

Dialectical images: methodological notes

For Bjørnar Olsen

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Dialectical images — persistent memories

In 2010 Bjørnar sent me a copy of a fabulous book he had authored with photographer Elin Andreassen and Hein B. Bjerck — *Persistent memories. Pyramiden — a Soviet mining town in the High Arctic* (Tapir/Fagbokforlaget). This essay is a long-overdue expression of deep gratitude for the inspiration and guidance the book has given me, alongside so much else in Bjørnar's archaeology.

In 1998 the Russian Arctic Coal Company decided to end more than 50 years of mining at Pyramiden in the High Arctic archipelago of Norwegian Svalbard. A remarkably abrupt abandonment created a ghost town packed with everyday left-behinds. The book is an expression of a fieldwork visit made to Pyramiden in 2006.

Photographs of the abandoned site and buildings lapsing into ruin are accompanied by a textual commentary that delivers lapidary insights into the actuality of the past, the conjunction of enduring remains of the past with encounter now. In this, *Pyramiden* explores an archaeological sensibility by mobilizing Walter Benjamin's concept of dialectical image, refreshed and revitalized in this visit to a post-human margin, a northern edge.

To rehearse these insights I cannot do better than begin with some quotations from the commentary that parallels the photographs of abandonment/ruin, and offer some short responses concerning the implications.

Excerpts, and commentary

"This book is an attempt to negotiate some of the limitations set by traditional scholarship and create reflection by transcending boundaries between research and art": page 24.

Research and creative practice or poetics are intimately connected and generate reflection. For me, this is a vital statement concerning the creative foundations of all

research in transdisciplinary connection across the old and discredited separation of the arts, sciences and humanities.

“A ruin in the true sense of the word ... a ruin *in the making* (my emphasis)”: page 138.

“Things actually may release some of their meaning or generate a different kind of knowledge precisely through processes of decay and ruination. ... “: page 142.

Metamorphic and entropic processes through time and space generate a kind of knowledge different to that typically delivered through historical narrative. This is an inspiring association of dynamic process that is time and site specific with knowledge building that is usually taken to deliver timeless findings.

“Pyramiden is a ruin, but it hardly fits into the common tropes of heritage. ... blurs established cultural categories of purity and dirt; in short, it becomes matter out of place — and out of time. ... Pyramiden is anti-heritage”: page 142.

“Nature intrudes and mingles, confronting our taken for granted conceptions of the world as orderly and divided with matters all in place”: page 143.

“Ruins such as Pyramiden ... rescue a forgotten past, not as heritage, ... but as a kind of *involuntary memory* that illuminates what conventional history has left behind. ... abject memories that this history has displaced”: page 152.

We should challenge the separation of past and present and those categories that come with familiar narratives and clichés of human progress, so too the consoling narratives of heritage, often nostalgic and romanticized.

Memory is the practice of recollection, the eruption of past into present. And our archaeological work is a kind of memory practice.

Waste and leftovers, discarded, consigned to margins, are the focus of an archaeological, rather than historical, sensibility.

In these points *Pyramiden* establishes a kind of counter heritage and an archaeology that is decidedly *not* history. Our archaeological work becomes the source of unique and powerful insights into what is forgotten and displaced by the tellings of self-serving interests.

“The unpolished and undisciplined ruin may teach us some alternative thing lessons. It confronts our customized habit of dealing with things as goods, as tamed domesticated possessions. Pyramiden takes us beyond consumption; the material is allowed to be itself. Things appear neither as frames nor backgrounds, but at center stage. The *forms* of things are foregrounded: their textures, their smells, their utter silence. In Pyramiden the *being* of things is

hard to ignore. It is present, pestering – providing the visitors with an affluence of uncanny affordances”: page 142.

Our experience and engagement with things involves surplus, non-identity with how they might be categorized and described, how they might be consumed. This is their being, their life energy.

I am very much taken with this focus on the life of things, their autonomy, and the lessons we may learn from close *empirical* attention.

“In experiencing *Pyramiden*, one finds truth in Walter Benjamin’s saying that a ruin often *speaks more honestly* (my emphasis), more revealingly, than a complete building. The ruin proper, moreover, *gives face* (my emphasis) also to that which is untimely and unsuccessful, bringing forth what are fragmented and lost in conventional history. It is “physically charged with history”, not as a treasure for eternity, but rather in the condition of ‘petrified unrest’ ”: page 152.

Metamorphic, entropic processes give face, a kind of physiognomy, to the effects of the past in the face of the present. We might recognize an expression in a frozen moment.

