

Caught in a flash, arrested at a standstill

German colonialism and the Holocaust in William Kentridge's *Black Box* – A reading with Benjamin and Buikema

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Abstract: This article seeks to articulate in one image the diverse genocides in German history, an image able to capture the piling wreckage of history in a flash. The point of departure is a multimedia installation by William Kentridge called *Black Box* (2005), in which he thematizes the Herero and Namaqua genocide during German colonial rule between 1904 and 1908. This research wants to respond to Kentridge's demand for grief work, and relies on Walter Benjamin's (1968) vision of history writing and Rosemarie Buikema's (2020) concept of revolts to seek out theoretical and conceptual possibilities that allow it to posit simultaneously the singularity of the Holocaust, to articulate its deep connections with colonial crimes, and to demand a working through of Germany's genocidal history.

Keywords: Benjaminian concepts of time and history, Buikema's revolts and cultural critique

Introduction

In this essay, William Kentridge's installation *Black Box* (2005), Walter Benjamin's philosophy, and Rosemarie Buikema's (2020) vision of revolts serve as points of departure to develop an alternative concept of history. In Kentridge's artwork, two different genocides intersect one another: the 1904-08 genocide of the Herero and Nama people in former German South West Africa and the European Holocaust under German fascist rule. In *Black Box* (2005), metamorphosing symbols pertaining to both historical events are projected onto the curtains and the backdrop of a miniature theatre. Allusions to colonial history – established through symbols of exploitation, violence, and genocide – are constellated with images that stand in for the murderous extermination politics of German fascism. The visions expressed in

Kentridge's (2005) artwork will converge with Walter Benjamin's (1968) historical materialism and Rosemarie Buikema's (2020) cultural critiques to develop an outlook on history that forecloses notions of historical continuity, causality, or temporal linearity. This essay investigates ideas Benjamin, Buikema, and Kentridge express conceptually and visually to suggest that the best way to constellate historical events is to search out points of overlap, stratification, and transformation. It inscribes itself into a current debate about whether Auschwitz' singularity means that it cannot be compared to other genocides. It answers to the demand for a cultural archive that includes colonial violence in its memory as much as the Shoah, while bypassing notions of similarity and causality.

Shaping time

A stick puppet enters the middle stage on one of the rails, grieving before projected Waterberg images, a site where in 1904, the Herero people were defeated by Germany's imperial army and 50,000 people died of dehydration when driven into the desert of Omaheke. Here a present reaction, mourning and sadness, is entwined with a past event. This entwinement allows, as Buikema (2020) has pointed out in her reading of Kentridge's artwork, that historical events can be represented which have previously been wilfully forgotten (Benjamin, 1968, 131). Benjamin would call the idea that springs out of such a constellation of past and present "the dialectical image" (*passim*). The dialectical image comes into being "[w]here thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions" (262), tensions that provoke a shock, thereby arresting (the idea of) movement and development. Frictions and oppositions between remnants of the past and objects of the present elicit this shock, constellating two temporalities that cannot be synthesized into a narrative of progress and causality, "of the homogeneous course of history" (263). By interrupting developmental expectations and the experience of a constantly evolving capitalist production, a rethinking of history and the present is possible and their painful aspects can be worked through (Buikema, 2020, 7). According to Benjamin, the dialectical image is the outcome of a juxtaposition and montage of material objects. Capturing the dialectical image that springs out of this constellation is the task of the historical materialist, one accomplished through a translation into conceptual language that recollects specificities and differences. It is my contention that Kentridge's constellation of past and present objects facilitates the emergence of the dialectical image, one that asks for a critical return to events that are otherwise revolting and object to a cultural amnesia (Buikema, 2020, 131).

What connects Benjamin's (1988) concepts of time and history and Buikema's (2020) notion of revolt as a mode of cultural critique with Kentridge's *Black Box* (2005)? It

is above all the media and technical aspects of Kentridge's (2005) work that link it to Benjamin's and Buikema's understanding of the historian and cultural critique's task. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1968), Walter Benjamin addresses the need "to brush history against the grain" (257). To do so, one needs a certain method: historical materialism – "the practice of conceiving history in contrast to historical progressivism or historicism" (Cvoro, 2008, 89). Only the historical materialist, says Benjamin, has the strength to break away from "the epic element in history" (1975, 29). The historical materialist is ultimately a blaster. Her or his aim is to explode 'the continuum of history' to get hold of an image that would otherwise flit by. The image that the historical materialist gets hold of is not history itself. Rather, "it presents a given experience with the past" (ibid.) that can take into account why "this fragment of the past finds itself precisely in this present" (28). For Buikema, the emergence of such fragments of the past in the present potentially gives rise to a 'poetics of recycling' which imbues "existing material (...) with new meanings" (2020, 9).

