

WEEK 1 THE HEART OF THE MATTER: A MATTER OF THE HEART

THE HEART OF ART AND LITERATURE

00:00:00

This is not science, but magic. For all that we're standing at the location of one of the 20th century's most remarkable scientific and medical interventions. Nonetheless, nothing here tells us anything substantial about the science or the medical procedures that went into it. Everything about this tableau is what we would call iconic. It is static. It is lit in a peculiarity that draws our attention. And it recapitulates, in fact, many, many images in, particularly, Western culture, but, in all likelihood, across all the cultures of the world.

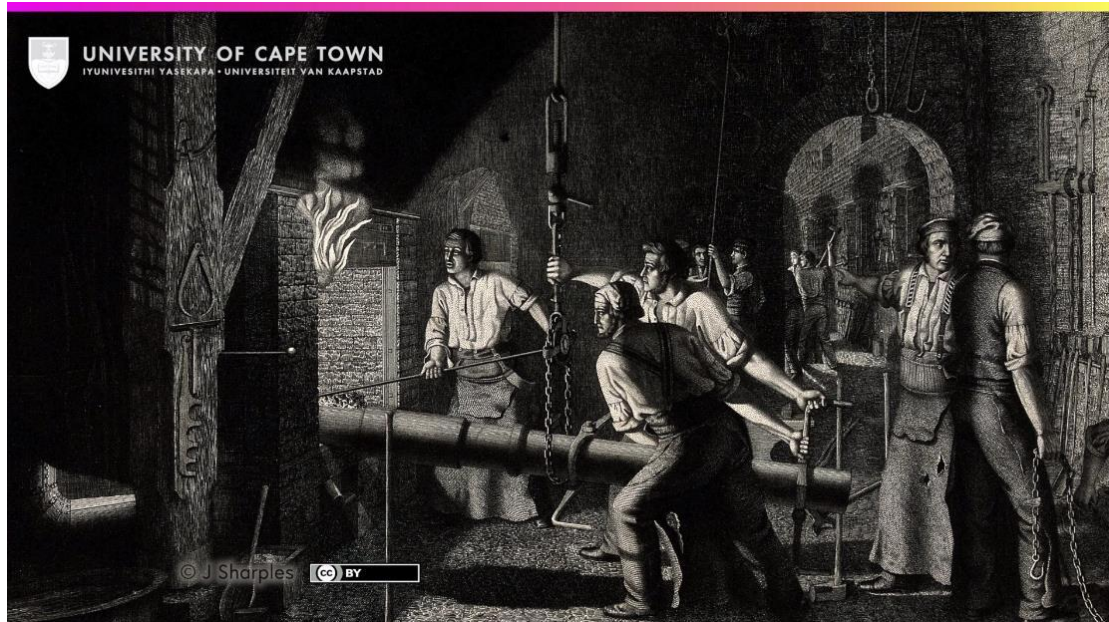
I think the significance of this particularly iconic representation of a moment in 1967, of which we're reminded by a clock on the wall over there fixed at the precise hour of the transplant, by a blackboard over there which shows the date on which it happened. I think that the significance of this event, what is extraordinary about something that has become relatively ordinary now, lies in the stillness, in the stasis that is here, lies in what is happening, as we say, in a heartbeat.

00:01:49

The entire culture in which this particular operation has its context, and perhaps many other cultures around the world, turn to the human heart for an occasion mysterious, for a metaphor useful, for a metonym everywhere in many languages. In the discipline in which I teach at the University of Cape Town, English literature, we find clues as to the origin and purpose of this particular arrangement everywhere and very far back.

At the very beginnings of Western literature and Western culture, and probably any culture which derived the working of iron, we find representations of human beings gathered around a light-- in those instances firelight-- working in a blacksmith's forge to transmute the element of iron found in rocks and stones into something useful to humankind. We find their concentration, tools, an almost mystical sense of purpose among a gathering.

