

# THE CADAVEROUS PRESENCE

HOLBEIN'S DEAD CHRIST AND MAW'S SUSPENDED UPRITCHARD

MARGRETA CHANCE

# THE CADAVEROUS PRESENCE

HOLBEIN'S DEAD CHRIST AND MAW'S SUSPENDED UPRITCHARD

MARGRETA CHANCE

A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology  
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy

School of Art and Design

2013

*In memoriam*

Samuel Killeen-Chance

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	v
Attestation of Authorship	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Abstract	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Living On, Not Living On	18
1.1 Dead Christ	19
1.1.1 Dostoyevsky's Doubt	20
1.1.2 Dead Christ Genealogy	23
1.1.3 Humanism and the Dead Christ	27
1.1.4 Man of Sorrows and Mother of Sorrows	31
1.2 Suspended Upritchard	35
1.2.1 Ideal Idol and Spectral Ghost	36
1.2.2 Humanism and the Virgin Mary	39
1.3 Coda	44
Chapter 2 Double Movement, Double Bind	45
2.1 Two Ends	46
2.1.1 Mortal End and Teleological End	46
2.1.2 Movement without End	49
2.2 Two Versions	53
2.2.1 Disembodied Resemblance and Cadaverous Presence	53
2.2.2 Structure of Identity and Structure of Trace	55
2.3 Coda	57
Chapter 3 Above the Horizon, Below the Clouds	59
3.1 Ignoble Nobility	59
3.1.1 Classical Axial Orientation	59
3.1.2 Orienting to Horizontality	61
3.1.3 Folding the Outside In	68
3.1.4 Decentring the Centre	72
3.2 Blind Sight	74
3.2.1 Trembling the Axes	74
3.2.2 Dethroning Sovereign Authority	80
3.2.3 Entering the Labyrinth	84
3.3 Coda	86
Epilogue	88
References	90

# LIST OF FIGURES

1.	Hans Holbein the Younger, <i>The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb</i> (1521-1522), oil on limewood, 32.4 x 202.1 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland.	2
2.	Liz Maw, <i>Francis Upritchard</i> (2010), oil on board, 209 x 113 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.	3
3.	Andreas Ritzos (attributed), <i>The Mother of God of the Passion</i> (late 15 <sup>th</sup> century), egg tempera on wood, 82 x 61.5 cm. Ikonen-Museum, Recklinghausen, Germany.	5
4.	<i>Christ in the Tomb</i> (late 15 <sup>th</sup> century), egg tempera on wood, 64 x 49.5 cm. Ikonen-Museum, Recklinghausen, Germany.	24
5.	<i>Christ Pantocrator</i> (c. 1140-70), mosaic. Palatine Chapel, Palermo, Italy.	26
6.	<i>Epitaphios</i> of Nicholas Eudaimonoioannes (1407), embroidered liturgical cloth. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain.	26
7.	Fra Filippo Lippi, <i>Imago Pietatis</i> (c. 1430), tempera on wood, 22 x 15 cm. Horne Museum, Florence, Italy.	28
8.	Giovanni Bellini, <i>Imago Pietatis</i> (c. 1460-1470), tempera on panel, 50 x 40.4 cm. Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan, Italy.	28
9.	Hans Holbein the Younger, <i>Diptych with Christ as the Man of Sorrows and the Virgin as Mater Dolorosa</i> (c. 1520), oil on limewood, 29 x 39 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland.	32
10.	Hans Holbein the Younger, <i>Christ as the Man of Sorrows Seated on the Cross</i> (c. 1519), pen and brush in ink, 16 x 20.5 cm. Museum of Prints and Drawings, Berlin State Museums, Germany.	32
11.	Antonio Da Firenze, <i>Crucifixion with Mary and St John the Evangelist</i> (c. 1400-1450), tempera on wood, 151 x 85 cm. The Hermitage, Saint Petersburg, Russia.	34
12.	Liz Maw, <i>Crying faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon</i> (2007), oil on board, 44.5 x 44.8 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.	40
13.	Liz Maw, <i>Maria Tranquillitatis</i> (1998), oil on board, 193 x 123 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.	40

14.	Liz Maw, <i>Satan</i> (2003), oil on board, 180 x 140 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.	42
15.	Liz Maw, <i>Colleen</i> (2005), oil on board, 232 x 130 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.	42
16.	Liz Maw, <i>Deepa</i> (2004), oil on board, 138 x 120 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.	42
17.	Liz Maw, <i>Lady Kathryn and I</i> (2011), oil on board, 151.5 x 111.5 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.	42
18.	Hans Holbein the Younger, detail from <i>The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb</i> (1521-1522), oil on limewood, 32.4 x 202.1 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland.	64
19.	Joel-Peter Witkin, <i>Corpus Medius</i> (2000), silver print, 40.64 x 50.8 cm. © Joel-Peter Witkin, image courtesy of Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago, United States of America.	66
20.	Tony Fomison, <i>Study of Holbein's 'Dead Christ'</i> (1973), oil on canvas, 68 x 311.3 cm. © Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, New Zealand, purchased with assistance from the Serra Trust and the Elise Maurant Bequest, 1996.	66
21.	Hans Holbein the Younger, <i>The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb</i> (1521-1522), oil on limewood, 32.4 x 202.1 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland.	69
22.	Titian, <i>Assumption of the Virgin</i> (1518), oil on panel, 690 x 360 cm. Church of the Glorious Saint Mary of Friars, Venice, Italy.	76
23.	Liz Maw, <i>Francis Upritchard</i> (2010), oil on board, 209 x 113 cm. Exhibition 2010, Artspace, Auckland, New Zealand. © Courtesy of the artist.	76
24.	Liz Maw, detail from <i>Francis Upritchard</i> (2010), oil on board, 209 x 113 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.	78
25.	Hans Holbein the Younger, detail from <i>The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb</i> (1521-1522), oil on limewood, 32.4 x 202.1 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland.	78
26.	Elias Moskos. <i>Christ Pantocrator</i> (1653), egg tempera on wood, 119 x 84.5 cm. Ikonen-Museum, Recklinghausen, Germany.	81
27.	Joel-Peter Witkin, <i>Glass Man</i> (1994), silver print, 80 x 64.5 cm. © Joel-Peter Witkin, image courtesy of Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago, United States of America.	81

# ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Margreta Chance  
October 2013

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to my supervisors, friends, and family whose support has made this project possible.

I am most appreciative of the valuable contribution made by my supervisors, and the indelible influence they had on the development of the project. First and foremost I thank my primary supervisor, Dr Christopher Braddock, for his guidance and critique. As well, I thank Dr Mark Jackson for becoming my secondary supervisor later in the project, and for his guidance and critique. I also thank my initial secondary supervisor, Andy Thomson, for his contribution in the early stages of the project.

I am grateful to my friends who gave me support and encouragement during the course of the project. In particular, I thank Dr Heather Devere who initiated the venture, and provided steadfast support throughout. I also thank Dr Elizabeth Manton, Elizabeth Mitchell, and Margaret Weston for their support at key stages during the project. Furthermore, I thank Peter and Hilary McLeavey for giving me access to their collection of photographs by Joel-Peter Witkin.

Above all, I thank my husband Richard Killeen and my daughter Zahra Killeen-Chance for their unwavering love and care.



# ABSTRACT

*The Cadaverous Presence* investigates two paintings: Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, and Liz Maw's *Francis Upritchard*. Both works of art put a metaphysical quest for an ontological truth into question, and open up an inquiry into the place of death in the image. The project explores how the art works are both a sight, and a site, for exploring ambiguities that cannot partake of a metaphysical closure, but instead expose an aporetic relationship between truth and death.

The research is guided by the theorists Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida. Their deconstructive strategies are employed to expose how the terms of a binary are not mutually exclusive, but co-exist in an infinite undecidability. Firstly, the inquiry explores how Holbein and Maw depict figures that signify an ambivalent play between the teleological and mortal ends of humankind, and how this undecidability is irreducible to a truth about death. Secondly, the inquiry explores how the image itself is the site for an undecidable ambivalence between presence and absence, and how all images are irreducible to an absolute presence. The project argues that the sight of the painted figures, and the site of the image, both expose truth as a relative structure in which death is experienced as a cadaverous, absence of presence.

Art is primarily the consciousness of grief,  
and not its consolation.

*(L'art est d'abord la conscience du malheur,  
non pas sa compensation.)*

Maurice Blanchot

# INTRODUCTION

Where is death in the image? This is the thetic question that defines the parameters of the research, and that is being asked of two paintings: *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521-1522) by the German artist Hans Holbein the Younger<sup>1</sup> (c. 1497-1543) (*Figure 1*); and *Francis Upritchard* (2010) by the New Zealand artist Liz Maw<sup>2</sup> (1966-) (*Figure 2*). The art works not only open up an inquiry into images that signify death, but also into the status of the image itself.

Each of the art works by Holbein and Maw confronts the viewer with an ambiguous figure that signifies both death and transcendence, and this enables an inquiry into whether the images can offer up a singular truth about death. The ambivalent play between the physical and the metaphysical ends of humankind challenges the classical notion of mimesis,<sup>3</sup> which holds that an image is a mimetic representation of an absolute truth. Here the thetic question is an inquiry into whether it is possible for Holbein and Maw to depict a truth about death. Implicit in the question is a second inquiry into the status of the image itself. The image of a cadaver challenges classical mimesis by bringing to the fore the notion that the object depicted is in fact irretrievably absent. In other words, the cadaver makes absence itself present. The thetic question here becomes an inquiry into whether the image itself is cadaverous, which is to say, an absence of presence. As Maurice Blanchot (1951/1999d) states: “The strangeness of the cadaver is the strangeness of the image” (p. 419).

The selection of a sixteenth century German painting and a twenty-first century New Zealand painting is not motivated by their distance from each other in time and space, but rather by their proximity to each other through a shared Euro-Christian heritage. Holbein and Maw are separated by over five hundred years of history and estranged by immeasurable cultural differences, but at the same time each of the figures in the art works depicts an ambivalent play between a mortal death and a metaphysical

---

<sup>1</sup> Hans Holbein the Younger is a German artist who began working in the Swiss city of Basel in 1520. However, the Protestant Reformation, initiated by Martin Luther in 1517, caused iconoclastic riots in Basel that threatened Holbein’s livelihood as an artist of religious icons, so he sought refuge and work abroad.

<sup>2</sup> Liz Maw is a contemporary New Zealand artist who lives and works in Auckland, New Zealand. She was raised in the Catholic faith, and her paintings often depict contemporary subjects combined with religious references.

<sup>3</sup> See Plato’s *Republic* for a classical understanding of mimesis. Plato argues that the sensible world is a simulacrum, which is to say a false representation or falsified copy, of ideal Forms. In Book VII Plato asserts that truth is only attainable outside the act of imitation, and in the intelligible world of reason: “the capacity for knowledge is innate in each man’s mind” (518c). Furthermore, in Book X Plato asserts that the sensible world is a copy, or doubling of an original truth. Art in turn, is regarded as a mimetic representation of aspects of the mimetic sensible world, which puts art at a third remove from the original ideal Form. For a radical critique of Platonic mimesis see Jacques Derrida’s (1972/1981) essay *The Double Session*, where he argues that there is no original, autonomous text, and no copy version. For Derrida, mimesis is an operation, a play of undecidability whereby a sign is at once imitator and imitated, signifier and signified, figure and ground: “passing alternately from one to the other” (p. 260). All signs have the syntax of undecidability whereby there is an “indefinite fluctuation between two possibilities” (p. 225). In other words: “signs ... have a double, contradictory, undecidable value that always derives from their syntax” (p. 221).



*Figure 1.* Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521-1522), oil on limewood, 32.4 x 202.1 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland.



*Figure 2. Liz Maw, Francis Upritchard (2010), oil on board, 209 x 113 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.*

*telos*.<sup>4</sup> Thus, both art works engage with an onto-theological dilemma that grapples with the relationship between life and death: living and not living; living and living on. In this way, the art works invite comparison. The second section of this Introduction, Selection of Art Works, discusses this comparison at greater length.

Holbein's painting depicts a full-length, lateral portrait of Jesus Christ's supine corpse, which is placed within the narrow recess of a rock-cut tomb.<sup>5</sup> Despite the partialness of Holbein's side view, the viewer is confronted with the putrescent corporality of the dead Christ,<sup>6</sup> which challenges the beatific vision of a future resurrection and "transcendental end".<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Maw's painting depicts a full-length, frontal portrait of the New Zealand expatriate artist Francis Upritchard, who stands with arms aloft at the centre of the picture plane. Here, the viewer is confronted with the unnatural suspension of a female figure in a skyless, cloudy ground. While this floating figure with uplifted arms connotes the Catholic dogma of the Virgin Mary's Assumption,<sup>8</sup> the glory of a *telos* is threatened by the figure's dismembering limbs,<sup>9</sup> and dismembered eyes. Thus, each of these images is ambiguous: Christ's putrefaction signifies an empirical death, but the stigmatic wounds also signify both the narrative of Christ's Passion, and the counter-narrative<sup>10</sup> of Christ's resurrection (Figure 3); Upritchard's suspension signifies a narrative of assumptive transcendence, but the dismembering limbs and dismembered eyes also signify an empirical death.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Telos* is the Greek word for ultimate end. A teleology holds that there is a final cause, purpose or end.

<sup>5</sup> Holbein's lateral view point suggests that Christ's tomb is a rectangular recess cut into a rock wall of a burial chamber. Nevertheless, the light falling on Christ's body is not coming from the side but from above, which suggests an open, freestanding sarcophagus.

<sup>6</sup> See Julia Kristeva's (1987/1989a) essay *Holbein's Dead Christ*, which provides the model for abbreviating Holbein's title *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, to *Dead Christ*. Likewise, Maw's title *Francis Upritchard*, is sometimes abbreviated to *Upritchard*.

<sup>7</sup> See Derrida's (1972/1995b) *The Ends of Man*, where he uses the phrase "transcendental end" (p. 123). For the sake of consistency, the thesis adopts Derrida's use of the word "transcendental" in relation to a *telos*, end or purpose. Refer to section 2.1.1 for further discussion. Similarly, the thesis adopts Derrida's phrase "transcendental signified". Refer to section 2.1.2 for further discussion. Otherwise, the thesis uses the word transcendent.

<sup>8</sup> The Assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven, also known as The Assumption, refers to the Virgin Mary being assumed body and soul into heaven. The Roman Catholic pope, Pius XII, defined The Assumption as an infallible dogma in 1950. However, it is not a doctrine of the Protestant Churches because it is not explicitly referred to in the Bible.

<sup>9</sup> At first sight, Maw's *Francis Upritchard* appears to be an integrated figure. However, the contrast between the minimal modulation of the black robe and the pronounced modulation of the body parts, creates a double movement in which the limbs detach and reattach. This evokes an uncanny, ambiguous indeterminacy between dismemberment and re-memberment. Refer to section 3.1.2 for further discussion.

<sup>10</sup> Prolepsis is the technique employed to foreshadow or anticipate a future event, and it is used in Christianity to construct a counter-narrative of salvation that is an integral part of the narrative of the Passion (Figure 3). See James Hillman (1992) who asserts that the Christian narrative of Christ's Passion has, as an integral part of the story, the counter-narrative of Christ's Easter: "in the Christian allegory Friday is never valid *per se*, for Sunday - as an integral part of the myth - is preexistent in Friday from the start" (original emphases, p. 98). Also, see Marina Warner (1976/1978) who argues that the Virgin Mary's narrative is predicated on Christ's salvation: "Her double consent - to the Incarnation and to the Atonement - associate her in this supreme way in the scheme of salvation" (p. 220). Warner contends that the Virgin's tribulations are suffered in so far as the forthcoming triumph is awaited: "The mystery of the *Mater Dolorosa* flourished on the tension between grief and joy, between the death of the Cross and the future Resurrection" (p. 219). Furthermore, see Sister Wendy Beckett (2009) who asserts that the Virgin's double consent to the incarnation and the cross is a particular feature of post-Iconoclastic iconography: "In post-Iconoclasm, nearly every icon of the Virgin seemed shadowed, however gently and tenderly, by an awareness that her Son will be crucified" (p. 121).

What are the implications of these ambiguities within the Western onto-theological tradition?

Western propositional logic includes the property of being either true or false, and a viewer might assume that the titles of these paintings are not only statements of fact, but also that there is a “truth in painting”<sup>11</sup> that can be located. Indeed, the declarative power of the titles *propose* that the image of Holbein’s *Dead Christ*, and the image of Maw’s *Upritchard*, are mimetic representations that will offer up the presence of a stable truth. However, these paintings are indeterminate, and this poses a dilemma



Figure 3. Andreas Ritzos (attributed), *The Mother of God of the Passion* (late 15<sup>th</sup> century), egg tempera on wood, 82 x 61.5 cm. Ikonen-Museum, Recklinghausen, Germany. This is an example of the Greek Orthodox icon type in which the sorrowing Madonna is anticipating the Passion as a necessity for the counter-narrative of atonement and resurrection. Archangels to the left and right hold symbols of the Cross, Spear and Sponge, while the Christ Child looks on in horror at this prefiguration of the Passion.

<sup>11</sup> See Derrida’s (1978/1987) *The Truth in Painting*, which is a lecture course that takes its title from a letter in which Paul Cézanne says: “I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you” (p. 2). Derrida’s extended discussion on aesthetics concerns the inherent instability of meaning, and the impossibility of attributing a single truth, or meaning, to a painting. In the final chapter *Restitutions*, Derrida examines the attempts by Martin Heidegger and Meyer Schapiro to identify the “true” referent in Vincent Van Gogh’s painting, *Old Shoes with Laces*. Derrida contends that when Heidegger and Schapiro each restores the shoes to a different subject outside of the painting, it exposes how a frame does not enclose a window on the world, but instead reveals the permeability of the framing contexts. Derrida demonstrates that there is a dynamic play of interpretation that is irreducible to a single truth.



in the classical paradigm of logical noncontradiction where truth and falsity are incompatible. Viewers who wish to locate a “truth” in these paintings may ask: How can Christ signify a resurrection if Holbein has depicted a putrescent body? Inversely, how can Upritchard signify dismemberment if Maw has depicted a suspended body? In order to resolve these dilemmas, a viewer may assume a polemical approach whereby one side of the polemic is argued at the expense of the other.

If we return to the thetic question it now becomes clear what is at stake. Where is death in the image? The question signals an interrogation into the classical presupposition that an image represents a stable presence, and that a truth can be located. In other words, the question challenges the Western metaphysical quest for an ontological<sup>12</sup> *telos*, and directs the inquiry towards interrogating several philosophical modalities<sup>13</sup> that underpin a totalising dialectic. “Where?” directs the interrogator to the modality of spatiality, and an inquiry into the presupposition that there is a metaphysical architecture that has a locatable centre, fixed axial orientation, and determined borderlines between inner and outer. “Is?” directs the interrogator to the modality of metaphysical presence, and an inquiry into the presupposition that there is a discarnate, omniscient, visionary truth. “Death?” directs the interrogator to the modality of absence, and an inquiry into the presupposition that truth and negativity are mutually exclusive. “In the image?” directs the interrogator to the modality of classical mimesis, and an inquiry into the presupposition that an image is a re-presentation of an ideal truth, and denotes a correspondence between a signifier and a signified. Thus, there is an interrogation into the way truth (a discourse on presence, Being, *telos*), and negativity (a discourse on absence, non-Being, death), are determined by philosophical modalities. The aim is to tremble these structures in order to open up an inquiry into the notion that these binaries are not mutually exclusive, but rather, that they are subject to a transgressive play of movement. From this point of view, an image is not a locatable presence but rather a “cadaverous presence”, an “ungraspable, noncontemporary” absence of presence (Blanchot, 1951/1999d, pp. 418-419).

While these inquiries bring the Western metaphysics of presence and its dialectical paradigm under scrutiny, it is not in order to “undo” or “correct” the current scholarship on the paintings by Holbein and Maw. The thesis seeks to extend current scholarship by uncovering self-contradictions, or aporias,<sup>14</sup> through the exposure of ideologies that have been excluded, or repressed. The exposure of an aporia neither

---

<sup>12</sup> Ontology is derived from two Greek words: *ontos*, which means being, existing, essence; and *logia*, which means science, study, theory. Ontology is a discipline of metaphysics that involves the philosophical study of the concept of Being itself. See Frederick Copleston (1985) who states that Aristotle calls metaphysics the science of “being qua being”, in contrast to the sciences of particular kinds of beings. Copleston says of this distinction: “The special sciences isolate a particular sphere of being, and consider the attributes of being in that sphere; but the metaphysician does not consider being of this or that particular characteristic, e.g. as living or quantitative, but rather being itself and its essential attributes as being” (p. 290). Thus, an ontological understanding is an investigation into Being as such, whereas an ontical understanding addresses the facts about the existence of things.

<sup>13</sup> Logical modalities are the modes or ways in which propositions can be true or false, possible or impossible.

<sup>14</sup> An aporia is a paradox or contradiction, which is derived from the Greek word *aporos*, which means impasse or without passage. See Derrida’s (1993) *Aporias: dying-awaiting (one another at) the ‘limits of truth’*, where he likens an aporia to an impassable passage: “the difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible, passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage” (p. 8). In



affirms nor negates a discourse, but instead it poses an uncertainty, an undecidability,<sup>15</sup> which suspends and questions the structures of exclusion operating in the discourse. In order to open the discourses to what they exclude or repress, the interrogation will be using deconstruction strategies. While these strategies cannot be formulated into a deconstructive methodology, the thesis applies a series of strategic moves as appropriate. These strategies include: interrogating texts for dialectical structures of exclusion and repression; locating and dismantling binary oppositions; exposing aporias, or moments of self-contradiction.

Several aporias are exposed during the course of the thesis. In Chapter One, an aporia of narrative is identified in Christian iconography, and in the paintings by Holbein and Maw, which expose the co-existence between a divine, objective metanarrative<sup>16</sup> and a mortal, subjective narrative. Two aporias are discussed in Chapter Two: Jacques Derrida's aporia of *eschaton* or ending, in which he uncovers the co-existence between teleological metaphysics and philosophical humanism; and Blanchot's aporia of the imaginary, which unveils the co-existence between the presence of an image and the irretrievable absence of the depicted object. In Chapter Three, two further aporias are exposed: an aporia of spatiality that uncovers the co-existence between verticality and horizontality, inside and outside; and an aporia of vision that unveils the co-existence between sightedness and blindness. For each aporia the metaphysics of presence is brought under scrutiny, and the thesis argues for the co-existence of presence and death in the image.

## BLANCHOT AND DERRIDA

The research is guided by the theories of Blanchot and Derrida. In particular, their deconstructive strategies are applied to the images to expose truth as a relative structure that exceeds both the physical and the metaphysical frames of reference. Both theorists challenge the dialectical paradigm of traditional Greco-Christian metaphysics in which oppositional terms are held to be an irreconcilable dichotomy. They contend that the terms of a binary are not self-present truths, but instead argue that there is a double structure where the terms are contingent on each other, and never stabilise into a final truth. For Blanchot and Derrida, there is an infinite undecidability.

The traditional Western epistemological paradigm assumes that antithetical polarities are mutually exclusive, and that oppositional terms can be related in stable, logical,

---

this way, an aporia is an impossible passage. See also, Derrida's (1979) *Living on: Border lines* where an aporia is referred to as an "impossible possibility" (p. 101).

<sup>15</sup> The radicality of Derrida's undecidables is that philosophy itself is opened up to its exclusion and repression of the other. As a result, the unconcealing of undecidables does not imply a lack of moral responsibility, but rather, and most crucially, it opens the ethico-political imperatives in any work, to the excluded other.

<sup>16</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard (1984) who critiques "metadiscourse" as a "grand narrative" whose totalising account appeals to a transcendent, universal truth: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives .... Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?" (original emphasis, pp. xxiv-xxv). Lyotard proposes that metanarratives give way to *petits récits*, which is to say little, localised narratives. This brings a plurality of other, suppressed narratives into focus.

hierarchical binaries.<sup>17</sup> In an interview with Julia Kristeva in *Positions*, Derrida (1972/2002) proposes that hierarchical binaries privilege one element as ideal and superior, while simultaneously repressing and marginalising the other element as supplementary and inferior:

In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful co-existence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition. (p. 39)

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida (1967/1997) postulates that the classical ontology of Western metaphysics privileges atemporality and presence while subordinating temporality and death.<sup>18</sup> “an ontology which, in its innermost course, has determined the meaning of being as presence”<sup>19</sup> (p. 70). Barbara Johnson (1972/1981), in her translator’s note for Derrida’s *Dissemination*, puts it this way: “In general, what these hierarchical oppositions do is privilege unity, identity, immediacy, and temporal and spatial *presentness* over distance, difference, dissimulation, and deferment” (original emphasis, p. viii). In other words, metaphysical presence is an undivided state of immediacy and presentness, which denies distance, difference, temporality and death. Thus, even though the paradox of the absent presence of the transcendent Christ is at the heart of the Euro-Christian metaphysical tradition of Being, this tradition has been determined as a history of presence.

---

<sup>17</sup> See Plato’s *Phaedo* for his epistemology, which asserts that universal, objective ideas can be recollected using logic (73a-77a). It also asserts that when ideas have an opposite, the two terms form logical, hierarchical binaries (70a-72d). Plato maintains that the process of acquiring knowledge consists primarily in remembering the Forms (things and ideas) that the soul once beheld in its state of pre-existence (72e-73a). Plato argues that these pre-existent Forms are “constant and invariable” (78d), “invisible” (79a), “everlasting and deathless and changeless” (79d) and “divine” (80a), which gives them an objective, ontological status. Derrida refers to this epistemological quest for indubitable, pure, self-present knowledge as logocentrism. Alan Bass (2002), in his introduction to *Positions: Jacques Derrida*, puts it this way: logocentrism is “the deep-laid metaphysical prejudice whereby the values of truth and reason are equated with a privileged epistemic access to thoughts ‘in the mind’ of those presumed or authorized to know” (p. xxiii).

<sup>18</sup> See Plato’s *Phaedo* for the Form of Life Argument where it is contended that since the body is mortal and subject to physical death, the soul (the Form of Life) must be its indestructible opposite: “soul will never admit the opposite of that which accompanies it? ... And soul does not admit death” (105d-105e). Also, see Plato’s Cyclical or Opposites Argument where it is asserted that those things that have opposites, come to be from their opposite: “opposites from opposites, wherever there is an opposite” (70d). Furthermore, see Plato’s Argument from Affinity for a list of attributes that likens the soul to eternal life, and the body to the cycle of mortality: “The soul is most like that which is divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, and ever self-consistent and invariable, whereas body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, dissoluble, and never self-consistent” (80b).

<sup>19</sup> See Derrida’s (1967/1997) *Of Grammatology*, where in a parenthetical aside, Derrida gives a “historical sequence” for the determination of the meaning of Being as presence: “(presence of the thing to the sight as *eidos*, presence as substance/essence/existence [*ousia*], temporal presence as point [*stigmè*] of the now or of the moment [*nun*], the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other and of the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth)” (p. 12).

Derrida (1967/1997) goes on to state that his intention is to expose the ambiguity<sup>20</sup> of presence: “To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words ‘proximity,’ ‘immediacy,’ ‘presence’ ... is my final intention” (p. 70). Derrida challenges the traditional taxonomical paradigm by arguing that the relationship between binary oppositions is subject to a play of movement, which resists stabilisation into hierarchical categories.<sup>21</sup> In his seminal essay *Différance*,<sup>22</sup> Derrida (1968/1995a) calls the play of movement *différance*, and posits that it is not a “pure nominal unity” but rather a play of difference and deferment: “The elements of signification function due not to the compact force of their nuclei but rather to the network of oppositions that distinguishes them, and then relates them one to another” (p. 10). Derrida asserts that this play of contrasts and relationships is a perpetual movement that never finds stasis in union, but makes substitution possible: “It ... unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and deferring .... This unnameable is the play which makes possible ... the chains of substitutions of names” (pp. 26-27). The ceaseless play of Derrida’s dislocating chain of differing and deferring exposes the instability of formalised hierarchical oppositions.

Similarly, Blanchot’s seminal essay *Literature and the Right to Death*, argues that language is inherently ambiguous, and that words do not have a stable, univocal meaning. Blanchot (1947/1999a) proposes that language is a paradoxical double gesture whereby a word negates the immediacy of the world, while simultaneously preserving a fictional presence in its absence: “The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being” (p. 379). Thus, words distance us from the things we give voice to by negating them, but at the same time, this distance is the condition of meaning:

---

<sup>20</sup> See Derrida’s (1998/2000) *Demeure*, where he argues that ambiguity does not invalidate metaphysics: “this undecidability, like the abyssal co-implications it engenders, does not in the least invalidate the exigency of truthfulness, sincerity or objectivity” (p. 92).

<sup>21</sup> See Rosalind Krauss (1993) who asserts that the instability of a paired contrary is akin to the indeterminate swing of a pendulum, and like Derrida, she argues that it “refuses formalization” into a static “categorical relation” (p. 191). Krauss observes this refusal in Alberto Giacometti’s sculpture *Suspended Ball* (1930-31), which is a tableau of three elements: a sphere with an incised cleft is suspended above a tilted crescent shaped wedge, and the wedge is anchored on a platform that is supported by a scaffolding of rods. The sphere and wedge are sexually ambiguous, and both objects evoke female and male body parts simultaneously. For each of the part objects, there is a “pendular swing” of shifting identity because they could be standing in for either a female body or a male body (Yve-Alain Bois and Krauss, 1997, p. 155). Each of the elements enters a migration, “with one element sent mutating into the next” (ibid). There is an operation, which ensures that closure in an absolute meaning, or definitive whole cannot be achieved: “If the grid’s system of intersection works to produce the universalization of difference – in a pure, abstract network of oppositions – each imagined swing of the work’s pendulum resists the work of this work, fails to reinforce this difference, refuses the repeated production of the categorical relation (male/female)” (Krauss, 1993, p. 191). Nevertheless, the analogy of the pendulum swing could be critiqued for implying that undecidability defaults to an either/or, and thereby conserves an oppositional binary. See Derrida’s (1995) essay *Khōra* where he postulates that deconstruction takes place by way of a double oscillation rather than a single, pendular oscillation: “[It] is not an oscillation among others, an oscillation between two poles. It oscillates between two types of oscillation: the double exclusion (*neither/nor*) and the participation (*both this and that*)” (p. 91).

<sup>22</sup> See Derrida (1968/1995a) who, in his essay *Différance*, proposes that meaning is subject to what he deliberately misspells as *différance*, a pun on the French word *différer* that means both to differ and to defer (p. 8). This pun underscores Derrida’s argument that meaning is subject to a double process of differing and deferring. Furthermore, by substituting an ‘a’ for an ‘e’ Derrida’s misspelling marks a difference that can only be read and not heard, thus demonstrating that the logocentric hierarchy of speech over writing can be inverted, and more importantly, that speech is dependent on writing.

[I]t is accurate to say that when I speak: death speaks *in* me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address: it is there between us as the distance which separates us, but this distance is also what prevents us from being separated, because it contains the condition for all understanding. (original emphasis, p. 380)

For Blanchot, language produces meaning absent of the object it designates: “the word excludes the existence of what it designates” (p. 381). There is a separation, a distance between words and things: “Thus is born the image that does not directly designate the thing, but rather, what the thing is not” (p. 382). As a result, there is an unending potential for meaning because the word designates neither one thing nor the other. The suspension of meaning creates a ceaseless movement that prevents a stable identity from ever arriving: “they [words] are unstable groups, no longer terms, but the movement of terms, an endless sliding of ‘turns of phrase’ which do not lead anywhere” (ibid). Thus, for Blanchot, meaning is indeterminate: “an ambiguous indeterminacy that wavers between yes and no” (p. 398).

The thesis does not seek a closure of meaning in the art works by Holbein and Maw, but rather it seeks to break open a unified, totalising meaning to expose a free play of alternative meanings that cannot be exhausted. As Roland Barthes (1964/1992) contends in *The Metaphor of the Eye*, a signifier points to other signifiers in a ceaseless chain that finds no rest in a stable signified, or final truth: “each of the terms is always the signifier of another (no term is a simple signified), without our ever being able to stop the chain” (p. 242). The thesis proposes that Holbein’s *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, and Maw’s *Francis Upritchard* signify multiple chains of signifiers whose indeterminacy ensures an irreducibility. As Derrida (1979) asserts: “open polysemia plays with the language to the point of stopping [*arrêter*] any translation of it” (p. 109). Nevertheless, this undecidability is not simply the liberty of no stable meanings where one can abdicate responsibility because meaning is in free play. On the contrary, the chain of signifiers offers up interpretive possibilities, and with it, a demand for the responsibility to decide in the face of the undecidable.

