reddy clinches the point by drawing attention to the image of a woman in the background of the photograph, saying that, because of the cultural artefact, the photo, several people have speculated on her identity, and mimics Strickland, by saying: “we have a duty after all to tell the truth. This is a museum, not a paperback novel” (Vladislavić, 1996:63). One of the theories was that the woman in the background was Pietersen’s mother and that she was holding the bullet that killed her son when the photograph was taken. In order to establish ‘the truth’, the museum employees advertised and asked this woman to come forward and tell her story. They also requested that she bring the bullet with her. Reddy then dramatically opens a Tupperware container which holds the bullets received from the public. It becomes evident that the public response was overwhelming. There are bullets for all types of rifles and guns. This is a likely story/scenario, but it begs the question: Why do people do this? Is it a sick sense of humour that motivates them? Or is it a yearning to be part of history, even though it is a false history? Could it be that by having her/his bullet included in a museum collection, a person feels that she/he becomes part of the bigger historical picture? I am of the opinion that the bullets are objects (if not cultural artefacts) through which people feel they can become part of history. It is also the case that they want artefacts: they wish to have proof. The bullet example also points to a desire for stories: with a bullet (or any other artefact, for that matter) in a museum collection, there will always be a story. The story shows, however, that the ‘proof’ need not be authentic – it can be constructed. Reddy’s narrative proves that authenticity is not only impossible to establish, but also that the link between cultural artefact and memory is a tenuous one. In the same way that Duncan’s memory endures even after he has burnt the newspaper and Lydia’s card, “The WHITES ONLY Bench” shows that memory can exist without an artefact, or in the presence of many ostensibly fake ones.

This lesson aside, Strickland finds a bench. The reader is told that “before the week was out she turned up the genuine article” (Vladislavić, 1996:63). Readers are not told how and if authenticity is established; it seems to be merely assumed. This is not a WHITES ONLY bench, but rather a EUROPEANS ONLY bench. Charmaine calls this bench “the imposter” (Vladislavić, 1996:52). A museum employee, Pincus, must fetch the bench from the Municipal Bus Drivers’ Association, which decides to gain some publicity from the event, so that when Pincus arrives, he finds a photographer “ready to record the event for posterity” (Vladislavić, 1996:64). The latter creates a photo-essay based on four or five photographs, taken in succession, of the bench being relocated to the museum. The essay appears in the *Saturday Star* “without a by-line” (1996:64), which indicates how easily and anonymously mediation takes place. Thus, another ‘historical’ record is created, this time depicting the ‘historically accurate’ cultural artefact.

On publication of the feature, offers of benches “poured in from far and wide” (Vladislavić, 1996:64). In the light of Reddy’s story about the bullet that killed Pietersen, it seems doubtful whether all the benches on offer were authentic, and by extension, whether the one in the museum, in “Room 27: Petty Apartheid” (Vladislavić, 1996:55), could be regarded as such. Young (2001:40) accurately observes that Room 27, allocated to artefacts reminiscent of petty apartheid, is a highly mediated space. The EUROPEANS ONLY Bench is also curious. In the 1960s, 70s and 80s, when these benches were placed in parks, many white South Africans would have been in South Africa for six or more generations. Would they have thought of themselves as European? This begs the question: was the bench intended for nobody? How does the European sentiment relate to Afrikaner nationalism? To my mind, the EUROPEANS ONLY bench, like the old homeland policy (cf. Chapter 2), creates a hyperreal fiction, according to which white people who have lived here for generations can still consider themselves part of another continent, another place. As such, interaction with this strange artefact impacted on identity formation.

Tongue-in-cheek, the narrator relates that the bench sports a “second prohibition too, an entirely non-racial one, strung on a chain between the armrests: PLEASE DO NOT SIT ON THIS BENCH” (Vladislavić, 1996:64). Strickland commanded Charmaine to paint the sign. The second prohibition renders the bench useless for any practical application. This is contrasted with Charmaine’s useful bench on which certain passers-by often sit in the garden of the museum. It is also ironic that the bench, on which no one is to sit, belonged to the MBDA where

it was indeed used as a bench. Warnes (2000:83) perceptively interprets this prohibition by the museum as a part of “a process of institutionalizing history [which] ironically ends up separating [...] history from the people to whom it belongs.” However, I do not agree that this causes the ‘authentic’ bench to become a “dead metaphor” as he proceeds to argue. Rather, it highlights the extent to which signifiers are substitutable and emphasises that memory does not need authentic cultural artefacts.

The physical places where the two benches are located accentuate their different functions. The EUROPEANS ONLY Bench is in Room 27, a room devoted to ‘Petty Apartheid’ and sports a “do not sit on this bench” sign, whereas Charmaine’s is in the garden, where it continues to attract and repel passers-by. The end of the story describes a white man sitting on the bench and a black woman shuffling past. Young (2001:40) succinctly summarises the effect the fake bench has on people when she writes that people’s reactions to the copy “[suggest] the degree to which past attitudes do still endure in the present, in spite of the efforts of museumising initiatives to distinguish a past from a present national self”. Both benches evoke the past.

Mrs King interacts with this tension between present and past when she poses for the photograph that eternalises her visit to the museum, seated on Charmaine’s inauthentic bench – the WHITES ONLY bench – in the garden. This photograph provides another example of how the choices that photographers make, as well as their perspective and intention, influence the creation of the photograph. The photographers trailed behind Mrs King “trying to sniff out interesting angles and ironic juxtapositions against the exhibits” (Vladislavić, 1996:51), but ironically, it is Mrs King, not the photographers, who spots the bench and creates the composition. The narrator relates that “the scene had been set by chance” (Vladislavić, 1996:51) and that perhaps the photographers felt they “had something to prove [...] having failed to notice a photograph opportunity so steeped in ironic significance” (Vladislavić, 1996:51-52), emphasising the role of chance and of the photographers’ intent. The description of the photographic composition foregrounds the fact that photographs are representations constructed from a very specific vantage point and perspective. Furthermore, the photograph presents ambiguities that make it more meaningful as several deferred interpretations create lacunae that would allow for other meanings to be formed. In other words, a concrete cultural artefact (photograph) encodes abstract meaning in an ambivalent way. The narrator uses a number of oppositions to describe the bench. He relates that

[t]he interest of the composition derives [...] from a lively dispute of horizontals and verticals. The bench is a syllogism of horizontal lines, flatly contradicted by the vertical bars of the legs at either end [...]. Three other verticals assert their position: on the left – our left, that is – the concrete stalk of the Black Sash drinking fountain, in the middle, thrusting up behind the bench, the trunk of the controversial kaffirboom; and on the right, perched on the very end of her seat, our subject Mrs King (Vladislavić, 1996:52).

The words, “dispute”, “contradicted”, “controversial” and the term “*kaffirboom*” (instead of coral tree), in the extract, introduce political innuendos to which the photograph alludes. The political implications surface with allusions to the activist women’s group, the Black Sash, as well as the apartheid regime and culminate in Mrs King’s presence on a WHITES ONLY bench. Furthermore, the opposition between horizontal and vertical lines is also qualified by the opposition of left and right that could, in the context of the other suggestive political terms, refer to political liberalism and conservatism respectively. The fact that perspective impacts not only on the composition of the photograph, but also on political alignment, is brought to the fore by the narrator’s clarification “our left”. It is also related that the kaffirboom (significantly, on the right) was relocated from a nursery in Nelspruit. The museum decided to place it in a context that is not natural, but alien to the tree, probably for dramatic effect. The entire scene is therefore constructed, as opposed to natural, and contains at least two ‘inauthentic’ elements: the temporally out-of-place bench and the spatially out-of-place tree, which complement the black woman on a WHITES ONLY bench in the composition. These inauthentic elements add to the irony and ambiguity that make the photograph interesting. Although the photograph records the scene, it remains mute on what in it is authentic and natural and what is not. The image is a constructed cultural artefact from which memories can be created, even though what it records is artificial, rather than natural and ‘truthful’. In this respect Young (2001:42) asserts that “[p]rojecting in a closed, archived form even the most volatile situation or abstract concept, photographs and monuments cover up even as they purport to reveal, and what they cover up is precisely their own ideological orientation.”

The narrator describes the rest of the photograph, and particularly Mrs King, with reference to other oppositions, namely past and present; timorousness and audacity; mock alarm and outrage; bitterness and mockery; black and white:

[t]here is an odd ambiguity in [Mrs King’s] body, and it’s reflected in her face too, in an expression which superimposes the past upon the present: she looks both timorous and audacious [...Her eyes are opened wide] in an expression of mock



alarm – or is it outrage? [...] The rest of her features are more prudently composed, the lips quilled with bitterness, but tucked in mockingly at one corner.

The photographer was wise to choose black and white. These stark contrasts, coupled with Mrs King's old-fashioned suit and hairdo, confound the period entirely (Vladislavić, 1996:52).

These oppositions echo the binary thinking that led to the apartheid regime, which created the context in which EUROPEANS ONLY benches were a common sight. The oppositions also create uncertainty which undermines the assumption that a photograph may be equated with the truth. As Young (2001:39) states

[t]he tension between victimhood and triumph in Mrs King's attitude suggests the extent to which the revisitation of an old symbol of black oppression has shocked even her into a fresh recognition of the perpetual and never-finally-buried presence of the past in her present identity.

The uncertainty defers interpretation and instead creates a myriad of possible interpretations. The meaningful photograph created using the inauthentic bench begs the question: Would the meaning of the picture have been any different if it had presented the EUROPEANS ONLY bench? Or if Charmaine's bench had been in the museum? The story suggests it would not have been different; that authenticity is not so important when it comes to memory and that memory is not inherently linked to specific artefacts. Consequently, there is no direct link between cultural artefact and recalled past, even though the artefacts evoke and facilitate memory.

The photograph of the inauthentic bench is also not only the image that the newspaper chooses, but also the one that Charmaine decides to pin up on the notice board, and, that ironically becomes symbolic of the events of that day: it is the photograph that mediates the memory and becomes the official record of the day. The image, a physical cultural artefact, becomes a symbol of what the museum represents, much as Hector Pietersen became the symbol of the 16 June 1976 uprising. The bench, the photograph and the boy are however not the full story. They are symbols or metonyms of more elaborate events and contexts. The concrete cultural artefacts relate to the past and create meaning according to present ideologically infused perspectives. Charmaine feels vindicated precisely because her bench was chosen to represent the irony, the conflation of two divergent contexts. Her photograph represents the boundary crossing that the museum aims to illuminate and preserve. She quite

rightly says that her bench has been “immortalised” (Vladislavić, 1996:52), as the photograph of her bench in the newspaper becomes the official mediation.

Like the photographs of the EUROPEANS ONLY bench that were published for marketing purposes, the WHITES ONLY bench image is also published in several newspapers for, among others, promotional reasons that stem from the significance of economic factors. Newspapers can be regarded as the first step in the creation of history and cultural memory. Both photographs, when published in the newspapers, become records of ‘what really happened’. Both the Municipal Bus Drivers’ Association and the museum benefit from the marketing, as the struggle benefited from the record of the Soweto uprising. As Alibia also illustrated, “The WHITES ONLY Bench” makes clear that memories can be constructed around any cultural artefact. Authenticity of artefact and absolute accuracy do not matter. What does matter is the function of the cultural artefacts. As a marketing strategy, this also draws attention not only to history and the role that it plays in the present, but also to the way in which any version of the past is used for economic gain in the present.

In contrast to the inauthentic bench, Strickland’s meeting also deals with authentic cultural artefacts and specifically with election posters that evoke the past context in which they were intended to signify and where they were used as propagandistic artefacts. A former town clerk and electoral officer from Bethlehem offered the museum a donation of his complete collection of election posters, consisting of all the posters displayed in the town since its founding, provided that the museum keeps the collection intact. A museum staff member, Barbara, mentions that she could use the posters for the “Birth of Apartheid” exhibition (Vladislavić, 1996:58). The fact that these are posters from the Free State town of Bethlehem is no coincidence. An exhibition title like the “Birth of Apartheid” is one of the typical claptrap exhibition titles that one finds in the heritage industry. Furthermore, as Bethlehem is usually recognised as the birthplace of Christ it would seem that, even though the story does not deal with religion, the use of the Bethlehem posters in the “Birth of Apartheid” exhibition in this context creates an analogy between religion and ideology, an analogy that Vladislavić explores in more depth in *The Folly*.

Election posters are propagandistic visual signifiers with a specific iconography: they usually present the broadly-smiling or stern face of the candidate as well as the emblem or logo of the political party that the candidate represents; they also contain party slogans and election details

such as the election dates and venues. The posters are designed and intended to signify in a very specific context, namely in pre-election times when they are put up against trees and lampposts, mostly in the central business district, but also in residential neighbourhoods. Their function within this context is to familiarise the electorate with the candidates, to present the candidates as friendly, or at least upstanding, members of society and, of course, to attract votes.

In a museum, the posters are decontextualised and their function changes dramatically. The posters were never intended to be displayed indoors, next to posters of previous and subsequent years. In this context, they are merely novelty items that indicate a sequence of events and, even though they may be historically significant in terms of iconography and design history, they relate fairly insignificant aspects of apartheid history. In the case of the election posters, a reader is confronted with authentic signifiers that are basically rendered insignificant, because they are decontextualised. Like the museum bench on which no-one sits, the posters become useless cultural artefacts.

The most useless cultural artefact and symbol of the heritage industry is the souvenir. Mrs King buys an assortment of fairly absurd and trivial souvenirs: soapstone hippopotami with sly expressions, coffee-table catalogues, little wire bicycles and riot-control vehicles, garish placemats, and beaded fly-whisks, among other things. "Her aide had to chip in to make up the cost of a set of mugs in the popular 'Leaders Past and Present' range" (Vladislavić, 1996:51). Few of these artefacts have any bearing on the museum exhibition, or even on apartheid. The soapstone hippopotami, wire bicycles, riot vehicles and beaded fly-whisks are part of the local economy. They are familiar cultural artefacts, usually made and sold by poor people, often next to the road, but they are more expensive at heritage sites, and thereby expose the heritage industry's exploitation of the poor. Furthermore, they have little to do with apartheid and therefore do not contribute to the creation of meaning within the apartheid museum context; they signify in an uncomplicated manner and represent nothing of importance. It would be accurate to say that instead of representing their most obvious signification, namely hippopotami, bicycles and objects alluding to typical South African cultural life, they actually function to remind the buyer of the museum visit as such, rather than to remind visitors of what the museum represents, namely apartheid. The coffee-table catalogues are relevant to the exhibition, but they are also associated with ostentation. People buy catalogues to show that 'they were there'. These books are picture-orientated, rather than information-orientated, and

are consequently often superficial. The museum is a representation of the apartheid context; the souvenirs become a representation of a representation and hence a simulacrum of the 'experience of the museum visit'.

The set of mugs in the popular 'Leaders Past and Present' range is another curious souvenir. The mugs presumably sport drawings or, more likely, photographs of political leaders and thus represent an embedded and mediated signification. They act as postmodern replacements of statues and oil paintings of important leaders that were fashionable in previous eras. In today's postmodern consumer and celebrity culture, the likeness of a leader is printed on a commodity, thereby erasing the high-art, low-art boundary. These souvenirs are relevant to the exhibition, but are also intended to remind visitors and tourists of their museum visit and experience, rather than of leaders "past and present". A person using such a mug is more likely to recall the museum where it was bought, than to think about the depicted leader and his or her legacy; it therefore also represents a hyperreal experience.

All of the souvenirs that Mrs King so "generously" (1996:51) buys are trivial memorabilia, with an aura of history or of Africa. They are insignificant mass-produced, money-making, curio-shop artefacts associated with the heritage industry. The fact that Mrs King buys "generously" makes the purpose of the artefacts clear: they are consumer goods. In the case of souvenirs authenticity is not an issue, because buyers/consumers know that they are buying cultural artefacts that they will probably throw away in a couple of years' time. The fact that they are copies of copies is expected, as they are made and sold for profit. Warnes (2000:85) correctly asserts that "in 'The WHITES ONLY Bench' the commodification of history occurs at the expense of memory." The museum sells objects to commemorate patrons' visits to the museum rather than to remind them of apartheid.

Graham (2007:72) correctly points out that Vladislavić "shows a keen awareness of [the] dilemmas inherent in the process of giving spatial or concrete representations to the transience of memory". "The WHITES ONLY Bench" presents and explores three different types of cultural artefacts associated with the heritage industry and their tenuous link with memory, namely authentic and inauthentic artefacts and souvenirs. The story presents the Hector Pietersen photograph, the EUROPEANS ONLY bench and the election posters as authentic cultural artefacts and Charmaine's WHITES ONLY bench as an inauthentic item. It points out that as museums should preserve ideas and not cultural artefacts, the artefacts are replaceable and

authenticity is not that important. The signifieds, or abstract meanings, associations and interpretations that people attribute to the cultural artefacts are important, not the signifiers.

Interpretations and associations depend on perspective, frame of reference and knowledge of the past, rather than on the authenticity of the cultural artefacts. Not only is authenticity unimportant for memorial practices, it is also frequently impossible to establish. If the objects are unimportant in the sense that any old object will do, then, by implication, memory can exist without material representation, without objects or cultural artefacts; memory can exist without materiality. The boundary between present and past contexts can be crossed without any reference to or proof from the past, from the material world. Yet, as the bullet story illustrates, there is a paradox here: even though authentic artefacts are unimportant, people still seem to want artefacts or 'proof'. They prefer symbols, even if the symbols are inauthentic. Stories and memories are constructed around cultural artefacts – whether authentic or not – that contain inaccuracies. This demonstrates that there is more to memory than truth, facts and authenticity; memory is essentially a story, rather than a truth.

Furthermore, as the authentic election posters reveal, cultural artefacts' meanings often change when they become decontextualised inside a museum space, which counteracts the artefacts' intended meaning; the stories created around the authentic Bethlehem posters are not nearly as interesting as any of the stories constructed around the inauthentic cultural artefacts. As Graham (2007:78) remarks, "the sterile, decontextualized space of a museum can work against such an institution's attempts to reanimate the past."

Lastly, the story explores the souvenir – the quintessential or prototypical cultural artefact of the heritage industry. Souvenirs are not intended to signify their primary mimesis, namely hippopotami or bicycles. Instead, they are often cast in the shapes of commodities, like mugs or postcards,<sup>8</sup> to make money and remind tourists of their visits to specific heritage sites. In addition, souvenirs often have no specific referential relation to the site, as Mrs King's purchases at the apartheid museum emphasise. They are merely sold there, and even if her intention were to support the museum, she would be making more of an economic impact if she were to buy directly from the poor people who make these cultural artefacts than from the museum that exploits them.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Vladislavić's short story "Sightseeing" in *Missing Persons*.

Both Alibia and the cultural artefacts in “The Firedogs” suggest that cultural artefacts are not in themselves meaningful; instead, perspective, memory and context attribute meaning to cultural artefacts. No direct link exists between object/artefact/signifier and the recalled past (memory or history). Vladislavić also explores the opposite of this dynamic, by showing how cultural artefacts conjure up memory. He addresses this issue via an exploration of the issue of the authenticity of memorial artefacts in “The WHITES ONLY Bench”. The story illustrates that authenticity and the factual recollection of events, names et cetera are not only impossible to establish, but also unimportant for creating or evoking memory.

The concern with the materiality of memory, the tangibility of traces that we leave behind, is evident in many of Vladislavić’s writings. In *Portrait with Keys* (Passage 13), Vladislavić quotes Sophie Calle’s own description of her exhibition, “The Detachment”, in which she explains that she visited places in East Germany where symbols of power had been effaced. She first asked passers-by to describe the objects that had once occupied the places, to her, then she photographed the absences, the “empty niches, overturned pedestals and unscrewed plaques” (Vladislavić, 2006:30), exhibiting these photographs alongside the descriptions of the passers-by and photographs of “the old times, when the symbols of power still occupied their places with confidence”. Vladislavić explains that “the citizens of East Berlin recollected the displaced memorials as best they can, *accurately or not, with or without fondness*” (Vladislavić, 2006:30; my italics). The accuracy of the accounts clearly did not matter in the construction of the artworks and neither did the citizens’ disposition towards the fallen icons. What does count in the present context is the narrative, the story told about what had been there. The story is, after all, the only thing that remains. Calle’s exhibition clearly illustrates that memory can exist without material proof. The value of absent or present statues and memorials is to be found in the stories that people tell about what no longer exists: it is in the abstract rendition and recollection.

