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# Thinking in the dark of William Kentridge's *Black box/Chambre noire*: reflections within reflections

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This article explores contemporary art historical practice, by considering a number of critical concepts, as these relate discursively to William Kentridge's multi-media artwork *Black box/Chambre noire* (2005). Walter Benjamin's concept "thinking in images" (*Bilddenken*) forms the theoretical basis for a reflection on art historical practice viewed as, to borrow a powerful metaphor of Frederic Schwartz, "thinking in the dark". W J T Mitchell's concept of metapictures is adopted as a means to interpret selected images that appear to "think" or "sense" our interpretation of them, while they reflect on their processes of coming to be. W J T Mitchell is followed in considering "the picture-beholder relationship as a field of mutual desire".

## Denke in die duister van William Kentridge se *Black box/Chambre noire*: refleksies binne refleksies

Die artikel ondersoek die hedendaagse beoefening van die kunsgeskiedenis deur 'n aantal kritiese konsepte wat diskursief verband hou met William Kentridge se multimedia kunswerk *Black box/Chambre noire* (2005) te oorweeg. Die "beelddenke" (*Bilddenken*) van Walter Benjamin bied 'n teoretiese basis vir nadenke oor beoefening van kunsgeskiedenis as "denke in die duister" met verwysing na Frederic Schwartz se treffende "thinking in the dark" metafoer. Die metaprent opvatting van W J T Mitchell word gebruik in die interpretasie van bepaalde voorstellings wat klaarblyklik "dink" of "bewus" is van hoe ons hul interpreteer, siende dat hulle hul ontstaansprosesse reflekteer. W J T Mitchell se beskouing van "the picture-beholder relationship as a field of mutual desire" word beaam.

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SUN MODIA  
BLOEMFONTEIN

Not only are lights and darks morally and physically inverted, but illumination and enlightenment is everywhere promised and withheld, or suddenly annihilated, by the envining obscurity (Stafford 1985: 357).

History — and this is the only truth about history — yes, history is the lie people tell to give meaning to their pasts (Verhaeghen 2007: 434).

By virtue of its very power over visible nature, representation is brought face to face with the limits that power sets. It thereby gestures towards horizons it can never fix or cross. Yet like the Platonic shadows shifting on the wall, what it contrives to make us see is transfigured by the awareness of what it cannot (Braider 2004: 68).

This article is a continuation of my exploration of the allegorical, self-reflexive representation of death in William Kentridge's oeuvre.<sup>1</sup> I trace the ways in which death is figured in Kentridge's *Black box/Chambre noire* (2005). My departure point is Robert Schumann's haunting and painful film *Nasbornjagd in Deutsch Ostafrika* (*Rhinoceros hunting in German East Africa*) (1911-12) (Figure 1), which is projected in Kentridge's "mechanised miniature theatre" (Figure 2, Law-Viljoen 2007a: 158) — a box that directly references the *camera obscura* as well as the popular nineteenth-century entertainment



Figure 1: Robert Schumann, still from *Rhinoceros hunting in German East Africa* (1911-12). Archival film. Documentation by John Hodgkiss

1 This is an expanded version of a paper presented at the twenty-third annual SAVAH conference hosted by the University of the Witwatersrand (September 2007). I wish to thank the session participants for their observations, in particular Maureen de Jager, Colin Richards, and Dirk van den Berg.

known as phantasmagoria. This article projects *Black box* in a constellation with various forms of representing seeing, reasoning, and deception such as the *camera obscura*, phantasmagoria, shadow-play, thought-images, metapictures, allegory, film, and photography.

The graphic stalking and shooting of a rhinoceros in Schumann's film is intricately interwoven with the construction of vision allegorised



Figure 2: William Kentridge, *Black box/Chambre noire* (2005). Mixed media.  
Installation view at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.  
Documentation still by John Hodgkiss

by phantasmagoria and the *camera obscura*. The film is evidence of the phantasmagorical, representational construction of Africa by Europe — as a virgin (if dark, opaque) frontier, ready to be pillaged. Land, animals, people, and artefacts were regarded as trophies to be accumulated, truncated, and displayed as so many curiosities. The African continent was regarded as a wilderness that should be tamed and civilised by European colonisers whose rationale can be pictured as a *camera obscura*, in which the outside is reflected on the inside, in reverse.

The rhino,<sup>2</sup> hunted and shot in Schumann's colonialist film, is a recurring figure in Kentridge's work and, whether still or animated, it consistently manages to subtly contradict Descartes's belief that animals are mere mechanical and thoughtless clocks (Figures 3 and 4). Contra the in-human belief that animals lack a soul, thought, or reason, in Kentridge's work animals possess a "face", which registers and remembers atrocity, and which summons us into an ethical relationship with the other. Contra Emmanuel Levinas' privileging of the human face as expression of the wholly other, in Kentridge's work the animal's naked, vulnerable, unadorned countenance possesses the "wholly other", mindful power to interrupt our selfish, egocentric opportunism; our self-righteous, clinical gaze.

Once incorporated into Kentridge's multilayered, multimedia reflection on reflection, representation of representation, Schumann's filmic document becomes exceedingly complex. Projected into a dark box, which consists of various moving and non-moving parts/images

- 2 Kate McCrickard (2007: 150) traces some of the art historical and cultural references implied by Kentridge's figuring of the rhino: "The rhino was a symbol of power and kingship in Europe for centuries, most remarkably exemplified by Clara, a three-ton Indian rhinoceros brought to Europe in 1741, who toured the continent in a horse-driven carriage for seventeen years, becoming a favourite of Frederick the Great and Louis XV and a popular motif on Meissen's eighteenth-century porcelain dinner services (before her demise from an alcohol and tobacco habit). Clara was immortalised by Jean-Baptiste Oudry in 1749 in his life-size oil portrait, and in Robert Lhongi's *Exhibition of a rhinoceros at Venice*, 1751. Both were corrective images to Dürer's fearsome beast and dispelled the fallacy attributed to Pliny and Gesner among others, which claimed the rhinoceros as a formidable creature that fought with elephants and was descended from the unicorn". Referring to Kentridge's dry points *Three rhinos*, the first two entitled *Dunce* (2005) and the third *Crowd pleaser* (2005), McCrickard notes: "Kentridge's three prints recall Dürer — and also Burgkmair's fantastical sixteenth-century armoured beasts — but transform him from a regal motif of power into a domesticated creature that solemnly gazes at his water (related drawings even display the dog's name, *Fido* on the rhino's bowl). This rhino is rather a symbol of a romantic, exploitative, colonialist view of Africa". Angela Breidback (2007: 40-1) observes that Kentridge's various renditions of a rhino derive from Dürer's 1515 engraving of a rhinoceros — based not on sight but on a letter from the Moravian printer Valentin Ferdinand, which contained a sketch. Ferdinand saw the animal displayed in Lisbon in 1515.

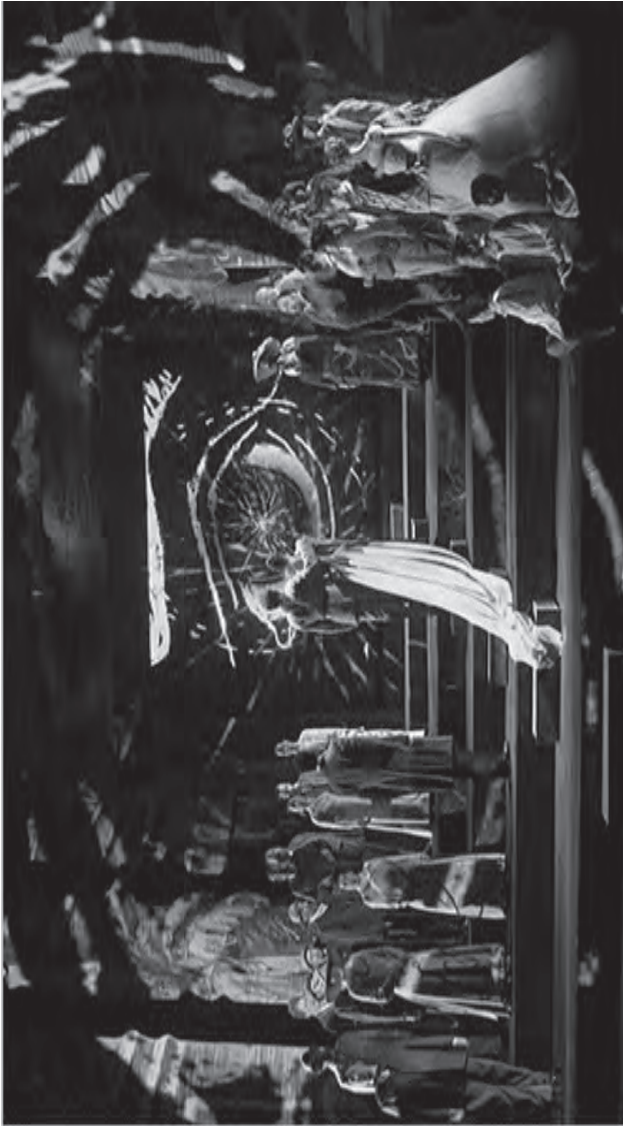


Figure 3: William Kentridge, Tamino and Pamina, *The magic flute*, La Monnaie, Brussels, 2005.  
<<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2007/04/09/arts/Ken1600.jpg>>



Figure 4: William Kentridge, *Three rhinos* (2005).  
Drypoints with red pastel on Hahnemühle warm white 300gsm paper  
(Law-Viljoen 2007: 150)

(indeed, like a clock, but exposed), even the film (camera or black box) itself seems to hunt and kill (mortify) the animal,<sup>3</sup> and this suggestion opens the viewer to the uncomfortable sense that s/he is an accomplice in the killing. Schumann's film, Philip Miller's mournful music and the "yearning, fearful images of death"<sup>4</sup> which pervade *Black box* together create a deep sense of melancholia. Kentridge references Freud's *Trauerarbeit*; the word is written on the megaphone of a moving mechanical figure, appearing at the beginning and at the end of the non-linear narrative of *Black box*. But the working through is endless, taking place in the dark. "All knowledge is enveloped in darkness", says Thomas Browne in W G Sebald's melancholy meditation on transience *The rings of Saturn* (2002). "What we perceive are no more than isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance in the shadow-filled edifice of the world".