This is such a distinctive and revealing component of the dialectical image - that we can grasp a kind of summary gestalt that is well described by Benjamin as a kind of physiognomy.

“To Benjamin, history decomposes into images, into historical objects, not into narratives. Historical objects are blasted out of continuous history, and become “dialectical” images made actual in the present”: page 152

“In Benjamin’s conception of the dialectical image the past comes together with the present – not in harmony or as a fusion of horizons, but in a tension-filled constellation, a power-field illuminating *both* a fore- and an after-history”: page 152.

The dialectical image is about montage, engagement, and experience — actuality. *Pyramiden* is such an effective manifestation of such praxis (theory-informed practice) that takes us beyond a quest simply to represent the story of the past.

Methodological notes and counterpoint

As a work of research-creation, the book *Pyramiden* presents a curated and annotated collection of dialectical images. Let me explore what this means to me in terms of an archaeological methodology. What I find in *Pyramiden* is a fleshed out set of tools and techniques for building an archaeological perspective on matters of deep concern revolving around pasts-in-the-present. I will expand the short responses of the precious section under the following headings: itinerary; figuration/constellation; ruin/metamorphosis; actuality/kairotics; everyday aesthetics; praxis/poetics; critique/politics.

Along the way I will post in counterpoint some allegorical images from an ongoing project in theatre/archaeology with Mike Pearson and inspired by *Pyramiden*. So let me now say a few words about this project.

Itinerary

Bjørnar visited Svalbard in 2006. In 2017 Mike Pearson and I began a series of visits to another northern edge, the English-Scottish Borders. Our purpose was to continue to explore the praxis of theatre/archaeology which we define as *(re)articulating remains as real-time event*. My own research in the region had included field survey, archival research, museum study, as well as the excavation of a military outpost and settlement at Binchester. I have struggled to reconcile the textures and particularities of archaeological experience with the coherent integrating and familiar narratives of this border region. These involve vigorous local characters, farming, fishing and mining communities, as well as empires and monarchies (Roman and British, Scottish and English), armies and outlaws, border conflicts, the industrial urbanization of the nineteenth century, the effects of a decolonized global economy and post-industrial decline in the second half of the twentieth century.

We took as inspiration for our engagement with these borderlands antiquarian chorography (John Wallis's *Natural History and Antiquities of Northumberland* 1769; David "Dippy" Dixon's *Upper Coquetdale* 1903), more recent explorations of "deep mapping" (Paul Carter, for example 2010), and especially W.G Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* (1998). Our visits took the form of itineraries (after Alexander Gordon 1726), following Walter Benjamin's enthusiasm for Baudelaire's *flaneurie*, the situationist *dérive*, Rebecca Solnit's wanderings (2005).

Here, then to there, and onwards to where? In following our loose and malleable itineraries (across a valley, along a road, a river, stretch of coast) we proceeded not efficiently but intensely, not positively or progressively, but disposed towards deviations and detours, interruptions, invitations to stop and consider, gaps and intervals, discontinuities, disorientations. Our itineraries offered little or no access to the reiterated and integrating narratives of these borderlands. Instead we encountered, of course, heterogeneous sequences, in parataxis or katachresis, synchronicities ("did it really happen here?"), anachronisms, anomalies.

Appropriate to itinerary are anecdotes, notes on particulars, observations on fragments, comments on anomalies or surprises, attempts to identify or explain, as well as remarks about emerging patterns of experience ("another skylark!"). And there was always more to explore and say, an ineliminable excess of experience, irreducible to representation, always beyond mimesis. Itinerary provokes singularities of presencing, actualities of encounter and association then-and-now ("we crossed where the old wall had recently been repaired"). Such local particulars and instants resist reduction to date, exceed any encompassing system, remain as lapidary fragments undissolved in narrative solutions.

Itinerary is not, in these ways, about subjective individual experience to be contrasted with rational and objective systematizing. The singular presences point to dialectical concepts of incompleteness and non-identity, dynamic tensions between material actuality and efforts to subsume the surplus into a system. The presences punctuate and dis-orient, upset any course of continual harmonious un-exceptionality.

Here then is the first methodological principle to be associated with the dialectical image:
 pursue itinerary as *dérive*.

Elsdon — an angel's face

So werd ich Todten-Kopff ein Englisch Antlitz seyn
 (“... so will I, a death's head, become the face of an angel ...”)

Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama (Trauerspiel)*, translated by John Osborne. London, 1977 [1928]. Page 215. Quoting playwright Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, *Redender Todten-Kopff Herrn Matthaus Mächners (The Talking Skull of Herr Mätthaus Machen)*, 1662.

I quoted above a most telling passage in *Pyramiden* that says how ruins *speak, give face, in a condition of petrified unrest*. In encountering the photos and text, and in the actual ruins of *Pyramiden*, I am constantly reminded of an image, a metaphor, a concept that recurs throughout the works of Walter Benjamin — the angel face as death's head, a figure of transformation or metamorphosis, a double Janus-face almost, of decay and redemption, of morbidity and revival, rejuvenation, of post-mortem fossilization and petrification that is also one of vital revelation.

And so, in reviewing our ramblings through the English-Scottish borders, I have found something of an itinerary of seven petrified faces and angels and present them here. There are scenarios associated with them (we saw this one here; see if you can see the face in this one; what might be the meaning in this one), but mainly I invite the reader to simply take in the material textures in an “affluence of uncanny affordances” (page 142).



Angel face? Gravestone, St Cuthbert's churchyard, Elsdon, Northumberland, England. One of more than 50 that feature winged faces, carved by only a few hands at the end of the eighteenth century. We were exploring vernacular buildings in Redesdale, a remote valley, bandit country, one of the last of the border clan communities to resist state authority.

Figuration / Constellation

Benjamin defines the dialectical image as "that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what has been to the now is dialectical — not temporal in nature but figural, suddenly emergent." ("Awakening" in *Arcades* 462 n2a3, Benjamin 1999)

The concept of image is not simply that of a picture that may be handled through the discourse of aesthetic appreciation and critique. Image is a schema, a composition, diagram, or model that is more-than-mimetic, more than representational. Benjamin employs the term dialectical in two related ways. The dialectical image cites or quotes the past, fragments out of context, in a present moment to create a conjunction, a constellation. This citation, this gestalt con-figuration interrupts the dialectical dynamic of historical experience and is therefore dialectics *at a standstill*. As equivocal constellation, a figure of allegory, the image begs for reading and

interpretation: image is riddle figure (the term used by Adorno, see Paddison 2016). Benjamin calls this tension between past and present dialectical.

Cut and capture, combine and compose. As well as citation and quotation, appropriate rhetorical tropes that can be applied to this concept of image include metaphor and allegory, metonymy and synecdoche, as well as the compositional tropes of parataxis, hypotaxis and katachresis.

Photography, when one recognises an arrest and quotation of a past moment in an image present to one's viewing and interpretation now, is something of a paradigm for the figuration that is the core principle of the dialectical image (cf Shanks and Svabo 2013). Photowork interrupts temporal continuity with its pencil of nature and generates a kind of quotation. Barthes (1982) introduced a related concept of *punctum*. This is when a detail or feature of a photograph punctuates, interrupts the easy identification of the subject of a photo picture, its assimilation into a category. One might be prompted to ask "Hold on, this isn't just a snapshot — just what is going on?"

Here the dialectical image may manipulate the relation of figure to (back)ground, of signal to noise. What may be seen as background noise against which the subject or figure acts their part or signals their meaning may be flipped and foregrounded by selection and quotation, promoted to significance in a new composition.

An old and related rhetorical trope is that of *ekphrasis*. Here one quotes an artifact in a text, introduces a vivid description, a (textual) image of an artifact such as a work of art into a case or argument, reaching out into the world of things and reworking such experience in the text one authors and delivers, to make a point. Image, artifact and text are mingled. Experimental archaeology and reenactment work directly with things in what may be conceived as ekphrasis because vivid hands-on experience is the basis of validating a claim such as "this is the way it was".

Methodological principles: **montage — extracting cut, and collage — composition mix.**

Methodological principle: **mobilize the life of things, the presencing appeal of material experience.**

Ruination / metamorphosis

As much as a substantive or noun, a structure in ruin, for example, one might conceive of ruination as process. Then decay is not negative but revealing, an alchemical metamorphosis, entropic change. In this way the dialectical image creates unexpected connections out-of-time, transforming remains into insight.

This is the life of things situated in complex living adaptive systems.

Methodological principle: **focus on process and connections.**

Coventina — genius loci



Altar dedicated to divinity Coventina in the late second or early third century CE by Vinomathus. Found in 1876 in the stone cistern of a spring at the Roman outpost variously referred to as Procolita, Brocolitia, or Brocolita, now known as Carrawburgh, part of the border monument Hadrian's Wall in northern England.