The flagstones at the Civic Theatre in *The Restless Supermarket* provide another example of a memory that exists without material proof. Tearle visits the place twice, once alone while the theatre is under construction and once, on the night of the goodbye bash, after the renovations have been completed, with Shirlaine, one of the ‘new crowd’ Café-goers. On the first visit, the place reminds Tearle of the flagstones placed in a little memorial terrace, modelled on the famous Grauman’s Chinese Theatre, where celebrated stars of stage and screen had left imprints of their hands and feet in squares of wet cement. Tearle wonders “[w]hat had become of their memorials” amid the renovations (Vladislavić, 2001:161). While he is searching the site

on his own, a curious labourer approaches and Tearle demonstrates the object of his quest by mimicking the act of imprinting and recording: he presses his palms into a bank of muddy earth and scratches his name on it with a nail. The labourer takes Tearle to where the flagstones are stored. The first stone that Tearle sees is that of Max Bygraves, one of his personal favourites, and he fits his hands into the impression. Tearle then speculates: "Perhaps our first language was a dialogue with the earth in prints of hoof and paw" (Vladislavić, 2001:162). Almost reverently, he speculates that people first communicated by imprinting themselves on their environments, which could be read as indicative of how people's interactions with the environment shape their identities. This powerful image illuminates the relation between architecture, memory and language and emphasises that the past exists outside of our representations of it. Our dialogue with the earth, our impression that is left behind, is not a representation of us; in fact, in this case, it resembles not the celebrities, but their direct opposites. The sign, the imprint, the language capture not the person, but rather a mould of her/his hand. The representation is a negative image, reminiscent of Tearle's negative achievement in proofreading<sup>9</sup> (Vladislavić, 2001:25), presenting, like the negative of a photograph, not the object imprinted, but the negative spaces around it. The imprints on the wet cement are like moulds or shells. They capture shape, but not content. The content of the memory only surfaces in the story constructed around the cultural artefact. The imprint and the concomitant memory stem from absence. Even though both have their origin in a physical presence in time and place, the actual past and body cannot be recaptured/recalled except in stories. Memory becomes a substitute for the actual and operates through language, through stories; it fills the negative space and connects one to the past. The language alludes to absence even as it compensates for it.

On the night that the Café Europa closes, Shirlaine walks with Tearle to the memorial garden: when she comments on the smallness of the hands and feet, Tearle explains that cement subsides before it dries (Vladislavić, 2001:162). The imprint that underlies the memory and the story deceives, and records a smaller hand or foot. The imprints are architectural signs intended as reminders of the past. Yet, when Tearle returns to the site on the last night of 1993, the night of the goodbye bash, after the flagstones have been replaced, he has to explain to Shirlaine,

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<sup>9</sup> Tearle ponders on the nature of proofreading and mentions that good proofreaders are "invisible" (Vladislavić, 2001:25), insisting that there is no such thing as a famous proofreader (Vladislavić, 2001:99). Yet, he considers what he will leave behind and answers his own existential question saying "invisible work, a negative achievement" (Vladislavić, 2001:25).

who has never seen anything like the flagstones, how they work, what they symbolise. Tearle must use language to decode for her “the dialogue with the earth”, the imprints. He comments that he could see he had a lot of explaining to do. His explanation is a representation in language, which is twice removed from the body/presence that initially left the mark. Language fills the negative space with substance, with a story, but it cannot capture that which is absent; it can merely substitute for that which is gone.

The idea of an ancient dialogue, between humans and their environment, evokes a sense of reverence during Tearle’s first visit to find the flagstones, and is echoed in his description of the second visit when he and Shirlaine are in search of Max Bygraves’s stone: “The inscriptions were illegible in the gloom, and so she waved the flame of her cigarette lighter over the flags. We went down on hands and knees and moved from stone to stone” (Vladislavić, 2001:294). The text again emphasises the physicality of the concrete object as Tearle describes how the “letters scratched into the cement were puckered at the edges like scar tissue” (Vladislavić, 2001:294); also, there was sand “in the hollows where hands and feet had been pressed” (Vladislavić, 2001:294). It is significant that the imprints are called hollows here: the negative spaces created moulds, hollows that are empty, recalling not only people, but also absence. The scar tissue emphasises that what fills the absence merely compensates, but does not replace. The sand in the hollows – in the absences – could be seen as the earth answering back, wanting to fill the hollow and erase the memory. The image may be perceived as a yearning to cross the boundary between present and past. Max Bygraves’s stone is gone – the only sign of him is in Tearle’s narrative, in language, in the story. Max Bygraves is remembered only in language, as the material, concrete proof of his existence is no longer there. There is an analogy with the mud into which Tearle presses his hand: the mud, like the missing stone, cannot hold the image while Tearle, like Max Bygraves, exists only in language, with only one layer of mediation separating them.

As previously mentioned, much of Vladislavić’s fiction alludes to the unstable link between concrete reality and abstract meaning to illustrate the impermanence and deferment of interpretation that he aims to convey. Warnes (2000:84) correctly points out that Vladislavić’s

commentary takes place primarily through the textual exploitation of semantic and semiotic multivalence, in order to point out that none of the meanings that surround us are singular or permanent, and they are always, in one way or another, open to contestation and reinterpretation.



Dynamic contexts brought about by changing ideologies often catalyse the multivalence of cultural artefacts: these are the types of contexts that Vladislavić explores. Memories and stories constructed around cultural artefacts, authentic or not, come into being within the boundaries of present ideologies. Multivalent cultural artefacts can change or affect the present, as the next analysis will reveal.

#### **4.5 Meaningful Presents and Memorable Pasts: “Courage”**

The previous analyses confirmed that Vladislavić often explores the unstable link between cultural artefact and recalled past and that this link is often reinvented in the moment of interpretation. This unstable relationship functions within a complex interrelationship between the present and the past. “Courage” explores the preservation and recording of the past in a statue erected for the sake of future generations and thereby illuminates not only the interplay between cultural artefact and past, but also between past, present and possible future. In particular, it depicts how present interests can shape the past and how the recalled past can influence the present.

“Courage”, published in 1996, sketches a post-revolution society in South Africa where some miscommunication and uneasiness still exist between different races. The story is narrated through the eyes of a black man who was a boy at the time when an artist visited his village, Lufafa. The story is recounted through the retrospective narration of an adult man, while the focalisation and perspective are, in places, those of a child.<sup>10</sup> The artist, “My Old Becker”, goes to Lufafa to search for visual reference material, a model, for a statue commissioned by the government to “honour the people for the courage they had shown in the struggle for our freedom” (Vladislavić, 1996:122).

The artist makes it clear that “the courage of the individual doesn’t matter. He wants somebody who looks like courage” (Vladislavić, 1996:123). His reference material thus need not be ‘authentic’. As he wishes to portray a universal concept, rather than a courageous person, My Old Becker grapples with the question of how one encodes a universal idea while

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<sup>10</sup> Webb (2006:28), in a study on whiteness in Vladislavić’s fiction, remarks that through the boy a reader is confronted with a “reverse gaze” that “dislodge[s] whiteness from its position as the normative.”

commemorating a specific era. How does one produce an artefact that will encode and remind the viewer of a courageous past? My Old Becker seems blind to his own ideological presuppositions as he tries to encode an abstract idea in a concrete signifier, as will be shown below. He does not and cannot transcend the boundaries of ideology while encoding the concept of courage.

The entire village is excited; everyone hopes to be the model for the statue, so much so that “[a]lthough My Old Becker said clearly he was looking for a man, some of the women thought they had an equal chance. ‘Women fought for our freedom too,’ I overheard one of them saying. ‘Women are also courageous’” (Vladislavić, 1996:125). My Old Becker ends up choosing a man called Kumbuza as his model for the statue. Kumbuza is a drunkard and an embarrassment to the village. He had lost three fingers on his right hand, as well as his left foot, his front teeth and his right ear lobe, and he has scars on one of his legs. The people of the village are furious. The narrator relates, “the choice aroused unexpectedly strong feelings among the men and women of Lufafa. They were outraged. They were filled with shame” (Vladislavić, 1996:132). The opposite of shame is pride, and courage is certainly more closely associated with pride than with shame; in the choice of models, the artist has already failed to capture what the community would have deemed courageous.

The sculptor asks the narrator to help him measure Kumbuza and promises to send photographs of the statue, but never does. Many years later, when the narrator returns to South Africa after his studies in England, he sees the statue and concludes that it looks nothing like courage. He thinks to himself “[i]t is not an idea. It is a soldier” (Vladislavić, 1996:136), implying that the statue signifies concrete, rather than abstract meaning. The soldier has “all his working parts, including his trigger finger” (Vladislavić, 1996:136). It is thus an idealised, hyperreal version of the original model. A boy with a camera approaches the narrator offering to take a photograph of him with “the General”. Initially the narrator thinks the boy is referring to the statue, but he sees Kumbuza lazing in the shade, dressed in a combat uniform, and reaches for his wallet. “Five rands is nothing”, the boy assures him. “He’s a true hero of the people” (Vladislavić, 1996:136). Like Hector Pieterse, Kumbuza becomes a hero of the struggle. The analogy may sound irreverent, but it does shine light on the ways in which human beings remember with the aid of cultural artefacts.

As was the case with the texts discussed above, Vladislavić explores the interplay between cultural artefact and recalled past, history as well as memory in this case. This dynamic, however, exists within another, which is the main focus of the story, namely that between present and past. The first dynamic, that between cultural artefact and past, in short, manifests in “Courage” in that the statue is made to facilitate memory and – for the characters in the story – the statue gains meaning because of their acquaintance with Kumbuza, their knowledge of its construction process as well as from their own perspectives on the situation.

“Courage” shows how art can colour and even improve the past. My Old Becker sculpted the statue on commission for the government in order to facilitate a specific official history, to create an artefact to represent the official narrative. Cultural artefacts aimed at evoking the past are created and interpreted by viewers whose views of the past are coloured by impressions and peculiar perspectives; consequently, the narratives that are constructed around such artefacts or signifiers do not equate to truth. Kumbuza is not courageous; neither does he have all his “working parts” (Vladislavić, 1996:136), yet he is the one chosen as the model for the statue intended to represent the idea of courage.

In “Courage”, a statue is supposed to represent an idea or signified, namely the courage exhibited during the freedom struggle. The signified/idea/meaning is fixed by the ideology propagated by the new government and so My Old Becker must search for the appropriate signifier to encode the signified/idea. As far as he is concerned, the signifier shifts and is not fixed.<sup>11</sup> Vladislavić shows how signified meaning is predetermined by ideology and by context, presenting readers with an artist who assumes that a myriad of signifiers can bring one to a desired interpretation: any model will do, the courage of the individual does not matter. However, the artist’s assumption is undermined by the fact the statue does not communicate the idea of courage to any of the characters in the story, least of all to the narrator who remembers My Old Becker and Lufafa.

My Old Becker bases his statue on his own perception of what courage should look like: his own personal bias dictates that the model for the courage statue should be a black person, that it

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that, in this story, Vladislavić inverts the usual poststructuralist technique aimed at showing that signifieds are shifting and arbitrary. Post-structuralists often demonstrate how signifieds, and therefore meaning, are perpetually deferred. Here the signifier is (initially) deferred.

should be of a man rather than a woman. However, he seems to forget that not only in encoding, but also in decoding perspective, personal bias and context play a role. In the eyes of the narrator, the artist fails to encode the idea of courage, thinking to himself that “[i]t is not an idea. It is a soldier” (Vladislavić, 1996:136). The artist’s bias and the viewer’s perspective, informed by their respective contexts, play significant roles in the creation of meaning, which is evident in the striking contrast between what My Old Becker endeavours to encode (the courage of the people) and the way in which the statue is eventually decoded and interpreted. Therefore, the statue’s meaning is brought into being by the artist’s and the viewer’s perspectives.

“Courage”, like “The Firedogs” and “The WHITES ONLY Bench”, illustrates that the link between cultural artefact and memory/meaning is arbitrary. The courage statue facilitates memory, but – like the Lenin and Strijdom statues in “Propaganda by Monuments” – its meaning is not fixed, as the commissioning government had hoped it would be, because the characters in the story attribute different meanings to the statue from those intended by the government. My Old Becker, blind to his own gender and racial presuppositions and to the community dynamics, creates the statue supposed to encode a universal idea, namely courage. The narrator is an educated man who interprets that statue as the likeness of a soldier. It is likely that from a less educated perspective, it will only be interpreted as a likeness of Kumbuza, the drunkard.

Because statues are based on impressions and adaptations, the narratives constructed around them cannot be equated with truth. It is quite clear from the narrator’s assessment of the statue that it will not shape his opinion of the courage of the struggle heroes. Instead, he will be reminded of Kumbuza and My Old Becker and his childhood in Lufafa. The implication is also that none of the people of Lufafa will be reminded of courage, because their own personal perspectives and contexts will inform their interpretations of the statue. The citizens of Lufafa, who were furious about My Old Becker’s choice of model, will most probably remember Kumbuza and the creation of the statue rather than the struggle heroes’ courage. For them, given their Lufafa context, the statue will always be a farce, a reminder of the drunkard Kumbuza. As Webb (2006:32-33) argues: “the physical aspect of the embodiment of courage that is supposed to represent a new reality [associated with a new government], in fact only highlights the dissonance between the idealised picture of a new South Africa and the actual reality.”

This statue is also shaped within the boundaries that the current ideology and discourse allow, a fact that changes and influences the present. The story suggests an interesting loop between cultural artefact (in the present) – the statue of Kumbuza – and signified meaning (the past) – the false history of the ‘General’ – and, as such, the story illuminates the interplay between present and past.

As pointed out above, in his choice of models, My Old Becker’s personal view of courage has already fed into his creation of the statue. His bias, however, does not exist in isolation, but is informed by present ideological concerns that determine what the statue will look like. In a (fictional) post-revolution South Africa, a statue of a black man is more politically correct and acceptable than one of a white man.

Furthermore, statues are intended to shape public opinion and form cultural memory, and they do so by using a particular iconography, in line with present ideology. A potent example of how current interests influence the creation of a statue relates to Kumbuza’s body. My Old Becker’s perspective and personal view conform to what is acceptable in current society. A statue of a maimed man is not publicly acceptable and people do not want to look at it; they do not want to confront the truth or reality of a badly injured person. Furthermore, as statue iconography dictates against presenting a maimed man, the image that is presented is therefore a more desirable or ideal one in which the model’s flaws are corrected. It is a visual signifier that conforms to what people in the present context *want* to see. The past is reconstructed and ‘corrected’ within a complex dialogue with current discourse and with present ideology, which dictate how the past should be encoded – in this case what the statue should look like.

Furthermore, the link between cultural artefact and history is commodified and reappropriated to serve current interests – particularly those of Kumbuza and the boy with the camera. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that what is supposed to represent the history of a nation becomes the false history of an individual, “the ‘General’”, who benefits from the statue of courage on various levels. The story points to two important limitations in the documentation of history, namely that it is based on people’s interpretations and tainted by their bias and therefore contains elements of fiction, even though the fictional element in history is usually smaller than that in “Courage”. Secondly, the link between cultural artefact and history is often exploited for monetary gain and consumer interests.

Present financial interests, ideology and personal bias influence how the past is encoded and interpreted, but the past that is recalled, the new false history, also shapes the present. The statue changes the past and, more interestingly, the present. My Old Becker recreates Kumbuza in his former glory; hence he erases Kumbuza's embarrassing past. Identity is closely related to the body. By 'correcting' his body in the representation, My Old Becker attributes new meaning to Kumbuza's real wounded body, thereby reaffirming Kumbuza's false struggle history, as he now *looks* like a struggle victim, rather than an unfortunate drunkard who has had several accidents. Kumbuza's real body and real scars acquire different meanings which he uses to his advantage. As Graham (2007:91) points out, "the original has been altered in the process of representation" and "art does provide the possibility of self-reinvention". Kumbuza's past and body are changed and reinvented by the artwork so that his history becomes an honourable and courageous one. The statue alters the present: it enables Kumbuza to have an 'honourable' job, money and a new identity. This illustrates that, even though a 'historic' artefact may have no real or logical connection to the past that it recalls, it could still influence and even change aspects of present reality and aspects of identity; it also indicates that a creative use of the resources that change generates can place one in a favourable position. Change can create new opportunities: Kumbuza and the boy know enough about the dynamics of recording the past through cultural artefacts to profit from the opportunity by manipulating the link between cultural artefact and history for their own personal present interests.

Consequently, the interplay between cultural artefact, present and past can be summarised as follows: the cultural artefact changes Kumbuza's identity and social status in the present by altering and improving his past while Kumbuza's past is altered because present ideology and statue iconography dictate against public representations of maimed bodies. "Courage" thus illuminates the interrelationship between cultural artefact and recalled past, as well as the dynamic within which it functions, namely that between present and past.

Present ideology also plays a role in the other texts discussed in this chapter: the TRC, referred to in "The Firedogs" and the apartheid museum in "The WHITES ONLY Bench, are forums for the negotiation of memory that have become available after 1994, while the memories *developed* in these forums conform to the ideology that the post-revolution government desires to establish. This ideology also often justifies and drives government projects like Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). As Warnes (2000:81) observes, "'museumising' is a process of granting meaning and significance that does not always correlate with the intention of

preserving memory.” The reason for this is that, contrary to popular opinion, museums are not neutral places where history is preserved; instead they, and especially state-funded ones, are forums for ideological negotiation. Furthermore, the idea of ‘preserving history’ is flawed because it presupposes that history is stagnant and does not change. Young (2001:39) succinctly states that “In ‘The WHITES ONLY Bench’, and I will argue that it is true of the other texts too, “Vladislavić focuses on the role of photographs and monuments [...] in negotiating the divisions of the past in terms of the current discourse of national unity.” In other words, memory is used in the service of present ideology.

Given that the link between cultural artefacts and reconstructed past is an arbitrary one, it is easy to see how the link can be exploited for commercial gain. Commodification of the past is one of the most important examples of how the past is constructed and exploited in the light of present needs. The photographs of Kumbuza and the curios that Mrs King buys at the apartheid museum indicate that people like to possess an artefact associated with past events or history, because, by possessing it, they may feel that they are part of that past and part of the story. Vladislavić also explores the creation of a false *history* for commercial purposes through the *Bullet-in* wall described in “Curiouser”. Here the artist, Majara, uses his own garden wall to create art, through which he claims to reflect on the suffering of people elsewhere. In an exhibition entitled *Bullet-in*, the artist displays photographs of architectural structures with bullet holes in them that he claims were taken in the “trouble spots” of the world (Vladislavić, 2004:122). This version of events is also printed and mediated in the official exhibition catalogue. He acknowledges, however, that “[u]nofficially, they had all been made here in Greenside [at his home] without a shot being fired” (Vladislavić, 2004:122); he recounts that he drilled the holes in his own garden wall and then patched up the holes in the wall with polyfilla before starting again. This deception is not mentioned in the catalogue, which instead conceals the real facts, because Majara intends to sell ‘meaningful artworks’ for financial gain. The catalogue thus repeats the lie as it mediates the false story for purposes of monetary gain in the present.

