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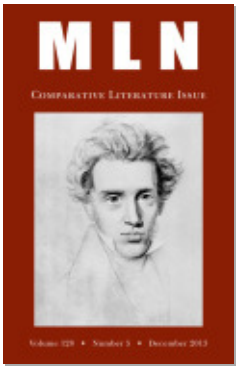

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Taking a Joke Seriously: Mickey Mouse and William Kentridge[1]

Nienke Boer

> Transformation, metamorphosis is of course the bread and butter of animation in the studio. Something difficult to do… on the stage, to turn a cat into a telephone, gets called together by the cloth, the paper, the charcoal, the eraser.
>
> —William Kentridge, "Drawing Lesson 5: In Praise of Mistranslation."

The film opens in what appears to be the control room of a large organization: computers line the left wall, and, on a large clock, moving hands illustrate the passage of time. The scene shifts abruptly to a man in a pinstriped business suit, standing in what seems to be a bedroom (wood flooring, a fireplace, a small rug and the end of a single bed), reading a letter, which moves slightly as he holds it. Then, the third scene: a difficult-to-identify structure next to the side of a road—gleaming tracks on the road suggest that it could be a tram station, but the position of the windows also hint at the security booth of a gated community or large business. A bird flies over from the top left corner of the screen, leaving a smudged trail behind it, and the scene changes again, to a close-up of the top of

[1]My sincere thanks to Mark Sanders for his comments on earlier versions of this article, which originated in the context of a graduate seminar he taught at New York University in Spring 2010: "Word, Image, Sound: William Kentridge and Literature."

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a power line, where a bird (the same one?) appears at the top left corner and flies across the screen, still trailing black smudges. Finally, the scene shifts again and a black cat walks across the screen from left to right. As the cat walks along a white wall, letters spelling out the word "Stereoscope" appear one by one on the wall behind it. This is the "cold open" of William Kentridge's eighth *Drawing for Projection*, *Stereoscope* (1999). All of this is drawn in charcoal and animated by a kind of stop-motion animation, where small changes are made to a base drawing in between sequential shots of it. Thus "each sequence as opposed to each frame of the film is a single drawing" (Kentridge, "'Fortuna'" 64). The charcoal leaves smudged traces behind when it is erased, resulting in, for example, the trail behind the bird as it flies across the sky. Kentridge uses this technique, which he calls "stone age film-making" ("'Fortuna'" 61), to produce a drawn and animated world peopled by three main characters—the man in the pinstripe suit, Soho Eckstein, his wife, Mrs. Eckstein, and Felix Teitlebaum, an artist who pursues Mrs. Eckstein—along with an accompanying cast of, among others, miners, doctors, police agents, a land surveyor called Nandi, a living statue, and an omnipresent black cat.

I've described this opening sequence in such great detail because it includes many of the stylistic features that I'll discuss in this paper: the imitation of filmic conventions (the moving hands on the clock indicating the accelerated passage of time); the use of visual cues to create meaning (we know Soho is reading the letter because it moves slightly in his hand); the creation of continuity between shots (the bird flying from left to right, linking two sequential drawings, suggests that these scenes are temporally and geographically adjacent); the mixing of realistic and impossible effects (the outsize cat patrolling a suburban wall and producing the word "Stereoscope" behind it). In my attempt to address the question of why Kentridge, in this particular section of his substantial body of work (which includes everything from constructing large mechanically-operated music instruments to directing and co-designing the Metropolitan Opera's 2010 production of Shostakovich's *The Nose*), chooses to engage with animation, I examine how he uses both the technological apparatus and techniques of this medium, and what they allow him to do. In this brief introduction I begin to suggest some answers, but a fuller explanation will require me to delve back into the history of the medium itself.

Rosalind Krauss, in her article "'The Rock': William Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection*" (originally published in 2000), has written very insightfully on Kentridge's technique of "stone-age film-making." To

Krauss, "the medium is the memory" (19), and thus, in order to study what she calls, in the Introduction to her 2010 book, "Kentridge's exploitation of cinematic animation" (xiv), she also investigates the historical development of animation. She argues that Kentridge is "building a new medium on the technical support of a widespread and mostly mass-cultural cinematic practice, welcoming its condition as a popular rather than a high art" (66). Regressing through time and technical complexity, Krauss discusses early Disney cartoons, flip-books or flicker-books, and the thaumatrope as the popular precursors of Kentridge's "stone-age animation," coming to the conclusion that, in some ways, Kentridge's work is even "more primitive" than these forms (71). Krauss thus sets the stage for a productive comparison between Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection* and early Disney animated short films, but she soon categorizes these earlier animations as "weightless" (68), henceforth using them purely as a foil for determining where the *weight* of Kentridge's works stems from. I believe, however, it is worth taking the time to examine in greater detail the aspects that Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection* have in common with early black-and-white Disney cartoons. This allows me to pinpoint exactly how both the technology and the formal conventions of early Disney animations are redeployed in Kentridge's work.

At this juncture, I find it particularly productive to turn to Walter Benjamin, who, as part of his work on mass culture, wrote briefly but insightfully on Mickey Mouse, specifically the relationship between the technological apparatus of film and the content and conventions of these early cel animations. Kentridge's demonstrated interest in the intersection between art, violence and technology is also the intersection at which Benjamin situates Mickey Mouse.