In the melancholy darkness of *Black box*, image and thing — subject and object, inside and outside — appear to merge or extend into one another (cf Van Alphen 1992). The merger both animates and petrifies our sense of self. In the shifting shadow play of *Black*

3 Cf Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, in which the obsessive film-maker, who hunts and "kills" what he films, finally kills himself by turning his camera on himself. Cf Barthes (2000: 11) on the "mortiferous power" of the camera.

4 To cite the author of *The rings of Saturn*, W G Sebald (Zisselsberger 2007: 281) writing about Franz Kafka's work.

*box*, both animal and image appear alive and dead, still and moving; and our sense of self is interwoven with that uncanny duality and strange ambiguity. Our vision and our sense of self is enmeshed in a web of projections and reflections, images within images that create a phantasmagoria in which points of view are shifted and reversed — made uncomfortable.

Everything solid turns into thin air; large appears small, distance appears near, self appears other. Recalling Simon Luttichuys' metapicture *Vanitas with skull* (1645) (Figure 5), the enfolded reflections within reflections, the representation of representation in *Black box* solicits a meditation on fleetingness, reversibility, and "opaque resemblance" (cf Zisselsberger 2007: 283), the distorting similarity of self and other. As a paradoxically moving still life, *Black box* is both phantasmagoria and *camera obscura*; it is also an allegory, signifying "the process of speaking [or picturing, GS] differently or of saying something else" (Richter 2007: 32).<sup>5</sup>

## 1. *Camera obscura*, phantasmagoria

The *camera obscura* works on the principle that if a small aperture is fitted in one wall of a black chamber (the size of a box or room), allowing the rays of the sun to enter the chamber, a reverse image of the outside world will appear on the wall opposite to the hole in the wall. The tool was exploited by scientists and by Leonardo to aid artists to draw from life and it was used for entertainment; it also reappears in David Hockney's (2006) recent attempt to recover the ways artists such as Caravaggio constructed their pictures using lenses and mirrors. Inherently Cartesian, the *camera obscura* is a meta-image of doubt in the senses (what I see is upside down); certainty in reason (sceptical of everything else, everything sensory, I am certain of one thing: I think therefore I am).

5 In this instance I am thinking Kentridge together with Walter Benjamin. Cf Auerbach (2007: 5): "Benjamin is also the speculator who profits from the traffic between the realm of things and the realms of allegory and of phantasmagoria; the one for whom the reflecting (on) images increases his stock".

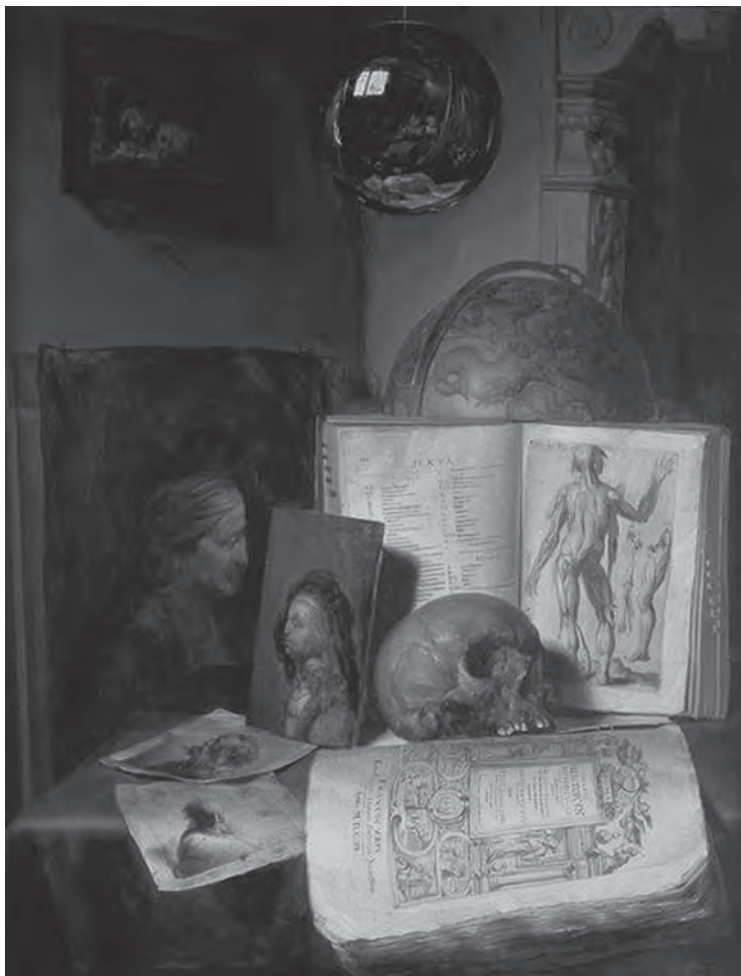


Figure 5: Simon Luttichuys, *Vanitas with skull* (1645). Oil on canvas, 49 by 37.3 cm. Sotheby's London sale 8 December 2004, lot 31. <[http://accel23.mettre-put-idata\\_over\\_blog.com/0/21/89/67/simon\\_luttichuys\\_1645\\_vanit\\_jpg](http://accel23.mettre-put-idata_over_blog.com/0/21/89/67/simon_luttichuys_1645_vanit_jpg)>



Kentridge's reference to the *camera obscura* also extends Karl Marx's use of it as an image of the distorted experience and ideology under capitalism, especially the reversal in which ideas supersede and displace material life. For Marx the *camera obscura* perfectly imaged — and explained — the false consciousness produced by the optical apparatuses with which capitalism projected its values; thus, as image, the *camera obscura* dialectically reveals the false consciousness produced by images (cf Mitchell 1987: 178).

In Kentridge's hands Marx's false consciousness includes the distorted and distorting ideology of a specular colonialism, itself a product of the distorted and distorting ideology of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment project, which was based on reason over appearance. Moreover, it becomes a meta-image for the ways in which Kentridge's own optical mechanisations, his use of optical mediators to represent the world, reveal and take part in, illuminate and obscure the displacement of reality by doubtful, phantasmagorical images.

In this regard, *Black box* refers to the optical illusions known as phantasmagoria, a popular form of entertainment among nineteenth-century European audiences. A reversal of the well-lit theatres in which nineteenth-century audiences watched the performances on stage as much as each other — phantasmagorical spectacles took place in the dark. Known as an art of light and shadow, phantasmagoria consisted mainly of a magic lantern (precursor to the modern slide projector) which, hidden from the audience, was used to project phantom-like images in the dark; the darkness would envelop the audience, disorientating their sense of perspective, exposing their fear of the unknown, making them unsure about the reality of what they saw.

The darkness of the theatre is illuminating because phantasmagoria combined reason with irrationality, science with superstition. Following directly in the wake of the French Revolution, phantasmagoria was described by one of its practitioners, Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, as the scientific disenchantment of the world. Precisely by relying on the audience's disbelief, Robertson and others could astonish the audience with disorientating projections of phantoms, ghosts, the dead — including the Revolution's dead heroes Marat and especially Robespierre, whose Reign of Terror returned to haunt

and torment an audience schooled in the dialectics of reason over the irrationality of the church and the monarchy (cf Warner 2006).

Thus phantasmagoria, a spectacle of optical illusions, deceptions, and distortions in a darkened theatre, enchanted an audience precisely to disenchant it. Marx's dialectical use of the word would similarly serve to undermine the enchanting phantasmagoria of the commodity fetish — which falsely projects exchange value over use value — from within. In both instances, the question remains whether disenchantment can indeed take place through enchantment; or perhaps this question is part of the process of self-critique.

Seemingly aware that phantasmagoria implies its own deconstruction, for Kentridge "phantasmagoria" involves the exposure not only of the ideological projections of capital and, by extension, of colonial power, but more importantly it also entails the deconstruction of his own phantasmagorical theatre. In referencing the dialectics of phantasmagoria and the optical reversals of the *camera obscura*, Kentridge reveals his entanglement in a contested critical tradition in which subjectivity and consciousness are (de-)constructed by the spectacle of reason.

