

## Mark Sanders

*Among contemporary artists, William Kentridge is notable for having worked across multiple media. Of particular note are the ways in which the techniques of his animated films intersect with elements from his collaborations in puppet theatre with Handspring Puppet Company, and how his ideas about automaticity reveal puppetry as a condition of possibility both for filmmaking and for the drawing that, in Kentridge's filmic work, underpins his Drawings for Projection (1989-2020). Tracing these intersections and ideas, this essay asserts the relevance of anamorphosis as an explanatory concept.*

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In Heinrich von Kleist's "The Puppet Theatre" (1810), a dancer, whom the narrator of Kleist's tale has seen attending the town puppet theatre, explains his fascination with puppets: "He added that this movement was a very simple one; that whenever the centre of gravity was moved *in a straight line* the limbs described a *curve*; and that often, if shaken by accident, the whole thing was brought into a kind of rhythmical activity similar to dancing" (Kleist 1997, 412).

Commenting on this passage, Paul de Man introduces the concept of anamorphosis:

The puppets have no motion by themselves but only in relation to the motions of the puppeteer, to whom they are connected by a system of lines and threads. All their aesthetic charm stems from the transformations undergone by the linear motion of the puppeteer as it becomes a dazzling display of curves and arabesques. By itself, the

motion is devoid of any aesthetic interest or effect. The aesthetic power is located neither in the puppet nor in the puppeteer but in the text that spins itself between them. This text is the transformational system, the anamorphosis of the line as it twists and turns into the tropes of ellipses, parabola, and hyperbole. Tropes are quantified systems of motion. The indeterminations of imitation and of hermeneutics have at last been formalized into a mathematics that no longer depends on role models or on semantic intentions. (de Man 1984, 285-86)

What makes de Man's use of the concept of anamorphosis notable is that the concept is typically encountered in descriptions of perspective in painting and drawing, but not of puppetry. An anamorphosis is a distorted image, so devised that, when viewed from a particular angle, it resolves itself into a regular image. Hans Holbein the Younger's painting, *The Ambassadors* (1533), is probably the most famous example. In Holbein's painting, an indistinct shape in the foreground becomes visible, when viewed obliquely, as a skull—a *memento mori* declaring the vanity of human scientific endeavor, including the optics underwriting the anamorphic conversion (Baltrušaitis 1996, 125-60). By the 1960s, no longer restricted to the field of optics, anamorphosis had become widespread as a concept-metaphor in French thought (Baltrušaitis 1996, 291-305). Whereas Jacques Lacan (1979, 85-89, 92) and Jean-François Lyotard (2011, 378-80), for example, use anamorphosis to describe the paradoxes of subjectivity, what de Man emphasizes from Kleist, in contrast to both the orthodox optical sense of the term and its twentieth-century adaptations, is a "transformational system" between one order of motion and another: from line to curve.

This "transformational system" is neither the motion of the puppet nor of the puppeteer, and perhaps it is not even motion at all, strictly speaking, because naming it a "system" involves a greater cognitive abstraction. Like the lines of the ellipse, the parabola, and the hyperbola in mathematics, the movement of the tropes of ellipsis, parabole, and hyperbole can, in de Man's Kleist, be plotted as regular, and accounted for according to a formula. This de Man calls "formalization." If meaning arises from this process, it is not

a result of intention, even if “[t]he puppets have no motion by themselves, but only in relation to the motions of the puppeteer.” And no “role model” provides any thing to be imitated (de Man 1984, 285). If there is animation, it is through pure, predictable automation (de Man 1984, 288).

It is therefore illuminating to pursue the implications of the concept of anamorphosis as it moves, in de Man’s hands, from perspective to puppetry, and to extend his generalization of the concept to animation in film. To the extent that it is anamorphic in character—which I shall show—then filmic animation, I propose, and indeed the drawing that is its basis, may be conceived of as having puppetry as its general form.

This proposal I develop by using de Man’s analysis of Kleist to elucidate the work of South African artist, William Kentridge, who is perhaps best known for his animated films based on charcoal drawings. This is the series of eleven films known as *Drawings for Projection*, made between 1989 and 2020. In addition to these films, Kentridge has produced several works involving anamorphic manipulation of perspective, including one film.<sup>[1]</sup> He has, moreover, experimented extensively with puppetry, notably in his collaborations for the stage with Handspring Puppet Company.

Viewed in the light of the transformational logic indicated by de Man, these two facts are clues, I propose, to the deeper relevance of anamorphosis as a way of elucidating Kentridge’s animated films, and to defining their significance for a thinking of artistic medium specificity. Whereas in her pathbreaking reading of Kentridge’s *Drawings for Projection*, Rosalind Krauss argues that a confrontation with digitization occurs by affirming drawing and the drawing hand, with filmic animation as a material support for drawing (Krauss 2000, 3-35), I argue that when one considers drawing-based animation within the full range of Kentridge’s filmmaking and theatrical collaborations, it becomes possible to see filmic animation itself, to the extent that it functions anamorphically, as a generalized form of puppetry. A subtext of my essay is that puppetry, historically a marginal artform compared to painting, drawing, and film, allows us to perceive elements overlooked about those forms more central in thinking about art and artistic

medium.