Various examples of commodification within the heritage industry were discussed above, including the exploitation of historical events to create false histories and manipulating art for commercial gain. Another example of this kind of exploitation can be found in *The Restless Supermarket*, when Bogey, a German ‘new-crowd’ Café goer, decides to sell pieces of the Berlin wall in South Africa, shortly after the wall was demolished. When Tearle points out that it

could be costly to import rubble from Germany (Vladislavić, 2001:160), Bogey responds that he “wasn’t that stupid. Half of Johannesburg was in ruins. He would scavenge his merchandise at the Civic Theatre” (Vladislavić, 2001:160-161). Again, Bogey plans to create an alternative history for the Civic Theatre rubble to make money. Bogey also has plans to sell what he calls “rememorabilia” (Vladislavić, 2001:251) of apartheid, explaining to Tearle: “Apartheid is yesterday [...] But things of apartheid is today. Many things [...] benches, papers, houses” (Vladislavić, 2001:251). It is clear from these examples that the past represents a treasure trove for exploitation in the present.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter considered Vladislavić’s engagement with representations and mediations of the past. His fiction is often concerned with two aspects of representing the past, namely the unstable link between cultural artefacts and past, and with the interplay between present and past.

Vladislavić’s fiction elucidates how cultural artefacts can evoke the past, as either history or memory, and how such artefacts can acquire meaning in the light of memories and histories. Since the link between cultural artefact and recalled past is arbitrary, perspective and context play a pivotal role both in interpreting cultural artefacts and recreating the past. Gaylard (2005:132) argues that the motifs which Vladislavić uses create unity and coherence in his short story collections and that “many of these0 [motifs] centre on a satirical understanding of power, history, nation, city and self”. He is of the opinion that “[m]onumentalism pervades not only the material, as in a central character/narrator, architecture, design, space, place, sculpture; but also certain attitudes, tones and especially words” (Gaylard, 2005:129). However, Vladislavić’s fiction illustrates that monumentalism also pervades our knowledge of the past, frames of reference and perspective.

Each of the texts discussed presents cultural artefacts that become meaningful in the light of the memories of their interpreters. Alibia, for example, reminds Café-goers of a number of places. The story that best illustrates this aspect of the interrelationship between cultural artefact and recalled past is “The Firedogs”, which juxtaposes two interpretations of the same artefacts in order to illuminate the role that (lack of) memory plays in this respect. As the link between



cultural artefact and the recalled past is arbitrary, viewers can attach a variety of different interpretations to the same object.

Cultural artefacts also conjure up memories, and as “The WHITES ONLY Bench” and “Courage” illustrate, are often created specifically for the purpose of preserving memory. Graham (2007:70 & 71) puts this rather mildly when he says that “The WHITES ONLY Bench” and “Courage” among other of Vladislavić’s texts “suggest a scepticism about the capacity of monuments and memorials to convey an authentic past”. To my mind, Vladislavić’s fiction suggests a puzzling dichotomy between cultural artefacts and recalled past, emphasising the arbitrary link between them. The unstable connection between history and reality aside, people seem to want statues, artefacts and memorial objects; they even desire to own them.

The link between cultural artefact and abstract meaning is arbitrary to the extent that meaning and memory can exist without a material referent, as the Great Wall of Jeff in *Portrait with Keys* (Passages 29 & 30; Vladislavić, 2006:46-49) illustrates. The wall exists only in Vladislavić’s writing, as an idea in the heads of the narrator, his brother and his friend. Murray (2008:31) calls the wall a “melancholy image of absence.” Vladislavić’s fiction makes clear that both the objects and the pasts recalled can be replaced. Sophie Calle’s artworks and the flagstones in *The Restless Supermarket*, too, indicate that memory can exist without materiality.

The second interrelationship discussed in this chapter, that between past and present, can be summarised in Graham’s words (partially quoted above): “Vladislavić confirms [the] tendency of memory and representation to transform its subject, and suggests that the proper role of memorials after apartheid is to animate absence and loss in such a way that individuals can engage with them in order to reshape the present” (Graham, 2007:92). “Courage” depicts both aspects of this dynamic. The statue changes the past to attribute an admirable history to Kumbuza, preferable to his actual past. The statue thus also alters the present, as the ‘General’ can now have a real job and assume the identity of a struggle hero. The statue reminds us of the ways in which the past eludes us and of the ways Kumbuza’s luck has changed. The interaction between past and present creates opportunities that creative people can seize.

One of the ways in which the relationship between cultural artefact and recalled past is reshaped in the light of present needs is by means of commodification, when the past is coloured and transformed for monetary gain. Vladislavić frequently explores the nature and

effects of commodification, often through humour and irony. The memorabilia in “The WHITES ONLY Bench”, the photographs of the ‘General’ in “Courage”, Bogey’s “rememborabilia” (Vladislavić, 2001:251) in *The Restless Supermarket* and Lenin’s head in “Propaganda by Monuments” are but a few examples. They make clear that between (in)authentic artefacts and false stories of the past, we are at a loss about the actual events or ‘truth’ that constitute the past; however, as the past serves present needs, especially financial and ideological ones, the ‘truth’ of the past is really not that important.

Still, as Graham (2007:27) observes, *The Restless Supermarket* and the short stories “portray memory and memorialization as complex phenomena, subject to tensions and competing forces too complex to be reduced solely to the economic determinism insisted upon by [Fredric] Jameson and [David] Harvey.” Monuments can be read against their grain and “against the grain of their historical intentionality” as Kossew (2010:574) suggests. The central role of perspective in the creation of memory and meaning is often foregrounded in Vladislavić’s fiction. This will be explored in more depth in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5

### Overlooking and Looking Over: Perspective in Vladislavić's Fiction

#### 5.1 Introduction

As discussed previously, Vladislavić's fiction illuminates the impact and imprint of abstract concepts such as ideology, history and memory on concrete reality, and specifically on cultural products and artefacts such as city planning, architecture and fine art objects, but also examines how concrete reality shapes conceptions of the past and ideology. As such, his fiction foregrounds the process whereby meaning is generated within the dynamic relationship between concrete and abstract. The city and the cultural artefacts in his fiction reveal how the passing of time transforms aspects of physical reality to become markers and symbols of change, and demonstrate that change is inevitable; that places evolve as ideologies alter and develop and that, in turn, human beings tend to re-view their beliefs and ideologies in the light of concrete reality. In brief, the old adage that 'circumstances alter cases' rings true, because change affects perceptions of identity and the interpretation of the past, which is captured in cultural structures and artefacts and in the final instance concretised in personal perspective.

Vladislavić makes use of unique and out-of-the-ordinary characters in order to foreground perspective. Through these unusual characters, such as Tearle, Majara, Budlender ("Villa Toscana") and the unstable narrator in "Journal of a Wall", he explores different kinds of bias and varying kinds of perspective that illustrate how the imprint of the past on physical places and cultural artefacts is open to various interpretations which depend on how characters view their world (discussed in Chapter 3). Subsequently, I considered the writer's engagement with the dynamics of memory when his peculiar characters consciously try to encode memory through the creation of cultural artefacts or architecture. In this regard, I argued that Vladislavić emphasises the importance of perspective, ideology and context in the encoding and decoding of both concrete and abstract reality. Consequently, physical artefacts and architecture are shown to acquire different meanings and thereby refer to a number of possible histories, deconstructing the notion that there is one 'truthful' or real history (Chapter 4). The focus therefore moved from a discussion of the dynamic between abstract and concrete in Vladislavić's fiction in Chapter 3 to a focus on the effects of characters' intervention in this dynamic in Chapter 4.

This chapter builds on the previous two and investigates the importance of perspective in his fiction, for the construction and recreation of the past, present and future realities. The focus now shifts to the extent to which perspective brings abstract and concrete into being in the present (in *The Folly* and “The Tuba”), the future (in “The Tuba”) and the past (in “The Prime Minister is Dead”). Vladislavić usually foregrounds and emphasises the visual: however, the two main texts discussed in this chapter, *The Folly* and “The Tuba”, feature architectural structures that are – in different ways – ‘invisible’. In *The Folly*, the central motif is itself invisible; the protagonists busy themselves constructing an imaginary house, while in “The Tuba”, the garden fence is invisible, because it becomes so familiar to the characters that it fades into the background. I argue that, through the use of ‘invisible’ cultural artefacts and architectural structures, Vladislavić illustrates that that which is perceived and remembered, has less to do with the inherent features of the cultural artefact or historical event and more to do with perspective. In the chosen texts, the concrete, which Vladislavić foregrounds in texts like *The Restless Supermarket* and “Propaganda by Monuments”, is significantly and noticeably absent, in order to emphasise the lack of physical points of orientation, which, especially in *The Folly*, is used to show that perspectives, informed by ideology and the past, bring concrete reality into being.

In English, as in several other Western languages, the word ‘see’ is also used to denote ‘understand’ in the sense of having insight and foresight. The texts under discussion foreground seeing, and its concomitant meanings and connotations.

## **5.2 Overlooking: Conceptual Boundaries in *The Folly***

In *The Folly*, Vladislavić creates a space where change and possibility are explored through three distinct perspectives. I argue that the three characters, Nieuwenhuizen, Mr and Mrs Malgas<sup>1</sup>, represent three types of people usually involved in change and that through them Vladislavić explores the role of perspective in relation to abstract and concrete reality in general, suggesting various possible outcomes regarding social and political change in the South African context, in particular. I start by delineating the three types and their perspectives, then focus on the vacant plot and imaginary house, as well as on a number of other cultural artefacts, through which the three perspectives become meaningful and, lastly, I consider the implication of

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<sup>1</sup> In the novel, Mr and Mrs Malgas are often merely called Mr and Mrs.

reading the novel as an allegory of how political regimes develop, disintegrate and follow upon one another. I also briefly consider how the novel alludes to similarities between political ideology and religion.

Niewenhuizen, apparently a tramp with no history (Vladislavić, 1993:32-33), arrives one day to appropriate the empty plot of land next to the Malgas couple. His arrival sets in motion a series of actions and reactions that illustrate the various personalities and perspectives involved in change, and also expose their respective ideological inclinations and biases. *The Folly* (1993) recounts how Niewenhuizen and Mr Malgas build an imaginary or invisible house. Barris (2010:289) summarises the main (lack of) action in the novel, writing that “Niewenhuizen builds an imaginary dwelling on [...] grand scale, so grand that it impels the bourgeois Malgas to join him in the same folly.” Niewenhuizen is a curious character, who comes to claim his “inheritance” (Vladislavić, 1993:2). Mr Malgas works in a hardware shop, called Mr Hardware. He lives in a fairly normal (lower-) middle class house with Mrs Malgas, next door to the vacant lot that becomes the ‘building’ site. Mrs Malgas thinks very little of the two men’s ‘building’ endeavours. She seems to be bitter and, throughout the novel, complains about Niewenhuizen’s eccentric doings, mimicking his nonsensical manoeuvres for Mr Malgas, to convince him of Niewenhuizen’s folly. Niewenhuizen has very strange ideas about building that are juxtaposed with Mr Malgas’s conventional ones picked up from years in the hardware industry.

The building of Niewenhuizen’s house consists of two phases: Phase One, the clearing of the land, and Phase Two, the actual building of the house. When Niewenhuizen finally starts Phase Two, he knocks the long brass nails that Mr Malgas provides into the ground, and winds string around them. The entire “plan”, which supposedly underlies the house, is connected to a mysterious nail that Niewenhuizen first heats in the fire and then cools in water. Niewenhuizen is able to visualise the house. He walks around in it and performs what from Mrs Malgas’s vantage point look like strange dance-like manoeuvres.

Mr Malgas continuously tries to see the house. Before he is able to do so, Niewenhuizen retires to his tent in the corner of the plot for several days; Mr Malgas feels that it is his duty to act as custodian of “the plan” in Niewenhuizen’s absence – this despite the fact that he cannot see the house, nor yet understand the plan. Just as Malgas is able to see the house, Niewenhuizen returns and – to Malgas’s horror – starts to demolish the house by pulling up the plan. Up to this point, there have been very few references to any other characters: the entire story centres on

the activities of the three main characters, and mostly on the two men's activities. Suddenly, crowds start to gather to look at the two men, and when Mrs goes to the campsite for the first time, the crowds swoop in and take what they can.

Interspersed in this bizarre tale, which, as noted, may be read as political allegory, are also several religious allusions. Niewenhuizen, for example, tells Malgas to call him "Father" (Vladislavić, 1993:22). When Malgas is finally able to see the house, Niewenhuizen calls him "my faithful Malgas" (Vladislavić, 1993:119). He then also instructs Malgas to call him Otto (Vladislavić, 1993:121), a name that has a similar sound structure to Tutu, a well-known South African religious leader and head of the TRC.

The fact that Niewenhuizen has no 'place' to call his and no possessions places him, on a social level, in an inferior position to the Malgas couple, who own a house, and Mr Malgas, who holds down a job, yet Niewenhuizen is the one who makes the decisions and heads up the 'building' process. The three characters reflect the main types usually involved in political change, but also represent certain factions present in the South African population. On a socio-political level, this setting could also be interpreted as a microcosm, or an allegory of the South African political scene, during the country's most recent political transformation; it could however also have more universal application and be read as an allegory of political change everywhere. In addition, the house-building emulates the intrigue and schemes necessary in plotting fiction or a novel, and could thus be read as metafiction.

The concept of perspective is developed through the verbs of looking, watching, spying and seeing in *The Folly*; hence their concomitant meanings and connotations are of utmost importance in the novel. The three characters see things differently – and see different things, because each adopts a distinct perspective on material reality, the past and specifically on change. As Gaylard (2011:85) asserts, in *The Folly*, Vladislavić explores how "the architectonics of power" relate to, among other things, vision. *The Folly* uses objects and cultural artefacts to characterise each type: Niewenhuizen, who is characterised by recycled material and the creative reappropriation of old objects, is a character with vision; he is the only one who sees, in all senses of the word, the house, the implied change and the possibilities that change creates. Mr Malgas is associated with hardware, practical objects, and conservative ideas about building. For the largest part of the novel, he is unable to see or imagine the house, even though he believes in its future existence. He wants change to occur on his terms. Mrs Malgas collects

trinkets for the sake of doing so. She does not see, or envision, the house and is negative about the proposed building. She does not visit the plot until the very end of the novel, and dreads the possibility of the house together with the concomitant change that it would imply. Each of the characters thus represents a particular view or perspective on (political) change that is articulated through symbolic objects and cultural artefacts. In addition to defining the three characters and their respective perspectives, these objects and artefacts are also markers of unequal distribution of wealth and consumerism. There are some artefacts, such as fire, the shoe(s) and the bathroom mat, that link the characters.

Niewenhuizen is an optimist, innovative and not materialistic; he is presented as a creative user of objects and creator of artefacts. He creates his own artefacts, frequently from discarded junk, and can be regarded as a recycler because he takes an object from one context, changes it slightly and adapts it to another context so that it may be used again, often for a different purpose. Recently, in popular media, the word “upcycling” has gained currency (Wikipedia, 2011); the word was coined to denote recycling where the recycled goods or products are not, as people often assume, inferior to the original product. An upcycled product is better than the products from which it is constructed: in this sense, I regard Niewenhuizen as an upcycler whose imagination and vision are articulated through his creative, upcycled and reappropriated possessions.

Some of Niewenhuizen’s strangest creations include a “luminous orange traffic-beacon mounted upside-down in a cardboard box and bound with copper wire” (Vladislavić, 1993:36) which he uses as a “bush rain-gauge”. It is calibrated for this purpose. He also made a cocktail shaker out of a lampshade and a surgical glove (Vladislavić, 1993:86) and has field-glasses constructed out of two brown beer bottles tied together with wire (Vladislavić, 1993:147). His upcycled possessions characterise him as creative, in line with the fact that he is the only one with vision. It is also important from a social point of view that he finds his possessions, rather than buys them.

Niewenhuizen’s possessions fascinate Malgas, who often snoops around the camp to look at them. Upon one of his visits, Mr Malgas notices, in a cove under the hedge, gadgets “whose function he could not divine, despite his many years in Hardware” (Vladislavić, 1993:35). Malgas’s uncertainty regarding how he should interpret the artefacts that he sees, casts

Niewenhuizen in the role of the mystery man. When Niewenhuizen initially arrives on the plot he picks up what people normally think of as junk. He considers all his finds to be valuable and is

surprised at how many useful objects lay concealed in the grass: beer bottles and cold-drink tins, inner tubes, bits of board and metal, scribbles of wire, insulators, screws, plastic bags, cardboard cartons [...], and scraps of newspaper [...] he also salvaged half a dozen fine fence-posts and a cast-off letterbox shaped like a shoe (Vladislavić, 1993:13).

Niewenhuizen's most pleasing find is a weathered "FOR SALE" notice, which he believes has "useful object written all over it" (Vladislavić, 1993:13). He ingeniously converts the sign into a braai-grille by making holes in it. He is resourceful and makes what he needs. The fact that he attaches value to and uses discarded junk testifies to his anti-consumerist tendencies. He also makes his own teacups and utensils and owns a tin ladle made from a soft drink tin (Vladislavić, 1993:35) and rough-hewn wooden spoons that he presumably made himself. The most important items with which Niewenhuizen is associated are the nails: objects with which one can build other things. In the novel, they could refer allegorically to the ideas underlying ideology (or "the plan"). The nails too frame Niewenhuizen as the man with the ideas.

One day, while spying on Niewenhuizen through the window, Mrs Malgas feels uncomfortable when she observes that he

settled down under the tree to hammer beer tins into soup-plates, to tinker with fragments of pottery and polystyrene, to plait ribbons of plastic into ropes, to carve and whittle and twist, to hammer holes through and to bind together [...] it seems that he was practising for something bigger, it became conceivable that he really would build a house next door, a house in the contemporary style made entirely of recycled material, a disposable three-bedroomed family home, held together by the dowels of his own ramshackle purpose (Vladislavić, 1993:30).

This makes Mrs Malgas feel utterly despondent, because she hates change, but Niewenhuizen leads even her to see a possible house, to consider change.

Niewenhuizen's creative and imaginative qualities are related to his vision of the house that has no material existence: he is able to see beyond the obvious, his vision and imagination representing a creative perspective on change that is not limited by consumerism. He leads Mr Malgas and – for a moment – Mrs Malgas to see the house and is the one who initiates the 'building'. Vladislavić, however, interrupts any facile attempt to frame Niewenhuizen: after the demolition of the house, Niewenhuizen announces that his furniture will be delivered that



afternoon, saying to the confused Malgas: “[o]f course I’ve got furniture! Use your head: a man of my age” (Vladislavić, 1993:132). Even though readers learn that his furniture is old and ugly, indicating that he is not materialistic, it does indicate that he owns ‘normal’ things, suited to his age (Vladislavić, 1993:137). Nonetheless, Niewenhuizen remains a mysterious visionary.

Whereas Niewenhuizen is open to opportunity, Mr Malgas is more cautious and conservative, adhering to pre-set ideas. While Niewenhuizen acts as an explorer-builder and creator of artefacts, Mr Malgas works in a hardware store and is thus characterised by hardware objects that are indicative of his preconceived ideas about building — and hence about change. Barris (2010:289) interprets Niewenhuizen as representing “creative energy, while Malgas represents suburban banality” and argues that it “is not class conflict that is anatomized so much as conflict between creative and stagnant elements of personality and/or culture.” Mr Malgas epitomises the formerly advantaged, slightly conservative type. He is a landowner and keeper of the tools, open to change, but wants and expects it to occur on his own terms. Even though he often questions Niewenhuizen’s ways, he stays committed to the latter’s vision and works hard, even though he does not always understand what he is doing. Mr Malgas’s conservatism and sense of stereotyped gender roles are reflected in two characteristics: his love for packaging and his yearning to preserve things for generations to come. Therefore, although Niewenhuizen’s orderless plot puzzles him, his desire for recycling appeals to Malgas’s sense of preservation and protection of the past. Malgas’s stereotypical behaviour can be compared to certain political factions who merely support a party because they have always done so and represent stoic conservatism.

As a practical man, Malgas is anxious for the actual building to start. He brings Niewenhuizen, “as a token of his desire for constructive effort” (Vladislavić, 1993:67), all sorts of building materials and hardware objects as gifts. Initially, while trying to befriend Niewenhuizen, Malgas takes him small gifts, such as a “bracket or a hinge, a packet of screws or a brass lug, a plastic grommet or fibreglass flange” (Vladislavić, 1993:68; see also p. 49). It is significant that Malgas obtains pre-constructed, bought objects whereas Niewenhuizen makes them; the latter has artefacts. This indicates that Niewenhuizen is more creative and resourceful than Malgas, who is a consumer.

