

**IMAGES IN, THROUGH AND FOR “THE W/WORD”: A REVISIONING
OF CHRISTIAN ART**

by

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Declaration

I declare that *Images in, through and for "The W/word": a revisioning of Christian art* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

(Mrs C E Truter)

Date

Abstract

Title

“Images In, Through and For ‘The W/word’: a Revisioning of Christian Art”

Abstract

During the premodern era, images corresponded to the doctrines of “The Word”, but in contemporary society this relationship is open and does not correspond to the divine Word. Because of our perceived, postmodern inability to respond to ancient Christian symbols, there is a need to re-vision these symbols and Christian spirituality. The result of such a revisioning would include an “opening up” of “The Word” and of traditional, worn symbols which have lost vitality in this milieu. Art produced with this in mind needs to make “The Word” more currently accessible and relevant. Further, this revisioning would add significance and enhance the possibility of resurrecting language dealing with “The Word”. In the process of revitalising old Christian imagery and language, I aim to show that the primary role of contemporary Christian art is to function metaphorically. Finally, I argue that Christian images can take on significance as contemporary images.

List of Key Terms:

Body; Christian Art; Christian Spirituality; Contemporary Religion;
Deconstruction; Discourse; Flesh; Holy Scriptures / Holy Bible; Icons;
Language; Metaphor; Postmodernism; Post-Structuralism; Religion; Signs;
Sublime; Spiritual; Symbols; Text; The Word.

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Preface

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A sentimental view of this topic of study and many preconceived notions had to be set aside in making the art works for this study. My gratitude is expressed here to the object of my faith, my Lord, for the strength and perseverance granted throughout these years of studying.

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List of Abbreviations

CCTV	Closed Circuit Television
Exh. Cat.	Exhibition Catalogue
KKNK	Klein Karoo Nationale Kunstefees

Introduction

Towards the end of the last century, a few advertising agencies were given the task of creating innovative messages about or “from” God. These include the American "Godspeaks" campaign, commissioned by an anonymous donor, and "God's Ad Agency" portfolio, requested by the Love Singapore movement.¹ Since the 1990s, the agencies have found ultra contemporary methods for conveying thought-provoking and often controversial slogans and statements as if written by God. These text based cultural visualisations use slang and colloquialisms to express the core content of Scriptural passages or faith anecdotes.² The media presentations were customised to complement the diverse contexts. A comparable strategy to this contemporary communication of Christian tenets of faith would be to identify, analyse and generate new visual equivalents of the traditional Christian religious imagery, which is the overall goal of this dissertation.³

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how ancient religious symbols, eroded of their power and relevance, can be rejuvenated in the contemporary milieu. John Griffiths (1989:94–95) argues that the “irrational” tendencies of deconstruction and Derridean philosophy have certain correspondences with Christian and Jewish analyses which “refuse or even break the conventions to reach back before the assimilation of Aristotelian logic”. Griffiths’ observation has particular relevance for this research. The artist’s exhibition *Flesh Text*⁴ broke several conventions in the representation of the Sacrifice of Christ by returning to the “essence” of this faith tenet before its assimilation by Classical philosophy which sought to rationalise the Christian doctrines. Through this, the traditional symbolism and representations of the Sacrifice were re-evaluated to arrive at a concept which encompasses the multiple meanings from both Scriptural passages and traditional artistic renditions. In this way, the ancient symbols were transformed and renewed into metaphors and images accessible to the contemporary viewer.

The need for this study lies in a perceived absence of a recognisable, current Christian art genre. The “void”, augmented by modernism’s rejection of tradition and postmodernism’s critique of meta-narratives, contrasts with the premodern era when the majority of Western art was made under Christian sovereignty. These images, produced by the mandate of the church, were seen as reflecting factual truths of doctrine and faith. As such, they were considered to be representing, even substituting, the objects portrayed. In this era images closely referred or corresponded to the interpretations of doctrines and dictates of Scripture and liturgy from Biblical times to the pre-Enlightenment period. The conforming relationship between religious images and The Word gave Christian art content, form and authority. This mimetic paradigm, in which images are conceptualised as corresponding to an external, objective and eternal truth, which is revealed and made accessible through the images, is no longer appropriate.

In contrast, in our milieu the evolving relationship between images and The Word⁵ can be characterised by attitudes informed by deconstruction. These include scepticism and incredulity towards meta-authority, a questioning of tradition and a cynicism towards received meanings. As a consequence, many artworks either do not address issues of Christian faith, or if they do refer to Christian themes, it is done in a cynical or parodic way. Images are often no longer seen to be representing unquestionable truths, even when depicting tenets of faith, but are known to be saturated, mediated presentations. In contrast to earlier religious images, contemporary images do not closely refer to the symbolism of the Scriptures as if it were a natural pre-existing relationship. Deconstruction has also addressed the reversal of hierarchies which has posed a problem for Christianity because, in orthodox and fundamental circles, the religion requires its adherents to acknowledge and respond to the divine *Logos*.⁶ The concept of a divine authority and eternal Word, possessing a

hierarchical and untouchable position in the Christian consciousness, has been severely critiqued in the belief that context colours perspective.

Inevitably, the relationship between images and The Word is also characterised by the constantly shifting dynamic between the visual and textual. The title of this dissertation, “Images In, Through and For “The W/word”: a revisioning of Christian art”, refers to this currently ambiguous dynamic with particular application to religious images.⁷ The title is meant to convey the complexity of the dialogue between images and the Bible, and with language and discourse in general.

The unrestricted and liberated un-correlation inaugurated by post-structuralism offers a means of rejuvenating art referencing The Word. In our postmodern mind-set the proliferation of symbolism and signification leads to multiple interpretations and open-ended meanings. It is the aim of this study to show that through the current, more open-ended signification context, Christian imagery can take on relevance by looking anew at and revising earlier symbolism. This should have the consequence that new value is imparted to the archaic symbols, which are thereby situated in contemporary dialogue. The hypothesis of this study is that the primary, effectual role of contemporary Christian art is to function metaphorically, enhancing the accessibility of The Word and through that disclosing its relevance to the modern viewer. The study aims to demonstrate that the result of such a revisioning would include a revitalisation of Scripture, Christian art-making and symbolism dealing with The Word.

Many Biblical symbols are familiar to the contemporary viewer. Yet it cannot be assumed that viewers are cognisant of all the symbolic nuances evoked by these archaic figurative forms. New approaches and visualisations need to be employed to achieve the same "power" or efficacy of the old symbols' initial impact. These premises allow an artist greater freedom to create new signification by using the old symbols in

contexts which have weakened connections to their original framework or accepted usage. In the process of finding new uses and situations for these symbols, it is possible to promote a fresh understanding of the accumulated meanings denoted by the symbolic content, now made accessible to the contemporary viewer. Through this study, I aim to demonstrate that contemporary art has the potential to enhance open communication by addressing issues which directly affect spiritual attitudes towards Biblical truths. In this way, religious tenets which seemed redundant because of over-familiarisation and codified usage, can be de-familiarised and re-presented as new and relevant.

Many reasons could be cited for the enormous reduction of the Christian influence on art-making. One reason is that with the questioning attitude of the Enlightenment, importance was attached to other areas of interest and exploration, which eventually replaced the position held by religiosity in the general consciousness. The rigid boundaries between religious and secular sensibilities have been blurred so that the clear distinctions which formerly kept the sacred apart from the profane seem insignificant. As Frederick Dillistone (1986:10) points out, "This [twentieth] century has seen a retreat from religious symbolism. ... Consequent spiritual disintegration has all but destroyed our ability to respond to ancient symbols". It is more difficult to respond to archaic symbolism when the original context is obscured or lost and such symbolism often seems naïve or unsophisticated. However, it might also be possible to consider the symbols themselves as having lost power and relevance by their over-usage and codification rather than our spiritual disintegration which prohibits us from accessing them. It requires a revalorisation of the old symbols into accessible forms for us to respond to them again.

One of the reasons for choosing this topic is to explore the contributions of historical Christianity and its cultural products to our generation. On the one side, situated in a positive appraisal of the relationship of art to

religion, are theologians such as Phillip Ryken and Von Ogden Vogt. According to Vogt, “A spiritual movement... that does not find expression in the arts cannot attain self-consciousness or dominance or survival” (Elkins 2004:44).⁸ The role of art in his estimate is not merely as a supplement, but more as a defining and integral aspect of the spiritual movement. Differing from Vogt’s affirmative views, James Elkins, an art history lecturer, negatively views the relationship between art and religion. According to Elkins (2004:115), he has “tried to show why committed, engaged, ambitious, informed art does not mix with dedicated, serious, thoughtful, heartfelt religion. Wherever the two meet, one wrecks the other”. For Elkins, contemporary, academic, pioneering art and genuine, life-affecting religion are incongruent and incompatible.⁹ However, he contends that it is necessary to sound the possibilities of a contemporary dialogue between them. Elkins (2004:116) substantiates his argument:

It is impossible to talk sensibly about religion and at the same time address art in an informed and intelligent manner: but it is also irresponsible not to keep trying. To paraphrase... Blanchot... : the name *God* does not belong to the language of art in which the name intervenes, but at the same time, and in a manner that is difficult to determine, the name *God* is still part of the language of art even though the name has been set aside.¹⁰

That is the stubbornness and challenge of contemporary art.

This challenge opens the possibility to embark on an investigative study of the potential of making informed, critical art which suggests the reality and relevance of The Word and Christian spirituality. Christian images can once again take on significance as contemporary images by maintaining multiple access points for interpretation and engagement.

The methodology of the dissertation is informed by the post-structural practice of revisiting former ideologies and histories. In this case, the revisiting is applied to traditional religious art and symbolism, leading to an intellectual reappraisal and validation of the archaic Christian symbols. Further, the revisioning exercise employed throughout this dissertation promotes intertextuality and the investigation of the multiple layers of

meaning contained in the traditional imagery. The practice of revisionism forms an important sub-theme with reference to the revisioning of old Christian images and symbols into contemporarily accessible images. In essence, revisionism recognises that cultural forms, including representations and our experiences, interpretations and concepts, are mediated. Victor Burgin (1986:48) summarises the post-structural realisation in his statement that “the only world we can know is a world which is always already *represented*”. Put differently, whatever we conceive and perceive about the world is coloured by our perspectives and frames of reference, prior experience, histories, and political interests.

Not only is the world mediated by various texts, which include literary works, artworks and other cultural forms, as well as readers, historians and artists, but the world is also constructed by the mediations. Consider Tom Gretton’s (1986:70) formulation of the complex relationship between culture and our experience of the world:

We have come to view the totality of practices and artefacts which constitute culture (... [including]... ‘art’) as constituting or constructing value systems, beliefs and ideologies, rather than reflecting or expressing them. As for social processes or realities, cultural forms will mediate them in far from simple ways... . We can now see cultural forms as the space in which people came, and come, to understand the circumstances in which they live, rather than as the space in which such an understanding, achieved elsewhere by another process, is reflected. This is an... important restatement. It permits cultural historians to argue that cultural artefacts make the world, as well as being made by it; it gives the cultural form under scrutiny historical as opposed to eternal significance.

The eternal significance of artworks was linked to the attribution of a presupposed “transcendental and spiritual ‘quality’” which was considered above or beyond contingent influences (Harrison 1986:77). Charles Harrison (1986:77) calls this previously dominant view the “‘author’ discourse” in which “works of art are identified as such as the embodiments or depositories of an objectively discernible quality”.

Structuralism and post-structuralism were instrumental in the change from considering our experience and understanding of the world as being *immediate* to being *mediated*. This was orchestrated by the shift from an emphasis on perception (placing significance on the interpretant) to language (where the focus becomes the involvement in the writing activity, in which reading is considered a form of writing).¹¹ The philosopher Johan Degenaar (1987:3) puts it succinctly: “Instead of saying that we immediately experience the world or immediately perceive the work of art, we say that language mediates our experience, that a grammar mediates the work of art.” Language, and the mechanisms of language, became the guiding principles for understanding and demythologising our evaluations of the cultural forms we apprehend and produce.¹² Degenaar (1987:3) summarises the consequences:

By introducing language as the necessary condition of understanding, philosophy has succeeded in overcoming three myths: the myth of the given, the myth of the innocent eye, and the myth of the immediacy of understanding. At the same time it has succeeded in exploring a new way of doing aesthetics. It enables us to look at a work of art as a text that has to be interpreted in a historical context, which itself is a text, by a reader who himself has to be considered as a text. This approach views the act of understanding as a continuing process in the context of a dynamic set of relationships.

Finally, revisionism is critical of its own conceptualisations and acknowledges the provisionality of its readings. Even understanding is considered to be a form of writing, which “limits and relativises and historicises our thinking about things and events. To ignore this insight would mean that the act of re-writing is wrongly seen as a privileged position which need not take into account the relative nature of its own inevitable position in history” (Degenaar 1987:9).

The research focuses on three areas of investigation in three chapters, which are applied in the fourth chapter to selected works from my exhibition *Flesh Text*. The first deals with the mimetic paradigm in an in-depth exploration of the role of early religious imagery. In the second

chapter the sublime aesthetic is discussed and in the third chapter there is an analysis of the influence of deconstruction. The thread throughout the dissertation will be the critical stance of revisionism. Mimesis, the sublime aesthetic and deconstruction are applied as potential starting points for revising selected religious and contemporary images. Each chapter is approached by addressing the duality of word and body in order to correspond with the dual focus of the exhibition *Flesh Text*.

In the first chapter, the discussion is around selected art from the premodern paradigm, which is largely characterised by being mimetic. Of interest to this dissertation is that premodern art conceived its images as representing the very concept it was addressing, as a species of religious revelation, Biblical tenets or Scriptural historical “facts”. For artists and viewers of mimetic work the representations were considered to be the truth and to have an unambiguous and closed relationship to the object represented. The historical debates around the validity and appropriateness of religious imagery are centred on the role of images and their attributes. The iconoclastic controversy is particularly relevant and is the focus of this chapter. Images embedded in text, in the form of illuminated manuscripts, and The Word as portrayed in Protestant images are discussed. The image as related to the body is brought out in the defence of icons. For those producing icons they were “writing” the essence of the person depicted and this idea was founded on the doctrine of the Incarnation, of God taking on the form of flesh. The rationale for including the premodern Word / image dynamic in this study is to set a base-line for the revisioning exercise.

In the second chapter the discussion and analysis is around the influence of the Romantic and postmodern sublime aesthetics on spirituality in art.¹³ This forms the foundation for the discussion of selected works by Anselm Kiefer which invoke spiritual and Biblical entities by inscriptions of their names. The aim in the discussion is to demonstrate the positive and

negative effects of the iconoclasm which he applies to his spiritual subjects for our understanding of the ineffable. The body aspect of this chapter focuses on the interludes and emotive responses evoked by the images of spiritualised bodies by Viola. His images recall the iconic presentations of single figures and are re-presentations of old Christian artworks within the contemporary paradigm. These modes of dealing with the sublime will be demonstrated to contribute to spiritual insight.

The third chapter deals with deconstruction and its far-reaching influences on metaphysical concepts and the implications for religious art in particular. Contemporary art-making is informed by the theories of deconstruction. To position this dissertation it is necessary to situate postmodern approaches to the spiritual in relation to deconstruction. In this context, Wim Botha's re-presentation of a Renaissance sculpture is both a critique and a contemporary re-reading of the symbolism inherent in traditional visualisations of the crucifixion. His sculpture is carved from Bibles and plays on the distinctions between word and body, The Word as body and the body in The Word. This is followed by an analysis of the work of local Christian artist, Alex Trapani, in the context of his revisioning of the ancient symbols such as the blood of Christ into sophisticated and accessible metaphors. In particular, the elements of containment and offering are highlighted in the discussion of his work.

Finally in the fourth chapter there is a discussion of selected works from my exhibition *Flesh Text*, in which salient points from previous discussions of the sublime and deconstruction are shown to point to the possibility of a reconstruction and renewal of Christian imagery. The fourth chapter is essentially a synthesis of the preceding theory and investigations. It acts as a synopsis of the insights arrived at in the first three chapters which are applied in the discussion of selected works from *Flesh Text*. This can form an academic foundation for the contemporary re-presentations of Christian symbolism.

The significance of this research lies in its investigation of the relationship between Christian spirituality and contemporary art-making. Various authors, such as Elkins, refer to art and religion generally, doubting the possibility of an authentic contemporary Christian art. Other authors, including Peter Fuller (1985:190–191) mourn the glorious past relationship between art and Christianity, and consider the postmodern questioning attitude antithetical to a genuinely contemporary Christian art. There do not seem to be any studies which investigate the potential of a contemporary Christian art from a South African perspective, nor from the viewpoint of an art-maker. This study contributes to that investigation and opens up contemporary Christian art to the Christian audience who are not necessarily acquainted or familiar with current academic art.

The field of this research is vast and many artists have been excluded whose work would have contributed to this dissertation. Because of constraints of time and space, it was necessary to make a choice of artists' works which best demonstrated the arguments set forth here and whose works are of some influence to my art-making. The literary works consulted are from diverse intellectual territories, including symbolism, metaphor, philosophy, ethics, theology and postmodernism. The engagement with the broad field of Christianity is from the position of an artist. The scope of the dissertation also limits comprehensive discussions of theological positions or extensive philosophical discourses in application to the subject at hand.

The following works were influential in this research and contextualisation of the specific interests of this study. In the area of semiotics, symbolism and art, *God and the creative imagination: metaphor, symbol and myth in religion and theology* by Paul Avis has been particularly useful. His exposition of sign, symbol, metaphor and narrative is founded in his interest in Christian liturgy and theological usage of these literary forms.

As such, his points of view were easily translated into inquiries on the necessity of metaphor in religious art. Jonathan Culler's *The pursuit of signs: semiotics, literature, deconstruction* provided an intellectual basis for early research into the current conceptualisations of the nature of signification and its implications for text and images. *The power of symbols* by Dillistone proves to be an insightful work written from a Christian perspective.

Of key importance to the understanding of the role of imagination and its evolution in postmodernism is Richard Kearney's *The wake of imagination: ideas of creativity in Western culture*. Kearney's writing provided clarification on the postmodern critique of religious art and the imagination. Elkins' *On the strange place of religion in contemporary art* has been a thought-provoking, brief study in which he analyses various types of art pertaining to religious sensibilities. He describes five possibilities for such art to remain academically sound. However, although his book was useful in many respects, his contentions are very different to my arguments. Supplementary works consulted in this field are *Art, modernity and faith: restoring the image* by George Pattison, whose work is apologetic towards Christian art and its position in the current academic milieu, and *Postmodernism – philosophy and the arts* edited by Hugh Silverman.

Of particular significance to this research in the field of the body in art was Francesca Miglietti's dissertation, *Extreme bodies: the use and abuse of the body in art*. She highlights the intrinsic relationship of the body to both art and religion in an unconventional way. Also, Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography* is a lateral and insightful work on the implications and associations of photography, one of the key media worked with in the exhibition *Flesh Text*. Finally, selected works by both Jacques Derrida and Barthes have been pivotal for discussions on deconstruction and post-structuralism.

The reader should expect a re-reading and application of postmodernism with alternative, empowering implications for Christian art. Further, the mediation of Biblical tenets in the current cultural visibility is proposed, which can provide access to these expressions of faith. The dynamic relationship and dialogue between images and The Word will be investigated in the selected milieus, with the main goal of revisioning traditional religious symbols to revitalise Christian art in our era. Gretton (1986:74, endnote 1) comments that the “new art history will renew the old art history in the same way as the new art renews the old art”. This study can contribute to the contemporaneity of Christian art and towards the critical debate around The Word in art. For, as Avis (1999:133) contends, narratives in The Word urgently need “meaningful restatement which can only be done in a symbolic or mythic mode”. With relevance to the research goals of this study, Avis’ argument might be paraphrased as follows: The symbolism of Christian art needs contemporary restatement which can only be done in a metaphoric mode – which revisionism can provide.

Endnotes: Introduction

1. For more information on these projects and for examples of the visual products, visit their websites: “Godspeaks” campaign - <http://www.demosnewspond.com/godspeaks/presskit/about.htm> (accessed on 2007-11-23); and “God’s Ad Agency” portfolio - <http://godsadagency.wordpress.com/category/gods-ad-agency/> (accessed on 2007-01-23).
2. Capital letters for the terms Scripture, The Word and Passion, amongst others, are used to denote the particular Christian significance attached to these concepts and to differentiate them from secular concepts.
3. In this dissertation the term “religious” primarily denotes specifically formalised Christian content, with particular application to symbolism and symbols, images and art. When the term “religious” refers to other faiths, such as Islam or Judaism, the meaning of the term will be made clear in the text.
4. *Flesh Text* was held at Fried Contemporary Art Gallery in Pretoria, 3 – 24 June 2006, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master in Visual Arts. The exhibition was opened by Ms Gwen Miller, from the University of South Africa.
5. In this dissertation, “images” primarily refer to visual images, but in certain contexts may include linguistic images such as symbols and metaphors. “The Word” refers to the Christian Bible, or Holy Scriptures, and to related issues such as doctrine and dogma, while “word” refers to language and communication, criticism, discourse and dialogue. The latter includes verbal and written language.

6. The term *Logos* refers to the very Word of God. Throughout the course of history, the term has come under criticism for its theological and philosophical associations with didactic authority. The deconstruction of Western metaphysics' assumption of an accessible transcendental truth was effected by Derrida's critique of logocentrism.
7. Simon Morley differentiates between the two relevant modes of gathering information from images and text. Firstly, the visual scanning of images "allows openness of interpretation and freedom of mental and sensual movement" (Morley 2003:9). In contrast the second mode, that of reading text, follows a predetermined, structured route that is ordered horizontally, left to right (in Western cultures). These two methods operate different configurations of consciousness and occur at "different tempos" (Morley 2003:9). Consequently, according to Morley (2003:9), artworks employing both images and text "play with perception and conception".
8. Elkins is quoting from Vogt (1921:9).
9. For the purpose of this dissertation, religion can be defined as the formalised worship and practice of a belief system surrounding a deity or deities. Faith is the personal, experiential aspect of belief, but is not necessarily attached to or affiliated with a formalised religion. Often, though, faith forms the individual basis for the corporate practice of religion.
10. Elkins paraphrases in a modified translation, which is first quoted on Elkins (2004:109), from a quote taken from Taylor (1992:314). The passage from Taylor reads as follows: "As Blanchot argues,
 The name God signifies not only that what is named by this name does not belong to language in which this name intervenes, but that this name, in a manner difficult to determine, would still be part of it [i.e., language] even if this were set aside. ..."
 From Blanchot (1973:69–70).
11. Degenaar (1987:6) considers every human activity as a form of writing and re-writing:
 [T]he world is continually being written through human activities by means of signs. ... There is nothing in the world which is not a sign or a construction of signs. ... What makes writing such an exciting and creative activity, is the fact that one becomes involved in a process of differentiation that is already taking place. Signs are being situated differently all the time.
12. Social criticism is another influential voice in defining the consequences of revisionism: From Degenaar (1987:10–11), I cite an abbreviated version of the six myths he considers social criticism to have exposed, which has relevance for the discussion on deconstruction in Chapter three:
 Man's experience is never innocent but always conditioned by a variety of mediations. ... On the basis of this principle [of political mediation] the social critic can expose a variety of myths.
 - a. The myth of the presence of an unmediated real world. Since [the] world is mediated by language and language is never neutral, natural, [or] direct... but always qualified by culture, context, discourses, power-relations, history, traces, [and] ideology... the world is always already interpreted.
 - b. The myth of the presence of meaning. ... Meaning is a function of differentiations which have social and historical dimensions.
 - c. The myth of the autonomy of the work of art. Since the work of art functions in the contexts of society and history it should not be approached as if it is a self-contained unit.
 - d. The myth of the innocent interpreter. This myth assumes a free-floating critical intelligence which directly confronts an unmediated artefact. However, 'a whole world of mediating presuppositions of an economic, aesthetic and political order intervenes' (Hawkes 1978:154) between man and the work of art and shapes his response accordingly... .
 - e. The myth of the objective critical position. Whatever critical position one takes up there is always an ideological dimension to it. ...

- f. The myth of the autonomy of culture. Social criticism does not deny the role that culture plays in understanding but it views culture itself as a problematic concept. ... What is needed is a critical approach to the assumptions of a culture. This applies to the culture in which the work of art was created as well as the culture from which the historian constructs the story of art.
- 13. In this dissertation the term "sublime" refers to ineffable, ungraspable elements which defy understanding. Sublime aesthetics refers to art which deals with these notions beyond our comprehension and which seek to portray an element of our inability to circumscribe the sublime.

Chapter 1: The Word and the Image

In this chapter the influences on the Word / image dynamic from ancient times through to the Reformation are traced. In the first place, there is a brief discussion of the Classical mimetic paradigm as a foundation of the word / image relationship. A description of the changing relationship between the religious image and The Word follows, with particular emphasis on the antagonism towards images, which finally leads to a discussion of icons. The dualism between priority given to The Word versus the pre-eminence claimed for the image will be demonstrated to function as a framework within which to interpret the conflict between iconoclastic attitudes and the defence of icons. The reason for this discussion is to present the subject of revision in its conventional forms so that the attempt can be made to revitalise images of The Word throughout the ensuing chapters.

The artist and author Simon Morley (2003:14) characterises the relationship between word and image since the classical era as contesting and conflicting. Morley (2003:14) traces the origin of this discord to Greek philosophy:

Plato initiated a philosophical tradition that not only judges all representations to be mere simulacra but is also deeply suspicious of writing. The alphabet, which in the fifth century BC was still a relatively recent invention, was seen by Plato as a dangerous new technology. This was because he believed... writing distanced the two sides of any communication, [and therefore] deception could prosper.

In the ancient secular realm the written word was considered to be a step removed from immediate speech as argued by Plato.¹ Plato's theory of mimesis is formulated on a hierarchical model in terms of the metaphorical distance between phenomena, such as art, poetry and writing, and the concept it refers to. Speech was considered to be the means of communicating truth external to language. Degenaar (1986:92) states that Plato "assumes that language is subservient to ideas which lie outside

language, the mind using language as a vehicle to express these ideas which are assumed to have an independent existence". According to Plato, then, language expresses and does not originate the concept communicated.

