

**MELANCHOLY CONSTELLATIONS: WALTER
BENJAMIN, ANSELM KIEFER, WILLIAM KENTRIDGE
AND THE IMAGING OF HISTORY AS CATASTROPHE**

by

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Submitted in compliance with the demands of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the Faculty of the Humanities,

Department of Art History and Visual Culture Studies at the

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

May 2007

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the following people, without whom none of this would have been possible:

Thank you to the University of the Free State, for granting me a merit bursary with which to pursue this study.

Thanks to my supervisor, colleague and friend, Dirk van den Berg, for his encyclopaedic knowledge and incredible humility — never has it been truer that living in a library is a gift.

Thank you to my family, for their presence in the world.

I am deeply grateful to my dear friends John and Vanessa, for their delirious affection.

My friend Michelle Key has been a source of constant motivation and generosity.

I am thankful to Suzanne Human, for her sensitive suggestions.

Thank you to my colleague and friend Michael Herbst, for all those late lunches during which we passionately argued about the precarious relevance of our theories.

To Maureen de Jager — for helping frame some of my first thoughts.

To Leonhard Praeg — for late night telephone conversations, filled to bursting point with intellectual friendship. Ours is, as Irving Wohlfarth so memorably articulated it, “a friendship of strange friends”.

Thank you K, for the “what has been”.

To M: for the “Now”.

Lastly, I wish to dedicate this project to the memory of my mother, Melody Mimmi Botha Schoeman, and to my friend and colleague Michael Herbst, who tragically took his own life May 1, 2007.

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Introduction

This dissertation is a study in representation. More specifically, it is a study in the representation of art and of art history as melancholy representation. The latter is produced or opens up, because objects of art — pictures, images, or *Bilder* (read “likenesses”) (cf Belting 2004, Wood 2004: 372)¹ — have a tendency to withdraw or turn away from view. Objects of art, which may be thought of as “thinking objects” or “living images” (cf Mitchell 2005: xv & 2006: 4f), that is, as quasi-subjects, negate complete ownership. Like living things, objects of art are infinitely incomplete; they arise out of an ongoing process of becoming and disappearance. As such, our relationship with them may be said to be one of “mutual desire”, want and lack (Mitchell 2005: xv & 2006: 6).

Moreover, as Michael Ann Holly (2002) has argued, the study of art history is bedevilled by lost, obscure, or obsolete objects; cloudy, shadowy, ghostly, even corpse-like objects that deny total acquisition or last words. It is in this sense that one can say, art history — perhaps like any history — is a melancholic science: It can do no more than patiently trace the shadows of the past “in ever new configurations” (Adorno 2002: 121). It is also from this melancholy perspective that this dissertation reflects, in various ways, on the imaging of history as catastrophe or as catastrophic loss.

How then do we write about art and the history of art, when the objects of our study are both too close and too far away, mutually absent and present (cf Gumbrecht 2004, Runia 2006) — fleeting, yet seemingly permanent? How can one “image” the catastrophic debilitation of melancholic disavowal or death of self, without succumbing to its

¹ My understanding and use of the phrase “objects of art”, bears in mind Mitchell’s structural distinction between image, object, and medium. He writes: “By ‘image’ I mean any likeness, figure, motif, or form that appears in some medium or other. By ‘object’ I mean the material support in or on which an image appears, or the material thing that an image refers to or brings into view. I also want, of course, to evoke here the concepts of objecthood and objectivity, the notion of something that is set over against a subject. By ‘medium’ I mean the set of material practices that brings an image together with an object to produce a picture” (Mitchell 2005: xiii). In the narrowest sense, my use of the phrase “objects of art” relates to Mitchell’s understanding of “pictures”, “as complex assemblages of virtual, material, and symbolic elements”, though by this Mitchell does not mean to imply only “art” pictures.

debilitating attractions? Following on from Max Pensky's (2001) tracing of the historical image of melancholia as dialectical, the aim of this dissertation is to delineate a discursive "space for perception and reflective thought" (Mitchell 2006: 1); a critical space within which to think of the melancholic im-possibility of representation qua possession, as essentially negatively dialectical: futile and heroic, pointless and necessary.

For the further the objects of our attention withdrew from us, the more we are drawn to, or absorbed in, them. Is this perhaps the joyful (or in Aristotle's terms, heroic genius) side of melancholic absorption? In this regard, my dissertation takes recourse to Michael Fried's (1980, 1992, 1998a & 1998b) dialectical understanding of antitheatrical art as absorptive. According to Fried, who follows Diderot, absorptive art negates or denies the beholder, paradoxically absorbing them all the more. An absorptive image's supreme "fiction of the non-existence of the beholder is answered by the beholder's fiction of the non-existence of the [image], which grounds the fiction-producing activity of the beholder" (Flax 1984: 6f). Here the denial of seeing dialectically heightens corporeal involvement in an image: instead of standing in front of an image, the beholder is to experience an image as if from within — with eyes closed; absorbed in absorption. The German Romantic Caspar David Friedrich's melancholy painting *Monk by the sea* (1808-1810) (Figure 1) perhaps best exemplifies this pictorial allure of melancholy absorption in absorption.

Like antitheatrical art, the historical image of melancholia is dialectical: both negating and affirming (cf Pensky 2001). Similarly, imaging art history as melancholic is bidirectional: both poison and antidote. Being absorbed in images picturing the melancholy feeling of loneliness, exile, self-reflexion and self-doubt can be debilitating. And yet, experiencing the image of melancholia as if from within, may motivate for a "melancholy writing" (Pensky 2001) that "goes against the grain" of melancholy madness, however weakly. In the final instance, blind absorption — or knowledge premised on not knowing, as in Nicolaus von Cues' *Docta ignorantia* — may translate as an affirmative immersion in, and reanimation of, things unknowable, dead or lost.

It is from the dialectical or bidirectional perspective of blind absorption that this dissertation is written: that is, as, a study in absorption that begins and ends (or fails to end, once and for all) a study in representing art and art history. It will be fair to say that such a dissertation will be self-reflexive. It engages in a close reading of the way an absorptive, or what Benjamin refers to as the expressionless and Adorno the non-identical, artwork “thinks” itself. If the artwork “thinks” itself, or is absorbed in itself perhaps like a dimly, sensuously aware or responsive sentient being (cf Mitchell 2006: 3), a “close reading” (Mitchell 2006: 2) of it cannot but entail a close reflection on the way we approach such an artwork. Studying absorption in art therefore involves studying the way we (consciously and unconsciously) represent, read, absorb, perceive, or think such art — the way we are absorbed in absorption, in the fullness and precariousness of time, or in “the precious now” as Michael Fried (qtd Wood 2002: 1) has it in his book on Adolph Menzel.

One can, together with Walter Benjamin, refer to this double absorption as “thinking-in-images” — a notion with particular relevance to a critical consideration of the dialectical dualities at work in Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge, something I will return to in depth in chapter four. These dualities have particular relevance not only to continental philosophy and history, but also to any thinking of the political polarities of South African philosophy and history. A powerful metaphor for this thinking and imaging of dialectical dualities is Frederic Schwartz’s (2005: xii) “thinking in the dark”: For thinking dialectically means recognising the brightest possibilities in the most nocturnal of places.²

As a means of introducing the performative notion of “thinking-in-images”, and “thinking in the dark”, in the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge, I have chosen to

² Writing about Benjamin, Bloch, Kracauer and Adorno, Schwartz (2005: xii) notes: “They were aware that they were inevitably thinking, to some extent, in the dark. They responded by allowing this darkness of an unknowable present to expand into a space of extraordinary speculative richness”. Similarly, Breton (1969: 299) writes: “I have discovered clarity as worthless. Working in darkness, I have discovered lightning”. Elkins (1996: 206) describes all seeing as taking place in the dark: “Perhaps ordinary vision is less like a brightly lit sky with one blinding spot in it than like the night sky filled with stars. Maybe we see only little spots against a field of darkness. Once in a great while there may be a flash of lightning and we see everything, but then darkness returns. My vision, even at its most acute, is probably not much better than the points of the stars against their invisible field of black”. This idea is beautifully evoked in two images by Kiefer and Kentridge, which I discuss in chapter four.

focus on Gerhard Richter's painting *Reader* from 1994 (Figure 2) in chapter one. In the manner of a *Leitbild* (cf Zaunschirm 1993), Richter's monadic painting presciently embodies the idea of an absorbed artwork that "performs" or "prefigures" our own dark absorption in it. Moreover, Richter's "thoughtful" or "mindful" painting will surface as an intertextual "pre-text" (Bal 1991: 4, Richter 2000: 34) or "pre-figure", with Jan Vermeer's *Woman in blue reading a letter* (c 1662-4) (Figure 2) serving as *its* "pre-text" or "pre-figure", to several absorptive images discussed during the course of this dissertation.

Chapter two takes as its thought-model or *Leitbild*, Albrecht Dürer's humanistic engraving *Melencolia I* (1514) (Figure 11). Dürer's engraving seems a particularly pertinent image, or "metapicture" in Mitchell's (2006: 1) sense,³ with which, and through which, to think (through) the thematising of absorptive melancholia in Benjamin and Kiefer (and implicitly in Kentridge). It is also for this reason that I speak of the "afterlife" of Dürer's engraving in the work of Benjamin and Kiefer: for the complexity of Dürer's image is prismatically added to, and extended, when one recognises the ways in which it seemingly prefigures the dialecticaly thematics at play in the work of its subsequent interpreters (cf Holly 1996: xiii).⁴

Chapter three focuses on Kentridge's animated film *Felix in exile* of 1994. I linger specifically with a particular still from the film, showing the naked Felix in his room

³ Mitchell tries to distinguish between three different kinds of metapictures: "First, the picture that explicitly reflects on, or 'doubles' itself, as in so many drawings by Saul Steinberg, in which the production of the picture we are seeing re-appears inside the picture. This is most routinely and literally seen in the effect of the 'mise en abime,' the Quaker Oats box that contains a picture of the Quaker Oats box, that contains yet another picture of a Quaker Oats box, and so on, to infinity. (Technically, I gather, the term first appeared in reference to heraldry, where the division of a coat of arms into increasingly diminutive sectors containing other coats of arms traces the evolution of a genealogy). Second, the picture that contains another picture of a different kind, and thus re-frames or recontextualizes the inner picture as 'nested' inside of a larger, outer picture. Third, the picture that is framed, not inside another picture, but within a discourse that reflects on it as an exemplar of 'picturality' as such. This third meaning implies, of course, that any picture whatsoever (a simple line-drawing of a face, a multi-stable image like the Duck-Rabbit, Velazquez's *Las Meninas*) can become a metapicture, a picture that is used to reflect on the nature of pictures. My reading of *Melencolia I* as a metapicture involves the first and third meanings of the term.

⁴ Cf also Donat de Chapeaurouge (1974: 47-69) on the borrowing of meaning-neutral and meaning-fixed motives in art history.

(Figure 19). The reason for this is the fact that the image seems to embody and underscore the absorptive state of melancholia central to this dissertation; a state of remotion from the world prefigured in Richter's *Reader* discussed in chapter one, and in Dürer's *Melencolia I*, discussed in chapter two.

In chapter four I attempt to gather together or configure Benjamin's thought, and Kiefer's and Kentridge's imagery, in and as a melancholy-mobile constellation. It seems apposite to choose the figure or image of a constellation with which to join their work, given that it is an image that occurs in the work of all three. This theoretical, conceptual and imagistic constellation joins the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge under the sign of melancholia; whilst as a mobile constellation it holds the potential for itinerant reflections and movable perspectives.

With chapter five, the last chapter of this dissertation, I turn to a central motif in the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge: the expressionless image of the corpse. But here I forego a discussion of the emblem of the corpse as it occurs specifically in their work (I do so in the preceding chapters). Instead, as with chapter one, which opts for a discussion of an image by Richter with and through which to reflect on the philosophical modus operandi of this dissertation, chapter five is composed as a reflection on what is at stake in Benjamin's, Kiefer's, Kentridge's work, by way of a philosophical meditation on mainly photographic images of and as corpses, by Sally Mann, Ana Mendieta, and Berni Searle. The discussion here of essentially forlorn, absorptive and melancholic images is projected in and as a supplement or meta-constellation to the constellation projected in the title of the dissertation. Reflecting on the image of the corpse, which may be seen as the figurative or allegorical embodiment or apotheosis of the state of melancholia, at the end of this study, serves to return the reader to the beginning premise of this dissertation: the melancholy imaging of history as catastrophe.

I conclude this dissertation with a meditation on Kiefer's painting *Lilith's daughters* (1990). Kiefer's painting seems to originate with the idea that the state of melancholia stems from the catastrophe of Eden. In his book *The moment of self-portraiture in*

German Renaissance art, Joseph Koerner (1993: 25) notes that “Medieval medical theory maintained that a person’s character is formed by the influence of the humors and the planets and predetermined by the catastrophe of Eden. Adam, striving to be equal to God, ate the apple and fell into a state of existential deficiency whose chief symptom is melancholy and whose consequence is death. The self, heir to Adam, strives ever toward mastery, equating its powers with God’s, but falls into a gloom that is the body’s bitterness”.

This mythical idea of the origin of melancholia, which precedes the glorification of melancholia as characteristic of genius, also appears in Benjamin’s philosophy of language, which is premised on the Fall from Paradise as a fall into arbitrary signification, that is, allegory. And the coupling of allegory and melancholia — both understood as originating with prehistorical guilt (at least in Benjamin’s hands) — lies at the basis of my cojoining of the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge.

From this perspective, Kiefer’s murky painting, heavy with Saturnian gravity and swamp-like consciousness, seems a fitting image with which to conclude the thinking and imaging of history as catastrophe. But perhaps this reading may only become legible when read side-by-side with the first *Leitbild* of this dissertation: Richter’s painting *Reader*. For perhaps it is only with the help of the “cool” distance that Richter’s painting affords us, that we may avoid falling prey to “the horror that beckons from deep in the primeval forest”, with its tempting “undergrowth of delusion and myth” (Benjamin 1999: 456f).

This dissertation returns again and again to the question: how can one write about the imaging of history as catastrophe, as this is figured from within different historical frameworks: that of an early twentieth century German-Jewish philosopher, a late twentieth/early twenty-first century German artist, and a late twentieth/early twenty-first South African-Jewish artist? How can one hope to relate their essentially melancholy work without becoming culpable of ahistoricity or even pastiche? No easy answers have been forthcoming during the writing of this dissertation. However, it is my delicate

contention that reading and picturing their work in and as a melancholy constellation whose parameters shift depending on one's point of view, as opposed to submitting their similarities and differences to rigorous systematic analysis, reveals surprising and enlightening elective affinities. In the final analysis, visual and philosophical analogy has the last say. And this seems fitting, especially where one encounters a writer and two artists whose thinking in images tirelessly challenge our thinking "logically" in words alone.

Lastly, I wish to alert the reader to the essentially dialectical thrust of my argument. Imaging the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge in and as a melancholy constellation ultimately entails seeing or sensing a possibility for finding and constructing meaning precisely where this possibility seems to be the most remote. Maybe the most obscure and cloudy images, in which we find ourselves lost or absorbed, are exactly the ones that, when interpreted as metapictures (cf Mitchell 2006: 2), best illuminate our precarious practice of reading and seeing images "in the dark" of the present moment. Or as the South African artist Willem Boshoff words it: "We need to cloud the elements of finding and losing, of clarity and obscurity, of feeling and *feeling*, of seeing and *seeing* by rediscovering our own redemptive blindness" (in Vladislavic 2005: 106).

This essential cloudiness, which *gestures* at an illuminating image that helps us to see by making us aware of what we cannot, may frustrate the reader's desire for overall clarity. But this frustration may be part and parcel of the power, and the limits, of representation as these are traced in what follows.

Chapter One: Clouds, veils, and time: Reading blindness or perceiving inaccessibility

A dream which is not interpreted is like a letter which is not read.
— Talmud

In this opening chapter, my intertextual, interdiscursive,⁵ inter-figurative and, ultimately, *self-reflexive* or performative (Bal 1999: 120, Bal 2001: 75 & 76) reading/animation of Gerhard Richter's painting *Reader* (1994) (Figure 2), which entails both reading visually and looking discursively (Bal 1997: 4),⁶ is motivated by Mieke Bal's argument that in intertextual readings "both text and reader *perform* something". As she says, "[a]rt performs; so does writing; so does the looking we write about and with" (Bal 1999: 120). In my reading, moreover, Richter's painting will be seen to allegorise the reciprocal possibility as well as impossibility of reading/seeing, and by extension, the availability as well as unavailability of both our own and the other's body (Richter 2000: 158).⁷ "[*J*]e est un autre: 'I is other'" and, reciprocally, "the other is 'I'" (Bal 1997a: 6). In this context, "allegory itself becomes an allegory for the acceptance of [history's] otherness within" (Bal 2001: 72), a semiotic operation of self-reflexivity that will be further explicated by way of the figure of blindness — seeing and representing in the dark of the moment.

⁵ For more on the relation between intertextuality and interdiscursivity see Bal (1999: 10).

⁶ And as Marin (1995: 2) writes: "An entire arsenal of ruses and tricks is needed if discourse is to explore painting. Or, for that matter, if paintings are to explore discourse, to explore discursive positions and various instances of displaced and partially incoherent knowledge".

⁷ See chapter two on the availability and unavailability of Nandi to Felix and of Felix to himself, in Kentridge's *Felix in exile*. One might here also refer to Lacan's insistence "that the impossibility of total satisfaction subverts the possibility of complete self-consciousness. Since there is always an Other 'within,' the subject can never coincide with itself and thus is forever split. What Lacan describes as the incomprehensible *reel* keeps the wound of subjectivity open" (Taylor 1987: xxxi).

1.1 Blind absorption, attentiveness, and the illusory promise of unity

Like the woman reading a letter in Vermeer *Woman in blue reading a letter* (Figure 3), the woman reading in Richter's painting is self-absorbed or antitheatrical, in the sense in which Michael Fried (1980, 1992, 1998a & 1998b) has it. This antitheatricality entails, in Fried's (1992: 10) words, "evoking the perfect obliviousness of a figure or group of figures to everything but the objects of their absorption, including — or especially — the beholder standing before the picture". Thus Richter's photo-realist painting may be seen specifically to address the issue of beholding, "by an appeal to absorptive means and effects" (Fried 1998b: 74n79); and by the suggestion that the woman reading, similar to the woman in Richter's *Betty* (1988) (Figure 4), is, through her turning away, obscured from and therefore, figuratively speaking, blind to the beholder.⁸

But what *effect* does this blind absorption or attentiveness, which Malebranche called the natural prayer of the soul,⁹ have on the seeing/reading viewer/reader, if by effect, as Bal (2001: 76) notes, "no coincidence, no symmetry, no equality between text and reader can be achieved"? How does the woman reading in Richter's painting, which is intertextually or interfigurally enfolded (Bal 1999: 8 & 24) with Vermeer's painting of a woman reading, *affect* or *touch* us (Van Alphen 1998: 94)? Put differently: "Who illuminates whom" (Bal 1999: 4) in this intertextual or interfigural cross-reading or reflection?

⁸ The majority of the figures depicted in Richter's oeuvre turn away from the viewer, whether literally or by being *distanced* through a process of blurring that conjures the image as (an image of) death. Cf also Deleuze (2004: 7) on the blur in Francis Bacon's paintings. Even Richter's abstract paintings, which according to Buchloh (1991: 194), "exist between the irreconcilable demands of the spectacle and the synecdoche", seem to turn away from the viewer in the sense that they appear veiled, cloudy, and impenetrable. It is in this sense that one might refer to Richter's paintings as "autonomous", that is, blind to the beholder. As Adorno (1997: 1) writes: "[A]rt's autonomy shows signs of blindness...". This antitheatrical "blindness" or turning away is quite striking in Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts' metapictorial *Reverse side of a painting* (ca. 1670-75) (Figure 5), a premodern painting depicting the back of a canvas. Gijsbrecht's "self-aware" image (Stoichita 1997) "turns around" to reflect on (the support of) its own production. The painting shows itself by hiding itself, following a dialectic that anticipates Richter's enigmatic *Betty*. As such, Gijsbrecht's premodern painting may be read as the "source" or self-reflexive "support" of Richter's image, a preposterous move that would transform Richter's painting into a metapictorial allegory.

⁹ See Benjamin (1999: 812) and Hartmann (1999: 195). In a letter to Benjamin, written 17 December 1934, in which he responds at length to Benjamin's article on Kafka, Adorno writes: "But above all, let me underline once again the significance of the passage on attentiveness as prayer. I cannot think of anything more important from your hand than this — nor of anything which could better and more precisely communicate your innermost intentions" (Adorno & Benjamin 1999: 71).

In his essay on translation Walter Benjamin (1996: 253) writes: “In the appreciation [or cognition (Richter 2000: 30)] of a work of art ... consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. ... No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener”. “This means that”, as the author Richter (2000: 30), not the painter Richter, notes, “to understand a text or artwork is to appreciate the specific ways in which it resists full comprehension”, a special case as it is of “the intrinsic inaccessibility of phenomenal reality” (Richter 2002: 128).¹⁰ “Rather than straightforward expression”, as Richter (2000: 30) writes, “Benjamin here privileges what he calls *das Ausdruckslose*, the ‘expressionless’”. By this he means the “poetic excess” of an artwork that “blindly” names “the self-reflexive obscurity of the aesthetic” (Richter 2000: 31), and that, in its singularity,¹¹ interrupts the ideological semblance of transparency and totality (Menninghaus 1993: 169). In this way, and with special reference to Richter’s painting *Reader*, Benjamin’s expressionless may be related to Adorno’s negative dialectical notion of semblance (*Schein*) promising nonsemblance (*das Scheinlose*). By this he means that the autonomous artwork, even though, or precisely because, it has absorbed heterogeneous elements, offers an illusory promise of what is impossible at present in antagonistic, even catastrophic society: that is, unity (Zuidervaart 1994: 179). As Adorno (1973: 404f) writes:

Art is semblance even at its highest peaks; but its semblance, the irresistible part of it, is given to it by what is not semblance. What art, notably the art decried as nihilistic, says in refraining from judgements is that everything is not just nothing. If it were, whatever it would be pale, colorless, indifferent. No light falls on men and things without reflecting transcendence. Indelible from the resistance to the fungible world of barter is the resistance of the eye that does not want the colors of the world to fade. Semblance is a promise of nonsemblance.¹²

¹⁰ John Rajchman (2001: 14) says something similar regarding Deleuze’s transcendental empiricist notion of “*a* life”, which, unlike *the* life of an individual, is “necessarily vague or indefinite, and this indefiniteness is real. It is vague in the Percian sense that the real is itself indeterminate or anexact, beyond the limitations of our capacities to measure it”.

¹¹ Cf Rajchman (2001: 10) who notes that for Deleuze “artworks hit upon something singular yet impersonal in our bodies and brains, irreducible to any pre-existent ‘we’”, and free from “the sort of ‘common sense’ that for Kant is supposed by the ‘I think’ or the ‘I judge’” (Rajchman 2001: 9).