In his "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,"[2] written in 1935, Benjamin implicitly engages with the question of what separates certain kinds of mass entertainment, the apotheosis of which, to him, is Mickey Mouse, from Nazi spectacle, which is designed to offer the masses the appearance of change without having to actualize it. To him, the early black-and-white Mickey Mouse cartoons embody the possibilities of a world in which technology is

[2]Most English readers of Benjamin are familiar with the version of this essay published in *Illuminations* (1969), which is a translation of the 1955 German version edited by Theodor Adorno and Friedrich Podszus. The sections on Mickey Mouse were cut from this version. The version I'm using is a translation into English of the version Benjamin submitted to the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1936 and to which Adorno responds in his letter dated 18 March 1936. For more information, see Miriam Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney."

allowed to fulfill its full potential, instead of being diverted into war. Through these cartoons, Mickey Mouse can circle the world, teaching new ways of visual perception, a new filmic language, and even new wishes, as the embodiment of the collective dream. Kentridge takes up the question of what the medium of animation renders possible and engages emphatically with what Benjamin hints at: the dream-like logic governing the understanding of these early animated cartoons, a logic found in the roots of the medium itself, in which drawings are perceived as being intrinsically connected (part of the same moving image) merely because they are projected one after the other. The most enigmatic feature of Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection*, the dramatic metamorphoses, is, I believe, a form of engaging with the dream-logic Benjamin intuits in early Mickey Mouse cartoons. I argue that Kentridge's interest in animation is premised upon the following formal aspects of the medium: the relationship between animation and language; the way animation, as a technique, allows the staging and acceptance of the impossible; its potential for destruction and reconstruction; and the insight it offers one into the optical unconscious: "what it is that we do when we see" (Kentridge and Breidbach 110). Placing Disney's early Mickey Mouse cartoons and Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection* in a relationship that does not see one as simply the obsolete predecessor of the other allows for a reinterpretation of both bodies of work: Kentridge's self-conscious engagement with the technology, artistic techniques and conventions of early animated film reveal how these features function in Disney and help illuminate Benjamin's rather obscure comments on the latter, whilst revisiting early Disney cartoons forces a closer encounter with Kentridge's chosen medium. This encounter suggests that Kentridge finds the technical support of animation, and specifically "stone-age" animation, attractive because he is interested in exploring the set of rules that governs this medium. If Benjamin ascribes the role of collective dream-figure to Mickey Mouse, thereby conflating the Freudian concept of the asocial dream with the wholly social joke, Kentridge wants to take the joke seriously—that is, work within and experiment with the predictability that predicates the rules, forms of perception, and universal language trained by the medium of early Disney animation.

Krauss locates Kentridge's interest in traditional animation in "the conventions cartoon animation developed, conventions that involve the serialized exploits of stock characters on the one hand and the possibility of physical metamorphosis on the other" (66). While these are key points at which to locate an overlap between the content of

Kentridge's work and early Disney cartoons, I'd like to take a step back and look at the similarities between these works at the level of technical support and aesthetic technique, which are implied but somewhat taken for granted by Krauss. On the most basic technological level, both Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection* and early cel animation work by combining drawings, cameras and music (contemporary computer-generated imagery, in contrast, cuts out both drawings and cameras). In both cases, sound is added to the films when they are at the editing stage, which, conveniently, allows me to side-step the question of sound in this paper. I will instead be focusing exclusively on implications arising from the fact that, fundamentally, both early cel animation and Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection* rely upon the bringing to life, through the illusion of movement created by the rapid succession of images projected at 24 frames per second on a screen, of hand-drawn two-dimensional lines on a page.

Animated films differ from conventional photographic films in that they start from stationary drawings that are converted into moving pictures—conventional film involves the filming of movement, which is converted into a series of stationary photographs, which are then reconverted into movement by playing them at a certain speed. Animated films thus produce a remnant or remainder in the form of the drawings that were used, whereas in traditional film, the individual photographs or shots form part of the finished film roll. In Kentridge's case, these drawings or remnants become artworks in their own right: since he makes alterations on each drawing, the final version of the drawing contains the traces of each change that has been made to it. These drawings can then be displayed alongside the films as a kind of frozen version of the film itself, from which one can reconstruct the changes made during a particular sequence (although not the order in which they were made). In the case of traditional cel animation, a much larger number of drawings are produced as waste products of the process. Looking more closely at the early Disney cartoons, however, makes it clear that they are not as wasteful as they could be: here, cel animation works by layering sheets of transparent cellulose nitrate (hence the name) over static backgrounds, or a series of background images that loop (so that, if Minnie is running along a riverbank, she passes the same sequence of trees repeatedly). The images on the cellulose nitrate sheets, too, can be recycled in the case of repeated actions: Mickey turning a steamboat wheel backwards and forwards while whistling, for example. Even though early cel animation doesn't draw attention to its recycling in the same way Kentridge does,

it is clear that the technical affinities between the two techniques are perhaps just as significant as the differences between them.

A closer look at the first black-and-white Mickey Mouse films is perhaps surprising, as these cartoons display a considerably more innovative relationship between contemporary technology and stylistic animation techniques than a passing knowledge of the later Mickey Mouse canon would suggest. The decisive change came, I suspect, with the departure in 1929 of Ub Iwerks, the animator of the very early Mickey Mouse cartoons. After that, the cartoons became increasingly formulaic and standardized. Looking at the opening scenes of the 1929 short animated film, "The Karnival Kid," however, demonstrates the magic of the early Mickey Mouse: As the title fades, the camera zooms out to reveal that what had seemed simply to be a black background to the title is actually the surface of a black balloon, which, along with three of its fellows, tied to her tail, are the only things keeping an upside-down smiling cow in the air. Behind her, you can see the hustle and bustle of the fairground: the crowd gathered outside the tent marked "Minnie the Shimmy Dancer"; the miniature planes of one of the rides circling around a pole; the rollercoaster, drawn in such detail that you can even see one small rider fall off. Entertainment that seems to be as light and airy as the balloons holding the laughing cow in the air is, however, also extraordinary, because of course, it isn't the camera zooming out to present you with the whole frame: it's a series of drawings, starting with a black screen and ending with a drawing featuring the entire, intricate world of the fairground. When you look closely, you notice that as the rollercoaster repeats its loop over and over again, the little figure in the distant background falls off at the same place every time: the background animation is being looped, creating an illusion of continuous movement and change. The techniques of conventional film are both imitated and exceeded using drawings, so that the animator can create the quasi-realistic impression that the cow is moving away from a camera being held in a fixed position, thereby gradually revealing what was initially hidden behind her, while at the same time showing the impossible: a cow being held up by four helium balloons.