In 1940, Disney's *Pinocchio* was clearly attuned to this generalization—and used it, symbolically, to eliminate puppetry (by freeing Pinocchio from his strings) as well as actors. Kentridge works the generalization in a different way, insisting on the hand, to be sure, although not only a drawing hand, as Krauss argues, but also a tearing and a positioning hand, producing ephemeral effects in a medium that is distinctive for producing a reproducible record. This allows us to read his films, low-tech as they are, as a practical commentary on digitization, and the effects of digitization in the arts, whether it be the visual arts, a combination of the plastic and performing arts—as in puppetry—or in film. Although its emphasis falls ultimately on film, my essay undertakes theoretical work provoked by scholars of puppetry who have remarked on the affinity between puppetry and new media (see Orenstein 2008, 172, 174). When we read Kentridge in relation to digitization in the arts, however, we reach the limits of automation, finding something of the aleatory, as did Kleist's dancer when he attended the puppet theatre, that “if shaken by accident, the whole thing was brought into a kind of rhythmical activity similar to dancing” (Kleist 1997, 412). It is also possible, of course, that no such transformation will take place—that, revealing an irreducible underlying violence, there will be a shaking that will bring nothing to mind save for the rattling of a skeleton.

### **Shadows, Puppetry, Animation**

When William Kentridge reflects on the play of light and darkness that make possible visual art—because they constitute the seen itself—he frequently also reflects on the politics and ethics of his art. Perhaps the most detailed of these reflections are in a lecture, delivered in different versions beginning in 2001, entitled “In Praise of Shadows.”<sup>[2]</sup> Kentridge takes issue with the simile of the cave put forward in Plato's *Republic*; whereas the ascent to truth—which is light—and its dissemination to the benighted, is privileged in Plato, Kentridge links the arrogation of truth to political power and violence in its colonial and totalitarian forms. Kentridge's praise of shadows against

the ideological privileging of light is not, however, a plea for illusion. Rather it is for an art that, by working with light and shadows in certain ways, is able to reveal how illusions are constructed, and how those illusions are taken for truth: “Not just the obvious agency in making, but the possible agency also in seeing. . . . Allowing us to be neither the prisoners in the cave, unable to comprehend what we see, nor the all-seeing philosopher returning with all his certainty. But allowing us to inhabit the terrain in between, the space between what we see on the wall and what we conjure up behind our retinas” (Kentridge 2014, 31-32). Kentridge’s insistence on “the terrain in between, the space between” image and what is conjured up behind our retinas recalls Paul de Man’s idea that, with the puppet and puppeteer, the aesthetic interest lies in “the text that spins itself between them” (de Man 1984, 285).

It is into an “in between,” then, that experiments with perspective such as anamorphosis bring the viewer. In the version of “In Praise of Shadows” with which he opens his 2012 Charles Eliot Norton lectures, Kentridge emphasizes the importance that anamorphosis has for him by connecting it to a memory of an early episode in the life of the artist:

Let us go back to the cave and the prisoners deceived by the shadows. And I think of an eight-year-old on the beach, and the long shadows cast by the sun close to the horizon. The shadows are a version of you. Lift your arm and the shadow lifts its arm. Step forward and the shadow advances. But the elongation, the anamorphic projection, changes things too. There is a speed, a skill. Ducking and weaving, no one can stand on the shadow. The shadow of the head now up at the dunes at the top of the beach moves twenty meters as I duck down, quick as that. I both control it and delight at a speed and a dexterity I did not know that I had. It is an extension and more than an extension of me. (Kentridge 2014, 15)<sup>[3]</sup>

Some of Kentridge’s most remarkable works are anamorphic projections involving the use of mirrors. Kentridge’s experiments with anamorphosis began with an image of a

Medusa’s Head in 2000 (Taylor 2008, 611). Most striking, perhaps, is *What Will Come (Has Already Come)* (2007), an eight-minute animated film that, continuing a series of works on colonial violence that includes the miniature mechanical theatre *Black Box/Chambre Noire* (2005) remembering the 1905 Herero genocide in German South-West Africa, takes as its subject Italy’s use of mustard gas during the invasion of Abyssinia in 1935-36. Projected in distorted form onto a circular table, the film images become visible as regular images when they are reflected in a cylindrical mirror at the center of the table (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *What Will Come (Has Already Come)* (2007). (Photo: Courtesy of the artist)

Instead of discussing Kentridge’s anamorphic works in more detail, I explore the



implications of reading the shadows of Plato’s cave at the nexus of animation and puppetry—which reveals the transformation involved in both media to be anamorphic.

Plato compares the “curtain wall,” behind which are “men carrying all sorts of gear ... including figures of men and animals made of wood and stone and all sorts of other materials,” to “the screen at puppet shows between the operators and their audience, above which they show their puppets” (KentrIDGE 2014, 6-7). In Plato, the entirety of this apparatus is behind the backs of the viewers, who are chained with their heads fixed, facing the wall on which the shadows, created by the light of a fire behind the passing figures, are projected. The force of Plato’s simile is to suggest not only that a viewer who is used to being captive in such a situation will mistake shadows for reality, but that, for that viewer, all of the figures behind the screen may as well be puppets, since what she sees is not anything stable and actual, but rather the result of a variation of the distance and position of the figures in relation to the source of light.