Robert Schumann's film, "in which we see the graphic stalking and killing of a rhinoceros trapped by both the gun and the camera" (McCrickard 2007: 152), visualises the phantasmagorical dialectic of self and other on which the enlightenment idea of individual consciousness is based. Incorporated together with Georg Hartmann's maps of South-West Africa in *Black box*, "to create a multilayered reflection on the representation of Africa abroad" (Villaseñor 2005: 95), the film was also projected in Kentridge's South African stage productions of Mozart's eighteenth-century opera *Die Zauberflöte* or *The magic flute* (Figure 6), which precedes *Black box*. Projected in *The magic flute*, Schumann's film casts a direct shadow across Mozart's Freemason and Enlightenment pretensions.

Continuing the European Enlightenment project of self-criticism, Kentridge's multilayered reflection on representations *qua* compartmentalisations of Africa, in both *Black box* and *The magic flute*, turns the Enlightenment against itself. His multilayered use of film, photography, drawing, projection, and automata produces a shadow play



Figure 6: William Kentridge, Tamino and the rhinoceros, *The magic flute*, La Monnaie, Brussels, 2005 (Law-Viljoen 2007: 151)

that obliquely reveals the limitations, deceptions, irrationality, as well as the violence and atrocity lurking within the Enlightenment desire for instrumental clarity. For Kentridge, as for Goya before him, the dream of reason produces the very monsters it seeks to vanquish. Thus the vision of an enlightening phantasmagoria is shown to be painfully inadequate, even monstrously flawed — but all too human.

But Kentridge does not merely partake of the clichéd compartmentalisation of the Enlightenment as bad; by exposing the mechanical/digital innards of *Black box* he draws attention to the machinations, optical illusions, distortions, projections, and overlays that make up its fascinating and absorbing phantasmagoria. In the process he reveals his own re-construction of history as potentially “dubious”; mere art. As with the Enlightenment, Kentridge’s self-criticism — from the criss-crossing perspectives of colonial and postcolonial Africa; involving the overlay of enlightenment and superstition, light and shadow — clearly has its limitations and deceptions.

Irrespective of one’s point of view, perception can be deceiving. By illuminating the ways in which our perceptions — as constructions;

sensory as well as reasoned — deceive us, *Black box* questions the totality of enlightenment. The box-within-a-box catches us in a phantasmagorical trap (the trap of history and of a spectral past), in which one thing turns into its opposite — outside is reversed as inside; near appears far; large seems small; light shifts to shadow; innocence shades into guilt; self is distorted as other. *Black box* suggests that all constructions (of vision and of reason) are flawed because they are entangled with “desire, possession, violence, displeasure, pain, force, ambition, power, obligation, gratitude, longing”, to cite James Elkins (1996: 31), writing about looking. Our constructions are entangled with us — they, too, need, demand, and lack.

## 2. Needing, demanding, lacking

Schumann’s archival film of a rhino hunt in German East Africa, circa 1911, establishes a discursive or allegorical link between the vision of enlightenment celebrated in *The magic flute* and *Black box*’s “searing treatment of the massacre of the Herero by the Germans in 1904 in German South West Africa” (Law-Viljoen 2007b: 2).<sup>6</sup> According to Kate McCrickard (2007: 152), Kentridge’s use of photography in his production of *The magic flute*<sup>7</sup> and in *Black box* makes a conceptual link between colonialism and the Enlightenment, in terms of its perverse belief “that it was bringing light to the Dark Continent”. I wish to appropriate Schumann’s film as a filter and as an image-sequence “‘wanting’ a narrative and discursive frame, in the multiple senses of wanting — i.e., needing, demanding, and lacking”, to cite W J T Mitchell (2006: 6), asking what pictures want.

According to Kentridge (Van der Vyver 2007: 60), “*Chambre noire* is what remains after [the fleeting production of Mozart’s] opera [*The magic flute*] is over”. According to Bronwyn Law-Viljoen (2007a: 185), *Black box*’s “dark memorial to the ‘strange fruit’ of the German colonial

6 For a history of the massacre, cf Law-Viljoen (2007: 158) who describes it as “the first genocide of the twentieth century”.

7 Schumann’s film was inserted into Kentridge’s production of the opera only in the New York and subsequent productions (cf McCrickard 2007: 152).

endeavour dissects the values of truth, light and rationality celebrated in the opera". Maria-Christina Villaseñor (2005: 77) observes that

the work on Mozart's Enlightenment-themed opera would lead Kentridge to *Black box/Chambre noire*, which explores the darker implications of that era's philosophical legacy, reflects the key process of reversal that so often takes center stage in the artist's work.

Like the reversal taking place in a *camera obscura*, in *Black box* — as well as in other works by Kentridge — enlightenment rationality<sup>8</sup> is reversed as “thinking in the dark”, to borrow Frederic Schwartz's powerful metaphor.<sup>9</sup>

Thinking about the human atrocity, loss, and trauma of Enlightenment-based colonialism means thinking in the dark; one seemingly starts from nowhere, given that the ground on which we could base our human beingness and our sense of justice appears flimsy at best. Estranged from the past, we ourselves seem implicated in the atrocity, loss, and trauma. Perhaps this is the post-colonial condition; a condition of melancholic yearning for an impossible, hollow past according to some theorists (cf Sorensen 2007).

To think about the relationship between Plato and the European Enlightenment, between the Enlightenment and colonialism, between the desire for the other and bloody violence means thinking in the darkness produced by the limits of vision and of representation. As

8 This tends to produce the monsters and shadows it seeks to vanquish. Cf Castle 1995 & Stoichita 1999: 164.

9 Writing about Benjamin, Bloch, Kracauer and Adorno, Schwartz (2005: xii) notes: “They were aware that they were inevitably thinking, to some extent, in the dark. They responded by allowing this darkness of an unknowable present to expand into a space of extraordinary speculative richness.” Similarly, Breton (1959: 299) writes: “I have discovered clarity as worthless. Working in darkness, I have discovered lightning.” Elkins (1996: 206) describes all seeing as taking place in the dark: “Perhaps ordinary vision is less like a brightly lit sky with one blinding spot in it than like the night sky filled with stars. Maybe we see only little spots against a field of darkness. Once in a great while there may be a flash of lightning and we see everything, but then darkness returns. My vision, even at its most acute, is probably not much better than the points of the stars against their invisible field of black.” Cf Ernst Bloch's phrase “im Dunkel des gelebten Augenblicks” [in the darkness of the lived moment] (Benjamin 1999: 393).

Christopher Braider (2004: 68) writes in *Baroque self-invention and historical truth*: “By virtue of its very power over visible nature, representation is brought face to face with the limits that power sets”.

Perhaps while remembering the pre-image to his rendering of a rhino, Dürer’s 1515 woodcut *Rhinoceros* (Figure 7), Kentridge (Law-Viljoen 2007c: 3) observes:

[W]hen we look it is not simply a matter of the world coming in to us, but it is us constructing the natural world as we understand it [...] This is always a process of meeting the world halfway, in which we counteract the products of the world onto our eyes with the pressure of the existing knowledge, understandings, prejudices and fixed ideas streaming out of us (Breidbach 2007: 39).

We think as we see, and *vice versa*: through our phantasmagorical constructions, distortions, and projections darkly. The desire for a flash of recognition that would illuminate everything (as in, for example, Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*) is also precisely the very thing that prevents it from happening.

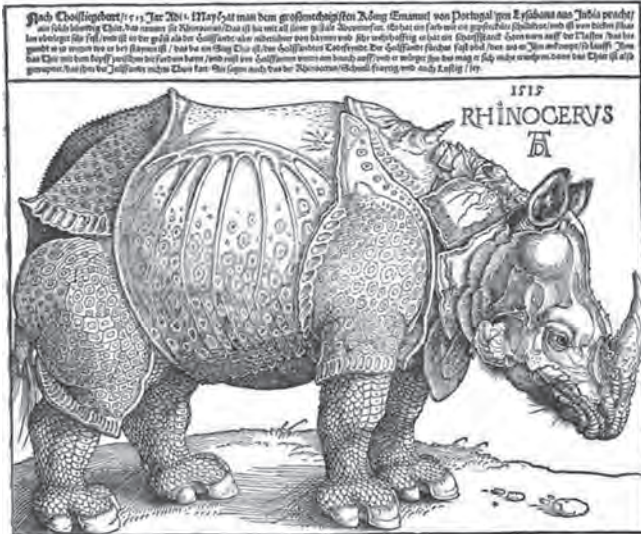


Figure 7: Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinoceros* (1515). Woodcut, 21.4 by 29.8 cm (Kentridge 2007: 39)

Thinking and seeing darkly also means our thinking and seeing determines darkness only to the extent that darkness determines our seeing; they are entangled, the way looking subject and viewed object, or natural world and its pictures, constructions and projections are (cf Elkins 1996: 35). In *The science of logic*, Hegel pictures this ambiguity or dialectic as follows, intertwining seeing with being and darkness with nothingness:<sup>10</sup>

But one *pictures* being to oneself, perhaps in the image of pure light as the clarity of undimmed seeing [*die Klarheit ungetrüübten Sehens*], and then nothing as pure night — and their distinction is linked with this very familiar sensuous difference. But, as a matter of fact, if this very seeing is more exactly imagined, one can readily perceive that in absolute clearness [*in der absoluten Klarheit*] there is seen just as much, and as little, as in absolute darkness, that the one seeing is as good as the other, that pure seeing is a seeing of nothing. Pure light and pure darkness are two voids which are the same thing. Something can be distinguished [*unterscheiden*] only in determinate light or darkness (light is determined by darkness and so is darkened light, and darkness is determined by light, is illuminated darkness), and for this reason, that it is only darkened light [*getrüübtes Licht*] and illuminated darkness which have within themselves the moment of difference and are, therefore, determinate being [*Dasein*].