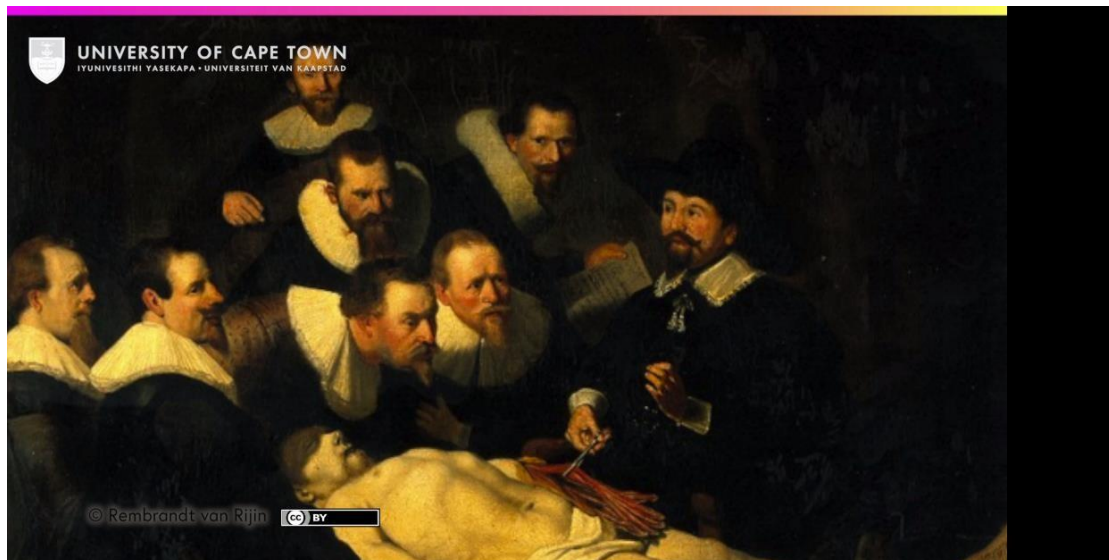
THE BLACKSMITH'S FORGE



© J Sharples CC-BY

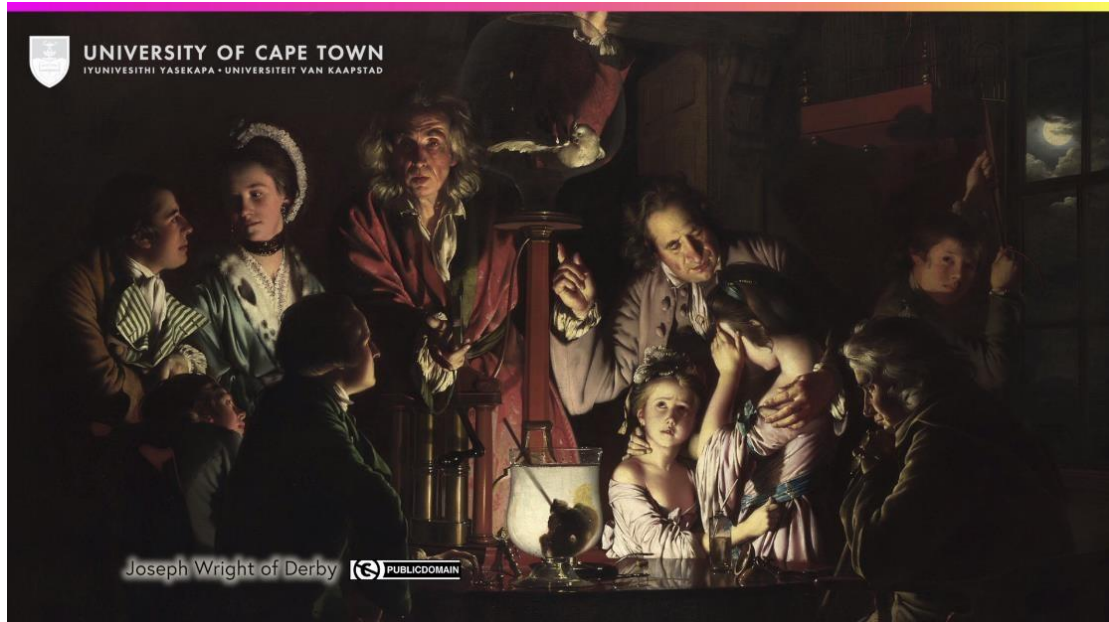
In Western culture, that particular iconic imagery tumbles down through the history of literature and art in many iterations. I'm thinking perhaps particularly here of Rembrandt's famous painting of *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp*, exactly what we're seeing here. I'm thinking perhaps also, and perhaps more to our purpose immediately, of the no-less famous painting by Joseph Wright of Derby, which shows a dove expiring in a vacuum flask as the air in that flask is subtracted and the necessity of oxygen to all life is proved. Around that particular experiment in Joseph Wright's picture, once again a group of people, a drop light, a sense of awe at the mystery and the magic. Not in this instance really anything to do about the science or the medical practise or the history of the transplant, but to do instead, I think, with the mystery of life and its particular occasion in the great brackets that surround life, which are death.