Mickey Mouse plays a pivotal role in the second version of Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" as the technologically mediated "figure of the collective dream" (38). In this essay Benjamin discusses the two faces of technology: throughout, he is optimistic about its liberating potential for the masses, but in his epilogue, he also warns: "If the natural use of productive

forces is impeded by the property system, then the increase in technological means, in speed, in sources of energy will press toward an unnatural use. This is found in war" (42). Benjamin here thus makes the argument that the full potential of technology can only be realized in a world where existing capitalist property relations have been overturned, since the current system will deprive it of the resources it needs to satisfy its ever-increasing appetites. Technology emerges almost as an independent force: "Imperialist war is an uprising on the part of technology, which demands repayment in 'human material' for the natural material society has denied it" (42). In this epilogue Benjamin explicitly addresses the threat of Fascism, and specifically the mass spectacles the National Socialists had started exploiting in Germany to generate mass support. War is the ultimate spectacle: "[Humankind's] self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure" (42). Mickey Mouse is seen as precariously tip-toeing the line between the potentially liberating or repressive fates of mass entertainment in an age of increased technologization: in an annotation, Benjamin writes of the Mickey Mouse cartoons filmed in color that "[t]heir gloomy and sinister fire-magic [*Feuerzauber*], made technically possible by color-film … shows how easily fascism takes over 'revolutionary' innovations in this field too" (51, endnote). These cartoons, through their reliance on the 'fire-magic' of color, more closely approximate the hypnotic, spectacular nature of Nazi rallies, for reasons I'll discuss below. Benjamin perceives a close relationship between the use of technology in war and in mass art, where the latter foreshadows the dangers of the former, but also offers an alternative outcome.

The epilogue I just discussed thus offers us clues for interpreting an earlier passage on Mickey Mouse within the same essay:

> If one considers the dangerous tensions which technology and its consequences have engendered in the masses at large—tendencies which at critical stages take on a psychotic character—one also has to recognize that this same technologization (*Technisierung*) has created the possibility of psychic immunization against such mass psychoses. It does so by means of certain films in which the forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis. The countless grotesque events consumed in films are a graphic indication of the dangers threatening mankind from the repressions implicit in civilization. American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies. (38)

We have already seen how technology can become threatening, in Benjamin's opinion, if its natural development is checked by capitalist relations of property. Films, and specifically films which showcase the absurd, rehearse this danger, the danger of war. Burkhardt Lindner, who stresses the historical specificity of Benjamin's Artwork essay in his essay on "Mickey Mouse and Charlie Chaplin," writes that the shock-moments in Disney cartoons "refer through both medium and theme to the most modern technology. Traffic, airplanes, telephones, childhood and technology, catastrophes and frights find their way in here. The new world, as comically insular as it might seem, exists in the context of the realities of technologization, the masses of the metropolis, and world war" ("Mickey Mouse and Charlie Chaplin" 153–154).[3] Thus, at the level of content, these films work by rendering visible the dangers of technology through rendering them laughable. Relief, a "therapeutic release of unconscious energies" in Benjamin's argument, occurs through laughter: laughter at another's pain and punishment at the hands of technology that is rehearsed without having to be realized. Modern technology is thus bereft of its ability to inspire fear and tension, domesticated and internalized, like an immunization, in its comic, apparently harmless guise.

At the same time, though, we can see why this practice of defusing technology through humor would lend itself to Fascism if we stop at this definition of "psychic immunization [*psychische Impfung*]." This would be closer to a Fascist spectacle, in which the appearance of change and the illusion of self-expression allow leaders to avoid implementing real change: "The masses have a right to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping these relations unchanged" (Benjamin 41). If Disney cartoons and American slapstick provided merely the appearance of a peaceful resolution or incorporation of technology, this would not satisfy Benjamin's vision of technology as a kind of independent organism with accelerating needs to be satisfied. For Lindner, the key term is also immunization, which he reads as turning the cinema into a kind of "isolation ward [*Infektionsanhalt*], in which the masses are estranged from their leaders as they follow outsiders with a totally different star-quality, unusable for totalitarianism, such as Chaplin or Mickey Mouse. These appear as the saboteurs of the burgeoning culture industry, as laughter therapists against Fascistic or Stalinistic collective psychoses" ("Mickey Mouse and Charlie Chaplin" 155). While I find Lindner's insistence on the

[3]I've used my own translation for both of Lindner's essays, as no English translation had been published at the time of writing.

historical specificity of the Artwork essay very helpful, I also find this reading of "psychic immunization" a bit too restrictive. I'm not sure that the collective psychoses Benjamin refers to can be limited to those of Stalinism and Fascism, or the desire for a Führer-figure. I also doubt if this explanation accounts for the fact that Benjamin sees the later, color Mickey Mouse cartoons as being appropriable by Fascism, in contrast to the early black-and-white ones, as most of the aspects Lindner describes would apply equally to both. Fascism is one possible reaction to the increased technologization of society, a reaction that, in Benjamin's reading, attempts to absorb technology into war. However, the "dangerous tensions" produced by technology would have arisen irrespective of Fascism, and in fact provide the conditions of possibility for Fascism to take hold. Therefore, we have to look elsewhere for the mass psychoses produced by technology, psychoses which are replicated in small in Disney cartoons.