Niewenhuizen immediately recognises Malgas’s practical bent of mind when he enquires from Malgas whether he stocks the nails he requires, and Malgas demonstrates his expertise as a

builder and salesman when he “narrowed his eyes professionally, took the nail weighed it in one palm and then the other, tapped it on his thumb-nail and held it up to his ear, sniffed its grooved shank and pressed its flat head to the tip of his tongue” before concluding that the nails are “unusual” (Vladislavić, 1993:69). This enacts his almost dramatic professionalism: he takes hardware seriously. Niewenhuizen accuses him of being unimaginative, saying “You’ve got hardware on the brain, my friend, and it leaves you no room for speculation” (Vladislavić, 1993:73). Malgas prefers the tried and tested ways of building and, as the house represents opportunity and change, he appears to have little vision. Gaylard (2011:87) accurately observes that Malgas “becomes fascinated by [Niewenhuizen’s] vision, lured by its lack of clarity – perhaps he finds it so promising primarily because, being a drone worker, he lacks vision of his own.” He does assume some measure of power, though, as he is the one who provides Niewenhuizen with tools for the house. He is also the one who seems to do all the real work (Wenzel, 2006:91).

In addition to general hardware items, packaging also fascinates Mr Malgas (Vladislavić, 1993:70 & 71). He often comments on the wrappings of both hardware objects and take-away food. Packaging is symbolic of protection, in line with the fact that Mr Malgas sees himself as custodian of the plan (Vladislavić, 1993:109) and reflects on his traditional male role (as the protector). Furthermore, packaging is indicative of his yearning for neatness and orderliness.

Malgas completely buys into the idea of the new house and desires to “keep the camp just as it is, for the generations who come after us. We’ll declare it a monument, an open-air museum.” He proceeds: “We’ll never forget where we came from” (Vladislavić, 1993:121). Although he uses the pronoun “we” in the sentence “we’ll never forget where we came from”, he forgets that he does not come from the camp – he comes from the house next door. Displaying typical *ubuntu* spirit and with a sense of camaraderie, Malgas forgets his own history and ‘place’ and becomes Niewenhuizen’s comrade, in a distinctly South African sense of the word. Museums, as the discussion of “The WHITES ONLY Bench” illustrated, decontextualise artefacts by removing them from dynamic places. When Mr Malgas wants to turn the camp into a monument, he intends to create a new comfort zone, where nothing ever changes – not unlike Mrs Malgas and her house.

When the masses rush in at the end of the novel and steal things, Mr Malgas “began scooping up gadgets, with a half-formed notion in his mind that they were of *historical significance*”

(Vladislavić, 1993:150; my italics). Again, his preservation impulse is evident. He values the past, even if he does not remember it correctly, nor understand it fully. He represents the limited perspective of the formerly advantaged. He is also a man who conforms to socially-accepted norms.

On the other extreme from Niewenhuizen is Mrs Malgas. While emptying Mr Malgas's trouser pockets before doing the laundry, she "examines each [of the objects in his pockets] in turn, as if each had a story to tell" (Vladislavić, 1993:19). We are told that "[t]his exercise gave her an appetite for conversation" (Vladislavić, 1993:19). She then goes to her "prize knick-knack cabinet" (Vladislavić, 1993:19) and lists the contents: "Budgie, Paper nautilus. Plastic troll. Worry beads. Dinner bell" (Vladislavić, 1993:20). Each of these objects suggests a context, but the reader is never enlightened about the meaning which they hold for her. As far as the reader is concerned, they do not signify beyond themselves; they convey only one meaning – a direct one. Yet, as Mrs Malgas "has an appetite for conversation", the implication exists that they do hold meaning for her. The narrator proceeds to explain, "in the end it was a glass paperweight with guinea-fowl feather aflutter in its heart that spoke to her" (Vladislavić, 1993:20).

It is quite obvious that Mrs Malgas uses these knick-knacks not so much as souvenirs that remind her of the past, but rather as objects that help her cope by escaping from reality in the present. When upset, she lists, almost compulsively, what she sees, which enables her to take her mind off reality. For instance, when Mr Malgas's behaviour embarrasses her, she thinks to herself: "Quickly, in order of appearance: Doily. Dust-cover. Double-boiler. Decanter. Doom. Découpage. Dicky-bird" (Vladislavić, 1993:26). When this "incantation" (Vladislavić, 1993:26) fails, she thinks to herself: "In alphabetical order then, slowly: Decanter. Découpage. Dicky-bird. Hum" (Vladislavić, 1993:26). Similarly, in order not to think of Niewenhuizen, "she distracted herself by making inventories of her knick-knacks" (Vladislavić, 1993:29). They focus her attention on something other than that which upsets her. The fact that she lists her objects in alphabetical order indicates her preference for order and stability. This preference is juxtaposed against Niewenhuizen's disorderly plot. One of her concerns over Niewenhuizen's plans is that there will be "[d]ust all over [her] ornaments" and this will be "terrible" (Vladislavić, 1993:26). She is an anxious collector. Like Mr Malgas, she is a consumer associated with mass-produced and bought, rather than self-made, artefacts, but where Mr buys and uses useful objects, Mrs merely collects. Her objects do not even seem to have stories linked to any memories. In contrast to Niewenhuizen, she lacks imagination and uses routine as a directive for life.

As she lists her possessions, some patterns emerge (such as figurines and paperweights), but there are always odd items, such as “Crumbs” (Vladislavić, 1993:29), and seemingly irrelevant words or phrases, indecipherable items, such as “However”, “As day followed day” and “As day follows night” (Vladislavić, 1993:29) in her lists. These words and phrases that she uses to denote objects, must either be printed on her trinkets, or they must have a story behind them that she summarises in these words used as nonce-phrases. Whichever way, the reader is given no context within which to interpret them and there is no indication that Mrs Malgas associates them with a particular (past) context, either; hence they are not particularly meaningful.

An object that Mrs Malgas frequently handles is her bone-china shoe. The shoe is described as “slim and white, with a gilt buckle and a wineglass heel” (Vladislavić, 1993:39). She muses “[i]t feels as though I’ve always had this [...] but that’s impossible. Always. Slipper. It must have come from somewhere? A gift from Mr? For some reason, it called to mind the day on which he’d bricked up the fireplace” (Vladislavić, 1993:39). It is obvious that she cannot remember clearly where she acquired the shoe. When the object’s signification is forgotten, there is really no point in keeping it. Also, she creates a (possibly new) memory around the day that Malgas killed the fire and replaced it with a TV. The fact that she cannot recall the story of the shoe, her favourite object, suggests that she cannot recall the lesser-loved objects’ stories either and that she keeps them not as souvenirs, but for other reasons, which may include consumerist tendencies and the fact that the objects’ familiarity accords her a sense of security, perhaps even a sense of identity. She collects useless objects for the sake of collecting them, because throwing the objects away would imply changing her knick-knack cabinet. Mrs Malgas’s objects typify her as an unimaginative and visionless consumer (or one with tunnel vision), scared of change.

The shoe may also be regarded as symbolic of the relationship between Mr and Mrs Malgas. According to De Vries (1976:421), a shoe is symbolic of the female sex organ. Mr gives her a shoe on the day that he bricks up the fire place, an act that could refer to a loss of desire; consequently the shoe may have sexual connotations. The relationship between Mr and Mrs Malgas is dull. Wenzel (2006:89) describes it as “lacklustre” while Gaylard (2011b:90) perceives a homoerotic element in the bond between Malgas and Niewenhuizen. Her shoe may be indicative of a loss of passion.

The relationship between Mr and Mrs Malgas is contrasted with that between Mr Malgas and Niewenhuizen. Malgas spends most of his time with Niewenhuizen, so that Mrs Malgas feels lonely (Vladislavić, 1993:39). She remarks that “[t]he house, when it was empty of Mr’s absorbing presence, seemed more full of objects. They multiplied and grew in stature, their edges became sharper, their surfaces more reflective” (Vladislavić, 1993:39). Therefore, in addition to whatever value they have for Mrs Malgas, the trinkets also become a symbol of her loneliness. The objects in her house become emblems of Mr Malgas’s absence, rather than of (past, shared) experiences.

The three characters are associated with particular artefacts/objects that characterise them as stereotypes of the role-players present in political change: the liberated visionary, the fairly conservative person with limited vision and the hyperconservative. Each type maintains a particular relationship with the past. Both Mr and Mrs Malgas are consumers. Whereas Mr wants to preserve items for posterity, Mrs keeps all sorts of souvenirs, but forgets their stories. Niewenhuizen, on the other hand, exhibits no sentimentality; he is completely unemotional and cut off from the past, (perhaps) because he has little to lose. The characters’ relation to the past is important as it predicts their perspectives on change. Each character shows different degrees of openness to change, thereby illustrating different perspectives on it. In the South African context, Niewenhuizen can be interpreted as standing for ANC activism, Mr as a typical National Party man and Mrs as the far right person who wants to maintain the status quo and did not take part in the negotiations for the new South Africa. To my mind, these types are however present in political change everywhere.

The vacant plot and the proposed house set a scenario where the three perspectives become meaningful, as the plot and house present the possibility of change. The vacant plot accentuates the difference between Mrs and Mr’s views on change. When Niewenhuizen takes a break between Phases One and Two, Mrs complains to Mr that he “turned the environment into a wasteland [... n]othing will ever grow there again” (Vladislavić, 1993:67), to which Mr responds “[u]nless we want it to”. Whereas Mr Malgas and Niewenhuizen see the vacant plot as a powerful area of possibility, Mrs perceives a wasteland; she is unable to imagine it being put to any purpose in future. Their respective views on the vacant plot are emblematic of their views on and openness to change.

That the house, to be built on the plot or “wasteland”, is no ordinary one, is evident from Niewenhuizen’s description or vision of it. Despite normal house-like features, such as bathrooms en suite and a built-in bar (Vladislavić, 1993:75), the new house will also be bullet-proof and have storage space for two years’ rations (Vladislavić, 1993:75). In addition to parodying the paranoia among conservative white South Africans associated with the possible overthrow of the Nationalist government, the house is clearly not a mere family home. Significantly, Niewenhuizen also claims that the house will be “double storey [...] to raise us up above the mire of the everyday, to give us *perspective*, to enable surveillance of creeping dangers. Make that triple storey” (Vladislavić, 1993:75; my emphasis). These military features make evident that the house refers to a political regime that will be contested by some. Furthermore, the triple storey house will enable an elevated perspective that will raise them “above the mire.” Niewenhuizen wishes to elevate people literally, to uplift and bring about a new perspective.

The analogy between the act of building and the creation of political ideologies is not a new one; it features in several of Vladislavić’s short stories. In “We Came to the Monument” and “The Prime Minister is Dead”, for example, he explores this analogy; in both he plays with the idea of ‘living in a monument’. Similarly, in “Propaganda by Monuments”, the protagonist, Grekov, ponders the “making and unmaking of history” (Vladislavić, 1996:18) and, as mentioned before, Tearle, in *The Restless Supermarket*, perceives an analogy between physical changes in the Café Europa and the CODESA discourse. Political change is a theme that recurs in Vladislavić’s fiction and is often expressed in terms and images of construction. In *The Folly*, the analogy between building and political change takes the form of allegory. Gaylard (2011:87) also considers the analogy between building and politics when he calls the planning of the building of the house a metaphor for apartheid, stating “apartheid was an imperialist form of social engineering with taxonomy, classification, cartography, planning and architecture at its centre.”

The analogy between building and politics is evident when Malgas is finally able to see the house and engages with it using terminology characteristic of both the world of construction and of popular political discourse:

[Malgas] tended the plan, and block by block, wall by wall, with unpredictable oozing of mortar and PVA, with innumerable proliferations and ramifications, with digressions, diversions and divagations, with false starts, blind spots and dead ends, with set-backs and quantum leaps, two steps forward and one step back, the house made an

appearance, until one day he found himself enclosed in it, surrounded on all sides and sealed off from the outside world (Vladislavić, 1993:116).

In addition to emphasising the association between building and popular political discourse, the passage also conveys Malgas's complete surrender to Niewenhuizen's vision, to such an extent that he finds himself "enclosed in it". Niewenhuizen's descriptions aside, his vision of the new house / new regime is, for the largest part of the narrative, foreclosed for Malgas. Even though Malgas is unable to perceive the plan, he feels committed to it and considers it his duty to look after it when Niewenhuizen goes into self-imposed exile in his tent.

While Malgas is tending to the plan in Niewenhuizen's absence, he finally starts to notice aspects of the house. He first observes a breeze-block (Vladislavić, 1993:113) and then a "ghostly balustrade" (Vladislavić, 1993:114). It is only when he calls the secret nail to mind, that "the entire house spurted out of the ground" (Vladislavić, 1993:117). Suddenly, Malgas gains insight. When Niewenhuizen starts to demolish the house, Mr Malgas responds "I still need the plan. I won't be able to see without it" (Vladislavić, 1993:132) – he needs visual confirmation.

Whereas the new house can be interpreted as representing a new political dispensation, Malgas's house, which may be seen as referring to an older regime, significantly vanishes when he is able to see the new house (Vladislavić, 1993:121). In their house, Mr and Mrs Malgas live a very secluded life: only the TV brings news from the outside world, usually in the form of unrest reports that seem very far away from their reality, and it gives them a false sense of security. It is noteworthy that Mrs Malgas does not want to leave the safe space of her house, but frequently spies on Malgas and Nieuwenhuizen through their lounge window.

Malgas eventually does see the house and becomes emotionally attached to it. When Niewenhuizen starts to destroy it, Malgas is overcome with sadness and asserts, "it's not right" (Vladislavić, 1993:133). Niewenhuizen asks him: "who do you think you are? [...] The architect? The landlord?" (Vladislavić, 1993:133). These two terms have very specific currency in the South African context: The main advocates of apartheid, and especially Verwoerd, are referred to as its *architects*. Landlords in apartheid South Africa were also usually white. Niewenhuizen's rhetorical question is meant to remind Malgas of his 'place' in Niewenhuizen's scheme of things. Again, Vladislavić steers away from a facile stereotyping of characters: a reader is left with the question of why Niewenhuizen destroys what he envisions. The answer could lie in the fact that the destruction is an ironic allusion or reference to the new regime's concept that the past has to

be destroyed to make way for a new future, while Malgas's objections could indicate that the future cannot be built on an illusion; it needs the past for comparison and improvement. Either way, this passage suggests that a number of stereotypes and perspectives are necessary for change to occur: both those with ideas and those with stamina to implement them are necessary for the process.

In the same way that the vacant plot and house become places where the three perspectives attain meaning, other objects and cultural artefacts in the novel also reveal the implications of the three different ways of looking at the world. Whereas the house is the focal artefact, fire plays a symbolic role in *The Folly* as it is an ambivalent and unpredictable force, symbolising a desire for creation, control and demolition. Fire is usually not considered an artefact. Yet, human beings' ability to create and control fire is seen as one of the evolutionary accomplishments that set early hominids apart from other primates. When humans discovered how to create and control fire 460 000 years ago they were not only able to protect themselves against wild animals, but also to survive the ice age. In a very real sense, fire is the cultural artefact that enabled humans to be here today. Fire can thus be seen as one of the primordial artefacts that give expression to humans' need or desire to create and control. In *The Folly*, the connection between fire and a desire for creation and change is evident as each character exhibits a different disposition towards fire. Niewenhuizen almost always has a fire burning. One night, shortly after arriving on the plot, while sitting at his fire Niewenhuizen observes through the window that Mrs Malgas lights a candle and blows out the flame of the match in her house. He then visualises in his own fire how

[a]n ornate citadel, in which were many golden chambers, with corridors and staircases of copper and brass, silver and lead, and bronze and pewter and aluminium foil, and other metals too numerous to mention, took shape in the heart of the fire, endured and crumbled away (Vladislavić, 1993:19).

Fire is a universal symbol associated with both destruction and forging. Here, Niewenhuizen perceives both the creation and demolition of a "citadel with golden chambers" in his fire. This reference alludes to the Biblical "house with many rooms", which is, as the house that Niewenhuizen conceptualises, an invisible and metaphorical edifice. From his perspective the fire represents a possible city. This is contrasted with Mrs Malgas who blows out the flame of the match. The juxtaposition of Niewenhuizen's blazing fire and Mrs' little blown-out flame may be indicative of the scale of Niewenhuizen's enterprise when compared to Mrs Malgas's small



and restricted world. Niewenhuizen's fire is also juxtaposed with the Malgases' fireplace that Mr Malgas bricked-up in order to have a place to put their TV. The Malgases often watch flames on TV, usually in the context of unrest reports on the news. For them, real fire is replaced by hyperreal fire, mediated through news reports (see for example Vladislavić, 1993:2 & 127), as Thurman (2007) suggests. Significantly, they see a shanty burning, on their TV, on the night that Niewenhuizen arrives. The Malgases, and especially Mrs Malgas, prefer to be removed from reality, to watch fire on TV, rather than in actuality.

Mr Malgas regards Niewenhuizen's fire in a positive light, viewing it as creating a pleasant atmosphere to converse and as a practical way to create heat and fuel to cook food, whereas Mrs Malgas views the fire as a threat and often complains about it. Mr Malgas enjoys going to Niewenhuizen's fire and often takes meat to braai (barbecue). One night, for example, while the men are braaiing, the reader is told that "[a]t that moment lights blazed in Malgas's lounge, a window burst open explosively, and Mrs Malgas was heard to shout, 'Put out that fire at once! This is a smokeless zone!'" (Vladislavić, 1993:65). She assumes an allegiance with her husband in this regard and instructs him, "Give him hell, Cooks!" (Vladislavić, 1993:65). But instead, Mr Malgas stamps across the field angrily and snaps back at her: "'Put out that light! You're spoiling the fire'" (Vladislavić, 1993:65), asserting an allegiance with Niewenhuizen instead and choosing the natural, real fire over the artificial life that his house and TV provide. The characters' attitudes towards fire indicate their respective desires for creation, control, destruction and ultimately for change.

Despite their different perspectives on change, the fire links them. This is illustrated by the scene, near the beginning of Malgas and Nieuwenhuizen's acquaintance, when Mr Malgas joins Mrs one evening to look through the window at Nieuwenhuizen in his camp:

Mr Malgas went to stand beside his wife. Nieuwenhuizen had built up the fire and was walking slowly round it, dragging his long shadow over the landscape.

After a while of looking straight through it, Mr Malgas became aware of his own reflection in the glass. Then he saw that his whole body was there, floating in the chilly space beyond the burglar-bars, and his wife's face too, with its body below, and their lounge and its familiar clutter, dangerously cantilevered, and Nieuwenhuizen's fire blazing in the middle of the carpet where the coffee-table should be. Tenderly, Mr put his arm around Mrs's shoulder and drew her to him and watched his pale reflection in the other room mimic the gesture (Vladislavić, 1993:42).

In addition to evoking connotations about being in glasshouses, this image may also parody claims of 'transparency' often heard during times of political change (such claims were often heard during the CODESA process). Mr Malgas emphasises the opposition between the 'houses'/places when he refers to Nieuwenhuizen "out there in the cold" (Vladislavić, 1993:42), while he and Mrs Malgas are "in their cosy home" (Vladislavić, 1993:42). The window, in the scenario quoted above, becomes a third or liminal, unreal space in which the two divergent places can converge. The window presents a transparent boundary that distorts both. In the "chilly space beyond the burglar-bars" Nieuwenhuizen, Mr and Mrs Malgas are brought together in one place. In the "chilly" liminal space, the window, Nieuwenhuizen's fire is brought into the private sphere of the Malgases' lounge. Cosy inside and cold outside; future regime and past regime are projected or reflected in a liminal space that is – like Nieuwenhuizen's house, and the fire citadel – unreal. The window thus represents an imaginary place, not only one where present and past and old and new meet, but also where the impossible is possible. The convergence, however, "cantilevers" the Malgases' world.