In contemporary shadow puppetry, which includes older forms such as *wayang*, the arrangement is somewhat different to what Plato describes. Viewers face a semi-translucent screen that separates them from the puppeteers. The puppeteer sees, back to front, on her side of the screen, what the viewer sees, right-way around, on the other side. The process is thus anamorphic, with the anamorphosis adjusted in real time in order to produce the desired visual effects (Schönewolf 1968, 59-61; Kaplin 93-97).

KentrIDGE opened the earliest published version of “In Praise of Shadows,” dating from 2001, by using Plato’s simile to describe the inner workings of his film, *Confessions of Zeno* (2000), which emerged from his collaboration with Handspring Puppet Company in the multimedia stage production, *Zeno at 4 a.m.*, an adaptation of Italo Svevo’s novel, *Zeno’s Conscience* (1923). Kentridge’s praise of *shadows*—which depend on the obstruction of light by objects—rather than his choosing another metaphor for optical illusion and the vicissitudes of seeing, thus appears to have been inspired by his work with puppeteers.<sup>[4]</sup> Before the techniques were used in such familiar films as *Shadow Procession* (1999) (Figure 2),<sup>[5]</sup> Kentridge worked with Handspring to devise “shadow

figures” for *Woyzeck on the Highveld*, an adaptation of Georg Büchner’s play (Kohler 2009, 71). In *Woyzeck*, in which the main puppets are sometimes lit in silhouette in live performance, we also see projected onto the backdrop a film of smaller silhouette puppets.<sup>[6]</sup> The latter, strictly speaking, only become “shadows” when the film is projected—making it different from a shadow-puppet performance in which the screen between puppeteer and viewer requires no intervention of a camera, and no projector in order for the puppet silhouettes to cast their shadows onto the screen.



Figure 2. William Kentridge, *Shadow Procession* (1999). (Photo: Courtesy of Art Exchange, University of Essex)

In “In Praise of Shadows” and the related artworks, Kentridge presents film as being, essentially, a projection of light that, as with a shadow-puppet theatre, creates shadows of different shapes on a screen when that light is obstructed by objects, or by the darker parts of the exposed celluloid. More recently, Manual Cinema, a Chicago-based puppet company, has pushed this idea further, using overhead projectors and transparencies,



as well as actors in silhouette, in order to bring to the screen between performers and audience a “film” in real time.<sup>[7]</sup> For my argument, the application by Kentridge of the word “shadow” to silhouette does not matter that much, since my main point, for now, is that the medium is one that does not involve drawing, but rather the use of light and solid shapes to create silhouettes or—when the source of light is turned in the opposite direction—shadows. A medium entirely distinct from drawing, shadow (or silhouette) puppetry has been the inspiration for a range of subsequent works by William Kentridge—the shadow processions and their variants, both moving and static,<sup>[8]</sup> with which museumgoers worldwide are now familiar. In recent years, Kentridge has, incidentally, made fewer films based solely on drawings.

As one would expect from an artist who also theorizes, deeper connections are made by Kentridge between puppetry and animation. Having linked Plato’s cave to the prehistory of cinema generally (Kentridge 2017b, 71), Kentridge makes the link with filmic animation explicit: “puppets are a different kind of animation” (Kentridge and Taylor 2009, 182). Different, that is, from the Soho Eckstein films—or “drawings for projection” that Kentridge began exhibiting in 1989. Both Kentridge and Adrian Kohler, one of Handspring Puppet Company’s founders, tell us that puppets were a solution, for Kentridge, for problems of animated film, as he had been working in the medium, specifically “problems with a longer form”; for a full-length animated film, Kentridge observes, “one would take, say, twenty years making the drawings!” (Kentridge and Taylor 2009, 182). This rough calculation may be no exaggeration, given his description of how he makes the films:

The technique I use is to have a sheet of paper stuck up on the studio wall and, halfway across the room, my camera, usually an old Bolex. A drawing is started on the paper, I walk across to the camera, shoot one or two frames, walk back to the paper, change the drawing (slightly), walk back to the camera, walk back to the paper, to the camera, and so on. So that each *sequence* as opposed to each *frame* of the film is a single drawing. In all there may be twenty drawings to a film rather than the thousands one expects. It

is more like making a drawing than making a film (albeit a gray, battered, and rubbed about drawing). Once the film in the camera is processed, the completion of the film—the editing, the addition of sound, music, and so on—proceeds like any other. (Kentridge 2017a, 26)

When he first began working with Handspring, Kentridge had recently completed *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City After Paris* (1989), the first film of what would, by 2020, be a series of eleven films entitled *Drawings for Projection*. The collaborators tell us that Kentridge’s animated films and puppetry—at least in Handspring’s practice, which is influenced by Japanese *bunraku*, where the puppeteers are visible to the audience (Kohler 2009, 48)—both make artifice visible; the double performance of puppet and actor parallels the visible erasure in the animated films (Kentridge and Taylor 2009, 191-92). “Puppeteering,” Kentridge observes, “makes apparent things that we know but don’t really see” (Kentridge and Taylor 2009, 198). This parallels what Kentridge says about his art, more generally: “The pleasure is that of finding and understanding what active seeing involves.[...][The drawings] are really an excuse for the pleasure of reminding ourselves, what it is that we do when we see” (Kentridge and Breidbach, 110).