To get at this question of psychoses, one has to turn to what Benjamin says specifically about Mickey Mouse, a few lines earlier in the Artwork essay:

> Moreover, these two types of unconscious [the optical unconscious and the instinctual unconscious] are intimately linked. For in most cases the diverse aspects of reality captured by the film camera lie outside only the normal spectrum of sense impressions. Many of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the optical world in films afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams. Thanks to the camera, therefore, the individual perceptions of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by collective perception. The ancient truth expressed by Heraclitus, that those who are awake have a world in common while each sleeper has a world of his own, has been invalidated by film—and less by depicting the dream world itself than by creating figures of the collective dream, such as the globe-encircling Mickey Mouse. (37–38)

These sentences help to clarify a number of points about the nature of the mass psychoses Benjamin posits, but also raise more questions. Firstly, at the most basic level, the technological apparatus of film allows for what had previously been purely individual experiences (dreams, hallucinations, psychoses) to be undergone as group experiences, through techniques such as the close-up and slow motion play. These techniques take the viewer outside the normal visual perspective, and thus reveal the world as unfamiliar—an experience that is liberating but also potentially frightening, as the reference to psychoses suggests. This revelatory feature of technology means that going to the cinema is akin to a kind of mass visual hallucination. Two things are interesting

here: First, Benjamin's conflation of a psychically healthy phenomenon, that of dreaming, with psychoses and hallucinations. Second, the fact that there seem to be two different kinds of psychoses at work in this essay: one that produces visual hallucinations (seeing things) and the mass psychoses inspired by the increased technologization of society. I'll return to Benjamin's conception of the collective dream shortly, but to stay with the question of psychoses for now, I would suggest that the simulation of the first kind of psychosis (watching a film as a kind of group hallucination) is what performs the role of the immunization in preventing the second, more dangerous kind. The increased technologization of the world, the accelerated tempo and more thorough penetration of the world by technical devices, means that human beings have to adjust to a world that is constantly transforming. Eventually, in Benjamin's opinion, this world will demand the overthrow of existing relations of property. These demands could exceed the ability of human beings to adjust to them. Certain films then provide the training that one needs in order to adjust to this new world, firstly by training the eye to perceive the world completely differently, but also by staging a world that has been thoroughly permeated by technology, a world in which technology is able to fulfill its potential. Thus, to return to an earlier point, these specific films are not putting on a spectacle of change without allowing real change, but are instead teaching new forms of perception.

Animation plays a key role here. Animated films are a product of technology: whereas before, one or two people could share a brief moment of amusement at the antics of a character in a flip-book, now an entire audience, and audiences across the world, can laugh at the same joke, in the same way they can marvel at the same dream or hallucination. The particular suitability of cel animation for performing this work of immunization stems from two aspects, I would argue: Animation's particular technical aptitude for illuminating the optical unconscious; and the dream-like logic governing the content of Disney cartoons, including, crucially, Disney's visual depictions of verbal jokes, where words become incarnated as things. Animation illustrates the idea of the optical unconscious in the most basic way, of course, by demonstrating to us even more clearly than film does the fact that our eyes and brains process a series of static images, projected at a rate of 24 frames per second, as movement. More than that, though, I think the early Disney cartoons also expose the extent to which some of the film techniques which Benjamin also discusses, such as zooming out, point-of-view camera angles, or pin-holing in, for example, have

already started training the human brain to read them in a certain way. We can see this in the example I gave above, where we interpret the opening scenes of "Karnival Kid" as showing the camera zooming out from the black balloon. Early Disney cartoons in particular (this is unfortunately yet another innovation that seems to have been written out of the Mickey Mouse scripts after 1930) imitate certain filmic techniques to fantastic effect in a way that makes us aware of these techniques whilst subtly making fun of them. They provide a meta-commentary to regular photographic films that, I believe, would have made them particularly attractive to Benjamin as the ultimate insight into the optical unconscious.

Lindner, as part of his extensive body of work on Benjamin, has also written on Benjamin's dream-work. In his 2009 "Essay on 'Traumkitsch': The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology," Lindner takes the reader on a fascinating journey through Benjamin's references to dreams throughout his career. In response to the section of the "Artwork" essay I've been discussing, he concludes, I believe correctly: "But precisely the stress on grotesque comedy and on collective laughter, into which the collective dream dissipates, is to a certain extent also a trick. With it, the fundamental difference Freud sees between the psychic settings of the dream and the comical is bypassed" ("Essay on 'Traumkitsch'" 243). Why is this conflation of the collective dream and the collective joke so crucial to Benjamin's understanding of the role that early Mickey Mouse cartoons played in the psyche of their audiences?

To return to my earlier point, we've seen that Benjamin groups together dreams, hallucinations and psychoses through the concept of "psychic immunization," which turns the negative phenomena of visual hallucinations and psychoses into positive forms of preventative medicine which allow one to circumvent infection by more dangerous forms of psychoses that could result from the increased technologization of culture. Dreams, in the Freudian tradition, also serve a positive medicinal role in the psyche—they allow for necessary sleep to take place by processing the day's events and frustrations in a positive way, and, through the dream-work, they also permit long-term healing as the patient can come to terms with the problems at the root of their psychoses. Even as Freud admits that dreams and jokes do share certain techniques—"condensation, displacement, and indirect representation" (165)—the fundamental difference between them lies in their social intelligibility. Jokes exist only to be shared, and a joke that isn't understood by others is a failed joke, whereas dreams

are based on events, memories, and wishes that can become intelligible only through the dream-work. "A dream is a completely asocial mental product; [… a] joke, on the other hand, is the most social of all the mental functions that aim at a yield of pleasure" (Freud 179). In order for Mickey Mouse to work as a collective dream-figure, this dream has to take on certain aspects of the joke-logic, as this collective dream has to elicit laughter from a large audience. At the same time, it is important to Benjamin that it retain certain formal features of the dream-logic, specifically the acceptance of arbitrary connections one finds in the dream, and also the role the dream plays as a kind of wish-fulfillment. If we have already seen films training viewers in a specific way of perceiving the world, then perhaps early Mickey Mouse cartoons train them in a specific kind of wish through the mass reception of these films.