The segregation of language and image since antiquity was refined in the increasing sophistication of subsequent societies' modes of communication. Advances in printing and type-setting in the fifteenth century augmented the split between image and text. Reproducible text had the effect of reducing the aesthetic quality of typography to practical, mass-produced forms. These technologies contributed to the spread of the Reformation which further entrenched the iconoclastic discrimination between word and image. Secular progress and philosophies often influence religious developments in varying degrees. The brief introduction to the secular word / image relationship provides the platform for an analysis of this dynamic in the specifically Christian historical context.

The first subsection of the current chapter will focus on symbolism and its application to the early Christian context. The arguments for and against religious imagery in the premodern paradigm, with specific reference to the Protestant position on aesthetics are discussed. The relationship between The Word and image is then defined according to the theory of icons, in which is included a brief exposition of one of the most important iconological defences. Particular emphasis will be placed on the applicable aspects of the mimetic paradigm in which the images were conceived and executed as if they were the embodiment of The Word of God.

1.1 PREMODERN SYMBOLISM AND IMAGES

When dealing with the word / image relationship the role of symbolic thinking is pertinent on a number levels. In the first place, symbolism and the generation of symbols are integral to our communication processes,

the most pervasive symbols being the languages we speak.² Secondly, symbolic thinking closely relates to that of the imagination and, of particular relevance to this dissertation, to the spiritual. Avis (1999:104) states that it is “through our symbol-making capacity [that] we make sense of the world and find meaning in life. Our capacity for symbolising gives us our characteristic ability to transcend, through imagination, our immediate environment...”. Transcendence might be said to be the predominant characteristic of premodern symbolisation. This trait is similarly emphasised in David Perrin’s (1998:11) reading of Mircea Eliade:³

According to Eliade symbolic thinking and living... is consubstantial with human existence, it comes before language and discursive reason. Images and symbols are inseparable from our psychic functioning; they respond to a need to expose the most secret places of the universe in conjunction with the most sacred parts of our own being.

In the above quote Perrin relates images and symbols to each other by their function, in Eliade’s formulations, of making spiritual connections to the universe and of sacred revelation. Symbolic thinking is shown as essential to living and precedes language and rationalisation. Avis (1999:106) moreover maintains that “symbols require some existential involvement. Symbols... have a reference to transcendent reality and themselves participate in that reality... . Their function is to connect us to that... reality and they thus have a mediatory purpose”. Avis is Orthodox in his understanding of symbols as mediators, which has affinities with the premodern theorisation on religious symbolism. Avis (1999:107–8) maintains:

Symbolism... is not an adornment of truth already gained on other grounds: it is itself the path to truth. It is the making present of something absent – something that would remain absent and inaccessible without the symbols. Symbols above all connect. ... In symbolism *mimesis* (representation) leads to *methexis* (participation).

It is this understanding of symbols as sacred mediation which informs iconography theology. In this view, through representation, symbols

actively enable participation in the truth made accessible and present through them.

The differences in conceptualisations of symbolism's roles and attributes are pivotal in the debate on the legitimacy and propriety of religious imagery. The conservative view of the religious image was considered to refer directly to the tenets of Scripture. These images were not understood to be symbolising transcendent "truths", but as being anchored in The Word and subservient to it. Iconic symbolism was also restricted to be specifically tied to intended meanings as a strategy to deflect accusations of idolatry. In contrast to the illustrative images in texts, iconophiles claimed that icons possessed equal sovereignty to that of the Word and equated icon-making with the Scriptures. The term for "painting an icon" is the same as "writing an icon", as Daniel Sahas (1986:14) points out, since the Greek term for Scripture, *Graphé*, "means both 'writing' and 'painting'". Icons were declared to manifest aspects of divinity which the iconoclasts interpreted as idolatry. These opposing readings of images formed the basis for the iconoclastic controversy.

1.2. THE POLEMICS OF THE RELIGIOUS IMAGE

The Byzantine iconoclastic controversy originated as an intense opposition to the liturgical use of religious imagery. In particular, the legitimacy of religious images was denounced and the worship of icons was attacked. For the iconoclasts, the Biblical Ten Commandments engraved in stone were considered to be the supreme representation of the unmediated Word of God, the *Logos*. The iconoclasts contended that divine revelation was channelled through the written, inspired canon. As Morley (2003:14) concisely states, "God, being invisible, was understood to communicate to Man not through visual forms but rather through the medium of a divine language – The Word of God or the *Logos*, which is intelligibility itself".

The implication, similar to Plato's argument, is that images are not able to impart the spiritual knowledge that the divine *Logos* alone can convey.

In addition to the pre-eminent significance attached to the *Logos*, the iconoclasts used the second commandment's "prohibition" of images as the chief justification for their opposition to the use of religious imagery.

The decree is recorded in Exodus 20:4–6 (MacArthur 1997:124):

You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

In essence, the iconoclastic argument states that God prohibits the imaging of any entity existing in the cosmos and expressly forbids worshipping these visual forms. The details of the iconoclastic arguments are outside the scope of this dissertation. However, some of the implications of their hostility towards images are discussed in 1.3.1 where the defence of icons is featured. The antagonism towards religious visualisations encountered in the iconoclastic controversy abated consequent to the iconophilic victory in 843 AD.

A new intense wave of iconoclasm reached similar proportions during the conflict between the Reformers and the Counter-Reformers in the first half of the sixteenth century. The Reformation was polarised internally between the extreme intolerance and iconoclasm of John Calvin and Martin Luther's pragmatism and tolerance of images. Luther disapproved of the veneration of images to the same degree that he denounced the icons' violent removal and destruction. He considered the narrative image which depicts scenes from the Bible, that "narrate[s] and instruct[s] in much the same way a biblical text does", to be a "permissible alternative to the prohibited cult images" (Belting 1994:466). In contrast, Calvin "radically

rejected bodily images of God as crimes”; for him images were only permissible outside religion (Belting 1994:466).⁴

The Reformers considered themselves to be returning to the true faith in their iconoclasm (Belting 1994:461–463). Hans Belting (1994:458) considers the bare walls of Reformed churches as symbolic of a “purified, desensualized religion that now puts its trust in the word”. The evangelical, fundamentalist Protestant tradition, descended from the Reformers, tends to adhere to the iconoclastic interpretation of the Biblical mandate and is accordingly ascetic with regard to the visual arts. Moderate positions do exist, such as Luther’s, which allow religious images of limited signification.

1.2.1. A Compromise for Religious Images

An alternate interpretation of the second commandment states that it is not images as such but the worship of images which is forbidden. Egon Sendler (1981:8) notes that Exodus 20:23 and Deuteronomy 27:15 limits the “interdiction to the representation of gods, [constituting] idols”.⁵ Sendler (1981:8) justifies his contention by noting that “all figurative representations were not prohibited, as we see in the episode of the bronze serpent... and especially the ordinances concerning the cherubim on the ark...”.⁶ Scriptural support for this affirmative position can similarly be found in the first time the Holy Spirit is mentioned. The artist, Bezalel, was filled with the Spirit of God for the beautifying of the tabernacle.⁷ These divinely ordained, humanly created works were integral to the healing of God’s people, in which the bronze snakes are symbolic precursors to the cross, and to the experience of God’s presence, seen in the sculptures of the gold cherubim. The divine appointment of an artist redeems human creative skill in this affirmative view.

By deferring to the principle of complementing God’s revelation and instruction, as these Old Testament examples suggest, images were

considered justifiable by being “literally” in The Word. These included illustrations and embellishments in Bibles and other holy books such as the Genesis Books, Psalters and Gospel Books. The *Vienna Genesis* (early sixth century), originally written in silver on purple vellum, contains colourful, compact miniatures such as the page illustrated below.



Figure 1. Anonymous, *Page with Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, from the *Vienna Genesis* (early sixth century).

In the *Page with Jacob wrestling with the Angel* (early sixth century, Figure 1), the image “turns” along a horizontal hair-pin bend worked into a landscape feature. The artist arranged the illustration as a successive visual translation of selected events along Jacob’s journey to Canaan. The image is constructed so that its assimilation approximates reading text. This method is known as “continuous narration” in which the image shows

a sequence of events rather than a single moment, composed “so that progression in space becomes progression in time” (Janson 1991:263). The mimetic element of visually converting the text virtually point for point indicates the rigid conceptualisation of the image as a direct correspondence to The Word in the early premodern period.

The figures are painted directly onto the background field onto which the text is inscribed, superficially creating a degree of coherence between image and text. The superior placing and allotted space of more than half the page shows The Word’s prominence. Although the image is restricted to a distinct block, the text is similarly confined and separated by a band of space from the visual component. This contributes to the impression that the image, although supporting the content of the text, has its own autonomy in terms of being a complete, independent image. In contrast, the illustration to Psalm 44 in the *Utrecht Psalter* (820–832 AD) is not contained in its allocated space but seems to push the writing aside with its bold, gestural and expressive linearity.⁸ The appearance of this pen drawing connotes an uncomfortable coexistence and a struggle for dominance between the visual and textual components.

The *Vera Icon* by Israhel Van Meckenem (c.1490, Figure 2), completed almost 900 years after the *Vienna Genesis*, suggests a subtle tension between word and image. This ornate engraving depicts a post-crucifixion / pre-deposition portrait of Christ. In *Vera Icon* (c.1490, Figure 2), Van Meckenem reverses the proportions of the illustrated page from the *Vienna Genesis*, the *Page with Jacob wrestling with the Angel* (early sixth century, Figure 1), and places emphasis on the image by its relative size and space allocation compared to that of the text.

However, words and letters are incorporated into each plane of the *Vera Icon* (c.1490, Figure 2). Firstly, text appears as the caption placed on the cross, a traditional feature of crucifixion images, which is situated

compositionally and structurally above Christ's head. This text plaque appears to coexist on the same visual plane as the figure. In the second instance, four large letters (possibly a reference to the date) are placed two on either side of Christ's halo. These letters seem to hover in front of the decorative background plane. Lastly, the majority of the text, which is small, fine and visually less assertive in comparison to the first two text fragments, appears in a dedicated section at the bottom of the composition. This block gives the illusion of being in front of the figure although it occupies the same plane as the ground of the image. Tonally, the texts are set in frames lighter than the surrounding parts of the image, or form a contrast to the darker background as in the case of the four capital letters.

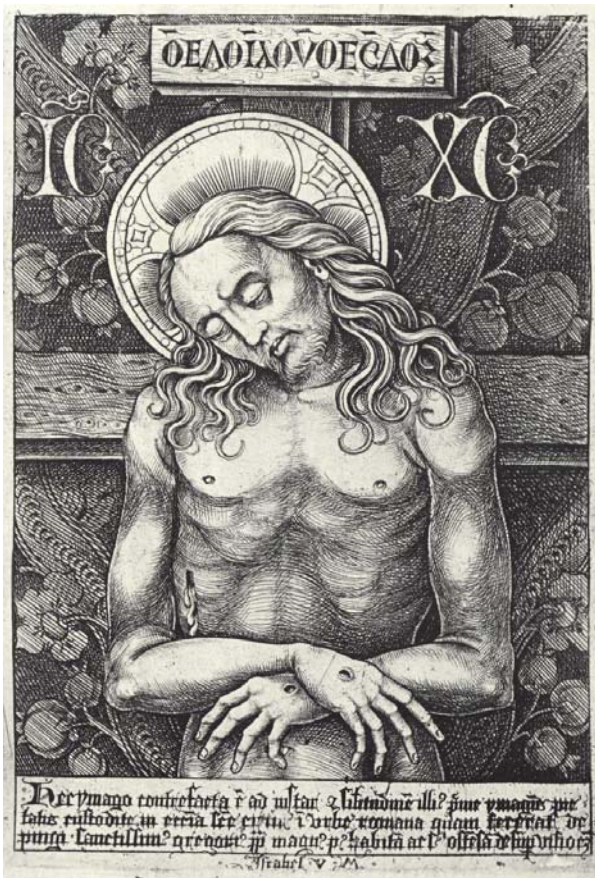


Figure 2. Israhel van Meckenem, *Vera Icon* (c. 1490).

The integration of text into the religious image indicates The Word's prominence in the premodern Protestant consciousness. But Van Meckenem's image resists the insistence of the literal elements. Even though words compel attention, asking to be read, the visual impression of the figure of Christ contains sufficient contrast and emphasis to capture attention and so dominates the text. Because of our familiarity with and the prevalence of textual insertions in religious imagery of the early Renaissance, the texts take on the appearance of being an incidental element of the composition. The irony of *Vera Icon* (c.1490, Figure 2) lies in its title. In contrast to traditional orthodox icons such as the *Encaustic Icon with Bust of Christ* (sixth century, Figure 6), which generally do not contain significant amounts of text, this image uses words to safeguard against the reading of it as a potentially idolatrous icon, which were still being produced under orthodox auspices.



Figure 3. Heinrich Füllmaurer (attributed), Central Panel of Mömpelgard Altar (c. 1540).

Aesthetic differentiations from before the onset of the Reformation iconoclasm to during the height of the conflict can be seen in the increasing emphasis placed on The Word. The Protestant *Mömpelgard Altar* (c.1540, Figure 3 shows the central panel), attributed to Heinrich Füllmaurer, was made at the peak of the Reformation. Unlike Van Meckenem's placement of the text below the image in Figure 2, which was completed before the radicalism of this era, Füllmaurer's altarpiece incorporates fine text at the top of the composition. This device was a structural affirmation of the "importance of written inscriptions (often biblical texts) for early Protestant art" (Michalski 1993:98).

The artist embellished the text with intricate frames and patterns, which to the contemporary eye seem to trivialise the text rather than emphasise its superiority. The text interrupts the visual plane and gives the illusion that it is spatially in front of the background image, as opposed to being integrated into the image. Consequently, the impression is that the pictorial component is supplemental and contrived because of the elaborate stress on the included text. The excessively detailed composition, cluttered with figures and extraneous detail, matches the intricacy of the text's embellishments. The overall result is that attention is detracted from the intended focal point of the altarpiece, which is the crucifixion of Christ.

The logical, iconoclastic extreme of the rejection of images is evident in the *Spitalskirche Evangelical-Lutheran Congregational Altarpiece* (1537, Figure 4). In this altarpiece, the "potentially idolatrous image" has been entirely substituted by the "pure, infallible and sacred Word" (Morley 2003:17). The lettering was the current letterform and "was intended to be visually unassertive" (Morley 2003:14). However, to our eye, the bold text is dominating and denotes dogmatism. Moreover, Belting (1994:467) states that the form of the triptych "comes from the tradition of the painted image, the absence of which is polemically underlined by the written text replacing it. Texts previously read in books are now displayed in the place

formerly occupied by the image – the altar – and demand the same kind of veneration”. Belting (1994:467) cites the example of a triptych depicting the Crucifixion which was “painted over with the Ten Commandments” as the high point in the antagonism towards images.⁹

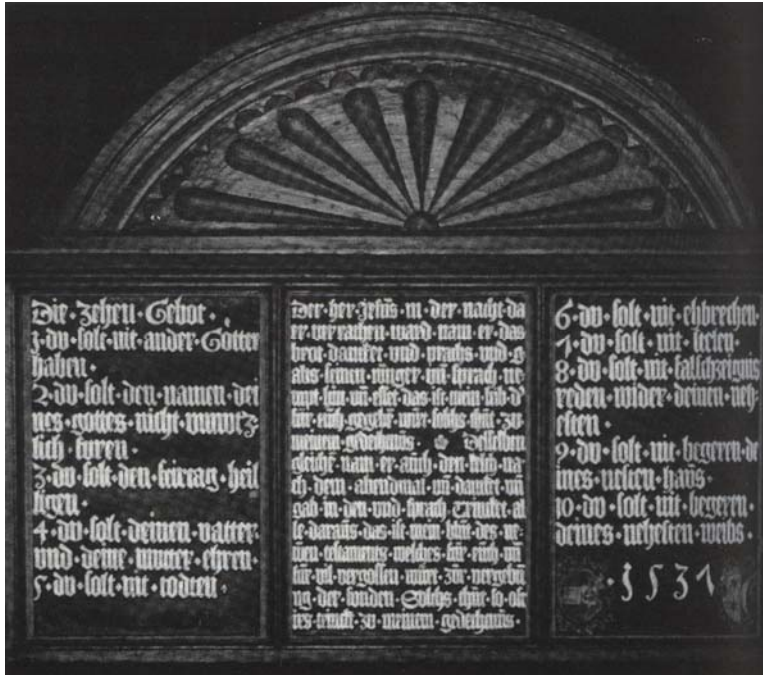


Figure 4. Anonymous, *Spitalskirche Evangelical-Lutheran altarpiece* (1537).

These iconoclastic practices illustrate Margaret Iversen’s (1986:91) comment that “the non-use of the image is likely to spill over into either indexical or symbolic signs.” The vacuum left in the rejection and absence of the image was filled by the indexical and regulatory word. However, later Protestant artists sought to reclaim the religious image once the iconoclasm of the Reformation had subsided.

In Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn’s *Moses with the Tablets of the Law* (1659, Figure 5), Moses is portrayed holding the two stone tablets above his head in the moment he shows the Law to the people of Israel. Rembrandt positioned the Word above Moses, touching the top edge of

the composition. The placement indicates its superiority and authority over the Protestant consciousness. The significant difference between this Protestant image and the previous two works is that The Word is not included as explanation or as the justification of the image. Instead, The Word is the text, visually depicted in the form of the divinely authored tablets of stone. Therefore, the insertion of holy script in this painting is an integral part of the image and its presentation is not in conflict with the visual presentation. Instead, the image is the carrier of The Word while simultaneously showing reverence to it.



Figure 5. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Moses with the Tablets of the Law* (1659).

In other works by Rembrandt, The Word is depicted as written manuscripts in the forms of scrolls, letters or Bibles. In such instances, the impression of authenticity is imparted through the portrayal of the documents as old

and worn and, when legible, written in Hebraic script. In these works, Rembrandt endorses the place and actuality of The Word in the lives of the subjects. For instance, The Word is read by Old and New Testament figures, written, studied and expounded.¹⁰ Rembrandt's images of Scripture are validations of the reality of God's Word in contrast to the images being validated by the inclusion of Scripture. The authority Rembrandt imbued in these holy manuscripts suggests a mimetic conception of the direct correspondence between his renditions of The Word and the abstract, eternal *Logos*.

The effects of the predominantly iconoclastic Reformation can be seen in the fluctuating prominence given to The Word in the latter images discussed. It is necessary here to focus on the early Byzantine debate during which iconophilic theologians formulated arguments to preserve the religious image. As is demonstrated in subsequent chapters, the arguments of the Byzantine iconoclasts resonate with certain contemporary attitudes towards images. Therefore, the understanding of icons has relevance for postmodern religious images which seek to represent Christian tenets of faith.

1.3. THE DEFENCE OF ICONS

The disputed hierarchy between the religious word and image was settled for the iconophiles in 843 AD (Rosenthal 1987:76). During the preceding two centuries, one of the most comprehensive theories of religious art was developed in the defence of icons against iconoclasm. Kenneth Parry (1996:1) comments on the impetus behind the formulation of iconic apologetics:

Without the phenomenon of iconoclasm there would be no Byzantine theology of the image. ... Byzantine theologians were obliged to formulate a theory of image-making capable of meeting every objection from the opposition. The special place of the icon in Byzantine Christianity made it imperative to define the exact nature of the Christian image.

Paradoxically, it became necessary to resort to lengthy discourse and in-depth expositions of the Scriptures in the defence of the religious image. In essence, justification for the liturgical inclusion of images was based on the belief that The Word, or *Logos*, became manifest in the flesh by taking on bodily form and substance. It was argued that the Incarnation was a divinely authored, physical image of the invisible God. The Incarnation doctrine also formed the foundation for complex arguments such as image and prototype, image and likeness (based on Genesis 1:26), and circumscription and uncircumscribability. The details of these arguments are outside the scope of this dissertation.¹¹ The discussion is limited to a brief explanation of the image and prototype defence and some of its implications.

1.3.1 The Image and the Prototype

The conversion of Emperor Constantine in 312 AD, who made Christianity the official faith of the Roman Empire, is historically one of the leading factors in the development of the icon aesthetic. In the transition from catacomb art to a sophisticated art form, the early Christian artists initially adapted aspects of secular practices to complement their new aesthetics.

Consider the observation Parry (1996:4) makes:

In the Platonic tradition, material images were understood as representations of eternal and intelligible realities. The image was a means of access to the higher world of the divine prototype. Arguments such as these were opposed by Christians before Christianity became the state religion, but were utilised by them once they needed to defend their own images.

The non-Christian practice of venerating a divinity by means of images became “Christianised” when it was adopted, expanded and elaborated upon by the early iconophiles. This argument about the mediatory function of images, which are supposed to point to the prototype, the original essence of the spiritual entity being signified, was used by John of Damascus. According to this conception of the attributes of icons, worship

is directed to the prototype by means of contemplating the metaphysical qualities which the icons represent.

John based his argument on the model proposed by Pseudo-Dionysius, which proposes that visible images analogically represent invisible entities (Parry 1996:37–38).¹² In essence, the argument proposed that the prototype of Christ was portrayed in the icons of him, although they could not capture (or circumscribe) his hypostasis (essence, or nature), by virtue of an identity of likeness, a “recognisable” representation. As such, veneration of the icon was veneration of the hypostasis of Christ himself since the worshiper understood that the icon signified him. This was permissible since Christ was a man visible to men and therefore his physical likeness could be used in icons which depended on a measure of likeness. The implication of veneration passing from the image to the prototype is that there is a communion and participation of the image with the prototype.

The prototype defence placed emphasis on the contribution of the senses to spiritual life. Parry (1996:38–39) observes that for John “it is through listening to words that we find spiritual understanding and through seeing images that we attain spiritual contemplation... . John is determined to show that our physical nature is essential to our spiritual life”. For John the intellect alone, which is addressed by words, is insufficient for the fuller spiritual enlightenment that sensory experience can provide by gazing at and meditating on icons. John also shows that the concept of the image was essential to Christian thinking. He defines six types of images encompassing various forms of symbolism and an early metaphorical understanding of words as images.¹³ The rationale for expanding the definition of the image was to “demonstrate the pervasive nature of iconoclasm”, for once iconoclasm of the image “took hold, it could be applied not only to icons, but to scripture, theology and even humanity

itself" (Parry 1996:42). By defending the visible image, John had formulated a defence of the metaphysical image.

The prototype defence elevated the subject of the icon over precise representation. This had the paradoxical effect, since the defence initially stressed the element of likeness to justify the icons' veneration, that iconographers began depicting human features with increasing abstraction to facilitate contemplation of the prototype. So, the traditional practice of portraying the eyes of icons as expressionless was symbolic of the icon's stated function. According to Kearney (1988:9), the icon invites "the onlooker to travel through the vacant regard of the image towards the suprasensible transcendence of God rather than linger at the surface level of purely human expressions and sensations... ". By de-emphasising "realistic" representation, the artists were encouraging worshipers to look beyond the visible to the invisible divinity. In addition, Sahas considers the icon to be an expression of spirituality and not of aesthetic sentiments. As such, the beauty of the icon was not aimed to please the senses. Rather, in Sahas' (1986:15) opinion, in "the icon the flesh has been crucified", in this way making it a statement of faith.

In the *Encaustic Icon with Bust of Christ* (sixth century, Figure 6), Jesus is shown expressing the typical "aloofness and timelessness associated with the Divine" (Weitzmann 1978:40). In this image the features of Christ are generalised, which was a traditional strategy to transcend his physicality. Christ's right hand is portrayed in the posture of giving a benediction which worshipers would appropriate through contemplation. In contrast to most icons, he is shown holding a Bible. The inclusion of The Word appears to be a proclamation of solidarity with The Word, as well as making the theological statement that Christ is The Word. The position of the Bible in this image suggests Christ's connection with it, as The Word made flesh (John 1:14). The depicted presence of Scripture is visually and metaphorically a shield against the iconoclastic radicalism which was

founded on the supreme place of The Word in their theology and adherence to their interpretation of the “prohibition” of the second commandment.

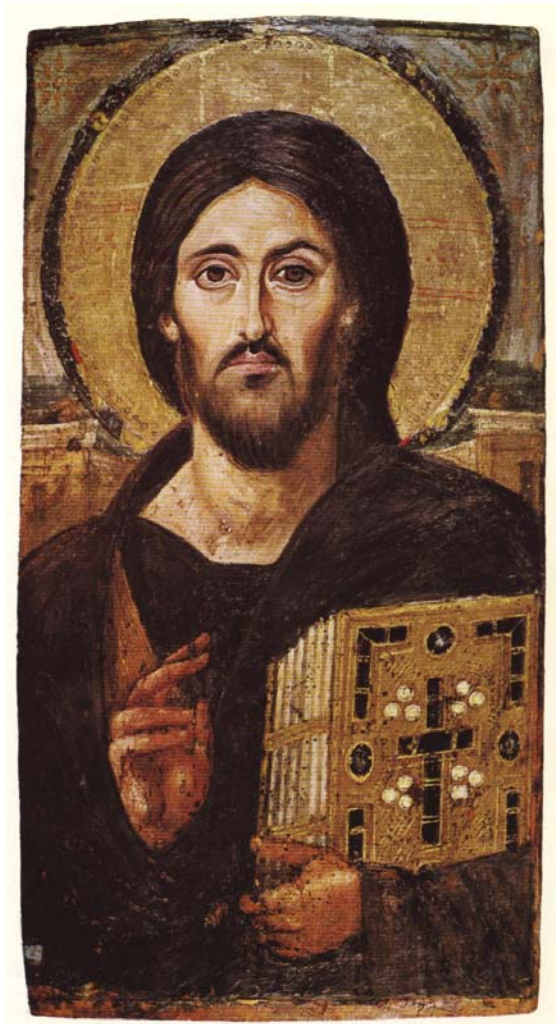


Figure 6. Anonymous , *Encaustic Icon with Bust of Christ* (sixth century).