The terms in which the puppeteers, and those familiar with their work, discuss their practice range from being humanist, at times with an animist accent, to an acute awareness of the primacy of the material support. On the humanist side, Basil Jones, co-founder of Handspring with Adrian Kohler, tells us that the puppet seeks life (Jones 2009, 254; Jones, et al 2014, 28-29), and refers to Victoria Nelson (2001) for how “our instinct for the supernatural—our animist beliefs—have been repressed and displaced from their religious origin, resulting in a welling up of dark imaginings in popular culture” (Jones 2009, 255). Artist and Handspring collaborator Gerhard Marx expresses similar ideas. Although, citing Heidegger on *Zeug*, he points to what does *not* work, he also explains that a puppet’s dependence on a puppeteer as “animator” is what makes it different from an automaton or a machine (Marx 2009, 242). Typically, in this

scenario, there is a puppet made of wood or some other material, which is dead, and a puppeteer, who, being human, is alive. Any life is imparted by the puppeteer. These are the assumptions that lend such poignancy to Carlo Collodi's story of the childless carpenter Geppetto, who carves from wood a figure that actually comes alive.

Although their commitment to such ideas remains firm, the puppeteers are rigorous in not eliding the careful artifice whereby a puppet is made (it is not just any piece of wood), so that the puppeteer, by following a regular and predictable series of movements, is able to produce an acceptable illusion of life. The achievement of this predictability is the greater part of the preparation for any production—as is clear from the descriptions of the modifications that needed to be made to the puppets in *War Horse* so that it would be possible for the Handspring puppeteers to work with them without developing repetitive-strain injuries (Kohler 2009, 137). The puppet may thus be viewed as primary. As Basil Jones tells an interviewer, “You’re always serving the puppet, and when serving the puppet is painful you can easily start thinking of it as an enslavement. I’ve just come from an operating theater where I had surgery, because the last play I did was so painful that I did some damage to the tendons in my arm” (Kohler and Jones 2011, 14).

In the conditions of possibility for the illusion, the conforming of the human to what is made possible by a machine or tool constructed in a certain way (other things are not made possible, or made not-possible), one discerns a system that is not opposed, as Gerhard Marx thinks, to the automaton, but depends on automation. Animation depends on automation. Even if Basil Jones is correct to call the puppetry “very old-fashioned technology,” it may not be inaccurate to view puppets and their puppeteers in performance as “cyborgs,” the term used by theorists of less old-fashioned modern media to describe an entity reducible neither to human nor machine, but operating through their interdependence.<sup>[9]</sup> This is an insight developed in different ways by contemporary theorists of puppetry such as Jennifer Parker-Starbuck (2013). Most examples of the cyborg, historically, involve a high degree of programming, to which the human user has to learn to conform to the device or software platform—like the

regularity and predictability sought after during the design phase of the horse puppets in *War Horse*.

That this programming anticipates anamorphic transformation is clear from some of the problems of puppet design alluded to above. Thus, introducing the framework of anamorphosis gets us beyond the idea of a rendering visible of artifice, which after a while becomes predictable and uninformative, and does so by questioning the premise of the idea that we have a human and a non-human entity, and that the latter depends on the former for “life.” As Baltrušaitis (1996, 85-100) observes, there is a historical precedent, especially in the work of Descartes and his contemporaries, for connecting anamorphosis and automation; like the automation attributed to the workings of the human body, anamorphosis is calculable, and at the same time capable of producing false ideas. If tradition tells us that the non-human puppet depends on the human puppeteer for life, the anamorphosis that entails automation suggests that the reverse may be equally true—that the “life” of the human entity (as puppeteer) depends on whatever the non-human entity allows by virtue of its design.

I am not interested in performing this simple reversal, however, but rather in displacing the field of oppositions governing theory about puppets—as well as about film. The collaboration of Kentridge with Handspring is a perfect place to carry out this investigation. Although Kentridge’s few remarks about puppetry and filmic animation only draw a sketchy parallel, what he says about his filmmaking frequently describes an anamorphic process, even if he does not actually use the word in that connection. Here is one example: “I walk backward and film myself walking backward, so I can project it forward. It is clearly wrong. The lean is in the wrong direction.[...] I lean forward as I walk backward, an unnatural action, to make a natural illusion” (Kentridge 2014, 107).

In the use put to it by de Man and others, including me, anamorphosis, of course, has a contingency as a theoretical model or concept-metaphor, because as an *example* it has two equally visible, and intelligible because visible, elements—the image’s distortion and its correction, the line and the curve of the puppeteer and the puppet—whereas it

stands for a system of transformation that is not, strictly speaking, visible, although it is intelligible, and, furthermore, may not comprise two *visible* elements. In digital media, as is frequently observed, the image that is viewed has a mathematical relation to computer code that, even if it is made visible graphically, is not thereby intelligible to a viewer as an image of anything or as a mimetic act. This is one of the things that make de Man prescient. Kentridge himself, however, always discusses anamorphosis as a *visual* effect. It is precisely the contingency of the example of two equally visible elements, faced by the invisibility of the one element—and of the “between”—in digital media, that makes this art and not technics.