¹² Cf Richter (2002: 128): “Art is based on these material conditions. It is a special mode of our daily intercourse with phenomena, in which we apprehend ourselves and everything around us. Art is therefore

Similarly, contrary to the understanding of art as communicating its referent in a transparent fashion, for Benjamin the expressionless artwork stages or communicates itself as a picture, which “wants” out of both lack and desire (cf Mitchell 2006: 6) — that is, “[i]t communicates, and it signals that it cannot communicate” (Richter 2000: 29).¹³ It communicates that it cannot communicate without a degree of blind or closed self-absorption that traverses the viewer/reader as heterogeneity, otherness, and indeterminacy.¹⁴ And yet this heterogeneity, otherness, and indeterminacy is precisely what points dialectically to the future — “*as in the unforeseeable itself*” (Derrida qtd. Richter 2000: 233) — of unity and univocality.¹⁵ Hence the ethical (Menninghaus 1993: 169) and political basis of the suggestion that the expressionless, blind or closed artwork, “which seals within itself both destructive and redemptive potential” (Richter 2000: 252n41), communicates “the paradox of the impossible possibility” (Adorno qtd Richter 2000: 15).¹⁶

the pleasure taken in the production of phenomena that are analogous to those of reality, because they bear a greater or lesser degree of resemblance to them. It follows that art is a way of thinking things out differently, and of apprehending the intrinsic inaccessibility of phenomenal reality; that art is an instrument, a method of getting at that which is closed and inaccessible to us (the banal future, just as much as the intrinsically unknowable); that art has a formative and therapeutic, consolatory and informative, investigative and speculative function; it is thus not only existential pleasure but Utopia”.

¹³ Or to borrow John Cage’s saying, which Richter (2002: 87) himself regards as important for his work: “I have nothing to say, and I am saying it”. In a recent interview with Robert Storr (2002: 287 & 288) Richter has noted that his earlier remarks that his paintings mean nothing were meant provocatively, “and in order not to have to say what I might have been thinking at that point, not to pour my heart out. That would have been embarrassing”. It would perhaps then be fruitful to read Richter’s “nihilism” in the light of Adorno’s negative dialectics, if not in terms of Scholem’s nihilistic-dialectical notion of the “nothingness of revelation” (see below). Nothingness here, at least as Benjamin understands it (cf Schoeman 2003: 109n31), relates to oblivion, which in turn may be “reinvented and rewritten in the postcontemporary idiom” (Jameson 2002: 4) as “the *oblivion* of ... difference” (Taylor 1987: xxvii). As Taylor (1987: xxvii) writes: “The oblivion here to be thought is the veiling of difference as such, thought in terms of *Lēthē* (concealment); this veiling has in turn withdrawn itself from the beginning. The oblivion belongs to the difference because the difference belongs to oblivion”. In terms of Richter’s reticence, carried over into the antitheatrical and absorptive or expressionless quality of his paintings, see also Derrida (1996b: 7) on “a response that held everything in reserve”.

¹⁴ As Derrida (1984: 8) says: “[F]or some of us the principle of indeterminism is what makes the conscious freedom of man fathomable”.

¹⁵ Cf Adorno on the figure of Odradek as “a sign of distortion — but precisely as such he is also a motif of transcendence” (Adorno & Benjamin 1999: 69).

¹⁶ Cf Taylor (1987: xxvii): “To think after the end of philosophy is to struggle to think the unthinkable, say the unsayable, name the unnameable. This task is, of course, *impossible*”. “And yet”, he notes, “this impossible undertaking preoccupies many of the most important thinkers and writers [but also artists, GS] of our epoch”.

Paradoxically, then, this blind otherness, this impossible/possible “speaking other” (Dilnot & Garcia-Padilla 1989: 43), also names and activates the viewer/reader. The woman blindly reading in Richter’s painting reflects, mirrors,¹⁷ or prefigures the viewer/reader in the sense that we too are blindly absorbed in the activity of viewing and reading. Expressed slightly differently, “[t]he ‘self-activity’ of the cognizing subject is at once ‘a receptivity’ for the object of cognition, and the passive ‘perceptibility’ of the object of cognition at once an active ‘attentiveness’ toward the cognizing subject” (Menninghaus 2002: 41). As Richter reflects in this painting upon, or alludes to, the Vermeer painting as a pre-text or “source”, in a way that “puts what came chronologically first (‘pre-’) as an aftereffect behind (‘post-’) its later recycling” (Bal 1999: 7), so we reflect upon, and are reflected by, the image of a woman reflecting upon her text.

Moreover, may we not see or read the woman as both illuminating, and illuminated by, the text she is reading? And could one then not argue that we both illuminate, and, in turn, are darkly illuminated by, the woman reading, “[a]s though we [darkly reflect, GS] back to surfaces the light which emanates from them...”, to cite Bergson (qtd Deleuze 2001: 32n1) writing on time and matter? I say darkly, because this cross-illumination exceeds us as much as it takes place obscurely or blindly, enfolded as it is with impenetrability, indeterminacy and cloudiness. This cloudy space, in which Richter attentively reads Vermeer, “Vermeer attentively reads Richter”, and we attentively read and are read by both, is at the centre of “the [disjunctive, GS] historicity of the act of reading” (Richter 2000: 26). I am reminded here of Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano’s recollection of their observation of the now famous painting by the German Romantic painter Friedrich, of a monk, with his back faced antitheatrically to the viewer, standing by the sea:

¹⁷ But the mirror disperses rather than unifies the self, the subject, or the body. I return to this in chapter three. For more on the mirror as metapictorial trope, cf Bal (1999: 209-30 & 263-8).

[A]ll the things I would have liked to find in the picture itself I discovered principally in the relationship between me and the picture, since the need [lack and desire] that the picture had set before me was thwarted by the picture itself... (in Eco 2004: 297).¹⁸

1. 2 The cloudy materiality of words and images

In his book *Berlin childhood*, Benjamin speaks of the reading child fully engrossed in texts. He writes that “through looking the child enters into those pages, becoming suffused, like a cloud, with the riotous colors of the world of pictures” (Benjamin 1996: 435, Richter 2000: 274n16). Elsewhere he also speaks of words as “actually clouds” (Benjamin 2002: 374 qtd Richter 2000: 220). Hamacher (1988: 175) comments:

The word — cloud — is the becoming imageless and wordless of the word. It proceeds as dematerialization from the word. As weaning. It de-interprets, dis-appoints, dis-pairs itself; its texture becomes threadbare and perforated with remembrance not of something forgotten but of forgetting itself. Nothing could come closer to the doctrine that is not there than the word that lets itself disappear.

I would like to pause at this image of the cloudy word or text, by way of Richter’s painting *Cloud*¹⁹ (1970) (Figure 6), which, I would like to suggest, may be read as an allegory of the self-reflexively impenetrable and indeterminate artwork itself. Hamacher (1988: 174) speaks of texts/artworks as “allegorical clouds” that disfigure themselves; their “self-commentaries are just as much self-privations” (Hamacher 1988: 175). He writes:

¹⁸ One should note also that my reading of Richter’s paintings as cloudy relates to the preference the Romantics (influenced by Edmund Burke’s theories) had for cloudy skies rather than sunny ones (cf Eco 2004: 290), as a means to evoke the sublime. Even if Richter’s “preposterous” citation of Romantic art is tinged with irony, irony itself was a key concept employed by the Romantics. As Eco (2004: 318) notes: “[T]he ironic method makes it possible to reveal the co-presence of two opposing points of view or opinions, without any preconceived or biased selection. Irony is therefore a philosophical method — if not *the* philosophical method”. Cf below for my reading of Richter’s painting of a skull through Benjamin’s notion of the expressionless-sublime.

¹⁹ *Wolke*.

The cloud ... does not stand in the sky of irony, for that is empty. It is a requisite of the allegorist... It is for him [or her, GS] the sign of a Protean capacity to transform oneself, the medium of likenesses and at the same time that which clouds all likenesses, making them non-transparent and disfiguring them. As such, it is the sign of failure that still awaits its critical end and, even more, its ironic dissolution (Hamacher 1988: 174).

The art historian Hubert Damisch (2002: 68) writes: “[T]he cloud, which now reveals the spectacle²⁰ that it conceals, can here clearly be seen to be one of the signs most favored by representation and one that shares its essence”. He notes that the cloud or veil²¹ “reveals only as it conceals ... and manifests both the limits and the infinite regression upon which representation is founded” (Damisch 2002: 61). The cloud, then, operates “as the lack in the center of” representation, “the outside that joins the inside in order to constitute it as an inside” (Krauss 2000: 85).²² This means that representation is “always being limited or conditioned by the unformed, which is unknowable and unrepresentable” (Krauss 2000: 84f).

In this sense, Richter’s painting of a cloud is an allegory of the artwork as intrinsically cloudy, or of representation as it communicates itself as essentially noncommunicable.²³ Read as a counterpart to Richter’s *Reader*, this painting of a cloud in a sense *performs* the cloudiness of reading/dispersing as this is figured both by the woman reading in Richter’s *Reader*, and by us as we attempt to read her in turn.²⁴ Like Benjamin’s child we become suffused, like a cloud — “the [hierophanic, GS]²⁵ thing that cannot be fitted into a system

²⁰ Cf Buchloh (1991).

²¹ Cf Benjamin (1998: 36 qtd Cohen 2002: 106) on “the story of the veiled image of Saïs, the unveiling of which was fatal for whomsoever thought to learn the truth”.

²² Cf Barthes (1975: 32) on the shadow of the text: “The text needs its shadow: this shadow is *a bit* of ideology, *a bit* of representation, *a bit* of subjectivity: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro”. My thanks to Maureen de Jager for bringing this line to my attention.

²³ In this regard, Richter’s paintings continue or extend the modernist notion of the artwork as refusing communication.

²⁴ Hamacher (1988: 175) writes: “[R]eading is not the gathering of disparate things but rather that dispersion in which gathering alone is possible”.

²⁵ In his semiotic reading of the significance of the signifier / cloud/, Damisch (2002: 44) notes: “To borrow from the vocabulary of the history of religions, cloud seems to have a hierophanic significance; in other words, it is an object that manifests that which is sacred, or contributes to its manifestation”. But as Krauss (2000: 85) notes: “Thus before being a thematic element — functioning in the moral and allegorical sphere as a registration of miraculous vision, or of ascension, or as the opening onto divine space; or in the

but which nevertheless the system needs in order to constitute itself *as* a system” (Krauss 2000: 82) — in the cloudiness of representation and illumination.

When juxtaposed with his painting of the woman reading, Richter’s painting of a cloud may thus be seen, intertextually and interdiscursively, as an allegorical veil or curtain that draws attention to the essential impenetrability or indeterminacy of reading the visual text.²⁶ Like his painting of a curtain, *Curtain IV*²⁷ (1965) (Figure 7), “which simultaneously blocks vision and stimulates the imagination concerning the invisible events behind it” (Human & Visagie 2002: 92), the painting of a cloud both directs and obscures our vision. This dual movement draws attention to the ambiguous status of painting as a self-reflexive and absorptive *representation of representation* (Damisch 2002: 63)²⁸ or mottled “vision of vision” (Bal 1997a: 10).

Furthermore, if Richter’s painting of a cloud self-reflexively allegorises paintings as clouds, or mottled screens, “evoked in order to celebrate the activity of reading” (Bal 1997a: 7), the whole of painting is also riddled with epistemological doubt. Similarly, his

psychological sphere as an index of desire, fantasy, hallucination; or, for that matter, before being a visual integer, the image of vaporousness, instability, movement — the / cloud/ is a differential marker in a semiological system”.

²⁶ I am reading the indeterminacy of both text and image here against the grain of W J T Mitchell (1996: 55f), who regards the border between word and image as insuperable. He writes: “If art history is the art of speaking for and about images, then it is clearly the art of negotiating the difficult, contested border between words and images, of speaking for and about that which is ‘voiceless’, representing that which cannot represent itself. The task may seem hopelessly contradictory: if, on the one hand, art history turns the image into a verbal message or a ‘discourse’, the image disappears from sight. If, on the other hand, art history refuses language, or reduces language to a mere servant of the visual image, the image remains mute and inarticulate, and the art historian is reduced to the repetition of clichés about the ineffability and untranslatability of the visual. The choice is between linguistic imperialism and defensive reflexes of the visual” He continues: “No method — semiotics, iconology, discourse analysis — is going to rescue us from this dilemma” (Mitchell 1996: 56). I would prefer to address this dilemma by way of Mieke Bal’s (1999) suggestion of a “preposterous” reading that enfolds word and image, allowing the one to “perform” the other. This enfolding is not nearly as “utopian and romantic” as Mitchell perhaps reductively claims it is.

²⁷ *Vorhang IV*.

²⁸ Cf also Marin’s (1995: 50) discussion of the raised curtain in a tapestry by Le Brun that is part of the “History of the king” series. He writes: “The raised curtain is *part of the represented scene* that picks out a given object as its referent; it is part of the historical event described by the painting’s story. However, the curtain is also necessarily an *element of the representation* that transforms the scene into a form of theater or spectacle. The curtain is no longer an instrument of the scenography of the event but of the scenography of the painting. In short, it is a means by which the frame encompasses and posits the painting as representation. The curtain is thus both an element of the utterance and a feature of the enunciation”.

painting of a curtain allegorises paintings as curtains — that is, as false or irregular appearances riddled with deception and therefore doubt or uncertainty.²⁹ This recalls Jacopo da Pontormo’s letter, of 18 February 1548, to Benedetto Varchi wherein he writes: “Painting consists of material hellishly woven, ephemeral and of little worth, because if the superficial coating is removed, nobody any longer pays any attention to it” (Damisch 2002: xi).

Similarly, according to Roland Barthes (1975: 64),

[t]ext means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue — this texture — the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of the web.³⁰

What Barthes says about the text resonates with painting, particularly in light of the way that I have tried to enfold cloudy text and cloudy painting in my reading of Richter’s *Reader*. For reader, viewer, and writer alike get lost in the cloudy materiality,³¹ ultra-thin surface, or skin of the text or painting. Paradoxically, getting lost in the cloudy surface or facture³² of an image also opens up space and time for interpretation and thoughtful absorption.

²⁹ One is reminded here of the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, as relayed by Pliny, as to who could paint the most successful *trompe-l’oeil*. Zeuxis’s representation of grapes was so successful that birds flew up to peck at them. However, Parrhasius outwitted Zeuxis by painting a cloth that Zeuxis attempted to draw aside, as he believed it hung over the real picture.

³⁰ My thanks to Maureen de Jager for the Barthes citation. Cf also Bataille (2004: 67): “In the end the face is dispersed. In the place where the fabric of things rips open — in the lacerating rip — nothing remains but a person introduced into the fabric’s texture”.

³¹ I am appropriating Damisch’s (Bois *et al* 1998: 4) notion of the cloud as “what is purely material or substance”. As such the cloud is a theoretical object, “which is closest to ‘painting’, and thus it has an emblematic value”. It is “the emblem of pictoriality” as materiality.

³² Cf Buchloh (1991: 194) for more on the dialectical facture of Richter’s paintings, which Buchloh reads in terms of “the irreconcilable demands of the spectacle and the synecdoche”.

1.3 Surfacing time

Bal (1999: 6) speaks of a “baroque engagement with surface”, and refers to “the image’s skin” as an “occasion for what Deleuze termed *texturology*: a theory or philosophy of the surface of the skin ... of texture as the site of point of view” (Bal 1999: 30).³³ Point of view is precisely what has been at stake in my reading of Richter’s *Reader*, where the woman in the painting illuminates and is illuminated by the cloudy text she is absorbed in, and where we in turn illuminate and are illuminated by her self-absorbed reading. Richter’s painting may thus be “preposterously” read as neo-baroque, not only in terms of its self-reflexive emphasis on the skin of the image, but also in terms of the sense we get that the woman depicted is illuminated monadically as if inside a tomb. She is illuminated as if from within “an enclosed space of darkness” (Bal 1999: 31), a typically baroque space that enfolds “the subject within the [cloudy, GS] material experience, thus turning surface into skin” (Bal 1999: 30).

Richter’s *Reader* may here be felicitously compared to, or enfolded with, Jeannette Christensen’s neo-baroque polaroid *The passing of time (girl reading a letter)* (1995) (Figure 8). I say felicitously because not only do both images evoke an intense sense of embodied absorption, thus drawing attention to time, but Christensen’s polaroid also resonates with Richter’s own interest in and use of photography. Richter’s ongoing *Atlas* project consists of photographs he has taken and collected over several years (cf Buchloh 1999a & 1999b) and most if not all of his figurative work derives from, and rehearses, the mechanically reproduced image (cf Buchloh 1991). In one way or another, Richter’s work makes a singular contribution towards a philosophy of photography that calls attention to the repetitive, time-based effects of the medium within the medium (cf Deleuze 1994, Thain 2004). I will return to the self-reflexive question of a philosophy of

³³ According to Claude Gandelman (1991: 133), “[a]nother skin metaphor in art is that of the palimpsest. According to this metaphor, behind the epidermic skin of a painting there may be a dermic layer that can be brought to the fore by the rolling up or down of the first skin”. Perhaps this “rolling up or down” is at stake in all pictorial interpretation, even the interpretation of photographs, where first and second skin appear as if one.

photography in chapter five, as a means of thinking the technology of representation from within the tomb-like darkroom.

In both Richter's and Christensen's image a single figure is illuminated as if from within a tomb-like space. Both images quote Vermeer's *Woman in blue reading a letter*, although Christensen has switched the gender of the figure reading, from female to male. Furthermore, both images draw attention to the question of the passing of time, in terms of both form and content. Skin ages. The skin of painting ages, wrinkles³⁴ or folds (cf Cohen 2002: 105), as does the skin of a polaroid photograph. Bal (1999: 169f) writes of Christensen's quotations of Vermeer:

The medium of the polaroid is the very opposite to that of the lasting work of art. But it is also the medium of the snapshot [something which holds particular interest for Richter]. In this capacity it grasps momentaneous existence by fixing time. By grasping time through light and fixing time by underscoring the difference, Christensen reaches over four centuries, boldly appropriating the Old Master pieces. Using polaroid, she simultaneously undermines the grasp; as soon as the polaroids are made, the process of fading begins, and the Old Master piece is revealed as a live creature subject to decay.

Richter's painting *Reader* correlatively reveals both the Old Master piece and itself "as a live creature subject to decay" but it, furthermore, draws attention to the other pre-text it takes as its "source" — the photograph, which too is subject to decay. Richter here reveals the dialectic at the heart of both painting and photography: both fix time and yet simultaneously both undermine the fixing of time.³⁵ Time, which "it is always too late to speak about" (Derrida qtd Jameson 2002: 19), surfaces melancholically in both painting and photography as fixed and lost all at once, "each time anew" (Bal 2001: 122); each time reflexively. At once here and now, both the painted and the photographic image

³⁴ Cf Benjamin (1999: 244f) on ageing and wrinkles in his Proust essay: "He [Proust, GS] is filled with the insight that none of us has time to live the true dramas of the life that we are destined for. This is what ages us — this and nothing else. The wrinkles and creases in our faces are the registration of the great passions, vices, insights that called on us; but we, the masters, were not at home".

³⁵ This is slightly contrary to David Hockney's insistence that only painting or drawing reveals or is inscribed with the passage of time. Hockney resorted to what he has referred to as "joiners" — polaroids arranged as in a temporal collage — to attempt to introduce time into the "mortified" photograph.

remain irreducibly remote and inaccessible. Perhaps this is what lends them both with aura in the Benjaminian sense: that which remains remote no matter how close what it conjures appears.³⁶ Making a distinction between aura and trace Benjamin (qtd Richter 2000: 227) writes:

[The] trace is the appearance of a proximity, however distant what it left behind may be.
Aura is the appearance of a distance, however close what it conjures up may be. In the trace, we get hold of an object; in the aura it seizes us.

At first glance it would appear that Benjamin's concept of the trace equates well with the notion of the photograph as an index,³⁷ as "literally an emanation of the referent", as Barthes (2000: 80) has it. Yet both Richter's painting and Christensen's polaroid appear auric in their linking of proximity and distance (cf Link-Heer 2003: 117), "with each pole constantly reappearing in the other" (Baecker 2003: 18). As Baecker (2003: 18) writes: [I]f one approaches closeness, motives are found that refer to distance; approaching distance, one nevertheless remains aware of the near-at-hand material techniques that make it visible". Conversely, while both Richter's "photo-realist"³⁸ painting and Christensen's polaroid appear aurically inaccessible, they also bear the physical imprints of the traces of time, hence their proximity to the here and now and to our own point(s) of

³⁶ I am reading Benjamin slightly against the grain. Benjamin appreciated the appearance of aura in the very early daguerreotypes, but he hailed the later decline of aura by way of film and then latter-day photography as revolutionary. For Benjamin the decline of aura dialectically marked the decline of the bourgeois class with its "auric" sense of self-importance. Nevertheless, his reading of the disappearance of aura remains ambiguous and has prompted several recent authors to revisit the concept. Cf, for example, Patt (2001) and Gumbrecht & Marrinan (2003). Link-Heer (2003: 117) for one notes that if aura is not bound to a specific medium, as Benjamin argues, then neither photography nor film is per se without aura.

³⁷ On the index as trace, and the trace as an index of time, cf Bal (1999: 74). On the index as unnerving and uncanny, "[b]ecause [in contrast to the icon, GS] of its concrete, existential proximity to its meaning", cf van Alphen (1998: 104). I return to this in chapter two.