THE ANATOMY OF DR NICOLEAS TULP



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AN EXPERIMENT ON A BIRD IN AN AIR PUMP



Public Domain Joseph Wright of Derby

AN EXPERIMENT ON A BIRD IN AN AIR PUMP – ZOOMED IN



Public Domain Joseph Wright of Derby

Most visitors to this museum are enchanted, and I use that word on purpose, by this particular tableau. And they tend to hurry past another one in that direction, one ward away from where I am, the theatre where the donor's heart was harvested. To turn back to this particular tableau and suggest something perhaps daring and uncomfortable to many of us, I'd like to suggest that there exists between heartbeats, as we say, in the instantaneity of this icon-- and I use that word on purpose, again-- something particularly familiar to anybody born into the Western tradition, anybody within earshot or a heartbeat of the Christian tradition.

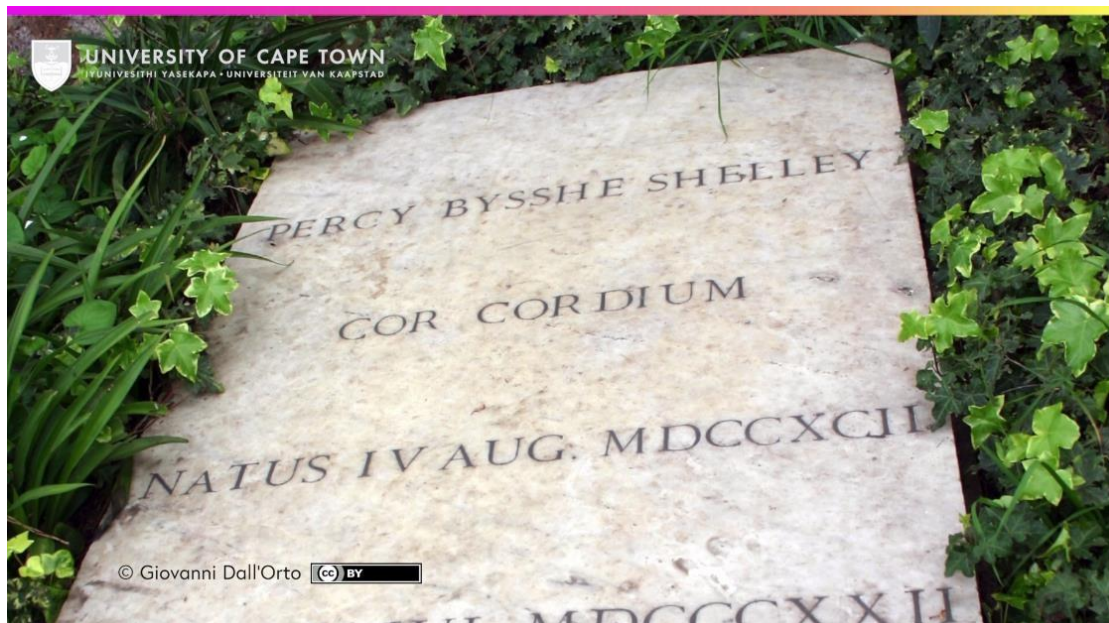
Because what happened there was that somebody died so that somebody here could live. And what we are looking at in this numinous, stupendous instant is in fact a resurrection mystery. Here, after all, are a body of people gathered around a table participating in something to do with the body and the blood. We are looking at a miracle of resurrection that has something to do with transmutation, transformation, even perhaps transubstantiation, as we rehearse the idea that something like the spirit is mysteriously constituted in something material like the human heart.

That may go some way to suggesting the significance of the stillness that is this theatre and this presentation. But to take that idea a little further, I want to go a little further back into my language and my literature, but perhaps to provoke those for whom English is not their language and their literature to think of the equivalent examples in any language and in any culture across the world. I'm thinking immediately of the way in which the heart is used consistently and constantly in metaphors throughout human experience. It stands for a variety of things.

Think, for example, of phrases that often become the titles of books, a phrase like *The Heart of the Matter* or *Heart of Darkness* or, in South African examples, the title of J. M. Coetzee's novel *In the Heart of the Country* or Zakes Mda's novel, *The Heart of Redness*. I'm thinking, perhaps, also of the young poet John Cornford, shortly to die in the Spanish Civil War, writing to his beloved in England in a poem which runs very briefly, "Heart of the heartless world, dear heart."