Blanchot’s distancing, and Derrida’s *différance*, contest classical mimesis in which truths are regarded as static terms of identity that denote a correspondence between an idea and a thing, and belong to a transcendent realm. In effect, Blanchot and Derrida are challenging the Hegelian legacy of modernist aesthetics that posits that an image has an ontological status,<sup>23</sup> which is to say, that an image confirms the continuing presence of the object beyond the senses. Thus, Blanchot and Derrida are contesting the presupposition that there is a meta-language, a language beyond rhetoric, which provides access to an unmediated experience of truth and Being. Indeed, Derrida announces a challenge in the opening gambit of his essay *White Mythology: Metaphor*

---

<sup>23</sup> See Paul de Man’s (1983/1989) *The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau*, where he defines the ontological status of an image: “When representation is conceived as imitation, in the classical sense of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, it confirms rather than undermines the plenitude of the represented entity. It functions as a mnemotechnic sign that brings back something that happened not to be there at the moment, but whose existence in another place, at another time, or in a different mode of consciousness is not challenged. The model for this idea of representation is the painted image, restoring the object to view as if it were present and thus assuring the continuation of its presence .... It (art) involves the representation of what lies beyond the senses as a means to confer upon it the ontological stability of perceived objects” (pp. 123-124).

in the *Text of Philosophy*: “From philosophy, rhetoric” (p. 209). Here Derrida posits that propositional logic uses rhetorical structures to identify one thing with another – *X is like Y*, or *X is Y* – in order to create the illusion of identification, as if there has been no rhetorical mediation. His deconstruction strategies expose, however, that these identifications are founded on a second term that is subordinated. In this way, Derrida demonstrates that Western philosophy is mediated by rhetoric, and in particular by the trope of metaphor.<sup>24</sup>

Derrida asserts that when the dominant term of a binary is based on a second term, there is a surplus or redundancy, which he refers to as a supplement.<sup>25</sup> However, Derrida postulates that while a supplement is a surplus to the dominant term, it also indicates a lack because it completes the dominant term. Accordingly, Derrida maintains that all terms have the ambiguous, double structure of a supplement, which is both surplus and lack. The double structure of supplementarity undermines the logic of identity, and its oppositional binaries. While Derrida’s structure of supplementarity cannot be explained within the rules of logic, Derrida locates this operation in syntactical structures that resist a single, clear signified. Like Blanchot, Derrida draws on the syntax of paired conjunctions such as *neither/nor*,<sup>26</sup> and *both/and*, which do not present a dialectical *either/or*, *yes/no* choice between terms. Instead, these syntactical structures create ambivalent relationships in which the terms are simultaneously negating and affirming.

Blanchot and Derrida challenge the classical logic of possibility by relating the negative and the affirmative in a way that allows both terms to be re-evaluated. Where the syntactical structure of *neither X nor Y* excludes both contradictory terms, the syntactical structure of *both X and Y* includes both contradictory terms. To put this another way, the *neither/nor* structure negates two contraries, while the *both/and* structure affirms two contraries. Blanchot characterises the double affirmation of two

---

<sup>24</sup> See Derrida’s (1971/1995d) essay *White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy*, where he proposes that Western metaphysics is dependent on the trope of metaphor to create a metaphysical discourse, and that the role of metaphor is subordinated because philosophy cannot accommodate the idea that rhetoric mediates a metaphysical order: “Insofar as it structures the metaphorical space of philosophy, the sun represents what is natural in philosophical language” (p. 251). Derrida is not reducing philosophy to an extended, heliotropic metaphor or to a system of figurative language, but rather he is insisting on metaphor’s complicity in Western metaphysical discourse. Metaphysics and metaphor are implicated in each other. While the rhetoric of metaphor is necessary for the creation of a metaphysical order, it is the ideals of philosophy that produce the trope.

<sup>25</sup> See Derrida’s (1967/1997) *Of Grammatology*, where he takes the term supplement from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In a hierarchical binary, Rousseau views a supplement as an “adjunct” to a natural, self-sufficient presence (p. 145). Derrida argues that what is complete in itself cannot be added to, therefore a supplement is conditional on there being a lack: “there is *lack* in Nature and that *because of that very fact* something is added to it” (original emphases, p. 149). Thus, it can be argued that in a binary relationship, the second term or “adjunct” supplements a “lack” in the first term. In this manner, Derrida is able to assert: “there have never been anything but supplements .... that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like ‘real Mother’ name, have always already escaped, have never existed” (p. 159). For Derrida (1972/2002), all terms are supplements, and they are neither a surplus nor a lack: “the *supplement* is neither a plus nor a minus” (original emphasis, p. 40).

<sup>26</sup> See Derrida’s (1979) essay *Living On: Border Lines*, which includes a reading of Maurice Blanchot’s story or *récit*, *The Madness of the Day* (*La Folie du Jour*) (1949). Derrida analyses several ways in which Blanchot uses paradoxical rhetoric so that meaning cannot be fixed or decided upon. For example, Derrida analyses the opening sentence of the narrator’s account: “I am neither learned nor ignorant”. Derrida argues that it is the syntactical structure, “I am neither ... nor ...”, which makes a decidable presence impossible: “which immediately removes the performance from presence” (p. 95).

contraries as a *sometimes/sometimes*<sup>27</sup> relationship, while Derrida characterises it as a *yes/yes* relationship. This is a deliberate departure from the rules of propositional logic. These syntactical structures provide strategies of deconstruction, which enable the thesis to argue that a possibility is simultaneously either possible or impossible. Derrida (1972/2002) expresses it this way: “Neither/nor, that is, *simultaneously* either *or*” (original emphases, p. 40). As Derrida (1980/1992) states, it is a paradoxical logic: “a paradoxical logic that is inscribed without being formalised under this name” (p. 243).

The rhetoric of “paradoxical logic” is a strategy that is applied in the thesis to contest the full presence of an image, and to demonstrate that the images of Christ and Upritchard admit to an ambiguity that cannot partake of an ontological determination, a metaphysical closure, as would be the case for any image. Derrida (1972/1995b), in his essay *The Ends of Man*, argues for a “trembling” of mortal humanity and transcendent metaphysics: “the co-belonging and co-propriety of the name of man and the name of Being” (p. 133). In this manner, the thesis seeks to demonstrate that the narrative outcome for Holbein’s *Dead Christ*, and for Maw’s *Upritchard*, is irreducible to a decidable truth and cannot be made fully knowable. To draw on Derrida’s (1979) rhetoric of paradox, a full presence is an “impossible possibility” (p. 101). Thus, the thesis proposes that a viewer may find themselves<sup>28</sup> suspended in an aporetic double bind where transcendence and mortality are both simultaneously possible and impossible.

Exemplary of the paradoxical rhetoric employed by Blanchot (1951/1999a) is his pithy oxymoron “cadaverous presence”, which is borrowed for the title of the thesis from his essay, *Two Versions of the Imaginary* (p. 419). This seeming contradiction signals that the thesis is arguing that the paintings by Holbein and Maw admit to an ambiguity in which presence and death have a relationship of “co-belonging”. For Blanchot, an image is not a representation of something in the world. Instead, Blanchot argues that an image, rather than resembling a thing, resembles itself. In other words, an image does not have an inherent referential power for communicating a truth, but like a cadaver, the image refers only to itself. As with a cadaver, an image is frozen in place and totally present, but at the same time there is an uncanny absence. In this analogy, the image is experienced as the presence of something, which is at the same time absent and irretrievable. Hence, there is a syntactical double structure of co-belonging at work between two genitives: an image is the condition of death because it depicts an absent thing, but at the same time death is the condition of the image because the absent thing is irretrievable. Each version of the image is the condition of the other, which is to say, it is the co-existence of the two versions that makes the image possible. In this way, the thesis proposes that the images by Holbein and Maw re-present an absent person, but at the same time, death is the very condition of the portraits.

While the thetic question is a direct challenge to self-presence, it is not seeking to

---

<sup>27</sup> See Blanchot’s (1951/1999d) essay *Two Versions of the Imaginary*, where he argues that ambiguity entails a double affirmation of contraries: “Nevertheless, what we distinguish by saying ‘sometimes, sometimes’ ambiguity says by saying always, to a certain extent, the one and the other” (p. 426).

<sup>28</sup> The singular, gender-neutral pronoun “themselves” is used throughout the thesis in preference to the gender-specific pronouns of “himself” (male-centric and exclusive), or “herself” (female-centric and equally exclusive).

subordinate presence but rather to demonstrate, through the application of deconstructive strategies, that presence co-exists with death as an ambivalent potentiality. Like Blanchot's *Two Versions of the Imaginary*, and Derrida's *The Ends of Man* the thesis is arguing that language and art are contingent on death. As Blanchot (1951/1999d) states: "To experience an event as an image is not to have an image of that event" (p. 425). Rather, it is to experience the duplicitous ambiguity of an image, which both annihilates an event, and recaptures it through a fictional figure. However, this puts the viewer in the impossible position of a double bind because the dual movement of negation and affirmation has no respite: "A movement that involves infinite degrees" (ibid). Derrida (1979) asserts that the perpetual movement of the double bind is an infinite violation:

[A] demand for what is impossible: a contradictory double demand, a double petition .... Hence the infinite violence of what can be called a 'double bind,' double obligation, double demand. The disjunction allows for no respite, no hope for reconciliation; it is unceasing, *sans arrêt*" (original emphases, p. 118).

Accordingly, the thesis is arguing that an image is "a contradictory double demand, a double petition" (ibid). It is arguing that because an image and death are the condition of each other, an image has the ambivalent potentiality to be both present and absent.

## SELECTION OF ART WORKS

As has been noted, two art works have been selected for the thesis: *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* painted by the German artist Holbein the Younger, and *Francis Upritchard* painted by the New Zealand artist Liz Maw. Despite the cultural disparities between Holbein and Maw there is a shared historical heritage: an acculturation in Christianity, and an art practice based on the European tradition of realistic representations of the human figure. Moreover, it is possible to contract the distance between these two artists by recontextualising them within a post-structuralist paradigm.

A post-structuralist paradigm enables the art works by Holbein and Maw to be viewed side by side as two "fragments", which can contribute to an open-ended and incomplete "history of the human body" (Feher, 1989, p. 11). The notion of "fragments" implies the fragmentation of a unified view of the human body, and an orientation towards multiple, disjunctive constructs that belong to different cultural contexts and historical periods. Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, and Nadia Tazi provide an exemplar of this paradigm in the editing of their landmark three-volume series, *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*. In the foreword, Feher states that the intention of the series is not to seek a unifying "schema", but to introduce disparate texts that are "fragments", each of which contributes a limited, partial view of the human body (ibid). Thus, when the series brings together forty-nine interdisciplinary and cross-cultural essays on the history of the body, it is with the intention that the dynamic interrelationships between the texts will create a multi-leveled narrative of dissonant fragments and uncertain authorship. The first volume includes Kristeva's essay *Holbein's Dead Christ*, which places Holbein's painting alongside a heterogeneous assortment of visual and scholarly texts, rather than within a homogeneous art historical context. This paradigm enables both Kristeva's

commentary and Holbein's art work to be viewed as "fragments" that have a supplementary relationship, not only with the other texts in the three volumes, but also with those texts that have been excluded or would be created in the future, such as Maw's *Francis Upritchard*.

Like Feher, the thesis is adopting a post-structuralist position where fragmentation is viewed not simply as the way of the world, but as the very condition of knowledge. Post-structuralism regards the work of an author,<sup>29</sup> whether it be a writer or an artist, as part of a complex "tissue of quotations" where there is no privileged centre of authorial discourse either in the sense of a metaphysical authority, or in the sense of a subjective authority: "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes, 1968/1978, p. 146). Moreover, as Derrida contends, each text is a supplement to other texts. There is no original, autonomous text, and no copy version. Every supplement or repetition is seen as something distinct and different from that which is imitated, and not as a likeness. In this Derridean paradigm there is no truth outside the mimetic. Mimesis does not, and indeed cannot, represent an absolute truth. Rather, mimesis is a distinct, unique, supplementary representation of previous texts. Feher has contextualised Kristeva's analysis, as well as Holbein's painting of the dead Christ, within a decentred, intertextual dialogue that is perpetual: "a writing that can know no halt" (Barthes, 1968/1978, p. 147). Similarly, Maw's painting, along with the other art texts discussed in the thesis, can be viewed as "fragments" that supplement, but never dominate, a complex intertextual dialogue on the human body that ranges between ancient and modern, occidental and oriental.

Over and above the art works by Holbein and Maw, the thesis references Byzantine and Latin iconography as well as contemporary art works by Marcel Duchamp, Tony Fomison, Alberto Giacometti and Joel-Peter Witkin. As a result there is a heterogeneous selection of texts ranging across Euro-Christian cultures in both time and space. The selection however, does not include film texts, performative practices, or body art, which are beyond the scope of the thesis. Moreover, given the deconstructive approach outlined above, the selection is not a random recollection for a personal narrative, and nor is it a specific collection for an art historical narrative. In other words, the art works have not been selected to illustrate a theory based on historical determinism and progression. Hence, the thesis is not an attempt to argue that Western art history is teleological by showing how modern art has evolved out of Christian iconography, or by showing how the signs and symbols of death<sup>30</sup> have

---

<sup>29</sup> See Roland Barthes's (1968/1978) seminal essay *The Death of the Author*, which posits that the meaning of a text does not reside with its author but with the reader, thus disrupting the traditional power axis between author and authority: "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue ... there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (p. 148).

<sup>30</sup> Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* and Maw's *Francis Upritchard* are signs of death, but death itself has no face and cannot appear as a sign. See Kristeva's (1987/1989b) essay *Psychoanalysis – A Counterdepressant*, where she argues that while death is not representable, symbols are used to represent the lost object: "The symbol is established through a negation (*Verneinung*) of the loss" (p. 25). Furthermore, see John Lechte's (1990) article *Kristeva and Holbein, Artist of Melancholy*, in which he argues that death does not have a referent, but rather signs are used to refer to death: "death as such cannot appear as a sign; or rather: death in art is only the *sign* of death" (original emphasis, p. 345).



evolved during the course of Western art. Nor is the thesis an attempt to argue that Western philosophy is teleological by showing how attitudes towards death have evolved over time.

Furthermore, the art works have not been selected to establish an alternative system of power by inverting or subverting the gendered binaries of the Western classical taxonomic system.<sup>31</sup> In his essay *Force and Signification*, Derrida (1963/1978b) employs the architectural metaphor of a “keystone” to illustrate how the practice of deconstruction seeks to locate a key moment that trembles the metaphysical structures that underpin a text: “the keystone of an institution, the stone which encapsulates both the possibility and the fragility of its existence” (p. 6). Hence, rather than inverting or subverting texts, the thesis is engaged with locating key moments that tremble the authoritarian determination of a metaphysical truth.

A post-structuralist paradigm enables the thesis to explore the way Euro-Christian artists of different eras and cultures disinter buried ideologies, and reinvent the formal languages that they inherit to expose subordinated ideas. Derrida posits that there is a historical cycle of hierarchical subordination whereby one ideology supplants another. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida (1992/1995) proposes that history could be compared “to a history of revolutions, even to a history of revolution”, where one historical conversion succeeds another (p. 8). Derrida is referring to an ascending movement that allows one historical ideology to repress another:

[T]he mystery that is incorporated, then repressed, is never destroyed. This genealogy has an axiom, namely, that history never effaces what it buries; it always keeps within itself the secret of whatever it encrypts, the secret of its secret. (p. 21)

The thesis applies deconstructive strategies to its heterogeneous selection of art works, to expose how a cycle of ideological subordination “never effaces what it buries” (ibid).

Thus, the thesis employs Blanchot’s double gesture of negation and preservation, and Derrida’s double gesture of differing and deferring, to undo oppositions while also preserving them. The double gesture gives space to that which has been deemed inferior and other, without repudiating what has been privileged as superior and central. To this end, the thesis acknowledges sexual difference<sup>32</sup> from the outset by

---

<sup>31</sup> See Derrida’s (1980/1992) essay *The Law of Genre*, where he acknowledges that the Western taxonomic system categorises by genus and gender, and posits that each categorical term is a pure presence: it “implies an institutionalised classification, an enforceable principle of non-contamination and non-contradiction” (p. 221). However, Derrida challenges a discourse premised on gendered binaries, by arguing that the classical relations based on sexual difference is not a formal one: “There is no natural or symbolic law, universal law, or law of a gender/genre here” (p. 245). Nevertheless, the terms of binary pairs have been gendered from classical times. Indeed, classical taxonomic tables can be traced back to pre-Socratic philosophers, and Aristotle refers to the Pythagoreans as having established a table of ten pairs of opposites in which the scheme of ordering associates masculine and feminine with opposing qualities: male/female, finite/infinite, odd/even, one/many, right/left, rest/motion, straight/curved, light/darkness, good/bad, square/oblong. Thus, any challenge to the dialectical paradigm is a challenge to the Western taxonomic categorisation system in which opposing terms are held to be gendered truths.

<sup>32</sup> See Hélène Cixous’s (1975/1986) essay *Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays* which exposes a series of hierarchical oppositions upon which patriarchy rests: “Activity/Passivity Sun/Moon

juxtaposing a male figure painted by a man, with a female figure painted by a woman. As a result, there is an implicit acknowledgement of two gender identities where neither is subsumed to the other, and where the biological and genealogical histories of the two sexes reciprocally refer to, and co-implicate the other.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, there is an implicit acknowledgement that the double gesture enables all hierarchical oppositions to be deconstructed in a process that disinters what has been culturally repressed, dissimulated and forbidden, while simultaneously acknowledging its debt to the texts it deconstructs.

## THESIS STRUCTURE

There are three chapters, each with a different frame but each centred on Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, and Maw's *Francis Upritchard*. Chapter One is a preparatory engagement with the extant literature; Chapter Two is an engagement with Derridean and Blanchotian deconstructive trajectories; and Chapter Three is an engagement with a more direct application of deconstructive strategies to several art works.

Chapter One is a review of the literature, which consolidates the extant scholarship in relationship to the European art tradition, and the Byzantine/Latin iconographical tradition. Also, the review contextualises the art works within the artists' oeuvre. The research reveals that the scholars do not engage with deconstructive strategies, but employ a traditional, art historical, hermeneutical approach that uses a dialectical framework. The focus of Chapter One is to isolate a key dialectic in the scholarship, and to make a summary analysis of it. The key dialectic selected for the thesis centres on the onto-theological debate around humanism and metaphysics, a debate that the literature frames as a dialectical opposition between the two ends of humankind: a biological end in death, and a teleological end in transcendence. This debate is explored further in Chapter Two via Derrida's essay *The Ends of Man*.

The review of the Byzantine/Latin iconic tradition reveals an aporia of narrative, which exposes the co-existence between a Christian metanarrative of divine redemption, and a human narrative of mortal loss and sorrow. This creates a second strand to the thesis, and an engagement with the Latin icons of the Man of Sorrows (*Vir Dolorum*), and the Mother of Sorrows (*Mater Dolorosa*). The aporetic relationship between an objective metanarrative and a subjective narrative is explored

---

Culture/Nature Day/Night Father/Mother ... Logos/Pathos ... Man/Woman" (p. 63). The list of oppositions provides key terms for a deconstructive reading because they underscore a phallogocentric master discourse that guarantees the superior value of the masculine order. In contrast, the feminine order is aligned with secondary terms such as negativity, death, embodiment, marginality, contingency and ambiguity, all of which are key concepts in the thesis. These concepts are implicated in binaries that embed power hierarchies and gender politics through the "subordination of the feminine to the masculine order" (p. 65). Thus, a deconstructive reading of any binary will "threaten the stability of the masculine structure", which is upheld by the logocentric metaphysics of presence (ibid). Thus, the deconstruction of the binarial discourse has implications not only for the feminist debate, but also for a masculinist debate. Nevertheless, it is outside the scope of the thesis to discuss these implications.

<sup>33</sup> For further discussion on how the selection of art works acknowledges the co-implication of gendered binaries, refer to the following footnotes in Chapter Three: 79 (pp. 74-75), 87 (p. 83), and 89 (pp. 84-85).

further in Chapter Three, via two *récits* by Blanchot: *The Madness of the Day* (*La Folie du Jour*, but also titled *Un récit?* and *Un récit* in a previous journal publication) (1949), and *The Gaze of Orpheus* (*Le Regard d'Orphée*) (1953). Finally, a review of the oeuvre of each artist reveals that both Holbein and Maw were engaging with the onto-theological debate over humanism and metaphysics prior to the art works under discussion.

Chapter Two takes two readings of the research via Derrida and Blanchot, who engage with a deconstruction of Western onto-theology. The first section focuses on Derrida's *The Ends of Man*, which contests that humanism and metaphysics are mutually exclusive oppositions. Instead, Derrida argues for an aporia of *eschaton* or ending by exposing the co-existence between metaphysics and humanism. The second section focuses on Blanchot's *Two Versions of the Imaginary*, which contests the proposition that an image is a re-presentation of an adducible, provable, knowable truth. Instead, Blanchot argues for an aporia of the imaginary by exposing the co-existence between the presence of the image and the absence of the depicted object. In each of these theoretical engagements, death is not a negative absence that is in opposition to presence, but rather death is in an aporetic relationship with presence. Thus, the Derridean and Blanchotian paradigms argue for a negative affirmation, a cadaverous presence, which is a "contradictory double demand" that disrupts the structures of metaphysics underpinning the extant research (Derrida, 1979, p. 118).

Chapter Three takes two further readings of the art works via Derrida and Blanchot. The first reading focuses on the hidden architecture of metaphysics to expose an aporia of spatiality. The texts used for this explication include the two art works by Holbein and Maw, two photographs by Witkin, *Glass Man* (1994) and *Corpus Medius* (2000), and a *récit* by Blanchot, *The Madness of the Day*. The second reading focuses on the hidden ocularcentrism of metaphysics to expose an aporia of vision. The texts used for this explication include the art works by Holbein and Maw, and two *récits* by Blanchot, *The Madness of the Day* and *The Gaze of Orpheus*. The aporias show that while death is unrepresentable and can only appear in art as a sign of death, death can be experienced as an absence of presence.

The hermeneutic desire to reveal a truth that is inscribed in texts is the legacy of the Western philosophical tradition. However, as the thesis contends, when an aporia destabilises a discourse on truth, it destabilises the very ground of interpretation. Rather than locating a truth about death in the paintings, the double movement of distancing and *différance* becomes the condition for the undecidable possibility of life and death. In his essay *Living On: Border Lines*, Derrida (1979) says of the unarrestable, suspensive play of undecidability: "It gives life; it gives death" (original emphases, p. 116). Accordingly, the thesis proposes that there is a dynamic play of interpretation that is irreducible to a single truth.

# CHAPTER 1

## LIVING ON, NOT LIVING ON

Chapter One is a review of the extant literature on Hans Holbein the Younger's painting, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, and Liz Maw's painting *Francis Upritchard*. The review is divided into two sections, Dead Christ and Suspended Upritchard, to enable a separate analysis of each of the art works. However, a three-fold inquiry is undertaken in both sections. Firstly, each section examines the extent to which scholars employ a dialectical framework in their research, and from this a key dialectic is identified that is common to the scholarship of both art works. Secondly, each section establishes a context for each of the paintings within the Byzantine/Latin icon tradition, and it explores how this tradition relates to the key dialectic identified in the scholarship. Finally, each section contextualises the art work within the artist's oeuvre, and explores the extent to which there are precedents that anticipate Holbein's *Dead Christ*, and Maw's *Upritchard*.

The primary focus of the review is to locate key moments of self-contradiction through the exposure of ideologies that have been excluded, or repressed in the research. The review of Holbein's work concentrates on a historical debate over the metaphysical and empirical implications of Holbein's *Dead Christ*, and the extent to which scholars have interpreted the painting both in the light of theological metaphysics, and in the light of secular humanism. The available scholarship on Maw's *Upritchard* is minimal, and being a contemporary work of art there is no historical debate to consider. Nevertheless, the review explores the degree to which the scholarship gravitates towards privileging an interpretation of teleological idealisation, and to what degree the figure's mortifying aspect is considered. The review reveals that there are scholars who attempt to found their research on a totalising view, by reducing their interpretation to either a *telos*, or a mortal death. While this chapter is confined to locating a dialectic that is common to the research of both paintings, Chapter Two explores an aporia of ending via Jacques Derrida's essay *The Ends of Man*, which argues for an aporetic relationship between a *telos* and death.

A secondary focus of the research is to contextualise the art works in relation to the Byzantine/Latin iconographic tradition, and to explore the relationship between specific icons and the paintings of Holbein and Maw. Regarding Holbein's work of art, there is an analysis of the extensive research available on the genealogy of the iconic Man of Sorrows (*Vir Dolorum*), which serves to establish a historical link between Holbein's *Dead Christ* and the Byzantine icon heritage. Similarly, links are made between Maw's *Francis Upritchard*, and two Latin icons that came to prominence during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the Latin Church: the Assumption of Mary<sup>34</sup> and the Standing Mother of Sorrows (*Stabat Mater Dolorosa*)

---

<sup>34</sup> See Marina Warner's (1976/1978) *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, where she states: "The feast of the Dormition arrived from the east in the early seventh century in Gaul, and its name changes to 'assumption' in some ninth-century liturgical calendars" (p. 88). In her chapter on the *Mater Dolorosa*, Warner contends: "The cult of the *Mater Dolorosa* begins to rise in Italy, France, England, the Netherlands, and Spain from the end of the eleventh century, to reach full

(Figure 11). The available research does not trace the genealogy of these two icons in great detail, and consequently what is known of their historical links with Byzantine iconography<sup>35</sup> is limited. The review reveals that, like the paintings of Holbein and Maw, these icons depict an aporia of narrative in which there is an undecidable, aporetic relationship between a Christian metanarrative of divine deliverance, and a subjective account of mortality and mourning. However, within Christianity this is not a contradiction because Church doctrine affirms the divine mortality of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Chapter Two explores the way humanism has sought to subvert this aporia via Derrida's *The Ends of Man*.

The final focus of the review is the oeuvre of Holbein and Maw, which reveals how both artists were depicting an aporia of narrative in earlier works. Regarding Holbein, there is a focus on two small art works: a painting, *Diptych with Christ as the Man of Sorrows and the Virgin as Mater Dolorosa* (c. 1520); and a drawing, *The Man of Sorrows Seated on the Cross* (c. 1519). There is an analysis of the extent to which these works foreshadow Holbein's major painting of the dead Christ with their ambiguous indeterminacy between a salvific metanarrative and a mortal narrative. Similarly, there is an analysis of several art works from Maw's oeuvre. In particular, the research focuses on a series of subversive portraits of the Virgin Mary, and the extent to which they foreshadow Maw's later painting *Francis Upritchard*, with their ambiguous indeterminacy between a redemptive metanarrative and a human narrative of desire and temptation. Chapter Three explores an aporia of narrative further, via two *récits* by Maurice Blanchot: *The Madness of the Day* and *The Gaze of Orpheus*.

## 1.1 DEAD CHRIST

Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* brings the issue of a transcendental purpose or *telos* under scrutiny. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's literary exposition on Holbein's work of art, in his classic novel *The Idiot* (1868-69), has had a seminal influence on the way scholars interpret this painting. Julia Kristeva (1987/1989a) draws on Dostoyevsky's analysis in her essay *Holbein's Dead Christ* to explicate her psychoanalytic theory of depression and melancholia. In turn, Kristeva's essay has had a critical influence on contemporary scholarship. John Lechte (1990) responds to Kristeva's psychoanalytic analysis to examine the role of realism in relation to the issue of transcendence, while Athena Colman (2004) relates Kristeva's analysis of Holbein's painting to Kristeva's politics of revolt. Furthermore, Jeff Gatrall (2001) explores the representation of the divine in Holbein and Dostoyevsky, while Tat'iana Kasatkina (2011) analyses Holbein's painting in relation to Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*.

In addition, three monographs provide detailed expositions of Holbein's oeuvre. Paul

---

flowering in the fourteenth" (p. 210). Warner's scholarship does not extend to tracing a historical genealogy between the iconography of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Western Latin Church. Also, see Julia Kristeva and Arthur Goldhammer's (1985) article *Stabat Mater*, which is based in part on Warner's text. It claims that The Assumption does not come to prominence in the West until the twelfth century: "the earliest visions of the Virgin's assumption ... date back no farther than the twelfth century" (p. 140).

<sup>35</sup> The Orthodox Church depicts Mary's departure from earth with the Dormition (*Koimesis*) icon type, and Mary's role as God-bearer with the Mother of God of the Passion (*Theotokos*) icon type (Figure 3).

Ganz (1950) provides a catalogue of Holbein's art works, as well as a brief introductory essay that contextualises Holbein's life and art. John Rowlands (1985) updates and expands Ganz's catalogue, and provides an in-depth chronological analysis of Holbein's life and art. Oskar Bätschmann and Pascal Griener (1997) provide a schematic biography followed by several thematic analyses, one of which is an investigation into Holbein's religious works. In each of these monographs the author(s) give(s) a brief description and analysis of Holbein's painting of the dead Christ. Where Ganz situates the painting primarily within an artistic context, Rowlands, along with Bätschmann and Griener, situate the painting within its religio-cultural milieu to provide an explanation of the original purpose for which it was intended. Hans Belting (1980/1981), Paul Hetherington (1990), Mitchell Merback (2002) and Lachlan Turnbull (2009) provide a fuller analysis of the academic discussion behind the Byzantine/Latin genealogy of the iconic Dead Christ, and of a new movement in Western iconography where an "uncompromising realism" serves as an aid "to devotion" (Rowlands, pp. 52-53).

### 1.1.1 DOSTOYEVSKY'S DOUBT

Two hundred years after Holbein painted his *Dead Christ*, Dostoyevsky delivered a sustained meditation on this work of art in his novel *The Idiot*. Dostoyevsky uses Ippolit Terentyev, a character in the novel, to voice his perception that one could be seized by doubt: "Some people may *lose their faith* by looking at that picture" (as cited in Kristeva, original emphases, 1987/1989a, p. 107). Terentyev's account draws attention to the dramatic realism of Holbein's *Dead Christ*, and the way it puts the divine laws of God into question:

It was a faithful representation of the dead body of a man who has undergone unbearable torments before the crucifixion .... if such a corpse (and it must have been just like that) was seen by all His disciples, by His future chief apostles, by the women who followed Him and stood by the cross ... then how could they possibly have believed, confronted with such a sight, that this martyr would rise again? Here one cannot help being struck by the idea that if death is so horrible and if the laws of nature are so powerful, then how can they be overcome? How can they be overcome when even He did not conquer them. (as cited in Kristeva, pp. 108-109)

The vividness of Dostoyevsky's graphic and illuminating description, of which the above quotation is a small excerpt, is a prism through which some scholars analyse Holbein's painting. Dostoyevsky understood the subversive implications of Holbein's forensic depiction of Christ's dead body when he wrote that it could undermine a pious belief in the resurrection, and could make one doubt. This unsettling doubt, this "absence of a clear message on the question of belief and disbelief", is reflected in the scholarship that is divided between two schools of thought: those who contend that Holbein's anatomical realism strips Christ's corpse of the promise of resurrection, and those who assert its pious intent (Gatrall, 2001, p. 219).

For those scholars for whom Terentyev's doubt has become a certainty, Holbein's *Dead Christ* fails to invite the spectator "to pious contemplation" of a metaphysical

*telos* (Ganz, 1950, p. 8). Ganz maintains that Holbein's Christ has been depicted "as a body rigid in death, a study after nature done with scientific exactitude, and lacking all spiritual values" (p. 218). Likewise, Kristeva (1987/1989a) asserts emphatically that Holbein's Christ "is truly dead .... not the slightest suggestion of transcendency. ... this corpse shall never rise again" (p. 110). Lechte (1990) contends: "perhaps for the first time in the modern era, a 'Minimalist' style is used to introduce an image of crucifixion without resurrection" (p. 145). Gatrall (2001) maintains: "Holbein's 'Dead Christ' betrays no trace of his divinity" (p. 229). Similarly, Colman (2004) states: "Confronted with Holbein's Christ we could very well be confronted with *any body*. Encapsulated and encrypted within a tomb that allows no space for the thought or the imagining of transcendence." Colman continues: "Nothing in the painting promises resurrection" (original emphases, p. 91). For this school of thought, the merciless, earthly realism of Holbein's *Dead Christ* affirms the physical end of life while simultaneously annulling the possibility of a metaphysical *telos*. In effect, the painting is being interpreted in terms of secular humanism, which exposes the employment of a hermeneutic, dialectical approach on the part of these scholars.