The question of automation is central to Rosalind Krauss’s important commentary on Kentridge, which draws upon the latter’s reflections in his 1993 essay, “‘Fortuna’: Neither Programme Nor Chance in the Making of Images” (Kentridge 2017a). Like “In Praise of Shadows,” “‘Fortuna’” offers important clues about Kentridge’s work. When Kentridge insists that procedure comes before meaning, Krauss emphasizes a “quasi-automatism” (Krauss 2000, 6, 13). Why quasi-? Because there is a difference between the entirely programmed, and the regularity of Kentridge’s walking back and forth between drawing and camera, the effects of which are not wholly predictable, and, although they involve mechanization because he uses a camera, are not mechanically determined. And it is this difference that leads Krauss to view Kentridge’s animations within a complex art-historical nexus: as primarily *drawing*, with animation “merely a technical support” (Krauss 2000, 9); as, nevertheless, also a response, as Eisenstein and other Marxists contemplated, in the form of metamorphosis, to the rationalization and mechanization of capitalism, with which animation, at another level, colludes (Krauss 2000, 14-16); and, in the art of the 1990s, a response, in drawing as well as film, to digitization and “new media” (Krauss 2000, 32-34).

Although the main thrust of Krauss’s subtle argument is to show that Kentridge’s medium is not film but drawing, it also applies to film. Krauss draws critically on Stanley Cavell, showing how digital film and other new media brought about the collapse of the distinction between indexical and non-indexical film upon which Cavell (1979, 103, 168)

relied in order to distinguish films and animated cartoons. Taking up Cavell's thinking of medium, however, as, alternately, "material support" and convention, Krauss shows how Kentridge's films, in their appeal to outmoded technology, can, as a response to digital media, also be understood as aligning themselves with older celluloid animation through their dependence on drawing, which makes both types of animation a handcraft (Krauss 2000, 32-33).

Krauss does not approach Kentridge's "Drawings for Projection" from the direction of anamorphosis, consider the relationship of those works to puppetry, or extend her purview of Kentridge's films to include *Shadow Procession* and others that do not involve drawing (or include drawing alongside "shadow play" of different kinds). The concept of anamorphosis, however, is crucial to understanding the automation or quasi-automation involved in these works, whether it is viewed as relating to their material support or to a set of codes and conventions governing their production. And, as I will show, puppetry sets to work an automation on which drawing, ultimately, also depends.

The implications of the collapse, with the advent of digital cinema, of the conceptual distinction between indexical and animated film have been explored by Lev Manovich and other theorists of film and digital media. In *The Language of New Media*, Manovich offers a decisive interpretation of the history of "new media," reflecting with great care and insight on what place cinema has in that history. Crucial for my investigation is Manovich's argument that:

Seen in the context [of the larger cultural history of the moving image], the manual construction of images in digital cinema represents a return to the pro-cinematic practices of the nineteenth century, when images were hand-painted and hand-animated. At the turn of the twentieth century, cinema was to delegate these manual techniques to animation and define itself as a recording medium. As cinema enters the digital age, these techniques are again becoming commonplace in the filmmaking process. Consequently, cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation. It is no longer an indexical media technology but, rather, a subgenre of painting.



(Manovich 2001, 295)<sup>[10]</sup>

It is possible, however, to generalize animation from a different premise, by emphasizing not painting but something more specific to film—namely stop-motion, which, in the early history of film, was frequently used both in indexical film and in animated films based on drawings. Could Manovich’s argument thus be radicalized to propose that *all* film—and not just digital film—is “one particular case of animation”? (Manovich 2001, 302).

If we watch Dziga Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), the film around which Manovich structures his book, we observe that two sequences may be juxtaposed: the stop-motion animation in the sequence with the camera tripod that moves on its own (Figure 3), and the sequences of the film being cut and spliced at the editing table. If film reproduces an image of *movement*<sup>[11]</sup>—and Vertov’s film revels in the fact that it can—by having exposed film to it at 24 frames per second, producing a succession of stills, and then projecting them in series by moving them in front of a light source at the same rate, then animation takes a succession of stills (with changes to the image in each sequence) and creates the illusion of movement by turning and projecting the film at the same rate.<sup>[12]</sup> This would go to show that *all* film is, in essence, animation.



Figure 3. Still frame from Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).

What bearing does this have on Kentridge? As in Vertov’s camera-tripod sequence, when Kentridge alludes to it cinematically in his short, animated film *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1997), a metamorphosis is staged in a way that brings to the fore anamorphosis. If the tripod “walks” in Vertov it is because somebody’s hand has, in a separate and different movement or series of movements—which may or may not, as in some of Georges Méliès’ films, be unseen—arranged its component parts before the camera. Here the parallel I am drawing between film and puppetry thus extends beyond the parallel with shadow puppetry that I introduced above. Vertov’s tripod is for all intents and purposes a puppet—in a more contemporary lexicon, it is a “performing object” (see Bell 2001, 5).