³⁸ I mean photo-realist here in terms of the excessive "photographic" or "photogenic" (cf Rifkin 1999: 39 & Deleuze & Foucault 1999: 83-104) perfection of Richter's *Reader*. The important dialectical point here though is that the more "realistic" or "representational" Richter's painting appears to be the more obscure, complex, cloudy, or allegorical it becomes. Conversely, as de Man wrote of Mallarmé's poetry, "whatever the complexity and 'obscurity' of the final product, all of its initial elements were 'representational'" (Jameson 2002: 120). Cf also Dilnot & Garcia-Padilla (1989) on the excessive representational perfection of Vermeer's paintings, which compels us to read them as allegories of painting, and as allegories of allegory. Here allegory ought to be seen as a figure through which representation is revealed as representation — flawed illusion and infinite deferral.

view.³⁹ And yet, to complicate things further, “Levinas describes the trace as ‘a presence of that which properly speaking has never been there, of what is always past’. The trace

³⁹ Suzanne Human has intriguingly suggested to me (personal correspondence, 14 January 2005) “that Warburg provides an alternative to Barthes’ clichéd notion that photography is mortifying”. She notes that “[f]or Warburg it preserves and transmits the energy of past experiences”. Human is referring to Warburg’s notion of the “engram”, which he borrowed from Richard Semon. Gombrich (1986: 242) observes that “[a]ny event affecting living matter leaves a trace which Semon calls an ‘engram’. The potential energy conserved in this ‘engram’ may, under suitable conditions, be reactivated and discharged...”. According to Warburg, “[i]n the life of civilizations it is the *symbol* which corresponds to Semon’s ‘engram’. In the symbol — in the widest sense of the term — we find preserved those energies of which it is, itself, the result” (Gombrich 1986: 243). Hence Warburg’s notion of “cultural memory”, a concept Bal (1999: 66) takes recourse to in her discussion of Serrano’s photographs. She writes: “Instead of ‘influence’, the past is present in the present in the form of *traces*, diffuse memories. ... Cultural memory is collective yet [correlatively, GS] subjective by definition. This subjectivity is of crucial importance in this view, yet it does not lead to an individualist subjectivism”. In my reading I have dialectically intertwined Barthes’s, but also Benjamin’s *allegorical*, notion that photography is mortifying with Bal’s suggestion that photographs are “epidermically” both dead and alive: they affect, touch and change us as much as we affect, touch and change them. This “entangled mobility” (Bal 1999: 65) “puts the subject at correlative risk” (Bal 1999: 63). For Bal (1999: 66), “[t]he past lies just outside the grasp of the photograph, but its relationship to it is here for us to see”. This means that the photograph implies memory as *activity* but also as loss (Bal 1999: 66); paradoxically it is precisely the latter that reactivates the former, mobilising the community to rejuvenate “the erased culture for a future in which it can finally come into existence” (Bal 1999: 74). Hence for Bal the “ageing” that is at work in the photograph is entangled with the rejuvenating force of remembrance. Similarly, in his essay “On the image of Proust” Benjamin (1999: 244) speaks of the dialectic between ageing and remembrance. He writes: “This is the work of *la mémoire involontaire*, the rejuvenating force which is a match for the inexorable process of aging. When that which has been is reflected in the dewy fresh ‘instant’ [of the photograph, GS], a painful shock of rejuvenation pulls it together once more...”. He notes: “Proust [who, Benjamin implies, writes in “photographic” images, GS] has brought off the monstrous feat of letting the whole world age a lifetime in an instant. But this very concentration, in which things that normally just fade and slumber are consumed in a [photographic, GS] flash, is called rejuvenation”. Cf also Missac (1995: 118) on “the flash, perhaps, with which one takes photographs at night”. The important point to bear in mind here is that for Benjamin mortification is always already *allegorically* dialectical: it always implies its opposite. One might phrase this Benjaminian dialectic as follows: “We can either train on it [the photograph] the withering gaze of the baroque allegorist who further immobilizes an already petrified landscape; or else we can contemplate it with the longing eyes of the ‘angel of history’ who yearns to piece the débris together” (Wohlfarth qtd Cohen 1995: 20n8). In my view Benjamin’s philosophy compels us to do both (cf Geyer-Ryan 1994). Though Benjamin radically distinguishes allegory from symbol (the former signifying transience, the latter eternity), his allegorical-dialectical notion of mortification/rejuvenation bears similarities with Warburg’s engrammatic notion of the mnemonic symbol. Furthermore, if for Barthes the photograph is “literally an emanation of the referent”, it would seem to have the *possibility* of being freighted with “the energy of past experiences”, however melancholy, ghostly or cloudy. Barthes (qtd Cohen 1995: 71) writes: “In the realm of the imaginary, the Photograph ... represents this very subtle moment where, to tell the truth, I am neither a subject nor object, but rather a subject who feels itself become object: I then live a micro-experience of death (of parenthesis): I become truly a ghost”. But would this invest the photograph with what Marx characterised as “the ghostly objectivity that ideological products possess” (Cohen 1995: 23)? Most certainly, and yet perhaps one could take recourse to Benjamin’s “allying [of] the theoretical procedure releasing the positive potential of [ghostly, GS] ideological projections with what he called ‘awakening’” (Cohen 1995: 25). In terms of this allegorical/dialectical/alchemical transformation (see chapters one, two and three) of ideological “detritus into an index of vital social energy” (Cohen 1995: 25), Benjamin again sounds similar to Warburg. Both Benjamin and Warburg seek to “awaken” from the phantasmagoric ideology or myth coiling around cultural artefacts, detritus or fossils — such as the alluring photographs in our family albums — though

marks the lapse of time by remarking the way in which the pre-original *anarchie* comes toward the subject as a departure. Never arriving or arriving only as departing, the trace opens everything but is not itself disclosed” (Taylor 1987: 205).

This fixing and losing of time, together with the linking of proximity and distance, is quite literally performed in the embodied act or absorptive process of reading that is both “captured” and enunciated within Richter’s and Christensen’s images, and put into motion without. Reading takes time. And as Bal (1999: 70) writes, “time matters: then and now”. On the one hand, the frozen image of someone reading (the internal focaliser) seems to precisely deny the material time of reading; the temporal process is negated at the exact moment that it is enunciated.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the reader fixed in the act of reading within the image summons us (the external focalisers) into the time it takes to read image or text. Whether photographic or painted, the image consists of constellations⁴¹ of elements, traces, or flurries that demand to be read, figured, configured, and reconfigured. As Fried (1992: 108) writes,

both attempts are ambiguous and even ambivalent. The ambiguous/ambivalent way in which Benjamin (1999: 507-530) calls for an “awakening” from the alluring aura of the bourgeois photograph and bourgeois past in his essay “Little history of photography” is a prime example. So also the ambiguous/ambivalent language of desire in his *The arcades project* (cf Stoljar 1996). But one should bear in mind here that Benjamin, contra Adorno, inflects ambiguity with dialectics: “[A]mbiguity is the imagistic appearance of dialectics...” (Benjamin qtd Cohen 1995: 48) — that is, an imagistic dialectics of “unevenness” (Althusser qtd Cohen 1995: 49) and mobile contradiction negated in Hegelian dialectics. Thus the mythic ambiguity or phantasmagoric ideology of the (fleeting) image of the past is dialectically turned inside out, but not unequivocally dissolved. And yet Benjamin nevertheless holds out for a univocal end to mythic ambiguity, as in his notions of the expressionless and the messianic caesura of homogenous time. This contradiction is inherent to his critico-theoretical production, which some have termed Janus-faced. See also Gombrich (1986) on Warburg’s ambiguous/ambivalent excavation of/desire for myth, madness, and superstition. Cf Castle (1995). I return to this point in my discussion of the dialectical entanglement of reason or enlightenment and madness or fate, in chapter one. Cf also Eco (2004) on the deep-rooted ambivalence in the discourse of the Enlightenment: between, say, faith in Reason and melancholy sorrow for the transience of life, between Beauty (qua lucidity) and the Sublime (qua obscurity).

⁴⁰ Cf Levinas (qtd Taylor 1987: 192f): “Temporalization as lapse [“which is derived from the Latin *lapsus*, error, sliding” (Taylor 1987: 192)], the loss of time, is neither and initiative of the ego, nor a movement toward some *telos* of action. The loss of time is not the work of any subject. Already the synthesis of retentions and protentions in which Husserl’s phenomenological analysis, through and abuse of language, recuperates the lapse, bypasses the ego. Time passes [*se passe*]. This synthesis which occurs *patiently*, called with profundity passive, is aging. It breaks out [*éclate*] under the weight of years, and is irreversibly removed from the present, that is, from re-presentation. In self-consciousness, there is no longer a *presence* of self to self, but senescence. It is as senescence beyond the recuperation of memory that time, lost time that does not return, is a diachrony and concerns me”.

⁴¹ I discuss melancholy/mobile constellations in depth, in chapter three.

time is required for ... paintings [or photographs, GS] to be made to yield their structures and meanings but also that those structures and meanings in turn imply — they all but enforce — an experience of temporal duration.

The image, relayed to the viewer or reader as cloudy surface, demands that we take time to read it, to be attentive toward it,⁴² and this is most pertinently so when the image itself *allegorically* depicts a figure in the (frozen) act of reading, of taking and losing time. In fact, one can argue, by way of de Man, that the allegorical figure reading is an allegory of the temporal process of both reading and of allegory itself (cf Jameson 2002: 113, 117). De Man (qtd Jameson 2002: 113) writes: “[I]n the world of allegory, time is the originary constitutive category”. Allegory here “designates the whole process as such, the temporality whereby the naïve symbolic or representational reading is superseded [placed under erasure, GS] by the [self-]reflexive literary or rhetorical” (Jameson 2002: 114). And, as de Man (qtd Jameson 2002: 114) notes dialectically (according to Jameson), “it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it”. Hence the evocation of the allegorical temporality of intertextuality, where the reader reads, or is absorbed in, an image or sign, through reading, or being absorbed in, another image or sign. To creatively misread Deleuze then: *every* image thus allegorically becomes a time-image, one that through our attentive act of “scanning” opens up (to) the material, temporal if cloudy space of interpretation. To cite Flusser (1983: 8):

The significance of images is on the surface. One can take them in at a single glance yet this remains superficial. If one wishes to deepen the significance, i.e. to reconstruct the abstracted dimensions, one has to allow one’s gaze to wander over the surface feeling [or losing, GS] the way as one goes. This wandering over the surface of the image is called “scanning”. In so doing, one’s gaze follows a complex path formed, on the one hand, by the structure of the image and, on the other, by the observer’s intentions. The significance of the image as revealed in the process of scanning therefore represents a synthesis of two intentions: one manifested in the image and the other belonging to the observer. It follows that images are not “denotative” (unambiguous) complexes of symbols (like

⁴² Cf Bal (1999: 60) on “the ‘maternal love’ — the slowed-down look that grazes the object, caresses it, and surrounds it with care...”.

numbers, for example) but “connotative” (ambiguous) complexes of symbols: They provide space for interpretation [and absorption].⁴³

1.4 Illuminating death

Richter’s *Reader* entraps, enfolds or entangles the viewer/reader/writer in the allegorical, cloudy materiality and impenetrability of its surface (cf McMahon qtd Thain 2004).⁴⁴ And yet the dissimulation and negation,⁴⁵ or drawing aside and dispersal, of “the superficial coating” of the cloud, veil, curtain, or skin of painting or text is also always already operational in Richter’s paintings — as in the expressionless. Emblematised by the sublime “veilless nakedness” (Benjamin 1996: 351) of the corpse or the death’s head, not unlike the one figured in Richter’s *Skull*⁴⁶ (1983) (Figure 9), for Benjamin the expressionless intervenes in the aesthetic semblance or “superficial coating” of the artwork. The expressionless rents the (ideological) myth of totality of the artwork.

Read as a self-reflexive allegory of Benjamin’s notion of the expressionless, Richter’s hermetic painting of a skull disperses the false claim to absolute totality, which is found in the beautiful semblance. And yet, as a painting, it remains self-reflexively and irreducibly entangled with the veil of semblance, that is, it remains cloudy and unreadable. The cloudy reflection of the skull below it underscores this point if one adopts Fried’s argument that reflections or shadows in painting thematise not only “the indirect production of representation” (Fried 1992: 218), but also “the eclipse of visibility

⁴³ Cf van den Berg (2004) on the multifarious ways of “scanning” an image.

⁴⁴ Thain (2004) quotes McMahon on the “literal image”: “The literal image, the most clear, obvious and emphatic — a simple act of showing — is also inextricably opaque because it refuses the sensory-motor link of abstraction, explanation or generalization. The image and the body is uncertain because it maintains itself in a space outside its determination in action, a space of infinite possibility, of the forces of grace or chance. This is not the secrecy of a dark interior, hidden so that it can all the better be inferred or perceived, the secret of a content within form, but a sort of unfolding or unraveling of the opposition between interior and exterior across a surface plane, across time, defying the depths of secrecy to create an impenetrability of the surface”.

⁴⁵ As Marin (1995: 51) puts it: “Enunciation is posited and identified only in order to be dissimulated and negated”.

⁴⁶ *Schädel*.

— the undoing of spectatorhood” (Fried 1992: 217). For Fried (1992: 219) this is most pertinently metaphorised in terms of “absorption in reading”.

Hence the skull — which refutes semblance, in as much as it is semblance, and which, like a sphinx’s face, cannot not be read, yet ultimately remains unreadable — allegorises both the availability and unavailability of the artwork or text, as this has been self-reflexively figured in Richter’s painting of the reader.⁴⁷ As Richter (2000: 107) writes:

The sphinx’s face or text demands to be read. It cannot not be read, as there is no other way to engage it but to *read* it carefully. In this sense it is readable. But this reading of the text of the sphinx can never arrive at a stable meaning or at hermeneutic closure — the enigmatic text to be read cannot be arrested, its laws cannot be broken for good. It thus remains unreadable.

Like the skull in the windowsill in Dürer’s *St. Jerome in his study*, Richter’s cloudy painting of a skull, which has been “reduced to the zero point of its own content” (Scholem 1989: 142), is a memento mori, an emblem of vanitas⁴⁸ and death. Moreover, as a “representation of death [the skull, GS] refers to the process of representation as

⁴⁷ Buchloh (1991: 194f) writes: “Richter has explicitly referred to the hermetic nature of painting as a [dialectical, GS] strategy of resistance against the dominance of consumption when saying that ‘... painting is the creation of an analogy for the invisible and the unintelligible, which should become figure and should become accessible... Good paintings are therefore incomprehensible... They are incomprehensible so that they cannot be consumed and remain essential...’”. I am reminded here of Adorno’s (qtd Jameson 2002: 160) statement that “in order for a work of art to be purely and fully a work of art, it must be more than a work of art” — that is, it must be radically other to “the dominance of consumption”. Or as Robert Hullot-Kentor (1997: xif) puts it in his translator’s introduction to Adorno’s *Aesthetic theory*: “[T]he book [or artwork, GS] makes itself remote from its consumption out of interest in, and by its power of, self-immersion”. In turn, both Richter and Adorno here recall Greenberg’s (qtd Jameson 2002: 169) “late modernist” (as Jameson 2002: 165 defines it) comment about “art’s sanctuary from capitalism”. Certainly there are several elective affinities between the ideas of Greenberg and Adorno, though the latter was much less prone to shrewd, positivistic generalisations about history etc. As for the affinity between Greenberg’s theories and Richter’s art, those are subtler. Richter’s work moves in many directions: from Romanticism and “high modernism” (as Jameson 2002: 165 defines it) to late modernism and postmodernism. Both ascetically dedicated to hermetic form and self-ironically dedicated to the formless, Richter’s oeuvre evokes multiple narratives in and of history, opening up historical and political context(s) to “narrative options and alternate storytelling possibilities” (Jameson 2002: 32). Whether Richter, Adorno, and Greenberg all posit an aesthetico-ideological programme of “the autonomy of the aesthetic” will have to be a question left open for the time being. See Jameson (2002, for example, pp. 176-179) for a comprehensive, dialectical discussion of the ideology of the autonomy or semi-autonomy of art vs. culture, the latter seen by the theoreticians of modernism as coterminous with barbarian, bad mass culture.

⁴⁸ I discuss the bidirectional thematics of vanitas, in chapter one.

death” (Marin 1995: 87). As an “absence [or death, GS] haunting representation” Richter’s painting of a skull “repeatedly places the picture in question” (Taylor 1999: 35). That is to say, it is a self-reflexive emblem of ephemerality, of error,⁴⁹ and of the impossibility of revelation⁵⁰ or representation as absolute transparency or total knowledge. As a “blind” allegory of “the self-reflexive obscurity of the aesthetic” (Richter 2000: 31), Richter’s painting of a skull may be related to Willem Boshoff’s dissection of the word apocalypse as this relates implicitly to his *Blind alphabet* (1991-5) (Figure 10).

Boshoff notes that “*apocalypse* is derived from the Greek, that *apo* means away from, *calyptos* a shroud/veil/cowl. ... Contrary to popular belief, the apocalypse will engender no revelation”. He notes: “[T]here is no lifting of the mists [or clouds, GS] of ignorance.⁵¹ It is a ‘conundrum, an unravellable revelling’” (Jamal & Williamson 1996: 147). And if Boshoff’s *Blind alphabet* stages a kind of “blind touching”,⁵² where the participant has “to try to touch with the eye, experience visual touch”, this involves a sighted reader “enamoured of blindness, who knows through not knowing” (Jamal & Williamson 1996: 149). In *Blind alphabet*, moreover, “those without sight have been given the advantage over the sighted” (Jamal & Williamson 1996: 149). For the duration of its exhibition at the 1995 Johannesburg Biennale, only the blind could read the plaque lids stencilled in braille, fixed to the top of each container, and only the blind were allowed to open the containers to handle the wooden objects within.

⁴⁹ Cf Jameson (2002: 112) on de Man’s “dialectical” notion “that error, cancelled and subsumed (*aufgehoben*) into truth [which de Man equates with lucidity or illumination, GS], remains, not only a necessary moment (aspect) of truth as well, but also a necessary moment or stage in the latter’s emergence”. Jameson notes that it may be paradoxical or perverse to reveal de Man as a dialectical thinker, and, by extension, to reveal classical deconstruction as dialectical. Yet, he argues, “placing ideas or terms ‘under erasure’ ... is a dialectics beyond the emergence of the theory of ideology (and thus a relatively more complex kind of analysis than what Hegel, lacking in any modern notion of ideology as such, had to carry out)”.

⁵⁰ Cf Benjamin (1996: 351) on revelation as enfolded with the secret of artworks. Cf also Scholem (1989: 142) on the “nothingness of revelation”: “[A] state in which revelation appears to be without meaning, in which it still asserts itself, in which it has *validity* but no *significance*. A state in which the wealth of meaning is lost and what is in the process of appearing (for revelation is such a process) still does not disappear, even though it is reduced to the zero point of its own content”.

⁵¹ Cf Manguel (2000: 32) on the colour blue, which “was often considered the colour of the Virgin Mary, the colour of the sky after the clouds of ignorance have been dispelled”.

⁵² See also Richter (2000: 147) and chapters one and two on blind touch.

The sighted reader of *Blind alphabet*, “confounded in the moment of failed apprehension” (Jamal & Williamson 1996: 150) is similarly frustrated in Fontcuberta’s⁵³ photographic project for an ideal library, entitled *Semiopolis* (1999), comprising photographs of braille transcripts. A work from that series, entitled *Aleph (Borges)* (Figure 11), may be seen or read as the central image of the series, as it alludes to both Borges’s “Library of Babel”, to his blindness, and by extension, his death.⁵⁴ Here we are looking at a photographic image of a text whose words “we cannot read because [it has] been designed for people who cannot see” (Caujolle 2001: 124). Furthermore, the epistemological equation of light with insight⁵⁵ and darkness with ignorance has been complicated by the fact that, although the text is illuminated so as to render it three-dimensional, it remains indecipherable to the sighted reader, and thus remains in shadow. In its indecipherability, the “virtual writing” of the topographical text (Miller 1995: 4) reverts to the impenetrable black above it, expanding “the horizon of the visible by folding into it that which eludes purposive seeing” (Cohen 2002: 105). Indecipherability may thus be related to death, which both illuminates and obliterates at the same time.⁵⁶

⁵³ My thanks to the photographer John Hodgkiss for alerting me to Fontcuberta’s photographs.

⁵⁴ The Spanish novelist José Saramago (1999: 104) writes in his novel *Blindness*, “to be blind is not the same as being dead. Yes, but to be dead is to be blind”. I return to this citation in chapter two.

⁵⁵ For more on light as a metaphor for truth and insight see Blumenberg (1993), Elkins (1996: 224) and Illich (2000: 14). For interesting discussions of the history of the representation of blindness as privileged insight and as the origin of representation see Barasch (2001), Derrida (1993), Elkins (1996), Jay (1994), and Mirzoeff (1995). On blindness as insight see Bal (1991: 286-360).

⁵⁶ Cf van Rensburg (1991: 60) who writes: “Illumination and revelations however, is always countered by what Nietzsche calls the tragic opening of the void, the ‘perpetual destruction of appearances’. Illumination is countered by destruction of appearances, blindness and the loss of sight to the same extent that Bataille’s illuminating sun is countered by the black and rotten sun that blinds”. Much contemporary writing has adopted the notion of illumination as enfolded with blindness. However, a too comfortable adoption of the ‘postmodern’ trope of blindness over supposedly logocentric sight should be avoided, in order to prevent merely aestheticising the point or reifying one position over another. In this book *Downcast eyes*, Jay (1994: 591) coins the term ‘ocular-eccentricity’ as a synoptic counterstrategy to a postmodern privileging of the trope of blindness. As he succinctly explains: “Ocular-eccentricity rather than blindness, it might be argued, is the antidote to privileging any one visual order or scopic regime. What might be called the ‘dialectics of seeing’ [à la Benjamin, GS] precludes the reification of the scopic regimes. Rather than calling for the exorbitation or enucleation of ‘the eye’, it is better to encourage the multiplication of a thousand eyes, which, like Nietzsche’s thousand suns [hanging, perhaps, affirmatively in the skies over Deleuze’s and Guattari’s thousand plateaux, GS], suggests the openness of human possibilities”. For all my emphasis on blindness and impossibility in my reading of Richter, I hope I have at least intimated “the openness of human possibilities”, through my thematising of an attentiveness toward the other, however fragile and imperfect. This fragile imperfection is best named melancholic.

When read as an intertextual counterpart to Richter's *Reader*, Fontcuberta's *Aleph* may be read as an allegory of the indecipherable text the woman is poring over in Richter's painting. And, as was suggested earlier, if the indecipherable text she is reading may be seen to metonymically⁵⁷ focalise⁵⁸ or reflect our reading of her, we reflect her blind absorption as much as she reflects ours. Moreover, if Richter's *Reader* is "a live creature subject to decay" (Bal 1999: 170), then she reflects our own decay and death by blindly touching and affecting us — at the limit of and beneath the surface of the skin.

It is at this point that we may return, in closing, to the question of the absorptive and self-reflexive turning away of the expressionless artwork from the viewer and "the scene of referential speech" (Menke 2002: 92) — as in the Greek *apo*, meaning away from, and *calyptos*, a shroud/veil/cowl. As has been argued thus far, the self-absorbed woman reading in Richter's *Reader* — who, like a beloved, turns away from us⁵⁹ — stands in for the expressionless artwork itself. And yet it is precisely when the woman in Richter's *Reader* becomes most inaccessible to us, the blind reader/viewer/writer, that she may be seen as an allegory of the artwork as something that "thinks" (Bal 1999: 9) and, by extension, something that "works to open" (Derrida 1996a: 171). Correlatively, as a self-reflexive allegory of the indeterminacy of reading, the woman reading in Richter's painting figures as, to cite Derrida (1996a: 171), "the one who takes the pains to help us to see, read, and think", the one who opens the wound of subjectivity (Taylor 1987: xxxi). As a cloudy representation of representation, Richter's antitheatrical *Reader* dialectically and, it can be said, *melancholically* enunciates and negates our intertextual

⁵⁷ For more on metonymy see Bal & Bryson (1991: 183n42). My thanks to Maureen de Jager for pointing this reference out to me.

⁵⁸ For a discussion of internal and external "focalisers" see Bal (1997b) and van Alphen (1998). Cf Bal's (1999: 98n21 & 165-207) understanding of deixis, where "[f]irst person and second person exchange roles and presuppose each other". I discuss deixis in detail in chapter three. Cf also Jameson's (2002: 19) on the "portable variability" of Jespersen's notion of "shifters": "[N]amely those empty vehicles of 'deixis' or reference to the context of the enunciation, whose meaning and content vary from speaker to speaker throughout time".

⁵⁹ Cf Bataille (2004: 71): "The beloved turns aside — is different from me". Perhaps this relates to the myth of the origin of painting: Butades tracing the shadow of her lover who is departing for war — "a declaration of love destined for or suited to the invisibility of the other" according to Derrida (1993: 49) —, her back to him or his back to her; their gazes simply not meeting?

and interdiscursive attempts to make meaning of the time of our own passing.⁶⁰ As such, this image is *anticipated* by Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I*, the metapictorial source of the next chapter.