The problem of visually communicating an ineffable truth was reworked throughout the course of premodern art through varying degrees of mimesis. The predominant characteristic of this form of mimesis is that the relationship between the signifier and the signified exists in a closed relationship. The image as illustration or icon was considered to relate

unambiguously to its referent. This conception of the mimetic role of images formed the theoretical apparatus for the development of the icon aesthetic.

In summary, in this chapter the discussion has ranged over the iconoclastic camps which either forbade religious images altogether or permitted illustrations of limited subjects derived from the Bible and inserted into holy documents. Such illustrations were regarded as visual signs with limited reference and symbolism and as inherently devoid of supernatural or transcendent attributes. The emphasis on the restricted signification in these images was related to the concept of images corresponding directly to the tenets of The Word. However, the distance between the image and the signified was observed by emphasising the difference of essence between them. Illustrations were not held to portray the spiritual truths pointed to in Scripture but were “merely” visualisations of “literal” readings of The Word with a closed, rigid relationship between Word and image.

The last section of the current chapter focused on the way in which iconoclasm forced the iconophiles to define their beliefs. By defending images, the iconophiles were defending their practice of worship and developed a complex system of defences to rebuff accusations of idolatry. The battles fought over the legitimacy of icons formed a foundation for arguing the legitimacy of later premodern religious art. Embedded in the history of icons is the recurring defence and iconoclasm of religious art, with the foundational arguments for and against images reappearing in modified forms throughout the history of Christian art. The iconophilic defences were based on the premise that icons and related symbolism illuminated, or revealed, the essence of the saint portrayed and acted as mediators to them. Icons were not perceived as being mimetic in the sense that illustrations were which corresponded directly to the tenets of The Word.

The argument that iconic imaging of saints emphasised the spiritual characteristics which could not be portrayed directly by tangible means was highlighted in this chapter. Physical traits were homogenised to lead viewers to a contemplation of the ineffable qualities of the saint and not the physical representations of the persons. Iconic correspondence was therefore less restricted than that of illustrations with regard to allusions to spirituality. Iconic mimesis aimed at leading, through contemplation of the icon's physical appearance, to uncircumscribable, essential truth, so reducing the distance between the image and signified. In this sense icons attempted to represent the spiritual realm in terms of the visible, based on the theological significance of Christ incarnate, being the presence of the divine among men. As Perrin (1998:75) says, "In Jesus exists the great original symbol of Christian theology, the fulfilment of the *imago Dei* [the image of God] in human flesh". By depicting Christ in visceral form, iconographers were pointing to the doctrine which underpinned their faith.

The key for later religious art seeking to be more than illustrative is this iconic aspect of giving form to that which can not be depicted. The pursuit of giving the invisible a visible form correlates to the aesthetic sublime which is discussed in the next chapter. The manifestation of the postmodern sublime in both iconoclastic and iconic approaches to the invisible is the theme of chapter two, in which contemporary artists' works will be shown to deal with the invisible according to these seemingly antithetical approaches to the invisible.

Endnotes: Chapter 1

1. In chapter 3 Derrida's critique of the assumption of the immediacy of the spoken word is discussed.
2. See Culler (1981:25). The rise of linguistics in the first half of the twentieth century enabled theorists and philosophers such as Ernst Cassirer to conceptualise languages as symbolic systems, paving the way for structuralism.
3. Perrin refers to Eliade (1958) and Eliade (1961), amongst others, in his exposition of Eliade's theories of religion.

4. See Michalski (1993) for a comprehensive study of the Reformation antagonism towards the image.
5. Exodus 20:23: “You shall not make anything to be with Me – gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves”; Deuteronomy 27:15: “Cursed is the one who makes a carved or molded image, an abomination to the LORD, the work of the hands, and sets it up in secret” (MacArthur 1997:126; 287).
6. Numbers 21:8–9: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live’. So Moses made a bronze serpent ...”; and Exodus 25:18: “And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat” (MacArthur 1997:226; 132).
7. Exodus 31:3–5: “And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to design artistic works, to work in gold, in silver, in bronze, in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of workmanship” (MacArthur 1997:140).
8. Reims School, *Utrecht Psalter* (820–32 AD). Ink drawing on vellum, 92 leaves, 33 x 25.5 cm. Universiteitsbibliotheek, Utrecht. MS 32/484. (Illustration and data: Janson 1991:322, fig 400, physical data available at <http://vitrine.library.uu.nl/wwwroot/en/texts/Hs32.htm>, accessed on 2007-07-26, catalogue data available at http://bibliomane.tripod.com/utrecht_psalter.htm, accessed on 2007-07-26.)
9. Reported by Van Mander, K. 1604. *Schilderboeck*, Alkmaar. fol. 204. The altarpiece, by Hugo van der Goes, was in the Netherlands.
10. See Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Rembrandt's Mother as the Biblical Prophetess Hannah* (1631). Oil on panel, 59.8 x 47.7 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Illustration and data: Bockemühl 1993:26) for an example of the contemplative reading of Scripture; the act of writing epistles is depicted in *The apostle Paul in prison* (1627). Oil on oak panel, 72.8 x 60.2 cm. Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart (Illustration and data: Bockemühl 1993:29); as an example of studying and debate over The Word see *Two Scholars Disputing (Peter and Paul?)* (1628). Oil on panel, 72.3 x 59.7 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Felton Estate, 1934 (Illustration: Bockemühl 1993:22, Data: Bockemühl 1993:23).
11. For details on the Byzantine icon theology, see Parry (1996), who highlights the iconic defences, and Sahas (1986), who is apologetic towards icons and has documented eighth century sources of iconoclasm.
12. See Migne (1844-1880), especially p.121C–124A. Relevant section available at http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/areopagite_14_ecclesiastical_hierarchy.htm (accessed on 2006-08-17).
13. Parry (1996:39–41) discusses the 6 different types of images according to John, from Kotter (1975:126–130). Here follows a paraphrased summary:
 - Firstly, there is the “natural image”, which takes precedence “over artificial representation”, of which the prime example is the Son of the Father who is the “first natural and identical... image of the invisible God”, except that he was begotten of the Father.
 - Secondly, the type of image related to God’s foreknowing and predeterminations, specifically relating to God’s seeing all things before they came into being.
 - The third type is that of “humanity made in the image and likeness of God”, whereby, made in an imitation of God, humankind shares in the uncreated nature of God, and thus participates in the divine nature.
 - The fourth type of image consists of the forms and types found in the Scriptures of “invisible and incorporeal things which are described in visible terms”. Through these types “we are raised up to the truth of what they represent”, which provide some understanding of God. Creation also contains images which reveal something of God.
 - The fifth type of image “prefigures” what is yet to come. These are mostly Scriptural images and typologies, such as the wet fleece or burning bush.

- The last type of image is that which is “made as a reminder... of past events” such as miracles or good deeds, found in two forms: “words written in books”, which are images according to John [an important defence against the iconoclasts who sought to assert the priority of the written word], or “material images, such as the jar of manna which was placed in the ark as a memorial”. Their role is to help viewers “increase in virtue and turn away from evil”. John identifies the painted icon with this type of image.

Chapter 2: The Sublime and the Spiritual

For centuries Christian art has endeavoured to give tangible form to the invisible qualities of the divinity. For this reason, the application of sublime aesthetics, which aims at finding tangible expression for the intangible, has the potential to contribute to a reinvigoration of Christian art. In this chapter the manifestation of The Word / image relationship, through its engagement with the postmodern sublime, is investigated in the work of two contemporary artists. While Anselm Kiefer and Bill Viola both deal with issues of the contemporary sublime and Christian personalities, their visualisations of the ineffable diverges according to approaches related to iconoclasm and icons respectively.

Kiefer's images which refer to spiritual entities are demonstrated to be a progressive iconoclasm of the subject. His works incorporate text in a circumspect way which serves to highlight the absences to which the inscriptions refer. In contrast, in the images selected from Viola's works, which reference specifically Christian figures, he returns to the icon format for his images of intense emotional expression. Although text is absent in his works, he uses historical religious artworks and ancient texts as inspiration for his video images. The similarity between these two artists is that they both use past spiritual sources and references in their works by which they explore a revisioning of spirituality and Christian tenets.

The discussion of these two approaches to the imaging of the sublime is set against a brief definition of the term "sublime". Then selected aspects of its Romantic manifestation are mentioned, followed by cursory comments on its contemporary form. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to an investigation of the works by Kiefer and Viola in terms of the postmodern sublime.

2.1 THE WORD “SUBLIME”

The nature of the sublime, having been conceived as fundamentally beyond the grasp of our intellect, makes the concept difficult to define. In this dissertation, the term “sublime” refers to that which is encompassed by the ineffable. Such a usage of the term focuses on those aspects which relate in some way, either positively or negatively, affirmatively or cynically, to the transcendent. In particular, this chapter concentrates on the aesthetic sublime with specific emphasis on the spiritual aspects of artworks. The Romantics formulated the sublime as an area of visual and spiritual investigation after the discovery of the treatise *On the sublime* by the first century philosopher Cassius Longinus.¹ The Romanticist artists, philosophers and writers focused on the inexpressible, on that which defies rational thinking and circumscription. Their theories and creative products continue to influence art which is concerned with sublimity. For this reason, here follows a brief discussion of selected theories which informed their art and philosophy.

Romantic artists searched for the divinity in Nature², which was elevated to the Divine itself, in contrast to pre-Romantic impulses of finding only traces of the divine in nature. Lynn Gamwell (2002:16) points out, “Before Romantic pantheism, religious painting done in the West from the Renaissance on had generally depicted God as a personal deity or as a clearly identified symbol. ... But in pantheism, the deity is shown not as a person or symbol but as a natural object...”. Divinity was no longer conceptualised as an individualised authority, but as a more pervasive, often terrifying power diffused in Nature. The artist-priest became the mediator and, as Gamwell (2002:23) succinctly states, disclosed the “sacred truth” intuited from Nature. This pursuit of the “revelation of the invisible” (Morgan 1996:40), of striving to grasp the divinity in Nature, gave rise to a sense of awe which found form in the artist’s mind and visual expression. David Morgan (1996:40) notes that the Romantic artwork was “understood as a visual manifestation of an invisible impulse discerned

and articulated by the artist...". In this sense, the Romantic artwork became an intuitive text, and therefore more fitting to point to realities beyond our logic by translating the incomprehensible into a visually comprehensible language.

The Romantic sublime was formulated through two major theories by the philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. Gamwell (2002:23) traces the "modern notion" of the sublime which was defined "in 1757, by Edmund Burke as the experience of the infinite in nature... . Kant disagreed with Burke's suggestion that the experience of the sublime is enhanced by a fear of the unknown and stressed that the sublime is a satisfying, exhilarating experience of grandeur".

Burke's formulation centres on our emotive responses of awe and terror to overwhelming objects, circumstances and natural powers, which is the experience of the sublime. According to Vincent Mosco's (2004:23) reading of Burke, "the sublime achieves transcendence through astonishment, awe, terror, and psychic distance". In other words, we derive pleasure from being able to appreciate terrifying, vast, indescribable and ungraspable natural elements or other dangerous situations when we perceive we are not in immediate danger. According to Burke's theory, we are able to use the experiences of shock to evoke a satisfying response, so elevating our encounter with the object or situation. This process "revivifies our sense of being alive" and is fundamentally existential according to Paul Crowther (1995:10). In this way, our experience of life is intensified.

In contrast, the sublime as theorised by Kant emphasises our intellectual ability to resist succumbing to the sensation of being overwhelmed by infinite factors, entities or all-encompassing voids. According to Gamwell (2002:23), "Kant linked the sublime directly to the pantheist notion of an awesome transcendent universe. The sublime is occasioned, according to

Kant, when one is confronted with something extremely vast, such as the heavens, or something overwhelmingly powerful, such as universal gravitation". Even though the sublime experience was connected to phenomena similar to those proposed by Burke, Kant specifically tied his theory to our cognitive response to infinity.

However, the limitations of our mental powers are also delineated in our experience of the sublime. Kant describes the response to the sublime manifestation as a "negative pleasure" or "a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of the imagination" to comprehend or encompass it (Taylor 1992:30).³ This pleasure materialises in the realisation of our "superior moral powers" when our "reason makes an intuitive leap to embrace the sublime object without actually conceptualizing or recognizing it" (Freeland 2004:38). We find engaging with that which eludes our rationalisation to be a thrilling experience, and in this way experience the awe of the sublime. As Crowther (1995:11) states, this encounter with the sublime revitalises "our capacity for rational insight – our very ability to create and discover meaning". Crowther (1989a:99) furthermore highlights the pleasure derived from our ability to conceptually and visually present an object which "exceeds or threatens our perceptual and imaginative capacities" by virtue of its magnitude, complexity or latent destructive nature as "excessive or threatening".⁴ Our creative and cognitive powers are vividly delineated in representing that which transcends us as transcendent.

The pleasure derived from the experience of the sublime is different to that imparted by the experience of the beautiful. Mark Taylor (1992:29), in his discussion of the Romantic sublime, states that the "other that is beyond beauty is sublime". To behold the sublime is to be taken beyond the comfortable, harmonious experience induced in the apprehension of the beautiful. Taylor (1992:30) elaborates that the pleasure experienced in the apprehension of beauty, which has discernible form, releases "harmony

between the imagination and understanding”. In contrast, the “sublime erupts at the *limits* of human consciousness”. The sublime creates a disruption of harmony in our understanding and subjective experience.

In contrast to the Romantic disharmonious pleasures derived from the sublime, several theorists contend that the postmodern sublime is devoid of these “pleasures” and the potential of transcendence. Correlating to our cynical, questioning mindsets, Elkins (2004:96) considers that in the contemporary sublime there is no longer the Romantic “thrilling infinity” in which to be immersed. Elkins (2004:96) states that the psychoanalyst Neil Hertz “emphasized the ‘end of the line’ quality of what he calls the ‘postmodern sublime’: the sublime, he says, occupies a place at the end of thought, where thinking itself is nearly extinguished”.⁵ However, certain correspondences are evident to the Kantian sublime which deals with the limits of cognition. According to Elkins’ (2004:98):

[T]he postmodern sublime is alluring because it fails: it offers no infinite vistas, only dark caves and black walls of paint. The postmodern sublime is a place where the exhausted mind digs among the last shards and fragments of meaning that might point toward something transcendental, even if pure transcendence, real sublimity, remains out of sight.

This evanescent transcendence can be perceived as a pseudo-transcendence – one which we know to be only virtually possible. Thus, the impossibility of attaining even this shadow of transcendence in our postmodern reality is emphasised. John Milbank (1998:259) argues that “modernity and post-modernity tend strictly to *substitute* sublimity for transcendence. This means that all that persists of transcendence is sheer unknowability or its quality of non-representability and non-depictability”. However, Milbank (1998:259) emphasises the creative possibilities in “the poststructuralist reading of the sublime... [which] insists that the indeterminate abyss not only *undoes* the subjective, but also gives rise to it...”. Contrary then to the extreme pessimism of Elkins and Hertz, the contemporary sublime, although it exhausts the mind seeking it, generates a new subjective experience of the indeterminacy of the sublime itself.

The German artist Anselm Kiefer engages with the postmodern sublime in a way which reminds us of our fragile spirituality and inadequate comprehension of postmodern sublimity. He presents the impossibility of circumscribing spiritual beings within our consciousness. The postmodern sublime is therefore signified in his non-representations of that which remains beyond the tangible and apparent.

2.1.1 Anselm Kiefer: Urban Spirituality

John Gilmour (1990:xii) considers Kiefer to be an “advocate of the visionary artist” through his contribution to the (aesthetic) revitalisation and renewal of history. Kiefer includes the narratives of ancient and classical myths, as well as references to the Scriptures and mysticism of both the Jewish and Christian traditions, in his treatment of the historical events of the past century (Taylor 1992:291). According to Gilmour (1990:52), Kiefer uses these old allegories to confront the viewer’s “thoughtless preconceptions”. This makes his integration of the mythological references into his images an opportunity for re-thinking our accepted and received historical discourses. Thereby the viewer’s uncritical complacency towards them is removed. This process of concentrating on past events and narratives initiates their re-situation into contemporary dialogue since they are now re-examined and re-validated. Further, they are reinstated as contributors of new meaning and narratives relevant to our time.

In Kiefer’s paintings which refer to religious or spiritual personages there initially seems to be a stark absence of the named “entity”. In the first two works dealt with in this chapter, *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (1973, Figure 7) and *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* (1973, Figure 8), only sparse, virtually impotent, religious symbolism is used to point to the Biblical Trinity. The third work, *To the Supreme Being* (1983, Figure 10), is devoid of any visible signs of a deity. An investigation of these works with particular focus on their implications for the revitalisation of Christian imagery

through his re-situation of Christian theological issues of divine presence follows.



Figure 7. Anselm Kiefer, *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (1973).

The painting *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (1973, Figure 7) is composed vertically of two seemingly incongruous parts. The top section is a rendition of a wooden interior while the bottom segment depicts a forest scene. These two wooden environments form distinctively different sanctuaries for the divine. The German words for the title are situated predominantly in the upper part of the natural environment, just overlapping into the man-made interior. The text's function of uncomfortably connecting the two disparate components appears to be an artificial linking solution, initially suggesting that the words are the only common elements.

The grouping of the forest's fore- and middle-ground trees into three focal clusters lead vertically to the three inscriptions and to the chairs situated above them, which appear transparent being solely composed of graphic lines. The flames and plumes of smoke are visually more substantial than the chairs and rise towards the top of the composition. There is a hint of a recognisable outside world through the windows. In this image, Kiefer creates a space for the Trinity by just barely indicating their respective positions. By not exactly circumscribing the place belonging to the divine, Kiefer makes it apparent that the chairs are not the source of the fires but only the potential, provisional places for the divinities.

Depth is an integral aspect of the natural scene, in which the eye is led by the funnelling positions of the tree trunks to an apparently infinite recession, the deepest of which leads upward to the "Father" inscription. Following these paths embedded in the woods will not lead to the room but, it appears, deeper into Nature. However, the alluded boundlessness is abruptly contradicted by the upper segment of the composition. Kiefer criticises, in the dichotomy between the two components, the Romantic pantheistic vision which is suppressed and replaced by an impotent, urbanised spirituality. The dual presentation of the sanitised room and the forest scene may also relate to the Romantic distinctions between the realms of Reason and Nature. In this reading, Nature offers infinite possibilities while Reason, that which inhibits our perception of limitlessness and which seeks to rationalise the experience of the ineffable, is itself limited.

In another work of the same year and theme, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* (1973, Figure 8), the viewer is confronted with a solitary stage-like setting of wooden side panels and floor and a brick back wall. A simple wooden chair is dedicated to each of the three persons of the Trinity, each of whom is denoted by a flame. The uniform structure and presentation of the

chairs, combined with the similar magnitude of the flames, create unity among the three named entities, corresponding to the Christian doctrine of the Three-in-One godhead. However, in comparison to *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (1973, Figure 7), the chairs in this composition appear more solid and the flames less forceful.

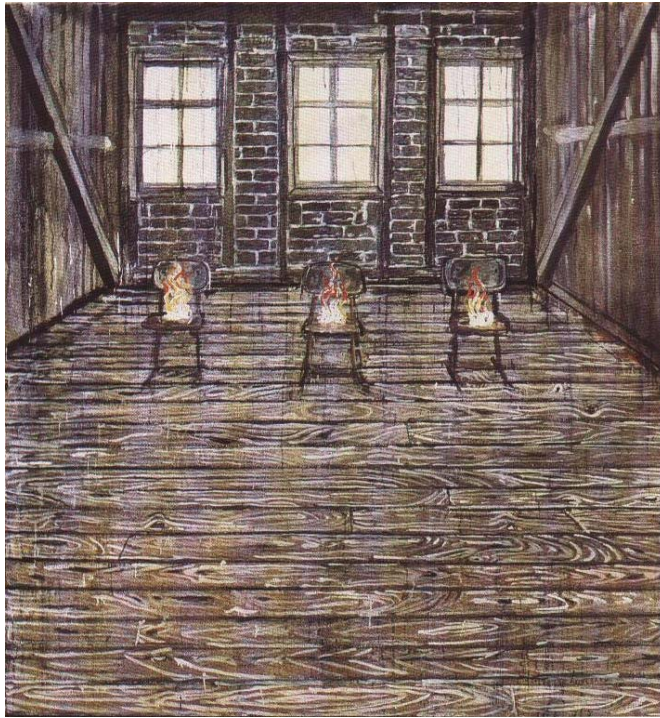


Figure 8. Anselm Kiefer, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* (1973).

In his commentary on Kiefer's use of flame symbolism, Taylor (1992:297) observes that for the ancient philosopher, Heraclitus, "fire is the material manifestation of the Logos. In Hebrew and Christian scriptures, fire is the sign of God's presence". Biblically, fire is symbolic of the anointing of the Holy Spirit and of God's guidance, both indicating divine presence.⁶ In this image, however, it appears there is nowhere to be guided to and only the elementary chairs to anoint. By depicting the frail chairs as intact and unconsumed by the flames which emanate from their seats, Kiefer references the Old Testament story of Moses and the Burning Bush.⁷ However, the viewer is not confronted with the powerful, direct experience

of God, but with a hesitant, triple and therefore possibly a diffused presence. The flames seem to allude to baptism with fire which, for David Jasper (2004:185), is a “dramatic symbol of death and purgation, of destruction and life”.

Set in the wall behind the seats depicted in *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* (1973, Figure 8) are three illuminated windows providing greater light, in both magnitude and brightness, than that emitted by the flames. Through this, Kiefer inserts the possibility, glimpsed through the glass panes, of an unrestricted spirituality and intangible reality beyond these imposed confines in the form of pure light.⁸ According to Milbank, commenting on the early theory of sublimity formulated by the philosopher Longinus, there is an intrinsic link between light and the sublime. Milbank (1998:262) notes that for “Longinus... the sublime does not reside in the obscure divine background alone: it is *also* the manifest, sudden and unbearable light. This light, although intolerable and excessive, is none the less visible and clarifying”. Brilliant and overwhelming light is the converse of the nebulous, both of which are ineffable and lead to the experience of the sublime.

When comparing the two works by Kiefer which refer to the Christian triune God to Masaccio's *The Trinity* (c.1425, Figure 9), the contemporary figurative absence of the named entities becomes more pronounced. In the premodern mural God the Father is shown supporting his Son on the cross, rendered by Masaccio in a literal manner. In Orthodoxy these two persons of the godhead were considered permissible to image since Christ was a man visible to flesh, based on the doctrine of the Incarnation, and the Father is our prototype since we are made in his image, which is the *Imago Dei* argument of the iconophiles.⁹ Masaccio depicted the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove, which forms the link between the face of the Father and the head of the Son. This device alludes to the mediation between the heavenly and the earthly realms as well as to the signs of divine approval.¹⁰



Figure 9. Masaccio, *The Trinity* (c.1425).

However, from our viewpoint, this artwork is not a testimony of our being made in the image of God. Instead, it appears that God has been made in our image, reduced to our human scale and enclosed in humanly designed architecture. The iconoclasts argued that depicting God in physical form is in essence a human effort to diminish the divine. Kearney (1988:45) equates the “drive towards idolatry” with “the attempt to reduce God to our own ‘graven images’”. In contrast, Kiefer depicts all three deities of the Trinity as symbolic, spiritual beings. Paradoxically, the premodern work alludes to a permanent, masonry enclosure above the triune Godhead, while Kiefer’s images of the Trinity place them in a more provisional and comparatively impermanent setting in which the ceiling is

implied but not depicted. Therefore, although the old artwork seems to display a glorious image of the Trinity, Kiefer seems to give greater respect to the spiritual beings by their symbolic presence and provisional placement.

From *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (1973, Figure 7) to *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* (1973, Figure 8), Kiefer re-thinks his representations of the invoked divinities. He displays greater subtlety and is more tentative in pointing to the sublime: he is uncertain, simultaneously indicating an honest apprehension of what cannot be figured. The throne-rooms Kiefer erects in both works are in secluded inconspicuous milieus. In both these works Kiefer has replaced the traditional literal rendition of the Trinity with Scriptural symbolism.

In contrast to the Trinity works in which there are recognisable symbolism for the spiritual, the painting *To the Supreme Being* (1983, Figure 10) is “utterly cryptic” (Taylor 1992:303). In this stark, permanent architectural environment, the prominent linear perspective leads to the far wall which is comprised of three black panels. Luminous, seemingly broken windows appear in the left wall, while the windows in the opposite wall on the right have been boarded up. The light illuminates the interior structure without contributing metaphysical insight while the windows serve as beacons to the dark end of the room. In this painting it appears that light is not the symbol for spirituality, in contrast to *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* (1973, Figure 8). Moreover, there are no symbolic flames and the light that does shine in is absorbed by the dark interior, implying the complete absence of divine presence and spiritual illumination.

The inscription “To the Supreme Being” is inscribed in a small cursive font near the bottom right corner. In comparison to the bold written utterances of the names in *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (1973, Figure 7), the writing in this work is tentative and seems to disappear in the overwhelming

surrounding darkness. A decade after the completion of the Trinity works it appears as if Kiefer approaches the named entity, the Supreme Being, with greater uncertainty. A feasible interpretation could be that the Supreme Being, which is more universal than the Biblical Trinity, is even more unfigurable and remains completely veiled from our sight. This exemplifies the contemporary sublime as described by Elkins (2004:98), which offers only “black walls of paint”, depriving us of any signs pointing towards meaning or of indications of transcendence. In this reading, Kiefer reminds us of our current loss of spirituality by the absence of any sign of the spiritual. The permanence of the environment contributes to the sense of an entrenched voided-ness in respect of the Supreme Being.