Citing the above passage from Hegel in the introduction to his book *A short history of the shadow*, Victor Stoichita (1999: 8) observes that a study of the relationship between shadow and light can only be fully justified if one adopts Hegel's viewpoint. In the context of Kentridge's *Black box* Hegel's dialectic can be extended when it is linked to the dialectical operations of reversal visualised in allegory (and in the *camera obscura*). In allegory, “[t]he analogy of opposites is the relation of light to shadow, peak to abyss, fullness to void”, as Eliphaz Levi (Eco 2001: 161) writes in *Dogme de la haute magie* (1856). It “is the replacement of the seal by the hallmark, of reality by shadow; it is the falsehood of truth, and the truth of falsehood”.<sup>11</sup> Barbara Maria Stafford (1985: 348) writes of allegory:

10 In the process he precedes Heidegger and Sartre.

11 Of course, Eco's citation of Eliphaz Levi in his book *Foucault's pendulum* is ironic. Eco is poking fun at the conspiracy theory surrounding the Knights Templar, in which every shadow becomes loaded with hyperbolic significance. Eco's tongue-in-cheek reference to allegory is all but missing in Dan Brown's populist *The*

In the allegorical presentation of mental or spiritual life, the lack of proportion between the infinite and the finite, God and man, soul and body, idea and expression, all and nothing, elicited the visual juxtaposition of opposites: the most simple with the most composite, the uniform with the altered, the most immense with the tiniest, the perfect with the idiosyncratic, the unmoved with the passionate.

As a figure of dialectical reversal rooted in lack, allegory speaks other (cf Dilnot & Garcia-Padilla 1989: 43, Schoeman 2004: 14); it means something other than what it says. Unable to meet up with the signified, the allegorical signifier becomes an arbitrary, floating signifier. It signifies that it cannot be whole, total, or meaningful. This is also why allegory is inseparable from the condition of melancholia — the state in which “the utensils of active life”, as Benjamin (1998: 99) writes in *The origin of German tragic drama*, become useless.

In speaking other, allegory reverses light and dark, fullness and void, above and below, self and other, beholder and image, reality and simulacrum, life and death. In picturing something else, the automata and the allegorical images projected in *Black box* anticipate — need, demand, lack — our thinking of them. As with the reversibility of the *camera obscura* and the dialectics of phantasmagoria, our thinking should clarify the ambiguity with which we are confronted; yet the ambiguity persists, because in *Black box* our seeing and thinking about self and other are revealed to be inescapably intertwined — distorted by similarity. What we think uncannily also appears to think (like) us; we see ourselves seeing and thinking in the shadows, reflections, and images with which we think the other.

### 3. Thinking in dark images or, obscure reflections

Walter Benjamin coined the phrase “thinking in images” (*Bilddenken*), thus introducing a shift from thinking systematically, logically, and rationally in words only to “thinking and acting in pictures” (cf Weigel 1996: 4). In order to think in images, Benjamin adopted the literary

*Da Vinci code* (2004), which takes the Knights Templar at face value, entirely missing their arbitrary significance. The seminal text on arbitrary signification in allegory remains Walter Benjamin’s *The origin of German tragic drama* (1928).



genre of the *Denkbild* — “thinking image”, “image of reflection”, or “thought-image”. As Gerhard Richter observes in his book *Thought-images: Frankfurt School writers' reflections from damaged life*, the image of reflection focuses on the everyday object or a seemingly insignificant phenomenon such as a dream, a shadow, even the telephone (a recurring *Denkbild* of Kentridge's) — “in order to place these objects and phenomena into a new, unexpected constellation that enables them to be read and evaluated as signs of a larger cultural semiotics” (Richter 2007: 8). The *Denkbild* combines language, image, and spirit, according to Theodor Adorno; one can say that in Kentridge's *Denkbilder* (and *Black box* is a combination or assemblage of numerous *Denkbilder*, such as the rhino) music serves the function of spirit.

Benjamin's imagistic thinking also reveals the uncanny or sub-semiotic (cf Elkins 1995) idea that thinking takes place within the darkness or opaqueness of images; that images themselves think, reflect, or are absorbed, however obscurely — however much they appear other to us, or turn away from us (cf Fried 1992, 2005 & 2007, Schoeman 2005). The *Denkbild* or thinking image is an image of reflection — and reflection entails likeness as well as thought. The reflecting image makes a likeness on which it reflects; reflection is a likeness of the representation of thought, or of representation as thought. Michael Baxandall & Svetlana Alpers (1994) argue likewise in their interpretation of Tiepolo's paintings as figuring thought or pictorial intelligence; Hubert Damisch, too, said something similar when he theorised that art “thinks” (cf Van Alphen 2005: xiv).

Following Damisch, Mieke Bal (1999) speaks of a “thinking object” and a “thinking image”; she has in mind Damisch's idea of a “theoretical object” that theorises itself. But while images may think or theorise, the image's self-thought, self-theorising, or self-criticism (in the tradition of the Enlightenment) is not confined to the realm of reason (cf Van Alphen 2005: xv). Bal's argument is partially levelled against the imperialist imposition of our thought onto images.<sup>12</sup> Mit-

12 She writes: “But theory here is not an instrument of analysis, to be ‘applied’ to the art object, supposedly serving it but in fact subjecting it. Instead, it is a discourse that can be brought to bear on the object at the same time as the object can be

chell points out that while images may think, that does not necessarily mean that they think like us. He observes:

The principles of vitalism and animism require that we also take account of what are sometimes called 'lower' forms of consciousness — mere sentience, for instance, or sensuous awareness, responsiveness, as well as forms of memory and desire (Mitchell 2006: 3).<sup>13</sup>

Mitchell is not one of those people who, as Freud (1988: 371) remarks, have rid themselves completely of naïve animistic beliefs so as to be insensible to the effects of the uncanny. He asks:

How is it [...] that people [and Mitchell includes himself here, GS] are able to maintain a "double consciousness" toward images, pictures, and representations in a variety of media, vacillating between magical beliefs and skeptical doubts, naïve animism and hardheaded materialism, mystical and critical attitudes? (Mitchell 2005: 7).

After reflecting on Barthes's about-turn regarding the magic of the image when he was faced with a photograph of his mother in a winter garden, Mitchell (2005: 9) observes:

[W]hen a group of students scoff at the idea of a magical relation between a picture and what it represents, ask them to take a photograph of their mother and cut out the eyes.

brought to bear on it" (Bal 2002: 61). Similarly, Mitchell (1986: 43) observes: "Insofar as art history claims to become a critical discipline, one that reflects on its own premises and practices, it cannot treat the words that are so necessary to its work as mere instrumentalities in the service of visual images or treat images as mere grist for the mill of textual decoding. It must reflect on the relation of language to visual representation and make the problem of 'word and image' a central feature of its self-understanding. Insofar as this problem involves borders between 'textual' and 'visual' disciplines, it ought to be a subject of investigation and analysis, collaboration and dialogue, not defensive tactics."

- 13 Mitchell (2006: 3) continues: "What we call thinking (in images or in living things) goes deeper than philosophical reflection or self-consciousness. Animals remember. And most of human consciousness is pre- or unconscious. The nervous system is not the only system in our bodies that can learn. There is also the immune system, which learns to recognize and deal with a staggeringly large number of alien organisms in the life of any individual, and which works through a mechanism of copying, mimesis, and reproduction of antibodies that are symmetrical 'twins' of the antigens they combat."

This power or hold of the image over us, as though it is something living, something capable of sentient thought, lies at the crux of my argument that the image of a rhino in Kentridge's *Black box* is alive and dead — reflecting (on) our reflecting on it. It is the reflecting (and distorting) other to our selves.<sup>14</sup>

Following Mitchell, if one were to regard Schumann's archival film of a rhino shot down and "posed" by the hunters for the purposes of photographic display, one might suggest from the point of view of animism and vitalism, and from the point of view of the thinking image, that perhaps images "think" darkly; sense, respond to, and remember loss, trauma, and pain. Thus — as shadow extensions of our constructed seeing and thinking; capable of needing, demanding, and lacking — images pain us, as we sometimes pain them.<sup>15</sup>

Schumann's film of mortification and killing concludes with a dead trophy — the image of the head of the dead rhino, which I have culled from Schumann's film as *Denkbild*, and as allegory of "the living image of the dead thing" (Schwenger 2000: 396) (Figure 8). As a metonymic photograph — inanimate still of the moving whole — the image of the dead rhino's head functions allegorically and melancholically as a horrible shadow of our desires to reify and possess the living other. This shadow-corpse as picture of the living dead is especially significant to the discourse and meta-discourse of photography, particularly in terms of what Roland Barthes calls "platitude" — meaning both surface accessibility and interpretative imperviousness (cf Zisselsberger 2007: 281). In *Black box* the duality and ambiguity of "platitude" confounds historical and discursive clarity.