Looking more closely at some sequences from early black-and-white Disney films will help elucidate what I mean by the dream-logic that plays out in them. One feature that Freud sees as particular to dreams, since he limits his investigation to verbal jokes, is particularly applicable to the visual nature of Disney cartoons: the way in which "dream-thoughts are given a pictorial character, and eventually a plastic situation is arrived at which is the core of the manifest 'dream-picture'" (162). Furthermore, dream-logic also relies on the fact that "the connecting paths which start out from words are in the unconscious treated in the same way as connections between things" (177). In Disney's "Karnival Kid," one sequence depends upon a play on the term "hot dog": the hot dogs Mickey-the-vendor sells physically resemble dachshunds ("sausage dogs"), can bark, roll over, scratch themselves and bite, and run away when you try to eat them. Thus, the visual gag is dependant upon a linguistic convention that associates sausages with dogs. At one point, Mickey loses his cart—after a couple of seconds of frantic searching, he whistles, and the whole cart comes crawling out from under the roundabout, sniffling "nose" first. The characteristics of a dog, which were first transferred to the sausages through a somewhat logical association, have now become associated with the cart from which the sausages are sold. The relationship between words (sausages and dogs), which exists only in language, is transferred into a relationship between things (sausages that act like dogs, the sausage cart and dogs, etc.) in a compelling pictorial presentation.

As I mentioned above, the major difference between jokes and dreams is that the "condition of intelligibility" (Freud 179) serves

to constrain the former because of their essentially social nature. In dreams, however, as opposed to jokes, "[u]nder the pressure of censorship, any sort of connection is good enough to serve as a substitute by allusion, and displacement is allowed from any element to any other" (Freud 172). The logic that governs the intelligibility of dreams is thus different from that governing jokes, and this logic is one that accepts arbitrary connections. Thinking in terms of the medium of animation, the entire technological framework that it is built upon supports this kind of logic. Technically, traditional cel animation works by placing a series of discrete drawings in a sequence. The brain interprets them as forming part of the same sequence based entirely on their temporal and spatial proximity (they are screened one after the other, and each frame is next to the other in the film strip)—there is no essential connection between one drawing and the next. To return to our earlier scene from "Karnival Kid," the sequence of images in which an entirely black screen changes into a fairground scene through the black oval progressively getting smaller in each drawing is interpreted by the brain, trained by watching other films, as showing a camera zooming out from a black balloon that then recedes into the fairground. Thus the arbitrary connections between two independent drawings—the fact that they follow each other and, in some cases though not all, are similar (if there is a change of scene, the two drawings could be radically different, and yet we still believe them to be part of the same story)—are interpreted as essential connections in the narrative reconstruction of the cartoon. Returning to the idea of the two layers of an early cel animation, one could even reuse a sequence of top, transparent layers (showing Mickey running, or dancing, for example) over a different background in a different cartoon, and it would then become part of a different story altogether (e.g. Mickey is running away from a monster, or Mickey is running to catch the cat who kidnapped Minnie).

To take this argument even further, the medium (both through its technical underpinnings and the filmic techniques exploited by the animators) then allows for an acceptance of arbitrary connections within the contents of the cartoons. For example, as soon as one becomes comfortable with this extended metaphor from the above example (sausage = dog), Disney's animators pull the rug out from under you—the hot dog which ran away rather than allowing itself to be eaten is caught, its pants pulled down and its bottom spanked. Suddenly we are in a different joke where the sausages are at the same time small children, not entirely sure how we ended up here. To

return to Freud's description of the dream, it is exactly the *connection* between elements that becomes hard to discern.

For Benjamin, it is crucial that Mickey Mouse is not just the figure of the collective joke, but the collective dream as well. As I have argued, looking at the dream-logic of early Disney cartoons themselves corroborates this observation. If the most important difference in composition between dreams and jokes relies on their social intelligibility or lack thereof, this is related to their function. As Freud states, "jokes and dreams have grown up in quite different regions of mental life and must be allotted to points in the psychological system far remote from each other. A dream still remains a wish, even though one that has been made unrecognizable; a joke is developed play [*ein entwickeltes Spiel*]" (179). Benjamin aligns Mickey Mouse with the dream/wish because this, in turn, means that Mickey Mouse cartoons act as a kind of wish-fulfillment, but the fulfillment of a wish that, I would argue, the cartoons themselves create. Earlier in the essay, Benjamin makes the temporally complicated argument that the very fact that a film receives a mass reception in a cinema in a way predetermines what that reception will be:

> The technological reproducibility of the artwork changes the relation of the masses to art. The extremely backward attitude towards a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film. […] The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, while the truly new is criticized with aversion. Not so in the cinema. The decisive reason for this is that nowhere more than in the cinema are the reactions of individuals, which together make up the massive reaction of the audience, determined by the imminent concentration of reactions into a mass. (36)

The experience of art thus changes fundamentally with the advent of the technological reproducibility of the artwork: the fact that the individual opinion will immediately become part of the group opinion influences the individual opinion itself, resulting in a mass opinion that is more likely to be progressive than reactionary. This is why it is so important to Benjamin that Mickey Mouse becomes the figure of a collective dream, not simply a dream-like figure: the collective aspect of the reception of Mickey Mouse thus means that the reaction of its audience will be predetermined to a certain extent—this is where the *training* comes in. If, as I have argued earlier, these black-and-white Mickey Mouse films present the audience with a world in which the varied needs of technology are satisfied, and not held back or thwarted in such a way as to lead to war, the collective dream allows this to be read by the audience as the fulfillment of a wish. The wish

is that for a fully technologized society, which for Benjamin implies a society in which the existent capitalist relations of property have been overthrown.