There are two inscriptions in Spain and one in France that may name her, but otherwise she is known nowhere else. (McKay and Allason-Jones 1985)

Is the face on the altar that of Coventina - an angel divine?

Actuality / Kairotics

In a dialectical image one works with what remains, quoting the past in the present to disrupt and disorient. This makes it profoundly archaeological. While the historian may be focused on understanding the past, the archaeologist is more focused on the present, working with what remains, with a care for the future. In this, to use a phrase from Benjamin, archaeology rubs history against the grain.

Actuality is the concept that refers to this temporality of past-present connection that sidesteps the flow of time at the core of the concept of progress. A related and critical concept is that of *kairos* which refers to particular conjunctions of past-present that carry opportunity, potential for insight and action.

The archaeology of the dialectical image is not concerned so much with discovering the past *per se*. Constructing a dialectical image is kairotic, a creative praxis, a poetics, that grasps an opportunity to forge a connection past-present that interrupts, makes a point. Remains are parachuted, memory-like, into the activity of presencing, into the now, to awaken a different understanding of historical and temporal process. These remains are not examples or representatives of larger causal forces driving history, but are incomplete by virtue of their quotation, of being cut out of narrative context. They are thereby freed for different association and context.

Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* is a tactic of interrupting the illusion, the mimesis of theatre in such a kairotic gesture. A character on stage might suspend the action and ask directly of the audience — "Hold on here — you don't really believe what you are seeing, do you?" This is a form of narratological *metalepsis* — schizo performance where personae flip or shift register (Svabo 2016).

Methodological principle: **seek out, create memory-like conjunctions, schizo displacements.**

Routin Linn — mark making



Angel?



Face?

Rock carvings from perhaps the fourth millennium BCE, two of many on the outcrop above the waterfall Routin Linn at the head of a picturesque woodland dell near Ford in Northumberland England.

I have come to be fascinated by apophenia, pareidolia — seeing forms where perhaps there should be none. Circles in the stone may appear as sun device, as angel or face — do you see them?

Notoriously, such evocative prehistoric traces of rock art, pose questions for the passer-by as well as the researcher. Riddle-figures, they prompt the question — given what you see and know, what you bring to this place, what are we? Expressions of belief? Stagings of ritual? Some would have us connect the carvings to prehistoric engagements with routes and views across the landscape.

Such responses leave the riddle intact. There's always a lack — never enough to fill out a complete answer. And a surplus — there's so much scope and range of experience evoked by the mark making, sensory, emotive, cognitive engagements with stone and locale. There's always more to say, feel, think about, relate to. And we often even find it difficult to focus on what there is to make sense of, when it may be difficult to separate signal from noise, figure from ground. We might instead propose another methodological principle: **be mindful of the indeterminate flickering of experience.**

Everyday aesthetics

In Benjamin, Sebald, and in *Pyramiden* the quotidian mingles with the monumental in and around memory practices, the recollection of remains. Scraps and fragments, the detritus of everyday life, question the overarching narratives because of their singularity, their raw material presence, their vital exorbitant resistance to being assimilated and abstracted.

Focus through the dialectical image on this raw and eccentric abjection, on these waste products and blind spots allows us to realize, to imagine a redemption of those hopes and wishes of forgotten pasts. In contrast to such raw cast-off garbage stands the monumental, the petrified statue.

Methodological principle: **look to experiences (cognitive, sensory, evaluative/emotional) in the neglected margins — the stuff of everyday experience.**

Methodological principle: **acknowledge the irreducible surplus, the ever-present noise in archaeological experience.**

Praxis / poetics

In the dialectical image one works with remains to create connections, collages, schemata, constellations that provoke insight and action. In a broader perspective, such work of interpretation, critique and knowledge building is creative praxis, poetics rooted in the now and so oriented on opportunity and care for the future. This implies a curatorial model of knowledge creation.

An emphasis upon an open-ended poetics of building knowledge, with research as performance, is found prominently in science studies. The argument is that knowledge is constructed, is an achievement, not a discovery. This counters the petrification of history that

aims at a narrative of what happened that will last for all time. In such a position history is held to have happened the way it did and the job of the historian is to tell that narrative — period — end of story.

Methodological principle: commentary and critique are creative acts in the performance of research, in the engineering of knowledge.

Methodological principle: theory and concepts are components of the tool kit for practicing research, building knowledge.

Methodological principle: in building knowledge, conceive and practice research as a mode of performance design.