Rowlands, along with Bättschmann and Griener, also approach Holbein's *Dead Christ* hermeneutically, however in contrast to the scholars above, they contend that Holbein's Christ provides a corpse that has the dramatic intensity with which pious devotees can empathise. Rowlands (1985) accedes that, "None of the physical aspects of death are spared", however he postulates that Holbein's intentions have been misinterpreted not only by Dostoyevsky, but by "many" others in the "last century", whom Rowlands chooses to leave unnamed:

Far from it being the product of an atheistic mind, its unpalatable details harmonize well with the uncompromising realism that was an abiding element in the late medieval meditations on Christ's Passion. Such paintings, produced as aids to devotion, were meant to be as dramatic as possible, so that the viewer's powers of imagination would be greatly intensified. ... Far from conveying despair, its message is intended as one of belief, that from the decay of the tomb Christ rose again in glory on the third day." (pp. 52-53)

Similarly, Bättschmann and Griener (1997) assert that Holbein's *Dead Christ* is a "work of piety", and argue that it seeks to deepen the beholder's pity through its "graphic and repugnant details" (pp. 89-90). This "martyrizing" reflects a "religious sensibility" that corresponds to a movement called *Devotio Moderna*<sup>36</sup> (ibid). Among the movement's tenets, *Devotio Moderna* stresses a personal and devotional meditation on Christ's life and death. In order to arouse piety in the spectator, the traditional liturgical function<sup>37</sup> of the icons was reinterpreted, and its ideographic

---

<sup>36</sup> *Devotio Moderna* is Latin for Modern Devotion. This is a pre-Reformation movement that originated in the Netherlands, and spread to Germany and beyond, in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century. Its central tenet is to imitate the life of Christ by renouncing the world and immersing oneself in the life of Jesus. The classic text for the movement is *The Imitation of Christ*, which is attributed to Thomas à Kempis.

<sup>37</sup> See Eva Haustein-Bartsch (2008) who describes how the Eastern Orthodox Church uses festival icons, in conjunction with a fixed cycle of twelve feasts, to mark the liturgical year (p. 90). These icons record a chronological sequence of episodes from the lives of Christ and the Virgin. Easter is an additional feast. Also, see Paul Hetherington (1990) who asserts that the *Anastasis* (Resurrection) is the *imago princeps* (principle image), and standard feast scene for Easter (p. 32). This liturgical icon depicts an image of Christ's victory over death and the harrowing of hell.

symbolism was displaced by dramatic scenes from the life of Christ: “the representation of devotional identification with the example of Christ extended into the realm of the image” (Turnbull, 2009, p. 11). These realistic, theatrical presentations emphasised the historical and narrative aspects of Christ’s life in order to actively engage the devotee in private devotional practices. Thus, while attesting to Hobein’s “dreadful vision of a corpse”, Bättschmann and Griener affirm that “the wounds betray the identity of Christ, and with it, reinstate the painting’s sacred dimension” (p. 89).

Furthermore, Kasatkina approaches Holbein’s *Dead Christ* from within a hermeneutic, dialectical framework, and like Rowlands, and Bättschmann and Griener, she argues for a metaphysical interpretation. Kasatkina (2011) maintains that in Russia, Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* has immortalised Holbein’s painting as “a symbol of Christ’s death with no resurrection” for two centuries (p. 75). Accordingly, Kasatkina argues against a discontinuous severance, which is to say the caesura or death of God. Instead, she proposes that there is a movement towards resurrection in Holbein’s painting. Kasatkina claims that when one views Holbein’s *Dead Christ* directly, and not from below, there is an “incipient movement of the head, neck, shoulders and hand” towards ascent (p. 80). She maintains that this dynamic is inherent in Holbein’s painting, and that it creates a rhythm “*from oncoming death to oncoming life*” (original emphases, p. 90). She also proposes that the colour Holbein uses for the background of the painting symbolises new life and resurrection: a “green radiance that ... is the light of a burgeoning life, the light of the energy of ascent” (p. 79). Moreover, Kasatkina argues from a position of faith: “no matter how ‘dead’ to the eye that image may be, no matter how corrupt, we know that He, too, was just as dead, yet he resurrected” (p. 86). Thus, Kasatkina is contending that there is a rhythmic movement of contraction and expansion in Holbein’s painting: contraction into corruptible death, and expansion into ascendant life. In effect, Kasatkina is proposing that in spite of Holbein’s faithfulness to nature, the painting contains a bias that points to a metaphysical end.

In summary, there is a consensus amongst scholars that Holbein’s *Dead Christ* is an image of stark, unsentimental realism: a cadaver that bears the wounds of Christ. However, there is a dialectical dispute between the scholars. One school of thought posits that Holbein’s depiction of Christ’s cold decay severs the corpse from a transcending *telos*, while a second school of thought posits that Holbein’s cadaver depicts a devotional image of Christ whose transcendence of mortal suffering and death is implicit. This includes Kasatkina who, while wrestling with the death/life dynamic, confines her discussion to a unilateral movement that has resurrection as its ultimate and final purpose. The reductive, dialectical nature of this dispute arises out of a polarisation between those scholars who reframe Holbein’s painting within a modern secular humanism, and argue for teleological severance (Colman, 2004; Ganz, 1950; Gatrall, 2001; Kristeva, 1987/1989a; Lechte, 1990), and those scholars who contextualise Holbein’s painting within the Protestant Reformation milieu, and argue for teleological continuance (Bättschmann and Griener, 1997; Kasatkina, 2011; Rowlands, 1985).

The art historical dispute around Holbein’s painting requires thinking of works of art as images, which offer up a decidable truth. Accordingly, the scholarship mobilises an orthodox notion of the image that is at odds with Blanchot and Derrida’s paradigm of



undecidability. The thesis seeks to augment and extend the scholarship by challenging the determination of painting as truth, and suspending the certainty of the scholarly assertions. To this end, the thesis applies deconstructive strategies to engage with the art works from the perspective of the undecidability of the image, and expose several aporias. It is with the exposure of specific aporias in the works of art under discussion that the thesis makes an original contribution to the field of art history scholarship.

### 1.1.2 DEAD CHRIST GENEALOGY

The cultural context for Holbein's *Dead Christ* is complex, and what follows in this section, and in the following section, is an investigation into the genealogy of the Dead Christ or King of Glory (*Basileus tes Doxes*) icon type (Figure 4). This contextual analysis highlights the cross-cultural exchange between the Byzantine Orthodox Church and the Western Latin Church, which was prevalent during the central Middle Ages when Holbein was painting. The research is important because it indicates why Holbein's morbid emphasis of Christ's humanity is so radical; why his image of Christ is an undecidable, double gesture between theological doctrine and secular humanism; and why the polemical dispute among scholars is aligned primarily along this divide.

There is a general consensus that the Dead Christ of the Western European art tradition has its antecedent in Byzantine icons, and the research establishes that Holbein's painting follows the Eastern Orthodox tradition in which icons have a liturgical<sup>38</sup> and devotional role. Rowlands (1985) contends that Holbein's painting belongs to the iconographical tradition of the Dead Christ, which stretches back to the Byzantine Orthodox Church: "Iconographically, this type of representation of the Dead Christ came from Byzantium through Venice to Western Europe" (p. 53). This suggests that Holbein's painting is part of a continuous and uninterrupted tradition of devotional imagery that posits a teleological doctrine. However, while Holbein's *Dead Christ* is indebted to Byzantine iconography, the research establishes that it is also indebted to the Western humanist heritage with its aesthetic of empirical realism that references the physical and psychological reality of humankind's mortality.

Current scholarship reveals that during the intercultural exchange between East and West, the Byzantine liturgical icon of the Dead Christ was transformed into the Western iconographic device of the Man of Sorrows. Turnbull (2009) maintains that from the mid-thirteenth century onwards, Byzantine iconographical imagery of the Dead Christ icon type entered the Italian peninsular where it was "appropriated and re-imagined in the West as being of Italian origin" (p. 4). Also, there is a consensus

---

<sup>38</sup> See Hans Belting's (1980/1981) article *An Image and its Function in the Liturgy: The Man of Sorrows in Byzantium*, where he argues that the Byzantine Man of Sorrows is "liturgical art", and that the icon is the "visual expression of its ritual function" (pp. 3 & 7). In particular, Belting maintains that the Man of Sorrows icon is the product of "the liturgy centered around the death of Christ and its reenactment" (p. 1). Moreover, he contends that it was used in the Passion ritual: "it was the Passion rituals of Holy Week that offered the context in which the Man of Sorrows had its function" (p. 11). Thus, for Belting, the Byzantine Man of Sorrows icon type is a "funeral portrait" that gains its significance from being "an image of Christ the sacrificial lamb" (pp. 6 & 12). This is an equation that is made in Isaiah 53: 3-7: "He is ... a man of sorrows ... stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted ... brought as lamb to the slaughter" (King James Bible).

that the Italian artists spawned a complex genealogy with regard to the Dead Christ's nomenclature, and that in Western scholarship this icon image is generally referred to as the Man of Sorrows (*Vir Dolorum*) (Belting, 1980/1981; Hetherington, 1990; Merback, 2002; Turnbull, 2009).

Belting's (1980/1981) authoritative article, *An Image and its Function in the Liturgy: The Man of Sorrows in Byzantium*, describes the Man of Sorrows as a "portrait bust", and he asserts that it was invented as a "companion image" to the bust of the "lamenting Virgin" (Figure 3) in order to create a diptych<sup>39</sup> of the "two protagonists of the drama" (pp. 6-11). Like Belting, Hetherington (1990) asserts that the Man of Sorrows is a cross-cultural image that conflates several Byzantine icons into "one complex visual allegory" (p. 34). Christ's uprightness, nakedness, and inclination of the head are taken from the Crucifixion, while the schema of the full frontal portrait



Figure 4. *Christ in the Tomb* (late 15<sup>th</sup> century), egg tempera on wood, 64 x 49.5 cm. Ikonen-Museum, Recklinghausen, Germany. This is an example of the Greek Orthodox Dead Christ icon type. The abbreviated words affixed to the cross, Ο ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΤΗΣ ΔΕΗΣ, mean King of Glory, which is an alternative inscription.

<sup>39</sup> The paired portraits of the Man of Sorrows and the "lamenting Virgin" invite comparison to the pairing of Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* and Liz Maw's *Francis Upritchard*, in the thesis. Maw's *Upritchard* could be regarded as a contemporary "companion image" to Holbein's *Dead Christ*, a possibility that is explored later in this chapter, section 1.1.4.

bust is taken from the half length *Christ Pantocrator*<sup>40</sup> (Ruler of All) icon type (Figure 5), as against the full-length *Christ Pantocrator* icon type (Figure 26). Belting (1980/1981) notes that over time additions were made to the Dead Christ image type that may include a cross, the indication of a tomb from which Christ may be shown emerging, and Christ's arms in "the crossed-hands burial position" (p. 12) (Figure 4).

Despite the accessories that have been added variously to the iconic *Vir Dolorum*, Christ is recognised by his wounds of identity. As Turnbull states, the figure of Christ as the Man of Sorrows "need not be attended by any iconographic accoutrements or indicators beyond the wounds of the Passion" (Gertrud Schiller, 1972, as cited in Turnbull, 2009, p. 2). Turnbull's assertion that Christ can be identified by his wounds alone, is consonant with the New Testament. When the disciples demand proof of Christ's identity after his resurrection, the wounds were Christ's means of proving who he was. Christ says: "Behold my hands and feet, that it is I myself" (Luke 24:39, King James Bible). In turn, Christ's narrative of martyrdom fits perfectly into the preexisting Old Testament narrative of persecution found in the last of the four Songs of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 52:13-55:12):

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief:  
and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed  
him not. (Isaiah 53:3, King James Bible)

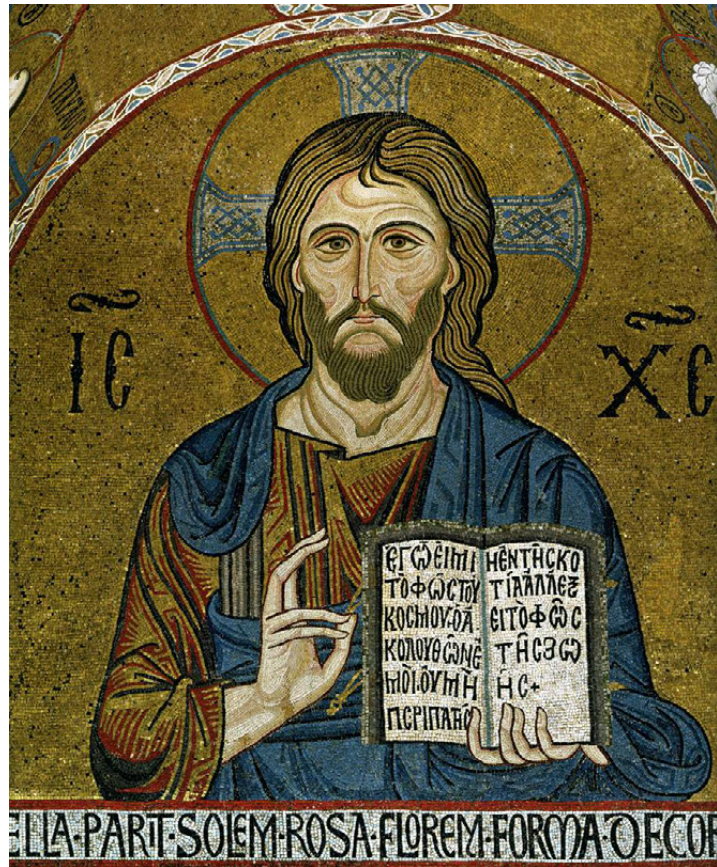
These lines were taken in retrospect to apply to Jesus, and as a result the stigmatic wounds not only serve to identify Christ, they also serve to identify Christ as the Man of Sorrows. This metaphoric doubling gives credence to the argument that the iconic *Vir Dolorum* provides a historical antecedent for viewing Holbein's wounded Christ as a Man of Sorrows. However, it is not just the wounds that circumscribe Holbein's *Dead Christ* as the *Man of Sorrows*. The agonised suffering implied by these wounds, and the figure's emaciated, putrefying body mark out Holbein's Christ as the Suffering Servant. It is a figure "acquainted" with sorrow.

There is a further parallel between the Man of Sorrows and Holbein's painting, which indicates that the Byzantine/Latin icon type is an important iconological antecedent. Not only do both images depict the dead Christ who bears the wounds of the crucifixion, both images are multivalent allegories that are not tied to one event of the Passion. Belting argues that the Man of Sorrows is a non-narrative, devotional representation, which has the complexity to function as a substitute for several icons. Turnbull (2009) makes a similar observation when he says of the Man of Sorrows: "The image is grounded in the Passion narrative, but refers to no particular episode in it" (pp. 1-2). The wounds and upright position of the Man of Sorrows links this image type to the Passion event of the crucifixion, but when a tomb is included, and Christ's hands are crossed, it is also linked to the Passion events of the deposition, lamentation and entombment. The flexibility of the Man of Sorrows image type can also be observed in Holbein's *Dead Christ*, which is able to condense several events of the

---

<sup>40</sup> *Pantocrator* is a composite word derived from the Greek prefix panto- (all), and the Greek verb krato (to have power, to rule). Transliterations are Almighty, All Powerful, and Ruler of All. See Belting (1980/1981) who states that the *Pantocrator* has "the scheme of a portrait bust", which entails a half-length, full frontal depiction of Christ (p. 4). This icon type depicts Christ with his right hand raised in benediction, and his left hand holding the gospels, or a codex (Figure 5).





Above, *figure 5. Christ Pantocrator* (c. 1140-70), mosaic. Palatine Chapel, Palermo, Italy.

Below, *figure 6. Epitaphios* of Nicholas Eudaimonoioannes (1407), embroidered liturgical cloth. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain.

Passion into one image: the wounds, tomb and supine position create links to the Passion events of the crucifixion, deposition and entombment. Thus, Holbein is drawing on a versatile icon type: “a flexible formula through which more ambitious artists could condense a wide range of Eucharistic meanings” (Merback, 2002, p. 39).

Furthermore, mention needs to be made of a parallel between Holbein’s *Dead Christ* and the iconic, Byzantine *Epitaphios* (Upon the Tomb) (*Figure 6*), which may have been influential. *Epitaphios* is the abbreviated form of *Epitaphios Threnos* (Lamentation upon the Tomb), which is an icon that is usually in the form of an embroidered liturgical cloth, but which also exists in painted or mosaic form. An *Epitaphios* cloth depicts a life-sized image of Christ lying face upwards on a shroud, or shrouded tomb, which is usually suspended in space. Christ is ready for burial, and is attended to, variously, by mourners and divine mediators such as holy saints, angels, and the four evangelists. Thus, like Holbein’s image, an *Epitaphios* depicts a life-sized Christ lying on a shroud in a supine position. However, where an *Epitaphios* typically portrays Christ afloat with divine attendants, Holbein portrays Christ aground without any attendants, human or divine.

Thus, while Holbein’s Christ image differs from all of the Dead Christ icon types, it shares attributes from each, which makes it possible for Holbein’s painting to be cross-referencing several icon types rather than drawing on one. While the rich repertory of antecedents to which Holbein was exposed remains unknown, his specific selection and combination of attributes from different image types has created a condensed, cross-cultural, Northern European reinterpretation of the Byzantine Dead Christ. It is a reinterpretation that humanises Holbein’s *Dead Christ* with a radical realism that deprives the image of any transcendent suspension or divine mediation. The stigmatic wounds alone connote a theological meta-narrative.

When Rowlands defends Holbein’s *Dead Christ* in terms of the Byzantine/Latin iconographic tradition, he is using this heritage to affirm that the painting is a devotional image in which a teleological continuance is implicit. Other scholars argue that Holbein has appropriated and subverted this tradition in the light of Western secular humanism (Athena Colman, 2004; Paul Ganz, 1950; Jeff Gatrall, 2001; Julia Kristeva, 1987/1989a; John Lechte, 1990). For these scholars, there is a disruption to the icon tradition, and they argue that a teleological severance is implicit in the image. In contrast to this dialectical dispute, Derrida (1972/1995b) suggests that there is an “equivocal relationship” between humanism and metaphysics in which death and Being predicate each other (p. 121). Indeed, Derrida postulates that it is only possible to define humanity in relation to the metaphysics of humankind’s Being: “It remains that the thinking of Being ... remains as thinking *of* man” (original emphasis, p. 128). Thus, from a Derridean perspective, a teleological outcome is neither avowed nor disavowed, but instead it seeks to expose an ambiguous play between mortal death and metaphysical Being.

### 1.1.3 HUMANISM AND THE DEAD CHRIST

While iconography is outside my field of scholarship, I am taking from the Byzantine icon tradition the notion that the iconic schema of the King of Glory is grounded in the liturgical narrative of the Passion, but does not refer to a specific episode in the





Above, *figure 7*. Fra Filippo Lippi, *Imago Pietatis* (c. 1430), tempera on wood, 22 x 15 cm. Horne Museum, Florence, Italy. The *Imago Pietatis* (Image of Pity) is the Latin interpretation of the Byzantine Dead Christ, or King of Glory icon type.

Below, *figure 8*. Giovanni Bellini, *Imago Pietatis* (c. 1460-1470), tempera on panel, 50 x 40.4cm. Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan, Italy. Bellini has naturalised the background setting of the Byzantine Dead Christ, or King of Glory icon type, with a landscape.

narrative. In this way, the King of Glory icon type depicts both the Christian master narrative of the Passion, and an indeterminate episode from the Passion. However, when the Western Church appropriated Byzantine iconography, the Eastern Orthodox iconic schema came under pressure from the demands of the humanist movement, and over time there was a humanisation of the iconic figures, and a naturalisation of the background setting (*Figure 8*). This can be observed in the Man of Sorrows icon type where the humanisation of the Christ figure is signaled by a shift towards earthly suffering. In particular, Holbein's *Dead Christ* highlights the difference between the Byzantine and Western schemas with its resolute use of unsentimental realism to depict Christ's dead body. Nevertheless, such graphic humanisation brings about a corresponding shift in meaning. Indeed, it has the subversive effect of bringing the aporetic relationship between a master narrative of salvation, and an uncertain episode of suffering into question.

By placing Holbein's painting in the broader discourse of the iconographical tradition, consideration can be given to the way the humanist movement demanded images with which people could identify from as early as the twelfth century: "an increasing theatricalization and 'psychological realism' drew participants into a close, affective relationship with Christ and Mary in their human suffering" (Merback, 1990, p. 38). Northern European artists such as Holbein were responding to a cultural and ideological demand for an increasingly realistic humanisation of Christian imagery (Belting, 1980/1981; Hetherington, 1990; Merback 2002; Rowlands, 1985; Turnbull, 2009). Nevertheless, there remains the presupposition of some scholars that the humanist art movement of the early sixteenth century could have been severed from its metaphysical underpinnings to assert a secular humanism (Colman, 2004; Gatrall, 2001; Ganz, 1950; Kristeva, 1987/1989; Lechte, 1990). In particular, this raises the issue of whether Holbein could have made a radical break with the iconographical tradition, while still using the ideographic symbols of that same icon tradition.

Religious art in the Western tradition is not tied to specific interpretations of the Bible or Church liturgy, and this permits the reinterpretation of the iconic tradition to which it is indebted. As a result, there are significant differences between the Byzantium Dead Christ icon types, and Holbein's painting. Unlike a Byzantine icon, Holbein's *Dead Christ* is neither sanctified by a luminous halo, nor by the attendance of divine saints, angels, or evangelists. Also, there is neither an unnatural suspension of an upright dead Christ nor a floating tomb, which, as discussed previously, are motifs found in Byzantine iconography. Moreover, Holbein has not gilded the image to evoke a sense of ecclesiastical space, and in its stead he has used a palette of earthly colours to evoke the space of the real world.<sup>41</sup> As Eva Haustein-Bartsch (2008) states: "The icon does not show a detail of the earthly world, but points to a supernatural and eternal reality" (p. 11) (*Figures 3, 4, 5, & 11*). Holbein's *Dead Christ* is bereft of the traditional iconic symbols that connote a timeless representation of sacred sacrifice:

---

<sup>41</sup> See Haustein-Bartsch (2008) who elaborates on the different use of light in Byzantine icons and Western art. She argues that Byzantine icons depict a "transcendental" space, and contrasts it to Western art since the Renaissance, which depicts a "corporeal" space: "In Western painting, the light shows what is depicted, the objects and persons have illuminated and shaded sides, they cast shadows and thus become corporeal and spatial. By contrast, on an icon, the image and the source of light are identical. This 'radiance' makes visible the transcendental, the divine in the picture, and illuminates the beholder. Just as there are no shadows in icon paintings, there is no atmospheric depiction to blur distant objects" (original emphasis, p. 12).

“ ‘the all-holy sacrifice and the life-giving entombment’ of Christ” (Patriarch Athanasios 1, c. 1305, as cited in Belting, p. 5).

Kristeva (1987/1989a) asserts that Holbein’s style reflects a new aesthetic of “minimal visibility” that does not embellish, ennoble or glorify (p. 123). In this manner, Kristeva maintains that Holbein’s *Dead Christ* encapsulates an extreme point of humanisation because Holbein has “isolated, pruned, condensed and reduced” his Christ so parsimoniously, that all glory and exaltation “is obliterated” (p. 115). However, Holbein’s *Dead Christ* is marked with the stigmata. Thus, at the same time that Holbein interrupts the Passion narrative by displacing a transcendent spatiality with an analogical realism, he inserts the symbol of the stigmata that connotes a key doctrine of the Church. In other words, Holbein provides an assumed narrative context by showing the wounds of Christ, while simultaneously unmooring his Christ from the Passion narrative by using an aesthetic of empirically observed “corporeal” realism. As Gatrall (2011) states: “Holbein does not simply replicate a canonical icon of Christ; he represents a human corpse” (p. 218). The viewer may be confronted with a dilemma: Is Holbein depicting the Passion of Christ as a proponent of orthodox doctrine, or is he treating the Christian doctrine symbolically as a psychological moment for “imaginary identification” (Kristeva, 1987/1989a, p. 134)? It is a dilemma premised on a dialectic that opposes theo-metaphysics against secular humanism.

A viewer might ask whether Holbein’s painting is no more than an exercise in reverse alchemy, transmuting the gold of Byzantine iconographical presence into the leaden materiality of mortal death. A Derridean perspective would indicate that Holbein’s painting would not be a simple dialectical inversion, but rather, its ambiguity suggests a navigation of the territory between Church doctrine and psychological identification. On that account, it is implicated in metahumanism<sup>42</sup> whereby neither metaphysics nor humanism is subordinated. As already noted, Derrida (1995) does not seek a simple inversion of oppositions, but rather he seeks to expose a process of “hierarchical subordination” in which there is an “*incorporation and repression*” (original emphases, p. 9):

Historical conversions ... well describe this movement by which the event of a second mystery does not destroy the first. On the contrary it keeps it inside unconsciously, after having effected a topical displacement and a hierarchical subordination: one secret is at the same time enclosed and dominated by the other. (original emphases, *ibid*)

The genealogy of the Dead Christ icon type reveals that the Man of Sorrows is a condensed allegory that can reference multiple episodes of the Passion narrative. However, Holbein has subverted this tradition to the extent that it has engendered scholarly debates about its implication for the “ends” of humankind. Moreover, this debate is implicated in a wider discussion about the hidden architecture of metaphysics that not only assumes a final ending, but also assumes an original beginning. That is to say, there is a hidden, linear, narrative structure at work, which implies an objective narrative truth, a narrative presence. Thus, if Holbein’s painting

---

<sup>42</sup> See Jacques Derrida’s essay (1972/1995b) *The Ends of Man*, where he refers to this complicity variously as: “humanist metaphysics” (p. 119); “transcendental humanism” (p. 123); “the unity of metaphysics and humanism” (p. 128); “metahumanist position” (*ibid*).



brings a teleological ending under scrutiny, it also brings the assumed spatiality of metaphysics under scrutiny with its determined centre, fixed axial orientations, and invulnerable boundaries between inner and outer.

#### 1.1.4 MAN OF SORROWS AND MOTHER OF SORROWS

Holbein's oeuvre provides an important frame of reference for contextualising his *Dead Christ*. Not only does Holbein make death his subject matter in other works of art, but he also makes the Man of Sorrows the subject matter of two minor works that are precursors to his major work of the dead Christ. Firstly, there is the painting *Diptych with Christ as the Man of Sorrows and the Virgin as Mater Dolorosa* (c. 1520) (Figure 9); and secondly there is a pen and brush drawing *Christ as the Man of Sorrows Seated on the Cross* (c. 1519) (Figure 10). In the diptych, Holbein reinforces his subject matter by depicting the suffering of Job in the medallion set into the spandrel above the Virgin. Job, like the Man of Sorrows, serves as an Old Testament prefiguration of the suffering Christ. In this way, both art works provide a context for viewing Holbein's *Dead Christ* as a Man of Sorrows. However, the diptych also provides a context for viewing Maw's *Francis Upritchard* as a possible *Mater Dolorosa* or Mother of Sorrows.

Kristeva (1987/1989a) contends that other paintings in Holbein's oeuvre, besides his *Dead Christ*, bring our mortality into sharp focus. Kristeva asserts that the anamorphosis of a skull in the lower part of Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, is an indicator of "the main ordeal of the new man", which is "their extinction in death" (p. 122). Likewise, Kristeva points to Holbein's *Danse Macabre* and *Alphabet with The Dance of Death* to confirm the erosion of the spirit of idealism and "exaltation" found in Christian icons, and its displacement with a new "spirit of deprivation, of leveling, of subtle minimalism" (p. 124). Kristeva characterises Holbein's style as having a "chromatic and compositional asceticism" that is "constituted by pain and melancholia" (p. 123). This asceticism is also evident in Holbein's *Diptych with Christ as the Man of Sorrows and the Virgin as Mater Dolorosa*. Here, both the chapel and the protagonists are painted in ochre tones while a cluster of small portals admit a leaden, turquoise blue. Not only is there no gilded glorification, but also the naturalistic colouring is evocative of a barren field under a heavy winter sky.

Each of Holbein's Man of Sorrows was painted one to two years before his *Dead Christ*. Ganz, Rowlands, and Kristeva make reference to Holbein's *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, which is the first panel of the small "devotional" diptych (Rowlands, 1985, p. 32). Kristeva views the diptych, together with a series of Holbein's Madonnas, as part of the context in which Holbein's *Dead Christ* is situated. Rowlands and Ganz also make reference to Holbein's *Christ as the Man of Sorrows Seated on the Cross*, but Ganz alone proposes that each of Holbein's Man of Sorrows is "similarly conceived" (1950, p. 217). Indeed, each of Holbein's Man of Sorrows is alive and subject to gravity, which is in contrast to the religious Byzantine/Latin icons where the body of the dead Christ is suspended in an upright imitation of the crucifixion and resurrection.

Holbein reconfigures the iconic upright Dead Christ into a living seated Christ in both art works. Similarly, Holbein reconfigures the iconic Standing Mother of Sorrows into



Above, *figure 9*. Hans Holbein the Younger, *Diptych with Christ as the Man of Sorrows and the Virgin as Mater Dolorosa* (c. 1520), oil on limewood, 29 x 39 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland.

Below, *figure 10*. Hans Holbein the Younger, *Christ as the Man of Sorrows Seated on the Cross* (c. 1519), pen and brush in ink, 16 x 20.5 cm. Museum of Prints and Drawings, Berlin State Museums, Germany.

a kneeling Mother of Sorrows. Thus, the diptych depicts a seated Man of Sorrows alongside a kneeling Virgin Mary. Together, the two panels share the joint architectural enclosure of a small chapel or shrine, which serves as the work's background and foreground. However there is no tomb, and Christ, who is dressed in a loincloth, is seated on a colonnaded plinth from which his shroud falls in a continuous spread down the steps before him. In contrast, *Christ as the Man of Sorrows Seated on the Cross* is sitting at the centre point of a wooden cross wrapped in a loincloth that falls casually across the cross bar. While the iconic Byzantine portrait of the Man of Sorrows carries the promise of ascension in the suspended upright posture of the iconic Dead Christ, Holbein subverts this by reorienting Christ's body and passion towards a descended horizon: *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* sits in contemplation of a stepped descent into unknown depths; *Christ as the Man of Sorrows Seated on the Cross* sits in contemplation of a descent to an earthly horizontal plane. As a result, there is a dual movement between the threat of descension, and the doctrinal teleological promise of resurrection. Thus, both portraits subvert the traditional iconic image with an ambiguous oscillation between descended suffering and ascended glory.

Holbein's reinterpretation of the Man of Sorrows icon type also creates an unresolvable disruption to the Passion narrative. While Christ does not bear the wounds of his crucifixion in either of these images, each of Holbein's Man of Sorrows is wearing a crown of thorns that places it within the Passion story. While these figures connote, variously, the story of the crucifixion, deposition, lamentation, and entombment, they are also "strangely athletic, brawny and tensed" as well as unmarked (Kristeva, 1988/1989a, p. 112). Their aliveness and absence of wounds begs the question of whether their lamentable, abject suffering has been displaced in time. It would appear that neither of Holbein's Man of Sorrows has yet been crucified, but instead each is anticipating his crucifixion, and in the case of the diptych, the *Mater Dolorosa* shares this anticipation. Accordingly, these images are proleptic representations in which the crown of thorns acts as a symbolic prefiguration of Christ's sacrifice. Moreover, the delicate radiant halo that surrounds Christ's head and face in the diptych, prefigures his resurrection.

Kristeva comments on "the threat of death", which weighs on each oncoming generation, and postulates that the distress of Holbein's *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* is symptomatic of being "haunted by death" (p. 112). Moreover, the seated position of each of Holbein's Man of Sorrows connotes a subversion of Christ's anticipated enthronement, which in the Christian narrative, follows on from the resurrection and ascension. It could be that Holbein's sunken figures are foreshadowing an end that is not an enthroned, transcendental *telos*, but rather, an end that has its seat on the steps of the mortal world. Each of Holbein's Man of Sorrows ruptures the traditional Passion story by suspending Christ's anticipated *telos* in a double vacillation between the promise of a transcendental enthronement, and an earthly burial.