The later Mickey Mouse films, starting with the departure of Iwerks in 1929 but firmly cemented by the advent of the spectacle of Technicolor in 1935, lost this utopic dimension. I believe that what Benjamin is responding to in his critique of the later films is the fact that they rely less and less upon the kind of dream-like logic I described earlier, and become increasingly formulaic and non-experimental. No longer do we have scenes that imitate camera angles or other cinematic tricks (such as point-of-view shots, or zooming in and out), Mickey Mouse and the other characters take on increasingly fixed shapes (no more crazy distortions of arms, legs, noses, etc), and the humor becomes increasingly predictable. These cartoons instead depend upon the "fire-magic" of color to distract viewers, unaccustomed to this new wonder of technology, from their lack of innovation and repetitive jokes. This is an excellent example of how the pretense of an increased utilization of technology can disguise the fact that technology is instead being harnessed and tamed, something that Benjamin sees occurring in Nazi mass spectacles. The fact that these cartoons can now be filmed and shown in color does not fundamentally alter what I have argued to be the crucial technical aspect of animation—the fact that a series of stationary drawings are brought to life by a camera. However, the relationship between the technical support and the contents (both thematic and stylistic) of the cartoons has changed—no longer do animators draw attention to the liberating possibilities of this specific technology, but rather, they attempt to hide its hallucinatory aspects, create films that are closer to what Benjamin refers to as "the normal spectrum of sense impressions" (37). As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno would write in 1947, "Donald Duck in the cartoons [like] the unfortunate victim in real life receive[s his beating] so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs" (110, translation modified). Technology in these films thus does not provide immunization against the mass psychoses it generates, but simply a mirror that reflects them as normal and even necessary. The characters lose their ability to function as figures of a collective dream or wish, and become, instead, part of the pageant that can be exploited (by Fascism, for Benjamin, or capitalism, for Horkheimer and Adorno) to retard the natural development of technology.

Krauss, like Horkheimer and Adorno, is skeptical of the revolutionary anti-capitalist potential of Mickey Mouse cartoons. She writes:

> Disney's 'plasmaticness' may thus not be a twentieth-century version of the phenomenon of fire or the primitive idea of animism [as Sergei Eisenstein argues], but, instead, an analogue of the principle of universal equivalence that reigns at the heart of capital … The abstract condition of the general equivalent, the fluidity of its circulation and exchange, the sense of its endlessly transformative power, make the cartoon figure and money particularly apt mirrors of one another. (68)

This "endlessly transformative power" is often attributed to Disney cartoons. In fact, Disney's early cartoon characters very rarely, if ever, turn into something else completely. It is not that "cars turn into dangerous monsters, pigs into accordions, fish into tigers, and octopuses into elephants" (47) as Miriam Hansen, to whose otherwise excellent essay "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney" I am heavily indebted, blithely states. Rather, cars grow into dangerous monsters that are still cars, pigs are played like accordions, tiger-fish roar like tigers, and a family of octopuses will follow each other, marching on four tentacles, with a fifth resembling a trunk and the sixth a tail, resembling and behaving like elephants while at the same time clearly remaining octopuses ("Steamboat Willie"; "Merbabies"). Krauss's argument that early Mickey Mouse cartoons are "weightless" in comparison to the weight Kentridge's bear relies heavily on the assumption that in early Disney cartoons "anything can turn into anything else": she argues that in Kentridge's work, as opposed to Disney's, there is "another condition that … operates against the principle of anything changing into anything else, or at least works to dilate the time within which the change occurs and to underscore the impossibility of predicting what form it will take" (69). This implicit criticism of Disney cartoons states that in Disney cartoons, the embodiment of the "principle of equivalence at the heart of capital," anything can change into anything else—however, this change also has to be somehow predictable. I've already discussed how, in the original Disney films, things do not actually change into other things. It is also hard to argue that these joke-sequences are always predictable, as I have demonstrated with the example of the hot dogs that act like dogs at first, but later like small children.

I would argue that rather than looking at the unpredictability of Kentridge's transformations or the "dilation of time" involved in them as being in some way a critique of early cel animation, Mickey Mouse cartoons in particular, one should focus on the way Kentridge engages with the features of animated films I have, through Benjamin, elucidated above. Kentridge, I believe, while not attempting to create

a kind of "collective dream" through his work, is interested in taking up the issues raised by thinking about Mickey Mouse as the figure of a collective dream—that is, the extent to which film, and particularly animated film, can train the viewer in new ways of perceiving the world visually, understanding visual cues to meaning, and accepting arbitrary connections between scenes as essential. All of these aspects are already present in the cold open to *Stereoscope* with which I started this article, but approaching them through Mickey Mouse, and particularly Benjamin's writing on Mickey Mouse, helps formulate exactly how they play out in the medium of animation, which in turn suggests what Kentridge gains by entering his work into this tradition.

In a recent televised interview, Kentridge states: "The absurd [is] not... a peripheral mistake at the edge of society, but a central point of construction. The absurd, for me, is a species of realism rather than a species of joke or fun. This is what allows me to take the joke of *The Nose* seriously" (*William Kentridge: Anything is Possible*). Kentridge in this case is referring specifically to his work on Shostakovitch's opera, *The Nose*, a version of which he directed at the Metropolitan Opera in March 2010. However, I suspect that this sentiment of taking a joke seriously is what guides much of his work, including the *Drawings for Projection*. As Kentridge says in the opening scene of this interview, his art stems from "the seriousness of play." This formulation—the seriousness of play—reminds us of Freud's distinction between the joke and the dream cited earlier: "A dream still remains a wish, even though one that has been made unrecognizable; a joke is developed play." If it was surprising to find Benjamin insisting upon the dream-function of Mickey Mouse cartoons when they seem, ostensibly, to fall so firmly within the category of jokes, it is perhaps even more surprising to find that Kentridge's description of his own work, work which is certainly more eerie than funny and filled with moments of indecipherability, aligns it closely with Freud's description of the key characteristic of jokes. In the same way that categorizing Mickey Mouse as a collective dream-figure was highly productive for Benjamin, though, it is important, in order to understand Kentridge's intentions, to look at what he means by taking a joke seriously. Elsewhere, he says of the usefulness of play that "through this activity of play, of giving yourself over to play and taking seriously the arbitrary rules of that particular form, when you play, a sense and a meaning can emerge" (Kentridge and Breidbach 65). Jokes, unlike dreams, tend to fall into certain patterns (which is why Freud can neatly categorize jokes according to how different types function), and be governed by certain rules. The most important of these rules would be the "condition of intelligibil-

ity" Freud talks about, but there are also others. Jokes are enjoyable, to a certain extent, because they are predicable. The listener knows that a punch line will conclude the recitation. It is this characteristic of jokes, rather than their humor or their social function, which interests Kentridge. Throughout his work, I believe, he is interested in working with, but thereby also exposing, the unwritten rules which guide perception.