Dryburgh Abbey — ut pictura poesis

Ut pictura poesis (Horace *Ars Poetica* 361) — “as is an image, so is poetics”.

A conception of image as schema, as constellation, as gestalt, as figuration, as model begs the question of relationship, of interpretation. How might we read the world? Just what might be made of these bits and pieces, words, marks, forms, things? How are we connected with, part of this world we seek to understand?



Eighteenth century. By the River Tweed, by the later grave of Walter Scott and Douglas Haig, in the land of medieval bard Thomas the Rhymer, painted by J.M.W.Turner.

Beneath another angel, what might one read in the book of life, or is it the book of death?

Critique / politics

One narrative of *Pyramiden* might feature the planned street layout, the street signs, slogans, the cultural palace with its library, concert rooms, football pitch, the everyday artifacts of the lifeworld of the miners to be read as a phantasmagoria of wish images, the plans, dreams, and aspirations of socialism.

But the ruin, the detritus, creates a different face to the story of the Soviet Union here in the north. This is so evident in *Pyramiden's* portfolio of photographs. Immanent in the same architectures and everyday artifacts are the gaps in the construction of history as progress. They do not refer us to a continuous narrative at all, but by remaining they bring to presence, they make tangible the mess, the noise, the discarded hopes of a past largely forgotten. This is a kind of Proustian untimely and involuntary memory that bears witness to those usually left out of the grand narratives of history that are told by those who would have us believe in order and coherence.

The politics of the dialectical image is to challenge the rationalization of historical narrative that abstracts and reduces the textures and polyphony of everyday experience to a particular plot of characters and agencies. Such narrative typically naturalizes the interests and perspectives of those who author and support the narrative. This is a commodification of historical experience. Many can feel excluded and alienated from such histories. Through interruption, juxtaposition, montage, disruption of temporal continuity, the dialectical image can manifest the inalienable agency of the overlooked and forgotten.

Commodified, rationalized experience reduced to essentials tends to empty repetition. How often have we heard the eternal story of the hero's journey, struggle for power and empire, the rise and fall of civilization, the march of progress, even, yes, in the face of resistance from deviant parties? Interruption of these abstractions in a dialectical image is only temporary and provisional, flashing up in an instant of kairotic opportunity, because it is founded in the life of things, in the everyday flux of experience and lifeworld. Yet this provisionality is precisely the source of its radical energizing force to elicit critical insight.

Chillingham Saint Peter's — becoming stone



Tomb and effigies of Sir Ralph and Elizabeth Grey. North transept of St Peter's church Chillingham, Northumberland. Fifteenth century.

Itinerary — from the hillfort and carved stone at Old Bewick to the site of Marmion's Flodden Field (1513, Scott 1810).

Pax — coda



In the spring of 2022 Mike Pearson and I were reviewing Michel Serres's wonderful book *Angels: a Modern Myth* (1995) — a miscellany of mobility, messaging, making sense, and conveyed in a kind of itinerary through an airport, another edgy interstitial third-space. We were reminded of a video work with which Mike introduced himself to me nearly 30 years ago.

Pax TV: Y Fam, y ddaear, a'r angel - The mother, the earth, and the angel (1994) was part of *Los Angeles*, a suite of works of site specific performance by theatre company Brith Gof (Welsh

— speckled memories) and directed by Mike and fellow art director Cliff McLucas. It is available online here - [\[Link\]](#).

Mike appears as astronaut, angel, as Hermes (communications expert, messenger of the gods), as a son in a dynamic layered montage of composite screen footage (a bedroom in a Welsh farm and surroundings), found imagery (satellite views of earth, Yuri Gagarin), animated text, multichannel sound track. A farm, the earth, sky, and space. Home, elsewhere, relations with land and place, and memories. Figuration and the impossibility of representing a mother's death.

Theatre/archaeology and, with hindsight, a dialectical image.

Postscript

It keeps happening: Bjørnar's work (not just *Pyramiden*) makes one think, reflect, shift, reframe, reconsider the lifeworld of things. And he shows us how - hence the methodological principles offered in this short essay. In rereading *Pyramiden* and through the lens of its imagery and insights, its observations derived from personal encounter and experience, I find myself retracing tracks and ramblings through my own archaeology at a northern edge. Rereading *Pyramiden* has prompted (opportunity and *kairos*) this short sequence of seven images of angel faces and becoming stone. This is not about telling another story of an archaeological landscape or set of ruins. It is much more important than that. Bjørnar offers us a model of active and creative engagement with the archaeological life of things which is simultaneously that of our own living actuality.

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