Holbein's oeuvre not only provides an important context for his major painting of the dead Christ, but it also provides a context for viewing it in relation to Maw's depiction of the suspended Upritchard. In particular, Holbein's diptych juxtaposes the portraits of Christ and Mary in a paired format, which is an indication that the artist was aware of the Byzantine double-sided icons that depict the Man of Sorrows (*Vir Dolorum*) and Mother of Sorrows (*Mater Dolorosa*) as a "double image" (Belting,



1980/1981, p. 6). Such bilateral portraits depict the Madonna mourning her young child in a proleptic allusion to the Passion. As Belting states, the icons foreshadow the Passion: “show the young mother anticipating what is to come”, and her insight into “the necessity of the Passion to achieve salvation” (p. 9) (*Figure 3*). In effect, the iconic image of the Mother of Sorrows anticipates the Virgin’s role as the Standing Mother of Sorrows (*Stabat Mater Dolorosa*) (*Figure 11*), who keeps vigil at the foot of the cross while lamenting the loss of her son, Jesus Christ.

Within this context, Maw’s *Upritchard* could be viewed as a “contemporary companion” to Holbein’s *Dead Christ*. Just as Holbein’s painting connotes the Man of Sorrows, so too does Maw’s dismembering figure connote a possible Mother of Sorrows (*Mater Dolorosa*). In particular, Maw’s *Upritchard* connotes the Mother of Sorrows who stands in lamentation at the foot of the cross. Marina Warner (1976/1978) argues that while only the fourth Gospel mentions Mary’s vigil at the Cross (John 19:2), it affirms her part in the Passion as the Standing Mother of



*Figure 11.* Antonio Da Firenze, *Crucifixion with Mary and St John the Evangelist* (c. 1400-1450), tempera on wood, 151 x 85 cm. The Hermitage, Saint Petersburg, Russia. An iconic Standing Mother of Sorrows is weeping at the foot of the cross while two nuns, who are wearing face veils, kneel in prayer.

Sorrows (*Stabat Mater Dolorosa*)<sup>43</sup> (p. 211). Mary's suffering is given voice in the dramatic antiphonal hymns of the thirteenth century: "Through her, the Crucifixion, the Deposition, and the Entombment came to life. Through her sorrow, the man or woman in prayer could feel the stab of loss and agony" (ibid).

As has been noted previously, the solitary upright suspension of Maw's *Upritchard* evokes the uplift of the Assumptive Virgin. However, this evocation of ascended, remembered glory is in an aporetic relationship with the figure's descended, dismembering sorrow. In effect, the portrait connotes two iconic roles of the Virgin: the Assumptive Virgin in ascent, and the Mother of Sorrows in descent. Because Maw's *Upritchard* connotes the suffering of the Virgin Mary, the placement of her portrait beside Holbein's *Dead Christ* invites a comparison with the "bilateral icons of the lamenting Virgin and the lamented Christ" (Belting, 1990/1996, p. 230). As a contemporary "companion pair" they serve to heighten both the iconic, and the humanist traditions in each other's work. Together, they assert that there are "two protagonists of the Passion", and bring to the fore the doctrinal function of the religious icon by emphasising how the linear-temporal narrative of the Passion has a teleological end (Belting, 1980/1981, p. 6). But as well, the pairing serves to heighten the humanisation of an aspirational transcendence, and its subjectivisation to human experience. Together, they emphasise that such an event need not be connected to a stabilising episode in the Passion, but can be cut free from narrative coherence, and become non-linear and non-narrative.

In summary, Holbein's oeuvre provides an important context for Holbein's supine *Dead Christ*. The threatening suspension of the Passion's outcome in each of his Man of Sorrows foreshadows Holbein's more radical and more famous painting, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. Moreover, Holbein's *Diptych with Christ as the Man of Sorrows and the Virgin as Mater Dolorosa*, contextualises Maw's *Francis Upritchard* as a possible Standing Mother of Sorrows, and contemporary companion to Holbein's *Dead Christ*. Together, they heighten a radical bilateral movement between the Church's liturgical meta-narrative and a personal *récit*. This aporia of narrative brings "the truth in painting" under scrutiny.

## 1.2 SUSPENDED UPRITCHARD

*Francis Upritchard* was the sole exhibit for Maw's "minimal installation" at Artspace in Auckland from December 2010 to February 2011 (Kate Brett Kelly-Chalmers, 2011, para. 2). Critical scholarship on *Francis Upritchard* is restricted to three sources: a press release posted on the Artspace exhibitions website (2010); a review of the exhibition by Brett Kelly-Chalmers posted on the art forum website Eyecontact (2011); and an interview with Maw by Kristen Wineera for an Artspace publication, *Volume 2* (2011), in which Maw discusses her art practice and her portrait of Upritchard. As a result, the in-depth analysis of *Francis Upritchard* in the thesis constitutes the first scholarly interpretation of Maw's painting.

---

<sup>43</sup> The phrase "*Stabat Mater dolorosa*", is the first line from a thirteenth century Catholic liturgical hymn, which meditates on the sorrows of the Virgin Mary during her vigil at Christ's Cross: "*Stabat Mater dolorosa/juxta Crucem lacrimosa*" (The sorrowing mother stands at the cross weeping) (*Figure 11*). See Warner (1976/1978) who gives a genealogy for this poetic masterpiece (pp. 211-214).

The first section of this chapter focuses on an analysis of the three commentaries. Amongst the scholars there is a consensus that Maw is painting “the narrative of Upritchard’s success”, and that her portrait is “a vessel for our aspirations” (Brett Kelly-Chalmers, 2011, para. 3). However, there is also a consensus that the painting depicts a deathly “ghostly spirit” (Artspace, 2010, p. 1). These polarised points of view create a tacit hierarchical binary. On the one hand, the portrait is valorised as a glorification of Upritchard, while the portrait’s impoverishment of Upritchard is disavowed (Artspace, 2010; Brett Kelly-Chalmers, 2011; Wineera, 2011). Nevertheless, Wineera suggests that the portrait conveys an ambiguous absence of presence. Thus, Maw’s painting is primarily viewed from a dialectical perspective, as a choice between two alternatives: idealisation and mortification.

While the scholars emphasise Upritchard’s biographical narrative of success, they do not address the religious connotations of Maw’s painting. The second section of this chapter seeks to contextualise Maw’s *Francis Upritchard* within her own oeuvre in order to demonstrate the extent to which Christian imagery and doctrine have been an integral part of Maw’s work since her first exhibition in 1998. In particular, it concentrates on several subversive depictions of the Virgin Mary that Maw produced prior to her portrait of Upritchard. The contextualisation of Maw’s work within her own oeuvre, and within the Christian tradition, challenges the available commentaries that confine their focus to the artist’s intent. As has been noted, it could be argued that there is an undecidable, dual oscillation between the assumptive Mary and the dolorous Mary in Maw’s *Francis Upritchard*. From this point of view, there is an aporia of narrative that exposes the co-existence between an optimistic metanarrative and a pessimistic *récit*.

### 1.2.1 IDEAL IDOL AND SPECTRAL GHOST

The critical consensus that Maw’s portrait is a homage to Upritchard’s stellar career is confirmed by Maw when she says of her portrait paintings: “I guess ... I’m painting my idols” (Wineera, p. 75). Maw is interested in the way popular culture idealises beauty and makes idols of celebrities, and she contends: “We’re living in a world where we’re wrestling madly with idealised forms” (p. 73). Not only does Maw argue that there is a “need to idolize someone, to put them on a pedestal”, but also Maw says of herself: “I’m happy to indulge myself with the objects of my appreciation and for them to be mysteriously other to me ... to be living in some kind of realm of the gods, like Olympia” (p. 75). Upritchard is regarded as a “beautiful, talented and internationally successful” expatriate artist, and her narrative of artistic success fulfills the necessary criteria for entrée into Maw’s personal Olympia of ideal idols<sup>44</sup> (Artspace, 2010, p. 1).

While Maw admits to “acting like an obsessive fan” with regard to Upritchard, she also describes her process of painting the portrait as: “behaving like the protagonist in the film *Single White Female*” (Artspace, 2010, p. 1). The central character of this

---

<sup>44</sup> Maw’s pantheon of idols includes: American singer and writer Michael Jackson, English singer and writer Robert Plant, English broadcaster and naturalist David Attenborough, New Zealand artist Bill Hammond, New Zealand art dealer Robert Heal, and New Zealand actor Sam Neil. See Natasha Conland (2007) who says of Maw’s portraits: “Borrowing from myth, religion and popular culture, she creates a family of celebrity and unearthly creatures” (p. 22).

film is a homicidal sociopath who becomes so obsessed with another woman that she not only imitates her, but also murders her in order to assume the woman's identity. Maw is using this fictional story to draw attention to her own obsession with Upritchard, and her admission raises the possibility of a psychoanalytical reading. As she says in her interview with Wineera (2011):

When I was painting it I was thinking that I wanted her to look like the particular kind of powerful woman that she was .... I wanted to capture that in her, in that moment. I wanted her position, and her being, and her phenomenon. (p. 83)

The interview suggests that Maw was not merely co-opting Upritchard's identity in order to "understand her" as suggested by Artspace, but rather, there was a psychological agenda to appropriate and manipulate Upritchard's persona in order to explore a self-projection (Artspace, 2010, p. 1). Maw says of her attitude to Upritchard:

I was very suspicious of my motivations. A part of me was holding on to her coat-tails, wanting to have some of what she has as an artist – prestige, whatever – and the other part of me was maybe trying to trick her into, ah ... It's not that I wanted her to look bad, but I somehow wanted to have one over her. ... Some sort of jealous thing. ... I think I wanted to put her below me somehow. (Wineera, 2011, pp. 79-80)

Maw is expressing openly her covetous desire to have what Upritchard has: "reputation, appearance and charisma" (Brett Kelly-Chalmers, 2011, para. 6). Thus, while there is a consensus that Maw idealises Upritchard, Maw herself questions her motives for making a portrait of Upritchard, and in the process she articulates an acute ambivalence towards her subject. Maw's statements of intent suggest that there is an ambiguous vacillation between her desire to capture Upritchard as a "powerful woman", and her subversive psychological desire to appropriate Upritchard's persona (Wineera, 2011, p. 83). As Maw says: "My subjects are the Faustian-type phantoms, the shades, of my own fears and desires" (p. 75).

Despite Maw's admission that her portrait subjects are projections of her own fears and desires, she asserts that she has been successful in "glorifying" Upritchard and making her "majestic", and denies that she has been complicit in subverting this idealisation: "in the end all those dormant, suppressed, hostile feelings went poof" (Wineera, 2011, p. 80). Indeed, Maw proposes that she has deified Upritchard as a "sage", and as an "entitled" and "privileged citizen of the world" (p. 81). However, the portrait of Upritchard is bereft of the highly decorative accoutrements used by Maw in previous portraits to bestow glorification and majesty. I have written elsewhere of Maw's painting technique as evoking "the dark panel paintings of the Renaissance and their world of translucent super-realism", a style where Maw embellishes her figures with "meticulous and exacting attention to fine details be it a diaphanous veil, shiny folds of silk, sparkling jewels, floral patterning, droplets" (Margreta Chance, 2008, p. 42).<sup>45</sup> Maw's baroque style serves to create a luminosity

---

<sup>45</sup> See Margreta Chance (2008) whose essay *Images We Hold of the World: The Paintings of Liz Maw* in *Art New Zealand 129*, makes a general analysis of several paintings that predate *Francis Upritchard*.

that both enhances and empowers her portrait figures. However, Maw's *Francis Upritchard* is denied such grandiose glory, and instead this luxurious ornamentation is displaced by a frugal puritanism. This has a humbling effect, which serves to portray Upritchard as a supplicant,<sup>46</sup> mendicant, or sightless seer. The erotic spectacle of plenitude observed in previous portraits has given way to an unsettling, ascetic sorrowing.

The painting's black and white chromatic asceticism, along with its lack of full-bodied modeling, draws attention to its minimalist aesthetic, as well as to the spectral quality of the portrait. Artspace, (2010) refers to the portrait of Francis Upritchard as "a ghostly spirit" (p. 1), while Brett Kelly-Chalmers (2011) states that the painting has "a reductive vacuity": "the eyeless Upritchard is two-dimensional and mask-like" (para. 6). Wineera (2011) makes a similar observation when she maintains that the figure's torso is "quite flat ... her eyes are blank, and she's hovering in that white space" (p. 80). Thus, there is a consensus that Maw's *Francis Upritchard* has not been hallowed and haloed, gilded and glorified, but is depicted as a ghostly, ascetic presence. These observations bring Maw's professed deification of Upritchard as a universal denizen of the world under scrutiny.

Maw's univocal interpretation of her portrait as a glorification exposes a suppressed oppositional binary between deification and mortification. When Maw claims that she is creating a magisterial portrait, she is disavowing her depiction of impoverishment in order to privilege veneration. Maw's "wrestling" with "idealised forms" is in effect, a struggle with a dialectical binary in which idealisation and mortality are opposed (Wineera, 2011, p. 73). This has the effect of opposing two points of view as if they are mutually exclusive and contradictory. However, in contradistinction to Maw, Wineera observes that the portrait is ambiguous: "She seems present, yet not present" (pp. 80-81). Wineera is describing the portrait of Upritchard as a paradoxical presence: a presence that is absent, which is to say, a ghostly presence, a cadaverous presence, an absent presence. To put this in Derridean terms, there is a "contradictory double demand" that sets up an undecidable play between presence and absence, a *telos* and death (Derrida, 1979, p.118).

Wineera's interview with Maw indicates that Upritchard's idealised success is not the true subject of Maw's portrait, but rather, it is Maw's expressed ambivalence towards Upritchard's success that gives the painting its ambiguous subject matter. However, both Maw and her critics argue that the portrait is an "amplification of Upritchard's captivating art persona", which privileges an interpretation of valorisation while

---

<sup>46</sup> It could be argued that the upright stance and outstretched arms of Liz Maw's *Francis Upritchard* connote the supplicating mercy of both the Virgin Orant (or Orans) of the Orthodox Church, and the Mother of Mercy of the Latin Church. In the Orthodox icon, the Virgin stands erect, frontal and alone in an orant or prayerful posture, to emphasise her role as intercessor. While the orant gesture can be portrayed with the hands at different heights, it is usual for the elbows to be close to the sides of the body, the arms outstretched sideways, and the palms upward facing. The Latin Church uses comparable postures to depict the divine mercy of the Virgin, as well as the merciful supplication of Christ and the saints, particularly Saint Francis. Indeed, Francis Upritchard not only shares the same name as Saint Francis, but also Maw's painting evokes the poverty of the Franciscan order. However, Saint Francis is portrayed with stigmatic hands, which denote Christ's narrative of crucifixion, resurrection, enthronement, and inauguration as divine intercessor to God. While a saintly imitation of Christ could be a suppressed referent, Maw's *Upritchard* more readily connotes the Virgin's narrative of assumption, enthronement, and inauguration as Mother of Mercy and divine intercessor to Christ.



sublimating its deathly aspect (Brettkelly-Chalmers, 2011, para. 7). But the glory of Maw's *Francis Upritchard* is its refusal to be either one thing or another. Maw's ambivalent diva-worship opens up an investigation into *Francis Upritchard* as an ambiguous image of spectral presence: an image that is both a glamorous ideal and a humbling abjection.

### 1.2.2 HUMANISM AND THE VIRGIN MARY

Maw's oeuvre reveals the degree to which Maw's art is steeped in the Western theological and humanist traditions, and hence it provides an important context for her painting, *Francis Upritchard*. Of particular importance is the way Maw's oeuvre exposes two preoccupations that are present in Maw's depiction of Upritchard: a subversion of the doctrinal metanarrative of the Virgin Mary, and an engagement with dismemberment and death.

As noted previously, Maw has painted a personal pantheon of ideal idols. These portraits are either standing or kneeling, and share the same large, upright, rectangular format as Maw's *Francis Upritchard*. I have written elsewhere of their ambiguity: "Maw's figures have the subjectivity of the person who has been the painter's model, but like the deities of Egyptian art, Maw's figures are hieratic and transcendent" (Chance, 2008, p. 44). Of particular relevance is a series of kneeling female figures painted between 1998 and 2011: *Maria Tranquillitatis* (1998) (*Figure 13*), *Satan* (2003) (*Figure 14*), *Deepa* (2004) (*Figure 16*), *Colleen* (2005) (*Figure 15*), and *Lady Kathryn and I* (2011) (*Figure 17*). These figures reference the Virgin Mary either directly or indirectly, and like Maw's *Francis Upritchard* each of these figures floats in suspension. Furthermore, like Maw's *Francis Upritchard*, these figures reveal an aporia of narrative in which there is an aporetic relationship between the Christian metanarrative of assumption, and a personal narrative of temptation. Kristeva and Goldhammer (1985) argue that the kneeling Virgin was a mooring point for the humanisation of Christianity: "kneeling ... epitomises the new cult of humanist sensibility" (p. 141). This is also evident in Holbein's *The Virgin as Mater Dolorosa*, where, as discussed above, the iconic Standing Mother of Sorrows is reconfigured into a kneeling *Mater Dolorosa*. Consequently, Maw's kneeling figures provide a flesh and blood counter-narrative of humble humanity.

Maw's *Maria Tranquillitatis* (*Figure 13*) is the first of Maw's portraits of the Virgin Mary. The figure plays a piano accordion while kneeling in reverential obeisance and submission. She is painted in cobalt blue,<sup>47</sup> and a bejeweled, floral halo floats above her head connoting the Virgin's coronation as Queen of Heaven (*Regina Coeli*), a dogma of the Catholic Church. This portrait also connotes the Byzantine icon, Lunar Madonna, which is a deification of Mary as the Mother of God (*Theotokos*). However, Maw's *Maria Tranquillitatis* (Mary of Tranquility), is an ironic pun that refers not only to the Virgin Mary's status as *Maria Regina* (Mary Enthroned), but also to one of the moon's basins, *Mare Tranquillitatis* (Sea of Tranquility). By taking poetic license Maw associates the Virgin Mary with a lunar sea, which is in fact a volcanic basin that consists of a vast pool of solidified basaltic lava. It is this lava that gives the *mare* its bluish tinge. In this way, Maw's blue, lunar Madonna subverts the

<sup>47</sup> See Warner (1976/1978) who states that blue was considered a fitting attribute of the Queen of Heaven: "As a sky goddess, Mary's colour is blue. Her starry mantle is a figure of the sky" (p. 266).



Above, *figure 12*. Liz Maw, *Crying faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon* (2007), oil on board, 44.5 x 44.8 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.

Below, *figure 13*. Liz Maw, *Maria Tranquillitatis* (1998), oil on board, 193 x 123 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.

iconic coronated Virgin by connoting a dissonant juxtaposition between the barren abjection of the moon's harsh geology, and the figure's tranquil expression of merciful compassion. This in turn creates an ambiguous tension between a subjective narrative of immanent<sup>48</sup> impoverishment, and a theological metanarrative of transcendent sanctification.

*Crying faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon* (2007) (Figure 12) is a small square painting. A blue moon floats at the centre of the picture plane, faced with the Sea of Tranquility. Three female figures are also afloat on the midnight blue ground, as if orbiting the moon. A tearful but richly red-robed Madonna floats in suspension above the moon. She clasps the green-robed Christ Child on her knee, however he is prematurely aged and balding in a prefiguration of the Passion. In the bottom left and right hand corners are two benighted, colourless figures, both of which are wearing religious habits. Each figure is on one knee: one is supplicating with upraised arms; the other is grieving tearfully. As in the painting *Maria Tranquillitatis*, Maw is subverting the Virgin Mary's association with an idealised, fertile moon, by associating her with the planet's arid geology. As Warner (1976/1978) argues, the association of Mary and the moon is one that associates Mary with fertility: "The feminine moon, which nourishes life with beams, was first identified with the Church and then by analogy with the Virgin Mary" (p. 257). Maw's sorrowing Madonna is a *Mater Dolorosa* weeping in anticipation of the Passion, however the title subverts the counter-narrative of Christ's Easter, and its promise of a fruitful resurrection. Accordingly, the doctrinal meta-narrative of a fecund resurrection trembles undecidably, with a subjective narrative of barren fruitlessness.

There is a more radical subversion of the Virgin Mary in the remaining four portraits. Each of the suspended figures in *Satan*, *Colleen*, *Deepa*, and *Lady Kathryn and I* is naked or semi-naked, and this radical sexualisation of the Virgin Mary creates a play between two contraries: Madonna and whore. Like *Maria Tranquillitatis*, the kneeling figure in *Satan* (Figure 14) is cobalt blue, and this connotes a celestial, sky deity. However, without the accoutrements of a crown, mantle, and gown, the figure also connotes a transgressive, unfrocked Queen of Heaven. This tension is played out in the figure's posture where her right hand is pointing a gun to her head, while the palm of her left hand is upraised in protest. The intervening "protesting hand" emerges from the sleeve-like folds of a veil as if in detached suspension, while the veiled arm has an unnatural elongation (L. Maw, personal communication, August 16, 2008). Together, the disembodied hand and the otherworldly reach of the arm connote the intercession of the Virgin, and as a result Maw conflates a transgressive, suicidal femme fatale with an interposing Virgin Mary. Furthermore, the "protesting hand" veils the figure's mons veneris, which connotes the classical pose of the unclothed but chaste *Venus Pudica* (Modest Venus). Consequently, there is a double movement between a metanarrative of divine benediction, and a narrative of mortal temptation.

<sup>48</sup> Immanence is derived from the Latin *in manere*, to remain within. Immanence is defined as the state of remaining within, of being within or of being inherent, and not going beyond the given domain of the material world. This is in contrast to its antonym transcendence, which is derived from the Latin *transcendere*, to climb over or go beyond. Transcendence is defined as the state that is beyond and wholly independent of the material world. In a religious or ecclesiastical context immanence refers to God being fully present and manifested in the material world, whereas transcendence refers to God being fully outside, separated and removed from the limitations of material existence. These terms are not necessarily mutually exclusive within a metaphysical or theological framework: God can be affirmed as being within and without the world, as pervading and surpassing the world.



Above left, *figure 14*. Liz Maw, *Satan* (2003), oil on board, 180 x 140 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.

Above right, *figure 15*. Liz Maw, *Colleen* (2005), oil on board, 232 x 130 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.

Below left, *figure 16*. Liz Maw, *Deepa* (2004), oil on board, 138 x 120 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.

Below right, *figure 17*. Liz Maw, *Lady Kathryn and I* (2011), oil on board, 151.5 x 111.5 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.

Similarly, *Colleen* (Figure 15) is a transgressive image of the assuming Virgin, and like Maw's *Francis Upritchard* it is titled after the person who sat for the painting. The pink, naked figure kneels provocatively on a cloud, which floats amongst suspended, oversized seashells. The image not only connotes the Virgin's assumptive ascension into oceanic heavens, it also connotes Sandro Botticelli's painting *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1486). In this work of art, Venus stands in naked suspension upon an oversized scallop shell after her emergence from oceanic waters. Botticelli's *Venus* reflects Christian Neoplatonism, which postulates a "metaphysical topography of the heavens" (Warner, 1976/1978, p. 264). In this Christian topography, both Paradise and the Virgin are identified with the heavenly body of Venus (*Stella Maris*). Moreover, Botticelli's *Venus* exhibits the classical pose of the *Venus Pudica*, whereby her left hand covers her mons veneris in a modest affirmation of chastity. In contrast, Maw's *Colleen* makes a teasing, partial covering with both hands. As a result, *Colleen* not only connotes the beauty and fertile sexuality of the Roman Goddess Venus, but also she connotes the Platonic, paradisiacal love of the Virgin Mary. Consequently, there is an ambiguous indeterminacy between a subjective narrative of eroticism, and a theistic metanarrative of divine love.

The two remaining kneeling figures also have a radical subversiveness. *Deepa* (Figure 16) creates an ambiguous oscillation between the veiled face of a courtesan, and the absent presence of the veiled face of a nun or modest woman<sup>49</sup> (Figure 11). Moreover, the coiling snake above *Deepa* connotes the maledict Eve as well as the absent presence of the Second Eve,<sup>50</sup> the beneficent Mary. Similarly, *Lady Kathryn and I* creates an ambiguous indeterminacy between the naked body of a temptress, and the veiled head of a nun (Figure 17). Again, these paintings reveal an aporia of narrative where there is an aporetic relationship between a narrative of carnality, and a metanarrative of salvation. However, both of these figures are also characterised by dismemberment, as is Maw's depiction of Upritchard. The figure in *Deepa* has truncated arms, while the figure in *Lady Kathryn and I* holds a dismembered, helmeted, male head in her left arm. This dismemberment of body parts is foreshadowed by an earlier work titled *Venus Doom* (2009), which has several floating heads. Furthermore, the perception that the figure in *Francis Upritchard* is dismembering at the joints, finds an echo in Maw's painting *Sirens* (2009), which depicts Christ's crucifixion as a latter day Ulysses. The quartering of the figure's limbs in *Francis Upritchard* creates a bilateral tension on both the vertical and horizontal axes, which suggests the suppressed referent of the crucifixion.

Each of Maw's kneeling portraits provides an important context for her painting of Upritchard. Like Maw's *Francis Upritchard*, the suspension of the kneeling figures connotes the Christian metanarrative of the Virgin Mary's assumption, and her enthronement. Again like *Francis Upritchard*, these figures also connote a subjective narrative of human desire and frailty. Thus, while these art works reveal that Maw's

<sup>49</sup> A face veil not only connotes the eroticism of a courtesan's veil, but also the chastity and piety of a nun's veil, the modesty of a Muslim niqāb (a facial veil that leaves the eyes and part of the forehead visible), and the virginity of a bridal veil. In the West, early church fathers such as the third century Christian writer Tertullian, recommended that women veil their faces in public for modesty, and in private for spiritual devotion (Figure 11). This has been a practice of Carmelite nuns.

<sup>50</sup> See Article 111 of the 1566 Catechism for the Council of Trent, which teaches that Mary is the "second Eve": "By believing the serpent Eve brought malediction and death on mankind, and Mary, by believing the Angel, became the instrument of The divine goodness in bringing life and benediction to the human race." Thus in Catholic doctrine, Eve and Mary are identified with each other.

oeuvre is steeped in the Western theological tradition, Maw is not upholding the doctrinal metanarrative of the Virgin Mary's transcendence. Unlike the Byzantine and Latin iconography, which reinforce the Christian scriptures and doctrines, Maw is subverting scriptural doctrine with secular humanism.

### 1.3 CODA

There are three frames of reference for contextualising Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* and Maw's *Francis Upritchard*: the extant scholarship, icons of the Greek Orthodox and Latin churches, and the oeuvre of each artist.

The literature review reveals that there is a dominant dialectic at work in many of the scholarly analyses, and that they tend to gravitate around an onto-theological debate in which a teleological and a mortal end are considered to be mutually exclusive. This debate reflects the Western metaphysical paradigm, which is founded on the logic of non-contradiction where truth and falsity are incompatible. Hence, there is a tendency for the scholarship to reject contradiction, and turn an ambiguity into a polemic by adopting one interpretation at the expense of another.

Nevertheless, the review also reveals that within the iconographical tradition there is a belief in a paradoxical relationship between divine transcendence and human mortality. Indeed, the belief that Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary are both divine and mortal is at the heart of Christian doctrine. In keeping with this belief, the research on Byzantine and Latin religious iconography exposes an aporia of narrative in the iconic images of the Man of Sorrows, and the Woman of Sorrows. Both of these icons contain a self-contradiction, an ambiguous play between a divine metanarrative of salvation and a mortal narrative of death and suffering. However, both the metanarrative and the narrative are affirmed as truths by Church doctrine, and in accordance with propositional logic it can be argued that this makes the doctrine true. In other words, because each narrative affirms the truth of the other, the seeming self-contradiction of mortal divinity is resolved.

However, where the iconographical tradition affirms the divine mortality of Christ and Mary, both Holbein and Maw bring this doctrinal belief into question. Research into their oeuvre reveals that both artists were subverting the classical, iconic aporia of narrative prior to their respective paintings of Christ and Upritchard. Holbein's two minor art works of the Man of Sorrows foreshadow the subversiveness of his *Dead Christ*, with their suspended double movement between a promise of ascension and a narrative of earthly descent. Similarly, Maw has a body of work that anticipates the subversiveness of *Francis Upritchard*. In Maw's paintings, the promise of the Virgin's assumption is suspended in an aporetic double bind with narratives of human temptation and desire.

The next chapter takes two readings of the research to investigate the way in which Derrida and Blanchot engage with the deconstruction of Western onto-theology. Their deconstructive strategies are applied to Holbein's *Dead Christ* and Maw's *Upritchard* in order to disrupt the dialectical structures of exclusion that underpin the extant research, and expose further moments of self-contradiction and aporetic uncertainty.

## CHAPTER 2

### DOUBLE MOVEMENT, DOUBLE BIND

Chapter Two focuses on two essays, which are precursory to exploring the place of death in Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, and Liz Maw's *Francis Upritchard*. The first section, Two Ends, focuses on Jacques Derrida's essay *The Ends of Man*, and the second section, Two Versions, focuses on Maurice Blanchot's essay *Two Versions of the Imaginary*.

Derrida's essay is an inquiry into the modality of spatiality, and it questions the presupposition that there is a fixed, unilateral ending. Derrida exposes hidden contradictions in Western philosophical humanism to reveal an aporia of eschaton or ending, which uncovers an aporetic relationship between humankind's teleological and mortal ends. This aporia provides an important context for the thetic inquiry into whether it is possible for Holbein and Maw to depict a truth about death, or whether the images are subject to a double gesture between a *telos* and mortality. Blanchot's essay is an inquiry into the modality of classical mimesis, and it questions the presupposition that an image is a re-presentation of an ideal truth. Blanchot exposes hidden contradictions in classical mimesis to reveal an aporia of the imaginary, which uncovers an aporetic relationship between the presence of an image, and the irretrievable absence of the object depicted. This aporia provides an important context for the thetic inquiry into whether the image itself is cadaverous, which is to say, the absence of a presence.

This chapter explores how Blanchot and Derrida demonstrate that negativity is neither the hidden antithesis of truth found in classical metaphysics,<sup>51</sup> nor Hegel's<sup>52</sup> dynamic operation that gives rise to antitheses that are resolved in a unilateral totalisation. While Blanchot and Derrida both contend that negativity is a dynamic operation, they characterise it as an ambiguous bilateral movement that never resolves into a totalising presence. Blanchot's (1951/1999d) *Two Versions of the Imaginary*, refers to this dynamic play as distancing, and characterises it as an ambivalent, double

---

<sup>51</sup> See Paul de Man's (1971/1989) essay *The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau*, where he makes the point that Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thinking, and by extension Eurocentric thinking, is governed by the Western metaphysical tradition of Being and non-Being: "Rousseau is not governed by his own needs and desires, but by a tradition that defines Western thought in its entirety: the conception of all negativity (non-being) as absence and hence the possibility of an appropriation or a reappropriation of being (in the form of truth, of authenticity, of nature etc.) as presence" (p. 114).

<sup>52</sup> See Jacques Derrida's (1971/1995c) essay *The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's Semiology*, where he argues that Georg Hegel recognised that negativity is not antithetical to presence, but rather, that negativity is an operation. Derrida refers to this dynamic variously as: "the movement of negativity" (p. 91), "the operation of negativity" (p. 93) and "the labour of the negative" (p. 97). Derrida's reading of Hegel's semiology demonstrates Hegel's circular dependence on a totalising ontology: "As the site of the transition, the bridge between two moments of full presence, the sign can function only as a provisional reference of one presence to another .... between an original presence and its circular reappropriation in a final presence (p. 71).



movement of negative spacing and preservation. In his essay *Différance*,<sup>53</sup> Derrida (1968/1995a) characterises this playful operation as an ambivalent double movement of spatial differing and temporal deferring, and refers to it as *différance*. Distancing and *différance* expose how negativity and truth are not pure identities, but are contingent on each other through a play of movement. In this way, it is argued that the paintings by Holbein and Maw both convey an undecidable ambivalence between negativity and truth. In other words, it is argued that death is implicated in the images of Holbein's *Dead Christ*, and Maw's *Upritchard*, as it is in any image.

## 2.1 TWO ENDS

### 2.1.1 MORTAL END AND TELEOLOGICAL END

As the research shows, the scholars of Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, and Maw's *Francis Upritchard* have sometimes adopted a dialectical position. With regard to Holbein's work of art, the discourses tend to be polarised around the oppositional binary of ideality and death. This has created two schools of thought whereby Holbein's painting is sometimes interpreted as an affirmation of an implicit teleological continuity (Oscar Bätschmann and Pascal Griener, 1997; Tat'iana Kasatkina, 2011; John Rowlands, 1985), but at other times it is interpreted as a disruption to a teleological continuity (Athena Colman, 2004; Paul Ganz, 1950; Jeff Gatrall, 2001; Julia Kristeva, 1987/1989a; John Lechte, 1990). With regard to Maw's work of art, the research shows that most scholars interpret a spectral reading as an idealisation, and not as a disruption to a teleological continuity (Artspace, 2010; Kate Brett Kelly-Chalmers, 2011; Kristen Wineera, 2011). Thus, there is a polemical approach at work in some of the critical analyses whereby the "eschato-teleological" ends of humankind are regarded as a discontinuous either/or.

