In the course of my writing, I have become aware of a strong impulse to reach towards something true, or at least that is how I define it to myself. It is a felt sense rather than anything I can pin down intellectually. It has nothing to do with accuracy in relation to outside historical or biographical events, the kind of truth that clings to fact; in fact I often feel it most strongly when I am writing fiction. It is a strong bodily sense that I recognize instantly when I have reached it. At these moments my breathing deepens and I feel totally absorbed.

In Camera Lucida, his remarkable, moving eulogy to his mother, Roland Barthes writes of two ways of reaching into the truth of a photograph – through the studium, which is the cultural, linguistic and political way of interpreting a photograph, and through the punctum, the wounding, the personally touching detail which establishes a direct relationship with the person or object in the photograph. It goes to the heart, touches the truth. (Barthes 1980)

The word truth in English derives from the Old English troth, and is used most commonly to denote agreement with the true facts about something, as opposed to what is untrue, imagined or false. The truth or falsity of a representation is determined by how it relates to "things", by whether it accurately describes those "things." This is what Barthes would call the studium.

However truth can also denote faithfulness or fidelity to an emotional or a felt experience. Emotional truth, Barthes’ punctum or wounding, falls into this second category – it is known subjectively. And it is this that I am trying to reach towards in this paper, subjective truth, which is so closely tied to psychoanalysis and fiction and art.
Recent studies in neuropsychoanalysis have confirmed that feeling and subjectivity, rather than being at a second or third remove from the truth, are the source and foundation of it, and that cognition is based on them. As Mark Solms writes in *The Conscious Id*: “The constant ‘presence’ of feeling is the background subject of all cognition, without which consciousness of perception and cognition could not exist.” (Solms, 2012, p 20).

According to psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, emotion lies at the heart of meaning. While objective truths are final and static, invested in the reified object, subjective truths are continuing and dynamic. Bion calls on the analyst to suspend memory, desire and understanding in order to learn from his patient, in order to be able to apprehend the live presence of phenomena. In her book, *Bion and Being: Passion in the Creative Mind*, Annie Reiner paraphrases this as follows: “The analyst is called upon to use a different level of his or her perceptual apparatus, without which assumptions continue to be made on an erroneous belief in an invariant world.” (Reiner 2012, p5)

Literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, too, calls for a shift from ‘the truth of philosophy” to another way of knowing – the slippage from the semiotic to the somatic and back again. (Bakhtin 1993)

This question of embodied subjective truth has begun to occupy much of my thinking, and I have begun to wonder whether it might have some kind of application and resonance outside of the artistic and literary sphere, whether it might perhaps be applicable and help to ground more academic work that sometimes seems to float off into excessive and dangerous abstraction. In this paper I will begin to sketch out an idea for a way of using the *punctum*, the wounding that I feel in relation to a part of my doctoral thesis.

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Laubscher

For some years now I have been engaged in research into the work of a South African psychiatrist and amateur ethnologist, Dr. B.J.F. Laubscher, who between 1935 and 1937 was the doctor in charge of the native wards at the Komani Mental Hospital in Queenstown in the Eastern Cape, a very remote part of South Africa.

Laubscher was an intellectually curious man, an explorer of sorts, working at the borders of what was known. He was trying to make sense of the radically other, trying to render intelligible and recognizable, in terms of his world view, the mentally distressed patients who were culturally and linguistically very diverse from himself, in a situation in which he held all the power.

Set against rising preoccupation with race in South Africa, Europe and the United States, and in an attempt to understand the ‘madness’ of his patients, Laubscher undertook a three-pronged study of the abaThembu people to which most of his patients belonged: an ethnological study of the culture; a psychiatric
epidemiological and genetic study of the incidence of psychopathology in the population; and a psychoanalytic study of its symbolic meaning, in particular of how traditional circumcision rites might represent a form of Oedipal developmental stage.

Travelling many hundreds of miles by car and on foot into very remote areas of Thembuland, he collected data on people's beliefs, their social and family structures, sexual mores and puberty rites, marriage, and the meaning of mental disorder within the culture. He enlisted the assistance of the local magistrates and native commissioners in collecting and collating data on the incidence of suicide, sexual deviance and murder, and corresponded with the families of his patients in an attempt to understand whether the mental distress of his patients was hereditary.

In 1937 he published a book, *Sex, Custom and Psychopathology: A Study of South African Pagan Natives*, which was republished another five times over the next fifteen years and which is still to be found in most of the major university libraries in Europe and the USA.

I was immediately intrigued by what he was attempting to do, and struck by the enormity of his ambitions. Yet I felt that he was avoiding the main question, which dealt with the humanity of the other. Judith Butler, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, captures some of what was at stake:

> The question most central to recognition is a direct one, and it is addressed to the other: “Who are you?” This question assumes that there is an other before us whom we do not know and cannot fully apprehend, one whose uniqueness and nonsubstitutability set a limit to the model of reciprocal recognition. (Butler 2005, p31)

While Laubscher's study is focused on the abaThembu people and his patients, he does not address the question “Who are you?” to his patients, but collects static objective information about them. My study focuses on Laubscher himself and grapples with questions of knowledge, of what Laubscher could really know of the other. My study draws attention to the unspoken assumptions subtending the efforts of one person to know another and the ethical implications that derive from this. I believe these questions have great relevance not only for understanding Laubscher and his patients in that remote hospital eighty years ago, but for our ongoing attempts to understand the other.