Recalling the terms of de Man’s description from Kleist, though, it remains to be noted

that the anamorphosis is corrected not immediately, as with a puppet performance, but only when the finished film is projected. This is what makes it different to an automaton in the narrow sense, whether of the age of E.T.A. Hoffmann, or those in Kentridge's *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, where the figures in the electromechanical theatre are built to run without human intervention. Thus, when commentators on Kentridge talk about metamorphosis—in *Ubu Tells the Truth*, a cat turns into a tripod, and so forth—what they are overlooking is the anamorphosis that has taken place—the programmed or, at least, formalized transformation from inert marks to images that signify. They make the conversion of image into word seem self-evident, writing as if the “suture” of Imaginary and Symbolic is uneventful.<sup>[13]</sup> And, perhaps, that is how Kentridge prefers it to be; when he talks about tearing paper, and arranging it into shapes, the viewer in his anecdote will always see, or recognize, something familiar (Kentridge 2014, 16-19). In Vertov, the impossible autonomous movement of the tripod, which may certainly be regarded as a metamorphosis, presupposes a placement of the object by the filmmaker or his set hand, which is not physically impossible—and, being dissimilar to what is seen by the viewer, entails anamorphosis.

A possible alternative to a commentary that relies on the instant or rapid recognition of the image in its metamorphosis, is to follow the drawn line itself. This is what Sean Cubitt proposes in *The Cinema Effect*, where, like Manovich, he writes a history of cinema in the light of digital media. Of most direct relevance for my argument is Cubitt's reading of *Fantasmagorie* (1908), a film by the early animator, Émile Cohl. Cubitt (2004, 70) invokes Paul Klee's description of his drawing as “taking a line for a walk”—an idea to which Kentridge (2009) has also appealed. For Cubitt, Cohl's film, principally drawn in chalk, is “evidence of a cyborg integration of human and machine into a signifying apparatus” (Cubitt 2004, 96). In Cubitt's analysis, the machine is not a McLuhanesque tool, but has an “autonomy ... equivalent to that of the user.” This autonomous signifying apparatus is what produces the “possibility of animated drawing” (Cubitt 2004, 88).

Were we to apply Cubitt's analysis to Kentridge, some of whose films include sequences

evocative of *Fantasmagorie* (in a vein of cinematic homage that includes allusions to Méliès, Vertov, Buñuel and Dalí, Rogosin, and others), we would be going further than Krauss, who treats Kentridge’s “drawings for projection” as an alternative to full automation, and does not posit the autonomy of the apparatus, and thus its role in the “possibility of *animated* drawing” (Cubitt 2004, 88).

In other words, drawing as a medium in Kentridge—at least as it forms part of his *Drawings for Projection*—needs to be understood as irreducibly filmic or cinematic. Krauss’s rethinking of a medium as convention or “code” would remain relevant, except that, in the medium of film, generalized as animation, the code would function differently to how it does in drawing, in which the line, once it has been taken for a walk, does not move. Manovich’s emphasis on the “manual” also omits the key element of autonomy of the apparatus.

The difference in the theorists’ respective approaches is clear when Cubitt (2004, 89) notes, analyzing two sequences of the photographed images of the artist’s hands in *Fantasmagorie*, “Whereas the first entry of the drawing hand is explicable as a throwback to the lightning-sketch genre, the second adds a whole new axis to the film, attributing autonomy to both the *fantoche* and the maker in addition to the autonomy of the apparatus.”

But perhaps the most interesting lacuna is that left by the privileged emphasis given by all of these scholars to painting or drawing—this, in Cubitt, despite the fact that, with the second entry of the artist’s hands in *Fantasmagorie*, the *fantoche* that is the film’s protagonist is not a chalk line-drawing but a miniature puppet pieced together from cut-out pieces of paper (Figure 4). In Kentridge’s films, puppetry—specifically shadow puppetry—is an important alternative medium to drawing. In the final section of this essay, I shall show how this is so, not simply in the films obviously made with shadows or silhouettes rather than by drawing, but also in those that have drawing as their ostensible medium. In short, I shall show that, when anamorphic transformation is understood as the underlying mechanism for the films, it becomes apparent that

puppetry is the condition of possibility no less for drawing than for the play of shadow and silhouette that Kentridge terms “shadow work.”



Figure 4. Still frame from Émile Cohl, *Fantasmagorie* (1908).