This essay demonstrates how William Kentridge, in his multimedia installation *Black Box* (2005), becomes the historical materialist and recycler that Benjamin and Buikema envision. This is the case because Kentridge evokes, ultimately, an image of history that is guided by layers and overlap instead of progress; metamorphoses instead of development. Kentridge's installation creates an image archive that is necessarily incomplete and whose interpretation relies on the subjective labour of the audience's thinking and feeling mind. He constellates different, non-identical events that are distant in time and place from each other. All these elements strive toward an understanding of image-making as a constructive, meaning-making activity that influences an audience's subjectivity, which is in turn held responsible for the resulting interpretation. Besides these media and technical concerns, the illusiveness and discontinuity of the images themselves demand emphasis if we want to connect the artwork's characteristics to Benjamin's (1968; 1975) and Buikema's (2020) ideas about the historian's task. *Black Box's* (2005) images, in particular its drawings and collages, are continuously metamorphosing and generating metaphors; therefore, their meaning cannot be finalized. Kentridge's (2005) drawings, just like Benjamin's images of the past, flit past. Often arranged on phenakistoscope disk that turns so quickly the images blur, Kentridge's (2005) images frequently grow unrecognizable and convey the impression that their content and meaning is irrevocably lost. Images shown under such conditions can no longer be deciphered. They belong to a singular, irretrievable past. The permanent transfiguration of the drawings and collages ensures that no fixed image or representation of the past emerges. And precisely because Kentridge uses images that are constantly transforming, their meaning can only be determined through an attempted symbolisation, allegorisation, or verbalisation: a transferal into another medium (for instance language) that provokes a standstill. Kentridge's flitting images are

graspable only through a translation into symbols and words, and therefore they become simultaneously entwined with the translator's present.

Within the black box

Kentridge's (2005) mixed-media installation derives its name from three different black boxes: the proscenium stage, which was developed in the 15th century to provide spectacular visual effects to its audience; the folding camera of the 19th and early 20th century, whose mechanism allowed the photographer to adjust the focal distance of an image; and the flight recorder of planes. These three media provide different knowledge to its recipients that Kentridge exploits in a specific manner, which I would like to lay out in the following analysis.

The proscenium stage is meant to unite character, place, and time by providing just one stage instead of several. Kentridge alludes to the baroque version of the proscenium in which the depth of the stage serves to allow a quick change from one scene to the other – such as by drawing curtains in the back, middle or front, or by introducing a new scenery. This kind of proscenium makes viewers aware of the simultaneous existence of other locations, actions, times, and characters that are absent from the scene but possibly waiting in the wings. According to Rosemarie Buikema (2016), the baroque theatre also articulates “a return to objects” (261) which have lost a metaphysical meaning. Kentridge exploits this kind of stage by projecting images onto different curtains in the front, middle, or back, and by introducing various puppets or characters that enter the stage on one of the rails that divide the stage. He thereby creates the idea that the images he shows exist simultaneously in time while remaining geographically unconnected.

This technique and its effect have already emerged at the beginning of the shadow play integral to the installation, when an image of the world under the header *Berlin* falls onto a curtain in the foreground of the stage. Subsequently, the curtain parts and a series of images flash onto the stage's backdrop, concluding with a hand-drawn map of the Waterberg and its surroundings. In this way, the installation *Black Box* brings two different locations – Berlin and the Waterberg – into play, and insinuates they are connected to each other by a history of exploitation, symbolized by images that metamorphose and alternate between rotary drills and men who club both one another and helpless victims. Kentridge's smart use of the baroque proscenium's depths brings two historical locations – one in Africa, one in Europe – into inexplicable proximity. He shows the exploitative and brutal nature of this form of contact and alludes to colonial conquest practices of mapping, measuring, and naming.