14 Cf Keith Moxey (2008) for a lucid discussion of two different approaches to visual objects: on the one hand, the one which emphasises the agency of the object, à la Mitchell, Elkins, Boehm, Belting and Bredenkamp; on the other hand, reception theory, which emphasises the identity, role, ideological make-up or "situatedness" of the viewer, exemplified by, among others, Nicholas Mirzoeff.

15 This pain includes the pain that James Elkins (1996: 18) locates in the simple experience of light entering our eyes (Elkins equates this with force). *Vice versa*, our seeing can be an act of violence that causes pain (cf Elkins 1996: 26). On the iconoclastic pain we inflict on images, cf Besançon 2000 and Latour & Weibel 2002.



Figure 8: Robert Schumann, Still from *Rhinoceros hunting in German East Africa* (1911-12). Documentation by John Hodgkiss.

#### 4. In the shadows of photographs

In his book *Camera lucida* Roland Barthes (2000: 78) writes:

If the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing. For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ('this has been'), the photograph suggests that it is already dead.

The image of the dead rhino in Schumann's film may be an artificially stilled/framed image, given that it is part of the moving whole of the film; yet the climax of the film can be read symbolically as culminating in a photograph — that is, the trophy, perversely real and live. This paper-thin trophy functions like a still and moving

shadow that falls across our seeing, or better, it paradoxically gives substance to our seeing — “highlighting, instead of casting into darkness”, to cite Barbara Maria Stafford (1985: 355), writing about Goya’s mocking of the mimetic law. As a shadow-corpse, there and not there, the head of the rhino highlights — makes us conscious of — our seeing and not seeing in the dark.

William Kentridge (2005: 43) observes: “Something about shadows makes us very conscious of the activity of seeing”. This thoughtful statement reveals the degree to which Kentridge’s art — not unlike Christian Boltanski’s or Kara Walker’s — concerns itself self-reflexively with the equivocations of projection, shadow, illusion, construction, absorption, transformation, process, motion, reflection, and reversal. It also reflects Kentridge’s ongoing concern with “uncertain endings” (Villaseñor 2005: 33) and conjecture.

Kentridge’s art of shadows, reflections, and conjecture also brings to mind the eighteenth century’s interest in shadows, reflections, and conjecture. To cite Barbara Maria Stafford (1985: 345), writing about Johann Caspar Lavater’s eighteenth-century system of physiognomy (Figure 9), which was premised on the projecting and reading of silhouettes: “In this world of shadows [...] where signs are probable or improbable depending on one’s angle of vision, conjecture is the most one can achieve”. Anamorphic conjecture is also Cesare Lombroso’s nineteenth-century idea that physiognomy revealed character could achieve (Figure 10) — that is, the grotesque, racial kind accomplished by nineteenth-century eugenicists who “conducted tests such as the measuring of skulls in order to determine race, predict criminality and detect insanity and other aberrations in human beings” (Law-Viljoen 2007a: 170). The recurring motif of the skull (complementary image of the dead head of the rhino) in *Black box* (Figures 11 & 12) serves to give a face or *facies hippocratica* to the idealistic conjectures of the singular and the universal, the particular and the species.<sup>16</sup>

16 Didi-Huberman (2003: 49) writes: “*Facies* simultaneously signifies the singular air of a face, the particularity of its aspect, as well as the *genre* or *species* under which this aspect should be subsumed. The *facies* would thus be face fixed to a synthetic combination of the universal and the singular: the visage fixed to the regime of *representation*, in a Hegelian sense.”



Figure 9: Johann Caspar Lavater, A page of profiles from *Essays on physiognomy* (1775-8).  
<<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/24/assets/images/lavater2.jpg>>

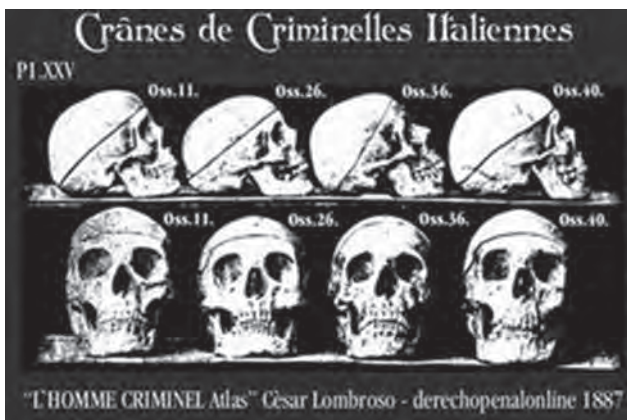


Figure 10: Cèsar Lombroso, *Crânes de criminelles Italiennes, L'homme criminel atlas* (1887).  
<[http://www.gsgis.k12.va.us/ourschool/AllSchoolRead/Secrets\\_files/image005.jpg](http://www.gsgis.k12.va.us/ourschool/AllSchoolRead/Secrets_files/image005.jpg)>

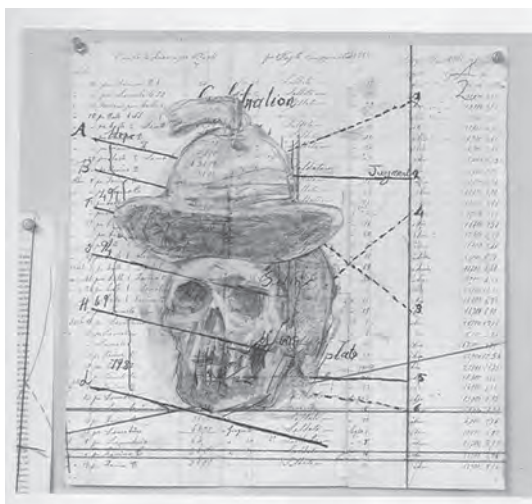


Figure 11: William Kentridge, Drawing for *Black box/Chambre noire* (2005).  
Charcoal and coloured crayon on found pages, 37 by 36.5 cm  
(Law-Viljoen 2007: 170).

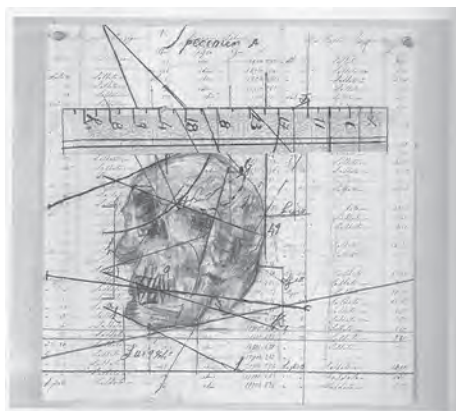


Figure 12: William Kentridge, Drawing for *Black box/Chambre noire* (2005).  
Charcoal, coloured crayon and collage on found pages, 37 by 36.5 cm  
(Law-Viljoen 2007: 170).

Similar to photographs, shadows index ambiguously; we can only conjecture the truth or hard evidence in them. Of course, we believe the photograph as shadow really gives us hard evidence;<sup>17</sup> we believe the photograph presents us with “a passive recording, an objective, because physical, reflection of the reality that is its ostensible material” (Law-Viljoen 2007: 180). As Georges Didi-Huberman (2003: 33) observes in his book *Invention of hysteria: Charcot and the photographic iconography of the Salpêtrière*: “The photographic image has indexical value, in the sense of evidence; it designates the one who is guilty of evil [*le mal*], it prejudices his arrest”. Hence the intricate connection between photography and policing perfected by the police official Alphonse Bertillon’s nineteenth-century measuring system known as anthropometry (cf Law-Viljoen 2007a: 180) (Figure 13).<sup>18</sup>

Highlighting the fantasy of exactly capturing aberrations like hysteria or criminality on film and in photographs, Didi-Huberman (2003: 61) comments:

But what of this ‘exact’ knowledge? Photography might be right about something (but what?), even as it falls short of what it leads one to believe by virtue of its tricks, points of view, and fabrications of beauty. Inversely, what exactly does it lead one to believe or imagine about that thing whose existence it nonetheless certifies?

17 Cf Didi-Huberman (2003: 60): “What everyone in photography called evidence, Baudelaire was already calling belief. He went further yet, characterizing this belief as adulterous, imbecile, narcissistic, obscene, as modern Posturing and Fatuity, even as blind — and especially as revenge, industry’s imbecilic revenge on art. The great, tireless quarrel between art and science.”

18 Hence also Yves Klein’s anthropometries of the body, produced by nude women covered in blue pigment making imprints of their bodies on a white surface. Klein’s anthropometries, inspired by the indents made by a body on a judo mat, recall Butades tracing the silhouette of her departing lover; both serve as metapictures of the mythical origin of painting, and by extension photography. Klein’s photographic performance *The leap into the void* (1960) is the logical end result of his indexical painting with imprints or shadows: both index the presence of the body in its absence; both present the body through its negative; both invent a mythical origin of artistic production. Julián Ríos (1994: 13) writes about the mythical origin of painting, or “art for love’s sake”: “The fable poses the old question about the ‘real thing’ and its mimesis. To paint is — like writing and in fact any artistic production — to cast away the substance for the shadow. At the same time this gives the possibility to recover the losses.”