The film

In my attempt to find a way of unpacking these questions, I have been working with different kinds of texts left by Laubscher: his book, his correspondence, the historic patient folders from the 1930s. What I have found has been disappointing in some ways, and in line with other studies of colonial case records. The records have great uniformity across all groups of patients, regardless of racial classification, gender, class and form of insanity. I have learned a great deal about Laubscher and the other doctors, and the paradigms
that shaped their worlds, and the fears and powers that guided them, but the
patients remain opaque, difficult to read, voiceless. I began to try and read
between the lines, but became increasingly aware of the risk that in trying to do
so I was bringing my own twenty-first century fictions to bear on the material.

And then by chance I came across a film that he had made of his work in the field
and in the hospital. It is a reel of 16mm black and white silent film that he shot
between 1935 and 1937. The film was in very bad condition when I came across
it, but fragments of it have been restored and digitized, and are now housed in
the special collections of the University of Cape Town's library. It is rare footage
of unusual historical and archival value.

It is the film, in particular, that interests me although I am not a film critic and
have no experience in film analysis. I am interested in the film because I had
hoped that here at least, in its silences and ruptures, I would find something
unmediated about the patients. There is something about the photographic
image that contains a kernel of verifiable truth. Even though the image may later
be tampered with and embellished, we know for certain that at a specific
moment in time, for a fraction of a second, this woman, whose photograph
appears on the first page of my paper, was there, that her eyes were turned away
from the photographer in just this way, the light fell on her head casting a
shadow on her right shoulder just so. The photograph offers irrefutable evidence
that this person existed.

The film and cliché

When I first viewed the film, after months of expectation and waiting while it
was being restored, my first feeling was of déjà-vu, a sense of tiredness. The film
was culturally and intellectually constructed in the same way as the book and the
case records. It seemed to me that all that I was seeing was Laubscher's world,
and his construction of the other through it.

Apart from a few frames where an unknown person is holding the camera, the
film follows Laubscher’s gaze. What we are shown is disconcerting – it is the
world as seen through his eyes. The way he frames the images, the selection of
what to foreground keeps telling us about him, not about the persons on the
other side of the lens.

It creates a certain kind of narrative that feels uncannily familiar - typical
ethnographic images such as we have all seen so often in National Geographic
magazines. An old woman walks across a barren landscape carrying an
enormous bundle of firewood on her head, some huts appear to the right and we
know automatically that she is headed for them. Bare-breasted women dance
and young boys fight with sticks. The focus on buttocks and genitals feels tired
and pornographic. The film is culturally and intellectually constructed in the
same way as the book, as the case records, It speaks to a clichéd way of seeing, of
interpreting, the *studium*. The other is seen as utterly other, as a third person
pronoun, a "he" or a "she", or even worse, an "it", with whom I can have no
conversation. I felt disappointed and ashamed at having convinced my university to spend limited resources on something so banal and clichéd.

Pondering my reaction to the film afterwards I realized it was my very tiredness and irritation and shame that I needed to pay attention to. Why did I feel so tired and angry and ashamed? Because of the strong feelings it had aroused in me I knew that there was something authentic happening. I decided to watch it again, this time with a few other people.

I arranged a screening for a group of colleagues, who by chance all happened to be white South Africans. Their reaction was of irritable silence, as if they had watched something quite shameful and embarrassing, something they didn’t want to explore. At the end they left without comment. I thought at first that it was the silence of the film itself that made it difficult for them to find meaning, hang anything on it; because it was not verbalized, they could find no words for it. But when I showed it to some black colleagues, the reaction couldn’t have been more different. They immediately felt wounded by the images, and spoke loudly and interruptedly with anger and shame. I realized that we were touching on something that was still alive in South Africa today. We were reaching something other than what Laubscher had wanted to explain intellectually – we were touching the haphazard unintended details, the slanting things that shimmer through.

I went back to look at the film again, trying to notice where in particular I felt so deadened. The images that sprang out at me this time filled me with a sense of outrage. What did I see? I saw heaviness, painful modesty and an almost intolerable acceptance, worn threadbare clothing, a barren landscape, rhythmic beating of feet, the play of light, movement withheld, submission. Where before I had noticed simply the bare bodies dancing, now I became aware of the details, the way the camera slid down to focus on naked breasts and genitals and hovered there, while heads and faces slipped disturbingly off the top of the screen. I noticed the forced smiles of the girls, the angry gestures of the old woman, the way eyes would not meet the camera but drew away, resentfully refusing contact. The film allows the truth to tremble between what we know is there in the images, between Laubscher and his world, with its underlying spectres of racism, Nazism, eugenics, and the world of the abaThembu.

I realized that my subjective felt engagement was beginning to take on an ethical turn. It seems that having begun to acknowledge the feelings that were aroused by the film, I could begin to start thinking about a subjective ethical relationship to the other. As Judith Butler puts it:

...ethics emerges precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility, the site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed, where one is, as it were, at the limits of what one knows yet still under the demand to offer and receive acknowledgement: to someone else who is there to be addressed and whose address is there to be received. (Butler 2005, p. 21)
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