⁶⁰ Hence the doubt that is at the heart of my reading of Richter's *Reader* as cloudy. As Benjamin (qtd Richter 2000: 264n25) writes: "When I speak with [or correlatively read the image of, GS] a human being and a doubt about him [or her, GS] arises within me, his [or her, GS] image becomes cloudy. I still see him [or her, GS] but I can no longer perceive him [or her, GS]". The melancholy doubt that may arise from Richter's painting is enhanced by the background of the painting: a Rothkoesque sublime field that both supports the figure reading and threatens to swallow or to void her.

Chapter Two: Reason and madness: The afterlife of Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I*

I learned that he who fights against the night must move its deepest darkness so that it gives out its light. — Benjamin, in a letter of 1916 (Handelman 1991: 140)

Keeping in mind the intimate relation between absorption, doubt, and melancholia — all that names our failure in the face of our own passing away — this chapter takes as its departure point the intricate relation between the figure of allegory and the spiritual or alchemical (rather than merely psychic) state of melancholia.⁶¹ The impetus here is Benjamin's (1998: 229) understanding of the figure of allegory as related to alchemy, magical knowledge, the process of decay, isolation, spiritual death, and ultimately both material and spiritual transformation. Linking painting to alchemy, as something that matters both spiritually and materially, Elkins (2000: 155), moreover, notes, "[a]lchemy is at home in depression, uncertainty, and melancholy". In the following analysis of Benjamin's thoughts and Kiefer's paintings, interpreted in terms of the afterlife of Dürer's *Melencolia I*, the proposition is to read allegory through alchemy, and vice versa, rooting them both in what will be referred to throughout this chapter as melancholia rather than melancholy.

The intention of this cross-reading is, firstly, *preposterous*, by which is meant Mieke Bal's (1999: 6f) notion of a historical "reversal, which puts what came chronologically first ('pre') as an aftereffect behind ('post') its later recycling". Secondly, this cross-reading will serve to highlight the dialectical movement between rationality and irrationality, black bile and inspiration, as it is figured in Dürer's engraving and as it returns in the subsequent interpretation of Dürer's work by Benjamin and Kiefer. Thirdly, this chapter will trace the conceptual bidirectionality of allegory and melancholia. Lastly,

⁶¹ Cf Buck-Morss (1997: 175) on Benjamin's materialist critique of "baroque allegory for its idealism" vis-à-vis Handelman (1991: 35, 38 & 74) for a critique of the poststructuralist appropriation of allegory as an hypostatization of language.

this chapter aims to locate reading, recollection, seeing, and listening within the philosophical conceptualisation or figuration of the sublime.

2.1 Preposterous positions

The argument of this chapter will venture to zero in on the positions of Benjamin and Kiefer related as self-critical or ambivalent adherents of the mystic tradition. In this light, Benjamin and Kiefer may be seen to represent one of various strands (or worldview traditions) within the ideological dynamics of crucial historical dialectics between (rationalist) modern thought and (irrationalist) postmodern thought. The ultimate aim of relating Benjamin and Kiefer in this manner will be to establish a particular position — albeit a dynamic, entangled, and mutable one that may be semiotically shifting and multiple — within recent postmodern art (cf Preziosi 1989: 167; Frow in Richards 1999: 205n103; Bal 1996, 1999: 19). The adopted strategy will involve picking up certain iconographical clues from Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I* (1514) (Figure 12) and (then) reflecting or mirroring them discursively off related images and metaphors in Benjamin's writings and Kiefer's art. This would mirror Bal's appropriation of the baroque mirror. She writes: "History, as a mirroring of the past within the present, is itself, in my preposterous version of it, wed to the act of mirroring [I would say, mirroring melancholia], without which we cannot live, yet for which we must not fall" (Bal 1999: 263).

Dürer's *Melencolia I* lends itself to be appropriated for this critical purpose because this work was done in the shadow of neo-Platonically inspired so-called first Renaissance or early modern occultists⁶² like J Reuchlin, Agrippa von Nettesheim, Paracelsus, Pico della

⁶² As opposed to the "second" or "modern" occultists like Dee, Boehme, Fludd, Chassidi, early Freemasons, Oetinger, Mandeville, Blake, Novalis, late Goethe, late Schelling, Hölderlin, Eliphas Levi, Mallarmé, and to the "third" occultists R Steiner, Rilke, Schuré, Leadbeater, Blavatsky, Péladin, Berdyaev, Solovyov, Nietzsche, Jung, Spengler, Benjamin, late Heidegger, E Bloch, G Steiner, Roszak, Baudrillard, Foucault, Derrida. Cf van den Berg 1993: 1-22.

Mirandola.⁶³ Though *Melencolia I* is certainly not a dominant feature of Dürer's varied oeuvre but rather an isolated item within the whole, the print is such a powerfully multivalent image or *Leitbild* that this enterprise can safely be argued to be valid. In the end, as Koerner (1993: 23) argues,

[i]nstead of mediating a meaning, *Melencolia* seems designed to generate multiple and contradictory readings, to clue its viewers to an endless exegetical labor until, exhausted in the end, they discover their own portrait in Dürer's sleepless, inactive personification of melancholy. Interpreting the engraving itself becomes a detour to self-reflection, just as all the arts and sciences whose tools clutter the print's foreground finally return their practitioners to the state of a mind absorbed in itself.⁶⁴

Moreover, it is in the light of a Benjaminian/postmodern⁶⁵ understanding of allegory read in close proximity with Mieke Bal's understanding of "preposterous history" that my preposterous enterprise may gain further momentum. In her book *Quoting Caravaggio*, Bal (1999: 5) refers to contemporary art that, quoting baroque art, exhibits or enacts a "baroque attitude to appropriation [as] a critical engagement" with the past. She writes:

Such revisions of baroque art neither collapse past and present, as in an ill-conceived presentism, nor objectify the past and bring it within our grasp, as in a problematic positivist historicism. They do, however, demonstrate a possible way of dealing with 'the past today'. This reversal, which puts what came chronologically first ('pre-') as an aftereffect behind ('post-') its later recycling, is what I would like to call a *preposterous history*. In other words, it is a way of 'doing history' that carries productive uncertainties and illuminating high-lights — a vision of how to re-vision the Baroque (Bal 1999: 6f).

⁶³ *Melencolia I* is one of the four "master engravings" of 1514, which together portray the four tempereaments, and which thereby illustrate their dangers and accomplishments. *Knight, death and devil* portrays the choleric and moral philosophy. *Melencolia I* portrays the melancholic and natural philosophy. *St Jerome in his study* portrays the phlegmatic and humanistic piety. *Adam and eve* portrays the sanguine and paradisaical man (after the Fall he is encountered only in the form of small children, like the putto in *Melencolia I*, or as unreachable ideal).

⁶⁴ For a discussion of the effectual history of Dürer's engraving on literary writings, see Böhme (1988).

⁶⁵ I am referring here to my enfolding of the Benjaminian approach to allegory with its postmodern variant as exemplified, for example, in the writings of Craig Owens.

She contends “that the subject’s agency, which matters in a way that his or her intention or psychic makeup does not, consists not of *inventing* but of *intervening*, of a ‘supplementation’ that does not replace the image it explains but adds to it” (Bal 1999: 13). And for Bal (1999: 8), “being enfolded in what one is studying”, being enfolded in the image, is what lends itself to this intervention and supplementation.

Although Bal (1996: 94, 5) is elsewhere somewhat reductively critical of allegory as “escapist”⁶⁶, allegory, as Bal herself suggests later in her Caravaggio book, may be argued to be critically suitable for the kind of history doing that Bal proposes. Referring to Jasper Johns, Fred Orton (1994: 115) notes that allegory, “as other-speaking ... other-speaks a pre-text, an anterior narrative or visual image”. He writes:⁶⁷

The allegorical mode never aims to hide its lack of invention, especially with regard to its pre-text or pre-texts. Any verbal or visual representation has to be understood as a nexus of several texts or images. But in a more or less conventional representation, even when allusion or reference is meant to be used as a guide to interpretation, the text or image or the nexus of texts or images which make it does not approach the complexity of connection which pertains between an allegory and its pre-text or pre-texts. The pre-text in allegory is not just a good idea taken, borrowed or quoted from some other place; it’s not just an appropriated resource: it is, in a way, the original truth or meaning. *Allegory takes over a truth or meaning and adds to it not to replace it but to ‘supplement’ it* (Orton 1994: 115f, emphasis added).

What I propose to do then is to utilise allegory as a means of “doing history” self-reflexively, critically, self-consciously and, by taking recourse to Bal, preposterously. If, for Bal, the reader is actively entangled in the meaning making of an artwork, *and vice versa*, allegory is a critically suitable figure for this type of entanglement in which artwork and viewer/ reader deictically and actively impact on one another. Orton (1994: 117) comes to a similar conclusion:

⁶⁶ Cf also Stafford’s (2001) critique of allegory.

⁶⁷ In sharp opposition to Bal (1996: 95), who too readily conflates metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and allegory as figures (Orton convincingly reads the first three as tropes and allegory as figure), privileging metonymy over the other three, which she claims are prone to escapism through naturalisation, obfuscation, imperialism.

Allegory ‘does not exhibit devices or hammer away at its intentions ... it beguiles the reader with a continuous interplay between subject and sense’, image and meaning. It is the most self-reflexive and critically self-conscious of modes and its aim is to make its reader correspondingly self-conscious. The locus of meaning of any allegory is the reader. And the reader must put an immense amount of energy into the activity of reading an allegory. The real action of allegory is the reader’s learning to read texts.

But crucially, one should add, this active, self-conscious reading does not imperialistically obfuscate or repress the “open, dynamic process”, in which art, as emblematically illuminated by the enfolded figure of Dürer’s *Melencolia*, may dialogically be shown to “think” (Bal 1999: 9). Recourse is here taken to Bal’s intricate delineation and employment of the baroque motif of the fold, as a means of establishing a baroque point of view that is enfolded into the present. Bal (1999: 30) writes:

The fold insists on surface and materiality, a materialism that promotes a realistic visual rhetoric in its wake. This materialism of the fold entails the involvement of the subject within the material experience, thus turning surface into skin in a relation ... I will call *correlativist*.

Correlatively, the obsessively detailed, cross-hatched folds in the dress of Dürer’s *Melencolia I*, “highly controlled and systematic” (Koerner 1993: 10), may be taken as prefiguring,⁶⁸ or are enfolded with the rather different, excessively illusionistic, painterly renderings of folds in baroque images. Thus the *Melencolia* may be enfolded both with the Baroque and the present, and vice versa, all three preposterously mirroring one another. It is, moreover, an enfolding wherein a non-Hegelian dialectical relationship is figured within the here and now of Dürer’s engraving.

⁶⁸ For Benjamin (1999: 140), Dürer’s engraving as such “anticipates the baroque in many respects”.

2.2 The dialectic between rationality and irrationality, black bile and inspiration

Intricately linked to the notion of the allegorical re-reading or doubling of one image or text by another, of their enfolding, is the question of the doubling or enfolding within them (cf Owens 1996: 1053). A careful study of Dürer's *Melencolia I* would reveal a series of dialectical poles. The central dyad, offset by a number of other polar structures, would be Dürer's compulsively brooding and doubting angel,⁶⁹ fatally inert, countered by the putto writing just above and to her right. If the inactive angel represents the obtuse and malign inertia of matter and gravity, the putto represents Eros — that is, amorous writing as Kristeva (1989: 6) would have it, or industry as Klibansky *et al.* (1979: 321) would have it. The fallen angel, as in Kiefer's painting *Falling angel*⁷⁰ from 1979 (Figure 13), represents the black bile of melancholy while the writing putto represents its lucid antidote.⁷¹

⁶⁹ This is a deliberate misprision Dürer's image, or a "twisting" of it back to its sources. Klibansky *et al.* (1979: 308, 318) refer to this figure as "winged Eros" and "winged genius". They note, "the notion of a 'Melencolia' in whose nature the intellectual distinction of a liberal art was combined with a human soul's capacity for suffering could only take the form of a winged genius". Cf Benjamin (1998: 158) who refers to her as "winged melancholy". Elkins (2000: 191, 154) also relates the "winged genius" to the alchemical philosopher's stone, which in turn is conflated with Jesus Christ. This would rhyme with a Protestant reading of Dürer's print. My misprision, or twisting of Dürer's engraving back to its purported sources, may be motivated as a valid strategy deployed for the purpose of illuminating a mystic or spiritualist reading of Dürer — appropriating aspects of Dürer's print for this tradition. That is, to elucidate the notion of the angel as a spiritual power of revelation in the mystic tradition (the gnostic, mystical, alchemical, hermeticist, occultist, Freemason, Rosicrucian, anthroposophist, etc varieties of neo-Platonism). This is the Benjaminian "brushing history against the grain" kind of strategy Bal calls "preposterous history".

⁷⁰ *Fallender Engel*.

⁷¹ Klibansky *et al.* (1979: 321) write: "the industry of the writing putto signifies the careless equanimity of a being that has only just learnt the contentment of activity, even when unproductive, and does not yet know the torment of thought, even when productive; it is not yet capable of sadness, because it has not yet attained human stature. The conscious sorrow of a human being wrestling with problems is enhanced by the unconscious suffering of the sleeping dog and by the happy unselfconsciousness of the busy child". For Benjamin (1994: 51, 1996: 361, 1998: 230), knowledge is guilt, and action is innocence. Benjamin (1994: 51) notes ironically, "the innocent person cannot do good, and the guilty one must". But knowledge leads to melancholia and the melancholy person is stricken with torpor, the inability to act.

The melancholy angel in Dürer's print is also dyadic within herself. On the one hand, she represents Lutheran faith,⁷² which would be strongly opposed to superstition.⁷³ On the other hand, she represents Saturnalian melancholia, an astrological concept which Dürer appears to have derived from a treatise, written around 1510, entitled *De occulta philosophia*, by the German physician Heinrich von Nettesheim, in which he proffers the belief that those born under the sign of Saturn suffer by nature from the melancholy temperament (Klibansky *et al.* 1979: 352, 360; Harris 1996). Klibansky *et al.* (1979: 261) also note the possible influence of the neo-Platonist⁷⁴ Ficino on Dürer's print: "Ficino is convinced that not only are children of Saturn qualified for intellectual work but that, vice versa, intellectual work reacts on men and places them under the dominion of Saturn, creating a sort of selective affinity between them ... all 'studiosi' are predestined to melancholy and subject to Saturn; if not by their horoscope, then by their activity".⁷⁵

Then the angel would be a substitute figure for the artist/creator, "a spiritual self-portrait"⁷⁶ perhaps akin to Goya's dreaming artist, as depicted in *The sleep of reason*

⁷² Following Benjamin's reading of Lutheranism as resulting in melancholia, one might say that the angel augurs Dürer's support of Luther and the Reformation, after Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle church at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. For more on Dürer's relationship to Luther, and Dürer's criticism of the Catholic Church, see Panofsky 1971.

⁷³ Cf Warburg 1999: 597-697.

⁷⁴ For a critique of the neo-Platonic bias of iconological studies à la Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, see Bredekamp (1986: 39-48). In contrast to Klibansky *et al.*, Bredekamp (1986: 43) stresses the influence that Epicurean sensuality, and the Aristotelian attempt at higher knowledge through a study of nature, had on Renaissance art and thinking.

⁷⁵ Similarly, if without recall to neo-Platonism, Adorno (1994: 121) writes: "All contemplation can do no more than patiently trace the ambiguity of melancholy in ever new configurations".

⁷⁶ As Panofsky and Saxl, in their seminal monograph on the image, interpreted *Melencolia*, locating the meaning of the print in the artist himself (Koerner 1993: 26). But cf Koerner (1993: 21) on the similarity between the pose of Dürer's Erlangen *Self-portrait* (c 1491), and the pose of the melancholy angel in *Melencolia*, and the tendency by various interpreters to see Dürer's own face reflected in the face of the angel. He notes that Dürer strikes his pose in the Erlangen *Self-portrait*, "because 'melancholy' appropriately names that condition where the self, turned inward upon itself, becomes absorbed in, and paralyzed by, its own reflection. The moment of self-portraiture appears suddenly more modern, more familiar. It becomes the premonition of romanticism's myth of genius: the artist as a sad, frail, inward-turned individual, tragically distanced from his life, his surroundings, his society, and his epoch, such as we see him in a *Self-Portrait* by the German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, dating from about 1802". Koerner cautions against this modern tendency: "The idea of melancholy as it was inherited and revised by Dürer depends on notions of self and image that remain radically alien to us today". Perhaps this bears also on the often facile conflation of artist and image, in interpretations of Kentridge's depictions of the figure of Felix. Bearing in mind that the gaze of melancholia can be read as the sign of thinking itself

*produces monsters*⁷⁷ of 1799 (Figure 14) (cf Stoichita & Coderch 1999: 168-183). On the one hand, Dürer proffers a rationally constructed principle of faith in God, pivoting around the notion of the universe constructed according to reason and order; on the other hand, his depiction of melancholia by way of astrology represents a belief in fate.

According to Walter Benjamin (1998: 138), the Lutheran principle of faith, antonymic as it was to everyday life, and in sharp contrast to the Calvinist notion of “good works”,⁷⁸ inevitably produced a heaviness of the soul. Furthermore, it may be argued that the Renaissance notion of reason and freedom holds, dialectically speaking, within itself its own counterforce — that is, unreason, disorder, and irrationality. Dürer himself puts it as follows: “For there is falsehood in our knowledge, and darkness is so firmly planted in us that even our groping fails” (Klibansky *et al.* 1979: 365). This dialectical duality — between faith and action, reason and unreason, order and disorder, light and darkness, insight and blindness⁷⁹ — is then the root cause of melancholia: for all of humanity’s claims to reason and transcendence it remains trapped in the darkness of superstition, fate, and ignorance. This duality is something Aby Warburg focused on in his study of Dürer’s *Melencolia I* in which Warburg “explores the manifold ways in which supposedly ‘primitive’ astrological beliefs persisted into the Reformation in Germany, even among supporters of Luther, who personally discouraged such practices” (Rampley 2001: 305).⁸⁰ Similarly, but writing in the context of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Terry Castle (1995: 15) notes dialectically: “the more we seek enlightenment, the more alienating our world becomes; the more we seek to free ourselves, Houdini-like, from the coils of superstition, mystery, and magic, the more tightly, paradoxically, the uncanny holds us in its grip”.

(cf Böhme 1991: 69), I prefer to think of self-reflection in terms of the self-reflexivity of the picture as well as of the beholder, the one “reflecting” (on) the desire and lack of the other.

⁷⁷ *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*.

⁷⁸ Here one should distinguish between the Roman Catholic, Calvinist and Puritan views (the latter being the source of the so-called Calvinist work ethic, cf Weber 1985).

⁷⁹ For more on insight and blindness see Barasch 2000. On blindness as insight see Bal 1991: 286-360. On seeing as enfolded with blindness see Elkins 1996. Cf also Derrida’s (1993) self-reflexive metaphors of blindness and insight.

⁸⁰ Cf Warburg’s (1999: 597-697) “Pagan-antique prophecy in words and images in the age of Luther” of 1920.

The dialectical relationship between reason and myth continues from the Renaissance into the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and by extension the twentieth-century, where the latter two, according to Adorno & Horkheimer (1972), perpetuate myth even as they seek to liquidate it. One of the most striking and complex images to depict this double bind, and the resultant melancholia or “bad humour”, would be Goya’s *The sleep of reason produces monsters*, in which, similar to the Dürer print, the writer qua artist is overwhelmed and struck inert by his sombre visions. In Goya’s etching the flight of reason is shown allegorically as the dark flight of ignorance and folly; while the print may more specifically be seen as a self-portrait in which the attempt is made to purge the foulness of “excess humour”.⁸¹

The struggle between the ideals of rationality and the opposing forces of irrationality is developed further in Dürer’s print: firstly, by way of the magic square in the top right hand corner of the picture. Here it is important to stress the intricate relation between mathematics and melancholia (Klibansky *et al.* 1979: 338). As representative of Jupiter the magic square serves as counterfoil to the baleful influence of Saturn (Schuster 1982: 85). The Jupiter square is magic because each row, each column and each diagonal, add up to the same number, which in the Jupiter magic square is 34. The numerals 3 and 4 also denote special importance in alchemy because they represent the spiritual transformation of the alchemist. 3 symbolises the limited, finite life of the physical world and everyday existence and 4 symbolises the infinite realm of the spirit and the cosmos. On the one hand their product is 12, the number of the Tarot card the Hanged Man, which in turn symbolises the union of physical life and spiritual life. This in turn may be related to both the Crucifixion and the Norse myth of the self-sacrifice of Odin as referenced in Kiefer’s 1985 image, *Yggdrasil* (Figure 15). In the Norse myth Odin is hung upside down from the Yggdrasil tree. Like Oedipus, he pulls out one of his eyes and is wounded with his own spear. When his head hits the ground, he gains entry to the underworld and learns

⁸¹ For more on Goya and melancholia see Nördstrom 1962 and Stoichita & Coderch (1999: 167-183) on self-portraiture, melancholia or “bad humour” giving rise to either genius or madness. See also Barasch (2000: 35) on blindness, black bile, melancholy, and madness. One might also relate the “inner sight” depicted in Goya’s print (Stoichita & Coderch 1999: 167, 8) to blindness as a kind of “inner sight” or hearing (Barasch 2000).

the meaning of the runes, in a moment of awakening that is simultaneously the moment of his death (Harris 1996). On the other hand, the sum of 3 and 4 is 7, which in astrological and theological numerology is the perfect number, also denoting the number of stages in the alchemical transmutation of lead into gold.

The second emblem in Dürer's print that represents the ideals of rationality and the opposing forces of irrationality, alluded to here by way of the duality of earth and spirit, is the polyhedron in the middle and to the left hand in the image. On the one hand, it represents gravity and matter, obtuse, irrational, and impenetrable. On the other hand, it stands for geometry, reason, lucidity; that is, the transcendence or negation⁸² of irrationality through reasonable thinking. The ladder with 7 rungs against which it rests furthers this thematics of ascending and descending. But geometry itself is also enfolded with melancholia and, as Klibansky *et al.* (1979: 339f) note, "was the science *par excellence* for Dürer". One might note here Henricus de Gandova's conception of two types of people: those endowed with a metaphysical reasoning not dominated by imagination and those with a geometrical reasoning. For the latter,

[t]heir intellect cannot free itself from the dictates of their imagination ... whatever they think of must have extension or, as the geometrical point, occupy a position in space. For this reason such people are melancholy, and are the best mathematicians, but the worst metaphysicians; for they cannot raise their minds above the spatial notions on which mathematics is based (qtd. Klibansky *et al.* 1979: 338).