In *The Ends of Man*,<sup>54</sup> Derrida (1972/1995b) acknowledges the difficulty of *not* thinking about the ends of humankind in terms of a dialectic: "What is difficult to think today is an end of man which would not be organised by a dialectic of truth and negativity" (p. 121). This is the very dilemma that creates a powerful link between Germany's sixteenth century Holbein, and New Zealand's twenty-first century Maw. The inherent dialectic of Western onto-theology opposes truth and negativity, and in doing so, the two ends of humankind are usually deemed mutually exclusive in the scholarship of both paintings. Indeed, Derrida's first sub-heading in *The Ends of Man*

---

<sup>53</sup> See Derrida's (1968/1995a) essay *Différance* where he proposes that *différance* is a double movement of differing and deferring, or as he also terms it, a dual dynamic of spacing and temporisation (p. 10). Derrida defines spacing as the interval that separates an element from what it is not: "An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself" (p. 13). Temporisation is defined as the relationship between an element and the past and future that are not present, but in which its meaning consists: "each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element ... and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not" (ibid).

<sup>54</sup> Derrida (1972/1995b) is using "man" not in the sense of the singular male, but in the inclusive sense of the plural "we", which embraces all humankind. Derrida argues that the use of a universalising "we" within the Western philosophical paradigm presupposes a universal discourse that extends not just to those within its sphere, but also to those outside the "occidental orb" (p. 112): "there is an uninterrupted metaphysical familiarity with that which, so naturally, links the *we* of the philosopher to 'we men,' to the *we* in the horizon of humanity" (original emphases, p. 116).



is titled “Humanism or Metaphysics”, which uses an either/or to alert the reader to the dialectical relationship between humanism (“the meaning of man”) and metaphysics (the meaning of Being) (pp. 114-115). Derrida, however, challenges this dialectical thinking, and the presupposition that humankind’s teleological end and mortal end are logical antitheses. Instead, Derrida contends that there is an “equivocal relationship” between the two ends of humankind (p. 121). Derrida characterises this equivocation of possibilities as “the play of *telos* and death”, which suspends truth and negativity (p. 134). Consequently, Derrida’s essay provides a theoretical context for exploring whether there is an undecidable “trembling” between the physical and the metaphysical ends of humankind in the paintings under discussion.

Derrida (1972/1995b) argues that the traditional metaphysical Christian paradigm embeds “the end of man” in a double ending: one that brings “completion” and “accomplishment” at the same time as it brings humankind to its final, finite end in death (p. 121). This pluralisation of “the end of man” is signaled in the title of Derrida’s *The Ends of Man*, in which Derrida posits that the ultimate metaphysical purpose of humankind is identified with mortal finitude and death:

The relève or *relevance* of man is his *telos* or *eskhaton*.<sup>55</sup> The unity of these two *ends* of man, the unity of his death, his completion, his accomplishment, is enveloped in the Greek thinking of *telos*, in the discourse on *telos*, which is also a discourse on *eidos*, on *ousia* and on *alētheia*.<sup>56</sup> Such a discourse, in Hegel as in the entirety of metaphysics, indissociably coordinates teleology with an eschatology, a theology, and an ontology.<sup>57</sup> *The thinking of the end of man, therefore, is always already prescribed in metaphysics, in the thinking of the truth of man.* (original emphases, *ibid*)

Derrida is arguing that there is a hidden metaphysical underpinning to humanism, which he reinforces with a radical reading of the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Edmond Husserl, Georg Hegel and Martin Heidegger.<sup>58</sup> Derrida maintains that their work does

---

<sup>55</sup> *Eskhaton* is the Greek word for last. In theology, eschatology is the study of the afterlife, specifically the four last things: death, judgment, heaven and hell.

<sup>56</sup> *Eidos* is the Greek word for idea or form, *ousia* is the Greek word for essence, existence or substance, and *alētheia* is the Greek word for truth. In the Greek philosophical tradition, form (*eidos*) was used by Plato to refer to the Ideals and Forms of his Theory of Forms. In the Western metaphysical tradition, form (*eidos*), essence (*ousia*), and truth (*alētheia*) are absolute terms that are identified with Being. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida (1967/1997) identifies Being with presence and logocentrism: “Logocentrism would thus support the determination of the being of the entity as presence” (p. 12).

<sup>57</sup> In Western metaphysical philosophy, ontology is the study of the nature of Being, and it is concerned with discovering the pre-existing form (*eidos*), essence (*ousia*) or truth (*alētheia*) of categories of Being, and the relationship between these categories.

<sup>58</sup> See Derrida’s (1972/1995b) essay *The Ends of Man*, where he argues that postwar French philosophy has been regarded largely as humanist in character, and he singles out the existential writings of Jean-Paul Sartre as the primary example. However, Derrida critiques Sartre for his implicit and unexamined assumption of the “unity of man”, and argues that Sartre’s unified subject exhibits “the metaphysical unity of man and God, the relation of man to God, the project of becoming God as the project constituting human-reality” (p. 116). Derrida also critiques the writings of Georg Hegel, Martin Heidegger, and Edmund Husserl to expose how postwar French humanism is based on a misinterpretation of their writings as “*anthropologicist*”, which is to say, as humanist (original emphasis, p. 117). Derrida maintains that certain readings of Husserl, Hegel and Heidegger reveal that their work has not escaped traditional metaphysics, but instead, like Sartre’s work, it leads back to a metaphysical paradigm. These analyses serve to uncover a hidden metaphysical underpinning to humanism that enables Derrida to deconstruct Western philosophy.

not escape metaphysics, but leads back to a metaphysical paradigm. This provides an opening for Derrida to deconstruct two presuppositions in Western philosophy. Firstly, Derrida (1972/1995b) deconstructs the presupposition that humanism and metaphysics have a dialectical relationship by exposing the way both the metaphysical purpose, and the physical death of humankind, are and always have been, “prescribed” in the language of Western metaphysics (p. 134). Secondly, Derrida deconstructs the presupposition that Western philosophy can either surpass or overturn metaphysics by exposing how these two strategic attempts to break with metaphysics have led back to “metaphysical systems” that reaffirm hierarchical binaries (ibid). While the first strategic attempt inverts the terms of a binary from inside metaphysics, this leaves a hierarchical order in place. Also, while the second strategic attempt subverts the hierarchy from the outside by erasing it, this leads to the reinvention of the hierarchy.

Derrida (1972/1995b) suggests that Western metaphysics may need to be deconstructed from the inside and outside simultaneously: “what we need, perhaps, as Nietzsche said, is a change of ‘style’; and if there is style, Nietzsche reminded us, it must be *plural*” (original emphasis, p. 135). The Derridean “style” argues for the two strategic attempts at deconstruction to be woven together: “the choice between these two forms of deconstruction cannot be simple and unique. A new writing must weave and interlace these two motifs of deconstruction” (ibid). Derrida’s “style” argues for the differences between metaphysics and humanism to be threaded together in a way that neither orders them into binaries, nor erases them. It is a plural style governed by the operation of undecidability whereby the two possibilities of metaphysics, or its two “eves”,<sup>59</sup> are interlaced. In this manner, Derrida poses an equivocal relationship between the two strategic “eves” of metaphysics, whereby metaphysics is both guarded and abandoned. In the same way, Derrida poses an equivocal relationship between the two “ends” of humankind where again metaphysics is both guarded and abandoned. As Derrida says in his summation: “Perhaps we are between these two eves, which are also the two ends of man” (p. 136).

Kristeva (1987/1989a) also distinguishes between the two ends of humankind in her essay *Holbein’s Dead Christ*. Kristeva refers to the doubling of humankind’s end as “natural death *and* divine love” (original emphasis, p. 136):

Hegel brought to the fore the dual action of death in Christianity: on the one hand there is a natural death of the natural body; on the other, death is ‘infinite love,’ the ‘supreme renunciation of self for the sake of the Other.’ (p. 135)

Like Derrida (1972/1995b) in *The Ends of Man*, Kristeva is making a distinction between a “transcendental end” and a mortal end (p. 123). Derrida argues for a suspension of the presupposition that the end of man entails a “transcendental end”, and asserts that such a suspension is possible by exposing how the “infinity of a *telos*” is contingent upon the “factual anthropological limit” of humankind’s mortality:

---

<sup>59</sup> Derrida is not only using “eves” as a metaphor for the possibility of two strategic attempts to break with metaphysics, he is also using the two meanings, eve/eave, to symbolise the two strategies. In the first strategy, change is sought from the inside whereby the “house of metaphysics” is guarded, just as eaves guard a house. In the second strategy, change is sought from outside whereby metaphysics is abandoned for something new, just as an eve is a threshold heralding a new stage.

The transcendental end can appear to itself and be unfolded only on the condition of mortality, of a relation to finitude as the origin of ideality. The name of man has always been inscribed in metaphysics between these two ends. It has meaning only in this eschato-teleological situation. (ibid)

Derrida's logic of suspension deconstructs the Christian *telos* by "trembling" the metaphysical and physical "ends of man". However, where Derrida (1972/1995b) focuses on disrupting a transcendental *telos* with a "radical trembling" (p. 134), Kristeva (1987/1989a) focuses on the psychological implications of such a disruption, and proposes that the rupture brings one to the edge a radical hiatus between mortality and divinity: "we are led to collapse in the horror of the caesura constituted by death or to dream of an invisible beyond" (p. 113). Thus for Kristeva and Derrida, the continuity between the "eschato-teleological" ends of humankind is problematic. However, where Derrida sees these two possibilities as an oscillating undecidability, Kristeva sees them as a discontinuous either/or.

Thus, when Derrida (1972/1995b) asks whether it is possible for there to be an end of humankind "which would not be organised by a dialectics of truth and negativity", he is in effect asking a rhetorical question that challenges the oppositional either/or model, and the teleological continuity that is inherent in the notion of the dialectic (p. 121). Derrida, however, makes this challenge in the light of his own paradigm of *différance*, which shows how it is possible to think of an end to humankind that is not polemical.

#### 2.1.2 MOVEMENT WITHOUT END

As has been observed, the classical paradigm of propositional logic is implicit in those discourses where scholars argue that the paintings of Holbein and Maw offer up a univocal truth about death. There is a presupposition that there is a singular meaning beyond the play of interpretation. Moreover, these discourses limit the play of meaning by appealing to historically instituted ideologies that diminish, or efface alternative interpretations. As noted previously, Kristeva's (1987/1989a) interpretation of Holbein's *Dead Christ* appeals to empirical materialism: "a man who is truly dead .... not the slightest suggestion of transcendency. ... this corpse shall never rise again" (p. 110). While Kristeva seeks to ground her interpretation in the certainty of philosophical materialism, other scholars seek to ground their interpretation in the certainty of an onto-theological *telos*. For example, and as noted earlier, Bätschmann and Griener (1997) assert that Holbein's *Dead Christ* is a "work of piety", and argue that its "martyrizing" repugnancy encourages pious devotion by deepening the viewer's pity (pp. 89-90). As a result, the graphic abhorrence of the corpse is diminished, and deemed secondary to "the painting's sacred dimension" (p. 89). Thus, Holbein's *Dead Christ* is interpreted as either a depiction of empirical discontinuity, or as a depiction of teleological continuity. Regardless of the interpretation, the play of meaning is curtailed when alternative possibilities are subordinated as secondary.

Derrida's (1967/1978c) essay *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, acknowledges the metaphysical desire for a centred, static structure that offers up a totalising meaning beyond play:

The concept of centred structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play. (p. 279)

Derrida is arguing that the traditional order of metaphysics posits a stable *telos*, which is to say an originating or final ground of untranscendible presence: “full presence which is beyond play” (ibid). In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida (1967/1997) characterises this aspiration to transcend temporality as a desire for a centre of meaning, an ultimate word, a Logos, or alternatively a “transcendental signified”: “the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for a transcendental signified” (p. 49).

In *Positions*, Derrida (1972/2002) proposes that the “fundamental quest for a transcendental signified” is a desire for an ultimate signified that exceeds the reach of play: “a ‘transcendental signified’ which in and of itself, in its essence, would refer to no signifier, would exceed the chain of signs, and would no longer itself function as a signifier” (pp. 19-20). The research shows that the figures in Holbein’s *Dead Christ*, and Maw’s *Upritchard* have been interpreted as transcendental signifieds. For some of the Holbein scholars, the stigmata of Holbein’s *Dead Christ* signify not just the passion narrative, but also an ultimate *telos* through the counter-narrative of salvation (Bätschmann and Griener, 1997; Kasatkina, 2011; Rowlands, 1985). Regarding Maw’s *Upritchard*, scholars interpret the figure as an idealisation, and identify Upritchard as a magisterial presence (Artspace, 2010; BrettKelly-Chalmers, 2011; Wineera, 2011). In this way, some of the scholars find an ultimate and final meaning in the art works that is beyond the reach of play. It is this teleological paradigm that is challenged by Blanchot and Derrida.

Blanchot and Derrida challenge the metaphysical notion that presence is an undivided state of immediacy, which denies distance, difference, temporality and death: “the ... eschatological meaning of being as presence, as parousia, as life without difference” (1967/1997, p. 71). Instead, they take the Hegelian insight that negativity is not oppositional,<sup>60</sup> but rather an operation, or movement, which is necessary for the subjective analysis of all distinctions that give rise to dialectical oppositions. However, Hegel posits that this dynamic is a “movement of idealisation”, which effectively resolves contradiction into a third term of a totalising *telos* (Derrida, 1972/1995c, p. 93). In contrast to Hegel, Blanchot and Derrida posit a bilateral dynamic that challenges a unilateral, teleological idealisation. Where Blanchot refers to this double

---

<sup>60</sup> In Western philosophy, metaphysics posits that there is a meta-language, a language beyond rhetoric, which provides access to an unmediated experience of truth and Being. These essential truths are regarded as static terms of identity that denote a true correspondence between an idea and a thing, and which are organised into mutually exclusive, hierarchical binaries. In this paradigm, all negativity is reduced to an opposition, a contamination, a dismissal. See Derrida’s (1980/1992) essay *The Law of Genre*, where he refers to the classification system as “the law of genre”, a system in which the law has an “essential purity” (p. 225). Derrida argues, however, that the law is unable to maintain absolute purity of truth, and he posits a “counter-law”, a “law of impurity”: “What if there were, lodged within the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination? And suppose the condition for the possibility of the law were the *a priori* of a counter-law, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order and reason?” (ibid). Derrida’s “counter-law” implies that pairs of opposites are not separate, but are interlaced in a co-contaminating, co-existent relationship: “a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy” (p. 227). Thus, the “counter law” posits that the possibility of generic limits is always already contaminated by the impossibility of maintaining those limits.

movement as distancing, Derrida refers to it as *différance*. In the first movement, distancing and *différance* expose negativity as the very condition of presence, but in the second movement they expose presence to be in perpetual postponement of an idealised self-referential truth. Thus for Blanchot and Derrida, negativity is not just an interval of spacing that is necessary for all distinctions to be made, but it is also the activity of temporisation by which these distinctions continue to be made in perpetuity, and by which a final distinction is kept in constant deferment. As Derrida (1968/1995a) asserts, there can be no “Hegelian teleology”<sup>61</sup> (p. 94).

When Blanchot and Derrida renounce the opposition between truth and negativity it opens a door into an indeterminate limitless play, a movement that is without end. From the outset, Holbein’s title<sup>62</sup>, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, disrupts the viewer’s aspiration for certitude with its oxymoronic phrase, Dead Christ. This contradictory phrase sets up an indeterminate play between Christ’s empirical death, and his transcendent resurrection. There is an ambiguous double movement that ensures that these signifiers are always pointing to each other without ever reaching a final assured signification: neither death nor *telos*; neither nullity nor eternity. Moreover, Holbein’s painting identifies the body of Christ with corporeal death and resurrection. The corpse moves in tone from the black of Christ’s hair, through a range of muted greens, blues and tans for his complexion, to the white of his loincloth. These tones not only give a clinical crispness to Christ’s form, they also connote the transience of nature, and undermine the solidity of his body. The body’s imminent corruption requires the spectator to engage with Christ as an earth-bound mortal. But at the same time, Christ’s wounds signify not just his narrative of the Passion, but also his counter-narrative of salvific resurrection. As a result, Holbein’s representation of Christ signifies a suspended undecidability between an earthly identity, and an unearthly identity, and thus there is no reassuring certitude. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida (1967/1997) states: “the transcendental signified, which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign”, is now subject to “de-construction” (p. 49).

---

<sup>61</sup> See Derrida’s (1968/1995a) *Différance*, in which his theory *différance* displaces the classical Platonic ontology of Being, and Hegel’s teleology. *Différance* is an unnameable dynamic of differing and deferring that is “irreducible to any ontological or theological – ontotheological – reappropriation” (p. 6). Derrida proposes that *différance* precedes Being: “‘Older’ than Being itself, such a *différance* has no name in our language” (p. 26). Derrida is arguing that because *différance* “has neither existence nor essence”, it is not a self-identical concept that can be reappropriated and reduced to an origin, “a predicate of existence”, “a rightful beginning” (p. 6). In effect, *différance* cannot be reappropriated and reduced to an ontology of Being with an *archē* and *telos*, which is to say a beginning and end. However, at the same time, Derrida proposes that *différance* “includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return” (ibid). Because *différance* is what makes presencing itself possible, *différance* both exceeds and includes presence. Thus, while *différance* is an operation that makes presencing possible, it also keeps *différance* beyond both propositional truths and empirical truths: “*différance* ... no more follows the lines of philosophical-logical discourse than that of its symmetrical and integral inverse, empirical-logical discourse. The concept of *play* keeps itself beyond this opposition” (original emphasis, p. 7). Gayle Ormiston (1988) puts it this way: “*Différance* cannot be thought by any ontology, nor can it be elevated to a master-word, master-concept, or master-key .... It is a chain that has no taxonomical, lexical, or ontological closure” (p. 41).

<sup>62</sup> Holbein’s painting of the dead Christ has been given different titles that do not always include the phrase, Dead Christ. See Paul Ganz (1950) who not only uses the inscription *Christ in the Tomb*, but also states that the inventory of Basilius Amerbach (1585-1587) registers Holbein’s painting as: “a dead man by H. Holbein, oil on wood”, with the title “Iesus Nazarenus Rex” (p. 218). Today, the inscription painted on the frame bears the additional word *Judaeorum* so that a translation would read, *Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews*.

Similarly, Maw's image of Upritchard signifies an uncertain suspension between an earthly and unearthly identity. The ground in which the figure of Upritchard floats is indeterminate, and it can be read metaphorically as cloud or smoke. Unlike the classical paintings of the assumptive Virgin Mary, there is no grand perspectival recession, no sense of pre-ordained transition, and no relationship with others. Indeed, the apostolic farewell, cherubic revelry, and divine welcome are clouded over, and the opaque ground creates a sense of enigmatic doubt that gives the painting an ambiguity. The ground could symbolise cloud that is about to coalesce, and raise the figure in an ascendant assumption, but equally, it could symbolise smoke that is about to envelope the figure in a descendent immolation. The impossible possibility of a final signification between a heavenly ascension, and an infernal descension, renders meaning partial, transitive and provisional, and ensures the de-construction of a transcendental signifier. As Derrida (1967/1997) contends, the limitless play of differing and deferring deconstructs the transcendental signified: "One could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of onto-theology and the metaphysical presence" (original emphasis, p. 50).

Distancing and *différance* mark an "invisible hinge"<sup>63</sup> that undoes the polemical discourses that oppose a teleological end against a mortal end (Derrida, 1979, p. 142). In the first movement, differing opens up and destabilises the fixed opposition between teleology and mortality to expose a mutual contingency in which neither term can be decided upon for an absolute and final meaning. Consequently, the art works by Holbein and Maw signify neither one position, nor the other: neither a *telos*, nor a death. In the second movement, deferring acts as a folding point by joining teleology and mortality together as two possible meanings that can be held at one and the same time. As a consequence, Holbein's *Dead Christ* and Maw's *Upritchard* signify both a *telos* and a death in an aporia of eschaton or ending.

Thus, distancing and *différance* are invisible hinges that open to an infinite play of signifiers that are equally essential, but which also defer meaning because no one signifier is able to bring a truth to self-presence. The images by Holbein and Maw are unable to depict a final truth about death because the play of meaning vacillates ambiguously with no final resting point, no reassuring end, no *telos*. As Rosalind Krauss (1993) says of the bilateral movement between terms: meaning "is not clear, will never be clear" (p. 166). Consequently, those polemical discourses that depend upon an either/or choice between the two ends of humankind, mortal and immortal, can no longer preserve their demand for a decidable truth.

---

<sup>63</sup> See Derrida's (1967/1997) *Of Grammatology*, where he uses a quotation from Roger Laporte to highlight the double meaning of hinge (*la brisure*) as both "difference and articulation". Laporte defines *la brisure* variously as: "joint", "hinge", "hinged articulation of two parts", and "folding joint" (p. 65). Derrida asserts that "Difference is articulation" to emphasise that "difference" is a double movement of differing and articulating, opening and linking, fragmenting and joining (p. 66). Thus, a hinge is at once a marker for a discontinuity or "impossibility", and at the same time a marker for a continuity or possibility (p. 65).

## 2.2 TWO VERSIONS

### 2.2.1 DISEMBODIED RESEMBLANCE AND CADAVEROUS PRESENCE

As previously observed, a spectator may be confronted with an undecidable ambiguity when viewing Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, and Maw's *Francis Upritchard*: Is the dead Christ alive? Is the suspended Upritchard dead? This ambivalence not only raises an inquiry into whether it is possible for these images to depict a truth about death, but it also raises an inquiry into whether an image is a static presence that can depict a truth. Blanchot's (1951/1999d) *Two Versions of the Imaginary*, challenges the classical notion of mimesis that presupposes that an image is a representation of a pre-existing ideal. Blanchot proposes that an image does not re-present the presence of the signified, but rather that the presence of the image co-exists in an ambiguous relationship with the absent object.

Blanchot's (1951/1999d) *Two Versions of the Imaginary*, ends with a footnote that challenges the reader to consider the possibility of subverting the metaphysics of Being with the proposition that Being itself is ambiguous. Blanchot asserts that while "being is essentially being", ambiguity exposes being as deceptive because it conceals the truth about itself: "Ambiguity expresses being as dissimulated; it says being is, insofar as it is dissimulated" (p. 427). Blanchot is arguing that all Being is contingent on a deceptive concealment: "all being is through dissimulation" (ibid). For Blanchot, Being is a simulacrum of presence, because it conceals the negation by which "it is always reserved and preserved" (ibid). Blanchot is challenging the notion of ambiguity as an either/or alternative between Being and nothingness: "Ambiguity is no longer the primordial Yes and No in which being and nothingness are pure identity" (ibid). In its stead, Blanchot argues for a both/and ambiguity where Being and negation are both implicated in each other, and define each other. It is with this latter understanding of ambiguity in mind that Blanchot posits that Being conceals its capacity to "recapture itself in negation" (ibid). Blanchot is making a radical challenge to Western metaphysics by raising the possibility that Being is contingent on a concealed negation for its very presence.

When Blanchot (1951/1999d) asks whether it is possible to "go farther" and apply ambiguity to the metaphysics of Being, his caution is in proportion to the far reaching implications of his proposition (p. 427). The radicalness of Blanchot's marginal footnote is implicit throughout *Two Versions of the Imaginary*, where he is applying ambiguity to images. Blanchot distinguishes between the two versions of the image with two pertinent oxymorons: "disembodied resemblance" and "cadaverous presence" (p. 419). With each of these contradictory phrases Blanchot is making a morbid identification between an image and death. Moreover, the syntax of these phrases creates an ambiguity in which there is a double movement of belonging: death belongs to the image, but so does the image belong to death. To put this another way, absence is the condition of an image because it re-presents an absent thing, but at the same time, the image is the condition of absence because the absent thing is irretrievable. Indeed, the opening sentence of Blanchot's essay alerts the reader to the co-implication of an image and absence: "But what is the image? When there is nothing, that is where the image finds its condition" (p. 417).

In Blanchot's (1951/1999d) first "version" of an image, the phrase "disembodied resemblance" signifies an artist's "ideal expression" of an object: "its presence freed of existence, its form without matter" (p. 419). Blanchot is referring to the classical ideal of creating an image that resembles the object, and which "continues to affirm things in their disappearance" (p. 417). Holbein's *Dead Christ* and Maw's *Upritchard* both create imaginative and poetic images that affirm the protagonists of these paintings in their disappearance. Where Holbein depicts the entombed presence of Christ's cadaverous body, Maw depicts the spectral presence of Upritchard's disembodied body. The images are a "vitalizing negation" because they affirm the "absent thing" (p. 425). From this point of view, the images are consoling because they re-present something that is lost to absence: "the image ... helps us to recapture the thing in an ideal way" (p. 425). Holbein's image of Christ's entombment recaptures the presence of a mythological figure in its absence, and similarly, Maw's image of Upritchard's transcendent suspension recaptures the presence of a contemporary idol in its absence. In a corresponding fashion, any image serves this function of re-presenting an absent thing.

In Blanchot's (1951/1999d) second version of an image, the phrase "cadaverous presence" signifies that an image is like a cadaver: "impersonal", "immobile", "impotent", "impassive", "mute", and "blind" (pp. 418 & 424). These epithets serve to convey how at the moment of death the cadaver becomes "its own image" because like an effigy or statue, the cadaver represents the absence of the mobile, seeing, speaking body (p. 421). From this point of view, Holbein's painting of Christ's dead body involves a double participation as both the sight, and the site of a corpse. As a sight, Christ is depicted as a rigid, blind, and silent corpse; as a site, the painting itself is a rigid, blind, and silent corpse. Thus, Holbein's image of Christ is a cadaverous presence twice over, and on both counts it is no more than an effigial, statuary resemblance of an irretrievable absence. Similarly, Maw's *Francis Upritchard* is a cadaverous presence because as an image it too approaches the cadaver. She too is the passive presence of an absence that is impossible to retrieve and make present. According to Blanchot's second version, the images of Christ and Upritchard are an absence of presence: "the image ... constantly threatening to send us back, no longer to the absent thing, but to absence as presence" (p. 425). That is to say, they draw us back to an irrecoverable absence: "the neutral double of the object, in which belonging to the world has vanished" (pp. 425-426). Consequently, the images are a disheartening negation because they cannot return what is irredeemable. Holbein's image of the dead Christ, and Maw's image of the suspended Upritchard are unconsoling because they represent the impossibility of return or recovery: theirs is the presence of an absence that is impossible to have present. Correspondingly, all images represent an impossible return: "the return of something which does not come back" (p. 418).

Blanchot (1951/1999d) contends that ambiguity reveals an image to be a deceitful simulacrum: "the brilliant lie" (p. 417). For Blanchot, an image is "duplicious" because it conceals the ambiguity, that is to say the "double meaning", which is produced by "the power of the negative" (p. 424). The image of Christ is duplicious because it is produced by the hidden power of the negative. The resemblance of Christ deceives the viewer because the presence of the image conceals not only the absence of Christ, but also his irretrievability. Similarly, the image of Upritchard is duplicious because it not only conceals the absence of Upritchard, but also the irretrievability of



her younger self and the time in which the portrait was painted. Thus, the ambiguity of an image resides in the way its presence conceals its contingency on negation: the presence of the image conceals the very absence of the idealised object re-presented, as well as the impossibility of the object's recovery.

In his essay, *Literature and the Right to Death*, Blanchot (1947/1999a) posits that the "amazing power of the negative" ensures the irreducibility of a double meaning:

[N]othing can prevent it from continuing to assert itself as continually differing possibility, and nothing can stop it from perpetuating an irreducible *double meaning*, a choice whose terms are covered over with an ambiguity that makes them identical to one another even as it makes them opposite. (original emphases, p. 398)

Blanchot (1951/1999d) is arguing that ambiguity is not the exclusive binary logic of "either or else", which entails a dialectical choice between the pure identities of presence and absence (p. 426). Presence and absence do not present an alternative to each other, but instead each implies the other. For Blanchot, representation is an ambiguous process that "implies the absence of what is being made present again" (Paul de Man, 1971/1989, p. 123). In this manner, an image "is the one and the other": it is both absent and present (Blanchot, p. 426). Thus, while absence and presence are opposing terms, they are also identified with each other.

An image, any image, and not just the image of a dead or disembodied figure, has two readings where neither reading can exist without the other.<sup>64</sup> As Blanchot maintains in *Two Versions of the Imaginary*, ambiguity exposes the way the presence of an image is not equivalent to the presence of the object depicted. Instead, an image is implicated in a deceptive negation on two counts: it conceals the absence of the object that is being depicted, and it conceals the irretrievability of the absent object. Thus, not only do Holbein's *Dead Christ*, and Maw's *Upritchard* depict an image that is an ideal substitute for the absent body, but also the images make absence itself present. There is reciprocity between the presence of these images, and the absence of the bodies depicted. Indeed, they refer to and co-implicate each other in an aporia of the imaginary. On that account, an image is irreducible to either an absence or a presence.

## 2.2.2 STRUCTURE OF IDENTITY AND STRUCTURE OF TRACE

Derrida also challenges the classical view of representation, or mimesis, by arguing that absence is the condition of the sign. In *Positions*, Derrida proposes that in the classical, Platonic view of representation, meaning is considered to be interior, which is to say, pre-existent and predetermined. Hence, all expression is viewed as a re-presentation, a translation of an interior ideal that is expressed in a process of exteriorisation:

---

<sup>64</sup> See de Man's (1979) *Semiology and Rhetoric*, where he makes a distinction between an ambiguity based on contextual contiguity, and an ambiguity based on a double meaning. De Man distinguishes between "two meanings that exist side by side", and "two readings (which) have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be undone by it. Nor can we in any way make a valid decision as to which of the readings can be given priority over the other; none can exist in the other's absence" (p. 12).

[T]he effect of language that impels language to represent itself as expressive re-presentation, a translation on the outside of what was constituted inside. The representation of language as “expression” is not an accidental prejudice, but rather a kind of structural lure, what Kant would have called a transcendental illusion. (Derrida, 1972/2002, p. 33)

Derrida deconstructs this classical view of representation by arguing that a sign is not a structure of identity that re-presents the presence of a signified. For Derrida, a sign is “a structure of difference”, or to put this another way, a “trace-structure”<sup>65</sup> (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1974/1997, p. xvii). As Derrida (1968/1995a) states: “trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site – erasure belongs to its structure” (p. 24).

Like Blanchot, Derrida’s analysis deconstructs the referential function of mimesis, and exposes an intertextual process of differences and relationships whereby a sign is not defined by what it is, but by what it is not. In this way, erasure, (which is to say negation, death, or absence), is the condition of a sign. As Blanchot (1951/1999d) asserts, there is a double movement in which an image is both the preservation, and the negating erasure of an object: “that thing as distancing, the present thing in its absence, the thing graspable because ungraspable, appearing as something that has disappeared, the return of what does not come back” (p. 418). Like Blanchot, Derrida is contending that a sign is not a presence, but rather the absence of a presence. Derrida refers to the simulacrum of presence as trace: the “mark of the absence of a presence” (Spivak, 1976/1997, p. xvii).

A sign marks a movement of play that cannot be conceived of as an either/or: “no longer conceivable on the basis of the opposition presence/absence” (Derrida, 1972/2002, p. 27). Rather, there is interplay between the presence of the sign, and the absence of its referent that consists of the simultaneous movements of differing and deferring. In Holbein’s painting the operation of spacing differs the artist’s image of the dead Christ from the historical Christ, as well as other referents such as the King of Glory, Upon the Tomb, Ruler of All, Man of Sorrows, and Image of Pity. But at the same time, the operation of temporisation defers an identification of Holbein’s *Dead Christ* with any one referent. Because the double movement is unending, Holbein’s image of the dead Christ cannot be grounded in a reassuring certitude of a full presence and identity. Instead, there is a ceaseless play that defies immobilisation.