How uncanny that photographs can make the guilt of being captivated by the violence of the moment seem so irrefutable, so authentic. An existence is authenticated, and this by theatrical means, by cutting up and staging, “a staging aimed at knowledge” (Didi-Huberman 2003: 62). Yet guilt (the guilt of knowledge which, according to Benjamin, is the origin and result of allegory and melancholy) remains ambiguous; physiognomic or photographic judgment merely displaces and contracts doubt. Is this not the moral aporia that melancholically shadows *Black box* — with its reference to the *chambre noire* (the inverse of Barthes’ *camera lucida*) that is the interior of a camera-as-self, its projection of Schumann’s sombre but also disconcertingly comical film, its entangling of wonder and brutality?

The awkwardness, uncertainties, ambiguities, and contradictions bodied forth by absorptive, photographic shadow-play points to Kentridge’s belief that there is a need for “a strong understanding of fallibility”; for Kentridge “the very act of certainty or authoritativeness can bring disasters” (Kentridge 1999: 34). A strong sense of fallibility describes our thinking in the dark of photographs, our producing pictures in darkness,<sup>19</sup> our sense that “the camera is merely a subjective apparatus, an apparatus of subjectivity” (Didi-Huberman 2003: 63). It is the cause and result of a pessimistic world view, ironically not at all foreign to the dialectics of the Enlightenment.<sup>20</sup>

Needing knowledge, demanding evidence, desiring enlightenment and amusement, we look to the photograph. But, as Didi-Huberman (2003: 64) argues, the photograph:

19 Didi-Huberman (2003: 63) notes that “Valéry compared the darkroom to Plato’s cave”.

20 In this regard, Stoichita (1999: 165) cites Diderot: “In the whole world there is not a singly perfectly formed, perfectly healthy man to be found. The human species is just a mass of more or less deformed and sick individuals.” Cf Eco (2004) on the deep-rooted ambivalence in the discourse of the Enlightenment: between, say, faith in Reason and melancholy sorrow for the transience of life, between Beauty (*qua* lucidity) and the Sublime (*qua* obscurity). Terry Castle (1995: 15) notes dialectically: “[T]he more we seek enlightenment, the more alienating our world becomes; the more we seek to free ourselves, Houdini-like, from the coils of superstition, mystery, and magic, the more tightly, paradoxically, the uncanny holds us in its grip.”

[...] traffics in our history and betrays it. Its superb 'materialist' myth, the filmy production of the double, in fact constitutes the passing to the limits of evidence. Exacerbated, multiplied, magnified: evidence passes into simulacrum.

This is the phantasmagoria of *Black box*: theatre of the production of simulacra and distorting doubles, reflected and reflecting in a cave or tomb of un-knowing.

## 5. The accursed cave as metapicture

In her introduction to the catalogue for *Black box*, Maria-Christina Villaseñor (2005: 33) describes Kentridge's *Black box* as consisting "of animated film, kinetic sculptural objects, and drawings, all housed in a mechanized theatre in miniature" (Figure 14). According to Villaseñor (2005: 33):

Kentridge considers the term 'black box' in three senses: a 'black box' theatre, a '*chambre noire*' (i.e., the interior) of a photo camera, and the 'black box' (flight-data recorder) used to record information in an airline disaster.

Following on from the third sense, one might say that "black box" also signifies grotto, grave, or tomb: transformative place or stage of death and resurrection.

As such, the "black box" metaphor lays bare Kentridge's ongoing thinking about death and the afterlives and loves of images, to paraphrase Mitchell (2005 & 2006: 3). In addition, as "accursed cave" (Stoichita 1999: 133) as well as "machine for drawing silhouettes" (Stoichita 1999: 157), the term "black box" signifies a space in which science marries witchcraft (after all, light may produce apparitions), and in which the wonder of creation is never far from the horror of destruction. Moreover, did Kentridge perhaps also have in mind Joseph Cornell's "shadow boxes" — those private chambers filled with the impossible and frustrating fantasy of being isolated from the traumas of the real (Figure 15)?

*Black box* was commissioned by the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, affording Kentridge another opportunity to continue his multifarious exploration of the ways in which German history intersects

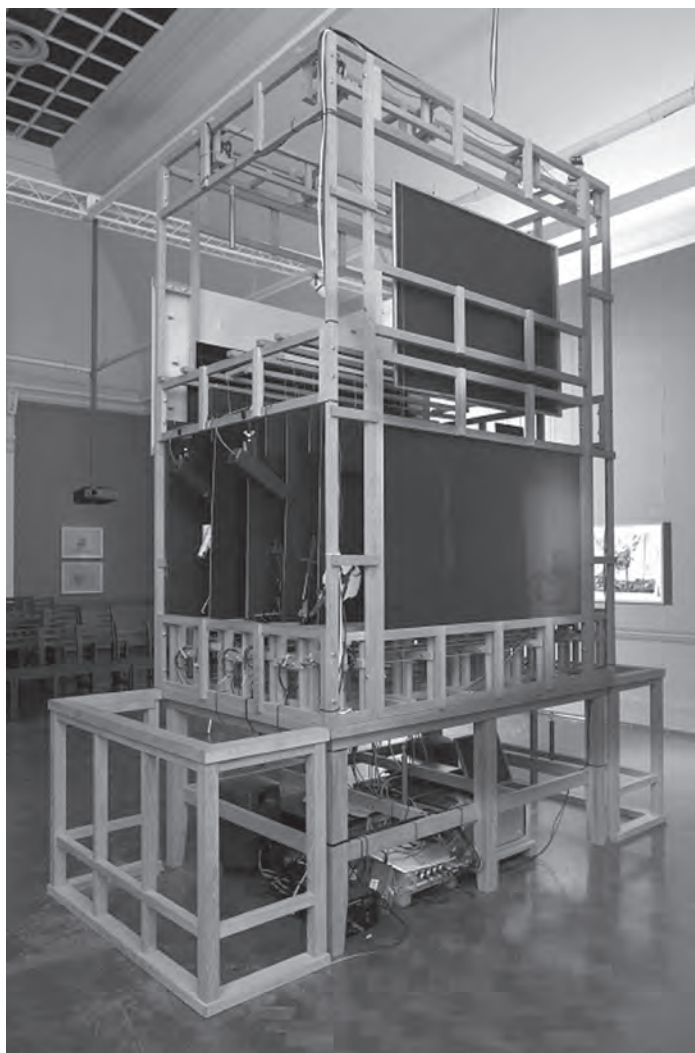


Figure 14: William Kentridge, *Black box/Chambre noire* (2005).  
Installation view at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.  
Photographic documentation by John Hodgkiss.



Figure 15: Joseph Cornell, *Object (Abeilles)* (1940). Mixed media, including wood, glass, engraving, rhinestones, cork, cut-outs, 23.2 by 35.0 by 8.7 cm. California: Mr & Mrs Frederick R Weisman. <[http://kistenet.com/brandon/images/Object%20\(Abeilles\)%20-%20Joseph%20Cornell.jpg](http://kistenet.com/brandon/images/Object%20(Abeilles)%20-%20Joseph%20Cornell.jpg)>.

with African and South African history. Villaseñor (2005: 33) writes that Kentridge's *Black box*:

[...] explores the convergence of visual technologies [such as photography and film] and colonial expansionism in Africa at the turn of the twentieth century, the latter by reflecting on the 1904 German massacre of the Hereros in Namibia.

Moreover, here as elsewhere Kentridge takes recourse to Freud's

[...] concept of 'Trauerarbeit', or grief work, a labor which is ongoing, and which dovetails with the artist's unrelenting and self-reflexive examination of the process of making meaning (Villaseñor 2005: 33).

The allegorical dispersal of meaning in *Black box* suggests that the desire to work through mourning can only ever be taunted by the loss that it replicates and multiplies, even as it attempts to overcome it.

But if Kentridge takes as his starting point the historical disaster of the massacre of the Herero by German colonialists, he does so obliquely, using the formal category of anamorphosis together with

the figure of allegory as his departure points. He writes: "I will not necessarily describe it nor didactically enumerate its stages" (Kentridge 2005: 51). This oblique or allegorical approach to history and/ or as catastrophe (always melancholic and Janus-faced, cf Schoeman 2003, 2004 & 2007), which involves an ambivalent approach to the legacy of colonialism and to guilt, tallies with Kentridge's consistent exposure of his own means and motors of representation (Figure 16). By rendering the processes of representation transparent, Kentridge — like Bertolt Brecht before him<sup>21</sup> — temporarily removes "the veil of opacity behind which selective, subjective memories are crafted into grand narratives of history," as Villaseñor (2005: 33) argues. With reference to Kentridge's self-reflexive representation, Law-Viljoen (2007: 188) writes:

The process of revisiting the Enlightenment ideals of reason, order and science expressed so dramatically in *The magic flute*, in order to lay them bare to scrutiny, is dramatically suggested by the very structure of the miniature theatre that houses *Black box*. When it is installed in a gallery, the theatre is deliberately set away from any walls so that the audience can walk around it and see its workings: the rudimentary but effective tracks for carrying the automata into view, the sections of the stage, the computers beneath the box. This element of the work is an invitation to look closely at the skeleton, the bare bones not only of the theatre itself, but of the very history [of violence and death] that is gathered in its wings.