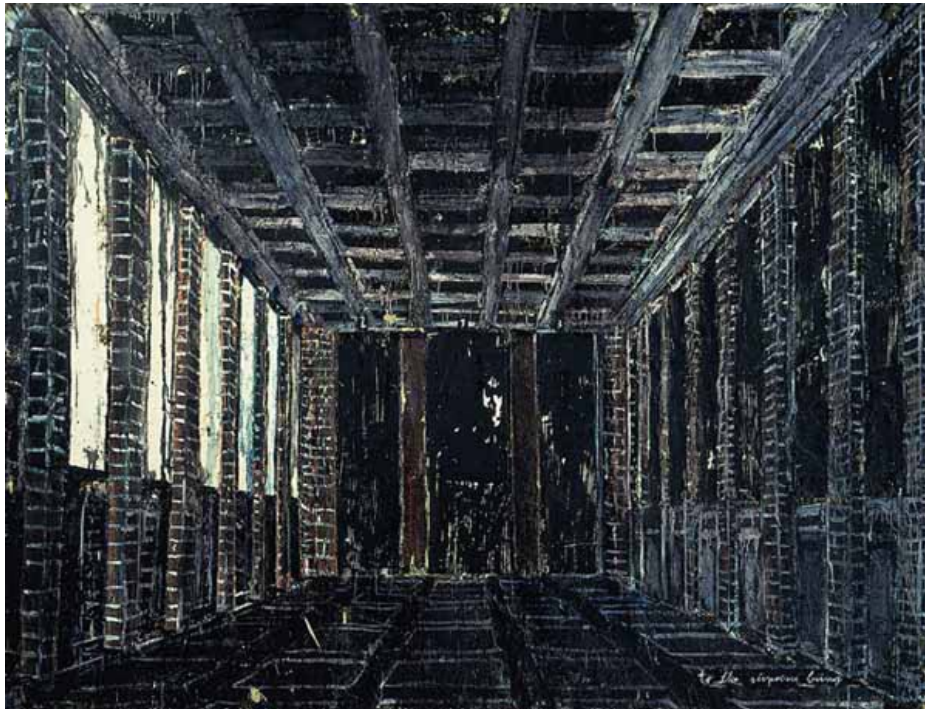


Figure 10. Anselm Kiefer, *To the Supreme Being* (1983).

In contrast to the Trinity works discussed above, the building appears completely deserted and unkempt, emphasising the apparent absence of spiritual presence. The dark and oppressive qualities of this vacuous place of honour assigned to the Supreme Being are underscored when

compared to Leonardo's da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1495–97).¹¹ Gilmour (1990:20) notes that the proportions of the back panels in Kiefer's image match those of the windows in the premodern work. The roof patterns are identical in both images and the side panels of da Vinci's painted architectural structure find echoes in the window panes leading to the back wall of *To the Supreme Being* (1983, Figure 10). These correlations therefore emphasise the significance of the differences, which include that Kiefer has omitted the communion table, the natural scene visible through windows, as well as the presence of Christ and his disciples. Gilmour (1990:23) considers these differences to be "more diagnostic than nostalgic", adding that the black panels have erased the altar or stained glass window of the alluded religious space.

In particular, the iconoclasm or dis-figuring of the subject within this eerily empty hall carries a strong reference to the aggressively iconoclastic Reformers, delivering comment on the anaemic religious iconographic heritage of Germany. The black triple panelled back wall recalls the *Spitalskirche Evangelical-Lutheran Congregational Altarpiece* (1537, Figure 4), in which the absence of the image is forcefully accentuated by the text replacing it. In *To the Supreme Being* (1983, Figure 10) the presence of the Being is denied and replaced by overwhelming emptiness.

Taylor (1992:292) considers the sites of desertion depicted by Kiefer in images such as *To the Supreme Being* (1983, Figure 10), to be the "no-place of a certain withdrawal. Something is always slipping away, always missing in Kiefer's art". The "withdrawal" is that of the unrepresentable, presenting the paradoxical problem of giving embodiment to the unfigurable. In this image in which the unrepresentable is untraceable, Kiefer can only refer, by way of a tentative inscription, to an ambiguous signified whose place is vacant. Gilmour (1990:37) makes the comment that in the portrayal of empty space in *To the Supreme Being* (1983, Figure 10) Kiefer asks the viewer to reconsider "what has become of our idea of the

real, given the way we now perceive it to be caught within our own nets of discourse". Kiefer's empty spaces are constructed to draw the viewer into a rethinking of and a confrontation with our postmodern, cynical concepts of the "real", which deny the possibility of a transcendental reality.

In comparison to Masaccio's image, *The Trinity* (c.1425, Figure 9), in which the illusionistic architectural structure is filled with figures, divine and human, encompassing immortality and mortality, Kiefer's dark architectural space in *To the Supreme Being* (1983, Figure 10) is stripped and gutted to its bare shell. In the premodern work, the place made for the divine is compact, barely providing sufficient space for Christ to be stretched out on the cross. Masaccio's mural depicts a barrel vault to encompass the divine, a circumscription of the divinity. So, in an alternative reading of the emptiness in *To the Supreme Being* (1983, Figure 10), Kiefer possibly alludes to a divinity which has escaped our rational "nets". For, as Taylor (1992:30) proposes, the sublime "exceeds every form and escapes all formation".

Kiefer's method of not overtly depicting the named entity initially appears to yield to the lost conception of an omnipresent God and of the consequent emptiness of the god-space. However, it can also be argued that Kiefer's absences epitomise Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's (1999:111) suggestion that the contemporary age is witnessing the end of perceiving "blankness as absence". Therefore, the blank walls and empty spaces in Kiefer's works do not point to a true absence. In Gilmour's (1990:30) opinion, Kiefer's acts of negation in *To the Supreme Being* (1983, Figure 10) demonstrate "how the forms negated continue to reverberate within what remains". This includes the negation of divinity, religious references and historic events, which leave an indelible trace. In the 1980's, Kiefer's architectural scenes deal with buildings used by the Nazi regime. In images such as the Supreme Being's haunting space Kiefer confronts viewers with the horrors which, although not depicted, does not erase their

trace. Kiefer seems to suggest that neither the re-presentation nor the re-working of these events can overcome their terror or imbue us with comprehension of the atrocities. Related to this idea, his image demonstrates Renée van de Vall's (1995:69) observation that, "Silence indicates inevitable gaps in our comprehension...". Kiefer keeps this space silent, yet alludes to the dark and repressed memories in these familiar architectures.

As Terry Eagleton (1990:91) suggests, "the sublime is a kind of anti-aesthetic which presses the imagination to extreme crisis, to the point of failure and breakdown, in order that it may negatively figure forth the Reason that transcends it". Hence, the sublime is pointed to in its negative figuration, which is a progression in iconoclasm from Kiefer's earlier removal of divine likenesses to signify the spiritual. It seems that Kiefer has reached the realisation delineated by Eagleton (1990:73), "Perhaps, then, the subject can figure only negatively, as empty excess or transcendence of any particular. We cannot comprehend the subject, but as with the Kantian sublime we can... comprehend its incomprehensibility, which appears as the negation of all determinacy".

Kiefer's "placements" of the missing presences in abandoned and voided settings draw the unfigurable into our contemporary urbanised consciousness, commenting on the uncertain spirituality that pervades our milieu. Jean-François Lyotard discusses Kant's theory of aesthetics which points to the failure to represent the sublime. This inadequacy causes the displacement of our faculties among themselves which gives rise to "extreme tension" (Lyotard 1993:250). Lyotard (1993:250) succinctly states, "At the edge of the break, infinity... can be revealed in what Kant calls a negative presentation, or even a non-presentation". Through Kiefer's non-presentations it becomes possible to intuitively perceive the "other", the sublime, even though it is impossible to discern its likeness or form. Cynthia Freeland (2004:30) argues that art which passes beyond

certain boundaries “creates a sort of rupture” in response to that which is unseen and which cannot be delineated. By breaching the boundaries of reassuring certitudes, Kiefer’s works ask for reflection on that which remains beyond representation and points to the very expansive rupture between the representation and the signified.

The rupture between the visible and the invisible is more subtle in the video works by Viola alluding to the intangible, which is internalised and indeterminate. His images require contemplative involvement from the viewer to discern the extent of the break between what is represented and what remains beyond representation. In contrast to the iconoclasm of Kiefer, Viola’s works reference the spiritual in a mode which emphasises the body within the format of icons.

2.2 THE SUBLIME BODY

The human body, as portrayed in art, is described by Miglietti (2003:17) in her unconventional analysis of the aestheticised body as precarious, wounded and mortal. Miglietti (2003:17) observes that the “iconography of pain, of the mortal offence, of savagery inflicted on the body, can be found everywhere in the artworks of Western culture over the past eighteen centuries and more. It is art itself... that gives itself a body, a mythical, spiritual, glorious body”. The body has been the canvas for portrayals of sacred wounds and incomprehensible pain and death in religious and sublime genres. For instance, the Romantic artist Goya depicted disturbing images of horror and revulsion.¹² According to Lyotard (1993:249), “The very imperfections, the distortions of taste, even ugliness, have their share in the shock-effect. Art does not imitate nature, it creates a world apart... in which the monstrous and the formless have their rights because they can be sublime”.

Morgan (2004:103) describes the body as the site “where awakening happens. It is the medium of transformation. ... [It is] the place where spiritual domains intersect with the ordinary world of time and space. Myth and ritual are grounded in the body, making it the register of transcendence”. In this sense, the body is also the site for the experience of the other-worldly. Bill Viola returns to the icon format in the following selected works in which he depicts internally wounded figures. In his close-up portraits, more is alluded to than the visible, sharing a similarity with the mediatory function of icons.

2.2.1 Bill Viola: Sacrificial Sorrow

The contemporary video artist Bill Viola frequently deals with themes of sacrifice, suffering and other religious rituals. His work is founded on his research into the mystical literatures of Asia and Europe, particularly the poetry of the Christian mystics St. John of the Cross and Meister Eckhardt (Walsh 2003:31). In his interview with Belting (2003:195), Viola states that through these philosophies he gained “the language to understand what [he] was really seeing”. According to these ancient perspectives, everything in front of us is merely the surface of appearances. Viola asserts that we “need the language of the senses to help decipher these surface distortions and penetrate through to the submerged connections underneath” (Belting 2003:195).

Accordingly, Viola stresses the importance of the body, which “becomes the frame, the dividing line. This corporeal language is essential in order to speak of certain things that can’t be discussed in any other way;... these subjects need to be transmitted through bodily experience, otherwise they would only be descriptions” (Belting 2003:219). For Viola, it is necessary to experience the spiritual in the body otherwise it could only be pointed at through conceptualisations, which is inadequate for metaphysical insight. Rather, spiritual experience is condensed through corporeal mediation.

Morgan (2004:101–103) considers embodiment as central to Viola’s work, whose “art is about the insides of things, about being within, about mediation”. The emphasis on the necessity of the body and of the physical senses for the experience of the spiritual recalls the arguments made by John of Damascus in his defence of icons (see 1.3.1). The difference is that for John the senses were integral to see, which led to the contemplation of the connections the icon pointed to, which were not considered to be submerged but direct. In a group of works entitled *The Passions*, which clearly render the human body, Viola searches out the ranges and expressions of various emotions. From this series, the *Dolorosa Diptych* (2000, Figure 11) and *Man of Sorrows* (2001, Figure 13) are discussed for their particular Christian references.



Figure 11. Bill Viola, Stills from *Dolorosa Diptych* (2000).

The *Dolorosa Diptych* (2000, Figure 11) comprises a folding double panel of video projections of the busts of a woman and a man. The work is based on the icons of the *Mater Dolorosa* and *Christ Crowned with Thorns* (1475–1500, Figure 12) by the workshop of Dieric Bouts. The title refers to

the road on which Christ journeyed up to the site of his crucifixion, Golgotha, which is beyond Jerusalem's boundaries. In contrast, the titles of the icons by Bouts refer specifically to the Mother of Christ observing Christ's ascent on the Via Dolorosa and the "Crowned" Christ. Both of Bouts' portraits are restrained, appearing to have been depicted in the quiet moments before the explosion of their grief. However, Jesus' comparatively serene, although subtly troubled expression in *Christ Crowned with Thorns* (1475–1500, Figure 12) seems incongruent with his impending situation.



Figure 12. Workshop of D. Bouts, *Mater Dolorosa*; *Christ Crowned with Thorns* (1475–1500).

Viola's portraits are similarly restrained by not depicting the climax of emotion. As Freeland (2004:31) points out, although the man "is consumed by tears, his grief is not so much intense as a persistent fact about his condition". Freeland (2004:31) considers their grief as perpetual, stating that, "They are always weeping, always going to weep. ... [We] inevitably experience their emotion as unutterably real and as directed at an unknown something. This mysterious, all-consuming 'something' needs

attention, and... makes this work... qualify as sublime". What strikes Freeland (2004:34) is that the *Dolorosa Diptych* (2000, Figure 11) "manifest[s] 'aboutness', but it remains obscure. This is... the rupture in representation that makes these works sublime. They simultaneously represent something and show that it cannot be represented... ". In this way, Viola renders the uncircumscribable in images which seem to be "about" something, which remains beyond the frame. This recalls the Spanish Baroque painters who attempted to depict the invisible in a visual medium (Belting 2003:219).

The format of the *Dolorosa Diptych* (2000, Figure 11) recalls the small devotional images and the folding altarpieces of the late Middle Ages. In the contemporary work the man and woman are both separated and brought into a relationship as provided and enclosed by the structural framework. They seem to acknowledge each other's presence, through their gestures and the inclinations of their heads, even though they were shot separately and their movements had not been coordinated (Walsh 2003:38). John Walsh (2003:40) observes that the close-up portrait, which isolates the participant from his or her circumstances, has precedence in art history:

Painters of the late fifteenth century removed the main actors from well-known historical scenes of biblical history and treated them as solo actors confronting an audience that knew who they were: Christ carrying the cross... and many others – single figures whose situation and emotional state could be appreciated minus the visual details of their stories.

These devotional images echo icons in their removal of the context, providing only the person's visage for contemplation. However, *Dolorosa Diptych* (2000, Figure 11) does not specifically refer to the personages of Bouts' icons nor does it overtly conform to iconic representations of Mary or Christ. Nothing external marks the contemporary couple as set apart from our daily, mundane realms and there are no overt visual clues of their religious reference. For instance, in *Dolorosa Diptych* (2000, Figure 11) the figures' hands are not shown in the traditional posture of prayer

(belonging to Mary) or of resignation (associated with Christ). The man does not wear a crown of thorns and neither figure is robed in pious or royal attire. Instead, their outfits belong to contemporary Western culture.

The title of Viola's work adds to the ambiguity since it could refer to miscellaneous observers on the Via Dolorosa, whose expressions of anguish are then in response to the suffering of Christ. Another possible interpretation is that these contemporary figures, removed from the original Biblical context, have internally appropriated the reality of the Via Dolorosa. Their emotional passage, endured in their navigation of a personal Via Dolorosa, becomes a metaphor for spiritual transformation through individual suffering. It is the encounter with unveiled expressions of internal pain that consecrates these figures and contributes to the work's spiritual reading.

The video, *Man of Sorrows* (2001, Figure 13) is a work with explicitly Christian associations because of the appropriation as its own of the Messianic title given to Christ in Isaiah 53:3. The work depicts a weeping, ordinary man who bears no visible wounds. The figure displays welling emotions which subside slightly and then intensify again. Belting (2003:200) comments that the first impression of images such as *Man of Sorrows* (2001, Figure 13) is that they are "rooted in the traditions of either Icon or Portrait. ... It is only in religious icons, mostly in the West, that [one] find[s] faces that are distinguished by expressions of suffering and sorrow". In the tradition of icons set up for meditation, the contemporary Man of Sorrows "holds himself up to be contemplated" (Walsh 2003:40).

In this image we sense the ungraspable distress which is at the point of overwhelming the figure. Our expectation to see him succumb to intense sorrow is left building in intensity, exploited by the use of the repetitive playback. The viewer is deprived of closure which would be provided by seeing the man totally overtaken by grief or of being delivered from it. The

work exemplifies the postmodern sublime in which there is no promise of redemption or transcendence, “causing us to feel the pain of incompleteness and unassuaged desire” (Eagleton 1990:89). The figure is caught in this vacillation, manipulated by the endless grief for which no explanation is offered. The contemporary work suggests the relevance of the Biblical Man of Sorrows by the visible grief of our contemporary.

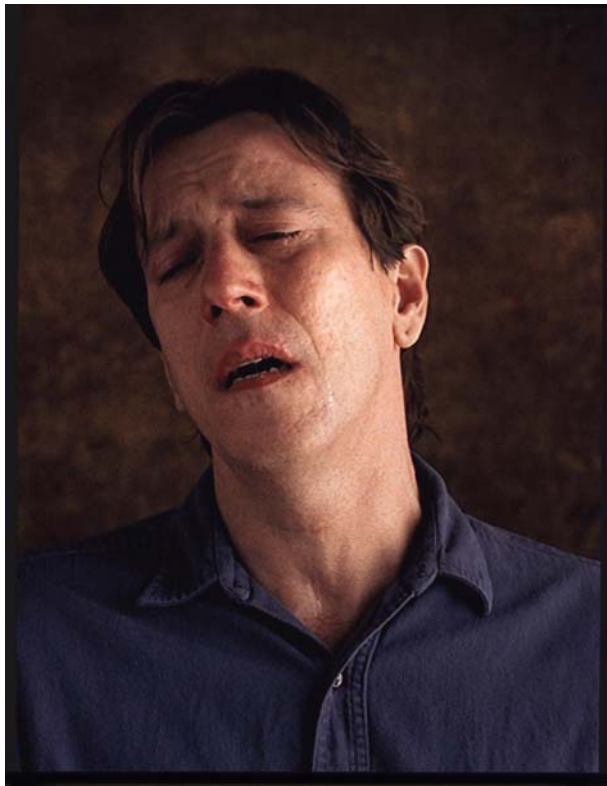


Figure 13. Bill Viola, Still from *Man of Sorrows* (2001).

However, there is another element to the internal sorrow that is witnessed through external expression. Lyotard (1993:251) links privation to the experience of intense anguish:

In pain the body affects the soul. But the soul can also affect the body as though it were experiencing some externally induced pain, by the sole means of representations that are unconsciously associated with painful situations. This entirely spiritual passion, in Burke's lexicon, is called terror. Terrors are linked to privation: privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects,

terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death. What is terrifying is that the *It happens that* does not happen, that it stops happening.

In this work, allusions to these Burkian terrors can be discerned - solitude, death and silence. In *Man of Sorrows* (2001, Figure 13), the technique of continual playback, of the continual experience of pain, seems to be a counter-attempt against the finality of the terror object. In her reading of Lyotard, Van de Vall (1995:71) states that the “sublime is connected with terror, the fear that there will be no more happenings. Lyotard is convinced that art deprives us from this privation as it brings relief”. However, contrary to the notion of art providing relief from the terror, the video formats employed by Viola stress the deprivation of resolutions that would bring relief. Similarly, in Fra Angelico’s *Christ with Crown of Thorns* (1430–35, Figure 14), the expression of intense anguish is portrayed without resolution.

Miglietti (2003:17) describes Fra Angelico’s *Christ with Crown of Thorns* (1430–35, Figure 14) as a “portrait of physical pain that emerges from the red that is so much a feature of this work...”. Besides the crimson blood, the colour also pervades the eyes, lips, parts of the halo and clothing. The impression is that the colour essential to life and death cannot be contained by the mortal body. In Miglietti’s (2003:19) opinion, the paradox of this image lies in the life-giving blood which has abandoned the “corporeal solidity... . [It depicts a] deviation from the relation with the divine, the possibility of a radical otherness: in the... face of the Christ crowned with thorns, [there is] the recognition of an alienation”. In this observation, she emphasises the uncomfortable attribution of a body to divinity. The physical characteristics of this painting mirror the “otherness” of giving the invisible a visible form, of the alienation from divinity by the appropriation of a physical body.

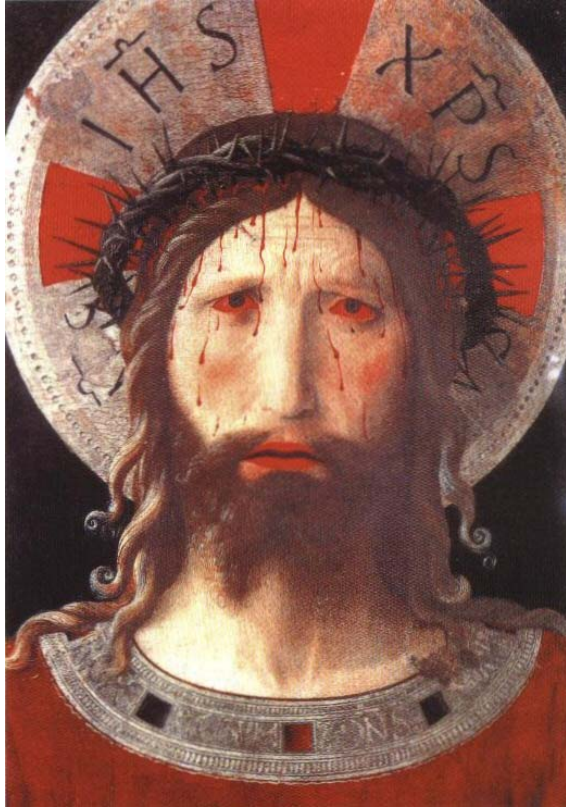


Figure 14. Fra Angelico, *Christ with Crown of Thorns* (1430–35).

Miglietti (2003:17) also states that the image is “a repressed weeping, a moment’s interval that becomes the power of a vision”. The sorrow expressed in this portrait of Christ is restrained and the portrait is devoid of comforting assurance in its depicted fragility. Miglietti alludes to the momentary pause which Fra Angelico portrayed, in a moment caught in the midst of the expression of sorrow. The intersection and passage from one emotion to the next, from a state of mind to the physical manifestation of it, forms the subject matter for both Fra Angelico and Viola in their images of the Man of Sorrows. The work of the premodern artist was constrained by the media available, limiting his depiction of grief to one static moment which he imbues with a lasting image. Viola’s work explores the effects of a changing image, which at first glance appears static, revealing its fluidity only with the concentration of time in contemplating it.

Viola transformed the iconic portraits into moving images, recorded at ultra high speed and played back slowly, resulting in movement which is seamless and almost imperceptible. Viola states that in these works he focuses on “opening up the spaces *between* the emotions”, which is an exploration of “the idea of emotional expression as a continual fluid motion” (Belting 2003:200). The gradual transitions, the ambiguous, seemingly insignificant time slipping from one emotion to another have become just as important as the main emotions. For Freeland, this element of slowed perception contributes to these works’ sublimity.

According to Freeland (2004:42):

Burke... notes that the miniature – vast minuteness – can evoke the sublime. ... [This] observation applies to works like... *Dolorosa*, in a way that Burke perhaps could not have imagined: their slowness. Their extreme slow motion... creates its own fascinatingly minute vastness. We observe more details of the development and expression of emotions in ‘The Passions’ than we ever could in real life.

In this way, Viola’s technique facilitates attention to the finer nuances of emotional expression, which are not ordinarily available to conscious perception. Viewers are enabled to perceive and contemplate the moments repressed or hidden in our Western culture.

This manipulation of contemporary media results in an awareness of the present, of the barely detectable increments of time flowing into one another as the emotions do. The opening up of the spaces between emotions leads to an experience of the sublime described by Lyotard as “the experience of a discontinuity in experience, the experience of a here and now” (Van de Vall 1995:69). According to Van de Vall (1995:69), Lyotard argues that:

[T]he here and now, seemingly the most commonplace of experiences, is in fact the most uncommon. Nothing is as strange to us as the awareness of ‘here’ or ‘now’. ... This ‘now’ is not a moment in time, not one in a series of events. It questions the time-sequence itself, the continuity that links one event to another. It is an awareness that locates itself outside time, space or causality.

By making the viewer aware of the slippages from one emotion to the next emotion, it brings about a realisation of the profundity of the moment, a dislocation of our faculties of orientation and cognition. In Van de Vall's (1995:71) opinion, the sublime is linked to the wonder that anything, rather than nothing, has happened. Ordinarily, the emotions displayed in such infinite detail would not rouse as much attention and their transitions would be considered as insignificant. Instead, Viola brings the actuality of an "it happens" to the spaces between the emotions, a profound awareness of the here and now that is before us.

Morgan (2004:104–105) contends that "Viola's installations bear the conviction that the conditions of traditional religious ritual can be simulated in works of art, in order to achieve something of the spiritual transformation wrought in the original context". Walsh (2003:61) maintains that the achievement of *The Passions* is that the works "touch our inner lives" by bypassing "the rational intellect and [causing] disturbances against which we are normally well defended. Disturbed, we are no longer mere spectators". So Viola involves the viewer and initiates emotional responses which dismantle our emotionally detached conceptualisations of the spirituality alluded to.

Finally, Pattison's (1998:185) commentary on Viola's *The Messenger* (1996)¹³, installed in Durham Cathedral, is relevant to the works discussed. He argues that the limiting of doctrinal content contributed to its Christian appropriation. According to Pattison (1998:185), it is because the work does not "impose a theological narrative, doctrine or interpretation on the viewer, but, engaging the unconscious mind before appealing to conscious reflection, it offers the possibility for religious symbol-making, while leaving open a space for the viewer's own interpretive effort". It is this opening up of interpretive possibilities which has the potential for the revitalisation of Christian imagery. In the work of Viola, this follows the transfer of the viewer from an objective approach to religious images to a

subjective involvement and identification with the depicted spirituality which then facilitates comprehension and appropriation of spiritual truth.

In summary, the aesthetic sublime from the Romantic and postmodern perspectives has been considered in this chapter. A brief outline of the theories of the sublime by Burke and Kant, who respectively emphasised the emotive and rational responses to excess, led to a discussion of the Romantic experience of the vast and overwhelming. Such an experience, they argue, leads to the experience of the sublime, which represents a disruption of harmony between the mind and our intuitive experience. The Romantic artist aimed at representing that which is beyond comprehension in visually comprehensible media. The artwork became the text and, similar to the individual meditation of the premodern icon which was considered to offer spiritual communion with the saints depicted, became the means of intuitive revelation and transcendence. The difference between the premodern and the Romantic artworks lies in the subject of veneration in which the Christian deities of icons were replaced by sublime Nature as the embodiment of the divine.