### Memory and Repetition: Rethinking Drawing

In *Tide Table* (2003), the ninth of Kentridge’s *Drawings for Projection*, we find Soho Eckstein, the chief character in *History of the Main Complaint* and earlier films in the series, alone at a beachside hotel. The film is about memory, and, as its title suggests, also about a regularity of repetition—of tides, and, at an abstract level, of the sine function that represents their regularity. Recall that for Kentridge himself the beach is a significant place, being where, as a boy, he says he first experienced the effects of

anamorphosis as he played with shadows in the setting sun (Kentridge 2014, 15).<sup>[14]</sup> Seated in a deckchair on the beach in his trademark pinstripe suit, Soho is visited by images of a boy in a sunhat skimming stones and building a sandcastle. Because he is asleep, with his newspaper over his face, these images suggest a repeating of early events in his life, rather than a conscious remembering. At the same time, a triumvirate of African men in military officers' uniforms gaze out through binoculars over the waves from the hotel, observing a cow emerging from the sea—perhaps one of the herd of seven cattle that appear in a different sequence (Kentridge has interpreted this as an allusion to the fat and lean years of Pharaoh's dream). A pair of bathing huts, which, like the art-deco hotel, are a distinctive feature of Muizenberg beach near Cape Town, become the frame for a plethora of images that connect Soho sitting on the beach to the suffering of HIV-AIDS—which, at the time of the film's release, was subject to the Mbeki government's denialism (Gevisser 2007, 727-65). Looking through their field glasses, like Soho in his mind's eye, the military officers see what is inside the huts. It is as if, although Soho is oblivious to these events, through some unconscious process, as in *Stereoscope* (1999), they insist on his not ignoring them.

The bathing hut sequences, which bring to the fore Kentridge's method of animation (drawing—filming—stop-motion—erasure—drawing), need to be analyzed in terms minutely attuned to the history of media technologies. In one of the sequences, framed within the outline of one of the bathing huts, a deck chair moves in a way that we interpret as a dance because of the rhythms of the soundtrack. With its jointed parts, this deckchair, like Kentridge's and Vertov's camera tripods, appears to move on its own. Then it becomes a number of parallel lines, only to rise again as a bed that introduces a scene in which people are dying in a cramped hospital ward.

To describe the sequence in this way is already to have begged the question; to say that the deck chair “becomes a number of parallel lines” is already to have said too much. And the sequence is foreshadowed by a sequence earlier in the film, in which the chair dissolves into a blur of charcoal lines and smudges (Figure 5). This foreshadowing makes the deck chair like Holbein's skull—except that, until the later frame series, there



is no possible anamorphosis that would make the relevant marks resemble either a deck chair or a bed. Without the lines being resolved into the next image, there is no image that could be named. The sort of reading of Kentridge that interprets the charcoal blurs as memory trace and palimpsest is, for this reason, teleological. There is no memory, strictly speaking, until an image is nameable. The erasure or displacement of the sign of white leisure by the sign of black disease and death, and the acknowledgment through making visible what the government (and, of course, Soho) would prefer not to see, or not to have seen, is only effectively such once the images can be named in sequence. The early blur is a reminder of the extreme fragility of memory, of recognition, of a sense-making through signs—of, ultimately, the ability to grasp critically a historical totality.







Figure 5. Three successive frames from William Kentridge, *Tide Table* (2003). (Still frames reproduced with permission of the artist.)

Contemplating these sequences, it is possible to note that drawing can be conceived as being anamorphic—in the sense that, as a medium, it depends on placing before the viewer a combination of representationally inert lines and shading that will be recognized by her as something in particular.<sup>[15]</sup> Broadly speaking, when thought in these terms, drawing is much like puppetry. Learning to draw is learning just how to achieve this placement (this is the revision of mimesis that de Man finds in Kleist’s description of puppetry as anamorphic) (de Man 1984, 285-86). It is no less dependent than is puppetry on a certain automation for its predictability—one which Klee interrogated when he spoke of “taking a line for a walk.” Drawing achieves an illusion of shadow and light, creating illusory depth, whereas shadow puppetry, whether it employs a screen between puppeteer and viewer or not, directly avails itself of shadow and light.

The significance of Kentridge’s engagement with automation, and consequently with digitization, is thus more fully grasped if his medium is understood as not being restricted to drawing, but is conceived of as extending into puppetry—specifically shadow puppetry, but not only. There are two main reasons for approaching Kentridge in this way. The first is biographical. Kentridge has worked extensively in puppetry, including shadow puppetry. Commentators have noticed how, in his more recent filmic work, in fact from as early as *Shadow Procession* (1999) and *Zeno Writing* (2002), the stop-motion animation based on drawing for which he is famous is less frequently in evidence compared to his use of paper cut-outs and other silhouettes, along with actors, for “shadow work”—as well as a number of variants, reminiscent of Méliès, in which live-action film and drawing are combined, sometimes using spatial montage, and reverse action, in addition to stop-motion. The terms of my analysis show how much I am indebted to Krauss’s commentary. But Krauss, in relying on “Fortuna,” and not being able in 1999 to refer to “In Praise of Shadows,” which appeared two years after publication of her influential essay, is led by Kentridge to privilege drawing, when, in “In Praise of Shadows,” “shadow work” and puppetry are described in almost the same terms as drawing was in “Fortuna.” “When operating a puppet,” Kentridge explains, “it does not help to have a Stanislavskian approach, which involves conjuring up

psychological memories, reliving them as a way to generate emotion. The considerations are different: a series of practical questions, angles to the camera and light, finding an imagined horizon, working through a series of what appear to be technical considerations to arrive at a meaning which is recognized” (Kentrige 2017b, 72). As with drawing, meaning follows technique.