Similarly, when the Malgases first become aware of Nieuwenhuizen, this is because of his fire. While wiping the porthole in the misted glass of the window, Mr Malgas observes "[a]n intimate relationship between the flames and his own palm circling on the glass" (Vladislavić, 1993:5). In contrast, Mrs Malgas is ready to phone the fire brigade and the police to extinguish the fire. Therefore, fire connects Nieuwenhuizen and Mr Malgas, indicating their desire for change, while showing Mrs' fear of it.

The TV also creates strange connections between the Malgases and Nieuwenhuizen and the two places. The couple will, for example, smell meat, presumably coming from Nieuwenhuizen's camp, then turn on the TV and see an advertisement for meat (Vladislavić, 1993:39-40) and as Mrs Malgas "fumbles for the flames" on the TV, she feels the "hot screen against her palms" (Vladislavić, 1993:40). Similarly, shortly after Nieuwenhuizen arrived and just before the Malgases notice his fire, they would see an unrest report on the TV featuring a burning shanty. The connection between fire, TV, fire on TV and the characters is strange and layered, suggesting a link between the different types. Nieuwenhuizen is closely connected to the primordial artefact, fire; Mr Malgas has a desire to be near fire, often joining Nieuwenhuizen at the latter's fire; while Mrs Malgas abhors smoke and dust. She prefers fire on the TV, which is a consumer product, where the fire is neatly contained and unthreatening. The characters'

dispositions towards fire mirror their (in)ability to see the house and hence their perspectives on/towards change.

In addition to the fire and the TV, the novel also features other objects and artefacts that connect the three characters, even though they hold different perspectives on change, showing how all three types are inevitable and necessary for the process. Another artefact that connects the three types is a mat which Niewenhuizen weaves from old plastic shopping bags. Mrs Malgas discovers it in the bathroom and deduces that Mr Malgas must have smuggled it in and put it there. She then uses his toothbrush to lever it into the rubbish bin (Vladislavić, 1993:43). The three views on change are articulated here on a smaller scale. The mat reveals another facet of Mrs Malgas's obdurate mentality and false sense of pride. Shopping bags are associated with consumer culture. Niewenhuizen uses them to make something useful: he recycles/upcycles old into new. Mr Malgas attempts to mediate between the two extremes, but Mrs Malgas discards the mat, because she does not want any of Niewenhuizen's things in her house – accepting the mat would imply agreeing to change.

Like Mrs Malgas, Niewenhuizen owns a shoe, but his is a shoe-shaped mailbox. A shoe and a mailbox are objects that protect (mail/a foot): because Mr is to an extent associated with protection, the shoe may hint at the other two characters' relationship with him. When Mr Malgas annoys Niewenhuizen because he is unable to see the house, Niewenhuizen snaps off the letterbox and throws it after Malgas. At the very end of the novel, when all is chaos, Mrs Malgas notices the plot on the TV and on the plot she observes

[Niewenhuizen's] old-fashioned ornaments trampled into the ground. There was a china shoe that looked familiar, a five and a half, a vase in the shape of a swan, a pretty tea-set, a porcelain figurine of a woman caught in the rain, a matchbox-holder with the crest of a seaside municipality on it. What were these trifles doing on the news? (Vladislavić, 1993:148).

Mrs Malgas's shoe and presumably her other trinkets appear to be amid Niewenhuizen's junk. Like the fire, the shoe connects the characters. This TV image may be indicative of how Mrs Malgas's possessions are redistributed in the new dispensation. It could also imply that she will in the end be subjected to change, however much she resists it.

The three characters employ different perspectives and opinions that come to the surface when they engage with the material world and specifically with objects. The significance of 'seeing' is

best illustrated through the characters' respective interpretations of the prefabricated concrete wall, cast in shapes of suns and wheels, that separates Niewenhuizen's plot from the Malgases' yard. The wall, which ironically symbolises separation, is another artefact that brings the characters together, foregrounding their distinct perspectives on material reality and on change. As the houses may be considered to be representative of two different regimes, the wall can be read as a significant division. Unlike the 'new house', this artefact is visible: all three characters see and scrutinise it throughout the novel, making it an artefact that elicits a consideration of perspective.

The wall sports wagon wheels while suns occupy their negative spaces. This type of wall is not uncommon in South African lower-middle and middle class suburbs. In the novel, however, the wheels and suns gain symbolic significance. Wagon wheels remind one of the Voortrekkers' Great Trek by ox wagon and could be read as a symbol of Afrikaner nationalism. The suns convey two obvious meanings: rising and setting suns are in the first instance symbols of beginnings and endings, but the sun is also a symbol of truth and is sometimes associated with God. It is informative that the suns, a more universal symbol, exist in the negative spaces of the wagon wheels. One possible interpretation of this image is that White Afrikaner history and ideology established a grand narrative that dwarfed all other interpretations and perspectives and obscured reality. As a symbol of truth, the suns and wheels also become significant on another level. Like many other exclusive regimes in history, the apartheid government managed to conflate religion and ideology, advocating the convictions of 'God's people'. Such regimes frequently claimed to act 'in God's light'.

In the same manner that the wall forms a barrier between the two houses, the grand narrative of Afrikaner history formed a barrier between interest groups involved in change. This aspect is graphically illustrated in the novel when, one night, Niewenhuizen "flick[s] a pebble against the lounge window" (Vladislavić, 1993:100) to draw Malgas's attention. When Malgas goes out "they confer [...] through the spokes of the wagon-wheel" (Vladislavić, 1993:100). This foregrounds the extent to which Afrikaner history, as represented by the wagon wheels, afforded an obstacle to real contact between people of different backgrounds and perspectives.

Whether the suns are rising or setting is a point of discussion throughout the novel. Niewenhuizen initially sees only the wagon wheels, but notices later on that the wheels are interspersed with suns (Vladislavić, 1993:14). He recognises them initially as rising suns, but

then “it struck him [...] that perhaps they were setting suns! And who could tell? This line of thought threw him into a violent scepticism about every perception he had had since he arrived in this godforsaken place” (Vladislavić, 1993:14-15). Niewenhuizen sees different ways of seeing, as it were; he gains insight that enables him to see or understand different interpretations or perspectives and to recognise uncertainty. What is more, he is able to reassess and be sceptical about his own views, indicating his perceptiveness in the situation.

Niewenhuizen asks Malgas whether he thinks the suns are setting or rising, and Malgas recalls the time when he built the wall: The reader is told that

[t]he light from his lounge window glowed comfortingly in the wedges between spokes and rays. No matter how hard he looked at them, the suns didn't budge – but he did notice a curtain twitching. Now he remembered building the wall. Mrs said, ‘Wheels and suns in one wall? What will people think?’ And he explained about discontinued lines, the principle of odds and ends, and discounts that were never to be repeated. It was simple. But rising or setting? Who could have foreseen such a poser? (Vladislavić, 1993:25).

Mr Malgas constructed the wall, without thinking too hard about what it meant, showing that he is practical and uncritical. The references to odds and ends and discontinued lines may be allusions to separate development in South Africa. It is highly significant that Malgas, in the light that comes from the lounge window from *his* house, ponders on the integration of wagon wheels (politics) and suns (a symbol of the divine/God) and reaches the conclusion that “[i]t was simple.” Malgas never answers Niewenhuizen’s question, however, indicating that he is uncertain whether it is a beginning or an ending.

The rising and setting suns interrogate the way people look at change. Mrs Malgas is of the opinion that “[a]ny fool can see they’re setting” (Vladislavić, 1993:28), implying her conservative view on change and the possible new dispensation. For people with her disposition towards change this was the end. At the conclusion of the novel, just before Niewenhuizen leaves, he looks at the wall and the house, reflecting: “Perhaps it was a trick of light, but even as the sun dropped behind the Malgases’ roof, the suns in their wall sent out a host of lack-lustre rays, which got longer and longer, so they appeared to be rising” (Vladislavić, 1993:152). For Niewenhuizen, the mysterious, imaginative visionary, it was indeed the beginning of something

new. The first clause of this quotation (“[p]erhaps it was a trick of light”)<sup>2</sup> again shows his awareness of perspective – an awareness that what he sees is not an objective truth.

I have illustrated how Vladislavić, in *The Folly*, explores perspectives on change. In the last part of this analysis, I offer a reading of the novel as an allegory of political change. Because *The Folly* is so vague it invokes various interpretations: it has been read as an example of magic realism (Kearney, 1994:92), satire (Gaylard, 2005:129) and allegory (Helgesson, 2004:785). This openness of the text is something Powell (2011:73) fails to comprehend when he criticises the novel, in an early review, for allegedly not pursuing “a single metaphor or allegory”. I agree with Wenzel (2006:93) that the novel is not magic realist in nature.<sup>3</sup> However, the distinction between satire and allegory is important in a study dealing with the dynamics between the abstract and the concrete, because the functions of concrete cultural artefacts differ in the two modes. This differentiation is now discussed.

According to Scott (1985:257) satire “hold[s] up [...] the vice or folly to ridicule” and in doing so “often makes use of sarcasm and irony” (Scott, 1985:257). The aim of satire is to amend. The satirist thus operates from a moral higher ground. Shipley (1970) traces the development of satire and states that “the single most important generic trait” of satire is “attack” (Shipley, 1970:286). Satire, he says, “criticizes, unmasks, subverts the world we know (Shipley, 1970:289). He identifies the effect of satire as inducing the reader to laugh (Shipley, 1970:289). The laugh, I would argue, is a condescending, holier-than-thou laugh, a laughing at something or someone, rather than the sort of laugh that comedy elicits. On the other hand allegory, according to Shipley (1970:10), is “[a] trope in which a second meaning is to be read beneath and concurrent with the surface story.” Coleridge (quoted in Scott, 1985:6) explains that “agents and images” in the surface story should form a “homogeneous whole”. The aim of allegory is also amendment.

There are obvious similarities between the two modes of expression: both satire and allegory attempt to amend; both present two layers of narrative where the surface layer acts as an extended metaphor for the implied underlying layer or meaning. They differ in that satire intends to ridicule, often through a scathing, sarcastic attack, whereas allegory merely reveals. Bruns

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<sup>2</sup> This phrase is reminiscent of Reddy’s “Or is it just the angle?” while discussing the Hector Pieterse photo in the short story “The WHITES ONLY Bench”, discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>3</sup> Barris (2010:285) also explains why Vladislavić’s early fiction departs from conventional magic realism and even though I do not agree with his entire exposition, I do support the sentiment.

(1991:10) explains that “[a]llegory is an appropriative discourse.” It appropriates the strange into the familiar and “it converts everything into itself” (Bruns, 1991:10). Satire, on the other hand, “rages at the gates for all the world like a madwoman” (Bruns, 1991:10). Its “task is not to reveal and redeem but to torment and scourge and even to bring the house down” (Bruns, 1991:11). Objects and artefacts in the surface narrative of satire are thus signifiers that reflect ironically on signifieds in the underlying narrative, whereas objects and artefacts in the surface narrative of allegory translate objects and concepts in the underlying level in order to exhibit them in a different light. Both satire and allegory use a double signification: a signifier in the surface layer refers to a signified in the underlying layer, but both refer to some signified in the actuality / the real world. Signifiers in the two modes of expression are put to different uses: In satire, they facilitate scorn and judgement, in allegory they assist in revealing things in a different light/perspective.

I do not consider *The Folly* to be a satire. It is too abstract to be an attack. It reveals the folly of political regimes and their underlying ideologies. Furthermore, it lacks a moral-higher-ground satirist, and, even though it is humorous at times, it does not really make one laugh. The humour in the novel results from its strangeness, particularly from Niewenhuizen’s unconventional actions and the mundane familiarity of Mr and Mrs Malgas, rather than from sarcasm or irony. Whereas satire is usually an unambiguous, slightly masked attack on a specific person or situation, allegory tends to have universal application in addition to its more specific target. *The Folly’s* vagueness and ambiguity make it applicable to more than one situation; its abstract nature causes it to be universal. The cycle of building and demolition in the novel also suggests this reading. Because the allegory in *The Folly* applies to more than one situation or ideology, I consider the readings mentioned above valid, even though they differ from my own.

That *The Folly* is an allegory of the succession of political regimes, and consequently of political change, is evident in Niewenhuizen’s words, uttered after he destroyed the house, that “[w]e are condemned to renounce and repeat, the head and the tail, the one barking and the other wagging, with the body of the same old dog between them” (Vladislavić, 1993:143). Niewenhuizen explains to Malgas the cyclical nature of building and demolition in terms that reveal the reality of political manipulation. In line with his liberated perspective on change, he rebukes Mr Malgas when the latter cries about Niewenhuizen’s destruction of the house, saying: “[i]t’s not in the heart, you clot, it’s in the head” (Vladislavić, 1993:135), indicating that

ideologies and political regimes are mental exercises, rather than emotional safe havens. Niewenhuizen proceeds to ask rhetorically “[w]hat’s in a house? There’s plenty more where this one came from” (Vladislavić,1993:135). While he is doing so, he creates and destroys several miniatures of different types of buildings:

He rifled a Moorish townhouse complex from his headband, balanced it in his palm, scrunched it up, popped it in his mouth and swallowed it [...] now Niewenhuizen flourished his hand and one after the other had a dozen modest family homes blossomed between his fingers, rolled over his knuckles and vanished [...] To crown it all, Niewenhuizen plucked a mansion from behind Malgas’s ear [...] tossed the little house up into the air, where it self-destructed with a thunderclap (Vladislavić, 1993:135).

This passage indicates how different types of regimes succeed one another. In the same way that the nails-and-string house came and went, these miniatures come and go. Niewenhuizen’s actions remind the reader of those of a clown or magician in a circus and could reflect on politicians’ actions, but they also indicate how easily change can occur. By creating and destroying miniatures of buildings, Niewenhuizen illustrates to Malgas that there are different political ‘houses’ in which one can live. Wenzel (2006:82) argues that the concept of belonging in *The Folly* is explored through metaphors of houses. One could also argue that through the ‘construction’ of the new house, both Malgas and Nieuwenhuizen are looking for a new sense of belonging – in a political sense too.

Furthermore, the vacant plot is a highly suggestive space, indicative of possibility as it spurs different approaches to and perspectives on change. In the (South) African context, it could refer to the process of colonisation that tended to view Africa as a blank space available for appropriation, or, in the South African context it might allude to the possibilities posed by the interim state around the time that the novel was published. The “FOR SALE” sign and mailbox that Niewenhuizen picks up on his arrival suggest that there had been another building, or at least previous owners on the plot. When Niewenhuizen leaves, he likewise takes certain things, leaving some of his personal possessions behind. In addition to alluding to land reform in South Africa specifically, this act could also, more universally, refer to the cyclical nature of political change. The continuation suggests universality – which is indicative of allegory.

People’s reactions to and perspectives on political change are allegorically reflected in the novel. After Niewenhuizen destroys the house and the plan, crowds suddenly start to gather on the edge of the plot (Vladislavić, 1993:145). This curious eventuality is made even more bizarre



by the fact that the crowd seems to stretch over several generations. The reader is told that, beyond the masses gathered, were “the vast and silent majority of the dead and the yet to be conceived” (Vladislavić, 1993:146). Curiously still (and reminiscent of the ending of “Missing Persons”), the reader is made aware of the “thousands lost to sight and millions – no, billions entirely absent!” (Vladislavić, 1993:146). This testifies to the fact that the political shenanigans will happen whether people notice or not and whether they care or not. In addition, the fact that the people only gather when the house is destroyed shows that they are interested in the noticeable events and not in the smaller detail about which politicians (here Niewenhuizen, Mr and Mrs Malgas) are obsessed. Indeed, after South Africa’s political revolution, there was tremendous international interest in the country, whereas such interest is absent in times of relative stability.

Through the creation and destruction of the invisible house, *The Folly* reflects allegorically on political change and specifically on how new political regimes replace older ones, often in such a way that not much alters – the vacant plot that Niewenhuizen inhabits at the beginning of the novel, is a vacant plot once more, when he leaves at the end of the novel.

Most criticism on the novel interprets it as a reflection on the South African political landscape. Gaylard (2011b) reads the novel as a satire of the entire history of apartheid and specifically as a satire of the macho homosocial behaviour upon which the apartheid regime rested. In a thorough analysis of the novel, he makes a convincing case that Malgas represents white people in South Africa, who ‘exteriorized’ their consciences, in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s sense of the phrase, onto the apartheid regime, represented in the novel by Niewenhuizen and his vision, thereby relieving themselves of the “burden of conscience” (Gaylard, 2011:86). Gaylard emphasises Mr Malgas’s realignment from allegiance with his wife to an alliance with Niewenhuizen, regarding the shift as indicative of Malgas’s yearning for homosociality (Gaylard, 2011:92-93); he compares this shift with white people’s alignment with the apartheid government. He argues that Malgas channels his love for his wife “into his new relationship with Niewenhuizen”, sublimating “domestic sexuality into a relationship with his new house, his new masculinity, his new vision” (Gaylard, 2011:94). Wenzel (2006:83) reads the novel as alluding to the context of the 1980s, and Thurman (2007) associates it with the socio-economic conditions of poverty and violence during the early 1990s in South Africa. On first reading the novel, I could not help but interpret it as a parody of CODESA. *The Folly* was published in 1993, the same year CODESA ended. CODESA was a forum that existed from 1990-1993, for talks about the

nature of the 'new South Africa'. It attempted to set the parameters within which the new South Africa would come into being. Significantly, the slogans 'building the new South Africa' and 'nation-building' were heard quite a lot during that time. During the existence of CODESA many people felt that there was too much talking and too little action. There was a general feeling that too little was being done to erase the boundaries that characterised apartheid South Africa. Similarly, despite the fact that Niewenhuizen and Malgas are constantly busy, the house never actually comes into being. The largest part of the narrative is devoted to building nothing. Niewenhuizen tells Malgas during one of the latter's visits, "I must say I've enjoyed exchanging words with you. It passed the time very pleasantly" (Vladislavić, 1993:25). The constant talking, while nothing is being done, reminded me of CODESA. The fact that different readers bring various interpretations to the novel proves that the machinations of ideology – which the novel explores thematically – are transferrable to multiple situations.

In addition, but to a lesser degree, *The Folly* is also an allegory of the extent to which political ideologies and regimes are analogous to religions. The religious allusions in the novel indicate the quasi-religious nature of political ideologies<sup>4</sup> and the manner in which political leaders are sometimes revered as Christ-like or God-like figures. Once, while Mrs Malgas describes Niewenhuizen's manoeuvres to Mr Malgas, "Niewenhuizen lay down on his back with his arms flung wide and his feet crossed" (Vladislavić, 1993:81). This pose, in particular, the out-flung arms and crossed feet, resembles that of pictures of Christ on the cross. In addition, after Malgas succeeds in seeing the house, he touches the hem of Niewenhuizen's safari suit, "as if to assure himself that that he was real" (Vladislavić, 1993:121). Malgas then softly says "Father" (Vladislavić, 1993:121). This is reminiscent of the woman who touches the hem of Jesus's clothes as described in the Bible (Matthew 9:20-22).<sup>5</sup> The Bible story becomes an intertext that illustrates Malgas's faith in Niewenhuizen and his project. The two types of behaviour are once more in line with the characters' respective perspectives on change. Through such allusions, *The Folly* illustrates how grand narratives of politics are often quite similar to the grand narratives of religion. Both frameworks create categories of good and evil and ways in which those without faith or vision can redeem themselves. Both also proclaim 'the one truth' according to a systematised set of values. In politics, this system is called an

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<sup>4</sup> In South Africa, the National Party was closely aligned with the Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederduits-Gereformeerde Kerk*) during the entire apartheid regime, while factions such as the Broederbond lubricated the alliance behind the scenes.

<sup>5</sup> The woman "had been subject to bleeding for twelve years" and Jesus told her that her faith had healed her.

ideology. It is also quite common that political leaders are seen and revered as religious leaders or as prophets. Revolutionaries are often characterised as martyrs in popular media. Ideology determines which perspectives are acceptable and which are not.