Similarly, in Maw’s painting the image of Upritchard is never “simply present or absent” (Derrida, 1972/2002, p. 26). The operation of spacing differs the image of Upritchard from what it is not, which is to say Upritchard herself, and any other

---

<sup>65</sup> See Derrida’s (1972/2002) *Positions*, where in an interview with Julia Kristeva, he argues that *différance* is a differential and relational network of differences, referrals and traces where each element is never “simply present or absent”: “The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself. Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each ‘element’ – phoneme or grapheme – being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system .... 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” (original emphasis, p. 26).

referent such as a sage, ideal idol, Assumption of Mary, or Standing Mother of Sorrows. But simultaneously, the operation of temporisation defers an identification of Maw's *Francis Upritchard* with any one referent. Thus, the constant play of differing and deferring ensures that Upritchard's image never stabilises into a static, self-same truth. The image is neither Francis Upritchard nor a sage, neither a sage nor an ideal idol, neither an ideal idol nor the Assumption of Mary, neither the Assumption of Mary nor the Standing Mother of Sorrows. Accordingly, neither one referent nor another can become the centre and guarantor of presence.

Thus, from the outset, meaning is "constituted" by a differential and relational network of referrals, traces and spacings. Meaning is exterior to itself, and constructed within a condition of exteriority, which is to say syntax and spacing, before any act of expression. Derrida (1972/2002) puts it this way:

What is called "meaning" (to be "expressed") is already, and thoroughly, constituted by a tissue of differences, in the extent to which there is already a *text*, a network of textural referrals to *other* texts, a textual transformation in which each allegedly "simple term" is marked by the trace of another term, the presumed interiority of meaning is already worked upon by its own exteriority. (original emphases, p. 33)

## 2.3 CODA

Blanchot's distancing and Derrida's *différance* are open, suspended styles that challenge the classical, closed style of oppositional binaries. For Blanchot and Derrida, possible terms are held in suspension, and the question of truth becomes an unlimited relay between potential truths. In this paradigm, it is not possible for Holbein and Maw to depict a stable truth or presence.

Derrida argues for an aporia of eschaton or ending where the aporetic relationship between the teleological and mortal ends of humankind is subject to a double movement, and an interminable, suspended delay. This equivocation makes both meanings possible, and prevents signification from ever closing in on itself. Subsequently, the narrative outcome for the paintings by Holbein and Maw is irreducible to a decidable truth about death. Blanchot argues for an aporia of the imaginary where there is an aporetic relationship between the presence of an image and the absence of the object depicted. Blanchot contends that an image can be an ideal placeholder of an absent object, and he refers to this version of an image as a disembodied resemblance. From this point of view, the portraits by Holbein and Maw re-present a resemblance of Christ and Upritchard in their absence. But Blanchot also contends that an image makes absence present, and he refers to this version of the image as a cadaverous presence. From this point of view, the portraits by Holbein and Maw confirm the irretrievability of the historical Christ and the younger Upritchard. Hence for Blanchot, there is an equivocation of possibilities in which the paintings are irreducible to either an absence or a presence.

Blanchot and Derrida's approach to mimesis is radical because they are positing an *a priori* play of movement that is logically anterior to any opposition. As Derrida (1972/1995a) maintains, the play of movement "precedes Being" and sets up the

opposition “between two differences” (p. 5). Thus, distancing and *différance*<sup>66</sup> are not in opposition to truth, but are the active condition that enables the possibility of truth: “The condition for its possibility and impossibility” (Derrida, 1979, p. 128). In this manner, neither presence nor absence is the ground for play, but instead it is the possibility of play that is the premise of presence and absence. As Denis Hollier (1974/1998) asserts, the valorisation of being has been “without success in eliminating the labyrinth”, the metaphorical site for the ambiguous play of presence and absence (p. 73). Hollier says of the restless, relentless, labyrinthine nature of the sign:

The labyrinth does not hold still, but because of its unbounded nature breaks open lexical prisons, prevents any word from finding a resting place ever, from resting in some arrested meaning, forces them into metamorphoses where their meaning is lost, or at least put at risk. (p. 60)

Holbein’s *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* and Maw’s *Francis Upritchard* resist categorisation into one meaning or another, and thus evade a scholarly interpretation. As a Blanchotian/Derridean analysis shows, a dialectic is not the ground for an interpretation, but rather it is the possibility of play that is the premise for it. The following chapter also applies a Blanchotian/Derridean analysis to the art works, and explores further how interpretations are forced “into metamorphoses where their meaning is lost, or at least put at risk” (ibid).

---

<sup>66</sup> Derrida has chosen the term *différance* to demonstrate how the meaning of what we say or write is not fixed in hierarchical binaries, but is instead unstable, and unable to conform to either side of a binary. *Différance* demonstrates this lexical instability because it is simultaneously a process of differing and deferring, and is thus neither one nor the other. Similarly, Maurice Blanchot’s distancing is also an unstable term, an aporia that exposes the instability of signification because it entails both negation and preservation, separation and restoration.

## CHAPTER 3

### ABOVE THE HORIZON, BELOW THE CLOUDS

Chapter Three explores the modalities of spatiality, and metaphysical presence in the art works of Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, and Liz Maw's *Francis Upritchard*. These inquiries signal an interrogation into the classical presupposition that an image represents a stable window on the world, which privileges an optical vision. This chapter seeks to challenge the Western metaphysical quest for a stable presence by exposing the hidden geometric organisation that frames the dialectic of the logocentric discourse, and keeps it positioned in hierarchies that can replicate themselves as visionary truths.

The first section, Ignoble Nobility, is an inquiry into the modality of spatiality, and it questions the presupposition that there is a metaphysical architecture that has a determined centre, fixed axial orientation, and invulnerable boundaries. This section uncovers hidden moments of self-contradiction in the spatial configuration of the art works. In particular, it exposes an aporia of spatiality in which there is a bilateral movement between verticality and horizontality, and inside and outside. The second section, Blind Sight, is an inquiry into the modality of metaphysical presence, and it questions the presupposition that there is a discarnate, transparent, visionary truth. This section uncovers hidden moments of self-contradiction in the way the eyes of Christ and Upritchard are depicted. In particular, it exposes a bilateral movement between sightedness and blindness in an aporia of vision. These aporias reveal that both presence and absence are implicated in the paintings, and this brings a univocal master narrative into question.

#### 3.1 IGNOBLE NOBILITY

##### 3.1.1 CLASSICAL AXIAL ORIENTATION

Geometry gives spatiality not only to ideas but also to whole disciplines such as philosophy and theology, and these disciplines use its architecture to facilitate the visualisation of abstract concepts. The Christian spatial paradigm of ascent and descent has its origins in the classical, Ptolemaic view of the universe. In this geocentric paradigm, the earth was determined as an immobile centre, a central point of orientation that conferred a fixed axial structure upon the world. The resulting geometrical framework ensured that the dialectic of up/down, inside/outside, left/right, front/back were accepted as unambiguous and universal. The immutable shape of the geocentric universe is reflected in the Hellenistic mythological underworld,<sup>67</sup> as well as in Christianity's doctrinal realms of heaven and hell. Indeed,

---

<sup>67</sup> In Hellenistic mythology the souls of the dead descend into the underworld where they are judged. If punished, the souls either descend further into the abysmal pit of Tartarus, or alternatively, remain above and enter the Asphodel Fields. If rewarded, the souls enter the Elysium Fields. Thus, the underworld is a space into which a soul descends to meet its fate in a hellish realm of descended

Christ's descent into hell and ascent into heaven are articles of faith that are referenced in the Apostles' Creed: "He descended into hell; The third day he rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven" (Book of Common Prayer). Thus, while the geocentric paradigm has been displaced by Copernican heliocentrism, it continues to permeate the Euro-Christian world view.

Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, and Maw's *Francis Upritchard* both make a covert appeal to the Greco-Christian axial topology. Holbein's image of Christ, and Maw's image of Upritchard are painted on a flat two dimensional surface, and these dimensions not only determine their height and width, but also generate cultural codes around spatial axes that are embedded in the Western paradigm. The vertical plane has the upper world of visionary transcendence at the top end, and the world of opaque immanence at the opposing end, while the intersecting horizontal plane has the moving traffic of this world, which is blind to both the upper realm of idealised forms and the lower realm of death. As Susan Sontag (1979) states: "To understand something is to understand its topography, to know how to chart it" (p. 13). From this perspective, the images by Holbein and Maw appeal to a sublimated architectural rhetoric, which maps ideas about life and death, and gives them spatial order. The axial orientation of these art works embeds them in metaphysical and physical domains, which is to say the domains of grace and gravity.

In life we pull against gravity to gain the elevated, upright stance of humankind's vertical axis, a stance that is mirrored in Maw's *Upritchard*. The central positioning of Upritchard's full-length, frontal image creates a perpendicular axis through the centre of the painting, which reinforces its plumb positioning in a transcendent "optical field". Because the figure hovers in an unnatural upward suspension, it evokes classical Latin icons that depict the suprahuman transcendence of Christ's ascension,<sup>68</sup> and the Virgin Mary's assumption. In keeping with the weightless, elevated grace of Christ and Mary, Upritchard floats in defiance of her heavy self, and her subjection to gravity on earth. Thus, with these powerful Christian referents in mind, Maw's *Upritchard* marks a geographic pole between earth and sky, an unanchored axis mundi, which connotes a visionary transcendence.

In death, however, gravity's downward drag pulls us into a prone position on the horizontal axis, a position that is mirrored in Holbein's painting of the dead Christ. Holbein makes a prerogative of the gravitational pull with an image that forsakes the "optical field" for the "horizontal field" (Rosalind Krauss, 1993, pp. 171 & 179).

---

depths, or in a redemptive upper field. Christianity has retained the classical geocentric dialectic while superimposing its own mythology over the Greek mythology: Tartarus is superseded by the realm of Hell, Asphodel by Purgatory, and Elysium by Paradise. The superimposition of Christian metaphysics over a Ptolemaic topography found its classical expression in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (1321). This is an epic poem that describes Dante's journey through *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory) and *Paradiso* (Paradise). It is a metaphysical journey of descent into perdition, and ascent into salvation: an allegory of the soul's journey towards God.

<sup>68</sup> Fra Angelico's (Guido de Pietro) fresco *Resurrection and Women at the Tomb* (1439-44), is a classical example of an ascendant Christ found in the canon of Christian iconography. Fra Angelico depicts the three Marys beholding the empty tomb of Christ while a seated angel points upwards to indicate that the Saviour has risen and is present. The upright Christ is suspended within a mandorla that is positioned centrally in the upper half of the composition. This alignment creates a perpendicular axis through the centre of the painting, which emphasises the elevated verticality of visionary transcendence.

Holbein depicts Christ's descension into death from a lateral perspective, and it discloses a sidelong view of Christ's supine corpse lying within a long, narrow niche, which has been cut out of rock. Moreover, Holbein achieves an image of constrained occupation by pressing the elongated extension of Christ's life-size body hard up against the picture plane. The body not only fills the shallow foreground space, but it also marks out a horizon line against the background space, which reinforces Christ's lowly descent to a recumbent, flat plane. The implacable horizontality positions Christ in a visionless, opaque field.

Thus, while Maw's painting uses the vertical axis to locate the suspended body of Upritchard in an eternal beyond, Holbein's painting uses the horizontal axis to locate Christ's dead body in a spatio-temporal reality. The perpendicular is not just a spatial construct composed of a vertical and a horizontal axis. Rather, the two intersecting axes are inscribed with connotations that govern the way ascension and descension have been imagined and thought about within the classical Western metaphysical tradition. Ascension is associated with the elevating grace of an all-knowing, optical outlook, while descension is associated with the grave ignominy of an ignorant, blind opacity.

### 3.1.2 ORIENTING TO HORIZONTALITY

There has been a cultural shift in emphasis that is remapping our orientation to the vertical and horizontal axes. Krauss (1993) expresses the shift this way: "The vertical body ... now drops the ground, felled by the action of the *informe*<sup>69</sup> to collapse the

---

<sup>69</sup> The formless (*l'informe*) of Georges Bataille introduces a new framework that contributes to an understanding of the undecidability of deconstruction. For an explication of Bataille's relevance see Jacques Derrida's (1967/1978a) essay *From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve*, where he employs Bataille's notions of sovereignty, difference and general economy to deconstruct Hegel's restricted dialectical economy. Derrida argues that Bataille's general economy of excess affirms a play of difference, and that this play is the sovereign rule, or condition upon which a restricted dialectical economy rests. In other words, there is a sovereign, formless movement of play that undermines dialectical oppositions, and subjects the terms to the undecidable syntax of neither/nor: "Beyond the classical oppositions .... the writing of sovereignty can enounce nothing, except in the form of *neither this, nor that*. Is this not one of the affinities between the thought of Bataille and that of Blanchot?" (original emphases, p. 273). Also, see Bataille's definition of the formless (*l'informe*), first published as an entry in his "Critical Dictionary" in the magazine *Documents 1*, 1929. Bataille (1929/1985) argues that we give shape to the universe by clothing it in a "mathematical frock coat", which is to say, by assigning rigidly reasoned classifications or categories (p. 31). However, Bataille asserts that the universe has no stable, credible categories, and that it is no more than a formless operation: "the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless*" (original emphasis, *ibid*). Bataille defines the formless as both an action and a state. As an operation it resembles an impulse, a force that is able to "bring things down in the world" by undermining classifications, taxonomies and hierarchies (*ibid*). As a state, it designates what "has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere like a spider or an earthworm" (*ibid*). Here the formless is characterised as the rejected, marginalised, repressed, and sublimated aspects that are denied, and not given conscious form. Bataille also says of the formless: it "amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit" (*ibid*). Given the context, perhaps this simile is comparing the formless to that which is libidinal (spider) and anarchic (spit), and evades any transposition into a hierarchy. Furthermore, see Derrida's *The Law of Genre* (1980/1992), for a corresponding analysis of the "presumed stability of ... classical nomenclature" (p. 228). Like Bataille, Derrida posits that there are no "tranquil categories", but instead there is an operation or movement that is "inaccessible, indeterminable, interminable and inexhaustible", which can "upset ... taxonomic certainties" (*ibid*).

vertical onto the horizontal axis” (p. 171). Krauss is using these axial terms metaphorically to draw attention to the collapse of the traditional geometric construct, which opposes the vertical and horizontal axes. Krauss is not seeking to invert this binary, but to emphasise that these axes coexist with equal status. As Leo Steinberg (1972) asserts in his essay, *The Flatbed Picture Plane*, this shift in emphasis does not repress or subjugate the “vertical posture”:

There, in the vertical posture of “art,” it continues to work in the imagination as the eternal companion of our other resource, our horizontality, the flat bedding in which we do our begetting, conceiving, and dreaming. The horizontality of the bed relates to “making” as the vertical of the Renaissance picture plane related to seeing. (p. 90)

Steinberg is collapsing the notion of an essential dominant by asserting that the terms of the axial binary are “eternal” companions, which is to say, equivalent opposites that predicate each other. In this way, the vertical posture of classical idealism “continues to work in the imagination as the eternal companion of our other resource”, our horizontal posture of empirical materialism. In effect, Krauss and Steinberg are seeking a metaphorical dethroning of the privileged viewing point assumed by the dominant term in traditional hierarchical binaries. Instead there is reciprocity between the vertical and horizontal perspectives. In other words, there is a radical aporia of spatiality where verticality and horizontality are implicated in each other.

The vertical axis employed by Maw in her portrait paintings, echoes the traditional, upright, rectangular format of Catholic holy cards that depict saints, martyrs, members of the holy family and liturgical events. Not only does the erect stance connote a traditional representation of a biblical figure, but also the verticality of the plane evokes a corresponding expectation for upstanding, moral rectitude. However, Maw’s portrait of Francis Upritchard subverts a vision of nobility by depicting the contemporary artist in a moment of potential collapse from erect to prone. Maw’s *Upritchard* is an anatomy of dismemberment with the four limbs moving between detachment and reattachment. However, Upritchard’s portrait is not only an assemblage of floating body parts, but also the black robe is flat and lifeless giving the appearance of a disembodied spirit. Moreover, the eyes have been dismembered. The figure is like a two-dimensional collage of cutouts; a spectral presence whose body parts have a tenuous hold on each other. The radical uncanniness of Upritchard’s portrait exposes an underlying instability in the ideal of vertical objectivity. It is a moment of uncanny suspension that could be perceived as a double oscillation between a dismembering descent, and a re-membering ascent. This ambiguity undermines a fixed orientation, and introduces a relay between vertical and horizontal that can never achieve stasis in a dominant, privileged meaning.

Steinberg (1972) argues that the collapse of the vertical axis onto the horizontal axis does not depend on whether the work of art is hung on the wall or not: “What I have in mind is the psychic address of the image, its special mode of imaginative confrontation” (p. 84). Steinberg is arguing that the horizontal perspective can be identified by the way a work of art confronts the world of action. Such images refer back to a perspective of action: “back to the horizontals on which we walk and sit, work and sleep” (p. 87). Steinberg’s list of everyday actions emphasises how the



horizontal perspective is one of “operational processes”, and man-made constructions (p. 84). Maw’s portrait is an imaginative construct that challenges an underlying assumption of stasis by implicating the figure in a double movement of rising and falling. This ambiguous dynamic may confront the viewer with an undecidable vacillation between a horizontal perspective of active doing, and a vertical perspective of eternal stasis.

Steinberg (1972) also identifies a critical shift from Modernism to Postmodernism as occurring when there was a break from picture planes that “simulate vertical fields”, to picture planes that assert “opaque flatbed horizontals” (p. 84). Steinberg is distinguishing between a picture plane that reflects what is seen in nature and is visionary, and a picture plane that reflects what is made in a culture and is constructed: “I tend to regard the tilt of the picture plane from vertical to horizontal as expressive of the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture” (ibid). In this reorientation, nature is no longer the site of a discoverable, hidden truth that can be captured in a painting: “the painted surface is no longer an analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes” (ibid). A painting is a culturally constructed sign: a “flat documentary surface that tabulates information” (p. 88).

In the exhibition *The Formless: Instructions for Use*,<sup>70</sup> Yve-Alain Bois and Krauss take Georges Bataille’s notion of *l’informe*, in combination with Steinberg’s flatbed picture plane, as their starting point for redefining “an iconological reading of Modern art” (Lauren Sedofsky, 1996, para. 13). Bois and Kraus (1997) wish “to declassify” traditional art history categories of “style, theme, chronology and, finally, oeuvre as the total body of the artist’s work” (p. 21). In Modernism, style refers to the essential formal properties of an art work; theme refers to its transcendent vision and revelation of meaning; chronology refers to the place of a work in a linear progression; and an artist’s oeuvre refers to their role as the creator of a significant autonomous body of work, where each work is “bounded” and has “a beginning and an end” (p. 26). Bois and Krauss wish to shatter the “signifying boundaries” of these art historical categories, and undo the notion of an idealistic, optical conscious<sup>71</sup> (Krauss, 1993, p. 157).

In their declassification of High Modernism, Bois and Krauss (1997) identify the formless with four operations: horizontality, base materialism, pulse and entropy. For Bois and Krauss, horizontality suggests the bodily and the carnal, and is opposed to verticality, the upright human and a “purely optical” or “retinal” vision (p. 32). Base

---

<sup>70</sup> For a similar exhibition, see Helen Molesworth’s (2005) catalogue *Part Object Part Sculpture*, which is based on a selection of art works that assert a “base materialism”, a “brute untransmuted materiality” (pp. 73 & 79). Throughout the exhibition there is a play on industrial production and biological reproduction, which draws the viewer’s attention to the power of replication and reproducibility. This dynamic suggests a perpetual, metonymical chain that can never reach completion. Moreover, the unending continuity and infinite profusion has an annihilating effect.

<sup>71</sup> See Rosalind Krauss’s (1993) *The Optical Unconscious*, whose title comes from Walter Benjamin’s essay *Small Histories of Photography* (1931). Benjamin demonstrates that movements, which cannot be perceived by the naked eye, can be photographed and made conscious. This reveals that our optical conscious is dependent on an unconscious perception of space. This in turn challenges the notion of an optical conscious in which categories are transparent to knowledge, and subject to mastery. Like Benjamin, Krauss argues for an “optical unconscious”: “a projection of the way that human vision can be thought to be less than a master of all it surveys” (pp. 179-180).

materialism suggests rot, waste and the scatological and is opposed to “the elision of matter”, which is to say the omission of materiality (Sedofsky, 1996, para. 16). Pulsation suggests libidinal rhythm, repetition and time and is opposed to an autonomous unified field beyond time, which is to say “the exclusion of temporality” (ibid). Entropy suggests annihilation by either decomposition or “infinite profusion”, and is opposed to structure and form (Bois & Krauss p. 38).

From this perspective, Holbein’s spoiling *Dead Christ* bears the characteristics with which Bois and Krauss define the formless: materiality, decomposition, temporality, and annihilation. Moreover, Christ’s imminent bodily decay is intensified by the long, narrow tomb. The length of his life-size body feels stretched and pressed into an exaggerated, horizontal elongation. At first sight, Christ’s capitulation to the horizontal plane appears to be no more than the natural physical “collapse” of a dead body, however the gesture of Christ’s right hand suggests that his lengthwise, supine pose is also symptomatic of a profound reorientation away from an ocular, visionary transcendence, and towards a blind, interior immanence. Indeed, it could be argued that Christ’s gesturing hand is emblematic of the permissive, cultural shift towards humanising the hieratic figures of Byzantine/Latin icons: Christ’s traditional two-fingered, outward facing blessing (*Figures 5 & 26*) is reconfigured radically into an inward facing, middle finger gesture, the *digitus impudicus* (*Figure 18*).



*Figure 18.* Hans Holbein the Younger, detail from *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521-1522), oil on limewood, 32.4 x 202.1 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland.

The obscene and offensive nature of the *digitus impudicus* gesture has been researched by Ira Robbins (2010) who states: “according to one commentator ‘it is the most ubiquitous and longest lived insulting gesture’ in the world, appearing as far back as ancient Greek texts” (p. 1413). Socrates defines the middle finger gesture as “finger rhythm”, which suggests that Holbein is using the *digitus impudicus* as a figurative device to embed Christ in a reading of biology and carnality (p. 1414). However, this knowing deployment of carnality does not necessarily aim at a

calculated desacrilisation. While Christ's hand may be resting on the tomb's bed with an extended middle finger,<sup>72</sup> the repressed blessing is an absent presence that suggests an ambivalent movement between the profane and the sacred. Nevertheless, the grounded horizontality of the "finger rhythm" gesture is pointing blindly along a horizon line, and it evokes an acentred, non-hierarchical rhizomatic system.<sup>73</sup> Put another way, it gestures towards a blind "metonymical desire" of perpetually deferred fulfillment (Julia Kristeva, 1987/1989a, p. 129). In this manner, the ambiguity of Christ's gesture creates a dual movement between profanity and sacrality, desire and reason, eros and logos. The second section of this chapter, Blind Sight, takes up and extends this discussion on the ambiguous tension between blind, operational processes and transparent, visionary truths.

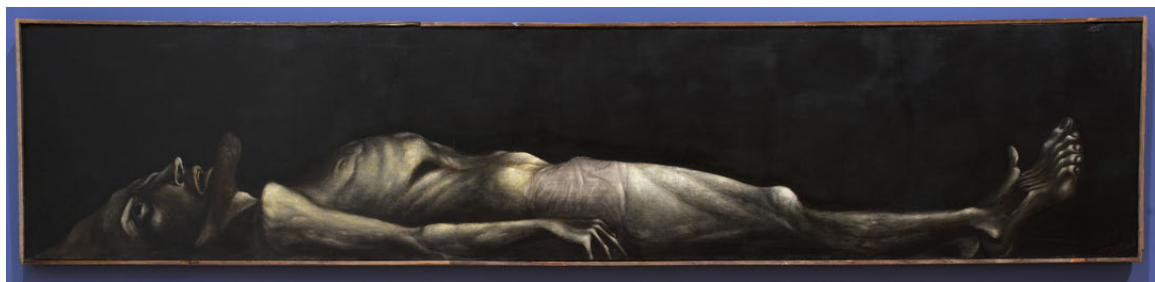
Joel-Peter Witkin's photograph *Corpus Medius* (2000) (Figure 19), provides a striking contemporary comparison to Holbein's *digitus impudicus*. *Corpus Medius* is a very confrontational and visceral photograph of the lower half of a male corpse, which has been bisected violently at the hips, signifying, among other things, butchered meat. The severed body has been placed lengthwise on a draped platform, and the cleaved corpse is angled to create a diagonal plane that provides the spectator with a frontal view of the groin. There is a violent disruption to the expected visual parataxis of head, trunk and limbs, and the missing upper body is a powerful absent presence of those bodily parts that signify heartfulness, speech, consciousness and spirit. The brutal physical cleaving focuses attention on those parts of the body that come into regular contact with the horizontal plane, and signify the formless realm of desire and potentiality. In particular, the subject's genitals are a central focus, and Witkin uses the inscription *Corpus Medius* to make an explicit identification between the severed body part and the libidinal impulse. *Corpus Medius* is Latin for middle finger organ, and it signifies the sexual connotations of the *digitus impudicus* or middle finger gesture. With this title, Witkin is perhaps inscribing the anonymous, dead body with a formless desire that is impersonal, blind and mute.

While the platform in *Corpus Medius* connotes, variously, a butcher's block, a mortuary table, and a funeral bier, it also evokes an altar of ritual sacrifice through its careful attention to detail. For example, the platform has been covered with a dark cloth, and the bifurcated body has been placed on it with ritual care. Moreover, the

---

<sup>72</sup> See Tony Fomison's *Study of Holbein's 'Dead Christ'* (1973) (Figure 20), where the middle finger gesture has been removed while the stigmata has been retained. Fomison not only strips away Holbein's *digitus impudicus*, he also strips Holbein's Christ of his crypt and shroud, and places his body directly in the matrix of matter. This signifies an earthly return of matter to matter that evokes the Christian funeral rite: "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust" (Book of Common Prayer). Nevertheless, Christ's stigmata create an ambiguous play between Christ's earthly materiality and his unearthly divinity. This aporia of divine earthliness, or transcendent immanence, could be identifying earth as a *telos*, an Eden. It is an identification that finds its echo in the Gospel of Thomas: "the kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it" (Logion 113).

<sup>73</sup> The rhizome of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri introduces a further framework. Its equivalence with the undecidability of deconstruction is not explored in the thesis, for while there is more that Deleuze and Guatarri can offer that is relevant to the deconstructive operation of undecidability, Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida were selected as the theorists when defining the limits for this project. Deleuze and Guatarri (1980/2010), define the rhizome as: "an acentered, non-hierarchical, non-signifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states" (p. 23). In other words, a rhizomatic system of thought has no universalising principle but instead seeks association and addition. It is a dynamic set of relations, a multiplying assemblage of codes that is repetitive, circular and never achieves closure.



Above, *figure 19*. Joel-Peter Witkin, *Corpus Medius* (2000), silver print, 40.64 x 50.8 cm.  
© Joel-Peter Witkin, image courtesy of Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago, United States of America.

Below, *figure 20*. Tony Fomison, *Study of Holbein's 'Dead Christ'* (1973), oil on canvas, 68 x 311.3 cm. © Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, New Zealand, purchased with assistance from the Serra Trust and the Elise Mourant Bequest, 1996.

legs of the corpse have been positioned lengthwise with the feet crossed at the ankles, which, it could be argued, connotes a crucifixion pose. Also, like Holbein's *Dead Christ*, the body is on the east-west axis aligning it to the rising and setting sun. In these ways, Witkin's corpse connotes a sacrificial offering. In particular, the cadaverous remains of the lower body evoke the sacrificial Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*)<sup>74</sup> that is slain as a necessary condition of life: "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8, King James Bible). At the same time, the cadaverous remains of the upper body are absent, and this evokes the invisible formlessness of death that is a necessary condition for the actualisation of form.

Unlike Holbein's *Dead Christ*, there is a complex ambivalence between the lower and upper body of Witkin's *Corpus Medius*. The upper body is the supplement to the lower body, and its absence creates a double cadaverous presence. Not only does the partial corpse signify the irretrievable absence of a life, but it also signifies the irretrievable absence of a complete body. The complex ambiguous interplay between absence and presence sets up a bilateral oscillation between ignoble profanity and noble sacrifice. The double movement of differing and deferring folds low into high, and high into low without cease. As Bois states: "To say that the slaughterhouse derives from the temple is also to say that the temple can be as sordid as the slaughterhouse" (Bois and Krauss, 1997, p. 47). The anonymous severed corpse trembles between a lowly slaughterhouse and a supreme temple, between earthly corporeality and an eternal tabernacle.<sup>75</sup>

To reiterate Steinberg's (1972) assertion: "There, in the vertical posture of 'art,' it continues to work in the imagination as the eternal companion of our other resource, our horizontality" (p. 90). In other words, a noble, ocular transparency remains the companion to an ignoble, libidinal opacity. In Holbein's painting, Christ's upright two-fingered blessing has been subordinated by the substitution of a transversal middle finger gesture, but the blessing remains its repressed companion. Similarly, in Witkin's photograph, the sacrificial Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*) remains the repressed companion to the butchered corpse. This process of "conversion" is discussed by Jacques Derrida (1995) in *The Gift of Death*, where he posits that the exposure of one class simultaneously subordinates another: "It is the subordination of one mystery by another, the conversion from one secret to another" (p. 8).

If Holbein and Witkin are reconnecting the viewer to a culturally hidden reading of Christ's narrative, it is because repression does not destroy: "Repression doesn't destroy, it displaces something from one place to another within the system" (ibid). Indeed, "the trace of one is always already there in the other" (Andrew Benjamin, 1988, p. 47). Here, Benjamin is applying Derridean logic to argue that there is no essential dominant, no "absolute self-presence" because there has to be a relationship in order to mark one term off from another (p. 46). Accordingly, Holbein's *digitus impudicus* and Witkin's *Corpus Medius* both signify an undecidable play of contrasts:

<sup>74</sup> *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God) refers to Jesus Christ in his role as sacrificial offering, and it is related to the Paschal Lamb of Passover. See also the Gospel of John for a second biblical reference to the Lamb of God: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29, King James Bible).

<sup>75</sup> See the Old Testament for the biblical reference: "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Corinthians 5:1, King James Bible).

a play of blind desire and omniscient beatification. This opens up a ceaseless chain of signification that ensures a deferral of meaning, and “the impossible possibility” of a final sanctified glorification, a beatified ending (Derrida, 1979, p. 103).

Kristeva (1987/1989a) says of Holbein’s painting: “Horizontal lines take the place of the *Crucifixion*’s verticalness, and the corpse appears more elegiac than tragic” (original emphasis, p. 116). Kristeva’s distinction between the tragic and the elegiac marks a shift between the mythological and the historical, the metaphysical and the human. It is a comparison that can also be applied to Maw’s painting of Upritchard where the verticalness of the assumption is subverted by the figure’s imminent dismemberment. The art works by Holbein, Maw and Witkin evoke both a mythological rite of heroic sacrifice and transcendence, and a historical earthbound drama of torment and mourning. As a result, the transcendence of the tragic vacillates in a double movement with the elegiac immanence of humanity’s subjection to nature.

### 3.1.3 FOLDING THE OUTSIDE IN

Gaston Bachelard (1958/1994) analyses the way geometrical metaphors underpin metaphysics: “profound metaphysics is rooted in an implicit geometry which ... confers spatiality upon thought” (p. 212). In particular, he is referring to the way the geometry of space forms “a dialectic of division” between outside and inside (p. 211). Bachelard maintains that the geometry of interior and exterior can form an image that governs the way philosophers think about Being and non-Being: “Philosophers, when confronted with outside and inside, think in terms of Being and non-Being” (p. 212). Bachelard says of the geometry of outside and inside:

Outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains. It has the sharpness of the dialectics of *yes* and *no*, which decides everything. Unless one is careful, it is made into a basis of images that govern all thoughts of positive and negative. (original emphases, p. 211)

In the classical metaphysical paradigm, an inner, definitive meaning is said to be divided from alternative outside meanings by the conferred limits of a signifying edge, border, frame or parergon. Derrida’s first chapter in *The Truth in Painting* is titled *Parergon*, and it exposes how the very structure of a framed artwork is a metaphor for the oppositional binary of inside/outside. The frame, or parergon, not only marks the boundary between the interior artwork and the exterior, but also serves the symbolic function of containing the art work’s inner meaning within a defined, denotative boundary. As Derrida (1978/1987) says:

One makes of art in general an object in which one claims to distinguish an inner meaning, the invariant, and a multiplicity of external variations *through* which, as through so many veils, one would try to see or restore the true, full, originary meaning: one naked. (original emphasis, p. 22)

The portraits of Holbein and Maw have wide, substantial frames that clearly serve the purpose of demarcating the interior artwork (ergon) from the exterior (parergon). The frame for Holbein’s *Dead Christ* (Figure 21) has an embellished lintel and decorative

side casings, which connote an elaborate sarcophagus.<sup>76</sup> In contrast, Maw's large vertical portrait has a moulded frame that is akin to the architraves of a doorway. Because it is hung close to the floor, there is the illusion that a figure is approaching a doorway at eye level. In each case, the frames serve to align the portrait at a specific border: Holbein's *Dead Christ* is aligned to horizontal lineations that place him along a horizon line; Maw's *Upritchard* is aligned to vertical lineations that place her at a threshold or opening. Subsequently, the parergonal borderlines serve the architectural function of orienting the art works in space. However, Derrida's (1978/1987) focus is to challenge the concealed function of the parergon whereby a signifying border confers a dialectical division between "an inner meaning, the invariant", and the "multiplicity of external variations" (p. 22).