The postmodern sublime which removes any possibility of transcendence, and focuses on the loss of the object of spirituality and our experience of it, provides a contrast to the pre-modern and Romantic view. Paul Hamilton considers the difference to lie in our interpretation of the ungraspable characteristic of the sublime. Hamilton (1999:13) states that the “Romantic trope of sublimity recasts failures of understanding as the successful symbolic expression of something greater than understanding; Postmodernism re-reads this success as indicating only the indeterminacy of meaning”. The loss of intuitive spirituality is seen in Kiefer’s *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (1973, Figure 7), in which the Romantic pantheism is cut off and transcendence is inhibited by the man-made room. In *To the Supreme Being* (1983, Figure 10) Kiefer offers no mediation to the spiritual entity but instead brings the divine absence into stark focus. In this sense his work

differs from icons which, by virtue of being a representation and through that pointing to the immediate absence of the deity, became the mediatory access to the absent being. Icons were indicators of absence but also the path to the missing being. Kiefer's images, on the other hand, depict the absence and offer no solution for spiritual union.

However, Kiefer's employment of the symbolic devices in *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* (1973, Figure 8), such as the chairs, flames and light allows for a freer understanding of the Trinity than when they are depicted in the finite representations of premodern representations. This liberates our interpretive and associative processes from didactic, foreclosed meanings. The removal of the recognisable visage has the potential to metaphorically make a space for that which cannot be seen or grasped. In this context, Kiefer's circumspect selection of religious symbolism allows for an apprehension of the sublime which would otherwise be inaccessible in representations that limit the appearance of the "other". Kiefer alludes to a relevant and contemporary spirituality, removing our complacent attitudes towards the mythical, archaic and spiritual. In this way, he facilitates a re-thinking of our accepted traditions and concepts.

The postmodern appropriation of the iconic formats to explore contemporary spirituality was investigated in the work of Viola. The postmodern sublime is embodied in depictions of unresolved emotional distress of his subjects in *Dolorosa Diptych* (2000, Figure 11) and *Man of Sorrows* (2001, Figure 13). His slowly unfolding video works shift us from our uncritical, comfortable position when facing public displays of emotion. The intense feelings displayed in his works are not exhilarating, in contrast to the Romantic thrilling experiences. The figures belong to our realm rather than to the transcendent and invite empathy with their unexplained grief. His images recall the traditional devotional images in their allusions to religious sorrow, yet they deprive us of closure. This compounds our unfulfilled desires to see the "end of the story", in contrast to premodern

images of similar themes, in which the conclusion is known and assumed. Viola also focuses on opening up the ambiguous, seemingly insignificant moments between emotions and their expression. This places emphasis on the ordinarily unperceived and brings the ungraspable transitions to our consciousness. In this way, he gives the intangible transformations physical form, which is the expressive experience of the sublime. Viola involves the viewer and forces a patient appreciation of the nuances displayed by the figures alluding to religious persons. This altered state of mind therefore has the capacity to absorb spiritual truth and to discover and appropriate embedded meaning in the images.

In conclusion, it can be seen in the works of these two artists that the transformation of our attitudes and personal involvement with images enable personal appropriation of the ineffable realities conveyed. This aspect of the sublime has the potential to contribute to the revitalisation of Christian imagery.

Endnotes: Chapter 2

1. See Boileau (1712) and Longinus (1899).
2. "Nature" was seen as the realm of the natural order (also referred to as "the Understanding"), whilst "Reason" was seen as the realm of the moral order. According to Bernard Bosanquet (1934:256), Kant focused on "the conception of compatibility between the natural and the moral order", which were seen as two different worlds. When referring to the Kantian conceptions of the terms, "Nature", "Understanding", "Reason" and "Freedom" appear in capitals in Bosanquet's text and in this dissertation.
3. Quoted from Kant (1973:91).
4. Kant formulated several categories of the sublime, including the mathematical and the dynamic sublime. However, the discussion of these forms is outside the scope of this dissertation. For a summary, see Freeland (2004:37–38), while Crowther's *The Kantian Sublime* (1989b) contains a comprehensive exposition and application of Kant's aesthetics.
5. Please note: The chapter Elkins discusses is in Hertz (1985:217–239); 10: Afterword: the end of the line. In no instance in this chapter or the preceding chapters was I able to locate Hertz' mention of neither the "postmodern sublime", the "end of thought", nor direct allusions to it. Hertz (1985:217) analyses the sublime and the tensions surrounding difficulties of perception in the "minimal difference between black and black" in the painting by Gustave Courbet, *La Grotte de la Loue* (c.1865). Oil on canvas, 98.4 x 130.4 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington. Gift of CL Lindemann, 1957. (Illustration and data: Hertz 1985:216; physical data available at

http://www.ibiblio.org/nga/landscape_booklet.html, accessed on 2007-11-27.) Hertz (1985:219) furthermore describes the disorienting effect of texts and images in which:

[One is drawn to]... an engagement with the act and with the medium of painting or writing condensed almost to the point of nonreflective opacity. That expression may be taken quite literally to describe the center of Courbet's canvas; figuratively it can serve to indicate whatever resists the reader at equivalent moments in written texts – difficulties of syntax or of figuration, apparent irrelevancies of association, any verbal play that shadows the referential appeal of the work – whatever keeps reading from being reducible to seeing.

For Hertz (1985:219–220), it is the opacity in sublime literature and artworks which characterise what he calls “the end of the line”, in which the author and/or viewer would attempt to psychologically position themselves, whether in the “space” of black opacity or in the place of the figure / character, leading to disorientation.

6. See Acts 2:3–4 for the anointing and filling by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and Exodus 13:21–22 for God's guidance of the Israelites by a pillar of fire at night.
7. See Exodus 3:2–4 for the Biblical record of Moses' encounter with the Burning Bush from which God spoke to him.
8. The representation of light is in itself an allusion to Scriptural metaphors for God and spirituality. For the metaphor of light as spiritual illumination, see II Corinthians 4:6; for light as the essence of God and his glory, see Revelations 22:5; and see John 8:12 for Jesus' second “I AM” statement of him being the light of the world. These doctrines are based on John 1:14 and Genesis 1:26 respectively.
9. See Luke 3:22 for the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove alighting on Jesus and the Father's commendation of him.
11. Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper* (1495–97). Oil and tempera on masonry, 422 x 904 cm. Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan. (Illustration and data: Buchholz 2000:45).
12. See Goya's *Disasters of War* series of etchings (1810–1820). (Selected illustrations and discussions available in Hagen 2003:55–63.) See also paintings such as *Saturn* (1820–1823). Oil on canvas, 146 x 83 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid. (Illustration: Hagen 2003:77; data: Hagen 2003:76.)
13. Bill Viola, *The Messenger* (1996). Video / sound installation (Durham Cathedral), 762 x 914.4 x 975.4 cm. Edition 1: The Chaplaincy to the arts and recreation in North East England. (Illustration: Rush 1999:141, fig 158, 159; data: Rush 1999:221, dimension data: http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_160B_1.html, accessed on 2007-11-27.)

Chapter 3: Deconstruction and the Logos

Deconstruction has influenced Western philosophy for more than two decades. Its theories have reached into spheres involving language, communication and the humanities, amongst others. Deconstruction theory is aimed at a critical reading of texts from the Western metaphysical tradition. The concepts of mimesis, ultimate meaning and authority, as well as transcendence, are questioned with cynicism and incredulity by deconstruction theorists. Because a critical distance from the topic is a necessary condition for any criticism to be objective, a schism exists between deconstruction and its focal areas of critique, including Classical philosophy, Christianity and traditional theories of the sublime.

The methodology of deconstructionist thinking, although deeply critical of Christianity, can also be set to the task of revitalising Christian art by using its very tenets. This can be done from a post-structural revisionist position which sees old texts as objects for re-reading. The resulting effort of re-situating such texts into contemporary dialogue has the potential of imparting current value to the old religious symbols and imagery. A comprehensive exposition of deconstruction's complexities lies beyond the scope of this dissertation. This discussion is limited to selected aspects applicable to contemporary visualisations of religious subjects. The focus in this chapter is on elements of deconstruction and its reformulation of signification. The new signification is then applied to postmodern art referencing religious themes. This theoretical context informs the discussion of David Small's interactive text work, the complexity of signification in Wim Botha's re-imagining of the crucifixion, followed by a discussion of Alex Trapani's metaphors for spirituality and Christ's Passion.

Post-structural signification theories, which were partly founded on Barthes' (1977:148) hypothesis of the "death of the Author", contrast to prior theories in terms of the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The theologian Louis Dupré (2000:1), writing from a religious Orthodox perspective, considers there to be a "rigidly univocal relation between sign and signified" since signs "*point* to the signified". In this context the relationship between the signifier and the signified is characterised as being predetermined and unambiguous. In contrast to his conception of the sign's functions, Dupré (2000:1) contends that symbols "carry meaning in themselves... which allows them to *articulate* the signified, rather than merely announcing it. ... Instead they *represent* it in the double sense of *making present* and *taking the place of*".

This latter formulation of signification relates to the function of icons, which, it was argued, were venerable as the prototype was venerable. The iconic conception of the sign amounts to an early precursor of the interchangeability of signifier and signified. In Dupré's definitions, symbols are therefore more independent than signs in their mediation of the signified. In contrast, the Structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure (Culler 1981:24) asserts that "all signs are arbitrary, involving a purely conventional association of conventionally delimited signifiers and signifieds". The signifier does not automatically point to the signified on the assumption of a unique and "natural" association but is linked by known rules alone. Saussure's formulation of the signifying association is unbound. In this way Saussure laid the groundwork for post-structural signification.

3.1 THE WORD "DECONSTRUCTION"

The French philosopher Derrida, recognised author of deconstruction, dismantles Western philosophy's assumption of "presence" which suggests that there is a definite, external truth reality to which

philosophical systems can correspond. This concept is founded on the principle of logocentrism, which prioritises the “Logos, the Word, the Divine Mind, the *self-presence of full self-consciousness*” (Sarup 1993:36). Derrida uses the term “logocentric” as a description of Western metaphysics because it has depended on a *logos* for its systems of thought. The presupposition of the existence of an essence or truth foundation is untenable for the deconstructionists.

Derrida maintains that the desire for a definite foundation or centre creates binary oppositions which are problematic when one term is elevated according to logocentric presuppositions. In the dualities or binary oppositions, including matter/spirit, body/soul and text/meaning, the first, “superior” term belongs to the *logos*, while the second, “inferior” term “serves to define [the superior term’s] status and mark a fall” (Sarup 1993:38). The risk in such exclusive categorisations is the denial of the possibility or existence of categories beyond the binary oppositions. For Derrida, dismantling the hierarchies alone is not sufficient. The order of preferences needs to be reversed and displaced. In Madan Sarup’s (1993:50–51) reading of Derrida, a deconstructive reading of the pairs uncovers the predominant term’s dependence on the exclusion of the subordinate term for its identity, which in turn proves the primacy and necessity of the inferior term.

Related to the hierarchies critiqued in binary oppositions, Derrida similarly turns to a deconstructive analysis of the logocentric priority given to speech. Griffiths (1989:95) observes that Derrida critiques the duality of the “‘within-without’, or *word-as against-writing*” as fore-grounded by structuralists and philosophers of the Western metaphysical tradition. He suggests that this former attitude “concealed a light-dark opposition with strong religious overtones”. Consider Derrida’s (1998:35) conviction that “writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to

speech, and to the logos.” Griffiths (1989:95–96) analyses this in religious terms, “One side of the opposition was pure spirit; but the outer form was sinful and contaminated. Western tradition has long conceived truth as what is signified – *content* – apart from how it is signified – *form*”. As discussed in chapter one, speech was given priority in Classical philosophy as being closer to the *Logos* while writing was considered to be an impure, lesser form of expression.

Derrida theorises that the instability of language in a post-structuralist paradigm commences with the rupture of the direct relationship between signifier and signified (Sarup 1993:33). He maintains that when reading a sign its meaning is not immediately clear or apparent and therefore the sign is a “structure of difference” (Sarup 1993:33). Signs refer to something absent while not being the object signified. As such, they still need to “be studied ‘under erasure’, always already inhabited by the trace of another sign which never appears as such” (Sarup 1993:34). Sarup (1993:34) notes that the sign contains the trace of the signs it excluded in order to be there, and therefore cannot fully contain any presence. The post-structural formulation of signification positions signifiers and signifieds in a multiplicitous web of relationships which cannot be predicted or defined.

The inevitable result of Derrida’s theory of signification is that there is an infinite play of changing configurations and reconfigurations of the attachments between signifiers and signifieds. Sarup (1993:33) states it succinctly, “Signifiers and signified are continually breaking apart and reattaching in new combinations”. This perpetually reconfigured signification process is linked to the deconstructionists’ abolition of the eternal ground of meaning. Derrida (1997:116) contends that, “The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*”. It is impossible to arrive at a signified which is not yet another signifier, so removing the distinction between the

two elements of the sign. Meaning is embedded in the networks operating between signifiers in relationship to the uncircumscribable network of other concepts and meanings which are implicit, but not present. This play of signifiers is the basis of Derrida's concept, *différance*, which simultaneously refers to the deferment or postponement of arriving at present realities and to the differences between meanings.¹

Sarup (1993:52) notes that "texts can refer only to other texts, generating an intersecting and indefinitely expandable web called *intertextuality*". Just as meaning cannot be fixed within the chain of signifiers, interpretations of texts cannot claim to be authoritative within the accompanying proliferation of texts. Burgin (1986:50–51) defines his conception of intertextuality:

*Text, as conceived of by Barthes... is seen not as an 'object' but rather as a 'space' between the object and the reader/viewer – a space made up of endlessly proliferating meanings which have no stable point of origin, nor of closure. In the concept of 'text' the boundaries which enclosed the 'work' are dissolved; the text opens continually into other texts, the space of *intertextuality*.*

Post-structuralism and by extension, deconstruction, deny the possibility of a unified, authoritative interpretation of any signifier or text. As Barthes (1977:146) argues, the text does not release "a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash". Text, and image as text, is simply a "tissue of signs" (Barthes 1977:147) drawn from innumerable sources.

Griffiths (1989:96) remarks on a positive outcome of this new understanding of signification, stating that "a text may be liberated from slavery to an inevitable significance. Now it is free to offer a new reality, to be creative. Text or artwork can create the new". Degenaar (1986:109–110) similarly emphasises the positive contributions of deconstruction:

[T]he meaning of life consists in the continual creation of meaning. Meaning is created by way of playing with signs. The role of deconstruction is to protect man from the death of dogmatism and premature totalisation in which signs are assumed to escape the

interminable play of differences. Meaning of life is found in the process of involving ourselves in the interminable play of differences without a privileged position which transcends human limitations.

The emergence of the creative potential of metaphor in current discourse is related to the liberation of the sign. The theologian Craig Koester (1995:6) defines his use of metaphor by stating that to “speak metaphorically is to speak of one thing in terms appropriate to another”. Language functions by transferring one kind of reality to another, similar to the mechanism inherent in metaphorical figuration, making metaphor an indispensable condition for language and the production of meaning. Degenaar (1987:5) considers that:

Since language is also used metaphorically this entails that everything in the human world is a text, a fabric or interweaving of differences. And of the texts that constitute our human world it can be said that ‘nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present [or] absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of differences.’²

Similar to the creative possibilities of liberated text, Sarup (1993:50) makes the point that “metaphors can be productive of new insights and fresh illuminations. They can promote unexpected or subtle parallels or analogies. Metaphors can encapsulate and put forward proposals for another way of looking at things. Through metaphor we can have an increased awareness of alternative possible worlds”. So, freer signification leads to new realities and creative possibilities, while metaphor contributes new understanding and alternative possibilities to the reader and viewer.

I now briefly apply selected aspects of post-structural signification to a parodic understanding of the sign in modernism before turning to the works of the contemporary artists, Small, Botha and Trapani. The post-structural play of signification is evident in Pop artist Warhol’s absolutisation of the sign. Taylor (1992:179) states that, “More explicitly than any of his predecessors, [Warhol] insisted that the sign is always the sign of a sign. ... Paradoxically, this proliferation of signs and images is iconoclastic”. The proliferation of signs in new media no longer accorded

the image its originary value of being unique, but saw all images and their reproductions, their proliferation, as “original”. This demoted the long-held worth of the artwork to being one of many signs in the field of signifiers. In Taylor’s (1992:179) opinion, Warhol’s modern iconoclasm did not consist of destroying images or of removing their visages as in the case of Kiefer, “but of manufacturing images, a profusion of images *in which there is nothing to see*. These are, literally, images that leave no trace. ... But, behind each of the images, something has disappeared”.³ Kearney (1988:5–6) argues a similar point in his assessment of parodic art:

[Postmodern culture] exclaims the omnipresence of self-destructing images which simulate each other in a limitless interplay of mirrors.

Mimesis has returned, it seems; but with a vengeance. No more is it a question of images representing some transcendent reality, as tradition had it. The very notion of such a reality is now unmasked as an illusionistic effect.

In this view, postmodern art has become self-reflexive since an eternal signified is no longer a reality. Kearney (1988:4) argues that the “advent of the technological image signalled a momentous shift from an age of production to one of reproduction”. One of the consequences of this shift is that the “individual subject is no longer considered the maker or communicator of his own images. ... The image which *is* has *already been*” (Kearney 1988:4). The artist now is “someone who plays around with fragments of meaning he himself has not created” (Kearney 1988:13). As an example of this definition of the contemporary artist, I now turn to a brief consideration of David Small’s digital interactive piece which represents a reconfiguration of holy texts by employing a positive application of post-structural signification.

3.1.1 David Small: Deconstructing Scripture

Crowther (1995:9) argues that the “deconstructive impulse” is part of a broad transformation connected with social and technological change. According to Crowther (1995:9):

[T]he everyday surface of life is dematerialised. That which once was simply present to consciousness, is, in the context of information deriving from new technologies, now seen to be a function of more complex relations. The material world is, as it were, a projection from this domain of 'immaterials'. Its meaning is no longer perceived; rather it has to be *deciphered* in relation to the broader network of relation which subtends it.

The nature of current technologies has influenced our conception of the physical world, of that of which we were simply aware, so that it is now understood to function within a complex network of relationships. The new, intangible reality of the digital age has forged multiple connections which are not open to being perceived, but have to be decoded within embedded relationships to be understood. This concept of deciphering and interpreting a work within a broader network of relations and meanings is demonstrated in David Small's *Talmud Project* (1999, Figure 15).

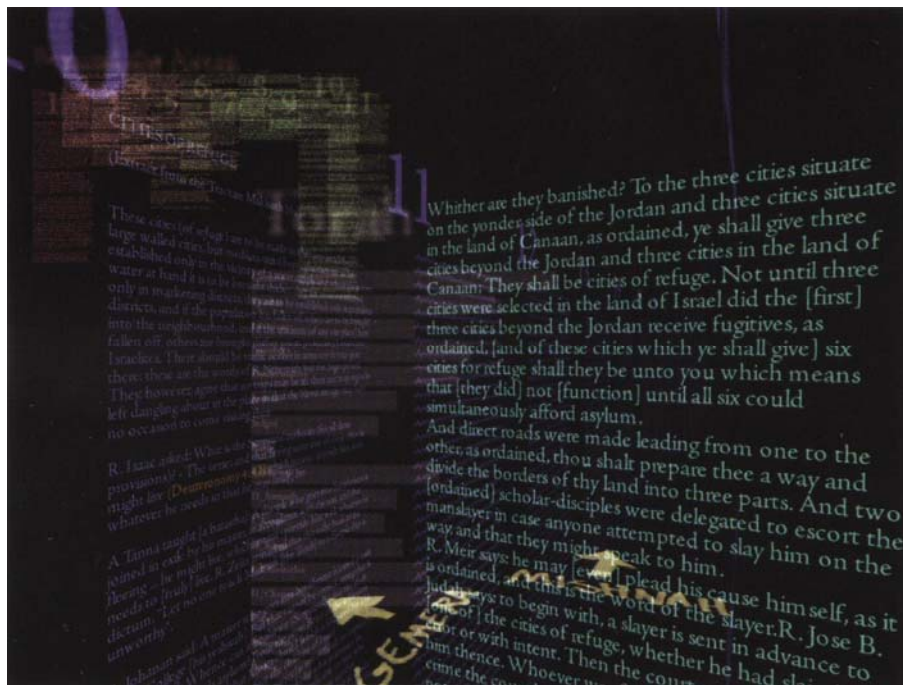


Figure 15. David Small, *Talmud Project* (1999).

In this work the various layers of text are presented in a virtual three dimensional setting in a way which conveys the approach necessary when encountering the Talmud, the Jewish Scriptures. The layers of text are

constituted of Scriptural extracts, commentaries on the Talmud and rabbinical expositions. As the viewer chooses to read or focus on one layer of text, the other layers fade and blur, although still remaining visible in the frame of the current layer, and form the context in which the text is to be encountered and comprehended. The approach taken by Small to these ancient and sacred texts recalls Homi Bhabha's (1996:12) description of interpretation:

Interpretations are not merely second-order readings that belatedly elaborate some pure essence or expression that the work emanates *ab novo*... . Interpretation, quite literally, turns the work inside out: it enunciates, even exacerbates, the multiple fields of visibility and surfaces of signification that are articulated in the work.

In *Talmud Project* (1999, Figure 15) Small has exposed the fundamental cognitive apparatus and dynamics involved in encountering the Jewish texts. He makes the methodology of approaching them accessible and comprehensible. He accomplishes this by aestheticising the text, the words and their overall appearance, transforming the text into an image. Small has rejuvenated the ancient Jewish texts into a visual format that is contemporary and relevant to viewers who are involved with the process of selecting and “playing” with the texts. His reconfiguration draws viewers into a reinterpretation of the methods used to understand these texts and so facilitates insight into the content.

By exploiting the technical possibilities inherent in the interactive digital media Small has generated a fresh re-reading of the ancient Scriptures. His approach echoes Degenaar's insistence on the need for re-writing following the closure when the creative process of writing has ceased. This re-writing “entails a new interpretation of the signs – one which looks critically at the assumptions of previous interpretations...” (Degenaar 1987:14). Small has critically re-evaluated and re-interpreted the signs and texts embedded in the archaic Scriptures, leading to their re-positioning in relationship to each other and to contemporary discourse. In this work Small offers new configurations for comprehension in the multiple

relationships between texts. His position affirms the value of the Hebraic Scriptures. This is done through the use of post-structural, complex signification within broader networks of relationships.

The deconstructive emphasis on multiplicity of meanings is also evident in the work of Wim Botha, whose approach to the Scriptures is iconoclastic. His treatment of The Word gives it aesthetic form in contrast to the Byzantine and Reformation iconoclasts who sought to destroy its visualisations. The discussion of his work is set against a precedent of the body as the ground of writing as understood by Miglietti.

3.2 DECONSTRUCTION AND THE RELIGIOUS BODY

Miglietti (2003:20) describes the Actionists of the 1960s as artists who substituted the “body itself for written pages”. Miglietti (2003:20) states that bodies were considered to be sites of being, where:

[E]xistence becomes a form of expression... that is inscribed in the body, through the cruel and necessary signs that transform it into a manifesto in which the obligatory and catatonic docility to which the body has been abandoned is opposed by the evidence of a body exhibited to society, witting and scandalous... .

Although working in the period shortly before deconstruction, the Actionists display certain affinities with deconstructive methods and ways of thinking. The Western emphasis on rationality suppressed the body as an important component of life and reality. This argument was correlative with the priority given to abstract speech over the written word. The suppressed body corresponds to writing, which in the Actionists' cause was to liberate the body from restraints imposed by Western society. Deconstruction similarly critiqued the norms of thought of Western religious and philosophical thinkers to liberate philosophy from its logocentrism.

The Actionists sought to remove people from their complacent attitudes and uncritical acceptance of societal control. They did this by touching on and exacerbating the vulnerable associations of the audience. The effect

of the bodily confrontation on the audience is described by Antonin Artaud as a “virtual revolt” which operates “on the spiritual level and provokes disturbances” (Miglietti 2003:20).⁴ The Actionists demonstrate similarities to religious self-sacrifice, although their goal was not sanctification or redemption in the religious sense. However, incidences of overlap with Christ’s sacrifice are notable. First, Christ was the fulfilment of the written Law and prophetically cruel and necessary signs were inflicted on his body. These signs were scandalously exhibited as evidence. His body was subjected to external violence, which was a process of systematic dehumanisation of his physical body, and the revolt that ensued was deeply spiritual. Lastly, the crucifixion itself is the manifesto of redemption, just as The Word is the manifesto pointing to Christ. Wim Botha addresses a few of these issues in his crucifixion work.

3.2.1 Wim Botha: Deconstructing Disbelief

Liese van der Watt (2005:5) characterises Botha’s work as a postmodern “hostility towards grand narratives” which is concerned with “power and the crude binaries that it spawns: good / evil... sacred / profane, sanctioned / rejected... purity / taboo, canon / exclusion”. Although Botha’s work addresses Christian personalities and artworks of previous eras, it is not the particularly religious element in the icons that he is drawn to. His focus is on the original works for their pervasive and universal visual occurrence, stating that icons “appear everywhere, and are an easily understood, already digested part of life” (Stevenson 2005:64). Botha’s fascination with these images is that they “have become their own archetypes... . In subverting or altering these you toy with centuries of accumulated meaning... ” (Stevenson 2005:66). He is not simply reinterpreting familiar icons, but finds his subject matter in altering their conventional meaning.

Botha explores the human need for religious iconography and the solace it provides. He poignantly comments on this need by using materials that people need to survive in the South African context, such as those for his

sculpture *Mieliepap Pietá* (2004)⁵ (Erasmus 2002:6). For Botha, the medium and the content of his works reinforce each other or, in some instances, contradict each other. The material “has potent possibilities as signifier, as carrier and refractor. And because it comprises the actual substance of the work, it can become self-referential as well” (Erasmus 2002:6). In *Commune: Suspension of Disbelief* (2001, Figure 16) the material is central to the commentary he delivers, being the medium for traditionally sacred text. Simultaneously, the sculpture subverts the permanent material of the original sculpture, on which this work is based, by translating the preciousness of the ivory into impermanent, yet highly valued, paper.⁶



Figure 16. Wim Botha, *Commune: Suspension of Disbelief* (2001).