The self-reflexive rendering transparent of the representation of absence, loss, and death in *Black box* may be productively theorised by way of Mitchell's concept of metapictures. He distinguishes three kinds:

- 21 As Walter Benjamin (1992: 4) writes: Brecht's "Epic theatre [...] incessantly derives a lively and productive consciousness from the fact that it is theatre [...]. The supreme task of an epic production is to give expression to the relationship between the action being staged and everything that is involved in the act of staging *per se*". In conversation with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (1999:19), Kentridge himself has noted the link between his theatre work and that of Brecht. Nevertheless, Brecht's consciousness-raising is foreign to Kentridge's melancholy world view, described by Colin Richards at the conclusion of my presentation of this paper at the University of the Witwatersrand in September 2007 as Kentridge's "woundedness", which Richards locates in the trauma of apartheid. Kentridge's "wounded" self-reflexivity never translates into a political programme. Cf Schoeman 2004 & 2007.



Figure 16: William Kentridge, *Black box/Chambre noire* (2005).  
Installation view at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.  
Photographic documentation by John Hodgkiss.



Figure 17: Saul Steinberg, *The spiral* (1964). *The New Yorker* magazine (Mitchell 1994: 39).

First, the picture that explicitly reflects on, or 'doubles' itself, as in so many drawings by Saul Steinberg, in which the production of the picture we are seeing re-appears inside the picture [Figure 17. ...] Second, the picture that contains another picture of a different kind, and thus re-frames or recontextualises the inner picture as 'nested' inside of a larger, outer picture,



as in Mark Tansey's *The discarded frame* (Figure 18).<sup>22</sup> And thirdly, “the picture that is framed, not inside another picture, but within a discourse that reflects on it as an exemplar of ‘picturality’ as such” (Mitchell 2006: 1). Kentridge's self-reflexive *Black box* bears traces of all three types of metapictures. As such its multifarious layering of projections, shadows, reflecting doubles, and uncanny automata (cf Freud 1988: 347) involves a metapictorial reflection (reflection within reflections) on the nature of representation as construction, projection, illusion, mastery, conjecture, and shadow-play.



Figure 18: Mark Tansey, *The discarded frame* (s.a.). Oil on canvas. <[http://www.ubs.com/4/artcollection/uploads/tx\\_artcollection/PW793.jpg](http://www.ubs.com/4/artcollection/uploads/tx_artcollection/PW793.jpg)>

- 22 In *The discarded frame* the represented “frame is neither inside nor outside” (Taylor 1999: 58), but is rather associated with the fold “through which both reference and reflection turn back on themselves to become self-referential and self-reflexive”, to cite Taylor in a slightly different context.

## 6. What the person conceals, the shadow reveals

Kentridge(2005:51)writes:“One wonders what can be clarified through the obscurity of shadows”. What does the shadow obscuring the sun reveal? What does the disaster following in the wake of a grand Enlightenment uncover about our need to illuminate, and force into the light? Kentridge’s metapictorial *Black box* — an inversion or reversal of Plato’s cave, which allegorises a hierarchy of invisible form, physical object, and visual imitation — provides no sure answers (Figures 19 & 20). Instead it animates and reanimates the separateness (distorting similitude) of those (animals and human beings alike) who suffer, and who have suffered, and who thus compel us to face them — as other. As Stanley Cavell (2005: 338) writes in a different context:

{W}hat is revealed is my separateness from what is happening to them; that I am I, and here. It is only in this perception of them as separate from me that I make them present. That I make them other, and face them.<sup>23</sup>

The suffering of others shadows/others us. The art historian Hans Belting (2002: 194) observed that the shadow, as natural image of the body, “is both an assurance and robbery of the body, both index and, as fleeting and mutable appearance, negation of the body, whose stable contours and substance it loosens”.<sup>24</sup> According to Victor Stoichita (1999: 132), from the time of the Renaissance the representation of the shadow has been used for:

23 Kentridge (1999: 143) observes that our own bodies are other to us: “The surface of the body is like the surface of the sea. We will swim at the top but have a fear of wet, slimy unpredictable things underneath”. The suffering of others is separate from me; my suffering is both part of, and alien to, me. This dialectic clears the ground for an ethics based on mutual difference. On the unavailability of our bodies to ourselves, cf Schoeman 2007: 114n232. Cf also Freud (Cohen 1995: 60): “[T]he unconscious [essential reality of the psyche] is as unknown to us as the reality of the external world”. Similarly, Wilhelm Reich (Viola 2002: 222) said: “When I put my hands on the body, I put my hands on the unconscious”.

24 “Der Schatten als ein natürliches Bild des Körpers hat die Bildproduktion der Menschen immer wieder angeregt und angeleitet. Er ist sowohl Vergewisserung wie Beraubung des Körpers, sowohl Index wie auch, als flüchtige und wandelbare Erscheinung, Negation des Körpers, dessen festen Konturen und dessen Substanz er auflöst.”



Figure 19: William Kentridge, *Black box/Chambre noire* (2005). Installation view at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Documentation by John Hodgkiss.



Figure 20: William Kentridge, *Black box/Chambre noire* (2005). Documentation by John Hodgkiss.

[T]he creation of solid bodies, the symbolization of 'real presence', the thematization of the authorial act [...] Finally, it would be capable of illustrating, at the very heart of the representation, the negative moment and the otherness of this moment. In this final example, the notion of the double re-emerges to be transformed into another. And from that moment on we would be able to refer to the impact of the 'uncanny' for the definition of which we have to turn to Freud.

With reference to the story of Peter Schlemihl who lost his shadow, and with it his sense of being grounded and his sense of self, to the smooth-talking man in grey due to greed for money and status, Stoichita (1999: 171) writes: "[T]he shadow is priceless only as a substitute for the soul. [...] it is through the shadow that a being is determined, where his identity is defined". Without a shadow somebody becomes a no-body. The shadow grounds us; but as with Otto Rank's notion of a nefarious double it may also act against us (cf Freud 1988: 356, Stoichita 1999: 138).<sup>25</sup> The shadow-double acts

25 My thanks to Maureen de Jager for reminding me of Otto Rank's notion of the nefarious double.

as “an insurance against the destruction of the self” (Stoichita 1999: 138), but it may also be “the uncanny harbinger of death” (Freud 1988: 357). The shadow of the self appears only at the cost of the self’s disappearance; loss and death is at the heart of every self-representation as shadow-representation (cf Zisselsberger 2007: 284).

Moreover, the shadow may be used for divination purposes; more often than not it reveals a person’s negative side (cf Stoichita 1999: 160-7). “What the person conceals, the shadow reveals” (Stoichita 1999: 159). The shadow, “ever present behind the living form” (Schwenger 2000: 400), is intrinsically related to the corpse — as an image of otherness. Moreover, given that photography means writing in light in Greek, the shadow is an early photograph (cf Stoichita 1999: 200) which, in turn, resembles the corpse as pure image (cf Schoeman 2007: 127-50). The shadow (photograph or corpse) is the body’s other — that which defines and undermines the body’s sense of unity and surety; it is also a signifying entity which allegorically symbolises representation,<sup>26</sup> and as such it bodies forth the construction and discovery of meaning, which may or may not be accessible.

The shadows projected (reflected and doubled) in Kentridge’s *Black box* bring into play *skiagraphia*, or “shadow painting” which, as Barbara Maria Stafford (1985: 332) describes, “depicts the appearance of shading on the surface of form”. As though reflecting on Jeff Wall’s metapictorial *Tattoos and shadows* (2000) (Figure 21), she writes:

This chiaroscuro technique, said to have been invented by the Athenian Apollodorus (late 5 B.C.) utilizes the ‘fading out’ (by gradation) and the ‘laying on’ (by building up) of shades of color. [...] Chiaroscuro, as the fragmenting of unitary, solid, homogeneous surfaces into juxtaposed and contrasting atomistic particles of lumen et umbrae, is a metaphor for the destruction of the

26 Cf Fried (1992) who interprets reflections in Courbet’s paintings as metapictorial allegories of the painting process. Reflections and shadows are not dissimilar in this regard, cf Stoichita 1999. The shadow may also be related to the simulacrum, the desire for which presents us with an aporia: “as an unrealizable desire for possession or as an unthinkable desire for metamorphosis,” as Scott Durham (1998: 45) argues. In the case of Kentridge’s *Black box*, possession tends to be displaced, transfigured, or liberated by the endless metamorphosis of “semblances formerly stifled by the Platonic tradition” (Stoichita 1999: 217).



Figure 21: Jeff Wall. *Tattoos and shadows* (2000). Cinematic photograph, digital montage, 195.5 by 255 cm. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum (Galassi 2008: 135).

intactness of pure gold, luminous Being, health, the Beautiful, by the spotted inlay, dark becoming, blemished disease, and the variegated grotesque (Stafford 1985: 323).

Both Kentridge and Villaseñor underscore the importance of the ways in which meaning is self-reflexively bodied forth — as “shadow-play”, which is constantly shifting, inverting, reversing. If meaning is found in the shadow, it is also grotesque (adulterous, imbecile, narcissistic, and obscene). Kentridge (2005: 51) writes: “If you have an image, and a shadow across it, you invert what is light and what is dark, and the shadow functions as a kind of spotlight”.