Thus Kentridge engages with the way in which traditional animated cartoons are, to a certain extent, shaped by our linguistic usage—for example, the extended play on the term "hot dog" that I elaborated upon above. Kentridge locates a model for his own way of constructing a film in Cockney rhyming slang, another form of play governed by strict rules and structures. Usually, slang words for an object are connected through rhyme: apples and pears for stairs, plates of meat for feet. "Then what happens within Cockney rhyming slang is that you only use the first word… You don't say 'I'm going up the apples and pears' for the stairs, you say, 'I'm going up the apples.' The key point of connection was there initially, but then it disappears" (Kentridge and Breidbach 87). Kentridge uses this analogy to discuss his technique, how he gets from an original idea to a final product that may contain no resemblance to the original thought, but it is also useful in discussing his visual metamorphoses. "You have the two words and they have a relationship which makes sense or a story. Then you have only one word and a gap in the story" (Kentridge and Breidbach 88). Unless you know the convention, the second word would mean nothing to you. Kentridge's visual metamorphoses seem to operate like a rhyming slang where the conventional connections have been lost. If in metaphor, according to Breidbach, "two terms hold an idea in themselves and between themselves, an image, a space, which is not spoken but implied or thought through them" (Kentridge and Breidbach 88), then in Kentridge's work, this third term is obscure.

To elucidate this idea, let's look more closely at one of Kentridge's transformations, a particularly apt one as it features one of Kentridge's favorite animated animals, the cat, whom we have already met in the first paragraph of this essay. Throughout *Stereoscope*, the cat will effortlessly move between spaces, undeterred by high walls, socioeconomic divides, or even the laws of physics. In a later shot, we see the cat walk past another wall, this one more suggestive of the inner city: topped with barbed wire, with two illegible signs on posts bordering it, the sequence of shots and soundtrack (you can hear the murmur of protesters) suggests that this is close to the protest site pictured towards

the end of the film. It also, at various points, moves in and out of what looks like the security booth separating the gated community or business from the rest of the city. The cat features in three main ways in this film: as Soho's loyal companion (shades of a James Bond villain stroking his white Persian cat) who can move between social spheres; as a blue subterranean figure who forms part of the network of communication lines which also span the different parts of the city; and, finally, as the bomb which blows up the various spaces, from the protestors to Soho's interior realm. In all of these incarnations, the cat possesses a freedom of movement Soho seems both to envy and fear, as he listens with his ears pressed against the wall of his small room to the gathering crowd outside. The cat thus plays a vital thematic role in this film, which is concerned with the segregation of spaces: both in the way Soho's room will be split (and split again), giving rise to the title *Stereoscope*, and in the division of the city, from the gated community with its high walls to the apartment complexes where each family or individual occupies his/her own 'box' to the city streets that fill with rioters who do not have the luxury of private space, who have even the space of their own bodies violated by the police.

In one of the film's most enigmatic moments, the frame shows a screen split in two, each half showing an initially identical scene, in the same way Soho's space is doubled earlier. In each half, we see the cat, framed by what looks like it could be a storage room or, more sinisterly, an interrogation chamber (the items on the floor are indistinct, but from the ceiling hangs what could be a noose). The cat bends over to lick itself, and in a second is transformed. In this sequence, I suspect, Kentridge makes changes to the drawing between almost each frame, since the transition is so quick and smooth—there is just one small pause halfway through, when the cat-creature is a square box for a couple of frames. Each cat turns into a different piece of mechanical equipment, and the room immediately looks more like a storeroom or outhouse built to house bulky mechanical items. Our interpretation of the setting is guided by the visual clues provided within the frame, but Kentridge here implicitly suggests that this perception is open to manipulation. The other question is about the relationship between the cat and the machines: is there some essential connection, some third term they share in common, that renders this readable as a metaphor? Kentridge's work is challenging because, I believe, it conveys the impression that there is—that, if only you could work your way back to the original bit of rhyming slang, this story would make complete sense. At the same time, this third term, the rhyming word,

is irrevocably lost from the outset: there is no convention that could provide the clue, or rather, any number of words could rhyme with "pears." Kentridge's metamorphoses thus push the essential technical condition of animated films, the fact that different drawings are seen as connected purely because they appear one after the other, to its limit. Of course, Kentridge's sequences are physically connected because the changes are made to the same drawing—thus, the mechanical pieces of equipment still bear the traces of the cat, since both figures occupied the same space on the single drawing used. At the same time, however, the contents of these metamorphoses strain at the human instinct to make sense of the happenings on-screen—as much as one tries to imagine a connection, there doesn't seem to be one. This makes the viewer aware of the dream-like logic governing the reception of animated cartoons, causing one to reflect back upon the transitions one did accept as a matter of convention: for example, the fact that a similar-looking bird crosses two separate scenes in the cold open leads one to assume that these scenes are geographically proximate.