Botha’s 2,4 metre tall crucifixion sculpture, *Commune: Suspension of Disbelief* (2001, Figure 16), presented at the 2001 Klein Karoo Nationale

Kunstefees (KKNK), formed part of an installation including a closed circuit television (CCTV) system. The work is carved from Bibles in the eleven official languages of South Africa which were sponsored by the Bible Society (Ntshingila 2003:6). In contrast to the Society's perception of the artwork to be religious, Botha does not consider it to be an object of faith but views it as "an experiment of 'assimilation'" (Ntshingila 2003:6). The embodiment of abstract religion into written text is now made inaccessible for assimilation since it cannot be read in its new physical form. The abstract religious dogma has gained concrete form beyond its traditional, transcribed format. This recalls Donald Kuspit's (1990:58) argument that "deconstructive modes of representation... get their revolutionary power by playing upon the ambiguity of the difference between abstract presentation and concrete representation".

In this work the medium of sacred paper delivers a commentary on religious dogmas which impose order through the transformation of abstract belief into written text. The issue of societal control is one of Botha's preferred targets of critique, while his employment of art in this context can be argued to be an avant-garde exercise. Morgan (1996:35) compares religion and avant-garde art "on the basis of their social purpose as forms of critical reflection, on the one hand, and as an authorization of prevailing forms of power, on the other". Ironically, Botha's medium for delivering criticism of power structures reinforces its authority. According to this reading, in *Commune: Suspension of Disbelief* (2001, Figure 16) his critique on the religious mechanisms of institutionalisation of faith through its inscription into text inadvertently affirms its prevailing authority.

Van der Watt (2005:6) makes the observation that the title alerts us to the fact that there is more to the work than visual punning in that it "wryly invokes the realm of power and politics". The suspension of disbelief refers to the cognitive process by which we repress our rational questioning of that which we find irrational to wholly engage with the seemingly illogical

propositions. For this reason, Van der Watt (2005:6) considers the work to be iconoclastic and “as an act of cultural insurrection which exposes the power of a belief system to entrap”. Deconstructive reflexivity is evident in Botha’s use of an icon to deliver iconoclastic commentary.

Reflexivity is further noted by Hazel Friedman (2005:47), who considers the presence of the CCTV system to re-capture “the Christ-form, point[ing] to the appropriation of abstract concepts into the Word (scripture), which are then given visual, modified representation and imbued with simulated reality that often supersedes actual lived, breathed knowledge of the ‘real’”. This recalls Gilmour’s (1990:37) comment on Kiefer’s iconoclasm in *To the Supreme Being* (1983, Figure 10) which compels us to reconsider our concept of the “real” now perceived to be caught in our nets of discourse. Dorothea Olkowski-Laetz (1990:112) discusses this form of simulation in terms of Baudrillard’s definition of simulacrum:

In its current incarnation... the *simulacrum* precedes reality. The signifier has completely detached itself from the signified, from the ‘natural,’ from the representational structure, breaking apart both subject and object. Signs no longer refer to either a subjective or an objective reality, but to themselves, because there is no reality left to represent, and because what we accept as reality is already a massive simulation, ‘a fabrication of effects,’ ‘an artificial world without meaning’.⁷

In this reading, Botha’s substitution of reality by simulation in a real, tangible way poses the question of whether we respond more to the simulation contained in the sculpture than to the reality pointed to in the Scriptures.

Van der Watt (2005:6) offers an alternative reading of the inclusion of the CCTV system:

[The title] exposes the power of religion to convince its followers to willingly accept irrationalities in the name of faith, while the CCTV cameras position all of this as spectacle and make it part of popular culture. Suggestive of yet another transmission of violence and victimhood that we hungrily consume, it implicates us all in this suffering.

The CCTV system introduces the element of exhibitionism which suggests eager absorption and appropriation of the violence, thereby making us complicit with this sacrifice. The monitors display the viewer/collaborator who becomes integral in the procedure of “assimilation of the sacrosanct” (KKNK Exh. Cat. 2001:47). Burgin’s observation that viewers are integrally involved in the generation of meaning of an artwork is particularly relevant. Burgin (1986:51) states that the “particular trajectories launched through the ever-shifting intertextual fields skip, stepping-stone fashion, and ‘dissolve’, along the traces of the spectators’... histories”. The concept of image capturing and playback fits into deconstructive reflexivity, adding increasing layers of meaning and points to the impossibility of locating exact meaning, which is the ongoing, shifting process of the assimilation of “The Word” by the viewer-collaborator of this artwork.

The strategic exposure of the red edges of the Bibles’ pages represents the wounds inflicted during Christ’s Passion. Friedman (2005:47) states that these stigmata “resurrect controversial debates around mortality, redemption and sacrifice”. These issues are controversial, rather than clear-cut and resolved, in an increasingly secular society for whom these concepts are not as relevant or “real” as they were for premodern Christianised cultures. Botha neither affirms nor rejects these issues of faith but presents an immanent and tangible sculpture which deals with the abstract faith subjects. The real-ness of the artwork suggests the necessity of re-evaluating the issues of Christ’s mortality and the redemption linked to his sacrifice. Botha asserts that, “As a result of the indigenous nature of its substance, the universality of the crucifix as an iconographical symbol is challenged, or by implication affirmed, by directly appropriating it into the South African context” (Smith 2001). In this sense, the work is a tribute to the image’s contemporary relevance by its re-inscription and re-presentation.

The contemporaneity of Botha's sculpture can be more fully appreciated when compared to a premodern image which deals with the deceased Christ. Andrea Mantegna's unorthodox *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1465, Figure 17) is objectively clinical and detached. Miglietti (2003:65) describes the scene as "excessively clean" and controlled, from the spotless cloth, the tidy wounds in the hands and feet, to the clean body and hair of Christ. The artist has intervened in the vision he presents to us by choosing not to portray the bloodied body of the Saviour, but the systematically, aesthetically cleaned corpse, artistically purified of blood.



Figure 17. Andrea Mantegna, *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1465).

The entombment scene suggests a clinical anatomical awareness or an operating table (Miglietti 2003:65). Miglietti (2003:65) considers that in this painting Mantegna "opts for a perspectival delirium, an all-involving... closeness to the lifeless body...". The impression of the image is that it is an experiment in fore-shortened perspective which portrays an unfamiliar view of the dead body of Christ. According to Miglietti, this disturbs our

perceptual balance when confronting the image, into a perceptual “collapse” towards the lifeless form. By placing us at the feet of the dead Christ, the artist makes us “witnesses and accomplices of the most famous death sentence in Western history” (Miglietti 2003:65). The onlookers placed in the left top corner express restrained grief, maintaining a slight but significant distance between themselves and the corpse.⁸

The rendition of observers in Mantegna’s work is in contrast to Botha’s capturing of viewers by means of the CCTV system. Whereas the onlookers in *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1465, Figure 17) express sorrow, viewers of *Commune: Suspension of Disbelief* (2001, Figure 16) respond with curiosity, admiration or reservation. Botha’s device of capture and playback draws the onlooker into the environment surrounding the crucifixion sculpture in comparison to Mantegna’s image which, because of the strange perspective, puts us on the perceptual defensive. By this means, Botha succeeds in moving the contemporary viewer from a purely objective, conceptually guarded approach to becoming integral to the event. We are therefore implicitly involved in the unfolding of the work’s meaning, which constantly shifts and changes.

Botha’s use of traditional Christian symbolism either delivers commentary, critique or invites reflection on issues of spirituality. His work functions as a metaphorical intermediary, between the original, pious work and its translation into a local, accessible material. Through his reconfiguration of the original work into the Scriptural medium, which implicitly points to Christ, Botha challenges our conceptions of Christ and religion, contributing to a reconfigured perspective. As Václav Havel (1995:233) contends, “New meaning is gradually born from the encounter, or the intersection, of many different elements”. The inherent multiplicity of signification and the perpetual generation of signifying, intertextual structures within Botha’s crucifixion installation encompass the deconstructive, post-structural attribution of reflexive and indefinable

meaning. My interest in Botha's work involves his re-interpretation and re-inscription of ancient Christian imagery into a contemporary image. In this way, he re-situates the ancient imagery in contemporary dialogue. This act has the potential of rejuvenating the archaic religious symbolism.

Alex Trapani's works which are discussed next deal with the deconstructive open-endedness of contemporary signification. He re-presents archaic symbolic associations by generating contemporary metaphors for personalised expressions of faith.

3.2.2 Alex Trapani: The Body Deconstructed

Trapani's works hover between revealing and concealing the faith that gives rise to his images. He conceptually works with binary opposites which inform his work, including; "Purified – Stained... Forgiven – Forsaken... Preserve – Sacrifice. Free – Bound... Integrity – Hypocrisy... Justified – Condemned... Perfection – Defiled..." (Erasmus 2002:22). However, these binaries are not necessarily conventional opposites but are metaphoric binaries which correspond to his conceptualisations of contrasting qualities according to his faith. For instance, the conventional converse of "perfection" would be "imperfection". Trapani's choice of "defiled" as the contrary to "perfection" is an interpretation of what imperfection would entail in religious terms, of that which could cause imperfection, and is also a more open-ended metaphor. Trapani's methods bear resemblances to structuralism which, according to Degenaar (1986:62), "claims that mythopoeic thinking produces a catharsis of clarification since the human mind succeeds in mediating contradictions in experience on the level of imagination". In his explorations of the binaries Trapani arrives at a point that is closer to neither of the poles but at an undetermined position, mediated from the contradictions in the binaries and which contributes towards metaphoric creation of meaning.

Indeterminate-ness is an important factor in the works selected. The images formed part of his exhibition *Co/Con: Prefix to Perfection*⁹, in which Trapani deals with themes centring on hypocrisy, potential and truth.

Trapani (2005) makes the following statement in the press release:

A prefix may suggest that there is **potential**, the potential of things to come, something that holds positive or negative results. As history has [been] told, truth is revealed, or found in varying quantities at a particular time. Truth also transforms and evolves into something other than what it was originally, something more potent, as we rethink it and re-examine its properties. The rethinking or re-examining is a natural human phenomenon that [seems] to drive us to the places of progress and the reinvention of our existence and how we live it out.

Trapani is concerned with exploring the nature of truth, proposing that truth may be deceptive, only revealing itself as the potential of what it could be. Trapani (2005) states that, "It is therefore possible that truth is merely an eternal prefix to itself, never allowing one to achieve a full understanding of what it is". For Trapani (2005), even "a state of perfection is only potentially perfect", as the perfect is only perfect until it is improved upon. This corresponds to the deconstructive chain of signifiers in which a final, teleological position is not locatable. His conceptualisation of truth as "an eternal prefix to itself" recalls the elusiveness of meaning in that no sign contains inherent meaning but contains traces of signs it excluded to be there (Sarup 1993:34).

In the triptych *Focal Pointless* (2005, Figure 18 shows the second print), Trapani presents an extreme close-up of a metallic plumb bob with varying degrees of clarity. The object, which is utilised in construction to find the true perpendicular through gravity, is symbolic for Trapani of finding the truth, the absolute. The image and its metaphoric associations are not overt, conforming to Degenaar's (1986:69) definition of a structuralist artwork which consists "of a set of relationships which resists immediate recognition". The degrees of obscuring, starting from the least in the first print to the most blurred in the third print, comments on the clarity with which we perceive "truth" and that, with increasing scrutiny, we become

less sure of this “truth” or of the possibility of “truth”. In this way, he delivers commentary on our idea of the “real”, now obscured by contemporary discourse, as alluded to by Gilmour (1990:37). In the other two prints not shown, the plumb bob is rendered on its side, which is an indication that that which we consider to point to truth is only relative and provisional.

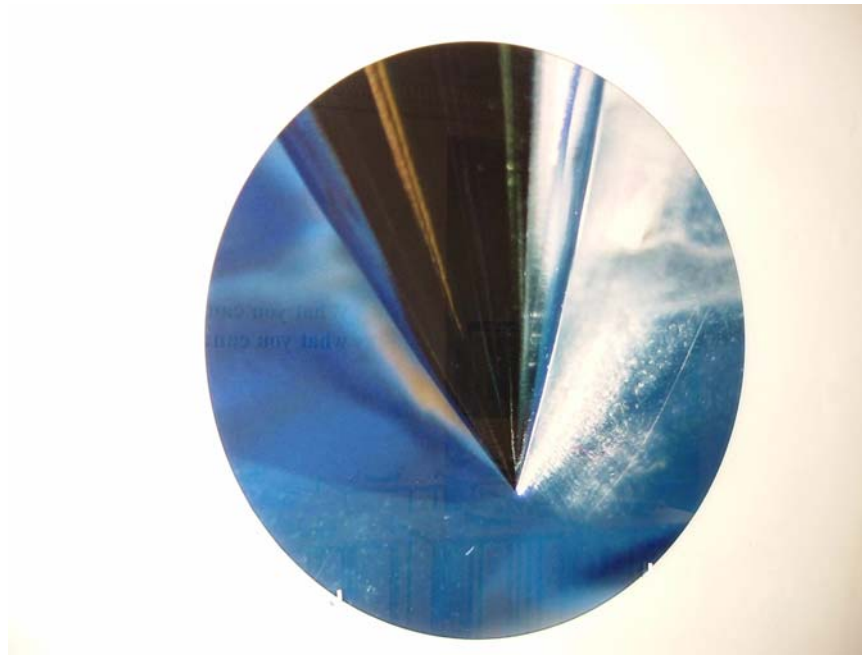


Figure 18. Alex Trapani, *Focal Pointless II* (2005).

Trapani continues to explore allusions to truth in the triptych *Evolved Perfection* (2005, Figure 19 shows a detail of the second print). In these images he has reworked the plumb bob into plastic bags filled with red wine. The wine, referring to the Eucharistic element which symbolises Christ’s sacrifice of blood, has been removed from its familiar religious context and placed into ordinary, mundane plastic bags. These bags have been transformed from their common usage into postmodern carriers of ambiguous sacred “truth” and serve as metaphors of the provisional nature of “truth”. Similar to *Focal Pointless* (2005, Figure 18), the three prints of *Evolved Perfection* (2005, Figure 19) include varying degrees of clarity.



Figure 19. Alex Trapani, *Evolved Perfection II*, Detail (2005).

The first print shows the grid shadow behind the liquid plumb bob the sharpest, which is progressively blurred in the second and third images. According to Trapani, the grid refers to Mondrian's geometric compositions in which the modernist artist sought for aesthetic and spiritual purity (Ruhrberg 2000:172–173). Trapani's objects are suspended and photographed in the perfectly vertical position, which echoes the plumb bob's function, implying that "truth" can be contained and comprehended in small increments when removed from its context. When compared to Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* (1435–50, Figure 20), the subtlety of Trapani's metaphorical treatment of blood in *Evolved Perfection* (2005, Figure 19) is emphasised.

In Van der Weyden's deposition scene the portrayal of blood is stylised, matching the overall impression of the painting. Blood flows along the contour of Christ's torso from the spear wound and radially from his hand's

piercing in nearly uniform streams. In the detail from *Descent from the Cross*, (1435–50, Figure 21), the depiction of fresh blood is contained in a limited flow from the hand's nail piercing, which is neatly depicted as gaping and clean, contradicting the physical contingencies of the event.¹⁰



Figure 20. Rogier van der Weyden, *Descent from the Cross* (1435–50).

Van der Weyden's treatment of the sacrificial blood is conventional, overt and unrealistic, pointing to a sentimental conceptualisation of the crucifixion. This depiction rendering has been sanitised in contrast to the gruesome realities of such a death, similar to Mantegna's aesthetic cleansing of blood from the body of the entombed Christ in *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1465, Figure 17). These artistic choices signify an unwillingness to "get real" with the bloodshed through a depiction of divine sacrifice which is rationalised and rationed. The irony of this image is evident in the artistic devices (such as the incorrect proportions of the cross), contradicting the idea that a stylistic realism was a proclamation of a direct correspondence to the signified event.



Figure 21. Rogier van der Weyden. Detail of *Descent from the Cross* (1435–50).

In contrast to the premodern rendition, Trapani presents a visual rejuvenation of one of the most ancient Christian liturgical elements. He achieved this by taking the most important factor of the Incarnation, the sacrificed blood, and reducing the doctrine to its core element. His depiction of blood, although finitely contained, is ambiguous and opens the potential of multiple readings. The wine-filled bags in Trapani's *Evolved Perfection* (2005, Figure 19) signifies life with its connotations of preserved bags of blood. The contemporary image simultaneously refers to Jesus' parable of the wineskins, which taught that the new message, the Gospel, was accompanied by a new view of life liberated from the old covenant.¹¹ In this way, Trapani relates his work to the re-situating of Christian tenets into the current era and thereby he re-presents meaning.

Trapani's revisioning exercise brings fresh insight into selected core tenets of Christianity. His role as a communicator and mediator of meaning is concretised through his generation of metaphors which express his

convictions on spiritual issues. His images of bodily elements recall the icon format by being singular presentations of the subjects without extraneous detail, emphasising the significance of the metaphors. Trapani's manipulation of visual elements, such as clarity, focus and varying light, become complementary metaphors for the content of the images. Extreme close-ups point to a need for re-thinking and new perceptions, while fading grids allude to the realisation that concepts of truth have the capacity to change. His digital techniques and uncluttered presentation contribute contemporaneity in his re-visioning and re-presentation of Christian themes.

In his works, Trapani reveals a personal appropriation and processing of spiritual truth and the Christian doctrine of divine sacrifice. His use of wine, with religious connotations of blood, sacrifice and redemption, combined with light, symbolising salvation and spiritual revelation, present Christian theology in a positive light. Although a critical element may be present in certain instances, it is neither obvious nor overriding. Trapani is relevant to these studies for a few reasons. First, his positive, personalised interpretations of Christian doctrines enable him to find relevant metaphors accessible to contemporary viewers. Secondly, his use of contemporary media for his subject matter infuses a freshness into his religious themes. In the third place, his conscious engagement with categories which are questioned by current philosophy points to an individual reconsideration of the relevance of Christianity in a postmodern society. Finally, he fits the description of the visionary thinker as proposed by Gilmour (1990:91) through his reworking and refining of "received meanings", which affirms the potential of creating contemporary Christian art.

According to Griffiths' (1989:96) reading, deconstruction entails detecting the "moments when aspects of the signified move over to become parts of the signifier; when content fragments into form...". In a religious sense, this applies to the doctrine of the Incarnation which states that physical

flesh was appropriated for the eternal God the Son. When Christ put aside his “content” of an immortal essence to take on a mortal body, the “form” became the message. The very act of divine kenosis, of the profound emptying of himself, was the process of God the Son fragmenting his spiritual essence into visceral, time-bound humanity. The Incarnation therefore became the embodiment of redemption. Both Botha and Trapani explore this fragmentation of content into form. Botha’s crucifixion sculpture deals implicitly with the fragmentation of The Word, the carrier of holy content, which he physically re-inscribes into the human form it points to. He adds reflexivity to our conception of the Word of God, now carved into an image of the Son of God, the embodiment of The Word. Trapani similarly works with fragmentation through his presentation of blood parcels which allude to a personal, individualised appropriation of the divine offering. He focuses on multiple forms which contain portions of the content, which indirectly refer to the sacrifice of The Word.

In summary, this chapter briefly considered deconstruction in terms of its formulation of signification and its potential applications to contemporary art. Particular emphasis was placed on the elusiveness of the signifier’s meaning, with the perpetual referral to other signifiers. The multiplicity and interchangeable status of signifieds and signifiers, leading to the impossibility of final meaning and the celebration of intertextuality, was highlighted. The digital interactive work of David Small was shown to incorporate the deconstructive mechanisms of multiplicity, fragmentation and intertextuality. His re-presentation of the Jewish Holy Scriptures presents a work which involves the viewer, thereby opening the space for a re-thinking and appreciation for the texts which are not as accessible in conventional formats of the texts. In his work, insight into the content is accessed through the fragmentation and re-configuration of the texts and through their relationships to each other.

The respective potential contributions to the revitalisation of bodily Christian symbolism and imagery were then highlighted in the works by Botha and Trapani. In Botha's sculptural installation he draws the viewer into an integral production of meaning and challenges our perceptions and conceptions regarding The Word and the crucifixion. By these means, he transfers viewers from their objective positions into an engagement with the signifying processes of the work. Botha's work was shown to be deconstructive, involving multiple layers of signification and the perpetual generation of meaning. In contrast, Trapani's unembellished, direct presentations imbue his explorations of Christ's sacrifice and Christian tenets with freshness and clarity. He probes the ambiguity of subtle metaphors which are accessible and appealing in our milieu. Trapani's works were shown to translate archaic symbolism into contemporarily accessible images.

These artists' works and methodologies differ from the correspondence models of the premodern paradigm by their inclusion of non-corresponding associations and references. They incorporate ambiguity rather than one-to-one relationships and their works are not illustrative, rigid or didactic. Each artist depicts re-readings of interpretations, references and core tenets. The departure from Romanticism is evident in the questioning of transcendental or ultimate meaning and the emphasis on re-presentations of received texts and meaning. Small's affirmative revisioning of the Scriptures will be compared to my aesthetic investigations of The Word. The iconoclastic challenges issued by Botha and the iconic metaphoricity of Trapani's work will be shown to have resonance with selected aspects of the works from *Flesh Text*, of which I expound key elements in the next chapter.

Endnotes: Chapter 3

1. The concept of *différance* is an important aspect of Derrida's deconstruction theory. However, due to space constraints, I omit a full discussion of this concept. See the excerpt, *Différance*, Derrida (1986:396–420).
2. From Derrida (1982:26).
3. Taylor quotes Warhol from Baudrillard (1989:187–88).
4. From Artaud (1958:28).
5. Wim Botha, *Mieliepap Pietà* (2004). Maize meal, epoxy resin, mirrored replica with dimensions corresponding to Michelangelo Buonarroti's *Pietà* (1499. Marble, height: 174 cm. The Vatican, Cathedral of St. Peter's. Illustration and data: Grömling 1999:23), height: 174 cm. Installation: Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York. Spier Collection, Cape Town. (Illustration: Perryer 2005:47; data: O' Toole 2005:6, Perryer 2005:46.)
6. The original ivory sculpture on which Botha bases his sculpture is from the collection of the Treasury of the Cathedral of St. Peters in the Vatican, Rome. (Illustration: KKNK Exh Cat 2001:46; data unavailable.)
7. Olkowski-Laetz refers to Linker (1984:44–46).
8. According to Jewish law, contact with a dead body defiled a person or made him or her ceremonially unclean. See Numbers 19:11.
9. Trapani's exhibition, held in July 2005, was shown at Gordart Gallery in Melville, Johannesburg.
10. According to Biblical accounts, Christ was taken down from the cross more than six hours after he was nailed to it, by which time the blood would have dried in a flatter, darker coating on the skin. The back of the hands had been pressed against the cross beam, which would have caused the blood spill to be spread irregularly. See Mark 15:25, recording that Christ was crucified in the third hour (about 9 am); and Mark 15:34–37 for the account of his death in the ninth hour (about 3 pm).
11. See Luke 5:37–38 for Jesus' parable of the new wineskins.

Chapter 4: A Reconstruction of Christian Images

Through the course of the dissertation I have dealt with issues in a two-fold investigation which focused on text / The Word and icons / the visceral body. Firstly, the premodern paradigm was investigated in terms of The Word / religious image relationship which was demonstrated to be contesting and conflicting (Morley 2003:14). The vacillating relationship between The Word and image was shown to be a function of iconoclasm and iconographical defences from Byzantine art through to the Reformation. Both the iconographic and iconoclastic models functioned according to the correspondence paradigm, in the light of the respective interpretations of the opposing camps. In chapter two I explored the aesthetic contemporary sublime with particular focus on works relating to Christianity either in subjects or titles. Kiefer's works were shown to incorporate words to underscore his iconoclasm of the subject while Viola gave Scriptural titles to his iconic images of bodies experiencing sorrow. Chapter three focused on deconstruction and post-structural signification, which were applied in my analysis of works dealing with deconstructed Holy Scriptures. The Word was reconstructed in the interactive work of Small while Botha carved a three-dimensional crucifixion from multiple Bibles put together. Deconstruction was also highlighted in the fragmented, metaphoric iconographical bodily elements in the work of Trapani. These discussions have laid the foundation for the following discussion of my practical works from my exhibition *Flesh Text*¹ in this chapter.

In my works I deal with received meanings which include evangelical Christian traditions, dogma and interpretations of Scripture. To present these core tenets of my faith as contemporary visualisations I reworked and refined my conceptions about my faith to filter out sentimentality and the reuse of received ideas. This process distilled two elemental and coexistent realities for my faith which could not be reduced: the Scriptures

and the Sacrifice of Christ. My exhibition explored contemporary aesthetic possibilities for portraying Biblical tenets and symbolism. I focused primarily on the phrase from John 1:14, “the Word became flesh” (MacArthur 1997:1574), and Isaiah 53:5 (MacArthur 1997:1038):

But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed.

These verses formed the impetus for my artistic investigations of the visceral manifestation of The Word, with particular emphasis on the bodily nature of Christ’s sacrificial wounds. I arrived at the text works by returning to the passages that dealt with various aspects of the “flesh” images, including those referring to wounds, the heart, healing and ritual purification. Most of the verses were chosen for their metaphoric meanings. The heart passages include issues of repentance, unrepentance and transformation. The wound texts were selected for their reference to spiritual conviction as well as the symbolism and physicality of Christ’s wounds. Purification and healing verses focus on spiritual cleansing and divine healing accompanied by references to the prescribed rituals which externally signified the internal processes.

I now turn to a discussion of selected aspects of my text-based images and works dealing with the visceral from the perspective of the sublime. This is followed by a discussion of certain applications of deconstruction to my works.