As would be the case with analyses of Christian Boltanski’s *Les ombres* (1986) (Figure 22) and Kara Walker’s *Darkytown rebellion* (2001) (Figure 23), any shadow-analysis of Kentridge’s shadow-play will be uncertain: shadows enlighten darkly, obliquely, allegorically;

so does the writing about, and with shadows. Like Boltanski's and Walker's shadowy narratives, Kentridge's spectral shadow-play — reflection within reflections — amplifies our uncertainties. In this regard, the “ghostly parade” in *Black box* brings to mind, yet again, phantasmagoria: “The shadowy phantasmagoria projected by a magic lantern” which, as Stafford (1985: 350) writes, “jumbles, as in a vast mirror, a host of fragmentary moving figures that change perpetually”. How can one hope to encapsulate this perpetual change — smoky, foggy, ephemeral as in Rosângela Rennó's *Experiencing cinema* (2004) (Figure 24) — in theory, which always tends to place limits on that which it theorises as limitless?

Villaseñor (2005: 61) cites Kentridge's reference to his drawing process as “thinking aloud”, and writes: “This conflation of thinking and doing is indicative of the process-oriented and open-ended performative aspect of the artist's work”. This performative thinking-in-time includes — enfolds, enshrouds, entices — the audience (and this writer) in the meaning-making process; a transformative process that remains open because the audience participates in it. The shifting perspectives implicated in translating the spectral images of the traumatic past that we see animated, reflected, and projected in *Black box* — as meaningful and meaningless, absent and present, alive and dead (cf Freud 1988: 354, Mitchell 2006: 6) — are precisely what Kentridge's self-reflexive, phantasmagorical “shadowgraphy” performs. Shadowgraphy — “the art of making shadows, and transforming them”, as Kentridge (2005: 49) writes; the art of thinking in transformative, reflexive, transient shadows. Looking at, thinking in, and writing about shadows — as complex absences and presences — means looking and thinking back, projecting forwards — it means transforming pictures that reflect (think and seem uncannily similar and other to) us. It means thinking our entanglement with the presence or the afterlife of the past — in *Black box*, the dead Herero; the dead rhino, and their dead slaughterers.



Figure 22: Christian Boltanski, *Les ombres (The shadows)* (1986). Electric fan, light bulb, mixed media. Installation view at the Hayward Gallery.  
<[http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/content/images/2004\\_3486.jpg](http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/content/images/2004_3486.jpg)>



Figure 23: Kara Walker, *Darkytown rebellion* (2001). Projection, cut paper and adhesive on wall, 4.27 by 11.43 m. Installation view at Brent Sikkema, NY. Luxembourg: Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean.  
<<http://www-tc.pbs.org/art21/slideshow/artists/w/walker-inst-003.jpg?Log=0>>





Figure 24: Rosângela Rennó, *Experiencing cinema* (2004), detail. DVD, fog machine, photographic projection on a smoke wall, dimensions variable, São Paulo: Galeria Vermelho.  
<[http://www.tcmhi.org/exhibits/Phantasmagoria/Renno\\_1Experiencia\\_Cinema\(high\)sm.JPG](http://www.tcmhi.org/exhibits/Phantasmagoria/Renno_1Experiencia_Cinema(high)sm.JPG)>

## 7. Looking back, projecting forwards, transforming pictures

Projecting shadows, and transforming pictures, involves doubling and reciprocity. The multi-sensory process of projection, doubling, and reciprocation is inscribed as “a field of mutual desire” (Mitchell 2005: xv) and mutual lack (Mitchell 2006: 6) that both fastens and loosens our sense of perspective. Villaseñor (2005: 79, 83) observes succinctly that Kentridge’s *Black box* stages itself as “full of potential for transformation”; site of “erasures and pensive perambulations”. Kentridge’s morphological animation of “the infinite migration of

error” (Kitaj 1989: 121)<sup>27</sup> and vacillation involves a return look — by the photographic image of a dead and live rhino allegorised as image of reflection; and by automata and their real counterparts. This return look by shadows and automata consistently casts mastery in doubt; and doubt, according to Mitchell (2006: 1), reveals “a space for perception and reflective thought”.<sup>28</sup> Doubt is the origin and the result of allegory and of melancholy; and the dialectics of both implies further (inspired) reflection.

In *Black box* reflective space is a dark space. An inversion of Plato’s cave,<sup>29</sup> *Black box* locates the sun not above and outside the phantasmagoria of the cave, but rather within: here there is no privileged post-colonial or pre-colonial perspective from where one can make lucid sense of the violence and death, the absence and loss that shadows the past and the present. In Kentridge’s “theatre of shadows” (Verhaeghen 2007: 565), made up of a series of thinking images, natural light is replaced by an artificial light beam that strikes “a surface with a framed rectangle of brightness into which shadows are introduced to simulate illusions of movement”, to cite Peter Greenaway (Schwenger 2000: 410), describing cinema. Kentridge’s use of cinema as a series of quotable, ready-made images of reflection heightens the sense that the shadow of the image entangles the viewer in anamorphic displacement.

In *Black box*, as in the *camera obscura*, shadow — as an active instrument; a thinking shape — becomes form, and form becomes shadow. Contra Plato, in this instance there is no soul with which to perfectly see pure form. For, as Stoichita (1999: 185) asks, consistently fascinated by the transformative representation of representation, “is the soul . . . nothing but yet another representation — a butterfly, a shadow?” In *Black box*, outside and inside, past and present, form

27 Kitaj (1989: 121) cites Maurice Blanchot as writing: “Error means wandering, the inability to abide and stay [...] The wanderer’s country is not truth, but exile; he lives outside”.

28 Cf Brenden Gray (2007: 61) who cites Derrida: “The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there”. Cf Derrida 2002: 369-418.

29 In fact, Kentridge’s *Black box* also recalls Leibniz’s rereading of Locke’s dark room as containing a screen, consisting of mobile and elastic folds, representing innate ideas, which shift, constructing new images out of those already received (Vidler 2001: 223).

and shadow, self and other overlap as phantasmagorically as guilt and innocence. Following critical theorist Mieke Bal (1999: 28), one might say that the entangled points of view in *Black box* put the judging, the looking “subject at risk” (Figure 25) — at risk of not being able to judge clearly, in the absolute light of reason.

The haunting question remains: “Who, what thing, or what unspeakable event helps us to see?” Perhaps there is nothing more hauntingly irresolvable than this question of privileged perspectives, of pure or untainted perception or reflection. For as philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1993: 93) evinced: “Every perception is hallucinatory because perception has no object”. Seen in the context of *Black box*, Schumann’s film is metapictorial, because it obliquely reflects (on) the way the hallucinatory object is lost at the moment in which we frame it — as an enlightening picture.

Schumann’s film of the shooting, amputation, and grotesque putting on display of an African rhino casts a phantasmagorical shadow



Figure 25: Robert Schumann, Still from *Rhinoceros hunting in German East Africa* (1911-12). Archival film. Documentation by John Hodgkiss.

across the mechanised action in *Black box*; it also casts a shadow across the thinking and reflecting viewer. The film of the killing of an animal, and the transformation of it into an exotic trophy and exhibit, reflects painfully on colonial desires. “All seeing is heated”, writes James Elkins (1996: 21); and never more so than the colonial seeing that is “involved in shooting a picture”. How do we animate that picture, or pictures, when even our animation — our thinking in the dark; reflection within reflections — can transform a corpse into a mere crowd pleaser?

The inverse sun of Kentridge’s *Black box*, melancholically illuminates nothing if not, what Jacques Derrida (1995: 86) calls, “the necessarily nocturnal source of the light” itself. Derrida’s deconstruction of reason *qua* illumination suggests that at the heart of enlightenment, there is the ambiguity of darkness. In addition, Michael Ann Holly refers to writing about art as the act “of trying to put into words, spoken or written, something that never *promised the possibility of translation*” (Bal 2007: 109) — that is, of clarification.

We may fail what we desire to translate or clarify — the primordially lost object, the absent/present rhino, pictured in Schumann’s image-sequence, and projected in Kentridge’s phantasmagorical *Black box* — when we ignore what reflecting and reflexive pictures themselves may want. According to Mitchell (2006: 2), reflecting and reflexive pictures may want to be experienced as untranslatable “wild signs”, “in the midst of the cultural labyrinth of second nature that human beings create around themselves”.

In the midst of this shadowy, reflexive, phantasmagorical labyrinth, enlightenment itself shifts to the obscurity that is the origin and result of all dialectical, allegorical, and melancholic shadow-play. This phantasmagorical labyrinth is also the *camera obscura* that would make us see the reverse image of our own desire for, and loss of, thoughtful and thought-provoking clarity. Hence at the close of *Black box*’s anamorphic, theatrical narrative — consisting of images within images, reflections within reflections — we are left, once again, with a work of mourning in which the spectral multiplication of loss makes us see that it need not be the “loss of loss” (cf Richter 2007: 34). Because that double loss would mean the impossibility of redemption from the obscuring light that produces corpses for the sake of mere amusement.

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