Kentridge is adept at using both techniques and conventions culled from films in his work—for example, eye-line matching, tracking shots, zooming in and out, close-ups, and other forms of continuity editing. As we saw with the Disney films, animated cartoons can provide a kind of meta-commentary on film conventions. Benjamin's writing on Disney suggests that film in general can train the way visual images are perceived—in effect, teach a different language that becomes universally comprehensible through the spread of films like Disney's Mickey Mouse animated cartoons. For example, the very first shot in *Stereoscope* shows the moving dials on a clock in an industrial control room. We all, immediately, understand that this indicates that time is passing. This is a sign universally understood wherever film culture has established itself. The idea of Mickey Mouse as a figure of the collective dream, if one follows my reasoning that this 'dream' produces a wish within its audience that it then presents itself as fulfilling, suggests that films do more than just train visual perception, but also, to a certain extent, are capable of training the unconscious as well. Thus, even if it initially seems as if much of Disney's humor is predicated upon linguistic usage and conventions that would be specific to the language in which they were created, English, this is not necessarily the case. In the first place, as director and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein, who wrote astutely on Mickey Mouse in 1941, points out, there is something already universal about the literalization of metaphor that one sees in Disney. Many of Disney's gags work

by exposing the illogical logic of language, or rather, by reminding you of the pre-logical roots of language. The appeal of animation stems, in Eisenstein's argument, from animism, a return to an earlier "stage of sensuous thought": "From an unexpected shock—a man bumps into a chair in the dark—you regress to the stage of sensuous thought: you curse the chair as though it were a living being" (127). This reversion takes you back to the stage in which "primitive man endows inanimate nature…with life" (Eisenstein 128). This stage of sensuous thought perhaps underpins most languages' use of figural language, so that the universal appeal of Mickey Mouse cartoons transcends immediate understanding of English-specific metaphors. Secondly, these early Mickey Mouse films are designed to speak to the then-growing population of world citizens fluent in the language of film. Mickey Mouse, as the figure of the collective dream, in fact teaches this universal language. I believe that Benjamin is referring to this characteristic of being universally comprehensible when he calls Mickey Mouse "globe-encircling [*erdumkreisend*]" (38). Kentridge is working in a period when familiarity with this language can generally be assumed. The moments of incomprehensibility in his films when this language breaks down are thus particularly striking, drawing attention to the existence of this generally unreflectively accepted universal language.

Kentridge self-consciously engages with another element of Benjamin's discussion of the violent potential of technology as embodied by film that is specific to animated film. As Kentridge states, in conventional animation,

> there is a sense of extraordinary violence that has no consequences. So a safe falls on someone's head and they get squashed flat but they reconstitute themselves. They go through a meat chopping board and get chopped up by thousand knifes [sic] and in the next frame they put themselves back … In my films there are very few changes from things being violently destroyed and rising again as a transformation. (Kentridge and Breidbach 102)

His examples here make it clear that Kentridge is not thinking of the early Mickey Mouse cartoons, where this kind of violent destruction of the characters almost never occurs. As I explained above, their bodies are stretched and distorted, but never completely destroyed. In fact, it seems almost odd that Kentridge would insist on the violence of traditional animation, when in his own films, objects very frequently turn from one thing into another, and back again (for example, in the example described above, the cat(s) re-emerge in a later scene, appearing out of what seems to be a giant hole punch).

Speaking of the ease of turning a cat into a telephone in the animation studio, Kentridge states that "transformation, metamorphosis is of course the bread and butter of animation" ("Drawing Lesson 5"). Kentridge's strategy for dealing with the violence he sees as inherent in the medium of animation, a violence that is already part of the technique of metamorphosis, is to insist on consequences. While the cat changes into a machine, or the hole punch into a cat, or the cat into a telephone, traces of the earlier form are still left in the imperfectly erased charcoal smudges. Thus, one's attention is sparked at moments when Kentridge's films do feature exactly that which he deplores in so-called "traditional animation": the violent destruction and putting back together of objects.

A broken teacup plays a vital thematic role in Kentridge's *Weighing… and Wanting* (1998), symbolizing the violent disruption of the relationship between the two main characters. Yet, towards the end of the film, the broken bits of the teacup come together before our eyes, and the lines where they are joined together are erased. The teacup in the final scenes of this film shows no traces of having been broken—not even smudged erased lines are visible. How are we to interpret this instance of Kentridge's avoidance of 'consequences,' his own play with the ability to turn back time that the technical support of animated film allows? After all, quite frequently in his films he will have recourse to older film footage; that is, at the end of a film he will re-use a shot from the beginning of the film, so that a scene to which we have seen several changes made will once again be shown in its pristine, original form (for example, *Tide Table* (2003) opens and closes with an identical shot of a drawing of beach huts). Is Kentridge here side-stepping his own insistence on consequences? It is hard to say. In the case of the teacup, it seems to me as if Kentridge is deliberately drawing attention to the artificiality of the reconstruction of the teacup, perhaps warning the viewer that reconciliation (inter-personal but also in the larger South African context) can sometimes paper over cracks apparently seamlessly, whilst leaving them intact. Here, the technology of animation allows for a visual demonstration of a thematic idea. In all the cases where Kentridge re-uses footage out of sequence (revisiting shots from the beginning of a film), the same structure may be in place—the viewer is called upon to view these shots with suspicion, exactly because they seem to erase the consequences of the oft-violent events that took place on-screen during the film.

The concept of taking a joke seriously lies at the foundation of what I have attempted to do in this paper. Engaging with Kentridge's

technical support, "stone-age" animation, requires that we revisit Walt Disney's early Mickey Mouse cartoons. Walter Benjamin provides the clues as to how to go about this endeavor by recasting Mickey Mouse as the figure of the collective dream. Ultimately, a minute examination of early black-and-white Disney cartoons alongside Benjamin's analysis of them suggests that Kentridge may have chosen the medium of animation as one way of engaging in "developed play": Benjamin and Disney suggest that the rules governing animation are particularly interesting in what they reveal about the way our visual perception, but also our unconscious, can be trained. By doing what he does best, taking the arbitrary rules of this form of play seriously, Kentridge is able to expand upon Benjamin's observations on these rules through demonstrating their limits. This allows him to ask, indirectly, penetrating and thought-provoking questions about the medium itself, questions which can also obliquely refer to larger issues of violence, reconciliation, and the processing of history. In the remark Krauss draws the title of her paper from, Kentridge describes Apartheid as a rock, saying that "you cannot face the rock head-on; the rock always wins" (quoted in Krauss 57). However, as any player of Rock-Paper-Scissors knows, paper can beat rock by folding around it, an apt analogy for the strategy Kentridge uses to wrap his paper-drawn animations around social and political issues in South Africa without attempting to resolve them.

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