Figure 21. Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521-1522), oil on limewood, 32.4 x 202.1 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland.

As Maurice Blanchot and Derrida contend, ambiguity destabilises semantic borders, and deconstructs boundaried truths. Derrida (1972/1981) puts it this way in his essay *The Double Session*: "These veils ... are at once the content and the form, the ground and the figure passing alternately from one to the other" (p. 260). While a fixed, parergonal binding between inside and outside is brought under scrutiny in the art works of both Holbein and Maw, *Francis Upritchard* provides exemplars of the way a differential between the figure and ground can create an inside/outside ambivalence. The figure/ground in Maw's painting has a destabilising ambiguity whereby the limbs hover ambivalently in a double movement of dismemberment and re-memberment. The double folding motion between attachment and detachment means that it is not possible to determine what it is one sees: "the fold which, being neither one nor the other and both at once, undecidable, *remains* as a text, irreducible to either of its two senses" (original emphasis, p. 259).

Moreover, there is an endless inward and outward refolding in Maw's *Upritchard* that uncoils and recoils from within the figure to create an ambiguous tension between the possibilities of retreat and advancement. The black robe at the centre of the painting is flat and without depth, and there is the sense that gravity is sucking the figure inwards into a lightless, easeful, blackness; drawing her into the dark matter of passivity,

<sup>76</sup> While the elaborate frame connotes a decorative freestanding sarcophagus, it is more probable that Holbein's tomb is a rectangular recess cut into a rock wall, as noted previously in the Introduction (p. 4). Moreover, Paul Ganz (1950) argues that the origin of the frame is unknown: "In all probability the wooden frame ... did not originate until the end of the sixteenth century" (p. 218). Nor is it known whether the painting was to be hung low at the base of an altar or at eye level for individual meditation, or whether it was to be used as an ornament for a tomb.



inertia, and sorrow. Yet the figure's outstretched arms and upward facing palms, in conjunction with her stepped feet, suggest a strong sense of potential movement, the possibility of an outward movement into active life. It could be argued that the posture connotes a movement towards self-preservation, or even, perhaps, a prayerful supplication. In this way, the ceaseless refolding movement of the figure/ground connotes a dual movement of dematerialisation and materialisation.

Derrida's (1979) essay *Living On: Border Lines*, uses the term "invagination"<sup>77</sup> to conceptualise the operation by which an outside meaning refolds into an inside meaning and back again, without either end or limit (p. 97). Invagination is a biological process that denotes an "inward refolding" of an outer surface, or edge to form a pocket (ibid). It provides a spatial metaphor<sup>78</sup> whereby it is possible to imagine signification as a process of refolding meaning from outside to inside, and vice versa. In Maw's art work, the viewer can observe the figure/ground ambiguity that gives rise to the double movement of invagination: both an inward refolding of the figure into the ground connoting deterritorialisation, and an outward refolding of the ground into the figure connoting reterritorialisation. Thus there is no clear boundary between figure/ground. Maw's *Upritchard* is in a state of oscillating flux, and the ambiguity of the text creates an unstable, permeable boundary that ceaselessly refolds upon itself exchanging outside for inside, and inside for outside. In effect, the process of invagination exposes how parergonal, signifying borders are subject to the process of *différance*. Krauss (1993) puts it this way: "It is a failure to maintain the boundaries between inside and outside, between, that is, figure and ground. A slackening of the contours of its own integrity, of its self-possession" (p. 155). The restoration of a "true, full, originary meaning: one naked" is an impossible possibility: Maw's *Upritchard* is simultaneously at the threshold of formlessness and form, poised in an uncertain suspension between inner amorphous chaos, and outer boundaried order (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 22).

In Maw's *Upritchard* the meaning turns inside out and back again in such a way that the source of the meaning cannot be located safely inside the frame. As Derrida

---

<sup>77</sup> See Derrida's (1979) essay *Living On: Border Lines*, where invagination is defined: "Invagination is the inward refolding ... the inverted reapplication of the outer edge to the inside of a form where the outside then opens a pocket" (p. 97). Feminist scholars challenge Derrida's use of biological terms such as invagination, womb, virginity and hymen, which are appellations for the feminine body. For an insightful analysis of this debate refer to: "Displacement and the Discourse of Women", by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in "Displacement: Derrida and After", Mark Krupnick (Ed.), 1983, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. For Derrida's defense of these biological terms refer to: "Interview: Choreographies: Jacques Derrida and Christie V. McDonald", by Christie V. McDonald and Jacques Derrida, in *Diacritics*, 12(2), 1982, The John Hopkins University Press.

<sup>78</sup> Craig Adcock (1987) argues that Marcel Duchamp uses a range of "inside/outside reversals" in his art works including a "concavity-convexity transformation" in *Fountain* (1917) and *Female Fig Leaf* (1950), and an "inside/outside transposition(s)" in *Objet-Dard* (1951) (pp. 153 & 162). A binding between inside and outside is also played out in Duchamp's sculpture *Coin de chasteté* (Wedge of Chastity) (1954). This work is comprised of two pieces, a wedge and a cavity that fit together. When the two pieces are separated, the wedge can be seen to have been cast from the concave mould that it occupies, and which is akin to an inverted vagina. Duchamp's playful inversion of this bodily orifice means that the "interior" is now "exterior", and exposed to the world. Skin functions as the body's mediator between inside and outside, but Duchamp toys with this boundary and destabilises it with an inside/outside transposition. This work challenges the notion that "the artist seeks to reproduce those inward truths whose essence lies beyond mere sensory representation" (Christopher Norris, 1988, p. 21). Instead, the implication is that meaning depends upon sensory experience, and that there is no inner essential truth.



argues, there are no mutually exclusive borders delineating an unequivocal inside meaning from other meanings outside the text. Derrida (1967/1997) puts it this way in *Of Grammatology*: “il n’y a pas de hors-texte”, that is to say, “there is no-thing outside of the text”, or in a transliteration, “there is no outside-text” (original emphases, p. 158). When Derrida proposes that there is no ‘outside’ to the text, he is contending that there is no place outside language from where meaning can be generated. Instead, Derrida (1979) posits a “differential network” that “overruns all limits assigned” to the borders:

[A]ll those boundaries that form the running border of what used to be called a text, of what we once thought this word could identify, i.e., the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame, and so forth. What has happened, if it has happened, is a sort of overrun [*débordement*] that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a “text,” of what I still call a “text,” for strategic reasons, in part – a “text,” ... that is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it. (pp. 83-84)

In *Living On: Border Lines*, Derrida (1979) uses Blanchot’s story *The Madness of the Day*, to elucidate his contention that there are no boundaried stories, or meanings: “no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network” (p. 84). Blanchot (1953/1999b) signals that his story is an unfinished corpus, a differential network, when the narrator denies the possibility of telling a story: “A story? No. No stories, never again” (p. 199). His double negative, *no/no*, signals that there is an equivocation whereby the *récit* has neither a beginning, nor an ending. The narrator is suspended between recounting the event, and the event of its recount. In this manner, the narrator’s recounting is in a perpetual approach that never arrives at an objective, boundaried testimony. Derrida (1979) puts it this way: “suspension, makes it start out again toward the impossible narrative, to recount that (which) it will not recount” (p. 128).

Derrida (1979) characterises “*the demand for narrative*” as a demand for presence, visibility, the light of day (original emphases, p. 87). The viewer of the iconic Man of Sorrows and Mother of Sorrows may demand narrative presence and closure from the Passion story, but like Blanchot’s narrator, the viewer may find themselves suspended between the doctrinal testimony of the event, and the subjective event of the doctrine. The viewer may occupy a space in between where they are in a perpetual approach to a truth that never arrives. Similarly, the viewers of Holbein’s *Dead Christ* and Maw’s *Upritchard* may seek narrative presence and closure by relating these images to Church doctrine, but again the viewer may occupy a space between a metanarrative and a narrative where truth is perpetually deferred. Thus, an observer may be confronted with the narrative truth in painting as impossible truth: “A pure testimony as impossible testimony” (Derrida, 1998/2000, p. 100).

The narrator’s emphatic and radical negation in Blanchot’s *The Madness of the Day* not only reflects his own unfinished story, but also reflects the way Blanchot

destabilises the opening and closing borders of the classical, linear, narrative structure to create an unfinished, fictional corpus. In particular, Blanchot creates a porous border by taking the opening sentences of the story, and repeating them towards its end. Indeed, the narrator observes how his story neither begins nor ends: “But the end was a surprise to all of us. ‘That was the beginning,’ they said” (p. 199). Blanchot’s narrative technique not only refolds the end into the beginning and vice versa, but it also sets up a repetitive cycle that defers the ending *ad infinitum*. As Derrida (1979) says of an invaginated text: “You lose sight of any line of demarcation between a text and what is outside it” (p. 82).

Despite the architectural separation of the *parergon* from the *ergon*, the ambiguity of the image ensures a play of signification whereby beginnings, endings, borders, and margins become permeable. The figure/ground ambiguity in Maw’s *Upritchard*, and the reiterated sentences in Blanchot’s story *The Madness of the Day*, tease the eye by creating a play of movement whereby the viewer/reader loses sight of where the texts begin and end. The texts keep refolding back in on themselves so that the viewer/reader cannot stabilise the border between inside and outside. Likewise, each of the art works under discussion teases the viewer’s eyes because the mutating play of an inside/outside transposition cannot be arrested. A transcendental signified never arrives because the image is constantly refolding in on the absent thing that has been depicted. As a result, a viewer may find themselves subject to a double oscillation between ignoble fiction and noble truth, and thus be unable to locate a boundaried centre of originary meaning.

### 3.1.4 DECENTRING THE CENTRE

Traditional metaphysics imagines an Archimedean point, an external standpoint of omniscience that provides a transcendent point of origin and destination. In his essay, *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, Derrida (1967/1978c) articulates this search for certainty as a search for a structured centre:

[T]he entire history of the concept of structure ... must be thought of as a series of substitutions of centre for centre .... The history of metaphysics ... is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix ... is the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre have always designated an invariable presence – *eidos*, *archē*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) – *alētheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth. (original emphases, pp. 279-280)

Holbein’s painting of the stigmatic Christ, and Maw’s painting of the suspended *Upritchard* both use historical Christian metaphors to connote a metaphysical centre. In particular, Holbein uses Christ’s stigmata to connote the Passion and its counter-narrative of a unilateral ascendance; Maw uses an uplifting cloud to connote the Virgin Mary’s assumption, and a narrative of unilateral ascendance. Accordingly, both art works connote the promise of “transcendentality” and an ultimate end. A *telos* is one of many historical “principles” that serves as a substitution for a centre, and as Derrida’s list above attests, they include the following: form (*eidos*), origin (*archē*), essence (*ousia*), truth (*alētheia*), and consciousness. The equating of a *telos*

with these other substitutions is made clear in Derrida's (1972/1995b) essay *The Ends of Man*, where he postulates that a "discourse of *telos*" is also a discourse on form, essence and truth: "the discourse of *telos*, which is also a discourse on *eidos*, on *ousia* and on *alētheia*" (p. 121).

Ambiguity and *différance* put into question the traditional, metaphysical quest for a central originating point, which is also a discourse on an ending point. Aware of the implications of thinking in terms of the structured binary, Derrida (1968/1995a) proposes that *différance* is not an originating point that can be located:

[T]here is nowhere to *begin* to trace the sheaf of the graphics of *différance*. For what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure, a principal responsibility. (original emphasis, p. 6)

In order to avoid the hidden spatiality of categorical thinking Derrida resists defining *différance* as a concept, and insists that "*différance* is neither a word nor a concept" (p. 7). As a result, Derrida effects a displacement of geometric axial thinking to ensure that *différance* cannot be mistaken for another originary concept. *Différance* necessarily entails the loss of an axiomatic topology: "the loss of the Archimedean point that used to provide orientation and direction" (Denis Hollier, 1974/1998, p. 65). *Différance* is not a location, a place, a fixed point of origin or destiny, but rather it is an unlocatable, unplaceable movement by which meaning emerges.

A centre, Derrida (1967/1978c) argues, forbids mobility: "it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible. At the centre, the permutation of the transformation of elements ... is forbidden" (p. 279). As has been observed, neither Holbein's *Dead Christ*, nor Maw's *Upritchard* offer up the certainty of a stable centre of metaphysical presence. Instead, the images of Christ and Upritchard are an absent presence, or to use Blanchot's term, a cadaverous presence. They depict the absence of that which they make present, and this ambiguity sets up an endless play of signification in which there is an unstoppable permutation between presence and absence. Moreover, this ambiguity assails all the other substitutions for the Greco-Christian centre of presence: just as presence alternates with absence, so too does a *telos* alternate with death, omniscient sight with blindness, form with formlessness, essence with exteriority, truth with untruth. Thus, because the traditional Greco-Christian centres have the potentiality to actualise and not actualise, the centre itself never appears: "the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences" (p. 280). Moreover, an endless play of signification is set in motion. As Derrida continues: "The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification indefinitely" (ibid).

The decentring movement of distancing and *différance* is exemplified in the opening line of Blanchot's (1949/1999c) story *The Madness of the Day* when the narrator articulates his hard won aporia: "I am not learned; I am not ignorant" (pp. 191 & 199). The narrator's double negative puts him in a double bind: he is neither one thing nor the other, which is to say he is decentred by the potentiality to be both. He is suspended in a double oscillating interplay between learning and ignorance, and it is this ceaseless erosion of categorical form that undermines an exact and true recounting of his account. Derrida (1979) refers to the narrator's double bind as a

“double invagination”, and insists that this is not confined to any one genre: “double invagination can come about in any text” (p. 100). Indeed, the decentring effect of this “double effacement” has been observed in all the art works under discussion:

Holbein’s *Dead Christ*, and Maw’s *Upritchard* are neither ascended nor descended; Witkin’s *Corpus Medius* is neither invisible nor visible; Marcel Duchamp’s *Wedge of Chastity* is neither inside nor outside; Tony Fomison’s homage to Holbein’s *Dead Christ* is neither immanent nor transcendent (p. 101). Hence, when viewing these art works, an observer may find themselves decentred by aporias of spatiality, and unable to locate a stable centre of meaning.

Thus, the art works are not about telling a story, representing a truth, or showing a thing. Instead, there is a play of relation; a perpetual approach between inside and outside, signifier and signified. Meaning is neither exhausted nor saturated. As a result, a viewer may find themselves decentred like Blanchot’s narrator: neither learned nor ignorant; neither noble nor ignoble.

## 3.2 BLIND SIGHT

### 3.2.1 TREMBLING THE AXES

Holbein’s *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, and Maw’s *Francis Upritchard* both use a traditional spatial construct to orient their figures within the classical Greco-Christian lexicon of ascension and descension. Nevertheless, this geometric binary not only refers to an architectural space that differentiates “vertical pillar from horizontal slab”, but also it differentiates values that are ascribed to the vertical and horizontal postures of the human body (Krauss, 1993, p. 168). The vertical, standing posture is regarded as noble: “the privileged viewing point of an optico-geometric mastery of space” (p. 183). In contrast, the horizontal, recumbent posture is subsumed as the ignoble other: “a space of viciousness and evil” (p. 184). Krauss, however, not only contests the assumption that these values are natural to humankind’s bodily structure, but also she contests the assumption that humankind has a natural architecture at all:

[M]an has no natural architecture .... What there is instead is a structure of values imposed by the human subject: noble versus ignoble; notions about elevation, loftiness, ideals, as opposed to a space of viciousness and evil. The body is thereby inscribed within the logic of the paradigm, given formal meaning: noble/ignoble. (ibid)

The art works by Holbein and Maw use an axial alignment to orient the viewer within the logic of the geometric paradigm so that the paintings connote a “formal meaning” of “noble versus ignoble”. However at the same time, both Holbein and Maw disorient the viewer by trembling the fixity of the two axes. In particular, the portraits tremble the axes by bringing ocularcentrism<sup>79</sup> and its privileged elevation of vision

---

<sup>79</sup> Ocularcentrism can be understood as the elevation and privileging of vision in the Western metaphysical paradigm. French theorists have explored the role of ocularcentrism, which is to say the centrality of vision in Western metaphysics, and its relationship to a phallogocentrism. See Luce Irigaray’s (1974/1985) *Plato’s Hystera* in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, which contributes to the anti-ocular discourse by arguing that Western philosophy and psychoanalysis both negate and exclude the

under scrutiny. The portraits challenge the centrality of vision in Western metaphysics with a radical aporia of vision in which blindness and sight co-exist as an ambivalent potentiality.

The classical logic of Plato's Allegory of the Cave in *The Republic* proposes that perception in the visible, sensible realm grasps just a shadow of the truth, and that true vision is grasped in the invisible, intelligible realm of reason (508b-513e). Plato also posits an eternal world of ideal Forms or Truths, which are imperceptible to eyesight, but are perceptible to the mind's eye. In the *Phaedo*, Plato maintains that these ideal Forms or Truths are not just invisible, but that they are also immutable, pre-existent and divine (78d-80a). Such visionary idealism contends that one is able to grasp objective truths, and this aspiration is reflected in the classical image of The Assumption<sup>80</sup> where the Virgin Mary is depicted being assumed bodily into heaven by God. Unlike Maw's *Upritchard* who floats in skyless cloud, the iconic portrayals of The Assumption (*Figure 22*) typically depict the Virgin rising up through layer upon layer of open cumulus cloud accompanied by winged cherubim against a blue sky. In such art works each layer is more glorious than the last, with a penultimate region of blazing golden light that finds its *telos* in the "privileged viewing point" of an all-seeing omniscience.<sup>81</sup> The all-knowing, ascendant perspective of The Assumption reinforces the enduring values of objectivity, idealism, nobility and eternity.

In contrast to the iconic images of The Assumption, Maw's suspended figure is immersed in a sea of opaque clouds that have the dull, grimy colouring of industrial smoke. In Maw's painting, there are no transitions between earth and heaven, no accompanying cherubim, and no golden light. Nor is there a ground plane of converging lines resolving in a "privileged viewing point" above or beyond the figure (Krauss, 1993, p. 183). Instead, Maw's *Upritchard* is engulfed in a disorienting,

---

female body as absence, lack and deficiency: "She is in excess of any identification of presence" (p. 307). Irigaray seeks to disrupt the hierarchical, gendered binaries that privilege the active, male gaze over female passivity and death. In this dialectic the male gaze is the bringer of light: "Lighting the earth, the gaze, the soul" (p. 309). The thesis seeks to subvert the repetition of gendered binaries in three ways. Firstly, by selecting art works in which death is personified as both female (Maw's *Francis Upritchard*), and male (Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*; Joel-Peter Witkin's *Glass Man*, and *Corpus Medius*). Secondly, by selecting artworks where both the female figure and the male figure oscillate ambiguously between life and death, thus subverting a fixed identification between the masculine/feminine and the life/death pairings. Finally, the thesis is engaged with locating some key moments that tremble the structural stability of the texts, and an authoritarian determination of a metaphysical, ocularcentric truth.

<sup>80</sup> Titian (Tiziano Vecelli) painted a Renaissance masterpiece of Christian iconography, *Assumption of the Virgin* (1518) (*Figure 22*). The Virgin Mary is depicted in upward flight on puffs of cumulus cloud while being ferried to heaven by a swarm of cherubim in full revelry. The Virgin's eyes and arms are upraised as she enters a transcendent round of golden light, a heavenly realm of cloudless enlightenment. God observes the scene from above the clouds, while below the clouds on earth, a crowd of Apostles either kneel in awe, or reach up in adoration and ecstasy. The central positioning of the Virgin in the upper half of the composition creates a perpendicular axis through the centre of the painting. This axial alignment emphasises the elevated verticality of visionary transcendence.

<sup>81</sup> The Western logic of identity privileges a solar mythos whereby terms such as sun, day, light, law, intellect, truth, omniscience, and vision have become identified with each other in a rhetoric of presence. These poetic metaphors uphold and reinforce Platonic ideals, universal laws and divine truths. Not only does the rhetoric of presence assert the primacy of vision, it also assumes a disembodied eye, a discarnate gaze that is devoid of sensible qualities, and transcendent to the sensible world. Consequently, the resurrection and the assumption are identified with a visionary incorporeality.



Above, *figure 22*. Titian, *Assumption of the Virgin* (1518), oil on panel, 690 x 360 cm. Church of the Glorious Saint Mary of Friars, Venice, Italy.

Below, *figure 23*. Liz Maw, *Francis Upritchard* (2010), oil on board, 209 x 113 cm. Exhibition 2010, Artspace, Auckland, New Zealand. © Courtesy of the artist.

smog-like void, and the figure floats without anchor; without destination. Thus, while an objective omniscience is implied, it is obscured from the viewer's sight. Moreover, the orthogonal lines converge on the centre of the figure, which because of its lack of modulation, resembles a black void. Subsequently, the viewer's perspective is oriented towards a subjective point of view, and the mortifying values of blindness, ignorance, ignominy, and temporality.

Maw's disruption to the classical, omniscient spatiality was especially heightened when *Francis Upritchard* was first exhibited at Art Space, Auckland (2010) (*Figure 23*). Maw's painting was the sole exhibit, and it was hung centrally in the main gallery, which is spacious, squarish, and white walled. Auckland's Artspace is a remodeled post office, and the main gallery has the architectural feature of a narrow band of clerestory<sup>82</sup> windows, which run between the top edge of each wall and the ceiling. The austerity of the installation, in combination with the elevated frosted windows, created a space that evoked the puritanism of a reformed, protestant chapel. Moreover, the enclosed emptiness of the gallery acted like an echo chamber for the viewer, because it reflected back and amplified the hollow vacuity in which Maw's figure floats. In situ, the viewer was subjected to an unavoidable void, which reinforced the subversion of an ideal perspective.

The white void of the gallery space subverted an omniscient perspective by destabilising the binding between inside and outside. The cloudy ground of Maw's painting not only blended with its white frame, but also the frame blended with the bare, white-walled gallery space. The frame was both part of the painting and part of the wall, so that the viewer could not be certain what was inside and what was outside. The uncertain border between inside and outside was also made porous with the figure's blank white eyes (*Figure 24*), which seemed to reflect the exterior void. The white, sclerotic gaze was at once part of the painting and its surround. Indeed, the white walls, which are the painting's outside, were let metaphorically in, and the viewer could find an echo of the outside void inside the figure's empty, whited eyes. The inside and outside transposition meant there was no objective point of view, for while the figure's uplifting ascendancy promises the possibility of an omniscient perspective, the voids inside and outside the painting ensured a restricted field of vision. This might have provoked an ambiguity for the observer whereby an objective omniscience oscillated undecidably with the limited perspective of a subjective point of view.

This ambiguity is in turn echoed in the figure's eyes, which are simultaneously blind and blinded: they cannot perceive the external world, and the external world cannot be perceived. The erasure of the figure's eyesight and its field of vision is a double blinding. The sightless, blank eyes have not only lost the perspective of the outside world, but also there is no objective perspective to behold. Just as the blind gaze cannot find a point of orientation beyond its own subjectivity, nor can the viewer's gaze find a point of orientation outside the stance of Maw's *Upritchard*. Her gaze engenders an uncanny image of blind sight. Thus, when viewing *Upritchard*, an observer may experience an uncanny unmooring. They might find themselves hovering between the reassurance of the figure's vertical uplift, and the unsettling absence of

---

<sup>82</sup> Clerestory (clearstory, clearstorey, or overstorey) refers to those windows that are above eye level, and allow light into a space. Clerestory windows have been used in temples and churches since the time of ancient Egypt.





Above, *figure 24*. Liz Maw, detail from *Francis Upritchard* (2010), oil on board, 209 x 113 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.

Below, *figure 25*. Hans Holbein the Younger, detail from *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521-1522), oil on limewood, 32.4 x 202.1 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel Switzerland.



“an optico-geometric mastery of space” (Krauss, 1993, p. 183). Furthermore, the viewer may find themselves wavering between the concealed ideal of an all-seeing, transcendental *telos*, and the blind, singular, immanence of their own subjectivity.

As with Maw’s *Upritchard*, there is no recessionary view or dream landscape in Holbein’s *Dead Christ*. Holbein’s figure of Christ is confined to an austere, forbidding tomb that is windowless and unadorned, and the muteness of the enclosure evokes an implacable denial of “the world of visual phenomena” (Krauss, 1993, p. 179). Indeed, the absence of an optical outlook beyond the tomb could engender a suffocating sense of entrapment in the viewer. Moreover, Christ’s emaciated figure pushes itself to the edges of the frame to assume the dual role of foreground and background, ensuring that there is no perspective above or beyond his body. Despite the fact that Christ is dead and blind to the sensible world, and sealed off from it, he gazes upwards with eyes<sup>83</sup> that are rolled back in their sockets (*Figure 25*). Indeed, Christ’s unclosed eyes draw the viewer into an apparent contradiction: Christ’s open eyes both look and do not see. They are blind to the subjective sight of the material world, but as a cadaver, they are non-blind at the same time. In this Blanchotian double gesture, Christ’s eyesight is simultaneously annihilated and preserved. As with Maw’s *Upritchard*, the aporetic relationship between Christ’s erased and preserved sight engenders an interminable interaction that resists reduction to one master term. The aporia of vision oscillates ambiguously between an embodied, subjective view and a disembodied, objective view, and as a consequence the observer may not be able to find a stable point of orientation.

The subjugation of an objective point of view is intensified by the rupture to Christ’s narrative. The unnatural pose of Christ’s head is tilted so that his eyes are focused upwards, as if in anticipation of his expected salvation, or a visionary *telos*. Indeed, it has been surmised that Holbein’s painting was to be installed as a predella<sup>84</sup> along the lower edge of an altarpiece, in which case the narrative’s promise for resurrection and ascension could have unfolded in further images above it. However, Kristeva (1987/1989a) argues that there is no evidence to suggest that this was to be the case, and that there were other more likely intentions: “The painting would have been done for a predella that remained independent”, and may have been “located in a recess” (p. 111). If this were the case, then in the absence of an altar Christ’s eyes point blindly to the absent presence of a *telos*, leaving his narrative open-ended, and leaving the viewer blindsighted. The ending of the narrative is out of the observer’s line of sight, and so the story cannot be seen in its full plenitude. Instead, the image of Christ oscillates ambiguously between a teleological ending and a mortal ending, thus rendering the viewer’s perspective metonymic.

The partiality of the sidelong view in Holbein’s work of art is also reinforced by the control of the painting’s linear perspective. While there is an optimal perspective for the viewer, which is to stand slightly to the left of centre, the orthogonal lines do not resolve in a vanishing point above or beyond Christ’s body. Instead, the orthogonal lines converge on Christ’s body, and in particular on his hand. This somatic focus is intensified by the ground plane, which leads the observer’s eye back and forth across

---

<sup>83</sup> In the scholarship on Holbein’s *Dead Christ*, reference is made to Christ’s “eyes” even though the viewer only has access to his right “eye”. While the left side of Christ’s body is an absence presence, I am following with the current scholarship that assumes symmetry between the two eyes.

<sup>84</sup> A predella is the long narrow strip that forms the platform, or base on which an altarpiece stands.

the lateral profile of Christ's body. In this way, the viewer's perspective is directed to Christ's humanity and a subjective reading of the narrative. As a result, the viewer could find themselves in a double vacillation that moves between the blind immanence of Christ's solitary subjectivity, and the expectation of a visionary, transcendent objectivity.

Like the protagonists of these paintings, the viewer too is blindsighted. Just as Holbein's *Dead Christ* and Maw's *Upritchard* are subject to the half-sight of their blind but seeing eyes, so also is the viewer. The full story can never be seen. Indeed, the trembling double movement of blind sight is irreducible to a singular point of view. This ambiguity collapses the notion of a natural architecture of the body, and "the privileged viewing point of an optico-geometric mastery of space" (Krauss, 1993, p. 183). The ambiguity of sight provides an invisible hinge that separates and joins what is sightful and sightless, ascendant and descendant, in a perpetual play of movement. It is this hinge that may subject the viewer's gaze to an aporia of vision where a ceaseless trembling of the axes hovers between a transparent, vertical perspective, and an opaque, horizontal perspective.

### 3.2.2 DETHRONING SOVEREIGN AUTHORITY

Witkin's photograph *Glass Man* (1994) (Figure 27), is a striking contemporary comparison to Holbein's *Dead Christ*. *Glass Man* is a viscerally disturbing frontal photograph of a naked male corpse, which is seated on a metal chair with opened eyes. His torso, left shoulder, and head are restrained by metal brackets, which hold the corpse in an upright, seated position. Like Holbein's *Dead Christ*, *Glass Man* is wide-eyed and open-mouthed in a contradiction of the blind muteness of death. The ambiguity conveys the paradoxical aspiration to see what is beyond sight, and to speak of what is beyond speech. In each case, these art works use Christ as a referent to reinforce the aspiration for a transcendental signified: a signified that will provide ultimate meaning for the invisible silence of death. Where Holbein employs the stigmata to reference Christ's Passion and the counter-narrative of resurrection, Witkin uses a chair that connotes the iconic image of Christ's ascended enthronement. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, this icon type is known as *Christ Pantocrator* (Ruler of All) (Figure 26), and in the Latin Church it is known as *Majestas Domini* (Christ in Majesty). However, unlike the full-length icons of the enthroned Christ, the legs and genitals of *Glass Man* have been cropped.

Christ's enthronement is also a Christian doctrine known as the Session of Christ. In the Apostles' Creed it states that in the heavenly session, Christ "sitteth on the right hand side of God the father Almighty" in an inauguration of Christ's rule as King (Book of Common Prayer). Indeed, representations of enthroned divinities signify an absolute, sovereign power, which operates as an external, universal constant: a "binding authority of a 'morality-sustaining' universe" (Christopher Prendergast, 1986/2009, p. 53). Witkin's seated *Glass Man* connotes both the iconic Man of Sorrows and the Session of Christ, and as a result it resonates with Holbein's depictions of Christ as a seated Man of Sorrows, discussed previously: *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, and *The Man of Sorrows Seated on the Cross*. However, where Holbein depicts a seated living Christ, Witkin depicts a seated dead body that is retrained artificially. Both Witkin and Holbein subvert the iconic posture of upright



Above, *figure 26*. Elias Moskos. *Christ Pantocrator* (1653), egg tempera on wood, 119 x 84.5 cm. Ikonen-Museum, Recklinghausen, Germany.

Below, *figure 27*. Joel-Peter Witkin, *Glass Man* (1994), silver print, 80 x 64.5 cm. © Joel-Peter Witkin, image courtesy of Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago, United States of America.

suspension used in Byzantine and Latin icons to depict a resurrected ascension, and instead they orient the seated figures towards a descended horizon. Indeed, these sunken, sorrowing figures subvert the promise of an enthroned *telos* with their oscillation between an end that has its seat in the mortal world, and an end that has its seat on an immortal throne. These oscillations threaten the hegemony of universal meanings by showing truths to be relative, and unable to be known in an absolute, sovereign sense.

The blind but unshut eyes of Witkin's *Glass Man* depict a complex ambivalence between the absence of sight and the presence of insight, which is comparable to the ambiguous blind sight of Holbein's *Dead Christ*. The two protagonists evoke the classical logic of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, found in *The Republic*. Here, Plato asserts that both pure light and pure darkness are equally blinding: "eyes may be unsighted in two ways, by a transition either from light to darkness or from darkness to light" (518a). Plato is demonstrating that light is required to see in darkness, and that to see in light requires darkness. However, vision is not only a play of light and darkness, it is also a play of seeing and not seeing. Indeed, it is the play between light and darkness that enables us to see. For Derrida, (1979) there is an aporetic relationship between illumination and blindness whereby the perceptible is made present by the imperceptible: "According to an old, omnipotent logic that has reigned since Plato,<sup>85</sup> that which enables us to see should remain invisible: black, blinding" (pp. 90-91). In other words, visibility is a condition of invisibility, and vice versa.