2.3 The bidirectionality of allegory and melancholia

This section proposes to link the previous section's preposterous co-joining of the notion of enfolding and dialectics with Thomas McEvelley's (1999: 229-235) notion of *bidirectionality*. Referring to the artworks of Marinus Boezem, which figure by way of a *sous rature*, a writing or figuring under erasure, McEvelley speaks of the bidirectionality

⁸² Negation here might, in the context of the unstable, tense, or ambivalent dialectic between negation and affirmation (*Aufhebung*) in both Benjamin's thought and Kiefer's art, be related to gnostic negation or, in the tradition of negative theology, Benjamin's "blasting", with its undeniable component of violence.

of their thematics of ascendance and descendance. This bidirectionality would be an apposite way of describing the thematics of ascendance and descendance figured not only in Dürer's engraving, but also in both Benjamin's and Kiefer's figuring of allegory and melancholia.

The polyhedron and the ladder in Dürer's engraving, as signifying both ascending and descending, are respectively used in Anselm Kiefer's *Melancholia* of 1991 (Figure 16) and his *Seraphim* of 1983-4 (Figure 17). Kiefer's leaden aeroplane refers to the alchemical transmutation of lead into gold, the transcendence of mute matter into spirit,⁸³ but also takes on the metaphorical and literal capacity to describe if not the psychic state of melancholia, then the constricted and repressed spiritual state of melancholia or *gravitas*.

This bidirectional melancholia may be compared to Marinus Boezem's *Signing the sky by an aeroplane* of 1969, from the same year as Kiefer's *Occupations*⁸⁴ series, which the latter performed at the outset of his artistic career. Thomas McEvilley (1999: 232) says of Boezem's work:

This perhaps most Kleinian of Boezem's works fulfilled in physical form a project that Klein had proposed in fantasy when he declared that in 1947, at the outset of his artistic career he had flown into the clear distant sky and signed it as his first work. A generation later, in an action that was part parody and part homage, Boezem had the sky over Amsterdam signed with his (Boezem's) name by a skywriting plane. Boezem's characteristic bidirectionality is present in the piece: While fulfilling Klein's fantasy as an homage to him and to his dream of relocating himself in the sublime, Boezem's use of the material apparatus of the airplane parodies Klein's project of the shamanic flight, pointing to the materiality of the body in the grip of gravity.

Boezem's work implies that, "One can ascend out of one's culture only on the vehicle designed by one's culture." But at the same time, "[t]here is a suggestion that 'there is no

⁸³ Cf Elkins (2000: 115f, 125, 126, 128, 130) on alchemical transmutation, sublimation, transcendence, and distillation.

⁸⁴ *Besetzungen*.

escaping the gravitational force of culture” (McEvelley 1999: 234). By extension Kiefer’s *Seraphim* with its snake and ladder refers to the fall into pure subjectivity brought on by the desire for knowledge or omnipotence. Benjamin (1998: 233) notes that this fall from the bliss of Paradise and the univocality of the name, “[t]his knowledge, the triumph of subjectivity and the onset of an arbitrary rule over things, is the origin of all allegorical contemplation”. Furthermore, it is the origin of melancholia.

The bidirectional theme of transcendence and acedia is further emblematised in Dürer’s print by way of the circle being halved systematically through three corners of the frame of the composition, clockwise from the bottom left, the circle finally disappearing. The symbolism is strongly indicative of death; but it also indicates resurrection, spiritual liberation or transcendence from melancholia (Harris 1996).⁸⁵

Fourthly, the bat, whose outstretched wings have been inscribed with the title of Dürer’s engraving, contradicts the sun,⁸⁶ which might be said to represent the Platonic Idea, the supreme truth, the Good. One might relate this sun to Bataille’s (1985: 66) reading of Vincent Van Gogh’s suns and sunflowers (Figure 18), where he notes, “the sun in its glory is doubtless opposed to the faded sunflower, but no matter how dead it may be this sunflower is also a sun, and the sun is in some way deleterious and sick”. Bataille (1985: 66) writes: “Even the ideal carries within itself something of the deformities of which it is the exasperated antithesis”. Anselm Kiefer’s *The famous orders of the night*⁸⁷ of 1996

⁸⁵ Cf Barasch (2000) on blindness, melancholic darkness, and death as dialectically related to spiritual insight, redemption or resurrection.

⁸⁶ This sun is not a sun, but a comet, according to Klibansky *et al.* (1979: 360). They write: “It is then scarcely a coincidence that a rainbow shines above Dürer’s sea, and that the water has so flooded the flat beach that it is lapping round the trees between two bright peninsulas; for even in Babylonian cuneiform texts it had been considered a definite fact that a comet with its head towards the earth pointed to high water; and it was the melancholic in particular who was able to foresee such misfortunes”. This relates perhaps obliquely to my comparison of the flood in Poussin’s *Winter* (1660-4), Kiefer’s *To paint* (1974), and Kentridge’s *Felix in exile*, in chapter three. My deliberate misprision here is meant to enable a spiritualist, neo-Platonic reading of Dürer “preposterously” entangled with, and subverted by way of, a heretic or perverse, gnostic atheology. The sun and its shadow seems to be the perfect double metaphor, aid or “semantic void” (Bal 1999: 133) for this misprision or entanglement of light and darkness.

⁸⁷ *Die berühmten Orden der Nacht*.

(Figure 19) astutely visualises this sick sun or ideal sunflower. Like black suns,⁸⁸ the sunflowers seem to loom over us, as if we were prostrate on the ground. While the sunflowers reach up toward the sun they also wither and die. But vice versa: if one reads the inscription at the top right of the painting, “For Robert Fludd”, an allegorical, alchemical or Kabbalistic countermotion is put into play. By way of the name or rebus of the early modern English Rosicrucian, the force of descending here increases another that is acting in the opposite direction.⁸⁹

Furthermore, the bidirectionality of Kiefer’s sunflowers reflect a recurring theme in Kiefer’s oeuvre. Like the cathedrals in Marinus Boezem’s cathedral series, which extend the theme of Orphic ascent as well as complicate and critique it, the sunflowers — seen in the context of the 1991 painting *Evil flowers*, the leaden aeroplane entitled *Melancholia*, and the 1996 book, *Grass will grow over your cities ... Fesaja* — may be said to function as transformative membranes “through which transpositions from nature to culture or below to above can be effected” (McEvelley 1999: 234).

And, finally, the scales hanging above the writing putto in Dürer’s print, which emblematised balance and justice — and which serve as a foil to the hourglass, emblem of

⁸⁸ Hartley (2000: 197) notes: “the alchemists used the image of the black sun or *sol nigger* to symbolize the death of base matter”. This is related to the first part of the process of turning base matter into gold, during which base matter was supposed to turn black and enter the stage known as *nigredo*, “in which the body of the impure metal, the matter of the Stone, or the old outmoded state of being is killed, putrefied and dissolved into the original substance of creation, the *prima materia*, in order that it may be renovated and reborn in new form” (Lyndy Abraham 1988: 135 qtd. Hartley 2000: 197). Cf Thomas McEvelley (1996: 4) on “the alchemical concept of the *nigredo*, a stage of the transformation of matter in which it burned down to a blackened residue before being reconstituted into a spiritual state in the *albedo*”, in relation to Kiefer’s oeuvre. See Schoeman (1996: 15, no. 9) on Derrida’s textual interpolations of light and dark. Derrida (1987: 86) writes, “But did not the Platonic sun already enlighten the visible sun, and did not the excedence play upon the meta-phor of these two suns? Was not the good the necessarily nocturnal source of the light? The light of the light beyond light. The heart of light is black, as has often been noticed”. One might compare this to the Gnostic notion of a dark light, and of course Kristeva’s reading of melancholia and depression by way of the metaphor of the black sun, as the loss of an ideal of “thing”. Cf Marin (1999: 76) who writes in *Sublime Poussin*: “How to show the darkness that all light contains at its source?”

⁸⁹ Cf Benjamin’s (1978: 312) “Theologico-political fragment” on the dialectical relation between the sacred and the profane: “If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom”.

the mythological idea of Cronos, the archetype of both Old Father Time and Death, the Reaper — underscore the dyadic or dialectical structure of Dürer's print. The scales of justice here counter the forces of fate and myth, both in a Platonic and in a Benjaminian sense. Rüdiger Safranski (1998: 217) writes:

The fundamental principle of justice, as demonstrated by Plato in his ideal republic, is the realization of the right measure and of order. In a hierarchically graduated world of unequal human beings, each one is assigned the place where he can develop his peculiar abilities and apply them to the whole. The picture of the harmonically collaborating whole is enlarged by Plato beyond the polis to the even more comprehensive dimension of the Pythagorean harmony of the spheres. And so the circle closes. The soul is of cosmic origin, and the cosmos is soul-like. Soul and cosmos both vibrate in a sphere of tranquility and unchangeability. They are pure Being, in contrast to changeable time.

For Benjamin justice is equated with the expressionless and the sublime, which he opposes to the ambiguity of myth as well as beauty. Menninghaus (1993: 172) notes: To the incapacity of myth as well as beauty “for lucidity about themselves, are opposed ‘univocality’, ‘clarity’, decidedness and self-lucidity”, a point that will be returned to in the closing section of this chapter.

In the humanist tradition Dürer's engraving serves to both represent and transcend melancholia — which is seen as both negative and positive.⁹⁰ According to Robert Burton, melancholia is a sign of genius and insanity, of both heroism and indolence. Lloyd Spencer (1985: 64) notes that Melanchton's *De anima* of 1548, a work of later-medieval humanism by the early Renaissance scholar, was influential in disseminating the doctrine of melancholy (or melancholia). Through a creative misreading of Aristotle and Plato, the text's elevation of melancholy (or melancholia) into a theory of visionary artistic genius “played a crucial role in ennobling the idea of melancholy”. He writes:

Whereas early scholars in the Middle Ages had seen melancholy only as an affliction, Melanchthon's work forms part of the process whereby melancholy became associated

⁹⁰ Much like the dualistic metaphor of blindness as a mental image in Western thought. See Barasch 2000.

with the creative frenzy, or ecstasy, described by Plato. Melancholy came to be seen not only as the driving force behind the scholar's absorption in the world of books, and his compulsive pondering of imponderables, but also as a privileged source of artistic inspiration.

Referring to Fritz Saxl and Erwin Panofsky's study of Dürer's *Melencolia I* published in 1923, Spencer (1985: 65) writes:

The syndrome of melancholy as laid out in the doctrine of the four temperaments was used to characterize the temper of the age when it was placed in conjunction with the astrological notions associated with the planet and the god, Saturn. At the same time the purely baleful influence of both Saturn and melancholy was re-interpreted and together they came to be seen as the mark of someone exceptional. The gift of prophecy, of inspired visions, of the most extremely spiritual form of contemplation, was thought to have been bestowed on those bowed down by the demoniac pull of saturnine melancholy. Saturn was associated with the mythological idea of Cronos, the archetype of both Old Father Time and Death, the Reaper. Intense contemplation and inspired vision were granted the melancholic, who was seized by the palpable passage of time, who was drawn ineluctably to gaze on the lowest and darkest aspects of existence and pondered the riddles of portents left by time's ruin. A creative frenzy which threatened to become madness was a gift, but also a kind of affliction of the melancholic. His rage against the world was the only intimation he was allowed of a better one.

In this context one ought to compare *Melencolia* to another engraving by Dürer from 1514, *St. Jerome in his study* (Figure 20). Serving as visual and spiritual counterpart to the former image, *St. Jerome* represents neither the inactivity and heaviness of melancholia, nor creative frenzy or rage, but like the writing putto in *Melencolia*, the bliss of study and the Eros of writing. Here geometrical exactitude counters, whilst paradoxically also being entangled with, the sloth of melancholia, the impenetrability of matter. Even the skull on the windowsill — emblem of vanitas and of petrification — looks peaceful rather than terrifying (Panofsky 1971: 154).

One might compare St. Jerome's sober scholarly activity as counterpart to the weight of melancholia, to the melancholy or allegorical artist. Dürer's angel's melancholia sees the

instruments of reason and craft, “the utensils of active life” as Benjamin (1998: 140) puts it, become so many useless and dead things, thus reflecting the transformation of the scientific optimism of the Renaissance into the melancholia of the allegorical Baroque *Trauerspiel* or German mourning play, with its landscapes of ruin and destruction.⁹¹ In turn, the Baroque *Trauerspiel* refers forward to Kiefer’s allegorical paintings of ruin and fallen meaning. As Saltzman (1999: 88) argues, “the deadened objects, inanimate, absent of all but imbued meaning that populate Benjamin’s theorization of allegory, may come to find their most powerful and acute visualization in Kiefer’s work — his landscapes, for example, uncannily embodying the allegorical conception of ‘history, as a petrified, primordial landscape’”. But as Saltzman (1999: 92) writes in the context of Kiefer: “The melancholic painter continues to work and to produce, and, if not to mourn, at least to confront, through acts of repetition, the deferred and traumatic memory that is the history of his nation. And, in turn, his audiences are repeatedly challenged by the very same anamnestic task”.

Saltzman is referring to the distinction Freud (2001) draws between melancholia and mourning. As Kuspit (1995: 223) notes: “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself ... it is the effect of the internal work which is consuming his ego”. Freud (2001: 244, qtd Rogoff 1995: 136) writes in “Mourning and melancholy”:

[T]he loved object no longer exists and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition — it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition can be so intense that turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis.

⁹¹ Cf also Koerner’s (1993: 23) interpretation of the tools as finally returning “their practitioners to the [melancholy] state of mind absorbed in itself”, as mentioned earlier.

In short, melancholia for Freud is related to the repetition characteristic of the death drive, while mourning signals a letting go, the amorous release characteristic of the life drive.⁹²

It will be noted here though that in his *The origin of the German mourning play*, published in 1928, Benjamin makes no distinction between melancholia and mourning. Given that this text carries the dedication “Conceived 1916. Written 1925”, he may however during this time have read Freud’s text “Mourning and melancholy”, which was published in 1917. In his 1916 text “*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy” Benjamin opposes the completion in and of time in tragedy with the mourning play, where the completion of time is eternally deferred in the Last Judgement. “Tragedy”, explains Caygill (1998: 53), “is another form of *agon* [or contest] in which the moment of death marks a point of fulfillment and completion”. Opposed to that, “In the mourning play, the organizing principle is not completion in and of time, but repetition; not praise but mourning”. Here Benjamin clearly relates repetition to mourning, much like Freud does with melancholia.

Moreover, Benjamin (1996: 60 & 61 qtd. and modified in Caygill 1998: 54) contrasts the “eternally full and fixed word” of the tragic dialogue with the “word in transition of the mourning play”. According to Benjamin (1996: 57 qtd. and modified in Caygill 1998: 54), “the mourning play is not the reflection of a higher life, but merely the reflection of a mirror in a mirror,⁹³ and its continuation is no less shadowy than itself. The dead become ghosts”. As Caygill (1998: 54) notes, “In tragedy the word is brought to completion in the dialogue where it receives its full meaning, while in the mourning play the arrival of meaning is perpetually deferred”. Here lies the key to Benjamin’s understanding of allegory and its relation to melancholia and mourning. Benjamin (1996: 57) speaks of the *distance* that “everywhere separates image and mirror-image, the signifier and the

⁹² Cf Lyotard (1999: 30): “This is why there is in the work the terror of a loss suspended within the sensible. The visual work makes one feel as though one’s eyes have been abandoned. ... It is an event, a birth, but always a melancholic one, a mourning; a *da* that brings the fort back within itself”. Cf the metaphors of insight and blindness mentioned earlier in relation to melancholia.

⁹³ Cf Bal’s (1999) discussion, and self-reflexive or performative use, of the baroque mirror.

signified”.⁹⁴ It is this distance, which is the result of the remotion of God from the world, which lends mourning play its *allegorical* and, by extension, its melancholic and mournful character.

But again, in the context of the mourning play, Benjamin delineates the bidirectionality of both melancholia and allegory. In allegory, writes Benjamin (1998: 175): “Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else”. In allegory there is no unity between signifier and signified, instead there is endless duality and ambiguity. Benjamin (1998: 139) speaks of the “empty world” of the Reformation, which became viewed as “a rubbish heap of partial, inauthentic actions”.⁹⁵ He continues by describing how the melancholy allegorist contemplates all things as empty, dead, and discarded masks. The melancholy allegorist suffers from contemplative paralysis and self-absorption, much like the angel in Dürer’s engraving, or the dreaming artist in Goya’s *The sleep of reason produces monsters*.

According to Benjamin, however, this ultra-subjective contemplation, in which evil reveals itself as a purely subjective and allegorical phenomenon (Benjamin 1998: 233), marks a dialectical reversal. For if the German mourning play in Benjamin’s reading is characterised by “the melancholy repetition of inchoate mourning” (Caygill 1998: 59), Benjamin speaks of a dialectical about-turn in which melancholy allegory becomes an

⁹⁴ Cf Böhme (1991: 72f): “Die Melancholie behält die Erfahrung ein, daß es aus der Vieldeutigkeit und der Endlichkeit des Können’s keine Erlösung gibt. Leben ohne ‘Gehäus’ und ohne ‘Rüstung’ ist der Schwierige, schmerzhafteste Weg”.

⁹⁵ An interesting comparison could be made here between Benjamin’s reading of the empty and inauthentic world of the Reformation, which for him serves allegorically and dialectically as an expression of Weimar Germany, and Heidegger’s existential-ontological interpretation of the inauthenticity of the Weimar of his own day in *Being and time*, which was published in 1927. *Being and time* was published one year before Benjamin’s *The origin of the German mourning play* appeared, although the latter had officially been submitted in application for *Habilitation* in 1925. Benjamin (1994: 82) voiced his criticism of Heidegger’s philosophy as early as 1916, when, in a letter to Gershom Scholem, he criticised Heidegger’s treatment of historical and mechanical time in the latter’s essay “Das Problem der historischen Zeit”. Again, in a letter to Scholem in 1920, Benjamin (1994: 168) criticised Heidegger for the latter’s book on Duns Scotus. And later, in a letter to Scholem in 1930, when speaking of the connection between his *Trauerspiel* book and the *Arcades project*, Benjamin (1994: 359) opposes his own theory of historical knowledge with Heidegger’s. See, for example, Safranski (1998: 160-162) on Heidegger, authenticity and inauthenticity in relation to the burdensome character of *Dasein*. On Heidegger and Benjamin see Caygill (1994: 1-31). Certainly the connection between Kiefer and Heidegger is worthy of attention. See for example Biro 1998.

allegory of itself, and in the process redeems itself. Benjamin's (1998: 235) reading of melancholia "gives mourning at one and the same time the cue for its entry and exit". For in sharp contrast to tragedy, the mourning play is just that: a *play* of mourning. Benjamin (1996: 61) writes: "It is the necessity of redemption that constitutes the playful element of this art form. For compared with the irrevocability of tragedy, which makes an ultimate reality of language and the linguistic order, every product animated by a feeling (of sorrow) must be called a game". "Sorrow conjures itself up" in this game "but it also redeems itself" (Benjamin 1996: 61).

And yet, continuing the thematics of bidirectionality, the game is also ultimately quite serious. Benjamin (1998: 232) writes:

For it is precisely visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins, which reveal the limit set upon allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality. The bleak confusion of Golgotha, which can be recognized as the schema underlying the allegorical figures in hundreds of engravings and descriptions of the period [the Reformation], is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In it transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection. Ultimately in the death-signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem. [...] This solves the riddle of the most fragmented, the most defunct, the most dispersed. Allegory, of course, thereby loses everything that was most peculiar to it: the secret, privileged knowledge, the arbitrary rule in the realm of the dead objects, the supposed infinity of a world without hope. All this vanishes with this *one* about-turn in which the immersion of allegory has to clear away the final phantasmagoria of the objective and, left entirely to its own devices, rediscovers itself, not playfully in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven. *And this is the essence of melancholy immersion: that its ultimate objects, in which it believes it can most fully secure for itself that which is vile, turn into allegories, and that these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented,* just as, ultimately, the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection. [Emphasis added]

Thus for Benjamin the repetition of the repetition, which is characteristic of mythic history, brings about a complete turn-around in which “time stands still”, in “a Messianic cessation of happening” (Benjamin 1992: 254). Accordingly Benjamin returns to Plato’s eternal Ideas into which all transient things are sublated; or rather, in Benjamin’s re-reading of Plato’s Ideas, the Ideas are brought down into the things, redeeming them the way geometry might “redeem” mute matter. Thus illuminated from within, matter fills out and denies the void in which it is represented. This is what Benjamin means by remembrance: it is the re-cognition or re-collection of the original name, Idea, pure word — viz. the Messianic or divine origin, in the fallen word. Furthermore, Benjamin’s remembrance is close to Saltzman’s ethico-theological notion of the anamnestic task of the melancholy painter, who, following mystical thought recalls the dictum: “as above, so below”; or as Kant would have it, “the starry heavens above and the moral law within”. Echoing the scales in Dürer’s engraving, Benjamin’s notion of re-membrance is therefore intricately linked to the notion of justice.

It is in this light of melancholic and mournful anamnesis, and the concomitant leap into the redemption of things, that Benjamin’s (1992: 249) allegoresis of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* of 1920 (Figure 21) — as representing the petrified angel of history propelled backwards into the future by a storm blowing from Paradise, a storm called progress — links up with Dürer’s print and with Kiefer’s petrified paintings, as a dialectical counterpoint. For if Klee’s scriptural angel, helplessly watching the pile of debris before him grow skyward, appears petrified like Dürer’s angel, petrification in Benjamin’s reading is related to the category of the expressionless. That is, the sober and sublime imagelessness of humanity’s ethical essence (Menninghaus 1993: 169), rooted in the catastrophe of history that, like the scales of justice in Dürer’s engraving, interrupts the eternal recurrence of fate and myth, and the acedia of melancholia. In its nakedness and state of utter devastation the petrified angel represents the transition of the beautiful to the sublime.

2.4 Sublime reading, recollection, seeing, and listening

The thematics of bidirectionality discussed before will continue as a methodological operation in what is to follow. While for Benjamin the anamnestic concepts of the sublime and the expressionless may ethically put an end to the dialectic of ascendance and descendance, both within allegory and melancholia, it will be suggested that this idea is itself enfolded with melancholia. Univocal knowledge here is always already bound to the gravitas of im-possible endings, and hence to absorptive doubt.

In order to comprehend, then, the ethico-theological imperative of Benjamin's anamnestic move toward the sublime and the expressionless — as an interruption of linear time, mythical eternal recurrence and, by extension, allegory and melancholia — one must make two distinctions. On the one hand, Benjamin's notion of anamnesis must be distinguished from Plato's; and on the other hand, Benjamin's notion of the sublime must be distinguished from both Burke's and Nietzsche's.

Firstly, Stéphane Moses notes that Benjamin's anamnesis does not lead back to a "sensory perception of images". He writes:

Unlike Platonic memory, which is essentially of a visual nature, the anamnesis to which Benjamin alludes is of an acoustic nature. As in biblical revelation it is not through vision (according to Kant an 'outer form of sense') that truth reveals itself to human perception; it is through hearing ('an inner form of sense'). Hearing must be comprehended here in the physical sense of the word as the faculty of perceiving by ear the sonorous harmonies of the word. In that sense, knowing the origin signifies refinding an original hearing, rediscovering the original signification of language which has faded through repetition and habit. 'In that renewal' — writes Benjamin — 'the original perception of words is re-established' in a constantly renewed movement between forgetting and remembering again (Moses 1993: 181).