This brings me to the second, and more far reaching, reason—namely, that by privileging drawing, we elide the implication, apparent from a consideration of “shadow work” and puppetry specifically, that drawing by hand itself entails automation. The manipulation involved in puppetry is also a condition of possibility for drawing. Addressing drawing in isolation does not really address this automation, and its status as a condition of possibility for both media. As I have argued above, following Cubitt, in both of these media, as in film, the apparatus has a certain autonomy, to which the draughtsperson or puppeteer is subservient—making her a “cyborg,” who works at her peril against the possibilities afforded by it. The automation or quasi-automation involved in both media—and not just in film-making, to which Kentridge (2017b, 72) refers in the same breath when he describes puppetry—is anamorphic because it requires precisely the sort of “technical considerations” to which Kentridge alludes, a series of “practical” steps to which what the viewer ordinarily sees bears no resemblance.

My analysis shows how animation, and film more generally, are, like puppetry, anamorphic. I have shown how this analysis applies to drawing, with puppetry as its condition of possibility. I have also suggested how memory itself—and the connected narratives we tell ourselves about the past—could be regarded as a *transformation* of obscure states of unease, of fugitive, or compulsively repeated, firings of pleasure and pain and plenitude and nothingness and satisfaction and frustration—into images, which formalize these disconnected electrochemical events into the (relatively) coherent structures of meaning that we call acts and omissions, which then cohere into stories. In the mid-1950s, in his seminar on *The Psychoses*, Jacques Lacan (1993) explored the misfiring of Imaginary-becoming-Symbolic. Film theorists, drawing on Lacan, would, in

the decades that followed, speak of a failure of “suture” (*Screen* 1977-78). The graphs with their sine waves in the newspaper Soho Eckstein reads in his deckchair at the beach—tide table, stock market indexes, and so forth—connote a repetition and regularity, even a totality of natural and economic processes that lies within human grasp (the conviction presupposed by Hegel and Marx). But somewhere—everywhere, really—there is a blur that, unlike the skull in Hans Holbein the Younger, will not cohere, not even into a symbol for our mortality. In the final analysis, we do not even have that, in the final analysis we are not given even that.

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[1] Perspective, generally, is a subject with which Kentridge is deeply occupied. See, for example, Kentridge and Breidbach 2006.

[2] For the earliest published version, dating from 2001, see Kentridge 2017b.

[3] A similar “early memory of shadows” is related in the 2001 version of “In Praise of Shadows” (Kentridge 2017b, 75), although there the anamorphosis of the shadow is not mentioned.

[4] This began in 1992 with *Woyzeck on the Highveld*. Other collaborations between Handspring and Kentridge include the adaptations, *Faustus in Africa*, and *Il ritorno de Ulisse in patria*, a baroque opera by Monteverdi. See Taylor 2009, 90-99.

[5] For a reading of *Shadow Procession* and other examples of “shadow play” by Kentridge, see Huyssen 2017, 79.



[6] My discussion is based on the film made of a performance in February 2008 at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg.

<http://www.handspringpuppet.co.za/our-work/handspring-productions/woyzeck-on-the-highveld/>. The original production may have incorporated live shadow puppetry with these figures.

[7] In the performances by Manual Cinema that I have attended, *Lula Del Ray* and *The End of TV*, the puppeteers and actors performing the shadow theatre have their backs to the audience, allowing viewers to observe the workings of the shadow theatre normally concealed behind the screen—notably, the use of overhead projectors and transparencies. A digital video camera transmits the moving images in real time from the other side of the shadow screen to a much larger digital film screen, placed centrally for the audience to view the “film”—which, being in principle ephemeral because it is a shadow play, raises fundamental questions about film—for example, whether it is essentially a medium for recording. In *The End of TV*, the shadow theatre alternates with segments in which actors perform directly on camera, denoting a succession of television genres. See [manualcinema.com](http://manualcinema.com).

[8] The films and static installations tend to complement each other as aspects of a single creative process, as is the case with the film, *More Sweetly Play the Dance* (2015), and the frieze, *Triumphs and Laments* (2016), on the walls along the Tiber River in Rome. See Kentridge 2015. For thought-provoking discussions of Kentridge’s processions, which, respectively, place them in historical context, and contemplate their ethical implications, see Sitas 2001, and Rothberg 2019, 87-117.

[9] Taylor (2009, 34) entertains this briefly, but without pursuing the implications.

[10] “Born from animation,” Manovich (2001, 302) concludes, “cinema pushed animation to its periphery, only in the end to become [in the form of digital cinema] one particular case of animation.”

[11] For Deleuze (n.d.), this is what makes film what it is. See also Cubitt (2004, 28) on



“le vif.”

[12] Discussing with Kentridge his films, Rosalind Morris draws a similar parallel (Kentridge and Morris 2014, 44).

[13] On “suture,” see *Screen* 1977-78.

[14] For more on Muizenberg beach, which was the subject of some of Kentridge’s earliest printmaking, see Kentridge 2006, 22-23.

[15] I employ the term “representationally inert” when arguing for the primacy of mimesis in the fiction of Marlene van Niekerk (Sanders 2009, 113).

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