Another religious allusion is found in the image of the nails. Niewenhuizen orders 300 nails from Malgas. The 300 must have the same specifications as the one he annealed in the fire. Malgas brings them to Niewenhuizen in two packages containing 144 each and the additional 12 wrapped in a separate brown-paper package. The two men, and especially Malgas, refer to them as “the Twelve” (Vladislavić, 1993:71), which recalls the nomenclature used to refer to Jesus’s disciples. Whereas the fire-annealed nail is the first to take its place in the plan, the Twelve take their place last (Vladislavić, 1993:86) as if subservient to Him.

The special nail takes its place in the plan in a very peculiar manner that is reminiscent of ritual: Malgas watches Niewenhuizen through the lounge window and notices how Niewenhuizen

[c]ircled the ash-heap. After three circuits, he waded into the ashes and scuffed a clearing with his boots. He took a nail folded in a bandanna from his pocket, unwrapped it under the light, kissed it, knelt and pressed its point into the ground. It kept falling over, and in the end he had to prop it up with up with a forked twig. For a while he was silent, on his knees in the grey surf. Then he began to sway backwards and forwards from the waist, solemnly, gathering momentum slowly, extending his range, until at length his bony forehead, at the limit of its forward swing, began to meet the head of the nail. And by these means he kowtowed it into the ground [...] Mr recognized the secret nail at once: it was the one Niewenhuizen had annealed in the fire on the night he placed his order. It was the odd nail out, and yet it was the very model of a nail (Vladislavić, 1993:92).

Ritual is usually associated with religion. Here, Niewenhuizen hits the nail into the ground with his forehead by kneeling and swaying his upper body upwards and downwards, a movement that is reminiscent of that of Muslims praying. In addition to creating another link between religion and politics, this scene is also cartoonlike and strange. It might parody the mysteriousness or seriousness of certain ‘visionary’ politicians.

In this analysis, I have interpreted *The Folly* as an allegorical exploration of perspective: the house and the vacant plot present opportunities to see and are scrutinised from three typical perspectives, embodied in the three protagonists characterised by particular objects and cultural artefacts. People’s disposition towards change is often linked to their social status and the possessions they own. Whereas Mr and Mrs Malgas are attached to their material possessions,

Niewenhuizen has nothing to lose and is therefore more open to change. The novel may be read as an allegory of the South African political transformation or of political change more generally. Furthermore, the novel subtly evokes analogies between political ideology and religion.

### 5.3 Looking Over: Conceptual Boundaries in “The Tuba”

In a (more) realistic mode “The Tuba”, too, foregrounds perspective by interrogating the limits of perspective and how they may be transcended. Vladislavić often draws attention to walls: The walls in *Portrait with Keys*, the prefabricated concrete wall in *The Folly*, the documented wall in “Journal of a Wall” as well as Alibia, the mural in *The Restless Supermarket*, are significant in various ways while in some cases they become the focal point in a specific text. “The Tuba”, however, presents a fence as a boundary that is unobtrusive and almost ‘invisible’, acting as a silent testimony to divisions. The almost invisible fence is functional, as it shows how boundaries become hegemonic, how they create blind spots that cause people to cease noticing or recognising them. The fence’s unobtrusiveness and subtlety offer insight into how boundaries become accepted, rather than questioned. The story explores how conceptual boundaries may be transcended through art (in this case music), placing the act of boundary crossing, and concomitantly change and adapting to change, in a positive light.

Before I analyse the story, it is necessary to explain that perspective and focalisation in this story are complex for two reasons: firstly, at the conclusion of the story, the narrator-‘focaliser’ relates what she *imagines* her child *sees*. The story thus presents a focaliser who does not see, but rather relays what she imagines her child perceives. Secondly, the identities of the different characters and especially the relationships between them are consciously concealed and underemphasised, which complicates commenting on perspective. The reader deduces that the narrator is female when she recalls how one of the men explained to her that “you don’t throw a dart, *lady*, you push it” (Vladislavić, 1996:1; my emphasis). The relationship between her and Richie is quite clear, as she often refers to him as “my boy” (Vladislavić, 1996:1). Her race and that of her son, however, is never explicitly stated. Basil’s behaviour towards both the narrator (Vladislavić, 1996:5) and Richie (Vladislavić, 1996:7) may suggest that he is in a relationship with the narrator and Richie’s father, but it could also be interpreted as patronising behaviour towards a black female servant and her son. The relationships between the other characters are even less clear. They seem to be merely friends. The fact that their various relationships with

one another and their class are concealed makes it difficult to denote their perspectives or behaviour as “typically that of a white lower-class father”, for example. It is only the blatant racism of the dart throwers towards the black musicians that denotes them as white. The concealed social identities of the characters enable Vladislavić to comment on racism without creating stereotypes. Simultaneously, it places the reader in a curious position: such a person has to resort to her/his own stereotypical constructions in order to comment on (for example) perspective, in the process, a reader is being made aware of her/his own assumptions. (I am going to assume that Richie is Basil’s son.)

“The Tuba” relates the story of a suburban family and their friends who enjoy a lazy afternoon of braaiing, throwing darts and drinking too much. The narrator’s son, Richie, colours “in the holes in the alphabet stencilled across the top of the blackboard” and keeps score for his father, Basil, and his father’s friends Cliffie and Sergeant Dundas, who “push darts”. Behind the seemingly normal and amicable setting, however, lurks a thick and tangible racism that becomes pronounced when the Salvation Army marching band, comprising black musicians, approaches the house. The antagonism and oppositionalism that underlie racism are already subtly invoked by the dartboard that sports Saddam Hussein’s face. The narrator explains that, as the face faded from the many dart pricks, “they recognised in its pock-marked features other faces that enraged them: politicians and priests; members of parliament and talk-show hosts; managing directors and their wives; half-remembered headmasters, playground bullies, army corporals; ex-wives, bad friends” (Vladislavić, 1996:2). The dartboard becomes symbolic of hatred and anger as it foregrounds the self-other dichotomy that underlies racism. Still, with the possible exception of Cliffie, who is rude and derives pleasure from other people’s misfortune, the racist characters are not projected as bad individuals. Instead, they are presented as normal ones with personal opinions and perspectives.

When the Salvation Army arrives, several “us” versus “them” comments illuminate the characters’ attitude towards difference. Sergeant Dundas, for example, instructs the narrator to turn up the volume of the portable TV (Vladislavić, 1996:4) to drown out the sound of the music, remarking “[f]unny thing about *blacks*, you know, they can’t hold a tune. Not one of ours, I mean. Their ears are different” (Vladislavić, 1996:4; italics in original). This black-white dichotomy is articulated by the fence that separates the house from the street. Although the fence in the story is presented in an unobtrusive, almost by-the-way fashion, it marks the boundary between the black musicians on the outside and white people on the inside. The band looks shyly at the

family and then crosses the street to stand in a semicircle in front of the gate. The narrator points out that the band preferred the sunny spot in front of the gate to the shady spot underneath the itchy ball tree. The decision to stand behind the gate, rather than behind the fence, could indicate a yearning to cross the boundary. As the band starts to play, Richie runs to the fence to listen (Vladislavić, 1996:4): in this action, the fence becomes both a boundary and a contact zone.

The scene is slightly bizarre and ridiculous: the narrator remarks that “[i]n front was a man carrying a music stand and a white baton. He was wearing sun-glasses with wrap-around frames and reflective lenses, incongruous under the melodramatic peaked cap with its puffed up crown” (Vladislavić, 1996:3). The uniforms that the Salvation Army Band members wear are not only impractical for the South African December, because they were designed for European weather, but also indicative of European culture. The baton-carrier adapts his uniform by wearing wrap-around glasses that are ideal in South African weather, but this looks “incongruous”. The black musicians are dressed in the clothes of the ‘other’, that is as Europeans/colonisers, rather than in clothes in line with their own tradition. Uniforms are associated with the military and hence with colonising culture. (Both Cliffie and Sergeant Dundas would have been wearers of uniforms, due to their occupations.) In addition, the Christmas carols that they sing are songs typical of Western cultural expressions that have been appropriated by the black musicians of the Salvation Army band to collect money for charity. Both the uniforms and the songs are hybrid forms of expression: European things adapted or reappropriated in a South African context.

The fence, the physical boundary, also signifies the cultural divisions between the two groups and creates both distance and unity. When the narrator, for instance, wants to give the band some money, the Sergeant objects that “they will spend it on booze” (Vladislavić, 1996:5), while ironically, it is very clear from the beginning of the story that the alcohol is flowing freely on the *inside* of the fence. The narrator describes the dart throwers as “ungovernable” (Vladislavić, 1996:2) in the festive season. This attitude accentuates the difference on either side of the boundary and highlights the hypocrisy of the white people inside, because, as a Christian organisation engaged in honourable causes, the members of the Salvation army are least likely to be inebriated, but the Sergeant’s projection of his own bad habit onto the band members creates a link between the drinkers on the inside and the possible/presumed drinkers on the outside.

The two contexts (inside and outside) are also linked and contrasted by the words of well-known Christmas carols outside and swearing inside. The narrator comments a number of times on the other characters' foul language, especially in front of Richie. As the band plays, Sergeant Dundas places his hands over his ears and says "Me, me, me" (Vladislavić, 1996:4). The very next line reads "Chri-i-st the Lord" (Vladislavić, 1996:4) – without an indication of who is speaking. The reader is momentarily unsure whether this is yet again one of the party of dart throwers swearing, or the Salvation Army singing the chorus of the popular Christmas carol "Oh come all ye faithful", which they had begun singing a moment before. The elongated "-i-" (Vladislavić, 1996:4) probably indicates that the phrase is part of the song, but it could also be swearing in this case. The two contexts, which are at that moment separated by a fence, are joined by the line/phrase, which signifies very differently in the two contexts. Also, a short while later the narrator wonders to herself if the Salvation Army band "deem[ed] it their duty to provide a soundtrack for our squabbles" (Vladislavić, 1996:8). In both instances, the two contexts are joined or connected through signifying systems – once through music and once through language. Furthermore, the narrator relates that "The same breeze that brought the devilled smoke from Cliffie's sosaties to our noses kept rifling through the pages of music, turning them in flurries and carrying off the melody" (Vladislavić, 1996:4). Nature seems oblivious to the boundary, indicating the unnaturalness of the division.

In order to belittle the musicians, the Sergeant and Cliffie decide to give the band what they call "big money" (Vladislavić, 1996:6). The narrator explains that, as an employee of Lost Property at Jan Smuts Airport (Vladislavić, 1996:6), Cliffie had got hold of a treasure chest with "paper mâché barnacles and oversized padlocks" filled with oversized wooden Kruger Rands the size of dinner plates (Vladislavić, 1996:6). The chest was used for a trade fair in Montevideo and ended up in Lost Property where Cliffie appropriated it. He derives pleasure from tipping people with this big money, giving it to beggars (Vladislavić, 1996:7) and even – in what he considered to be a humorous act – paid casual labourers with it. When the black victims of his pranks became upset, he concluded that this proved that "your blacks didn't have a sense of humour" (Vladislavić, 1996:9). Cliffie seems oblivious to the pain that he causes, since the narrator says that the "memory of these transactions made him laugh until the tears ran down his cheeks" (Vladislavić, 1996:7). His laughter at these fairly powerless people is a mean act that asserts his dominant position. Once, when Cliffie used the money to pay a labourer, the labourer started to cry. The narrator remarks that she "thought Richie [who was summoned to watch the

remuneration] would cry too, but his eyes were hard and dry. It made [her] lids itch just to look at them” (Vladislavić, 1996:9). This is one of several references to Richie’s eyes that leads the reader to consider perspective and meaning.

In order to ‘pay’ the band, the two men send Richie in to fetch the last of the coins. Richie however returns with the last coin, but then runs away with it and climbs into a tree, out of reach of the adults. By commenting expressly on Richie’s eyes, the narrator implies that Richie sees things differently. The narrator therefore foregrounds perspective when she mentions that “[h]e was always drifting off, he didn’t answer when he was spoken to, he looked through us with his round eyes” (Vladislavić, 1996:2) and adds that “Richie was always otherwise. He would be staring down at us absently, through eyes too full of colour, as if the irises had been stirred into the whites” (Vladislavić, 1996:8). She wonders what he sees from up there in the tree. Being up in the tree would allow Richie to observe beyond the fence, to regard the fence as a line, rather than a three-dimensional structure. His position would make the fence less imposing. Like a high-angle shot in a film, his elevated vantage point would enable him to perceive the event about to happen from a different perspective.

When the Salvation Army starts to laugh at the family, and specifically at Sergeant Dundas, underneath the tree, trying to retrieve the big money, the Sergeant marches across the street to his house to fetch his tuba. He thus literally crosses a boundary. Without attempting to play a melody, he starts to make loud sounds on the tuba: “[t]he Sergeant crossed the street, picking up his feet and plumping them down to the rhythm of *his own* music” (Vladislavić, 1996:10; my emphasis). The reference to his own music emphasises the extent to which the music – a form of cultural expression – articulates difference. Even though Sergeant Dundas has physically crossed the boundary and is in the midst of ‘the other’, his ‘art’, or rather noise, still creates a conceptual and perceivable boundary. The physical boundary crossing, however, gradually leads to a conceptual one. A strange thing happens: the conductor incorporates the Sergeant’s noises into a new melody. The music is given a material quality, treated as though it is an object, when the conductor “waved his arms, scooping up the music in his hands and splashing it over them” (Vladislavić, 1996:10). Sergeant Dundas forces his way into the semicircle of musicians, trying to cause chaos: “he pattered up and down in the space between the conductor and the musicians, huffing and puffing louder and louder, trying to drown them out or break their rhythm” (Vladislavić, 1996:10). Even though the music falters for a moment (Vladislavić, 1996:10) the conductor is unperturbed, and “with his head thrown back, gazing up into the sun,



gathered the drifting parts and pulled them together again. A new melody assembled itself from the disjointed components of the old one and to our great surprise, and his own, Sergeant Dundas was at the heart of it" (Vladislavić, 1996:10). The Sergeant inadvertently becomes part of new community, as he crosses a conceptual boundary and

[...] found a new rhythm, a difficult one he had never conceived of until now, three rising notes full of hurt and resentment dredged up from the depths of his being, which he began to blast out, as if he was hurling stones from the throat of the tuba. This time the faltering was barely perceptible. The music closed over the Sergeant like brown water (Vladislavić, 1996:11).

Still, the Sergeant does his best to cause chaos and tries to escape, but the rest of the band would not let him (Vladislavić, 1996:11). Suddenly, he starts to dance and disappears. He is absorbed into the new harmony. Wood (2001:32) regards this as a symbolic overturning of the world view that Sergeant Dundas represents. Even though the reader is not told of a change in the Sergeant's perspective, the dance suggests that he subscribes to a new way of seeing, a new perspective. In the same way that cultural artefacts in Vladislavić's fiction become markers of change, the music in "The Tuba" becomes indicative of change and a way in which a boundary may be crossed. The music represents the power of art to transcend boundaries. The narrator thinks to herself:

I would choose to be with Richie, in the tree, nested in leaf-green shade, with rough bark scratching pleasantly against my spine, with the tang of itchy-balls stirring a monumental sneeze in my nostrils. I would be the one to let fall the useless currency. But I am unable.

What does he see from there?

[...]

And I imagine he sees a multitude, something more than a mass, growing larger and clearer as it recedes, and Sergeant Dundas borne along in it, his spot marked by the big mouth of the tuba, growing smaller and fainter, passing out of our neighbourhood, our times and our lives" (Vladislavić, 1996:12).

The story concludes with an almost magic-realist intimation that a larger conceptual boundary crossing is at hand. Wood (2001:32-33) interprets the ending of the story as "a glimpse of a world in which oppositions and polarities melt away and nothing, however hardened and inflexible it may seem, is impervious to mutation." The narrator does not see, but significantly "imagines", that Richie perceives not only beyond the physical boundary of the fence, but also beyond the conceptual racial boundary; he gazes into a future where that boundary no longer exists. She imagines in the same way John Lennon imagined in his famous "Imagine". She is able to look into a future without boundaries, making use of perspective, even though she does

not physically see. It is effective that the fence is unobtrusive, almost underemphasised, because this allows the reader to become aware of the conceptual boundaries rather than of the physical one. This is suggestive of the extent to which people are often unaware of conceptual boundaries, or blind to them, until they cross them.

Like the fence at the edge of the yard, people become blind to boundaries: the boundaries become hegemonic. The white characters' world views and perception of their place are limited by the 'invisible' fence. Sergeant Dundas's music, that initially articulated the difference between outside and inside, becomes a vehicle for transcending the boundary between black and white and for broadening perspective. The music is a form of cultural expression, an immaterial cultural artefact, and like other cultural artefacts in Vladislavić's fiction may be read as reflecting metafictionally on the role of art. Against his will, Sergeant Dundas crosses (firstly the physical and then) the conceptual boundary and becomes part of 'the other side'. Both the narrator, on the ground, imagining and Richie viewing the episode from up in a tree, are able to look past the boundary and transcend it, albeit not as profoundly as the Sergeant, even though they do not cross it. Their perspectives shape how they see the present and future world – they perceive a larger world than the characters inside the yard.<sup>6</sup>

"The Tuba" illustrates how perspective can be limited by an 'invisible', hegemonic boundary, until that boundary is crossed. Like *The Folly*, it presents limited and enlightened perspectives and emphasises how future and present realities are constructed through perspective. In "The Prime Minister is Dead", Vladislavić illustrates the role of perspective in the re-construction of the past.

#### **5.4 Looking back: Re-constructing the Past in "The Prime Minister is Dead"**

In *Africa: A Modern History*, Arnold (2005:336) states that Prime Minister "[Hendrik F] Verwoerd was assassinated in 1966, stabbed to death in the parliamentary chamber by a temporary messenger, Demetrio Tsafendas, a Mozambican of mixed racial descent." He was buried in Hero's Acre near the Union Buildings, according to a popular internet site, Wikipedia (2009). This is the record of events as documented in a history book and in popular media. Vladislavić

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<sup>6</sup> Another text where art articulates boundaries is "Curiouser" in *The Exploded View* while texts that illustrate how art transcends boundaries include "Propaganda by Monuments" and Mevrouw Bonsma's piano music in *The Restless Supermarket*.

uses history and cultural memory as a backdrop for the short story “The Prime Minister is Dead”, which explores the extent to which personal memory is a culmination of history, cultural memory, context, perspective and imagination. Even though he mentions no names, it is quite clear that the story refers to the day that Tsafendas stabbed Verwoerd to death and to the latter’s funeral.<sup>7</sup>

Although the events of Verwoerd’s assassination are narrated in retrospect by a mature person, the focalisation is, in places, that of a ten-year-old child. Similar to the narration in “The Tuba”, Vladislavić uses a child’s perspective to present a different or new way of seeing.<sup>8</sup> The narrator in this story remembers and relates two coinciding events: his own memory of his family moving to a new house and planting an orchard and the cultural memory of Verwoerd’s death and funeral. The story is divided into two parts that are reminiscent of Niewenhuizen’s two phases in *The Folly*. The two sections are entitled “The day they killed the Prime Minister” and “The day we buried the Prime Minister”. The “they”/“we” opposition in the two subtitles conjures up notions of self and other within an Afrikaner nationalistic framework.

The opening lines of the two subsections of “The Prime Minister is Dead” indicate a significant progression: “The day they killed the Prime Minister” starts with “They killed the Prime Minister during the winter” (Vladislavić, 1989:1), whereas “The day we buried the Prime Minister” starts with “We buried the Prime Minister in the spring” (Vladislavić, 1989:3). The events of death and subsequent interment not only coincide with the family’s clearing of the yard and planting of an orchard, but also with the progression of the seasons and natural change. Personal memory, cultural memory and context are brought into relation with one another in that the clearing of the land, death and winter occur simultaneously, while planting, burial and spring likewise occur together. The child’s perspective is foregrounded in the time lapse: usually funerals take place within a week of the death, but the narrator relates the death and burial with reference to the seasons, associating seasonal change, where old is replaced by new, with the possibility of political change.