If this Judaic notion of acoustic anamnesis⁹⁶ informs Benjamin's allegoresis of Klee's angel, then one might say that the angel listens rather than sees. Or, as Benjamin (1992: 141) writes in the context of the self-absorbed Kafka: "[H]e who listens hard does not see".⁹⁷ On the one hand, Benjamin's acoustic anamnesis may be compared to Klee's friend and colleague Kandinsky's, in terms of the latter's notion of musical pictures comprised of *Klänge*, or "pure interior sound[s]", "wholly divorced from representative associations" (Birringer 1983: 146). In this sense, like Kandinsky, both Benjamin and Klee would hold out for mystical nothingness, simultaneously both empty and full. On the other hand, if one substitutes Benjamin's reading of Kafka listening to tradition with his reading of Klee's angel, then the latter could also be said to be listening to tradition — in particular the Jewish tradition of the Messiah whose anticipated coming will interrupt the empty, homogenous time of history. As in the Christian notion of "The *ponderación misteriosa*, the intervention of God in the work of art" (which is assumed to be possible, if inadequately expressed in the German mourning play (Benjamin 1998: 235)), the Messiah is anticipated in Benjamin's melancholic allegorical reading of Klee's painting. He writes in the "On the concept of history":

The soothsayers who queried time and learned what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogenous or empty. Whoever keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance — namely, in just this way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future: the Torah and the prayers instructed them in remembrance. This disenchanting the future,

⁹⁶ Again a comparison may be drawn here between Benjamin and Heidegger. According to Jay (1994: 269), "...Heidegger's thought, for all its fascination with certain Hellenic models, can be construed as recovering the Hebraic emphasis on hearing God's word rather than seeing his manifestations".

⁹⁷ Another interesting comparison could be made here between Benjamin's reading of self-absorption and Michael Fried's reading of absorption in Courbet's paintings. Fried (1990: 177) writes in the context of Courbet's *The quarry* of 1856-57, "the hunter's immersion in reverie makes him dead to the world". In Fried's reading the relation of the passive hunter's absorption to the active *picqueur* blowing his hunting horn, which faces into the painting, is such that one might say he listens to, rather than beholds, his own activity of painting. The denial of beholdership is of course key to Fried's interpretation of Courbet's paintings as anti-theatrical. For a similar phenomenological approach to absorption see also Clive Dilnot and Maruja Garcia-Padilla's (1989: 41) interpretation of absorption in Vermeer's *Woman in blue* (c. 1662-64): "The intensity of the absorption depicted, imitative at once of our own transitory state before the picture and of our deeper desire for equivalent self-absorption, pushes us to project our own presence into the picture, which appears at once to evoke, recognize and embody these desires, and to lay them out for our contemplation".

which holds sway over all those who turn to soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future became homogenous, empty time. For every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter (Benjamin 2003: 397).

The coming of the Messiah, which interrupts the transience of earthly time, may then be further related to Benjamin's interpretation of the expressionless or the sublime. But as mentioned before Benjamin's notion of the sublime is idiosyncratic.

Menninghaus (1993: 169) notes that in "almost the entire tradition — in Longinus, Addison, Dubos, Burke, Klopstock, Kant, etc. — the aesthetics of the sublime is connected to the concept of motion, in many authors even to mystical intensifications of the concept of motion such as ecstasy and enthusiasm". Opposed to this, Benjamin's expressionless-sublime is "a 'power' of 'petrification': it precisely 'checks' 'motion', interrupts it". Benjamin's idea of "purification through petrification" would therefore also distinguish it from the Nietzschean notion of sublime, Dionysian ecstasy. Benjamin's notion of the sublime is more Apollonian than it is Dionysian.⁹⁸ Furthermore, in contrast to Burke and Kant's notions of the sublime as vague and veiled, Benjamin's expressionless-sublime operates as a clear, univocal, "pulling aside of the veil" (Menninghaus 1993: 173). In other words, for Benjamin the expressionless-sublime operates as justice and would mean the end of ambiguity — the ambiguity of myth and of the appearance of beauty.

And yet ambiguity persists; as does melancholia. For while in Benjamin's reading the nothingness from whence comes the Messiah, or the nothingness to which we return⁹⁹ is sublime, it may paradoxically fill us with both serene gnosis and with melancholia. On the one hand, like Dürer's *St. Jerome in his study*, Benjamin holds that learning and

⁹⁸ Cf. Benjamin's (1986: 301) "Apollonian image of the destroyer" in his text, "The destructive character".

⁹⁹ Cf. Benjamin's (1999: 715) text "Agesilaus Santander", written in 1933, where he also speaks of "that road to the future along which he came, and which he knows so well that he can traverse it without turning around". This "future along which he came" and which "he" will return to is, of course, the mystical origin, the pure nothingness, which Karl Kraus, the eminent Jewish Viennese satirist who converted to Catholicism, also saw as the goal (Benjamin 1992: 252). In Benjamin's allegoresis this nothingness, this sublime origin, is quite clearly depicted behind Klee's angel.

knowledge may counter the danger, horror or catastrophe of a life in history without meaning or purpose.¹⁰⁰ As he writes in the context of Kafka's students, and pre-empting his later allegoresis of the storm blowing from Paradise: "It is a tempest that blows from the land of oblivion, and learning is a cavalry attack against it" (Benjamin 1992: 133). Yet on the other hand, the anamnesis of the coming of the Messiah and the divine redemption of the fallen things remain infinitely flawed ideas — unsayable, unreadable, marked by endless deferral and sublime ambiguity — not least of all for being entangled with the terrifying violence of notions of a secular Last Judgement.¹⁰¹ Hence also the ambiguity of Kiefer's canvases: characterised by a hermeneutics of undecidability, they cannot but both point the way upward and downward.

In this regard, as has been suggested, that a thematics of bidirectionality — in which ascendance is dialectically mirrored by descendance, and vice versa — is at play not only in Kiefer's paintings and Benjamin's thoughts but also in Dürer's *Melencolia I*. This follows from the proposition of a preposterous reading in which Dürer's *Melencolia I* is enfolded with both Benjamin's thoughts and Kiefer's paintings of allegory and melancholia. Correlatively, Benjamin and Kiefer are enfolded with Dürer's engraving thus complicating the past with the wavering viewpoints of the present. And while all three point the way to the possible checking of the motion of ambiguity, of justice pulling aside the veil of myth and redemption giving sonority to mute matter, this anamnestic knowledge or expressionless ending remains entangled with melancholia. Like Dürer's angel,¹⁰² neither Benjamin's philosophy of history nor Kiefer's art — of destruction and redemption — can ultimately escape their earthbound origins.

¹⁰⁰ Cf Alter (1994: 431) on "the deep and dangerous business of life in history that informs almost everything [Gershom] Scholem wrote".

¹⁰¹ Cf Derrida's (1992: 62) uneasiness with Benjamin's vertiginous allusions to eschatological expiation in the name of gnostic or "messianico-marxist" negation or justice. On the tension between violence and redemption that characterises a secularised Jewish reading programme see also Rabinbach 1985: 78-124.

¹⁰² Klibansky *et al.* (1979: 327) write: "But all these antidotes [from the wreath, which the woman has around her brow, to the magic square] are merely a weak makeshift in the face of the real destiny of the melancholy person. Just as Ficino had already realised that selfless and unconditional surrender to the will of Saturn was after all not only the 'ultima' but also the 'optima ratio' for the intellectual man, so, too, Dürer (as we can see from the dark face and clenched fist) creates a *Melencolia* whose sad but sublime destiny cannot, and perhaps should not, be averted by palliatives, whether natural or magical. If the cosmic

It is then also at this point, where destruction is entangled with the im-possibility or unreachability of redemption, and where the figure of allegory is entangled with the dialectics of melancholia, that Benjamin's and Kiefer's work meets up with Kentridge's work. If the deep absorption depicted in Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I* can serve as a *Leitbild* or metapicture in Mitchell's sense, with which and through which to think the imaging of history as catastrophe in Benjamin's and Kiefer's work, its allegorical complexity can also serve to illuminate what is at stake in Kentridge's work. With this aim in mind, the following chapter will take as its point of departure Kentridge's depiction of the naked Felix brooding alone in his room in *Felix in exile*. For Felix personifies the melancholy mood of the *Grübler*; at the same time that he, like the self-absorbed figure in Richter's painting *Reader*, prefigures or mirrors the immersive beholder or reader. As such, Felix is a self-reflexive figure whose "dialectical distance"¹⁰³ allegorises the ambiguous exile, solitude, loneliness, self-reflexion and self-doubt of the thinking/imaging subject of art and of history.

conflict between Saturn and Jupiter ever came to a final decision, it could for Dürer not end in victory for Jupiter".

¹⁰³ To cite Didi-Huberman (1999: 233) on the dialectics of accessibility and inaccessibility projected by the continuously open door in Kafka's parable of the doorkeeper, in the second last chapter of *The trial*

Chapter Three: Self-reflexive allegories of art and history: Kentridge's *Felix in exile*

God is absence of God. Exile within Exile. — Reb Sarda (Jabés 1977: 104)

In the previous chapter the dialectics of melancholia and absorption, of allegory, knowledge and guilt were framed “preposterously” as pictorial and epistemological questions of self-absorption and self-reflexivity rooted in doubt. Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I* was appropriated as a *Leitbild* or thought-model, with which and through which to consider the limits and possibilities of making and discovering meaning, as staged in Benjamin’s and Kiefer’s imaging of the catastrophic meaninglessness of history — that is, of history perceived without any clear prospect of justice and univocality. It was proposed, via the historical image of melancholia, that any meaningful consideration of an image of history would entail a reflection on the representation of history as melancholy representation.

As a means to extend these concerns, this chapter focuses on Kentridge’s animated film from 1994, *Felix in exile*,¹⁰⁴ which may be seen as a self-reflexive allegory or deconstruction of his production as such. Such a reading will be in keeping with the suspicion of the concept of the oeuvre,¹⁰⁵ which originates in a suspicion of the concept

¹⁰⁴ 35 mm animated film, transferred to video and laser disc, 8 mins., 43 secs., colour. Soundtrack: composition for string trio by Phillip Miller; Go Tlapsha Didiba by Motsumi Makhene. All of Kentridge’s animated films involve a similar practice: each film comprises around 20 images, rendered in charcoal on paper, each drawing photographed during its successive stages of being worked, erased, and reworked, the photographs finally arranged so as to suggest motion. Kentridge’s “primitive”, hands-on stop-frame technique deliberately recalls the “primitive” cut-and-paste technique used by Eisenstein in his “revolutionary” film-montages of the 1920s. As in the work of the latter, Kentridge’s grainy animated films metapictorially “show” the processes by which they come to be. Cf also Ollman (1999), Dubow & Rosengarten (2004), and Krauss (2000).

¹⁰⁵ Cf Foucault’s notion of the “absence d’oeuvre” (the absence of the author or “author-work”) and Blanchot’s notion of *désœuvrement* (“unworkness”, “worklessness”, “inertia”, “lack of work”, or unworking, de-working, working under erasure). See Carroll (1987: 68, 196n.10). What is at stake here, is an implicit critique of (the metaphysics of) totality, similar to the one inaugurated in Benjamin’s theory of allegory. One might also relate the word “oeuvre” to “corpus”, the Latin word for “body”, meaning “[t]he whole body or substance of something, especially the complete collection of writings on one subject or by

of the author (cf Burke 1993: 35-7), and which is found in contemporary theory as much as in Kentridge's own complex game with autobiography as de-facement. Thus this chapter hopes to undermine the "false appearance of totality", to quote Walter Benjamin, while asserting Benjamin's notion of "truth bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas" (Dilnot & Garcia-Padilla 1989: 52).

Furthermore, this chapter attempts to illuminate the complex allegorical processes of inscription and erasure in *Felix in exile* by — both implicitly and explicitly — taking recourse to Benjamin's dialectical enfolding of allegory and melancholia. For Benjamin, "[m]elancholy vision ... necessarily precedes allegorical technique. The assignation of meaning onto unredeemed elements of a natural-historical stage, a 'petrified, primordial landscape', presupposes the tremendous alienation from immediacy, from the quotidian, that the melancholic experiences" (Pensky 2001: 116).¹⁰⁶ For several reasons, Benjamin's dialectics of allegory and melancholia — wherein the one presupposes the other — may be seen to be especially pertinent to understanding Kentridge's work.

As a form of "melancholy writing", the "performative" imaging of history as catastrophe — as a shifting constellation of the now and then¹⁰⁷ in the work of both Benjamin and Kentridge — may be read as always entangled with a dialectical or allegorical rhetoric of transience, disappearance, loss, ruin, alienation, obscurity, impossibility and failure. More specifically, in the imaging of history in the work of both, one gets a sense "of the radically restricted range of the politically possible, and a concomitant heightening of the sense of the mournful, historically exiled, and imperiled contents of human experience", to cite Max Pensky (2001: 42) on Benjamin. In this regard, the imaging of history in Benjamin and Kentridge may be mutually related to the Baroque mourning play, and the

one person" (Room 1999: 281). Of course, the word "corpus" bears an uncanny resemblance to the word "corpse", a semiotic slippage, shifting, or doubling, which figures as a leitmotif of this dissertation.

¹⁰⁶ For more on Benjamin's thoughts on allegory and melancholia see also Schoeman (2003a).

¹⁰⁷ For more on Benjamin's thoughts on images as constellations see Weigel (1996) and Pensky (2001). I return to this in chapter four.

Jewish understanding of history as endless exile, danger and catastrophe,¹⁰⁸ both of which are characterised by melancholic repetition rather than resolution. Repetition here includes the idea that melancholia is both the origin and result of the longing for (historical) knowledge and meaning. Hence the repeated return in this chapter to the self-reflexive figure — in both Benjamin’s and Kentridge’s work — of the melancholic body (trace/corpse/text or ghost) in exile.

3.1 Self-reflexivity and the body in exile

Following van Alphen (1998) and Bal (1999), this chapter will prompt Kentridge’s animated film *Felix in exile* to have the agency to “speak ‘theoretically’ in [its] own right” (van Alphen 1998: 12) — that is, to speak as a “theoretical object”.¹⁰⁹ But if Kentridge’s film may be argued to *perform theory self-reflexively*, that is, if it “thinks” (Bal 1999: 9) and reflects, philosophically and theoretically, on the processes of representation “while happening” (van Alphen 1998: 13, Bal 1999: 5 & 22), this has consequences for our present reading of it. For Bal (2001: 5n5) the term theoretical object

¹⁰⁸ Pensky (2001: 17) takes note of Gershom Scholem’s reading of “Benjamin’s melancholia as the quintessentially Jewish persistence of a loyalty to the order of creation, arising not despite but precisely out of the universality and endlessness of historical catastrophe”. Adorno (Pensky 2001: 18) also characterises Benjamin’s melancholia as particularly Jewish: “Sadness — which is different from the simple fact of being sad — was his nature, as Jewish awareness of the permanence of danger and catastrophe as well as the antiquarian tendency to see the present transformed into the ancient past, as if by enchantment”. My reading here of Kentridge’s Benjaminian “Jewish-melancholia” relates perhaps not as much to his person or nature, as to the melancholic traits and rhythms of his work. My use of the word “trait” here is derived belatedly from Derrida’s *Memoirs of the blind*, where its use, as the translators (Brault & Naas 1993: 2) note, suggests a range of meanings: “[F]rom a trait or feature to a line, stroke, or mark”. Derrida’s (1993: 45) suggestion that “[t]he heterogeneity between the thing drawn and the drawing *trait* remains abyssal”, resonates with Benjamin’s theory of allegory. My thanks to Maureen de Jager for reminding me of this trait in Derrida’s text.

¹⁰⁹ Bal (2001: 5n5) relates the term theoretical object to the term meta-painting as used by Stoichita (1997). She notes that this term was probably first discussed by Louis Marin and Hubert Damisch in a series of colloquia at Urbino in the late 1980s. She notes that Krauss (1990) speaks about it on the basis of these colloquia in *Le photographique. Pour une théorie des écarts*. Bal also mentions Careri’s use of it in *Bernini: Flights of love, the art of devotion*. Bal’s understanding of the theoretical object is not dissimilar to Mitchell’s (1985: 5-6) notion of the hypericon, which “involves attention to the way in which images (and ideas) double themselves: the way we depict the act of picturing, imagine the activity of imagination, figure the practice of figuration”. Dirk van den Berg’s (2003: 6) paper, “Not I: troubled representations of the self”, addresses Mitchell’s idea of the hypericon. My thanks to Maureen de Jager for gleaning this from van den Berg’s text.

foregrounds “both the theoretical thought and the visual articulation of that thought in visual objects”. Bal’s articulation of this term, as intertwined with the concept of intersubjectivity, will later also have bearing on this chapter’s discussion of the reciprocal dynamic at play in the concept “deixis”. She writes:

[A theoretical object] ‘occurs’ when it is *observed* (which implicates the subjectivity of the viewer), and when it *resists* (implicating the ‘intentionality of the work’) normalization into the theory previously held. Thus, paradoxically, respect for the image as *immutable object* requires acknowledgment of its *transformation*: it demands we see it differently. Hence, the artwork is not an immutable object only, but acts over time and across subjectivities. If the artwork is to be respected on its own terms, it must be undone and redone again and again (Bal 2002: 277).

Following from this, if Kentridge’s film deconstructs the notion of representation in the act of representing, if it challenges the claim of representation to transparency, totality and revelation, then, to quote van Alphen (1998: 16), “the attempt to write about this process will be caught in a paradox. For writing about art is also a representation of it”, and thus is itself correlatively (Bal 1999: 39) marked and inscribed by time, transformation, im-possibility and (melancholic) self-reflexivity.

Hence the self-reflexive focus of this chapter on the self-reflexive marking and unmarking, making and un-making, drawing and erasure of the auto-graphic body in *Felix in exile* — as an uncanny allegory of the text as both corpus and corpse. Here Richter’s (2000) reading of the body in Walter Benjamin’s autobiographical writings as “unusable” for the Fascist ideology of the body as totality, unified and transparent, will feature as a pretext for this chapter’s absorption in the body-as-corpse in *Felix in exile*. For the body in *Felix in exile* is also inscribed with a sense of the “unusable”. That is, it appears only to disappear again as a corpse, and thus is incommunicable, unsayable, expressionless: unusable to a Fascist aesthetics and regime of mass ornamentation (Kracauer 1995, Buck-Morss 1993 & 1997), theatricality,¹¹⁰ and presence.¹¹¹ Richter’s

¹¹⁰ On the one hand, I am referring to Guy Debord’s *The society of the spectacle* (1994). On the other hand, I am freely appropriating the distinctions Fried (1980, 1992, 1998a & 1998b) draws between theatricality

reading of the body in Benjamin's texts as unusable to a Fascist aesthetics is particularly pertinent to the body "shifting irremediably" (Ollman 1999: 113) in Kentridge's work, particularly as this body is inscribed by the perplexing politics of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa (Ollman 1999). And to narrow the gap between these two unusable bodies further one need only to acknowledge Kentridge's own — sometimes acerbic, sometimes melancholic — fascination with the similarities between European Fascism and its South African variant in several of his films, in operas such as *Faustus in Africa!* (1995), as well as in the multi-media *Black box/Chambre noire* from 2005. Richter (2000: 158) writes:

The body prevents its reading from being organized into a closed hermeneutic system. In the moment of reading, it is in a certain sense already a corpse. This corpse registers its multiple and heterogenous affinities with absence and finitude.

Richter (2000: 159) cites Adorno & Horkheimer: "The body cannot be remade into a noble object: it remains a corpse, no matter how vigorously it is trained and kept fit", and notes, "[r]eading the body is by necessity a form of maiming or mutilation". Similarly, for van Alphen (1998: 14): "Representation, then, cannot preserve life but can only expose its undoing". For Richter (2000: 161), representation is thus figured as a self-reflexive and self-critical act of "mourning over the unavailability of the other's body that the corpus of the text enacts".

and antitheatricality. Where the former is linked to conscious display, which stems from the knowledge of being looked at, antitheatrical art is predicated upon the cancellation of beholdership, as brought about by figures depicted in a state of absorption, seemingly unaware of being looked at. I would like to link the latter notion to the body as being both blind to itself and to the other, and thus antitheatrically self-absorbed. I will pursue the question of absorption further below. For an interesting semiotic discussion of the "secret kinship" between figurative representation — as in painting — that presents itself as representation, and theatrical spectacle, since the Middle Ages and beyond the Renaissance and the Neoclassical or Baroque age, see Damisch (2002: 61-81). However, in Damisch's reading of painting as a stage set, painting is seen to perform — or *cite* (cf Bal 1999: 10f) — itself as painted theatre rather than as natural reality. This *performativity*, in which the ambiguous status of the image is emphasised, and in which representation is shown to be just that — *representation*, is itself in marked contrast to the essentialism of a Fascist aesthetics of theatricality, display and presence. In the latter's hypostatizing of sameness there would be no self-criticality, no play of difference, and no absorptive uncertainty — precisely what may be seen to characterise Kentridge's *Felix in exile*.

¹¹¹ Cf Fried's (1998b) distinction between presence and presentness: the former is argued to be literalist and theatrical; the latter signifies absorptive grace.

It will be argued in this chapter that this “mourning over the unavailability of the other’s body” features in several respects in Kentridge’s film *Felix in exile*. As “a kind of provoked becoming of thought” (Galetta & Tomlinson 1989: xv), this film “epitomizes the provisionality of being, how *becoming* necessitates both doing and undoing” (Ollman 1999: 71). The mourning or melancholia that characterises the interminable process of doing and undoing, and of doing again, is importantly related to the uncanny proximity between the other’s and the self’s bodies, in which both are inscribed with inaccessibility. This inaccessibility will be linked to a kind of blindness: for in *Felix in exile* the self can be seen to be blind to both itself and the other, and hence is marked by a sense of melancholic ghostliness.¹¹²

In reading the corpus/corpse in *Felix in exile* as performed in its un-doing, as enfolded with loss and death¹¹³ — *as allegory* — recourse here will be taken to Benjamin’s reading of the figure of allegory, as characterised by death and melancholia, dispersal and deferral. Benjamin (1998: 175) writes: In allegory “[a]ny person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else”. Entangled in both finitude and infinity, one might say that allegory, as a figure of speech, is “concerned with what is not shown, what cannot be represented, what must go missing”, to cite Elkins (2001: 201) out of context. The self/body/corpse/text as allegory is then also always already represented or figured in dispersal.¹¹⁴ Which means that Kentridge’s allegorical inscription of the corpse-as-allegory in *Felix in exile* — *as an allegory of allegory* — is marked by dispersal. As Richter (2000: 159) notes, explicitly referring to the corpus-as-corpse, and implicitly referring to allegory: “It is always already shifting into something else”.¹¹⁵ He writes:

¹¹² The uncanny figure of the ghost and ghostliness features throughout Richter (2000). See also the essays in Richter (2002).

¹¹³ I am motivated here by van Alphen’s (1998) “affected”, “oblique”, and “performative” reading of Francis Bacon’s paintings as figuring and performing the loss of self.

¹¹⁴ Cf Bal’s (2001: 65-91) essay “Dispersing the image: Vermeer story”.