In addition to creative use of the stage's depth, the framing curtains play an important role too, since they limit or delimit different locations and can provide, in the manner of Brechtian theatre, a commentary. The final curtain, for instance, is engraved with the words "negative" (on the left hand side) and "dialectics" (on the right hand side), thereby alluding to the impasse, which Theodor W. Adorno delineates in his *Negative Dialectics*, of concepts coming into existence under social conditions that determine what they can describe: "They are moments of the reality that requires their formation, primarily for the control of nature" (1973, 11). Instead of claiming to represent the object conceptually, philosophy is tasked with scrutinizing and laying bare its own processes of concept creation – these being tainted by subjectivity and sociality – and revealing the non-identity between the-thing-in-itself and thought. For Adorno (1973), however, the mind cannot stand still. This is because the mind's encounter with the things of the world will always lead to theory, interpretation, and/or narrativization, a process that, for Buikema (2020), gives rise to re-significations that can be taken up to revolt against hegemonic exclusions. This stands in contrast to Benjamin's (1968) ideas, who wants to establish a shock, a standstill, a moment through which these forms of development are suspended. If we accept the argument that Kentridge's artwork incorporates Benjamin's historiographical suggestions about dialectical images, Kentridge (2005) like Adorno (1973) aims to lay bare the impossibility of grasping reality through thought, while he produces, as Benjamin's (1998) understanding of dialectical images demands, the impossibility of constructing narratives, theories, or interpretations that pass themselves off as seamless representations of reality (cf. Feldman, 2011; Haverkamp, 1992). Kentridge revolts against the integration of images into a form that denies its construction, and thereby deconstructs tales of origins (Buikema, 2020, 138).

The folding camera, which is the second device that the title *Black Box* (2005) alludes to, in turn allows the photographer to adjust focus and distance for an event, and that is paramount to constructing, through selection, which details are shown in an image and which ones remain left out. The folding camera hints at the photographer's activity when taking pictures. The folding camera's oversized presence as a set piece in *Black Box* also makes us aware of how little of reality photographs capture when we compare their scope with the vast spaces beyond them – an experience offered to museum visitors through the installation space itself. The articulation of the photographic apparatus hints at the selectiveness of photographs and, simultaneously, at a world outside that will never find its way into the pictures taken and preserved for later generations. *Black Box* highlights the interference of the photographic apparatus in photography, an apparatus hidden from view whenever we look at photographs later on. This emphasis stresses

the material aspect of photography, reminding us that any memory evoked by photographs relies on concrete forms of memorization, and of exclusion too (cf. Cadava, 1992; Koch, 1992). The emphasis on the photographic apparatus in *Black Box* allows the audience to experience how limited modern visual forms are that distribute and circulate knowledge about events. Relying on Benjamin's insight that the 20th-century arrival of reproductive media like film and photography inaugurated them as the main sources of information on distant experiences or nearby events for the masses, Eduardo Cadava (1997) admonishes us in *Words of Light* to consider the artificiality of memories that result from them and the effects of ensuing archiving. Given that reproductive media are nowadays playing a considerable part in the constitution of a visual archive through which historical knowledge is conferred, this insight allows the audience to grow aware of archives' limitations and involvement in power relations. As Randall C. Jimerson (2009) reminds us, "[t]he archival record (...) represents power relationships in society, both in the events, persons, and ideas memorialized in the documents themselves and in the process of how they are selected for preservation and validation within archival repositories" (212). What is selected to be documented for posterity, as well as decisions regarding its storage and archiving, is influenced by power relations, too (cf. Derrida, 1995). The selective focus of photography is a useful allegory for this condition of historical knowledge and individual, social, and cultural memory.

Cadava also forefronts Benjamin's recurrent likening of historiography to photography in his essays, suggesting that the photographic apparatus can act as an allegory for history writing. Especially because photographs arrest movements in time and space and create a caesura in the course of action, Benjamin has resorted to the qualities of photography when describing the tasks of the historical materialist. By definition, photographs display objects severed from their context: there is just one moment in the life of an object captured, and the object has been cut off from its surroundings, too. According to Cadava, this fundamental incompleteness and lack within the medium is easily forgotten because of its iconic quality. In his view, however, this fundamental lack makes history possible, "the history of photography as well as the history inaugurated by the photograph" (Cadava, 1992, 93). The realization of photography's incompleteness may drive the urge to sustain, through historical research or by fictionalizing accounts, what has been missing from the historical record (cf. Wiese, 2014). Buikema argues that art's rearticulation of history makes past, present, and future contemporaneous, and gives rise to "a renewal of social relations through symbolic rearticulation" (2020, 7).