Each of the solitary figures in the art works by Holbein and Witkin, have lost their vision to the darkness of death. The protagonists are blind, but paradoxically their unlid eyes are open to the possibility of vision, and the restoration of sight. As Derrida (1979) argues, vision is made possible by the "black, blinding" power of darkness (p. 91). To put this another way, it is the force of darkness that gives an image the possibility of being differentiated from other images, and to come into view as a distinct image. An image is a cadaverous presence: the perception of an image is relative to the absence of everything else, against which it is defined. Blanchot (1949/1999c) explores this paradox in his *récit* titled, *The Madness of the Day*, in which, as previously noted, an anonymous narrator recounts an incident. It is a debilitating, physical incident that nearly blinds him, and deprives him of his eyesight for seven days. The narrator experiences his deprivation of sight as a death: " 'This is death' " (p. 195). But it is this very deprivation that enables the narrator to discover that a deathly darkness is essential for the possibility of sight. The narrator expresses his aporetic insight with an oxymoron: "Yes, seven days at once, the seven deadly lights" (ibid). This contradictory pairing, "deadly lights", encapsulates how a deadly darkness is not in opposition to sight, but is the very condition of sight. Moreover, Blanchot is making an amusing allusion to the seven deadly sins, which implies perhaps, that they co-exist with the "lights" of the seven heavenly virtues.

---

<sup>85</sup> Derrida's (1979) reference to Plato is most probably an oblique allusion to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, found in *The Republic*. Here Plato proposes that if prisoners were facing the back wall of a cave they would mistake black shadows for reality. Moreover, if these prisoners were to turn around, the blinding light of a fire, or the sun, would prevent them from perceiving reality. Furthermore, if these prisoners were to turn back into the cave, the blinding darkness of the cave would also prevent them from seeing (514a-517a). The allegory demonstrates that both darkness and light are necessary conditions for sight.

Eyesight is simultaneously a gift and a deprivation for the protagonists in the art works, and in Blanchot's *récit*. In a paradox, the loss of their eyesight emphasises how sight is a gift of this very deprivation. Giorgio Agamben's (1999) essay *On Potentiality*, postulates that potentiality is not only "the potentiality for vision" but that it also coexists with the potentiality to "experience darkness": "human beings ... can experience darkness: they have the *potential* not to see, the *possibility of privation*" (original emphases, p. 181). Like Derrida, Agamben<sup>86</sup> is arguing that the latent potential for vision is contingent on the latent potential of its very privation. Thus, while the protagonists may have the potential to attain omniscience and see everything, the contingent relationship between vision and darkness ensures that they are unable to exhaust the limitless potential of what can be seen. Christopher Braddock (2013) expresses an aporia of vision this way: "We cannot see everything, though potentially, there is nothing we might not see" (p. 144). Sight and blindness are not a yes/no binary, but instead coexist in an ambiguous relationship of blind sight: "a seeing unable to see" (ibid).

While the narrator of Blanchot's (1949/1999c) *The Madness of the Day*<sup>87</sup> is a resident in a socio-medical institution, bureaucratic authorities demand that he confess the facts of his "trials" according to his legal obligation: the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth (p. 192). The law is not only demanding the truth in order to dispense justice and compensation, but it is also assuming that it has the sovereign power to access the all-knowing light<sup>88</sup> of taxonomic truth. The narrator comes to

---

<sup>86</sup> See Giorgio Agamben's (1999) essay *On Potentiality*, which concludes with an analysis of potentiality and impotentiality. Agamben argues that a potentiality is both potential and impotential, which is comparable to Blanchot and Derrida's argument that a possibility is both possible and impossible. In other words, a potentiality, or a possibility, is simultaneously actualising and not actualising. In this way, Agamben, like Blanchot and Derrida, is able to argue that the potential for sight coexists with the potential for sightlessness.

<sup>87</sup> In *The Madness of the Day*, Blanchot (1949/1999c) both repeats and subverts a classical gendered binary that opposes a male subject against an objectified female. In the classical hierarchical binary, the male is the active protagonist while the female is the passive antagonist, however Blanchot's *récit* plays disruptively with this binary with a transposition of roles. The anonymous male subject, who is the narrator of the story, is identified with the passive formlessness of an incomplete unnarratable account. In a complementary move, Blanchot identifies the anonymous female "silhouette", who is personified as "the law", with the objective stability of categorical forms (p. 197). In French, the word law has a feminine article, *la loi*, and Blanchot's *récit* reinforces this grammatically gendered identification. In particular, *la loi* exclaims, " 'Oh I see the day, oh God' etc. ", which is a metaphorical claim for her ocular access to the light of categorical truths (p. 198). The thesis seeks to subvert the repetition of the classical binary by showing that the judicial gaze cannot be privileged as either masculine or feminine. In the art works by Holbein and Maw, the divine law of Christianity is personified as both female (the suspension of Maw's *Francis Upritchard* connotes the assumed Virgin Mary by analogy), and male (Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* connotes the counter-narrative of the resurrected Christ). However, an identification of the judicial gaze with either of these figures is disrupted because neither has access to the metaphysical presence of the light of day, and its categorical certainties. Instead, both figures are subject to a subversive bilateral oscillation between sightlessness and sight.

<sup>88</sup> See Derrida's (1980/1992) *The Law of Genre*, where he proposes that heliotropic imagery dominates the rhetoric of Western metaphysics, and that optical images of light are identified with an objective, judicial gaze that can see invisible, universal laws in the visible. This classical judicial gaze is equated with a pure gaze that can access ideal, categorical forms: the law's "juridical code" of "taxonomic certainties" has an "essential purity" (pp. 225 & 228). Derrida uses both the rhetorical structure of a simile and a metaphor to emphasise this classical identification between law and day: "the law which, like the day that it is" (p. 242). Here, Derrida is drawing attention to the way the law is not only "like" the day, but also that the law "is" the day.

understand the absurdity of the law's demand for the whole truth: "the law absurdly credited me with all powers" (p. 197). As the narrator says of his ability to see: "my sight was a wound" (p. 198). Thus, just as the narrator discovers that his eyesight cannot exhaust its potential to see everything, so too does he discover that his account cannot exhaust its potential to narrate everything. His account is unnarratable and can never be seen in its full light; never be recounted in its full truth. Instead, the narrator's testimony is fictional and partial: like the "half light" of twilight, it glimmers in the "half light" between truth and untruth (p. 195). Derrida (1980/1992) puts it this way in *The Law of Genre*: it is "a formless form, it remains nearly invisible, it neither sees the day nor brings itself to light" (p. 231).

In *Living On: Border Lines*, Derrida (1979) observes that the task of narrating everything about a story is simultaneously possible and impossible: "its possibility and its impossibility, each equally essential" (p. 122). As Blanchot's narrator discovers, daylight simultaneously blinds and makes visible, obscures and clarifies. Thus, the demand for a universal truth is one that Blanchot's narrator cannot access, and one that cannot be offered up by the paintings of Holbein and Maw. Like Blanchot's testifying narrator, the viewer of these art works is confronted with testifying a "truth without truth" (Derrida, 1998/2000, p. 56). Truth and untruth tremble in the half-light, and like a blinking eye opening and closing to the light of day there is an economy of exchange at work between sight and blindness, knowledge and ignorance. The viewers' stories are subjective; metonymic fragments of a whole. They cannot see the full picture because their perspective is subject to an ambiguous play of blind sight. As Derrida (1979) concludes in his commentary on Blanchot's *The Madness of the Day*: what we see comes "from an experience of blindness" (p. 91).

The seated corpse in Witkin's *Glass Man* also depicts an image of blind sight. The corpse is restrained in an unnatural, upright posture, in defiance of a natural, gravitational fall to the horizontal plane. This contradiction is played out further with the wide-eyed, open-mouthed gaze of the dead protagonist. While it could be argued that *Glass Man* looks as though he is about to summon a visionary truth, he does not have the sovereign authority. He has not, and cannot be coronated with a visionary idealism, but instead he sits halfway between a blinding descent into unknown depths, and an ascendant, all-seeing, all-knowing enthronement. Likewise, the viewer is unable to command an optical mastery of space, and they may find themselves caught between a descendant opacity and an ascendant transparency. Indeed, the observer may find themselves subject to an aporia of vision where the potential to make everything present, trembles with the impossibility of ever exhausting the hidden potentiality of all that is absent. An enthroned, omniscient vision is an impossible vision. Pure vision is in perpetual deferral.

### 3.2.3 ENTERING THE LABYRINTH

Blanchot's (1953/1999b) essay, *The Gaze of Orpheus (Le Regard d'Orphée)*,<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> See Karen Jacobs's (1990) article *Two Mirrors Facing: Freud, Blanchot, and the Logic of Invisibility*, for an analysis of Blanchot's (1953/1999b) essay, *The Gaze of Orpheus*. The Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice creates an oppositional binary in which the male subject Orpheus, is identified with action and artistry while Eurydice, the female object of Orpheus's quest, is identified

explores the vanity and futility of seeking the recovery of a self-presence. In the Greek myth, Orpheus travels to the underworld to retrieve his dead wife Eurydice, but when Orpheus turns his gaze upon her he discovers that he cannot return the disappearing Eurydice to full presence. Similarly, when a viewer turns their gaze upon the art works by Holbein and Maw, they cannot return with a plenitudinous meaning. As Blanchot and Derrida make clear, the viewer can only perceive by contrasts, which is in effect the labyrinth of distancing and *différance*. The viewer's gaze is confronted with an ambiguous play between concealment and visibility so that an image can never be brought to a totalising presence. Not unlike the gaze of Orpheus, the oracular gaze of the viewer may behold an aporia, an irresolvable contradiction that is forever dislocating and displacing the centre.

Blanchot (1953/1999b) uses a poetic metaphor to describe this Orphic aporia of vision: "to look into the night at what the night is concealing – the *other* night, concealment which becomes visible" (original emphasis, p. 438). Blanchot's two nights, which are nocturnal darkness and the otherness of death, symbolise the double concealment that occurs when an image becomes visible. When Orpheus beholds an image of Eurydice, he discovers that there is a double dissimulation: not only is Eurydice's absence concealed, but also her irrecoverability is concealed. In his aporia of vision, Orpheus comes to understand that Eurydice's image is neither present nor absent, but is a trace resulting from its own erasure in the movement towards its production. Similarly, when viewers behold the paintings under discussion, and indeed any work of art, they too may see that an image is subject to a double concealment: a *no/no* (*non/non*), or if one wishes to take poetic license, a *night/night* (*nuit/nuit*). It could be argued that the two nights are a metaphoric allusion to Blanchot's two versions of the image,<sup>90</sup> which as discussed previously in Chapter Two, analyses this double erasure.

Orpheus's quest for Eurydice could be read as analogous to Blanchot's quest for a narrative truth, and it invites comparison. While Orpheus and Blanchot are male artists who conform to the privileged terms of classical hierarchical binaries, they signal a turning point, a Blanchotian double movement of retreat and return. They turn away from the brightness of the sun, and turn towards the night in their search for the truth in singing and writing. This is, in effect, a metaphorical return to the dark cavern of Plato's cave from which Western culture departed for the solar mythos of the metaphysical light of day. It is here, in the cavern of the night, that Blanchot reveals the futility of Orpheus's pursuit for a self-present truth in song and his own pursuit for a truth in writing, because like the full light of day the night is blinding. They need the double movement of retreat and return, the light of day and the

---

with passivity and death. Jacob argues that despite Blanchot's use of paradox, he entrenches this classical binary by repeating gendered associations: "woman with inarticulate darkness and man with symbolic sovereignty" (p. 33). Nevertheless, one can also argue that while Orpheus and Blanchot are not ungendered, their gaze is equivocal and without "sovereignty". Indeed, their ocular sight co-exists with the "inarticulate darkness", and in this way they subvert the classical binary that aligns pure vision with masculinity. The thesis acknowledges the difficulties of subverting gendered binaries, and has sought to challenge them by selecting works of art where both the male and female protagonists are blind sighted. The protagonists in Maw's *Francis Upritchard*, Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, and Witkin's *Glass Man* are simultaneously sighted and blind, and thus they suspend the classical binary that identifies the ocular with masculinity, and blindness with femininity.

<sup>90</sup> Blanchot's *The Gaze of Orpheus* was first published in 1953, while *Two Versions of the Imaginary* was first published in 1951.

darkness of Hades, in order to see. However, it defers the recovery of a self-present truth in Orpheus's song, as it does in Blanchot's writing. Similarly, in his essay *Différance*,<sup>91</sup> Derrida demonstrates that neither speech nor writing have an immediate self-presence, but instead are subject to an endless play of differing and deferring that postpones the recovery of a full meaning. Blanchot and Derrida contest the metaphysics of presence, be it an aural presence or an ocular presence, and invite us to enter into labyrinthine depths where aporias of voice, and aporias of vision, defer the recovery of a final truth.

When a viewer approaches the art works of Holbein and Maw with an Orphic gaze, the recovery of meaning is metonymic, partial, and subject to deferral. While there is nothing that might not be made visible, the gaze of the viewer can never exhaust the infinite otherness of potentiality, and bring a final meaning to presence. Blanchot (1953/1999b) says of Orpheus's quest, that it is an "error" to think that the "infinite" can be exhausted:

Orpheus is guilty of impatience. His error is that he wants to exhaust the infinite, that he puts an end to what is unending, that he does not endlessly sustain the very impulse of his error .... Orpheus's impatience is ... also a correct impulse: it is the source of what will become his own passion, his highest patience, his infinite sojourn in death. (p. 439)

When Orpheus journeys to the underworld he is confronted with the presence of an absence, the cadaverous presence of Eurydice whose plenitude cannot be summoned like a passive, nominal essence. Blanchot contends that Orpheus comes to understand that his journey is an "infinite sojourn in death", which can never be exhausted. Similarly, the viewer of the paintings by Holbein and Maw is confronted with the cadaverous presence of the dead Christ, and the suspended Upritchard. Like Orpheus, the observer's gaze is subject to an "infinite sojourn in death" because they can never exhaust the meaning of these paintings, and find a teleological truth. Thus, while Orpheus brings back a song, the song of Orpheus, it is no more than a surrogate, a compensation. In the same way, the gaze of the viewer may find a meaning in these art works to sing about, but again it is no more than a surrogate, a compensation.

### 3.3 CODA

When Derrida deconstructs the quest for an eternal, immutable transcendental signified, he is deconstructing the quest for a cosmic centre, a central point of orientation for viewing the world. The immutable shape of the geocentric universe provides an Archimedean point that gives an axis of certainty by conferring a fixed orientation, and an objective point of view upon the world. The axial structure ensures that the dialectic of vertical/horizontal, inside/outside, visible/invisible are unambiguous and universal. However, as previously noted, Krauss (1993) maintains that "the upright body has no natural architecture" (p. 184). Instead, there is a constructed architecture in which topographical and ocular metaphors map a dialectical ordering of ideas.

---

<sup>91</sup> See Derrida's essay *Différance* (1968/1995b), for an analysis of the phonocentric privileging of voice over writing, and a demonstration that speech and writing co-exist.



Each work - Blanchot's *Madness of the Day* and *The Gaze of Orpheus*, Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, Maw's *Francis Upritchard*, and Joel-Peter Witkin's *Corpus Medius* and *Glass Man* - makes a covert appeal to Greco-Christian axial topology and its spatial codes. But at the same time, these works unhinge the geometric binaries that privilege "verticality" and "inside" as central, while marginalising the secondary terms of "horizontal" and "outside" as other. Similarly, each of the protagonists in these works unhinges the optical binary that elevates ocular omniscience at the expense of death's invisibility. Thus, the works do not abide within the opposed domains of metaphysical concepts, but instead operate in an aporetic realm that undermines binaries, and the logic of identity. They are neither vertical nor horizontal, inside nor outside, sighted nor blind. In this manner, the modalities of spatiality and metaphysical presence are exposed as cultural constructs: there is no fixed orientation; no predetermined topography; no omniscient viewing point.

The double movement of distancing and *différance* dislocates and displaces without providing a central reference point of orientation. Thus, there is a play of movement that is without a compass point; without a true north; without a centre of gravity. It is a play of movement that ensures that the "true story" of each work lives on in a perpetual evasion of identity and difference: " 'Living, living on' differs and defers, like 'différance,' beyond identity and difference" (original emphasis, Derrida, 1979, p. 136).

## EPILOGUE

The thesis does not seek to overturn the hierarchical, taxonomic system that exalts life over death, transcendence over immanence, and omniscience over blindness. Nor does it seek an inversion of values that converts the order of things so that immortal now becomes mortal, vertical becomes horizontal, and noble becomes ignoble. Rather, the thesis seeks to locate some key moments that tremble the structural stability of the art works. The thesis argues that corporeal images such as the body, hand, and eye, and incorporeal images such as the cloud, tomb, and chair, can be agents of contradiction that do not affirm a metaphysical, ocularcentric truth, but instead expose an irreducible ambiguity between absence and presence. Accordingly, an image is exposed as a trace structure whereby the image is the condition of absence, and absence is the condition of the image.

Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, and Liz Maw's *Francis Upritchard* depict a disturbing instability that usurps ideals, disrupts the fixed positions of traditional binaries, and questions the place of death in the image. Holbein's gangrenous Christ is an ominous narrative of impending annihilation that questions Christ's metanarrative of resurrection. Maw's suspended Upritchard is a hopeful metanarrative of assumption, which challenges the dismembering flux in which the figure is losing its body limb by limb, in a baleful narrative of death. In both images, there is a double oscillation between metaphysical revelation and transient dissolution, but the transcendent is not lifted up to a disconnected beyond, and the immanent is not buried in a disconnected underworld. Rather, Holbein's *Dead Christ* and Maw's *Upritchard* forever hover above the horizon and below the clouds in a double bind of immanent transcendence, ignoble nobility, and blind sight.

The art works expose aporias in which infinite relays of contradictory nuances resist a narrative resolution in a *telos* or mortal death. Holbein's *Dead Christ* is neither a teleological metanarrative of upright, visionary resurrection, nor a subjective narrative of putrescent collapse into death's blindness. Likewise, Maw's *Upritchard* is neither a teleological metanarrative of vertical, all-seeing assumption, nor a subjective narrative of dismembering descent into death's opacity. The promise of a *telos*, be it a resurrection or an assumption, is a powerful narrative propellant, but the undecidability of meaning enforces a suspended delay, and a reevaluation of a narrative end. A viewer may find that the images resist narrativization; resist offering up a truth about death. But at the same time, a viewer may find this opens up a space for reinterpretation.

A Blanchotian and Derridean analysis exposes a destabilised indeterminacy of meaning in which neither presence nor absence are the ground for play, but rather, the possibility of play is the premise of presence and absence. As a result, there is an undecidable play that disseminates a chain of mutating signifiers. Holbein's *Dead Christ* unleashes a metamorphosing chain that unfolds the absent presence of the ascendant Christ, the enthroned Christ, the omniscient Christ, and the beneficent Christ. Similarly, Maw's suspension of Upritchard unleashes a metamorphosing chain that unfolds the absent presence of the earth-bound Upritchard, the embodied

Upritchard, the sighted Upritchard, and the carnal Upritchard. As Derrida (1972/1981) says in his essay *The Double Session*: “Every determinate fold unfolds the figure of another” (p. 270). The resulting accumulation of aporias is the means by which the mysterious invisibility of death is made present. Each ambiguous motif adds an unresolvable tension, an unresolvable mystery.

Where then, is death in the image? Death is the cadaverous presence that haunts these images as it haunts all images. Death is the negative affirmation that brings the images into view, and leads the viewer into a labyrinthine realm of aporias where possibilities remain unconfirmed, narratives are incomplete, and judgments are suspended. But at the same time, it is this very undecidability that enables a response of responsibility to the excluded otherness of death. Thus, in the spirit of inconclusiveness the thesis resists giving a fixed conclusion. As Derrida (1998/2000) says of a conclusion in *Demeure*: “it remains in abeyance” (p 95).

## REFERENCES

- Adcock, C. (1987). Duchamp's eroticism: A mathematical analysis. *Dada/Surrealism*, 16(1), 149-167. Retrieved from <http://ir.uiowa.edu/dadasur/vol16/iss1/11>
- Agamben, G. (1999). On potentiality. In G. Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected essays in philosophy* (pp. 177-184). (D. Heller-Roazen trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Artspace, (2010). Liz Maw & Seung Yul Oh. [Web exhibitions post]. Retrieved from <http://www.artspace.org.nz/exhibitions/2010/francisupritchardlizmawseungyulohpokpo.asp>
- Bachelard, G. (1994). The dialectics of outside and inside. In G. Bachelard, *The poetics of space* (pp. 211-231). (M. Jolas trans.). Boston, MA: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1958).
- Barthes, R. (1978). The death of the author. In R. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (pp. 142-148). (S. Heath trans.). New York, NY: Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1968).
- Barthes, R. (1992). The metaphor of the eye. In R. Barthes, *Critical essays* (pp. 239-247). (R. Howard trans.) Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press. (Original work published 1963).
- Bataille, G. (1985). Formless. In A. Stoekl (Ed.), *Visions of excess: Selected writings, 1927-1939* (p. 31). (A. Stoekl, C. R. Lovitt & D. M. Leslie Jr. trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota. (Original work published 1929).
- Bätschmann O., & Griener P. (1999). *Hans Holbein*. (C. Hurley & P. Griener trans.). London, United Kingdom: Reaktion Books. (Original work published 1997).
- Beckett, Sr. W. (2009). *Encounters with God: In quest of the ancient icons of Mary*. New York, NY: Orbis Books.
- Belting, H. (1980/1981). An image and its function in the liturgy: The Man of Sorrows in Byzantium. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34/35, 1-16. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1291445>
- Belting H. (1990/1996). *Likeness and presence: A history of the image before the era of art*. (E. Jephcott trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Benjamin, A. (1988). Deconstruction and art / The art of deconstruction. In C. Norris & A. Benjamin, *What is deconstruction?* (pp. 33-56). New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

- Blanchot, M. (1999a). Literature and the right to death. In G. Quasha (Ed.). *The Station Hill Blanchot reader: Fiction & literary essays* (pp. 359-399). (L. Davis, P. Auster & R. Lamberton trans.). Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press. (Original work published 1947).
- Blanchot, M. (1999b). The gaze of Orpheus. In G. Quasha (Ed.). *The Station Hill Blanchot reader: Fiction & literary essays* (pp. 437-442). (L. Davis, P. Auster & R. Lamberton trans.). Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press. (Original work published 1953).
- Blanchot, M. (1999c). The madness of the day. In G. Quasha (Ed.). *The Station Hill Blanchot reader: Fiction & literary essays* (pp. 189-199). (L. Davis, P. Auster & R. Lamberton trans.). Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press. (Original work published 1949).
- Blanchot, M. (1999d). Two versions of the imaginary. In G. Quasha (Ed.). *The Station Hill Blanchot reader: Fiction & literary essays* (pp. 417-427). (L. Davis, P. Auster & R. Lamberton trans.). Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press. (Original work published 1951).
- Bois, Y-A. & Krauss, R. E. (1997). *Formless: A user's guide*. New York, NY: Zone Books.
- Braddock, C. (2013). *Performing contagious bodies: Ritual participation in contemporary art*. Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brettkelly-Chalmers, K. (2011). *Liz Maw portrait*. [Online forum post]. Retrieved from <http://eyecontactsite.com/2011/01/liz-maw-portrait>
- Chance, M. (2008). Images we hold of the world: The paintings of Liz Maw, *Art New Zealand* 129, 42-45. Auckland, New Zealand: Art Magazine Press.
- Cixous, H. (1986). Sorties: Out and out: Attacks/ways out/forays. In H. Cixous & C. Clément, *The newly born woman* (pp. 63-132). (B. Wing trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1975).
- Colman, A. (2004). Holbein's work of art in Kristeva's political thought. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 42(S1), 88-95.  
doi: 10.1111/j.2041-6962.2004.tb01017.x
- Conland, N. (2007). *Mystic truths*. Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.
- Copleston, F. (1985). The doctrine of forms. In F. Copleston, *A history of philosophy* (pp. 163-206). New York, NY: Doubleday. (Original work published 1946).
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2010). Introduction: Rhizome. In G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, *A thousand plateaus* (pp. 3-28). (B. Massumi trans.). London, United Kingdom: Continuum. (Original work published 1980).

- De Man, P. (1979). Semiology and rhetoric. In P. de Man, *Allegories of reading: Figural language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (pp. 3-19). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- De Man, P. (1989). The rhetoric of blindness: Jacques Derrida's reading of Rousseau. In P. de Man, *Blindness and insight: Essays in the rhetoric of contemporary criticism* (pp. 102- 141). London, United Kingdom: Routledge. (Original work published 1971).
- Derrida J. (1978a). From restricted to general economy: A Hegelianism without reserve. In J. Derrida, *Writing and difference* (pp. 251-277). (A. Bass trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1967).
- Derrida, J. (1978b). Force and signification. In J. Derrida, *Writing and difference* (pp. 3-30). (A. Bass trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1963).
- Derrida, J. (1978c). Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences. In J. Derrida, *Writing and difference* (pp. 278-293). (A. Bass trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1967).
- Derrida, J. (1979). Living on: Border lines. In H. Bloom, P. de Man, J. Derrida, G.H. Hartman & J. H. Miller, *Deconstruction and criticism* (pp. 75-176). (J. Hulbert trans.). New York, NY: The Seabury Press.
- Derrida, J. (1981). The double session. In J. Derrida, *Dissemination* (pp. 173-286). (B. Johnson trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1972).
- Derrida, J. (1987). Parergon. In J. Derrida, *The truth in painting* (pp. 15-147). (G. Bennington & I. McLeod trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1978).
- Derrida, J. (1987). Restitutions. In J. Derrida, *The truth in painting* (pp. 255-382). (G. Bennington & I. McLeod trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1978).
- Derrida, J. (1992). The law of genre. In D. Attridge (Ed.), *Jacques Derrida: Acts of literature* (pp. 221-52). New York, NY: Routledge. (Original work published 1980).
- Derrida, J. (1993). Aporias: dying-awaiting (one another at) the "limits of truth". (T. Dutoit trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1995). *Khōra*. In T. Dutoit (Ed.), *On the name*, (pp. 89-127). (I. McLeod trans.). Stanford CA: Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1993).
- Derrida, J. (1995a). *Différance*. In J. Derrida, *Margins of philosophy* (pp. 1-27). (A.

- Bass trans.) . Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1968).
- Derrida, J. (1995b). The ends of man. In J. Derrida, *Margins of philosophy* (pp. 109-136). (A. Bass trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1972).
- Derrida, J. (1995c). The pit and the pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's semiology. In J. Derrida, *Margins of philosophy* (pp. 69-108). (A. Bass trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1971).
- Derrida J. (1995d). White mythology: Metaphor in the text of philosophy. In J. Derrida, *Margins of philosophy* (pp. 207-271). (A. Bass trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1971).
- Derrida, J. (1995). *The gift of death*. (D. Wills trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1992).
- Derrida, J. (1997). *Of grammatology*. (G. C. Spivak trans.). Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press. (Original work published 1967).
- Derrida J. (2000). *Demeure: Fiction and testimony*. (E. Rottenberg trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1998).
- Derrida J. (2002). *Positions*. (A. Bass trans.). London, United Kingdom: Continuum. (Original work published 1972).
- Feher, M. (1989). Foreword. In M. Feher, R. Naddaff & N. Tazi (Eds.), *Fragments for a history of the human body: Part two* (p. 11). New York, NY: Zone Books.
- Ganz, P. (1950). *The paintings of Hans Holbein: First complete edition*. (R. H. Boothroyd & M. Kay trans.). London, United Kingdom: Phaidon Press.
- Gatrall, J. (2001). Between iconoclasm and silence: Representing the divine in Holbein and Dostoevskii. *Comparative Literature*, 53(3), 214-232. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3593496>
- Haustein-Bartsch, E. (2008). *Icons*. Cologne, Germany: Taschen.
- Hetherington, P. (1990). Who is this King of Glory? The Byzantine enamels of an icon frame and revetment in Jerusalem: For Hugo Buchthal at 80. *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 53(1), 25-38. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1482503>
- Hillman, J. (1992). *Re-Visioning psychology*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial.
- Hollier, D. (1998). The labyrinth, the pyramid, and the labyrinth. In D. Hollier, *Against architecture: The writings of Georges Bataille* (pp. 57-73). (B. Wing trans.). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. (Original work published 1974).

- Irigaray, L. (1985). Plato's *hystera*. In L. Irigaray, *Speculum of the other woman* (pp. 234-365). (G. C. Gill trans). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (Original work published 1974).
- Jacobs, K. (1990). The mirrors facing: Freud, Blanchot, and the logic of invisibility. *Qui Parle*, 4(1), 21-46. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20685905>
- Johnson, B. (1981). Translator's introduction. In J. Derrida, *Dissemination* (pp. vii-xxxiii). (B. Johnson trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1972).
- Kasatkina, T. (2011). After seeing the original: Hans Holbein the Younger's *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* in the structure of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*. *Russian Studies in Literature*, 47(3), 73-97. doi: 10.2753/RSL1061-1975470303
- Krauss, R. E. (1993). Four. In R. E. Krauss, *The optical unconscious* (pp. 149-195). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1989a). Holbein's dead Christ. In J. Kristeva, *Black sun: Depression and melancholia* (pp. 105-138). (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1987).
- Kristeva, J. (1989b). Psychoanalysis – A counterdepressant. In J. Kristeva, *Black sun: Depression and melancholia* (pp. 1-30). (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1987).
- Kristeva, J. & Goldhammer A. (1985). Stabat Mater. *Poetics Today*, 6(1/2), 133-152. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1772126>
- Lechte, J. (1990). Kristeva and Holbein, Artist of melancholy. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 30(4), 342-350. doi:10.1093/bjaesthetics/30.4.342
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). Introduction. In J.-F. Lyotard, *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (pp. xxiii-xxv). (G. Bennington & B. Massumi trans.). Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press. (Original work published 1979).
- Merback, M. B. (2002). Reverberations of guilt and violence, resonances of peace: A comment on Caroline Walker Bynum's lecture. *German Historical Institute Bulletin* 30(2). <http://www.ghi-dc.org/publications/ghipubs/bu/030/37.pdf>
- Molesworth, H. A. (Ed.). (2005). *Part object part sculpture*. Columbus, OH: The Pennsylvania State University Press, and University Park, PA: Wexner Center for the Arts.
- Norris, C. (1988). Deconstruction, post-modernism and the visual arts. In C. Norris & A. Benjamin, *What is deconstruction?* (pp. 7-31). New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Ormiston, G. (1988). The economy of duplicity. In D. Wood & R. Bernasconi (Eds.),



- Derrida and différance* (pp. 41-49). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press). (Original work published 1985).
- Plato, (2003). *Phaedo*. In Plato, *The last days of Socrates* (pp. 97-199). (H. Tredennick & H. Tarrant trans.). London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books.
- Plato, (1987). *The Republic*. (H. D. P. Lee trans.). London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books.
- Prendergast, C. (2009). *The order of mimesis: Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval, Flaubert*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Robbins, I. P. (2008). *Digitus impudicus: The middle finger and the law*. *UC Davis Law Review*, 41(4), 1403-1485. Retrieved from [www.wired.com/images\\_blogs/threatlevel/2010/03/middlefinger.pdf](http://www.wired.com/images_blogs/threatlevel/2010/03/middlefinger.pdf)
- Rowlands, J. (1985). *Holbein: The paintings of Hans Holbein the Younger complete edition*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Phaidon Press.
- Sedofsky, L. (1996). Down and dirty. In *Artforum International* 34(10). Retrieved from <http://www.questia.com/library/1G1-18533853/down-and-dirty>
- Sontag, S. (1979). Introduction by Susan Sontag. In W. Benjamin, *One-Way street and other writings* (pp. 7-28). (E. Jephcott & K. Shorter trans.). London, United Kingdom: Verso.
- Spivak, G. C. (1997). Translator's preface. In J. Derrida, *Of grammatology* (pp. ix-Ixxxvii). (G. C. Spivak trans.). Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press. (Original work published 1976).
- Steinberg, L. (1972). The flatbed picture plane. In L. Steinberg, *Other criteria: Confrontations with twentieth-century art* (pp. 82-91). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Turnbull, L. (2009). The Man of Sorrows and the King of Glory in Italy, c. 1250-c. 1350. *emaj issue 4*. Retrieved from [www.melbournartjournal.unimelb.edu.au/E-MAJ](http://www.melbournartjournal.unimelb.edu.au/E-MAJ)
- Warner, M. (1978). *Alone of all her sex: The myth and the cult of the Virgin Mary*. London, United Kingdom: Quartet Books. (Original work published 1976).
- Wineera, K. (2011). The unfathomable nature of the human puzzle: A conversation with Liz Maw. In E. Bugden (Ed.), *Volume 2* (pp. 71-83). Auckland, New Zealand: Clouds & Artspace.