¹¹⁵ Richter (2002: 3) writes of Benjamin’s work: “To the extent that any truth can emerge from his writings at all, it is one that the reader must seek in what the text does not say on the surface, not even between the lines, but in an elsewhere that remains open to discussion. Indeed, the truth of his writings *is* this elsewhere. Cf Buci-Glucksmann’s (1994: 39) suggestion that Benjamin’s work “continually refers us elsewhere”. If allegory — with its dialectical emphasis on surface materiality and on the spaces or gaps between words

Reading the face [body or corpse], we are confronted with the text of a riddle, or the riddle of a text, whose meaning we cannot access. It is the face of an alterity that is simultaneously readable and unreadable or, more precisely, is unreadable because, paradoxically, it is readable (Richter 2000: 107).

In my self-reflexive reading of *Felix in exile*, then, as self-reflexive allegory in which the corpus of Felix bears an uncanny, unstable allegorical resemblance to the corpse of Nandi, reading will be enfolded with unreadability, accessibility with inaccessibility, tracing with erasure. Thus reading and representation, here, will figure correlatively — and *performatively* — as both enfolded and open-ended. If in *Felix in exile* the “continual erasures, yielding ghosts, traces, stains, evoke both memory’s natural slippage and a more calculated form of amnesia” (Ollman 1999: 71), our present reading cannot but perform similar slippages. Felix performs Nandi and Nandi performs Felix; in the process the film may be seen to perform our own performative attempts at tracing and erasing the film’s endless transmutations. As Bal (1999: 129) writes:

Performance ... can be seen as role-playing, as framing and framing-up; as a speech act, doing something to the other; as achievement, carrying out a much-needed task; as a recycling of the rules of the game that can be neither new nor identical to the earlier one. Among the many metaphors of what art does, what seeing is, and what writing affords, this would be my favorite, precisely because it is so multisemic. Art performs; so does writing; so does the looking we write about and with.

3.2 Allegory, absence, and absorption

One might begin this examination with a brief synopsis of the film, given in Kentridge’s own words, followed by the unpacking of a specific drawing from the film. Kentridge (1999: 122) writes: “[...] Felix is alone in his room (I assume Paris, from the title of my first film). The landscape of the East Rand fills his suitcase and walls. The terrain is filled

and things — is seen as the mobile link between Benjamin’s and Kentridge’s work this characterisation may also apply to the latter.

with bodies. These corpses melt into the ground. A new female character, Nandi, surveyor of this landscape, appears to Felix reflected in his mirror. She is absorbed into the ground [...]"

In one of the drawings of Felix in his room (Figure 22), a naked man is sitting alone in a room, or better, a cell, perhaps akin to the one depicted in Dürer's *St. Jerome in his study* (Figure 19). In section 1.3 I interpreted Dürer's engraving as visual and spiritual counterpart to his *Melencolia I*; *St Jerome*, like the writing putto in the melancholia print, representing the quiet bliss of study and the Eros of writing, rather than the inactivity and Saturnian heaviness of melancholia. The phlegmatic figure of St Jerome overcomes the vanity of life — emblematised by the skull resting on the window sill — by way of absorption in study and in writing, and by way of faith — emblematised by the statue of the crucifixion depicted on the table in front of him.¹¹⁶ "The gate to justice is study", writes Benjamin (1999: 815) with reference to the law in Kafka. But like Kafka's assistants "who have lost their house of prayer", and similar to Kafka's students "who have lost the Holy Writ [*Schrift*]" Kentridge's Felix is less a figure of faith than a figure whose tradition has failed him.

The depiction of Felix's room also relates directly to a photograph of the *0-10* exhibition of works by artists of the early twentieth-century Russian avant-garde, specifically a display of Malevich's Suprematist paintings featuring his *Black square* in the corner where the holy icon was placed traditionally (Figure 23). According to Staci Boris (2001: 36): "[T]he Suprematist and Constructivist movements appear to have a special significance in this context as the symbols of utopian hopes for the power of art to change official politics. By showing the drawings in the room ultimately being destroyed,

¹¹⁶ In Dürer's oil on panel painting *St Jerome* of 1521, an ill-tempered looking St Jerome, interrupted from his reading/writing, gazes at the beholder whilst pointing to a skull lying on its side in front of him: thus he warns the viewer about the vanity of life. His gesture of holding his head in his hands is distinctively melancholic; nevertheless his warning about the meaninglessness of life is countered by a statue of the crucifixion, depicted slightly behind him, in the top left hand of the picture. The meaninglessness and transience of life is overcome through faith in the resurrection.

Kentridge is questioning the role of art to change social and political life”. Thus disenchantment and melancholy replace utopian hope. This relates to Ollman’s (1999: 71) observation that Kentridge’s films in general are “permeated with the texture of resistance”, nod in the direction of classic agitprop art, and consistently reference the concrete social and political circumstances of catastrophe and turmoil,¹¹⁷ but remain “antithetical to propaganda”. Open-endedness replaces closure and permanence; hope for political praxis is more often than not followed or complicated by a sense of melancholic doubt and withdrawal.¹¹⁸

In the drawing of Felix in his room, he is shown seated, absorbed, poring over his suitcase, emblematic of a refugee’s suitcase, which is open on his lap. He is unpacking

¹¹⁷ For example, Ollman (1999: 113) notes that in the film *Ubu tells the truth* (1997) white-on-black drawings are punctuated “with brief rushes of archival footage and sound from infamous flashpoints in apartheid history — the 1956 riots in Natal, the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, the 1976 Soweto uprising, mass demonstrations from the 1980s and the recent hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission”. But while these references are both graphic and direct, as Ollman suggests, they also fail to “tell the truth”. Herein lies the recurring melancholic ambiguity of Kentridge’s imaging of history. In doubting the mythic claim to reality, which would see the images of the direct past “regress to the mythological and phantasmagorical” to cite Adorno (Pensky 2001: 147), Kentridge’s images dialectically point elsewhere. Rooted in the mythic and antimythic, in the material and the ineffable, they circle around the unfulfillable. For Benjamin and Adorno this would signal a redemptive melancholia: of hope in hopelessness, possibility in impossibility.

¹¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, Kentridge may also be compared to Sergey Eisenstein, the Russian revolutionary film maker from the 1920s. The use of montage in his 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin* predates Kentridge by sixty years, whilst the visual texture of Eisenstein’s silent, black-and-white film is deliberately invoked by Kentridge’s animated films. Sweeping crowds in Kentridge’s films — for example, in *Johannesburg, 2nd greatest city after Paris; Monument* (1990); and *Ubu tells the truth* (1996-7) — may also be seen to evoke the crowded masses in Eisenstein’s film, as well as the revolutionary masses in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* of 1926. However, the revolutionary dialectics of *Battleship Potemkin*, where form and content are dialectically synthesised under the banner of liberation, is largely absent from Kentridge’s work. Disenchantment and melancholy replace the revolutionary climax and fraternal bliss of *Battleship Potemkin*, something Eisenstein himself, like so many other revolutionary artists and intellectuals oppressed by Stalin’s politics during this time, became afflicted by toward the end of his life. Cooke (2001: 42) also makes the connection with Eisenstein’s cinematography. But is this melancholy in Kentridge’s work the melancholic nostalgia of the Left that Walter Benjamin (1999: 423-427) inveighed against as feigned and fashionable in his 1931 essay, “Left-wing melancholy”? Charity Scribner (2003: 308) points out that Benjamin saw the melancholy of the Left, who make an aesthetic feast of their dyspeptic nostalgia (and here Scribner extends Benjamin’s argument to include the work of Joseph Beuys), as “bad” melancholy. As Scribner writes, for the melancholic Benjamin “the gaze we cast back onto horrors and failures is not part of a debilitating fixation on the past but rather a source of redemptive hope”. In my reading, a form of redemptive melancholy may be seen in Kentridge’s work — as “a weak Messianic power”, to cite Benjamin (1992b: 246). See also Wendy Brown (2003: 458-465) on the melancholy of the Left, and chapter four of this thesis on Benjamin’s redemptive melancholy.

his “library” of drawings.¹¹⁹ The walls of the room are adorned with drawings of the landscape of the East Rand, and scattered around the room are more drawings, which recall the pages from a newspaper, and which will later be related to the emblem of the corpse. One can detect traces of the scattering of the drawings in the room, as these have been animated by way of Kentridge’s technique of drawing, erasing, and re-drawing. In the center near the top of the drawing one can faintly make out the ghost of the name of the man, who is also the protagonist of this film: “Felix”. This static drawing that moves, and correlatively moves us, may be read as a synecdoche¹²⁰ of Kentridge’s film, where figures or corpses appearing and disappearing into the ground allegorise both the processes of history “as a petrified primordial landscape” (Benjamin 1998: 166), and also the process of drawing itself. And if both history and drawing may be read as allegorical, as figured intransitively around absence, this drawing may be read as an allegory of allegory.

The point may be sharpened by way of a comparison between this drawing from *Felix in exile* and Vermeer’s painting *Woman in blue reading a letter* (c.1662-4) (Figure 3), which also serves as the pre-text or pre-figure to Richter’s *Reader*, discussed as *Leitbild* in chapter one. On the one hand Vermeer’s painting, in its hyper-realism, denotes an intense absorptive presence, but on the other it denotes absence. As Clive Dilnot and Maruja Garcia-Padilla (1989: 41) note: “between the represented moment (however this is projected) and its representation, is an unbridgeable abyss”. As both Benjamin and postmodern theorists have argued, this unbridgeable gap or abyss between signifier and signified is characteristic particularly of the figure of allegory. For in allegory as “a means of *speaking other*” (Dilnot & Garcia-Padilla 1989: 43) there is a difference, a gap between the signifier and the signified. Or, to put it differently: “As soon as there is, there

¹¹⁹ To borrow the title of one of Benjamin’s (1992a: 61-9) essays, “Unpacking my library”. Felix’s unpacking of the “library” of his drawings by extension mirrors or anticipates my unpacking of this drawing itself.

¹²⁰ I understand synecdoche as meaning a part standing in for the whole but I am also implicitly following Benjamin Buchloh’s (2000: 399) understanding of synecdoche as a potential “form of resistance and opposition to the totality of myth in the mass cultural forms of representation that govern everyday life: the spectacle of consumption and the consumption of the spectacle”.

is *différance*” (Holly qtd Bal 1999: 126). Conscious of its own inability to bridge the gap between the represented moment and its representation, Vermeer’s painting turns around and reflects on its own conditions of meaning, its own representational processes *as being allegorical*. Prefiguring the operation of self-reflexivity in *Felix in exile*, it becomes an allegory of allegory; or in Bal’s (2001b: 72) words, “allegory itself becomes an allegory of the acceptance of otherness within [representation]”.

On the one hand, in Vermeer’s painting, the solitary woman reading what is possibly a letter from or to her absent lover allegorises the relationship the Calvinist or Catholic believer of Vermeer’s day had with God.¹²¹ That is, she allegorises faith in the divine light or revelation of God even in, or precisely because of, His insurmountable distance from the profane world. Her absorption in the letter — which reflects, mirrors, alludes to, or allegorically pre-figures the viewer’s/reader’s absorption in this painting — potentially signifies absorption in the sacred Word of God, a point that is emphasized by the suggestion that she, like the Virgin, may be pregnant with His divine presence. Like the map on the wall, which may be read allegorically as providing topographical evidence of the single canonical text of the world,¹²² the letter she studies allegorically gives meaning to, and sheds light on, the world.¹²³ On the other hand, because the painting is in essence

¹²¹ Arasse (1994: 18) notes that Vermeer himself came from a Calvinist family, but upon marrying Catharina Bolnes in 1652 he converted to Catholicism. This conversion, as Arasse points out, had its social consequences in Calvinist Delft between 1650 and 1675.

¹²² According to Arasse (1994: 49), in the seventeenth century the map was related to knowledge, more specifically, the prestigious knowledge of representation. He writes: “In an allegory, the pictorial treatment of the map engages the painter’s conception of knowledge in painting and of the relationship in painting between seeing and knowing”. The intimate relationship between seeing and knowing will be expanded upon further below, but here I would like to draw specific attention, hermeneutically speaking, to the theological ground of seeing and knowing. Nevertheless, it should be added that in seventeenth century Dutch art the map also has another significance. Jay (1994: 63) notes: “The mapping impulse, which [Svetlana] Alpers has linked to the Dutch art of describing because of its valorization of flatness, can also be seen as a more active search for controlling and dominating the earth, not very different from the imposition of the Albertian grid on visual space in paintings”. This mapping impulse may then be related to the activity of surveying in *Felix in exile*. Here the figure of Nandi as surveyor recalls the colonial practices of the past, but her surveying may also suggest — as somewhat nostalgically identified by Ollman (1999: 74) — “the new generation at last charting the terrain under its own terms”.

¹²³ In this, Vermeer’s painting recalls St Augustine’s concept of faith in search of understanding: “...understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that thou mayest understand” (Miller 1970: xii). Cf. also Arasse (1994: 18-21) on Vermeer’s painting *Allegory of faith* (1665-70) as “incontestably Catholic”.

a fiction, the presence — or, following Fried (1998b), the absorptive, antitheatrical presentness — that is depicted allegorically turns into an absence. This absence in Vermeer’s painting thus incites us to read faith itself as an allegory of fiction, once again prompting a reading of Vermeer’s painting as an allegory of allegory, and as a metapicture.

As a counterpart to Vermeer’s painting, the naked Felix in Kentridge’s drawing may be read as allegorizing the fall from Paradise, the abysmal and melancholic fall into knowledge, guilt,¹²⁴ and subjectivity (Benjamin 1998: 229-31).¹²⁵ Felix is guilty — of having arbitrary or meaningless knowledge,¹²⁶ of sexual desire, of melancholic hypersubjectivity and inertia, and of nostalgia. Concomitantly, his proximity to both life and death, figured in his body’s proximity to Nandi’s corpse, enfolds the viewer in an uncanny relationship in which decisions must be made, have already been made, and are impossible to make (Menke 2002: 269).¹²⁷ Thus Felix’s own melancholic sense of the weight of meaningless knowledge mirrors our own; Felix not only extends into Nandi, he extends into the viewer.

¹²⁴ Knowledge is guilt, and action is innocence (Benjamin 1994: 51, 1996: 361 & 1998: 230). “However”, as Benjamin (1994: 51) notes ironically, “the innocent person cannot do good, and the guilty one must”. But knowledge leads to melancholy and the melancholy person is stricken with torpor, the inability to act. Felix cannot act — instead he withdraws inward or flees by yielding to sexual desires, the latter always already being implicated in knowledge, guilt, loss, and melancholia. The character of Zeno in *Confessions of Zeno* (2002) is rather similar.

¹²⁵ *Felix in exile* was made in 1994, shortly prior to South Africa’s first general democratic election. In this context one might see the figure of Felix melancholically reflecting (on) the ambiguities of Paradise Lost, that is, of the supposed Paradise of the colonial-apartheid past. Benjamin’s understanding of knowledge as related to both allegory and guilt, and also as the fall into subjectivity, may then be related to the ambiguous consciousness raising processes, which followed the elections and which culminated in the often irreconcilable traumas and differences experienced during and after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC represents the often terrible proximity between remembering and disremembering, innocence and guilt. Instead of resolving the contradictions and paradoxes of testimony, guilt, and forgiveness, and contrary to its desire for symbolic closure, the TRC as event may be seen to open up the allegorical abyss of signification.

¹²⁶ For more on melancholia and meaninglessness, see Pensky (2001).

¹²⁷ See Pensky (2001) on the proximity between melancholia and indecisiveness in the baroque mourning play, and on the paradoxical attempt to overcome melancholia by way of a politics of decision making. I shall return to these questions in chapter three.

Benjamin (1998: 229) writes, knowledge, as opposed to truth, is intricately and profoundly related to allegory, “[f]or something can take on allegorical form only for the [person] who has knowledge”. Herein lies the dialectical paradox, the aporia of the inertia of the hypersubjective melancholic, bogged down with arbitrary and discontinuous knowledge, and the undecidability of allegory, in which multiple fields of arbitrary signification are opened up. Instead of a map accurately and eternally marking the way, Felix’s room is cluttered and composed of scattered drawings, inchoate memories — mere marks on a page. All he — and by extension the viewer — can do is to read/map the drawings as indeterminate allegories, as allegories of allegory. And as Benjamin (1998: 166) writes:

Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face — or rather in a death’s head.¹²⁸

Furthermore, instead of a divine or natural light, which pours from the left into the room in Vermeer’s painting, Kentridge depicts a solitary light-bulb,¹²⁹ which does not light up the room so much as it emblematises the forlorn loss or impossibility of divine light,

¹²⁸ Jay (1996: 10) suggests that instead of glossing *facies hippocratica* as death’s head, it is perhaps better to imagine it as “the face of someone mortally ill”. He takes his cue from Robert Hullot-Kentor’s notes to the English translation of Adorno’s *Kierkegaard: Construction of the aesthetic*, p. 152. Following Pensky’s (2001: 140-150) discussion of Adorno’s dialectical reading of Kierkegaard’s melancholia, one might suggest that Felix’s face, which he sees reflected/defaced both in Nandi’s face and in the drawings of “the *facies hippocratica* of history” which surround him in his room, is the face of someone mortally ill.

¹²⁹ This light bulb may be compared to the bare light bulbs in Francis Bacon’s paintings, which, as van Alphen (1998: 83) notes: “[N]ever illuminate some area of the represented space”, but act instead as a force for the extension of the body into a shadow. The light bulb in *Felix in exile* may then be argued to act as a force — or “*weak Messianic power*”, to cite Benjamin (1992b: 246) — that extends the body of Felix into his uncanny double or corpse. That is, the light bulb as indexical sign extends rather than “illuminates” the body of Felix into the melancholic figure of Nandi, his alter-ego or shadow — the lost thing that is both the origin and result of his melancholia. In the process the boundary between inside and outside is blurred or problematised, as well as the boundary between life and death. Writing in the context of Bacon’s portraits van Alphen (1998: 113) notes: “When the differentiation between life and death is problematized by the blurring of the figure’s position in either of these realms, the reader or viewer is contaminated”. This may be both destructive and redemptive, a point I shall return to below.

reason or truth.¹³⁰ This loss or doubt is signified by its blue colour, which Kentridge repeats like mirages in the desert-like landscapes of the East Rand, here in this drawing as in several other scenes in the film.

3.3 The blue Virgin and the flood of melancholia

In his history of the colour blue, Michel Pastoureau (2000: 50-51) comments that, by the beginning of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the West, representations of the Virgin Mary saw her predominantly dressed in blue. This expressed her mourning over her dead son. Pastoureau (2000: 51) writes: “At the same time ... [g]lazers and illuminators of the early and mid-twelfth century made the blue of the Virgin’s robes brighter and clearer, because this luminosity was a form of divine illumination”. And Manguel (2000: 32) notes that, during the Middle Ages, “blue was often considered the colour of the Virgin Mary, the colour of the sky after the clouds of ignorance have been expelled”. He adds, “Mary’s dress changed throughout the ages, shedding certain symbolic values and acquiring others, but the sky-blue colour remained hers as the sky goddess” (Manguel 2000: 60).

The blue colour of the woman’s dress in Vermeer’s *Woman in blue reading a letter* may be related to this Western/Catholic iconography of the “blue” Virgin Mary: blue here signifies both mourning and illumination. Interdiscursively speaking, the blue light-bulb and water in *Felix in exile* may be related to the meaning of the colour blue as associated

¹³⁰ Pastoureau (2001: 42) notes that, “[i]n medieval theology, light is the only part of the physical world that is both visible and immaterial. It is ‘the visible and the ineffable’ (Saint Augustine), and as such a manifestation of God”. Hence the interpolations of light and dark, from Plato to Hegel and from Heidegger to Derrida. Cf Bal (2001) on light in Vermeer as semiotic sign, index, and parergon. Cf. van Alphen (1998: 60) on mirrors and lamps in Western culture, “where they have acted as metaphors for the revealing role of visibility and the human eye”. See also Elkins (1996: 224) on the relation between seeing, thinking, and illuminating. I will return to the ambiguous and uncanny figure of the mirror in *Felix in exile*, which, like the mirrors in Francis Bacon’s paintings, serves to disperse rather than unify the self, the subject, or the body.

with the Virgin, as well as the Romantic conception of blue — emblematised by Novalis’s blue flower — as symbolising both melancholy and the ideal life (Pastoureau 2000: 140). As such, blue in *Felix in exile* comes to represent both the faint hope for the water that will rejuvenate the barren, primordial land of the past, as “it lies subliminally contemporaneous” (Stüssi qtd. Frisby 1996: 22) in the present, but also the melancholy knowledge that this hope is constantly being delayed, or is in fact illusory.¹³¹ As the colour of the rising waters that eventually result in a flood in Kentridge’s film, blue, which briefly turns red to signify the murder of Nandi, may be argued to signify — as an index of time¹³² — the sublime ambiguity of death and life, destruction and renewal, loss and rebirth.

In this sense the flood in *Felix in exile* may be dialectically related not only to the Biblical-cosmic tempest depicted in Poussin’s *Winter* (Figure 24), painted as part of his *The four seasons* between 1660-4 just before his death, but also to Kiefer’s *To paint*¹³³ of 1974 (Figure 25). The flood in Poussin’s painting speaks allegorically of the Old Testament judgment, doom, and death of the unfaithful, while the floodwaters themselves connote a mythic, primordial rebirth (Lagerhof 1990: 70). Poussin’s depiction of the flood bears traces of a Christian, a cosmic, as well as a stoic worldview; the latter, as

¹³¹ Cf Pensky (2001: 150) on Adorno’s rereading of Benjamin and melancholia, in relation to “the messianic dimension of hope that arises at the heart of the allegorical intention”. He cites Adorno: “No truer image of hope can be imagined than that of ciphers, readable as traces, dissolving in history, disappearing in front of overflowing eyes, indeed confirmed in lamentation. In these tears of despair the ciphers appear as incandescent figures, dialectically, as compassion, comfort and hope. Dialectical melancholy does not mourn vanished happiness. It knows that is it unreachable” (Pensky 2001: 146). Adorno’s image of a flood of tears, of overflowing eyes, resonates with the flood and the corpse with the pouring wound in *Felix in exile*, as well as with my reading further below of Felix’s blind seeing of Nandi. Adorno continues: “Such hope rejects all mythical deception, all claims to having once existed, but this *never*: it is promised as unattainable; whereas, if it were directly asserted as reality, it would regress to the mythological and phantasmagorical, surrendering itself to the lost and the past. For the true desire of melancholy is nourished on the idea of an eternal happiness without sacrifice, which it still could never adequately indicate as its object. Although the wish that follows this aim is unfulfillable and yet full of hope, it originates in its aim, and just as it circles around happiness, the wish circles, fulfilled, in happiness itself”.

¹³² On the index as trace, and the trace as an index of time see Bal (1999: 74). On the index as unnerving and uncanny, “[b]ecause [in contrast to the icon] of its concrete, existential proximity to its meaning”, see van Alphen (1998: 104).

¹³³ Malen.