I'm thinking of the great romantic poet Percy Shelley, whose body washed up, after it had drowned, on the beaches of Italy, was burnt on a pyre on the beach, but whose heart was rescued by his friend Trelawny at the last minute. His heart, said Trelawny, would not burn.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY'S GRAVE



© Giovanni Dall'Orto CC BY

And I'm thinking of Shelley's grave now in the Protestant cemetery in Rome on which is written, quite simply, Cor Cordium, heart of hearts.

Wherever we turn, we find the organ passed from that room to this room and situated in this man's chest used as a metaphor for something, many things. Sometimes relatively trivially the human affect of love, but I think fundamentally and at base, something mystical, which makes this particular tableau inviolable, special, sacred. That sacredness I can suggest perhaps by breaching the confidence of this particular statement, perhaps by putting my hand on the wax hand, which even has hair on it, of Louis Washkansky, or perhaps even more transgressively, reaching in to pat the head of the surgeon, Professor Chris Barnard.

To do so, I'm reaching into the heart of the mystery. And that mystery, as I've suggested, has to do with what happens between there and here, between, as we say, heartbeats. The peculiar thing about the human heart is this it is a matter of substance, a matter of tissues, fluids, things of this world, real, to taste, to touch, to feel. And yet it has stood for a greater mystery, the mystery of life itself, perhaps even the mystery of that aspect of life which we like to hope will outlast us or reaches beyond us and pervades for whom we have heart or whom we keep in our heart.

That mystery of life, I think, is at the centre of us all. And I think that the reason the human heart has become metaphoric for life and for everything that we value in life depends upon two things. Firstly, it depends upon concentricity. It depends upon the fact that the heart lies, as it were, at the centre of us. And the whole rhetoric of this museum repeats that consistently. This is the heart transplant museum, but the strap line that runs underneath the billboards advertising it around the show call it The Heart of Cape Town.

Now, I'm a Capetonian, and I would never think of this particular place as the heart of my city. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of this museum, The Heart of Cape Town, repeats the idea of the human heart's centrality to all our interests. This is, after all, The Heart of Cape Town. And here we are in Groote Schuur, for many, many years the central hospital of Cape Town. And here we are in the precise theatre, and here we are at the centre of that precise theatre where the operation took place.

And at the centre of that theatre, we find the table on which the mystic rite is taking place. And we find gathered in concentricity a circle, functionally as needs to be the case, but in the instant, representing concentricity once again, the actors at that particular rite, the celebrants at this sacerdotal, sacramental mystery. And at the heart of it all, the patient, and at the heart of the patient, the hole in the thorax, a circle, and within that circle the roughly spherical object of the heart itself.

So to the spheres that radiate out from that heart and the circle and the group of people to this theatre, to this hospital, to this city, to this continent, finally find themselves in the sphere of the world and in what was once thought of as the sphere of the cosmos itself. That idea of these dolls nesting in one another, concentric dolls, is an idea at the heart of Western thought. It is an idea begun in the philosophy of Plato, recapitulated perhaps most pertinently in the philosophy of the Neoplatonists who hold it at the centre of everything is an it, something out of which radiates repeated emanations that link us all together and the bind us to the project of the

universe and to the god that we conceive of as making sense of it or making it in the first instance.

Secondly, the human heart is peculiar in our body. Because it moves--

[HEARTBEAT]

-- to our feeling, to our consciousness. Conspicuously, others can even feel it all the time.

[HEARTBEAT]

And it's that last phrase that I think is important. The heart moves, and in moving, in our pulse, measures time. It reminds us insistently and naggingly.

[HEARTBEAT]

Sometimes too fast, sometimes worryingly slowly, mostly extraordinarily at the same rate as the minute, 60 beats, 60 seconds, of the fact that our existence is time bound. It reminds us that time is the medium mysterious-

[HEART MONITOR SOUND]

-- in which we have our bustling being, but that time also is that agent which will take life from us.

[FLAT LINE SOUND]

It's against that peculiarly vital confluence of soul, material body, and the heart's ability to know time, preach it and practised it to us, that this stillness, this strangeness, this moment between heartbeats has its peculiar rhetorical force.



Peter Anderson, 2015

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