4.1 CARMEN TRUTER: ENGAGING WITH THE SUBLIME

The sublime, as delineated in this dissertation, deals with that which cannot be rationalised. Elements of the aesthetic sublime are easily translated into art which relates to spirituality and issues of faith since they are beyond rational circumscription. Theories concerning the sublime in art shed light onto possible modes of addressing the unrepresentable which

will be applied to selected works from my exhibition *Flesh Text*. Milbank (1998:258–259) describes the role of the unrepresentable in the sublime as follows:

Because it still concerns at the limit a subject representing an object, the sublime can best be defined as that *within* representation which none the less *exceeds* the possibility of representation. And... thereby it invokes at once the subjective as such, as the unrepresentable ground of representation, and yet also the subject as on the brink of collapsing its distinction from the represented object... .

Whereas Kiefer's works move away from representing the ineffable by naming but not depicting the spiritual beings, I focus on preserving the form of The Word as words in the text works from my exhibition *Flesh Text*. The Word invokes its subject which cannot be represented.

Scriptural text, the ground of this unrepresentable realm of meaning, is so intricately bound with its subject that the distinction between The Word and its Incarnation collapses. This is the process alluded to in John 1:14 which is an internal identification of The Word with its subject. The following works depart from traditional, didactic presentations of Scripture, going beyond the surface appearance of the holy script and so avoiding illustrative imaging of The Word. These works invoke metaphoric associations through the methods of manipulation applied in my presentation of The Word.

4.1.1 Carmen Truter: The Sublime Word

Crowther (1989a:100) argues that the postmodern sublime occurs when “familiar categories are loosened and made strange”. In an exercise of defamiliarisation, the texts constituting the text works are arranged vertically, questioning our familiar, accepted readings and conceptualisations of Scripture. This new configuration, shown in the detail from *Constellation* (2006, Figure 22), makes the texts visually strange, complicating any normal assimilation of the text. When confronting these letters spaced equally apart vertically and horizontally, the initial response

is to attempt reading in the conventional way until it is realised that the rows of letters are seemingly random and incoherent. The unusual visual reconfiguration of Biblical text enhances the experience of the text's presence and opens the possibility of seeing the familiar texts differently.

In my text works the “loosened” words channel viewers to apply uncharacteristic effort to reading the verses. This method of focusing on the text's actuality facilitates a conscious appropriation of its meaning in contrast to the “immediate” recognition of traditional presentations. As Charles Norris (1997:95) contends, “It is only at these points of unexpected resistance – moments where the text disrupts any form of settled, consensual belief – that reading can escape... the closed circle of interpretive foreknowledge”. The resistance of the text to traditional assimilation opens up new interpretive possibilities which are not foreclosed according to conventional, accepted readings.

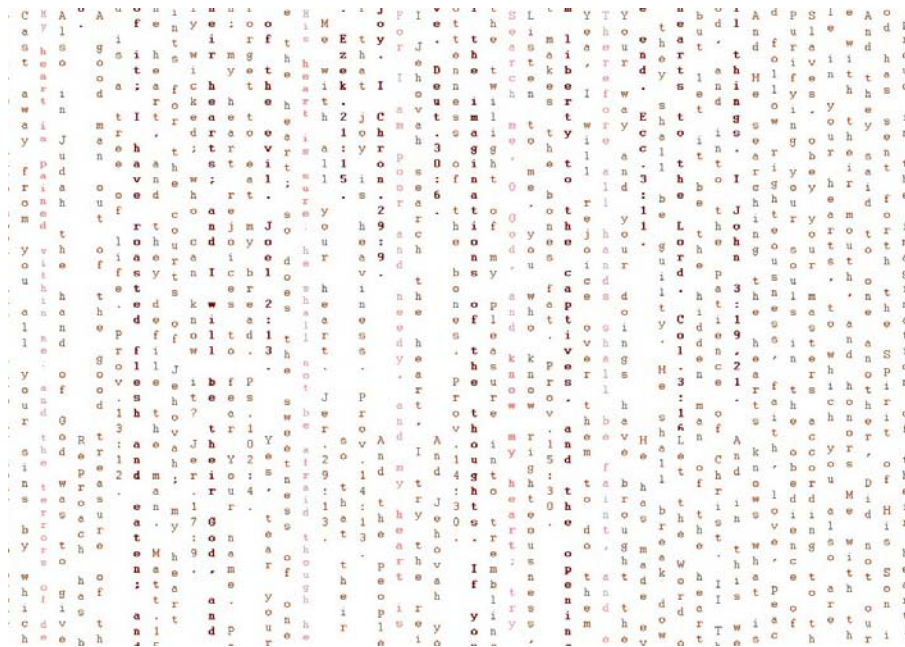


Figure 22. Carmen Truter, Detail of *Constellation* (2006).

In this new configuration the verses are repeated directly beneath themselves, forming the second aspect of this new presentation of Biblical text. The topmost strand of text is presented in a hue reminiscent of the deep red of deoxygenated blood. The text below is of a lighter and brighter fresh blood red, followed by a strand tinted brown and then ochre, until the letters are tinged with the pale, almost transparent yellow of blood plasma. The text therefore “runs” down in both its direction and its allusion to the colours of blood flowing down from a wound until it is clear.² In the images in which I use this formulation of text The Word is equated to blood, to the visceral. The invisible Word of God is made tangible and related to life. This presentation of text, in its colour and direction, therefore refers to the Incarnation (The Word became flesh) and the Passion of Christ (The Word released blood). When compared to premodern representations of sacrificial blood, the subtlety of this new configuration becomes more evident.

In comparison to Van der Weydens’ *Descent from the Cross* (1435–50, Figure 20), the reference to blood in my text works is muted. The liquid life-force takes on a literal meaning through the blood colours in each letter which is a subtle realisation of The Word becoming flesh and blood. The blood streams have metamorphosised into letter flows, enhancing a metaphorical connection between Word and flesh in contrast to conventional, “literal” readings of the Incarnation. The blood element is suggested rather than overtly presented to re-present the element of the sacrifice in unfamiliar terms. Familiar depictions of sacrificial blood generally facilitate only recognition of its inclusion, without encouraging a deeper consideration of its presence or significance. Similar to Van der Weydens’ *Descent from the Cross* (1435–50, Figure 20), the blood in my text works is neatly delineated. The difference is that the current appearance of blood is not sanitised in the conventional way, but is presented in an understated and contemporary format.

In *Uncovered Text* (2006, Figure 23) I digitally overlaid the reconfigured text onto an enlarged photograph of fabric and manipulated the text to follow the vertical contours of the cloth. The text stands are visually embedded into the weave of the material, which gives the text an organic and embedded appearance. The verses deal with themes of cleansing, purifying and the binding of wounds. The white muslin cloth, itself physically distorted into landscape-like contours, connotes burial rituals and alludes to both the interrupted burial preparations of Christ's body and to the unfolded burial cloths which were found in the tomb after his resurrection.³ The cloth, pure in its appearance and containing references to healing and preservation, is threaded with The Word as traces of blood. The flow and subject of the text is complemented by the cloth's hues of green, grey and blue, colours relating to water and purification.



Figure 23. Carmen Truter, *Uncovered Text* (2006).

The integration of Scripture into the material denotes the close relationship of The Word to the believer's life, "covering" the person's spirituality. Its

integration with the cloth suggests that The Word is not rigid but that its appropriation is malleable and living. Simultaneously, the text appears to hover over the cloth and so imparts an ephemeral quality to The Word. In this work The Word is fluid, following every subtle contour, forming a permeable skin, living and flowing over our consciousness. Thus it is visualised as a living entity, covering the fabric of our beings. The title suggests that the text is uncovered from its accumulated layers of dusty historical associations, newly re-presented in contemporary art. This signals a revisioning of The Word, which is given a fresh form and visualisation, now made open and accessible for assimilation. The text is presented in a modern font which augments its contemporary appearance.

When compared to the *Spitalskirche Evangelical-Lutheran Congregational Altarpiece* (1537, Figure 4), it can be seen that unlike the Reformation's dogmatic presentation, *Uncovered Text* (2006, Figure 23) allows for a contemporary reading. The altarpiece's depiction of The Word is an obvious, authoritarian presentation of religious text, which does not facilitate personal interpretation or engagement. The Reformation work demands to be acknowledged as the authority, not allowing for individual involvement in terms of assimilation or application, nor for the possibility of being misunderstood. In contrast, my new presentation requires viewers to approach the image to recognise the words, in contrast to the Spitalskirche altarpiece in which the text implies the maintaining of a certain "respectful" distance. *Uncovered Text's* (2006, Figure 23) presentation of Biblical text encourages viewers to expend time and effort in reading the text. The drawing out of this encounter opens the potential for personal comprehension and appropriation of the text's meaning. The "loosened" and "strange" presentation of the text involves the viewer in a journey of insight by revealing meaning previously inaccessible which can be attributed to our over-familiarity with the Biblical verses.

The text in *Uncovered Text* (2006, Figure 23) is not embellished to assert its prominence unlike the *Mömpelgard Altarpiece* by Füllmaurer (c.1540, Figure 3). Instead, the text flows freely over the whole image, not limited by the edges of the format, which is a subtle realisation of its significance. The words do not override the image but form an integral part of it, suggesting an understanding of The Word as accessible and relevant. A further difference to Füllmaurer's engraving is that my presentation is not elaborated or cluttered by superfluous details, which could cloud the content of the work. Even though The Word is not readable throughout the image, it is presented with directness, without anything to obscure its presence. This presentation of The Word fosters cognition of it as "genuine", not requiring external persuasive tactics to assert its significance or strength. The Word, having been stripped of its historical baggage and represented as fresh, provokes interest and involvement.

The work is sublime in the contemporary sense because it makes the familiar strange, rearranging a space for re-thinking and enabling personal involvement for the viewer. It represents that which is ineffable, The Word, in ways which figure its characteristics, obliquely pointing to its subjective unrepresentability. The sublime can be traced in the flesh works from my exhibition *Flesh Text* which appeal to pre-rational responses to wounds while simultaneously carrying references to religious sacrifice. These images avoid overt, traditional illustrations of the Passion.

4.1.2 Carmen Truter: The Word in Sublime Flesh

Miglietti (2003:21) considers the wound to be a "symbol of disorder, of the rupture of an equilibrium". Wounds, corresponding to Burke's notion of pain being relevant to the sublime (Freeland 2004:39), induce emotional responses of uncomfortable awe, fear and repulsion. In his discussion of the Romantic sublime, Lyotard (1993:251) argues that "there is another kind of pleasure that is bound to a passion stronger than satisfaction, and

that is pain and impending death". In my work, the body and its wounds recur frequently. Morgan (1996:40), in his commentary on Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, highlights the effects of artworks which are experienced as wounds and which leave the mark of a stigmatum:⁴

Premised on this spirituality of the pouring out of the self, a work of art is not worth serious consideration unless it is felt like a wound... . Art that speaks powerfully is art that makes a claim on the viewer, exacting a stigmatum, leaving the mark of its presence on the body. The spiritual in art is not a formal feature embedded in the surface of the image, but something that happens between the work and the viewer, or better, the worlds in which the viewer exists. The work touches us where we touch others, at the seams of worlds held together with pain and desire.

The dialogue initiated by images of wounds inevitably carries references to violence and sacrifice, effecting a spiritual experience of the work. The empathetic response, appropriate to the sublime according to Burke (Freeland 2004:39), has the potential of connecting the viewer with the sacrificial wounds by way of identification with pain and suffering, which is a contact between the viewer's world of experiences and the work's effect. Although Morgan is speaking of metaphorical wounds induced by artworks the following images of wounds, *Contrite Heart* (2005, Figure 24) and *Cut Through the Heart* (2006, Figure 25), are intended to function in the same metaphorical wounding process. The images are expected to leave a mark on the consciousness of the viewer, particularly since traditional images of religious wounds have lost their affective power.

My images of flesh investigate ways of communicating the reality of the Passion, while the visceral and symbolic concepts of The Word are derived by concentrating on the texts mentioned above. I made the prophetic wounds into lamb kidneys and chicken hearts which respectively connote purification and Biblical sacrificial rituals. The isolation of a single organ as metaphor for the theological concepts of death and salvation carry intrinsic reference to incompleteness and displacement. Morgan comments on this facet of artworks, stating that, "Theodor Adorno spoke of the enigmatic aspect of artworks as their fragmentary character, their

status as damaged... or incomplete. We might say injured with the wound of violation" (1996:41).⁵

Wounds in themselves denote violation and the forceful negation of wholeness. Each of these elements highlighted by Adorno, of damage, violation and fragmentation, resonates with Christ's sacrifice, which could paradoxically only be completed through these processes. In the following works, the body functions metaphorically as the site for the concretisation of the Sacrifice of Christ. The viewer is confronted with images of organs, cut and pierced, stained and stitched, which relate to the Body of Christ and the body of the believer. The photographs are presented as clinical investigations and as evidence of wounds to the now absent bodies. The progression of images manipulates the visceral impact which emphasises transfiguration and eventually the ephemeral.



Figure 24. Carmen Truter, *Contrite Heart* (centre of triptych) (2005).

Contrite Heart (2005, Figure 24) is a photographic image of a lamb kidney which has been wounded in the form of a piercing. The image refers to the nail wounds of the crucifixion, of Isaiah 53:5, "He was wounded [also

translated as “pierced”] for our transgressions” (MacArthur 1997:1038). The title refers to Psalm 51:17, where it is said that a broken and contrite heart is the sacrifice God accepts (MacArthur 1997:789). The Biblical reference is complemented by the traditional, sentimental shape of the romantic heart, which is undermined by the unromantic, raw appearance of the kidney, the organ of purification and cleansing. Within the enlarged close-up photograph, presented for our scrutiny, no explanation is given for the wound or the ink. This echoes Viola’s video works depicting expressions of sorrow in which no clues are offered as reasons for the subjects’ suffering, such as the figures in the *Dolorosa Diptych* (2000, Figure 11) and *Man of Sorrows* (2001, Figure 13). Similarly, these kidneys undergo unexplained, ambiguous transformations, initially implemented through violent manipulations, followed by subtler, metaphoric interventions referring to spiritual processes.

Contrite Heart (2005, Figure 24) forms part of a series of visual investigations in which the kidney has been photographed at various stages of intervention. Firstly, the bare wound was recorded, after which undiluted ink was added to the wound, followed by a record of the dilution of this ink with water. The kidney was then placed in shallow water, into which ink was added in increments until the watery environment turned pitch dark. In this setting milk was added to the wound. Then the kidney was removed from the liquid surrounds and blotted dry. The wound was then stitched with surgical thread, after which more milk was added to the now “fixed” wound. This process has been followed through with three other kidneys: one with parallel cuts referring to Christ’s stripes, an “N” shaped wound symbolising the spear piercing and a “bruised” wound.

The sequence of wounding and intervention follows the process of a personal appropriation and internalisation of the Passion. The wound is felt experientially by making it, which is represented by the depiction of the raw wound. It is inflicted for the sins of the individual believer represented

in the image of the ink in wound. This is followed by spiritual cleansing (dilution of the ink in the wound) and redemption (kidney in water). The stain seeps into the water, which absorbs it as the individual is cleansed, thus symbolising Christ's redemptive work (ink in water environment) and individual souls are healed (milk in wound). The body of Christ was taken down from the cross (kidney removed from black liquid) and his body was transformed (stitched wounds). Theologically, the series of interventions approximates the sequence and significance of the Passion. Personally, the images function as meditative contemplations on the work and the stigmata of Christ which enhanced an experiential, personal understanding of the reality and meaning of his Passion.



Figure 25. Carmen Truter, *Cut Through the Heart* (2006).

Following the kidney images, a similar series of wounds and staining was investigated with chicken hearts. From a Scriptural perspective, doves were offered by poor mothers after the birth of their children.⁶ The wounds inflicted on chicken hearts represent these sacrifices and serve as metaphors for people's spiritual transformation wrought through personal

sacrifices. The hearts were wounded with various instruments, including safety pins, needles and hunting knives. On a metaphorical level the differing wounds symbolise varying painful, convicting individual experiences. The organs were stained with ink, onto which water was added in small increments and they were then blotted dry. Each stage was photographically documented from multiple angles. The thoroughness of the investigation is complemented by the surrounding clinical marble surface. The impression of an examination table invites close scrutiny, offering the potential of deciphering the forensic signs in the hearts and interventions.

The oblique angle of the view foreshortens the heart in the photograph, *Cut Through the Heart* (2006, Figure 25). The organ is splayed open with the cut edges flat on the marble slab. Although the wound's presence is known, the details and extent of the laceration are not open for our scrutiny. The overall shape, violently altered, is more conventionally heart-like than the uncut chicken heart. The ink residue evident in the stain on the upper parts of the flesh points to a shallow submersion when the heart was cut side facing upwards. The flesh-ness of the organ is emphasised by the sharp details and naturally illuminated folds and colours of the tissue. Although the wound is hidden from our sight, the wounded heart is presented, larger than life, to be examined, vulnerable and raw, bringing the viewer into an unavoidable confrontation with its presence.

This device recalls Mantegna's *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1465, Figure 17) which perceptually draws the viewer into an awkward observance of the clinically detached and cleansed scene. The body of Christ has been fore-shortened by the artist, placed on a stone slab as if presented for close scrutiny, with the comparatively minimal illumination emphasising the folds in the cloth and contours of the holy body. The oblique angle of the view also has the effect of compressing the extent of the physical suffering, complementing the aesthetic sanitisation of the

entombment scene. The similarities between *Cut Through the Heart* (2006, Figure 25) and the premodern image of the deceased Christ emphasise the sacrificial aspect of the splayed heart and the presentation of the reality of suffering for our unavoidable contemplation. The differences between the two works emphasise the contrasting approaches between the premodern and contemporary attitudes towards issues of faith. The dark scene by Mantegna indicates that the artist has metaphorically placed himself within the situation of being a sympathetic witness in the tomb, which the perspective also suggests. The light quality of my photograph of the chicken heart acknowledges that it is a re-worked and internalised interpretation of the redemptive element of the sacrifice. The use of a metaphor for the sacrifice of Christ similarly does not portend to be a claim of being a first-hand witness, but of a conceptualisation of the sacrifice in the contemporary milieu.

Several contrasts and similarities between my flesh images and the traditional Sacred Heart images, which are essentially modern orthodox icons of Christ, can also be noted. In the sentimental images, Christ is shown holding his bleeding heart which no longer resides fully in his body. In some instances, he is shown offering it to the viewer or in other images it is encircled by his hands against his chest. The impression is that the heart has been removed from its place and yet is still in the possession of Christ. He is depicted with a serene, other-worldly expression, no longer dependent on the fleshly heart. The sentiment of these images belies the agony of the depicted thorn crown circling the heart. In these pictures, Christ is most often portrayed wearing a royal robe, having been removed from his earthly context of suffering. These modern icons point to his heavenly reign, yet he is portrayed keeping the symbolic seat of his sorrow, the sacred, wounded heart. The heart is meant to convey his visceral suffering which has been collapsed into sentimental associations, rather than pointing to his spiritual grief encountered during his Passion.

In both the kidney and heart series, a similarity to these Sacred Heart images is that the organs I documented have also been removed from their context. However, my clinical images are unsentimental and display real, open and fresh wounds which have not been aestheticised into stylised, sentimental hearts. The surgical sutures of the later processes in the kidney series form an embedded crown that binds the wounds, functioning in a healing capacity and form an integral component of the flesh. This contrasts with the thorn crown of the Sacred Heart images which appears obvious and superficially symbolic to our contemporary sensibilities. The allusion to Christ is embedded in the nature of the kidney and heart wounds, yet the signified himself is absent in these presentations. No external details are added nor are any reasons offered for these inflicted wounds. In comparison to Van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* (1435–50, Figure 20), my images are uncluttered and direct. But, the realism of Van der Weyden's painting is echoed in the photographic media of my images, where the difference lies in the premodern macro inclusion of detail versus the contemporary micro focus on the organs. These current flesh images do not dogmatically state their meaning. Rather, multiple interpretations emerge and the viewer needs be open to unfamiliar associations probed by the unapologetic imaging of wounds based on Christian tenets.

The multiplicity of angles and photographs in these works is an investigation of that which is hidden, an exploration of the steps in-between, similar to Viola's slow-motion video works of extreme emotion. The multiple exposure of the wound, which draws out the encounter with wounded flesh, echoes Viola's aims of opening the space for contemplation. The suggestion is that the multiplicity of the images could probe the depths of the wounds, of healing, in a process of making sense of the sacrifice. Each image thus becomes a mediatory icon in this process. The processes and manipulations applied to the organs, representing Christ's body, are reverent re-enactments, a making present

and real of that which is not presently in front of us. These processes are a means of re-presenting the sacrifice's factuality in our current time. The images become a contemplation of the source of the sacrificial blood, of the wounds, and of the significance of The Word as flesh. The images have been sanitised to a degree - for scrutiny and to avoid the aversion caused by blood, but they should still touch the viewer in the pre-conscious realm of empathy and sublime relief. The wounds are not ours, as Barthes (1981:73, 98)⁷ would point out, which leads to a sense of distance even as we empathise. This distance is sublime according to Lyotard's (1993:251) reading of the Romantic sublime:

Burke wrote that for this terror to mingle with pleasure and with it to produce the feeling of the sublime, it is also necessary that the terror-causing threat be suspended, kept at bay, held back. This suspense, this lessening of a threat or a danger, provokes a kind of pleasure that is certainly not that of a positive satisfaction, but is, rather, that of relief. This is still a privation, but it is privation at one remove: the soul is deprived of the threat of being deprived of light, language, life.

The emotional and psychic distance created by photographs of wounds which do not belong to us opens the space for a realisation of the substitutionary wounds of Christ. In these photographs of wounded organs I aim at bringing the unsentimental reality embedded in the Christian narrative and faith to the consciousness of the contemporary viewer. The goal of these images is to confront our entrenched preconceptions about the Christian religion to expose its core, which has been buried by familiarity and sentiment. I worked on revitalising the ancient symbolism of the Incarnation and Passion to make it relevant and accessible to the contemporary viewer. The media chosen for these images, clear, close-up and enlarged photography, speaks to our sensibilities in that it is concise, uncluttered and direct. In this way, no distractions or diversions are offered which would provide relief from the bold, confrontative images.

I now turn to a discussion of selected aspects of my images which employ certain elements of deconstruction theory and post-structural signification.

4.2 CARMEN TRUTER: ENGAGING WITH DECONSTRUCTION

Degenaar (1986:74) states that, “Poetic language has the pertinacity to refer to itself and its ability to do something new with language and to use an old signifier to refer to a new signified”. In this statement Degenaar refers to several postmodern phenomena with reference to poetic, or creative, language. First, such modes of communication are reflexive and self-aware. They do not attempt to hide behind formal structures within language, which would grant them a pre-existent authority, but acknowledge their own provisionality. Secondly, he points out that such language is creative with language itself, finding new modes of expression. In the third place, Degenaar states that poetic language uses old signifiers, that which already exists, to point to new signifieds. It is this last characteristic of this type of language which is of particular relevance to my text works. In these works I use Scripture, which is pre-existent to my visual re-interpretation, to refer to new ways of perceiving The Word, to new meanings which are signified by their reconfigured integration.

4.2.1 Carmen Truter: Images of The Word Deconstructed

The text works in which The Word is aesthetically re-presented recall Griffiths’ (1989:96) description of deconstructionist artworks:

Creating and using a sign-system (including a visual artwork) means manipulating a ‘transformative apparatus’, or sign-system, a set of interactive elements defined by its own internal distinctions. The play of differences which make up the sign-system is ‘inscribed’ in each of its elements... . Moreover, any meaningful system is a network or ‘texture’ of intervals and delays. The system and its inward play are organised by a ‘centre’ which paradoxically is both within and without the structure. There is none of the reassuring immobility and certitude of the outdated notion of a centre.

The centre in this context, relating to Scripture, involves received traditional interpretations and expositions of the text. It refers to accepted, unquestioned approaches to The Word’s dogmas. My works aim to probe these assumptions and present a contemporary, re-thought approach to The Word. The centre shifts according to new meanings and

interpretations brought by viewers in their interaction with the artwork. The approach taken towards the texts was to consider them as signs, existing and interacting within a sign-system, *The Word*, which is then adapted to create a new aesthetic system of signs. New relationships are suggested in their new presentations, which highlight the post-structural interrupted reading of these texts. The woven works offer the potential of deciphering the newly rearranged signifiers, and as such require a close reading. The departing point was to transfer the vertically arranged texts onto a transparent ground. The columns of verses were cut, separated into individual threads of text. This represents a decontextualisation at a second remove: the first involved selecting texts and placing them thematically into a new context. The second is to remove the verses from this coherent, relatively stable frame of reference and to work them into a more fragile structure.



Figure 26. Carmen Truter, *Integrated Word* (Illuminated detail) (2006).

The base of *Integrated Word* (2006, Figure 26 shows an illuminated detail) is an enlarged photograph of distorted muslin cloth. The text strands are woven vertically through the irregular spaces cut out between the threads of the cloth. The element of physically weaving The Word into cloth implies that it is completely embedded in reality, forming its texture and augmenting its structure, forming a complex, corporeal body of sacred text. Certain areas of the woven surfaces form delicate textures, while other parts comprise text strands which form shallow, irregular reliefs. In contrast to *Uncovered Text* (2006, Figure 23), in which the digitally woven letters flow easily over and around the undulations of the cloth, the intricate weaving of text into a physical ground causes an obstructed, complicated visual tracing of the verse fragments. Most of the text strands are not readable as a totality, because of the obscurity caused by weaving in front of and behind the perforated photograph. The strands are fragments shaped into the necessary lengths and widths to match the specific thread requirements. This physical contingency of broken and partially hidden text, although fully and tactilely embedded in the image, carries the deconstructive reference to the fragmentation of meaning. The physical manipulation echoes Botha's paper sculpture which both interrupts and resists a straight-forward reading of the texts.