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<sup>7</sup> The companion story in the same collection called “Tsafendas’ Diary” supports this. Thurman (2011:51) is of the opinion that both stories are to an extent autobiographical and draw on Vladislavić’s own childhood memories.

<sup>8</sup> In the collection, *Missing Persons*, Vladislavić explores various other types of perspectives, such as madness in “Missing Persons” and “Journal of a Wall”.

The cultural and personal memories are presented in such a manner that the personal, individual narrative and perspective are foregrounded, and cultural memory and history are shaped, in the light of the small narrative. The story starts with the words

[t]hey killed the Prime Minister during the winter.

I was ten years old. That year my parents and I moved to a house in a new suburb. Granny moved with us [...] (Vladislavić, 1989:1).

The narrator proceeds to describe what they did, how he and his father cleared the yard, how the grandmother knitted et cetera. The first sentence seems almost at odds with what follows in the next page or two. The historic occurrences are initially only presented as background information and treated as not really important at all. What are important – especially in the first part of the story – are the cement path that his father laid, the clearing of the grass and the death of the grandfather. Contrary to what the title suggests, the story only uses the Prime Minister's death as a temporal marker to show that the past as recounted in history books, popular media and cultural memory is recalled in a particular context and is never absolute, or clearly delineated. It never exists on its own, but is always recollected from and therefore dependent on, personal memory, context and perspective.

During the planting of the orchard (in the second part of the story), the cultural and personal stories converge: the narrator's mother thinks it is a good idea to let the boy witness this important event, namely the Prime Minister's state funeral, and so his father takes him in the wheelbarrow to see the procession. After the tank carrying the coffin of the Prime Minister breaks down, he and his father carry the coffin in the wheelbarrow to the cemetery and dump it in the grave.

The interrelatedness of personal and cultural memory is evident in this story from the way the big and small narratives mirror each other as well as the way in which personal memory and perspective mould or shape cultural memory. Spring and planting are associated with hope. The narrator recalls that

When the Prime Minister died he left us a compost heap, on which practically anything would grow. Mealies grew there once, all by themselves. Granny speculated that

Lazarus,<sup>9</sup> who sometimes worked in the garden, must have thrown away the sweetcorn that she'd given him for lunch (Vladislavić, 1989:2-3).

The death of Prime Minister Verwoerd held the promise of growth and change. This thought is again immediately related to a personal memory of the family's own compost heap where mealies once grew. From the child's perspective, it even seems as though the metaphoric and real compost heaps are the same heap: "mealies grew *there* once" (my italics). Again, personal and cultural memory and place are shown to be interrelated. The personal memory mirrors the public memory, affecting the way the narrator remembers and perceives his own personal place in his new environment. The more generally accepted cultural memory influences how the narrator remembers his own life and home/place. The seminal role of context and particularly place is emphasised when the narrator relates that "[o]nce the Prime Minister was dead they started renaming streets after him, and stations, and schools, even pleasure resorts. They renamed our suburb after him. They wanted us to live in a monument" (Vladislavić, 1989:3).

The place (Verwoerdburg, even though it is not specifically named in the story) is renamed in the light of cultural memory and history. The identity of the place changes in the light of history: the narrator perceives it as though the suburb becomes a monument. A monument usually commemorates an aspect of the past. "[L]iving in a monument" would imply that the characters' living space is/becomes a memorial of the past. The past impacts on the place. Again, the fact that the child has just moved to a new house influences how and what he remembers. Marais (2011:36) interprets the child's words as "an unconsciously ironic and naïvely wise reflection on the metaphysical entombment and stasis of the suburb's inhabitants."

Twice in the story, the narrator finds himself in places analogous to those the Prime Minister occupies, although one is closer to being imaginary than the other. While planting the orchard, on the day of the burial of the Prime Minister, the narrator has to climb into the holes his father dug for the fruit trees. His father uses him as a measuring-stick to make sure the holes are deep enough. Like the Prime Minister, the narrator finds himself in the ground. The Prime Minister's burial is thus mirrored in the narrator's own actions, so that he remembers the events of the day

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<sup>9</sup> As remarked earlier, Vladislavić frequently chooses telling names, such as Niewenhuizen in *The Folly*, MT Wessels in *The Restless Supermarket* and Strickland in "The WHITES ONLY Bench. Lazarus is of course an allusion to the Biblical figure, who rose from the dead that Vladislavić uses here, tongue-in-the-cheek, in the context of the Prime Minister's death, funeral, the compost heap and the possibility of growth. The name also denotes the South African context, where many black people, in the apartheid era, bore, in addition to their real names, also a Western name that their white employers would use.

within the framework of his personal memory. Put differently, the cultural memory is encoded in light of his personal memory and linked to place.

His father also takes him in the wheelbarrow to see the funeral procession, shortly before the coffin of the Prime Minister is loaded onto the same wheelbarrow. Here, the child imagines that the Prime Minister again occupies the same place as he did. It is not unlikely that he remembers or conjures up this imaginary memory because he has been in the ground, like the Prime Minister. From a ten-year-old child's perspective this does not seem too strange. The story is however recounted as the memory of an older man. Dumping Verwoerd's / the Prime Minister's body in a grave using a wheelbarrow could also be interpreted as an expression of wish-fulfilment of which there are several examples in *Missing Persons*, most notably in the story "The Box". In addition to the child's perspective which is infused by imagination, Vladislavić also presents an adult wish-fulfilment perspective in this story.

The coffin-on-wheelbarrow story constitutes an incongruous and banal image that subverts the stately funeral accorded to Verwoerd and the way most people remember it, but it seems quite a plausible memory for a ten-year-old child who was working in the garden and climbing in holes as the Prime Minister was buried. The surreal ending indicates how not only place, but more importantly imagination and perspective, impact on the formation of memories. The narrator's memory is simultaneously no different, and very different, from other memories of the day. It is no different as all memories are tainted by imagination, personal memory and perspective yet it is very different as it presents a singular recollection of events. Shown as a personal memory and focalised through the eyes of a ten-year-old child, "The Prime Minister is Dead" subverts the idea that history is an objective and clearly delineated narrative of the past.

The child remembers the death and funeral of the Prime Minister within the framework of his own lived experience and memory. The deadpan, factual tone of the narration creates a truthfulness in this imaginary memory while the story subverts the idea that the past and history exist independently from individual/personal recollection. Ricoeur (2006:146-7) writes that there is no history without testimony, even though testimony is often afterwards seen as the inferior of the two. Testimony, being fictional, is not fact, however.

"The Prime Minister is Dead" explores how memory is an amalgamation of perspective, imagination and contextual factors that include ideological aspects. It is interesting to note that,

in an interview with Thurman (2011:52), Vladislavić explains that he drew on childhood memories for the imagery of the story, while the imagery for Verwoerd's state funeral was drawn mostly from his memories of the inauguration of the Republic (31 May, 1961), which were supplemented with "acquired memories" from footage of Verwoerd's funeral. Thus, on a metatextual level, the creation of this short story, or cultural artefact, is indebted to a convoluted memory.

## 5.5 Conclusion

The three texts discussed depict how present, past and future contexts come into being because of perspective and suggest that what is seen has more to do with the act of looking, who is looking, why and from where, than with the inherent features of the cultural artefact or event recalled. Vladislavić equates and foregrounds seeing and understanding in different ways in the three texts.

In *The Folly*, the invisible house presents the three characters with the opportunity to 'see' and it also emphasises how present perspective colours interpretation and even brings the present context into being. Moreover, the impossible, the imaginary, the visionary becomes possible, becomes concrete in the light of perspective. By presenting three different perspectives on the house, the novel investigates the reactions and dispositions of different role-players in political change.

In "The Tuba", the (negative) space between the house and the fence is, initially, virtually invisible – the characters do not think in terms of inside and outside and the fence, too, becomes so familiar to the inhabitants that they no longer see it. The fence represents their limited perspective, making clear that the boundary only becomes evident once it is crossed (Sergeant Dundas) or transcended (Richie) or the crossing is imagined (the narrator). The story hints at the role of art in transcending boundaries; similarly, the conclusion of the story also suggests that perspective and imagination will determine the future.

In "The Prime Minister is Dead", Vladislavić again uses a child's perspective to show how the past is brought into being, not only in a dynamic dialogue with context, specifically place, but also through imagination.

To summarise, Vladislavić appeals to the reader's imagination by hinting that to envision an alternative reality would entail a different means of interpretation and perspective. This aspect indirectly refers to the power of fiction as an alternative reality; a space that creates distance and foregrounds other perspectives. The implication is that distance creates a clearer impression of the whole picture.



## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate the relationship between historical context, cultural artefacts, ideology and identity formation in Vladislavić's fiction: it examined how Vladislavić captures the interaction between the South African past and present in terms of recollections of the past and the past's concrete expression in places and in art(efacts), and illustrated the significant role of perspective in his fiction in the interpretation of the visible and invisible cultural and political boundaries that still exist in South African society. In short, this thesis explored Vladislavić's engagement with ideology, change and identity formation within the contemporary South African postcolonial context.

Vladislavić writes within and represents a dynamic South African context that was and still is characterised by boundaries, divisions, a variety of often irreconcilable histories and a myriad of memories that are reflected in the vibrant life and architecture of cities like Johannesburg and Pretoria, which contain these differences. Vladislavić makes sense of and represents the South African context by exploring the effects of perspective. His fiction illuminates the interplay between concrete reality, specifically architecture and cultural artefacts, and abstract conceptions about past and present realities that are grounded in ideology. His work covers the whole spectrum of the South African context, illustrating that time and distance create a clearer perspective on the past and its influence on the present reality. The main theme that informs the fiction discussed in this thesis relates to the question of perspective that he illustrates with reference to concrete and abstract aspects of human experience in the changing South African context. Vladislavić illustrates the significance of perspective by using off-beat characters with strange views on reality.

Whereas Chapter 1 provided background information on the context within which Vladislavić's writing is produced and to which it alludes, Chapter 2 delineated the analytical tools necessary to analyse Vladislavić's fiction which sets out to reveal and undermine preconceived perceptions of history and to expose the underlying ideological base of all perceptions. For this reason, this thesis distinguished between history, personal and cultural memory and heritage, all of which are interpretations of the past, employed for different reasons and serving different functions. Vladislavić uses concepts connected to these assessments of the past to intimate that there are

different ways and reasons to remember. These are informed by ideology and coloured by perspective and personal motivation.

Because this thesis investigated time and place, an analogy was set up between aspects of time and aspects of place, using Lefebvre's notion of spatial practices, representations of space and representational space. In the same way that the term 'past' refers to actual bygone time, 'spatial practices' refer to experienced place. 'Representations of space' are analogous to 'history' and 'representational space' to 'memory'. In the South African context, official renditions of time and place are often in conflict with, and undermined by, unofficial renditions as well as people's experience of both. Vladislavić's fiction interacts with the boundaries, discrepancies and inequalities that exist because of apartheid and post-apartheid restitution. Young (2001:38) succinctly summarises this aspect of his work:

[i]n foregrounding the marginal perspective, Vladislavić reveals an acute awareness of the ideological power of representation emanating from the so-called 'centre'. At the same time, through narrators' self-conscious struggles to give expression to their own ideas, Vladislavić cautions against a too-easy glorification of the 'truth' of the marginal perspective which ignores its own particular, often masked ideological location.

In addition to his exploration of different perspectives on the past, Vladislavić also juxtaposes present and past to demonstrate how they impact on one another. The influence of past on present and vice versa, is most clearly seen in the dynamic between concrete and abstract in his work. Chapter 2 also discussed implications and parameters of this dynamic, considering how past and ideology are manifested in tangible reality, specifically in cities, architecture and cultural artefacts, but also how such reality determines perspectives on past and on ideological presuppositions.

Chapter 3 investigated how aspects of concrete reality, in the forms of city planning and cultural artefacts, become markers of change: these contain *and* are endowed with meaning when characters decode and interpret them. History, memory and ideology were shown to be inscribed in Vladislavić's renditions of place: Hillbrow in *The Restless Supermarket*, Johannesburg as represented in *Portrait with Keys*, *The Exploded View* and in various short stories are places that bear the marks of a changing South Africa. The characters who interpret these places, and the artefacts in them, all hold different perspectives on the same reality and their diverse perspectives lead each character to perceive a different 'truth'. This is most obvious when the Johannesburg that Aubrey Tearle sees in *The Restless Supermarket* is

compared to the Johannesburg of Bogey in the same novel, or the Johannesburg of Majara, in *The Exploded View*. The same physical place takes on vastly different meanings and abstract connotations when viewed from different perspectives. The complexity of concrete places and cultural artefacts is amplified when one considers that they contain past contexts and that such places and artefacts are therefore palimpsests revealing past and present ideologies.

Characters in Vladislavić's fiction often try to fix meanings or versions of the past in concrete reality, or they opportunistically use the discrepancy between interpretations to their advantage. The conscious human intervention in the dynamic between concrete and abstract was considered in Chapter 4, with reference to in texts dealing with characters that specifically attempt to manipulate signification. Lydia makes artefacts to remind Duncan of "the old days" in "The Firedogs" in much the same way that employees of the fictional apartheid museum in "The WHITES ONLY Bench" create, collect and exhibit cultural artefacts that should remind visitors of apartheid. It became clear that between cultural artefact and recalled past any number of different stories can originate that are all dependent on ideology and perspective.

"Courage" features an excellent example of a character who uses the unstable link between memory and artefact to his advantage. Kumbuza and his young friend with the camera saw an opportunity to use change to their benefit. Bogey (*The Restless Supermarket*) and even Niewenhuizen (*The Folly*) are also able to use change for material gain. It is through such characters that Vladislavić casts a critical eye on postmodern society's tendency to commodify. He often uses the souvenir, in for example "The WHITES ONLY Bench", "Sightseeing" and "The Firedogs", to show how the past or a present experience can be bought. When Tearle plans to give copies of "The Proofreaders' Derby" to the café-goers as a "keepsake" (Vladislavić, 2001:299), he does not think of it as an investment in the economic sense of the word and the mere thought that his 'friends' may want such a keepsake serves to show how out of touch Tearle is, not only with his friends, but also with the world.

Uncouth as he may be, Bogey has a clearer idea of the role of souvenirs in changing contexts. In contrast to Bogey's approach to remembering with the aid of souvenirs, the narrator in *Portrait with Keys* thinks fondly on his mother's wooden box in which he keeps his grandfather's tokens. He is truly sad when he loses these in a theft: they were purely sentimental objects to him, rather than commodities. The most extreme consumer in Vladislavić's fiction is probably Mrs Malgas, who owns scores of trinkets and knickknacks, but seems to forget what they

represent. Characters who benefit from consumerism serve two functions in Vladislavić's fiction: firstly, they enable the author to critique the South African consumerist society, but they also point to the unstable link between concrete reality, concrete cultural artefact, and abstract meaning or memory – a link that is exploited in consumer society and in the heritage industry. Vladislavić's fiction often represents memory, sometimes contained in souvenirs, as a cornucopia of wealth in the present.

The dynamic relationship between memory, place and perspective explored in the first two analytical chapters was shown to be even more complex in certain of Vladislavić's texts that deal with concrete reality which is not present, not represented. By foregrounding that which is *not there*, Vladislavić draws attention to perspective and creates an uncanny situation where – in a context that is otherwise realistic – aspects of concrete reality or experienced time are in various ways absent, invisible or surreal. Chapter 5 discussed Niewenhuizen's invisible, imaginary house, a hegemonic fence in "The Tuba" and a boy's surreal memory of Verwoerd's death and funeral in "The Prime Minister is Dead". Where concrete reality is absent, invisible, or surreal, it is perspective, informed by personal memory and ideology that brings the concrete reality into being. Each of these three narratives foregrounds perspective. *The Folly* does so by presenting three views on change and possibility, namely a visionary, liberal view, a conservative one and a hyperconservative view. However, Vladislavić stops short of giving readers a facile framework to interpret the world in the novel, because the text creates more questions than answers. In "The Tuba", Vladislavić employs a complex focaliser-narrator construct where the 'focaliser' imagines and narrates what her child would see from his vantage point up in the tree. Perhaps one should speak of an 'imaginator', rather than a focaliser. The focaliser-narrator draws attention to perspective, to seeing and having insight, as she imagines and tells how her son would see the racist Sergeant disappear into another dimension of being. Vladislavić also focuses attention on perspective in "The Prime Minister is Dead" when the child-narrator-focaliser gives a surreal account of Verwoerd's death and burial. The story, which never mentions Verwoerd by name, is distant enough to be read as a child's memory, but close enough to have specific South African resonances for the reader. The deadpan serious narration is juxtaposed with the irreverent description of the burial which induces readers to consider different ways of seeing and remembering the event.

By presenting and shifting between a range of perspectives on past and present realities in authentic South African contexts, Vladislavić's fiction invites readers to reconsider the limits and

limitations of their own perspectives as he foregrounds the lack of tolerance within the South African society that causes a breakdown of positive connections and communication.

By exploring perspective through concrete reality, Vladislavić also comments on the role of art. Several analyses of cultural artefacts and fine arts in Vladislavić's fiction indicate that such artefacts always contain their original contexts within them. Cultural artefacts, like architecture, become markers of change. They often encode historical events or abstract meaning, but each time they are interpreted, they gain new meaning for each person decoding the artefact. As such, art has the capacity to bring together in one place differing and divergent contexts. Khumalo's own personal Lenin head is a case in point. Whether Khumalo is aware of it or not, the statue retains its original meaning, even as its current context renders that meaning ironic.

Art and cultural artefacts are always in dialogue with their contexts; this can be seen in stories like "Propaganda by Monuments" and "Courage", where the Strijdom, Lenin and Courage statues all gain additional meaning because of the contexts in which they were created and the contexts in which they are interpreted. Vladislavić also shows that museums and art galleries create sterile and artificial places that interrupt the dialogue which cultural artefacts had with their more natural contexts. This is best illustrated by "The WHITES ONLY Bench" where artefacts are placed in a museum that strips the artefacts of their practical function. Majara creates artworks, sculptures, that critically enquire about the 'place' of art and craft.

Vladislavić's fiction is a testament to the inevitability of change and shows that perspectives mould experiences of change as either positive or negative. I am reminded of Hamlet's words to Rosencrantz: "for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (Shakespeare, 1994:216; Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 248-249) – perspective, in Vladislavić's fiction "makes it so." Many early critics, such as Wood (2001), comment on the language games that Vladislavić plays. I would argue that the perspective games that he plays are equally intriguing. In the light of these main findings, the significance of Vladislavić's oeuvre development and use of language need to be discussed in order to point to analogies between the author's use of artefacts and his use of language. Despite its small size, Vladislavić's oeuvre, which straddles South Africa's official transition to a constitutional democracy, is diverse. His concern with change, perspective, the past, the city and ideology is woven like a thread through all of his fiction, but he presents these themes and concerns very differently in each text. The two main developments evident in his oeuvre are, firstly, a move from surreal and humorous fiction to

more realistic and sober depictions of change. Should one compare the mode of expression in *Missing Persons* (1989) to that in *Double Negative* (2010), it is hard to imagine that the texts were written by the same author. A second development, and characteristic of Vladislavić's oeuvre, is that his fiction becomes more experimental in terms of genre, even though his last novel, *Double Negative*, is a straightforward *Bildungsroman* in three parts.