A flight recorder is the third black box that the title alludes to. It is an aural and electronic recording device that registers either flight data or conversations in the cockpit. A plane's black box is a testimony of the aircraft's flight history that

assists investigations in case of a crash. Because flight recorders can repeat and document past events, they perform an uncanny recreation of the past. Flight recorders consequently hint at the possibility of citing details from past events in the present. Additionally, the title *Black Box*, in conjunction with its allusion to the flight recorder, hints possibly towards the different music fragments that serve in the installation like the *March of the Priest* recording from Mozart's *Magic Flute*. As Kentridge revealed in an interview, this recording aired in Berlin during a 1937 concert where numerous Nazi dignitaries were present (Buikema, 2016, 252). And while it is impossible to know the origin of the recording unless one is told, it is nevertheless telling that Kentridge uses this song, which speaks about universal love, friendship, and forgiveness in sacred halls, to accompany brutal beatings: "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin, 1968, 256).

As my reading of the *Black Box* (2005) shows, Kentridge's installation brings forth allusions and undermines dichotomies of absence and presence, on- and offstage, present and past, in and off the grid, to make us aware that any focal point is constructed and consequently a matter of choice. What role the past plays in the present is dependent on decisions that we as contemporary agents make and construct; it is our charge to extend our knowledge so that it includes what has been left out.

Setting sail

To be confronted with the past means to be confronted with incompleteness and loss. What belongs to the past is always irrevocably past; it cannot be brought back into the present. Buikema therefore writes that "Every past is a heritage without a testament" (2020, 3), which demands from the critical audience to compile it collectively. Grief, triggered by the realization of loss's irreversibility, constitutes a reaction in need of translation too. For Benjamin, only a redeemed mankind "has its past become citable in all its moments" (Benjamin, 1968, 254). As people who have not been redeemed, we are unable to articulate the past "the way it really was", as Benjamin reminds us and as Ranke first wrote (255). As materialist dialecticians, we struggle still to repeat the image received when experiencing danger. Cancelling the idea of progress and continuity, we could adopt the viewpoint of the angel of history, who does not perceive a chain of events but a catastrophe, "which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his [or her] feet" (257). Going one step further, Buikema (2020) asks us to engage with these wreckages to be able to establish new meanings that revolt against uniform thinking.

As is well known, in the body of all Benjamin's writings, a concept of time emerges that is permeated by fractures, cracks, jumps, snapshots, and diverse temporal dimensions. It is the task of the historical materialist "to blast open the continuum of history" (1968, 262), to seize an image "as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (255). By no means, however, can this picture stand in for the past. It is a constructed, constellated image that derives from the past but cannot represent it. In her reading of Kentridge's *Black Box* (2005), Buikema (2020), therefore argues that the past is a palimpsest that can only be read through the traces it has left behind (138).

In his notes, Benjamin compares the historical materialist with a photographer who operates a camera. The photographer deliberately chooses a field size, an angle, and the exposure before taking a picture, just like the historical materialist. Similarly to a photographer, once the photograph has been taken, the historical materialist knows that they have to develop the image – not photographically, but conceptually. The historical materialist, like the photographer, knows that the photographic plate they carry home is only a negative and, as such, far from a finality (see Benjamin, 1974, 1165). For Benjamin, the past is historically and materialistically made present when it is conceptually articulated by a subject that was previously overwhelmed by an image at the moment of danger. Only presence of mind will give rise to the expression and articulation of the image of the past, for the image flashes by unexpectedly and abruptly in memory. Buikema (2020, 141), on the other hand, is interested in the material remains of history, in ruins and decaying objects that need to be worked through to gain new meaning, and that direct us to a different future. For Benjamin and for Buikema, it is crucial that concepts, insights, significations are articulated to create a vantage point for envisioning the past and the future anew.

One must learn to set the concepts, Benjamin (1974) contends elsewhere. "For the dialectician, thinking means: setting sail," he writes. "*How* they are set is important. Words are sails. How they are set makes them concepts" (591; my translation). I would like to conclude with the concepts that meet Buikema's demand to face the past, and to make space for a continuous working through of histories too painful to remember – like the crimes committed in the name of the German people, the colonial genocide in Namibia and the Shoah. These terms are as follows: overlap and stratification rather than unfolding and linear progression; configurations of different time levels whose singular narratives do not merge; comments that do not strive for a solution but for a complication; transformation instead of development. I demand that the viewer, in a dialectic of standstill, breaks up the continuum of history and reassemble the images without narrative solution. Kentridge's *Black Box* lends itself to this work, which is ultimately that of remembering. This thinking does not measure the extent of a crime but is possessed by the need to perceive

and consider it, to work it through as Buikema (2020) exacts, and to capture its specificities and singularities in a memorized image and in conceptual language.

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