Photographs were taken of the most dense and protruding areas of *Integrated Word* (2006, Figure 26) to produce the images of *Textual Complexity I and II* (2006, Figure 27). The originating work was back-lit, giving the effect of light pouring between the text strands, dissolving and blending fragments of words. The back illumination blends the overlapping strands, creating a textured, layered unity. The images invite reading because of the comparatively larger letters than the corresponding ordinary area, yet the translucence of the strands make the words unintelligible. Griffiths (1989:96) comments on aspects of the deconstructionist artwork which resonates with certain characteristics of these images:

[A deconstructionist work] deliberately presents then complicates and fractures a meaning or set of meanings. It does this to disclose the possibility of a desirable basic meaning, but one which is never reached in the creation or 'active contemplation' of the work... . [The artist] rearranges elements... and thus 'defamiliarises' or alienates them so that the observer begins to perceive the possibility of a... very different reality 'underlying' the seemingly secure conventions by which we are said/shown to be enslaved. By superimposition, the work may go on to suggest other conventions, more appropriate to our condition.

Griffiths emphasises the defamiliarisation characteristic of deconstructionist art, in which new realities are revealed or suggested. These text works present *The Word*, although in formats that rearrange their accepted contexts and interpretations. The texts are superimposed, approximating our complex milieu of multiplicitous signification and blended meanings.

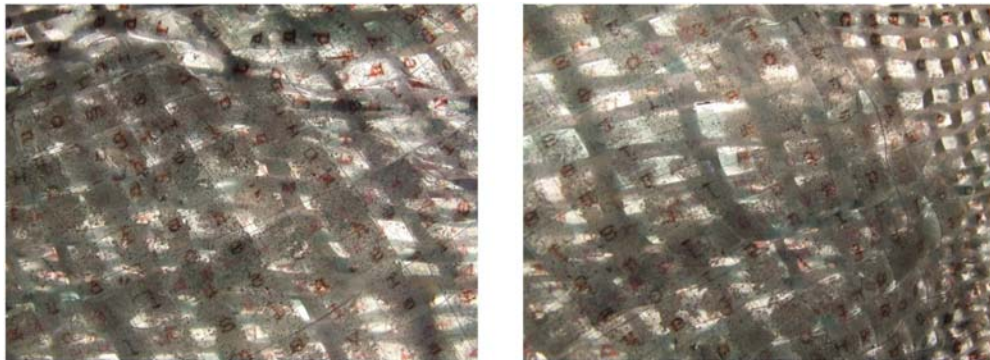


Figure 27. Carmen Truter, *Textual Complexity - I, II* (2006).

One of the significant elements of these text works is that the images physically or visually depend on spaces. The holes through which the text strands are woven form the interstices for the integration of *The Word* into the visual planes. Metaphorically speaking, these multiple "gaps" provide room for the sacred and invite permeation and saturation by *The Word*. The spaces are the mechanism for literal, sensorial illumination which promotes an understanding of the pervasiveness of spirituality. In these images, the spaces function negatively in the deconstructive sense to allow for the possibility of illumination. The fabric, denoting daily, personal

life, is negated to form the spaces which allow for the integration of the *Logos*, which functions similarly to Taylor's (1992:273) description of the negation that is an indirect affirmation. In this case, form is negated to affirm the spiritual.

When compared to the *Vienna Genesis* (early sixth century, Figure 1), it can be seen that my illuminated texts approach the visualisation of The Word in a contemporary way. Whereas the premodern work sought to illustrate the text virtually point for point, my works reconfigure and recombine the texts into the contemporary position. The textural images are formed by the texts themselves by their placement and configuration. In *Integrated Word* (2006, Figure 26), the overall appearance of the woven texts is of a corporeal, if unidentifiable, body. In *Textual Complexity I and II* (2006, Figure 27), the text image is more subtle, forming an undulating woven fabric consisting solely of text strands. The new aestheticisation of the texts involves the viewer in an exercise of deciphering and close reading, while the new visual presentations mirror the deconstructive approach to signification as noted by Griffiths. This contrasts the traditional view of the Scriptures as something to be adorned, in which the illustrations were considered to illumine the content of The Word. However, such illustrations correspond to the content rather than adding new insight. The reconfigured texts in *Integrated Word* (2006, Figure 26) and *Textual Complexity I and II* (2006, Figure 27) shed new light on our perceptions and conceptions of assimilation of Scriptural content, thus contributing to a revitalisation of The Word in our time.

I now turn to an analysis of the deconstructive elements within a visceral work which explores aspects of spirituality by building on a new reading of traditional symbols for death and sacrifice.

4.2.2 Carmen Truter: Religiously Deconstructing Flesh

Miglietti (2003:65) contends that the entire strategy of the contemporary system has relegated death to the idea of disappearance and absence.

Barthes (1981:79) comments on the confusion surrounding absence and death induced by photography:

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

My choice of photography for recording and documenting the images of wounded flesh is founded on these two presuppositions noted by Barthes. Firstly, the subject is real, the photograph attests to its existence.

Secondly, it suggests that it no longer exists, that the photograph was taken at a prior time and is now a preserved record of its appearance at that time. This fits the intention of the images of the visceral which explore ways of representing the actuality and significance of Christ's Passion. It was an event in historical time, yet the reality of it is presented as real and relevant in our time.

According to Miglietti (2003:69), for Barthes, "only the images that belong to one's own history become a 'wound'; the others, those that form part of the history of a stranger... are taken as symbols of evidence". The photographs of wounded organs are presented as evidence. As discussed earlier, in their transformations and manipulations they are intended to wound the consciousnesses of viewers, facilitating a shift from complacency towards these Christian tenets of faith to a re-thinking of their actuality and implications. These works correspond to Griffiths' (1989:97) observations about deconstructionist artworks, which "seek to 'denude'... the observer of illusions... . Such works ask to be deciphered not as substitute structures corresponding to the formal structure of the external

world, but as experiences in which gaps, puns, differences, 'slips', destroy any immutable appearance and meaning". These images are not correspondences to traditional aesthetic propositions of Christian tenets but aim to generate new modes of translating Christian spirituality into contemporarily accessible artworks. Viewers are encouraged to decipher the clues embedded in the invasive transformations and processes, which would enrich an understanding of Christianity as current.



Figure 28. Carmen Truter, *Filtered Affections - Stained* (2006).

A form of transformation of the heart object was explored in a series of works based on the kidney images, constructed from layers of laminated digital colour transparencies. The wounds inflicted on the kidneys in the first series become the deconstructed material of this series. The contours which are followed have been formed by the wounds and their ink markings. The initial wound making and inflicting have become the source for further cutting / wounding and delineating. I assembled the transparencies in contoured topographical layers in various configurations

to invoke metaphors of transformation. The six contour sculptures comprising *Filtered Affections* (2005–2006, Figure 28 shows the *Stained* sculpture), are constructed of delineated shapes within the kidneys, transposed over each other to form a light, luminescent object. The sculptures filter light through, which symbolises spiritual insight. The light catches on the cut edges and serves as their defining element. These acetate kidney sculptures appear as embodied as the kidneys in the originating series, even though they are comprised of separated layers, reconfigured into a new form. The only holistic view available to the viewer is the exterior, consisting of fragmented and multiple strata, which form a coherent whole, obscuring the inner details of the layers.

Points of dialogue can be traced between these sculptural objects and Fra Angelico's *Christ with Crown of Thorns* (1430–35, Figure 14). In the premodern work the colour red, symbolical of the sacrificial blood, is infused into the portrait and appears to be welling up from inside the figure, slowly pouring out of the sacrificial body. The lack of definition contributes to a fluid impression where the skin and hair seem as viscous as the blood itself. Similarly, although the facets of *Filtered Affections - Stained* (2005, Figure 28) are delineated, the overlap and transparency of the layers contribute to a fusion of the colours and fluidity from one layer to the next. The colours seem to emanate from deep within the object, made richer and integral by the multiple layering, with the ink appearing to well up from the centre, spilling onto and dissolving into the surfaces of the sculpture. The laminated surfaces further contribute to a fluid impression by virtue of their gleaming appearance, augmented by the light element which is an integral aspect of the work.

The construction technique lends an “otherness” to the kidney object similar to Miglietti's (2003:19) description of Fra Angelico's portrait as an image of an alienation, of the rupture between the divine and the visceral, highlighted by the light which seems to radiate as much from the skin as it

does from the halo. The kidney sculpture contains an ephemeral quality through its infusion of light and suspended presentation. The object is removed from the image of raw flesh which forms its foundation to an appearance of precious beauty. Reconfiguration is integral in the sculptural works. The organs and objects were altered and reconstituted to produce new, fragmented wholes. Such transformations respectively expose or conceal internal characteristics. The reconstruction, following the destructive interventions, involves selective disclosure and then delineating these revelations by harnessing light, symbolic of spiritual insight and revelation.

In the last subsection of this chapter I turn to a brief discussion of reconstruction, which is the positive re-situating of signifiers after the process of deconstruction has loosened the presumed bonds between the signifier and signifieds. This allows for creative possibilities and for the generation of new, unexpected and previously undisclosed meanings.

4.3 RECONSTRUCTION AND THE WORD

Degenaar (1986:81) contends that, “Deconstruction is not destructive. ... It takes the elements of a text apart, points out the behaviour of figural language and puts the elements together again in a different way. This aspect of deconstruction is called ‘re-inscribing or situating signs differently’”. This definition of reconstruction involves proposing new methods and combinations of signifiers which then contribute new meaning. Griffiths (1989:96) points out a similarly creative potential of post-structural signification in which texts, liberated from an “inevitable significance”, are “free to offer a new reality, to be creative”.

Elements of this positive approach to deconstruction’s creative possibilities have been observed in David Small’s *Talmud Project* (1999, Figure 15). In this digital interactive work the artist pulled the various texts out of their

traditional contexts and rearranged them, bringing new relationships between the texts and their meanings to the contemporary consciousness. These reconstructive processes contributed to a renewed understanding and a revitalisation of the Jewish Holy Scriptures. Small's reconfiguration of these texts recalls Degenaar's (1986:74) proposal about poetic language:

[T]he exploration of the iconicity of language within the structures of texts enables the reader to transcend the familiar way of relating to reality. This process of defamiliarisation does not alienate man from reality but enhances the quality of life by intensifying the sensation of being alive. This sensation is dulled by habit, and art is needed to sensitise man to the rich texture of experience.

In these elements of defamiliarisation and the intensification of life deconstruction echoes certain definitions of the contemporary sublime. Consider Crowther's (1989a:100) notion that the postmodern sublime occurs when "familiar categories are loosened and made strange" and his (1995b:10) argument that the sublime "revivifies our sense of being alive". The relation of the sublime to deconstruction lies in its disruption of harmony which breaks apart familiar categories and ways of seeing. New relationships, re-configured from the deconstructed subjects, are therefore brought to light, contributing to new perceptions and conceptions of the subjects.

These are the aspects of the postmodern sublime and deconstruction which I have highlighted in the discussion of my works. The various components of the works complement these two elements, of making the familiar unfamiliar and of disclosing previously obscured or hidden relationships. In both the digitally integrated text work and the physically woven works the newly re-arranged verses suggest fresh ways of seeing and interpreting the Biblical texts. Both methods symbolise contemporary and personal modes of appropriating Biblical tenets. The unfamiliar presentations of the text facilitate a concentration on the presence of the texts and their newly disclosed relationships, thereby leading to a revitalisation of The Word.

My works which deal with The Word as flesh were also examined from the perspectives of the postmodern sublime and deconstruction. This visceral Word visualised the fleshly component of Old Testament prophecies of suffering and sacrifice. I removed sentiment and focused on confronting the viewer with the reality of Christ's wounds with the view of shifting the viewer from his or her complacent and uncritical ideas of Christ's Passion and Christian spirituality. Re-thinking is initiated which opens the space for a reconfigured response to the foundation for the Christian faith which is Christ in the flesh, the Incarnated Word.

To conclude, in these works from my exhibition *Flesh Text* I aimed at finding visual means of communicating the reality and significance of two Christian tenets of faith, The Word and the sacrifice of Christ. This involved generating new presentations of these subjects which differ from premodern images of the Scriptures and the Passion. My images do not illustrate. They are non-corresponding. They are presented in contemporary formats and allow for ambiguous interpretations which are not foreclosed. The revitalisation of religious images, which focused on defamiliarisation from both the postmodern sublime and deconstructive perspectives, has the potential of shifting viewers from their complacent attitudes towards received meanings and interpretations in metaphoric visual language. Crowther (1989a:99) states "forms of discourse are not independent of one another. They must conflict, displace, converge, and overlap, because our engagement with the world is historical – a shifting complex – a perpetually developing interaction". My works acknowledge and explore this ever-shifting inter-relationship between contemporary art, philosophy and faith to approach an affirmative and unsentimental, yet provisional, place to revitalise Christian art and symbolism.

Endnotes: Chapter 4

1. A catalogue of the exhibition works is available in the UNISA library.
2. This indicated that Christ had already been dead when a spear was pierced into his side. See John 19:34.
3. See Luke 23:53–24:1 for the Sabbath interruption of Christ's embalming, and John 20:7 for the loose grave cloths.
4. Morgan refers to Barthes (1981:26–27).
5. Morgan refers to Adorno (1984:184).
6. See Leviticus 12:6 for the prescription of doves as sacrifices.
7. According to Barthes (1981:26–27), the second element of a photograph, that which attracts and keeps our attention, is the *punctum*, designating our experience of it as wounds or pricks such as those inflicted by sharp instruments. Moreover, for Barthes (1981:73), the evidence of photography belonging to the other seems indifferent to us and does not "wound" us emotionally or psychologically. In other words, these images do not concern us and are inessential to us (Barthes 1981:98).

Conclusion

My stated primary objective for this dissertation was to investigate ways in which ancient religious symbols, eroded of their power and relevance, could be rejuvenated. Throughout this dissertation I have discussed ways in which contemporary art addresses issues about attitudes towards Biblical truths. Traditional symbolism and representations of The Word and the sacrifice of Christ were re-evaluated within this context. I have shown how Christian imagery can take on new relevance by revising earlier symbolism and thereby imparting new value to the archaic symbols, now situated in contemporary dialogue. New signification was achieved in the works of the various artists discussed. They used the content of the old symbols in contexts which are removed from the original contexts. By resituating these symbols, a fresh understanding of the accumulated meanings denoted by the symbolic content is made accessible to the modern viewer. In this way, religious tenets which seemed redundant because of over-familiarisation and codified usage have been de-familiarised and re-presented as new and relevant.

The post-structural practice of revisiting former ideologies and histories formed the underlying methodology of this dissertation. Revisiting was applied to traditional religious art and symbolism, leading to their reappraisal and the re-situation of symbols into temporarily accessible images. The revisioning exercise employed throughout promotes intertextuality, recognising that representations, interpretations and concepts are mediated.

Throughout this dissertation I demonstrated the vacillating relationship between religious images and The Word which also formed the structure for the discussions of each chapter. In the first chapter I discussed the mimetic paradigm, in which images were conceptualised as corresponding to an external, objective and eternal truth, which was revealed and made

accessible through the images. Art in this premodern era conceived its images as representing the very concept it was addressing, being religious revelation or Biblical tenets. Artists and viewers of this period considered the representations to have an unambiguous, closed relationship to the object represented. The conforming relationship between religious images and The Word gave Christian art content, form and authority.

The premodern historical debates surrounding the validity of religious imagery were centred on propositions about the role of images and their attributes. Images embedded in text, in the form of illuminated manuscripts, and The Word as portrayed in Protestant artworks, formed the word pole of the first chapter. These word-oriented images arose from the iconoclastic climates pervading the Byzantine and European Reformation periods during which religious images were either forbade or permitted as illustrations in holy documents. Such illustrations were considered to possess limited symbolism and as inherently devoid of transcendent attributes. Illustrations were not held to point to the spiritual truths of Scripture but were rigid visualisations of “literal” readings of The Word.

The pre-eminence of the image was brought out in the defence of icons founded on the doctrine of the Incarnation. I discussed how iconoclasm forced the iconophiles to defend their beliefs against accusations of idolatry. The iconophilic defences were based on the premise that icons and related symbolism revealed the essence of the saint portrayed and acted as mediators to them. The physical traits of the depicted personages were homogenised to lead viewers to a contemplation of the ineffable qualities of the saint and not the physical representations. Iconic mimesis aimed at leading, through contemplation of the icon’s symbolic appearance, to uncircumscribable truth. Icons attempted to represent the spiritual realm in terms of the visible, based on the theological significance

of Christ Incarnate. The pursuit of giving the invisible a visible form correlates with the aesthetic sublime which I discussed in chapter two.

In the second chapter I briefly considered the Romantic aesthetic sublime before exploring the influence of the postmodern sublime on art which deals with contemporary spirituality. In both periods the sublime is connected to apprehending meaning beyond the immanent and to the experience of disharmony. I briefly outlined the theories of the sublime by Burke and Kant, which are related to the experience of the vast and overwhelming, leading to the experience of the sublime. The Romantic artwork aimed at representing that which is beyond comprehension and became the means of intuitive revelation and transcendence. In contrast, I briefly discussed the postmodern sublime which questions the possibility of transcendence, focusing on the loss of the object of spirituality and our experience of it. I then investigated the manifestation of the postmodern sublime in both iconoclastic and iconic approaches to the ineffable.

The word pole of this chapter centred on Anselm Kiefer's works which invoke spiritual entities by inscriptions of their names yet his images are iconoclastic in relation to the spiritual subjects. The works I discussed highlighted the current loss of intuitive spirituality and offer no mediation to the spiritual entities but emphasise the divine absences. However, his employment of the symbolic devices, such as chairs, flames and light, contribute to a deeper understanding of the ineffable than when the Trinity is depicted in the finite representations of premodern works. The removal of the recognisable visage metaphorically makes a space for that which cannot be seen or grasped. In this context Kiefer's circumspect selection of religious symbolism allows for an apprehension of the sublime which would otherwise be inaccessible in representations which limit the appearance of the "other". Kiefer alludes to a relevant and contemporary spirituality by removing our complacent attitudes towards the mythical, archaic and spiritual.

The image pole of the second chapter focused on the exploration of contemporary spirituality in Bill Viola's video works. His images recall the iconic devotional representations of traditional Christian figures, appropriated within the contemporary paradigm. The postmodern sublime is embodied in his depictions of the intense and unresolved emotional distress of his subjects. The contemporary figures belong to our everyday realm and invite empathy with their unexplained grief. In contrast to premodern images of similar themes in which the conclusion is known, his slowly unfolding images deprive us of closure. I also discussed how Viola's focus on opening up the ambiguous, seemingly insignificant moments between emotions and their expression gives visual form to the intangible transformations. This places emphasis on the ordinarily unperceived and brings the ungraspable transitions to our consciousness, thereby forcing patient attendance to the nuances displayed by the figures. This process facilitates the absorption of spiritual truth and appropriation of embedded meaning in the images.

The third chapter dealt with deconstruction and its far-reaching influences on traditional metaphysical concepts and with selected implications for religious art. In this milieu, which includes incredulity towards meta-narratives and a cynicism towards accepted meanings, images are no longer seen to be representing unquestionable truths but are known to be mediated presentations. Deconstruction also critiques hierarchies, posing a problem for Christianity because the religion involves acknowledging and responding to the divine *Logos*. The concept of a divine authority and eternal Word, possessing a hierarchical and untouchable position in the Christian consciousness, has been questioned.

In particular, I briefly considered deconstruction in terms of its post-structural formulation of signification and its potential applications to contemporary art. Emphasis was placed on the elusiveness of the

signifier's meaning and the perpetual referral to other signifiers. The multiplicity and interchangeable status of signifieds and signifiers, which leads to intertextuality, was highlighted. The digital interactive work of David Small, forming the word pole of this chapter, was demonstrated to work according to the deconstructive mechanisms of multiplicity, fragmentation and intertextuality. He also harnessed the positive creative possibilities in deconstruction in his affirmative re-presentation of the archaic religious text. By involving the viewer, Small opens the space for a re-thinking and appreciation of the texts which are not as accessible in conventional formats. In this work, insight into the content is made accessible through the fragmentation and re-configuration of the texts and through their newly disclosed relationships to each other. This contributes to a renewed understanding and revitalisation of the Jewish Holy Scriptures.

I then discussed the works by Wim Botha and Alex Trapani which explore the deconstructive fragmentation of content into form. Both artists contribute to the revitalisation of bodily Christian symbolism and imagery in their respective works which reference Christian themes or personalities. Botha's crucifixion sculpture deals implicitly with the fragmentation of The Word, the carrier of holy content, which he physically re-inscribes into the human form it points to. He inserts reflexivity to our conception of the Word of God, now carved into an image of the Son of God, the embodiment of The Word. His re-presentation of a Renaissance sculpture is both a critique and a contemporary re-reading of the symbolism inherent in traditional visualisations of the crucifixion. His sculpture, carved from Bibles, plays on the ambiguous distinctions between word and body, The Word as body and the body in The Word. In Botha's installation he draws the viewer into becoming integral to the production of meaning. In this way he transfers viewers from their objective positions to an engagement with the signifying processes of the work. By these methods Botha challenges our perceptions and conceptions of The Word and the crucifixion.

Trapani works with fragmentation through his symbolic presentation of blood increments which allude to a personal, individualised appropriation of the divine offering. I analysed Trapani's work, which formed the body pole of this chapter, in the context of his revisioning of the ancient symbols such as the blood of Christ into sophisticated, contemporary and accessible metaphors dealing with sacrificial elements. Trapani's unembellished, direct presentations imbue his explorations of Christ's sacrifice and Christian tenets with freshness and clarity, while probing the ambiguity of subtle metaphors. These artists' deconstructive works were shown to differ from the mimetic models of the premodern paradigm by their inclusion of non-corresponding associations and references. They incorporate indeterminateness and their works avoid illustration and didacticism. Each artist depicts re-readings of interpretations, references and core tenets, placing emphasis on re-presentations of received texts and meaning in our time.

Lastly, I discussed selected works from my exhibition *Flesh Text* in the fourth chapter, in which salient points from my discussions of the sublime and deconstruction were applied with the aim of arriving at a reconstructive possibility for the renewing of Christian imagery. At the outset my practical work was aimed at making informed, critical art which points to the reality and relevance of The Word and Christian spirituality. I demonstrated the potential for contemporary Christian art which, by functioning metaphorically, can enhance the accessibility of The Word and disclose its relevance to the modern viewer. The exhibition works represent an exploration of the core associations of the traditional visual symbolism historically attributed to The Word and the Passion. This involved an in-depth analysis of the relevant symbolism, which resulted in a critical reappraisal of the received visual interpretations and an investigative return to the prophetic and descriptive Scriptural passages.

Metaphor was employed in my artworks to allow open-endedness, facilitating the communication of a plurality of embedded meaning. Crowther contends that overt symbolism degenerates into clichés. According to Crowther (1989b:161), there are “many works *heavy* with Christian symbolism that it is only when a familiar symbolic device is played off against one of striking singularity... that we sense the enormity of the tragedy and redemptive possibilities that are figured in Christ’s death”. When familiar religious symbols, such as those of the crucifixion, are juxtaposed with one that is unusual and which strikes the viewer powerfully, the new symbol facilitates an understanding of the spiritual truths of Christ’s death and its significance.

Crowther (1993:192) furthermore argues that it is not sufficient to merely produce works which are unprecedented, but rather works whose “unprecedentedness casts new light on the traditions of art or on our broader relation to the life-world”. The re-illumination of Christian symbolism and imagery in my works was founded on this premise of unprecedented interpretations and readings which contribute to the rejuvenation of Christian imagery and symbolism. The metaphors I have chosen to work with probe the core meanings embedded in the archaic, inherited symbolism of the sacrifice and Passion of Christ. By stripping away the accretions of time and usage-induced “dead” associations, I have explored metaphors which express the significant associations alluded to by the old symbolisations. By removing the didactic and obvious associations, my images have the potential of reaching the thought-spaces of viewers which facilitates a re-thinking of “dead” metaphors.

The text works were shown to be positive re-readings and re-presentations of Biblical text and incorporated subtle imaging. These works, although focused on The Word, are not iconoclastic, but affirm the Scriptures by presenting The Word with freshness and clarity. Traditional reading is disrupted by the unfamiliar reconfigurations of text, thereby facilitating a

recognition of the actuality of The Word. The flesh works present images containing metaphors for Christ's wounds, emphasising the reality of the bodily suffering. The unavoidability of the confrontations with wounded and stained flesh induces a re-thinking of Christ's prophetic stigmata. Therefore these images function as metaphoric icons or devotional images. Reconfiguration was shown to be integral to the sculptures of organs, which inserts the spiritual dimension of light and transformation. These works were shown to be affirmative re-presentations and re-worked conceptualisations of Christian tenets of faith and symbolism in the contemporary paradigm.

I highlighted Degenaar's (1986:81) notion of the reconfiguration of signifiers, which he calls "re-inscribing or situating signs differently". I pointed out that this definition of reconstruction involves proposing new combinations of signifiers which contribute new meaning. The element of defamiliarisation echoes definitions of the sublime such as Crowther's (1989a:100) notion that the postmodern sublime occurs when "familiar categories are loosened and made strange". I pointed out that the disruption of harmony that is integral to both deconstruction and the postmodern sublime contributes to the dismantling of conventional categories. Previously undisclosed relationships are brought to light, contributing to new ways of perceiving and conceiving the content. These aspects of the contemporary sublime and deconstruction were highlighted retrospectively in the discussion of my works.

To conclude, in the works from my exhibition *Flesh Text* I aimed at finding visual means of communicating the reality and significance of two Christian tenets of faith, The Word and the sacrifice of Christ. This involved generating new presentations of these subjects which differ from premodern images of the Scriptures and the Passion by being non-illustrative and non-corresponding. The revitalisation of religious images throughout the dissertation focused on defamiliarisation from both the

postmodern sublime and deconstructive perspectives, which have the potential of shifting viewers from their complacent attitudes towards received meanings and interpretations. By exploring the ever-shifting inter-relationship between contemporary art, philosophy and faith my works approach an affirmative and unsentimental position from which to revitalise Christian art and symbolism. Lastly, this dissertation positioned my artistic processes and aesthetic revitalisation of Christian art within a historical niche and a contemporary discourse.

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