Accounting for oeuvre development is a tricky business, which always entails subjective speculation, as Barris and Gaylard illustrate in their respective discussions of Vladislavić's early fiction. Whereas Gaylard (2005:131-132) suggests that Vladislavić's "elusive" and "allusive" qualities are due not only to his "postmodern leanings", but also to the fact that he tried to avoid being censored by the apartheid government. Barris (2010:286) disagrees and claims that "the oblique and allusive style" of Vladislavić's political writing is to be attributed to creative choice, rather than "safety under an oppressive regime". Vladislavić's initial surreal and allegorical expression may also be the result of the 'youthful experimentation' that a young writer employs to find his own voice. The point is that reasons for changes in an oeuvre cannot be proven, we cannot be sure why they occur. However, we can reflect on the pattern that emerges. In a small oeuvre of eight works of fiction, the pattern that emerges when one studies Vladislavić's work, looks like this: surrealism, allegory, humorous realism and other types of realism that include autobiography. My overview here reflects a rather reductive way of looking at a rich oeuvre, but even in this reductive categorisation, I used five categories to denote eight works, and that without even referring to literary conventions such as 'satire' and 'postmodern allegory'. I would venture to say that this broad scope of literary genres and devices presents more variation than the work of most other writers.

When the system above is viewed on a timeline, we find that Vladislavić wrote surrealism and allegory before 1994, humorous realism between 1996 and 2001 and other types of realism since. Would it be possible to cite contextual factors for the changes in his oeuvre? I would venture to suggest that it is: the uncertainty that characterised the time before 1994 could account for elusive styles such as surrealism and allegory; the excitement and hope that characterised the young democracy could have been translated into humorous realism and the disillusionment with later governments could have called for more sober realism. But whichever reasons I give, remain in the realm of speculation. So, while I am in this realm, I would posit that Vladislavić is one of the most creative authors in South Africa today, and that he consciously steers away from employing a 'recipe' to churn out a book. It is my subjective opinion that, in the

same way he experiments with and explores different perspectives, Vladislavić also experiments with different modes of expression and with genre to assess change. In the same way that he often arrests our attempts to identify with the characters that he creates, he also does not present readers with ready-made 'genre tools' to decode his work, keeping readers on guard and often undercutting their expectations.

Related to genre and modes of expression is Vladislavić's use of language. In the literature survey in Chapter 1, I mentioned that several early critical assessments of his work commented on Vladislavić's use of language and the word games he plays. Gaylard (2006:72-73) writes that Majara's sculptures may be read within a metafictional paradigm as indicative of Vladislavić's own fiction/creation and, I would argue, this may be true of all the cultural artefacts and 'sculpting' in the author's work. Several critics mention the link between writing and building in Vladislavić's fiction and Vladislavić himself elaborates on this link in an interview with Miller (2006:117), saying: "I've discovered that often when I talk about writing, the language I use is appropriate to building or engineering, the construction of the text, as if it was an object. The text feels like a construct." Many of his works of fiction contain examples of building or creation that may be read as metafictional. One of the earliest examples is "Journal of a Wall" in *Missing Persons*, where a neurotic and megalomaniac narrator plans to record his neighbour's wall-building "brick for word, word for brick" (Vladislavić, 1989:34). As the strange, unstable narrator plans to record in writing the building as it happens, the metafiction in this story is thinly veiled: most readers will agree that Vladislavić is here writing about writing in addition to writing about perspective and white middle-class fear amid the unrest reports. So too, the entire *The Folly* may be read as an allegory on writing a novel. "The Tuba", "The Omniscope (Pat. Pending)", "Courage" and especially "Kidnapped" may, to a greater or lesser degree, also be read as metafictional. Tearle, too tries his hand at writing fiction, and, even though he scorns the genre, he occasionally makes metafictional comments. Of course, Tearle's agenda is to edify his friends and to uplift them to his level, and his comments should be viewed in this light. The creative efforts of Budlender, Egan, Majara and Duffy in *The Exploded View* and the two photographers' yearning to represent the city in *Double Negative* can also be read as metafiction. All of these examples show that, as he himself had said, Vladislavić views writing as a process, a construction.

As I pointed out in some of the analyses (most markedly in the analysis of "The WHITES ONLY Bench"), Vladislavić often embeds representations, such as a WHITES ONLY Bench in a

photograph in a newspaper pinned up on a notice board in a museum. These embedded presentations do two things: they create distance between representation and artefact/event and foreground the role of mediation, which also casts light on the different perspectives that influence the re-presentation of ideas. Embeddedness, when read metafictionally, may also reveal that, in writing, there is never a 'pure space' around any object. A writer, like a sculptor, takes words/objects from one context and then converts them and adapts them to another context. Morphet (2001:22) identifies this aspect of Vladislavić's writing in a review of *Missing Persons*, when he writes that after reading the volume, he became "wary of the innocence of words and phrases – especially ones that have been around for so long that [he] hardly notice[s] them anymore. Like 'in the box', or 'of the rocker', or 'a place to stay', or 'playing with fire', or 'sightseeing'." He suggests that by taking the ordinary, commonplace word out of its familiar context, Vladislavić draws attention to the word as word, a 'place' where new meanings and connotations may originate.

Another method through which Vladislavić draws attention to his medium – words – is by listing words and objects. Mrs Malgas's compulsive listing, analysed and discussed in Chapter 5, serves as an example, but lists are found throughout Vladislavić's fiction. Lists tend to dislodge the semantics of the listed objects from their initial, more natural contexts, so that the listed objects are read in relation to the rest of the listed items, rather than the context with which they are normally associated. In this way, the list has the same effect on words as galleries have on fine art and museums have on historical objects; hence listing gives to the words that Vladislavić uses the "found object" quality that Helgesson (2004:782) and Clarkson (2006:106) observe in his work.

Thurman (2007) refers to Vladislavić's "tricks of assonance and alliteration [...] distortions of semantics and typography" through which the "stale word and dull object are depicted as sources of imaginative play, escape, invigoration, transcendence – they constitute (a version of) art." Two aspects of Thurman's assessment require attention: firstly, assonance and alliteration are usually associated with poetry, rather than fiction, and poets often use these figures of speech to draw attention to their medium – language. Vladislavić is a novelist, who like a poet, draws attention to the language of the text's construction. In this way too, he defies genre conventions. As was the case with listing, he uses poetic devices to foreground words and word choices. Secondly, Thurman, like Murray (2008), observes a likeness between Vladislavić's work and that of visual (and other) artists who, through the use of various media, that may



include language, create meaning. In Vladislavić's hands, language becomes clay or paint or wood – a medium through which he can reflect on a changing context. In the same way that characters like Hauptfleisch, Majara, My Old Becker and even Tearle create artefacts, Vladislavić creates fiction. He is continuously conscious of his medium, which not only sets him apart from most other South African authors, but also changes our engagement with his language: we become aware of the medium used and the constructedness of meaning. We cannot merely read for a plotline – even though his plotlines are captivating, we also consider his word choices, sentence constructions, homonyms et cetera, as he draws our attention to language.

Language is itself an abstraction of reality; it substitutes reality in that it provides signifiers to stand in for signifieds. Vladislavić illustrates that writing does not differ much from other forms of art through which artists attempt to come to grips with their contexts. Whereas fine artists use form and colour, writers use words and syntax; both however use texture, composition, images and metonyms. Vladislavić shows that the similarities between artists in different fields far outnumber the differences: in his writing, he often employs strategies that are closer aligned to visual art than most other writers do; I am reminded of Graham's (2006) comment that Vladislavić's rendition of Johannesburg resembles Kentridge's technique of imperfect erasure. In changing contexts, language can represent the concrete and the abstract, but, as Pretorius Wright (2010:75) shows, Vladislavić's use of language subverts the idea that language provides straightforward access to reality. A reader of Vladislavić's fiction is constantly aware of the frequently problematic relationship between language – and other media – and objective reality.

In *The Folly*, Vladislavić draws attention to his medium by employing literary conventions that have been interpreted as magic realism (Kearney, 1994:92), satire (Gaylard, 2005:129) and allegory (Helgesson, 2004:785). The confusion that he creates regarding mode of expression also makes readers aware of the creative tools that he employs.

In *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys*, Vladislavić draws attention to his medium on the level of genre. In these two works, he tests the boundaries of both the novel and the short story. *The Exploded View* presents four long short stories that are intricately related, which results in a deliberate fusion of the two genres, and even though it resembles aspects of both novel and short story, it really is neither. *Portrait with Keys* is even more intricate in terms of its genre experimentation, as it combines autobiography, vignette and a mode of writing that simulates walking. What makes this book unique are the maps at the conclusion that suggest different

routes through the vignettes. Beginnings, middles and conclusions gain different meanings in the light of these maps and, in postmodern style, the narrative parts are shuffled so that reading assumes the nature of a game and of a stroll through the city. I remember books like these from when I was a teenager: a chapter would end with a character making a choice and the reader would be instructed to go to a specific page, depending on which choice the reader had made on behalf of the character. These books were boring and often moralising. Vladislavić's map-book does not centre on character choices, but rather on motifs and artefacts in the city. In addition to short, medium and long routes, a reader can choose to go on the "Gardens" route (Vladislavić, 2006:206), or the "Walls" route (Vladislavić, 2006:208). In this map-book there is no cause and effect, just meandering about the city.

By drawing attention to his medium, Vladislavić places language within the same conceptual framework as the cultural artefacts that he uses as motifs in his fiction and consequently, the same deductions can be made regarding cultural artefacts and language. Vladislavić's fiction makes clear that both are mediations and all mediations crystallise time and place and are subject to ideology and shaped by perspective. Fiction is Vladislavić's artefact, language his medium. Importantly, all mediations are imperfect renditions of real life in the changing South African context that Vladislavić attempts to capture, aware that lived experience always falls outside of language, outside of art and outside of mediation.

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## Appendix 1: The Voortrekker Monument



Source: <http://www.voortrekkermon.org.za>



Source: <http://www.southafrica-travel.net>



**Appendix 2: Sam Nzima's Photograph of Hector Pieteron**



**Source:** <http://www.sahistory.org.za>





### **Appendix 3: “Where Apartheid Statues Go to Die” by Sean O’Toole**

'What are they going to do with the head?' I wondered as the noose on the strap tightened around the prime minister's stiff neck.

The image on the television showed a bronze bust of Hendrik Verwoerd being hoisted off a sand-coloured plinth and deposited on a white flatbed truck. Perhaps the old man would be carted off to a secret municipal dumpsite named in honour of Leon Trotsky.

There is no such place. Metaphors are not fact and history is not easily swept aside by Trotskyite rhetoric, especially when it is cast in bronze. Dismantling this sort of history, which is ceremonial, blatant and weatherproof, requires many talents, not least being a head for political theatre and nous for logistics. A contact number for a man with a crane is also useful.

Timothy Nast, the 28-year-old executive mayor of the Democratic Alliance-led Midvaal municipality, recently proved himself adept at the latter when, on May 4, he rid his metropolitan region of what was said to be the last Verwoerd sculpture on official public display. But his handling of the event was marked by naivety, allowing a nominally benign action to escalate into a national comedy.

A quick recap of where things stand.

On the morning of May 5 Nast's office telephone started ringing off the hook. What had the mayor done with the Verwoerd bust that had stood outside the Meyerton municipal offices for the past 28 years? The queries intensified as television news replayed images of the former prime minister's summary lynching. Who was the man with the white truck? And why did he pitch up for the removal job at 10 the previous night?

"It was removed when the contractor could remove it," Nast, who grew up in the patrician village of Henley-on-Klip, bluntly told an inquisitive Sapa reporter. "Ask the contractor." And he is? "A man called Piet," responded Nast, unable to offer a surname.



*Final resting place. (Madelene Cronjé, M&G)*

The low comedy of his opening gambit set the tone for what was to follow. Responding to inquiries about where Piet had journeyed into the night with Verwoerd's bust, Nast offered an unequivocal response. The bust had been returned to its owners, the Klipriviervallei-kultuurvereniging (KKV), an obscure cultural council that is technically defunct.

The KKV formed part of a network of regional cultural councils allied to the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge (FAK), a powerful Afrikaner heritage organisation and Broederbond front group founded in 1929.

In May Freddie Peters, a former KKV chairman and current Democratic Alliance member, hastily reconvened the inactive council following threats of vandalism to the bust made during the run-up to the recent hotly contested local government elections. (The elections saw ANC heavyweights such as Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and Julius Malema trek to Meyerton in an ultimately failed attempt to drum up party support).

On May 4, the day the bust was removed from its plinth, Jackson Mthembu, the ANC national spokesperson, issued a statement lambasting "the sheer display of arrogance by Nast, who has refused to remove Verwoerd's statue". He added: "To the majority of South Africans, except in the eyes of the DA, Verwoerd remains a symbol, embodiment and apartheid architect of all ills of the country's terrible past and his statue should be confined to a museum."

Nast, who was 19 when he was elected a municipal councillor in 2000, acted swiftly, convening a meeting of the mayoral committee. It passed a "formal resolution" to have the Verwoerd bust removed and Piet was summoned.

The hurried removal of the bust has ushered in a period of political theatre.

A day after the bust's removal, Dumisani Dakile, Cosatu's provincial secretary in Gauteng, issued another of his quixotic communiqués. Dakile, who last year denounced Malema as a "premature leader" and a "grandstanding crazy individual", demanded that the statue "be removed and thrown into the dustbin of history within seven days".

Presumably the biblical timeline is indicative of how long it takes to build this mythical dustbin.

The Midvaal chairman of the Freedom Front Plus, Corrie Pyper, was equally annoyed, if for entirely different reasons. "*Skelm*," he cried, accusing the DA council of being underhanded. "I'm not saying apartheid was right but it is still part of our history," Pyper told Sapa. "If you want to do something like this, you tell people: 'Listen, we are going to remove your uncle. Come take a picture, come shed a tear.'"

Were it 1994, Dakile and Pyper's statements would read as urgent and timely. But by 2011 both men appear to have boarded the late flight to a place called Political Expediency. "How soon people become bored with the making and unmaking of history," says Pavel Grekov, a Russian state functionary, in Johannesburg writer Ivan Vladislavic's superb 1996 short story, *Propaganda by Monuments*. Grekov makes this observation about his memory of "the hundreds and thousands who had taken to the streets to watch the first monuments fall".



*Busts of apartheid leaders, including Verwoerd, stored at the Voortrekker Monument. (Madelene Cronjé, M&G)*

It was not just the Russians who lost interest in toppled monuments. In Germany thousands turned out to see the undoing of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Three years later, when a 19-metre red Ukrainian granite effigy of Lenin was dismantled in East Berlin, men in hard hats were the

principal crowd. Unmaking history had become a dull logistical exercise.

As in Berlin so too in Bloemfontein: three years after the workmanlike disassembly of Lenin, a 4.3- metre bronze statue of Verwoerd, which had stood in front of the headquarters of the Free State provincial administration since 1969, was removed from its pedestal. The steady removal of Verwoerd busts from council offices in the ensuing period has, for the most part, happened unnoticed.

"Where do they put them all?" Grekov wonders to a work colleague.

"Scrapheap ... of history," he is told.

"No, seriously," Grekov insists.

It is a fair question. In Hungary, which also saw its fair share of toppling monuments, a 20-minute ride on a Budapest bus will deliver you to Memento Park, which displays 42 public sculptures dating back to Hungary's four decades of communist rule. Not all monuments are preserved in this way. Nikolai Tomsky's stone Lenin, all 129 pieces of it, is buried south of Berlin.



*(Madelene Cronjé, M&G)*

The situation is no less contradictory in South Africa. After spending 12 years in a warehouse attached to a Bloemfontein furniture factory, sculptor Gerard de Leeuw's life-size statue of Verwoerd is currently in Pretoria -- so too the Meyerton bust. Their display couldn't be more distinct.

The De Leeuw sculpture lies on its back on old tyres in a storage yard at the Voortrekker

Monument. It is wrapped in shade cloth and dotted with mud dauber nests. In contrast, the diminutive Meyerton bust is being displayed provocatively alongside the old orange, white and blue national flag at Kleinfontein, an 860-hectare right-wing enclave northeast of Pretoria.

Established in 1992 on a South African Anglo-Boer War battle site, Kleinfontein is home to, among other things, the Afrikaner-kulturbond (AKB), a conservative Afrikaner cultural organisation that entered into a loan agreement with the KKV to house the Meyerton bust. Symbols are important to the AKB.

In 2006 the group staged a protest ceremony at the National Women's Memorial & War Museum in Bloemfontein. Speaking at the event, AKB chair Theuns de Wet said: "Monuments testify to our nation's heroes, our religion and our nation's future hopes." He said any changes to them represented "an effort to strip us of our identity".

The presence of the Verwoerd bust at Kleinfontein has clearly emboldened some of the enclave's residents. On June 2, a day after *Beeld* reported that Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe had written to the department of arts and culture requesting it to locate the "stolen" Verwoerd bust, Jan Beyers, who chairs the Donkerhoek Verkenners, a regional branch of a conservative cultural and religious organisation espousing self-rule, issued a challenge to the presidency. Come and "steal" the bust back.



*The statue of HF Verwoerd that was removed from its place in Midvaal now stands in the town hall on the farm Kleinfontein, east of Pretoria. (Madelene Cronjé, M&G)*

"The department is taking up the matter of the bust with the Midvaal municipality as it is part of the history of the country," Lisa Combrinck, the department's head of communications, said. Public memorials are protected in terms of the National Heritage Resources Act 25 of 1999 and cannot be disturbed unless under permit from the relevant authority.

When I mention Kleinfontein to Cecilia Kruger, the chief professional officer at the Voortrekker Monument, she shakes her head. It is Kruger's job to handle the day-to-day running of the Heritage Foundation, a section 21 company founded in 2002 to protect Afrikaner heritage.

In 2006, for example, the foundation negotiated an agreement with former Free State prime minister Beatrice Marshoff to transfer De Leeuw's sculpture to Pretoria. Its outdoor resting place is an exception. The foundation has a climate-controlled gallery and storage facility containing dozens of bronze statues, oil portraits and photographs of apartheid statesmen, including four Meyerton-style busts of Verwoerd alone.

I was first made aware of this collection by Jonathan Cane, a history graduate who decided making art was more attractive. For his contribution to the 2010 Spier Contemporary Cane mapped the outlines of all the hospitals, office blocks, dams, airports, primary schools and suburbs named after Verwoerd. ("They wanted us to live in a monument," writes Vladislavic in his 2003 short story *The Prime Minister is Dead*.)

Cane's display included a photo of a forlorn Verwoerd bust. I asked him where he found it.

"It is underneath the Voortrekker Monument," he said. "These very kindly old Afrikaans ladies in white coats -- all doctors of archaeology and what not -- obsessively, neurotically care for these things, to protect them." It sounded vaguely sinister.

Kruger, who has blue eyes and treated blonde hair, is anything but creepy. She doesn't wear a dustcoat. She speaks fluent English. She has a master's degree in heritage management.



*The Voortrekker Monument, presided over by head museum official Etta Judson has provided a home for many symbols of the apartheid past. (Madelene Cronjé, M&G)*

"We are not a political organisation," said Kruger. "We just passionately care about our culture and our heritage. We believe that through apartheid a lot of injustices have been done and, in the event, many of the positive contributions and contributors to the building of South Africa have been forgotten."

Although curatorship forms a large part of her duties, a common sense approach to business is also on her agenda. The Voortrekker Monument is a museum, which, as Mthembu stated, is where Verwoerd ought to be confined.

Verwoerd is only a small part of the story the museum wants to tell. As it is, most visitors go to the Heritage Foundation to research their genealogy. There is an additional walk-through display of Afrikaner history since 1900. It includes a large photo of runner Zola Budd.

As I wind up my visit to Pretoria's very real dustbin of history, I ask Kruger what she makes of something Vladislavic stated in an essay accompanying a 2008 exhibition of William Kentridge's tapestries in the United States.

"People," he wrote, "may feel the loss of symbols more acutely than the loss of direct political power or economic status."

"Probably," said Kruger, "the Afrikaans community has accepted that, politically, they will never be able to achieve anything. The accent has moved to the achievements and contributions on the socioeconomic level."

Nonetheless, symbols remain important. "Look, it is part of your identity. Whether it was right or wrong what apartheid did, those were leaders who played an important role."

**Source:** Mail & Guardian Online (<http://mg.co.za/article/2011-06-17-finding-verwoerd-lifting-the-lid-on-dustbin-of-history>)





#### Appendix 4: The Afrikaans Language Monument



Source: <http://www.gotravel24.com>



Source: <http://www.sa-venues.com>