Benjamin (1999: 140) argues, inevitably resulting in melancholia.¹³⁴ The flood in Kiefer's painting speaks allegorically of both the ruin and redemption of a present afflicted by the catastrophes of the past. Here the mythical bursting of the levy, read in conjunction with the emblematic palette floating over the landscape, connotes the ambiguous role of the artist as creator and destroyer. Similarly, the flood in Kentridge's work speaks allegorically of the healing of a traumatized land through the remembrance of the silent other, but also connotes further loss as the flood of memories strikes Felix impotent. This im-possible remembrance, then, relates to the im-possibility of representing the body of the other/self, since figuration here is always already inscribed with disfiguration and loss.

On the one hand, Poussin's Winter landscape may be seen as tragic, in the sense in which a series of conflicting triumphs and defeats succeed one another as the tragedy unfolds according to the dictates of fate (Lagerhof 1990: 213). On the other hand, Kiefer's and Kentridge's landscapes are closer to the German mourning-play where, instead of resolution or completion, time is open-ended (Caygill 1998: 53). But one may read both Poussin's and Kiefer's European landscapes of disaster and catastrophe as dialectical counterparts to Kentridge's landscape. The East Rand landscape in Kentridge's work is then flooded not only with memories of South African history but also with the history of Europe, the colonial and mythical past of Edens fabricated and lost. Correlatively, the landscape in Kentridge's work — continuously marked, erased, and remarked almost in a cyclic if compulsive manner — may be seen as allegorising nature as history and history as nature. "But", as Benjamin (1998: 166) notes, "if nature has always been subject to the power of death, it is also true it has always been allegorical". It is in this sense that

¹³⁴ As Benjamin (1999: 140) observes: "Like all the other antique qualities of the baroque, its stoicism too is pseudo-antique. The influence of rational pessimism is less important than the desolation with which the practice of stoicism confronts man. The deadening of the emotions, and the ebbing away of the waves of life which are the source of these emotions in the body, can increase the distance between the self and the surrounding world to the point of alienation from the body. As soon as this symptom of depersonalization was seen as an intense degree of mournfulness, the concept of the pathological state, in which the most simple object appears to be a symbol of some enigmatic wisdom because it lacks any natural, creative relationship to us, was set in an incomparably productive context. It accords with this that in the proximity of Albrecht Dürer's figure, *Melencolia*, the utensils of active life are lying around unused on the floor, as objects of contemplation".

Kentridge's depiction of nature as history, similar to Vermeer's depiction of faith as both presence and absence, may be read as an allegory of allegory — self-reflexive representation of representation.

3.4 The mirror dis-figures, or, blindness and insight

There is a scene in Kentridge's *Felix in exile* where Felix looks at his mirror image¹³⁵ while shaving (Figure 26).¹³⁶ The mirror turns into a window — which, after Alberti's theories, is the traditional synonym for picture, thus rhyming with the pictures on his walls — through which he sees the face of Nandi, the land surveyor. She mirrors him and he mirrors her, as the inside uncannily mirrors or dis-figures the outside.

The uncanny proximity between the inside and the outside in *Felix in exile* may be addressed as an epistemological problem, related perplexingly to the recurring philosophical, and politically loaded, question of experience and identity, and their correlates inwardness and interiority. The figuration of melancholic inwardness and interiority appears throughout Kentridge's oeuvre, particularly as embodied in the naked figure of Felix who, as Ollman (1999: 73) observes, “shares the artist's own interiority, his gravitation toward the role of observer”. On the one hand, Felix's inwardness may be interrogated from the perspective of Adorno's sustained critique of bourgeois inwardness and interiority, exemplified by Kierkegaard's philosophy,¹³⁷ and Benjamin's (1997: 167) critique of the “phantasmagorias of the interior”. When characterised as bourgeois Felix's inwardness, and by contiguous extension, Kentridge's repeated figuration of it, bears

¹³⁵ For more on the mirror see Bal (1999: 209-230 & 263-268). The mirror in Bal's self-reflexive deployment of it may be read as an example of Mitchell's (1986: 5-6) definition of the hypericon. See also Dällenbach (1989) on the *mise en abyme* or the mirror in the text, and the chapter entitled “Thematizing narrative artifice: Parody, allegory, and the *mise en abyme*” in Hutcheon (1980: 48-56).

¹³⁶ An interesting comparison — in relation to the dividedness of self — could be drawn here between the image of Felix shaving and Francis Bacon's *Three studies of the male back* (1970), wherein two images of a naked man shaving mirror each other and flank an image of a naked man writing. In both Bacon's triptych and Kentridge's depiction of Felix, the mirroring of writing/drawing and shaving/erasure performs or enacts the division of self. See van Alphen (1998: 43).

¹³⁷ For Adorno, “Kierkegaard's melancholy inwardness thus becomes the truest expression of the phenomenology of the bourgeois *intérieur*, as well as the dialectical moment in which this phenomenology is referred to the idea of reconciliation” (Pensky 2001: 142).

uncanny similarities to the Hegelian “(anal-)retentive, self-interiorizing memory (*Er-
Innerung*)” (Wohlfarth 1994: 176) that Benjamin’s destructive character decries.¹³⁸
Felix’s “bourgeois” interiority may, furthermore, be related to Schopenhauer’s
“decadent” (as Nietzsche later termed his philosophy)¹³⁹ privileging of interiority, with
Schopenhauer here seen as a precursor of Lacan’s thinking on subject-formation along
the lines of desire and lack.¹⁴⁰

On the other hand, the phantasmagoric inwardness and interiority of Felix may be seen as
displaced through Kentridge’s emphasis on “external materiality, the surface of
signification” (Richter 2000: 58), as in Benjamin’s writings. As Adorno (qtd. Richter
2000: 58) puts it in connection with Benjamin: “Inwardness for him is not merely the seat

¹³⁸ Benjamin (1978: 302) writes: “The destructive character is the enemy of the etui-man. The etui-man looks for comfort, and the case is its quintessence. The inside of the case is the velvet-lined track that he has imprinted on the world”.

¹³⁹ See Dollimore (1998: 232) on Nietzsche’s lament against the modern decadent sense of “world-weariness, the wish to die, to perish, to deny the will to life — conditions expressed supremely by Schopenhauer”. Yet, as Dollimore (1998: 242) notes, Nietzsche has an intensely contradictory attitude toward this decadence, something Nietzsche readily admits. Dollimore (2001: 244) writes: “In important respects Nietzsche’s philosophy, especially its vitalism, is a projected fantasy of health and omnipotence. His repudiation of the decadent contemporary world is in part a projection of his illness, in part an identification, even an empathy, with decadence made possible by illness: ‘I am *décadent*, I am also its antithesis’ (*Ecce Homo*, p. 10). Illness generates a fantasy of health which then becomes a vantage point from which to expose the death wish — ‘to look down from the abundance and certainty of rich life into the secret labour of the instinct of *décadence* (pp. 9-10). Here too Nietzsche’s critique of *décadence* is a repudiation forged from seduction”. Interestingly Pensky (2001) notes a similar paradox in the historical image of melancholia — as a state of both illness and privileged insight, a paradox Pensky sees articulated in the work of, amongst others, Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin, both of whom were ambivalently drawn to and critical of Nietzsche. Certainly the dialectical paradox of “heroic melancholia” to which both Warburg and Benjamin subscribe resonates in Kentridge’s figure of Felix.

¹⁴⁰ For Schopenhauer, as Karen Lang (1999: 17) summarises: “[T]he only true path for philosophy is through the interiority of the subject. The subject can, however, never know the knowing subject, since one can never be both knower and known subject simultaneously. Separated from himself [sic] as an onlooker, the philosopher enacts the disjuncture between the perceiving subject and the object of his knowledge. It is nature, personified through the body of a woman, and her realm, namely the murky waters of imagination and the indeterminate, which shape the space between darkness and light, between the merely perceiving subject and the truth that is the object of his pursuit. As nature, the slumbering woman is likewise an emblem of mortality, and, according to Schopenhauer, it is death that offers the only release from the separation of subject and object”. If articulated within a Schopenhauerian framework, the division (as *opposed* to reciprocal dynamic) between Felix and Nandi, posits Felix as philosopher and divided onlooker, and Nandi as emblem of nature and mortality. In Schopenhauer’s scenario the divide between subject and object, Felix and Nandi, can only be overcome through death. Certainly in *Felix in exile* Felix extends into Nandi as into death; thus he both loses Nandi and himself. Only in death does Felix thereupon overcome his hypersubjectivity or melancholia, which, paradoxically, is also the only road to privileged insight (Pensky 2001).

of torpor and dull complacency; it is also the phantasm which distorts the potential image of the human being — he always contrasts it to the bodily exterior”.¹⁴¹ In this light, Felix’s inwardness is potentially indicative not so much of a turn away from reality¹⁴² as of a melancholic absorption in the earthly materiality or corporeality of signification.¹⁴³ Here one might refer to this film as a “real allegory” in which deixis displaces interiority, or where, concomitantly, interiority is read dialectically — referring negatively to the idea of reconciliation, to follow Adorno.

Martin Jay (1994: 56n116) notes: “Deixis refers to the linguistic utterances that contain information about their locus of expression. In visual terms, this means the concrete body of the painter [in the case of *Felix in exile*, the body of Felix who shares the features of Kentridge the artist] positioned in the world”. The indexical extension of the artist’s body into the artwork, and back again, absorbs the observer into the artwork¹⁴⁴ and enfolds him or her in a deictic relationship or constellation with the other. If Kentridge is enfolded with Felix, and Felix is enfolded with Nandi, the observer/reader (and by extension, the writer) is enfolded with what he/she is studying or looking at. This deictic process, moreover, puts the subject at risk: for at no point does deixis allow for symbolic closure

¹⁴¹ One might, moreover, relate the material face/trace of the other in *Felix in exile* to Levinas’s notion of the face/trace of the other, which, “incommensurable with consciousness” (Levinas qtd. Taylor 1986: 26), and contra Hegel, calls us out of ourselves, beyond being and nonbeing, beyond absolute knowledge. Levinas (1986: 355) writes in “The trace of the other”: “The beyond from which a face comes signifies as a trace. A face is in the trace of the utterly bygone, utterly passed absent, withdrawn into what Paul Valéry calls ‘the deep yore, never long ago enough’, which cannot be discovered in the self by an introspection”. And in *Otherwise than being* Levinas (Basualdo *et al.* 2000: 122) writes: “It is in the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability”. “As a past that can never be re-collected (*er-innern*), Levinas’s other”, as Mark C Taylor (1986: 25) notes, “is an absolute exterior that can never be interiorized (*er-innern*)”. Similarly concerned with the ethical uncertainty of inwardness Bernstein (2001: 111n43) caveats: “Avoiding recourse to interiority — by ascribing what is important about being alive, being a living thing, to the soul, self, subjectivity — is difficult”. Difficult, even impossible, but, as I tentatively hope to suggest, it is our critical, deictic, if fragile responsibility nevertheless.

¹⁴² Although Felix’s yielding to sexual desires, as characterised throughout Kentridge’s oeuvre, certainly signals that too. In terms of his flight into sexual intrigue — with, for example, Soho’s wife, Mrs Eckstein — Felix is not dissimilar to the melancholic character of Zeno in Kentridge’s *Confessions of Zeno* (2002).

¹⁴³ Cf Pensky (2001: 103) on Benjamin’s rethinking of Ficino’s notion of melancholia, as interpreted by the Warburg School, placing emphasis on “the deep connection between [melancholic] contemplation and the earthbound attraction to the realm of things”.

¹⁴⁴ This motion of extension and enfolding is not dissimilar to Fried’s (1992) notion of quasi-corporeal absorption.

or corporeal completion. Each relationship or constellation is mobile and unstable. Self is deictically both figured and disfigured by the material other, and vice versa; and while the allegory of this process (performed in the film *Felix and exile* as an allegory, as well as in the performative allegory of reading) is “real”, it also remains figural. This complicates the matter of political deeds and of the accessibility of the representation of social and political subject matter as figured melancholically in *Felix in exile*.

According to Bettine Menke (2002: 266): “[T]he figurality of reading as an (ornamental) arrangement on the surface is related to the ground and is determined through this relation, through what it is not, what is not there, what is not readable”. She notes:

[The] Benjaminian [metaphorical] model of the materiality of script as ‘flurries’ [*Gestöber*], which occur as the pulsing of the rhythm in which language [figuration] constructs and withdraws meaning, insofar as every *something*, every figure remains bound to the (absently) determinant relations, as the *margin* of the constellation, as the — cloudy — border-zone of itself inscribed within the constellation. In the pulsing of the constellation organized by unreadable intervals, in the rhythm with which a figure, on the one hand, constructs itself as surface-figure or constellation and, on the other hand, returns to the surface, the ground, before which it lifts itself, the constellation is unreadably distorted into flurries (Menke 2002: 276).

Benjamin’s model of the materiality of script as ‘flurries’¹⁴⁵ resonates with the surface signification of *Felix in exile*, in which figures both appear against and disappear into the ground, becoming both readable and unreadable in the process of reading/inscription. If material figures extend into one another in the film, crossing the boundary between inside and outside as demarcated by the frame of the window, mirror, or picture edge; so too does the observer extend into the space of the film. The uncanny result of this “cloudy”¹⁴⁶ crossover is that melancholic interiority or hypersubjectivity is both preserved and

¹⁴⁵ The term “flurries” is also a felicitous way of describing the intertwinement of calligraphic figures, numbers and characters into shifting arabesques, projected onto the screen in Kentridge’s opera *Confessions of Zeno* (2002).

¹⁴⁶ For more on “the pictorial graph [or signifier] denoted as *cloud* at the level of description” see Damisch (2002: 14).

overcome. Perhaps this signals a form of “heroic” or redemptive melancholia,¹⁴⁷ in which the subject, self, or observer finds a way to take the objects along with him or her (Pensky 2001: 150), while always being both figured and disfigured by their resistance to being appropriated (Holly 2002: 16).

The uncanny mirroring of the inside by the outside, and vice versa, where the one both figures and disfigures, sights and blinds, the other, also mirrors the experience of the viewer/reader of *Felix in exile*. Correlatively with Felix and Nandi, the viewer/reader also contiguously experiences a sense of displacement and dispersal, inscription and exile. For the relationship between the internal viewer and the viewed, figured within the text of the film, uncannily correlates with or mirrors the deictic¹⁴⁸ relationship between the film and the external viewer/reader. The external viewer/reader sees him or herself both mirrored and lost in the disfigured faces and bodies of Felix and Nandi. “The question”, then, as Bal (1999: 4) notes, of “‘Who illuminates whom?’ is not easily answered”. This deictic struggle, however, between I and you, absorbed picture and viewer, and between construction and dispersal, allows us to redefine the self as the one who is not him or herself (Richter 2000: 37), but is instead configured as a ghostly set of traces. Richter (2000: 34) speaks of “the subject’s linguistic displacement”, and notes:

[T]he fragmented, constantly revised subject eludes the desire for completion and closure, even as it strives toward them. The subject’s textual figures trace the contours of this perpetual deferral (Richter 2000: 35).

The fragmentation within *Felix in exile* impacts on — *affects* and *touches* (van Alphen 1998: 94)¹⁴⁹ — our bodies as these belong to, or are both placed and displaced, in history.

¹⁴⁷ Cf Pensky (2001: 103) on the Renaissance notion of “heroic melancholia”, exemplified in Ficino’s ideas, and Benjamin’s idea of a redemptive or messianic melancholia. See also, for example, Pensky (2001: 149f) on Adorno’s appropriation of Benjamin’s idea of messianic melancholia.

¹⁴⁸ As in deixis: where “[f]irst person and second person exchange roles and presuppose each other” (Bal 1999: 98n21 & 165-207).

¹⁴⁹ Cf also Brian Massumi’s notes on Deleuze’s and Guattari’s (2003: xvi) use of the term “affect”: “Affect/affection. Neither word denotes a personal feeling (*sentiment* in Deleuze and Guattari). *L’affect* (Spinoza’s *affectus*) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act. *L’affection* (Spinoza’s *affectio*) is each such state considered as an encounter

As Richter (2000: 69) notes: “[T]he body belongs to history most fully when it is not embodied by it, when it is exiled from it. Our body, then, names our simultaneous inscription in, and exile from, history”.¹⁵⁰

Thus Felix looks into the eye of Nandi through a surveyor’s lens, a critical and recurring emblem in this film, similar to other figures in Kentridge’s films, such as the camera on a tripod, the tape recorder or the hospital monitor. All of these are semiotic stand-ins for the body and all emblematised looking, listening, surveying, tracking, tracing, marking, mapping, recording, dividing, parceling, projecting, and by extension drawing. Moreover, these technical apparatus, as self-reflexive emblems or hypericonic features, may be seen to “take up the function of mnemonic devices in a culture whose capacity for memory is shrinking”, as Richter (2000: 187) puts it in relation to the figures of the telephone and gramophone in Benjamin’s writings. “But”, he continues, “no apparatus can guarantee the stability of memory”.¹⁵¹

These self-reflexive apparatus of looking, then, figured hypericonically and dialectically as both tools for panoptic surveillance and mnemonic instruments for remembering or understanding the other, are marked by melancholic failure. As instruments of inscription and recording, representation and reflection, they mark dispersal rather than construction, frailty rather than stability. As in Lacan’s (1998) allegory of the mirror-stage, Felix’s looking at Nandi through the surveyor’s lens describes and inscribes the reflection or contiguous extension of the other-as-self as unstable and disconcerting, signifying in fact a moment of misrecognition or death.¹⁵²

between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include ‘mental’ or ideal bodies)”.

¹⁵⁰ Cf Blanchot’s writer/wanderer whose writing/wandering is marked by failure, error, and exile: “The wanderer’s country is not truth, but exile; he lives outside” (Blanchot qtd. Taylor 1986: 32).

¹⁵¹ Hence the debilitating flood of memory mentioned before.

¹⁵² Van Alphen (1998: 88) draws a critical distinction between a Lacanian notion of representation as reproduction and representation as extension. He writes: “But while these reproductions, these replicas, claim sameness with their model, they are experienced as alienating and distorting. Lacan’s well-known protostory about the child and the mirror makes this point most clearly. Representation seen as extension,

Moreover, does the one eye looking into the other eye not signify a form of blinding, the seeing eye seeing itself blind?¹⁵³ As Derrida (1993: 57) notes in *Memoirs of the blind*:

The staring eye always resembles an eye of the blind, sometimes the eye of the dead, at that precise moment when mourning begins: it is still open, a pious hand should come to close it; it would recall a portrait of the dying. Looking at itself seeing, it also sees itself disappear right at the moment when the drawing tries desperately to recapture it. For this cyclops eye sees nothing, nothing but an eye that it thus prevents from seeing anything at all. Seeing the seeing and not the visible, it sees nothing. This seeing eye sees itself blind.

Both van Alphen (1998) and Richter (2000) point to the failure of sight, and relate sight to (in the case of Richter, blind) touching.¹⁵⁴ Van Alphen (1998: 48 & 49) speaks of the

in contrast, claims not sameness but contiguity. It emphasizes spatial or temporal contiguity in the *process* of representation, while it acknowledges difference between the *model* and the *product* of the representation. In other words, this view proposes representation as extension, that is, not as reproduction, but as procreation". For the sake of my argument here I have deliberately enfolded these two conceptions together.

¹⁵³ The Spanish novelist José Saramago (1999: 104) writes in his novel *Blindness*: "[T]he eye that is blind transmits the blindness to the eye that sees". And later, still in the same paragraph, "[t]o be blind is not the same as being dead, Yes, but to be dead is to be blind". Blindness is a metaphor for the other side of reason and truth, for historical myopia and psychic repression but it may also be related to the allegorical mortification of semblance; death; the expressionless, and the sublime, a point I return to. Cf Menninghaus (1993: 166-179). For an interesting discussion of the history of the representation of blindness as privileged insight and as the origin of representation see Barasch (2001), Derrida (1993), Elkins (1996), Jay (1994), and Mirzoeff (1995). On blindness as insight see Bal (1991: 286-360). From here, of course, blindness is not too far from the psychoanalytic metaphors of castration related to blindness, and of castration and its *Aufhebung* in the phallus as the origin of representation, with the phallus variously seen as synonymous with the One, form, idea, *logos*, reason. See Jean-Joseph Goux (1992: 57): "Neither in [Hegel's] *Aesthetics* nor in the *Lectures on the philosophy of religion*, where the figure of Osiris, fully explicated, epitomises the Egyptian moment, is there ever mention of the lost penis, restored in the form of a phallic simulacrum by the patient ministrations of Isis. And yet where is there a more significant reestablishment, recovery, overcoming, revival? What philosophical satisfaction if we could proclaim, without betraying Hegel's censorship of the myth, that the phallus is the *Aufhebung* of the missing penis, and that this moment is the origin of representation, of the signifier, of the simulacrum, of symbolisation in general? *Anastasis* [the reestablishment, the raising, the erection] is the secret core of the Hegelian dialectic". Following from this one might read the loss or blindness in Kentridge's work, and in allegory proper, as involving the imaginary missing penis and its resurrection as sublime phallus. Except that, from the perspective of a Benjaminian bidirectional dialectic as opposed to Hegel's confident dialectic of resurrection, the phallus as idea in Kentridge's work is always already earthbound. Here resurrection is always dialectically enfolded with the melancholic materiality of failure and impossibility — as emblematised by the corpse.

¹⁵⁴ Cf also Derrida (1994) on the touch. For more on the theoretical "axis or spectrum that joins the objective pole of art (where beings and things are 'rendered' as they are first presented to the sense of touch in the immediate proximity of their surface) to the subjective pole (where they are such as they are revealed

shift from a Cartesian/modernist/positivist “‘arrogant’ self-confidence in the human eye”, as the means to, and accessibility of, truth, to a Nietzschean/postmodern doubt “in knowledge and the belief in truth as a false appeal to ‘masterstories’”. He writes: “The sense of touch stands at the other end of the spectrum from sight: it cannot operate without the bodily involvement of the subject. Touch, then, becomes the master trope of perception and contaminates even its opposite, sight. Sight is now proposed as a kind of touch, an act that is inflicted upon the body as a whole”.

But for Richter (2000: 147) touch is entangled with blindness and im-possibility; the desire for *proximity* in touch actually “produces the greatest and most irreducible *distance*”.¹⁵⁵ He writes:

Our touch is thus thrice removed from the being of the other: first, what we touch is merely one possible surface of an other who does not necessarily coincide with that sur-face and whose being cannot be contained by it; second, what we touch when we touch the other is part of the *image* that we have of the other and its body, not its “actual” body as it is when no one is looking; third, the image of the other’s body being touched is not the “actual” image of that body but rather our very specific construction of the image of the other’s body, a construction perhaps precariously distorted by our desire, our language, our history. There is never an unproblematic “touch” of the body — at least not of an identifiable someone (Richter 2000: 147).

Elkins (1996: 235) also speaks of sight as “blind touching”. He writes, “[I]ooking at visual art, we see the product of blind touching and the memory of it”, a sentence with particular resonance in relation to the scene in *Felix in exile* in which Felix briefly touches the face of Nandi, which he has just drawn or traced. Moreover, Elkins connects seeing, blindness, and thinking, and, enfolded with what he is writing about, notes:

to sight, at a distance, in three-dimensional space) and, accordingly, also the distance that separates the tactile and the optical modes of representation”, see Damisch (2002: 9).

¹⁵⁵ Cf Merleau-Ponty (1986: 322) who says something similar in relation to sight: “The world is what I perceive, but as soon as we examine and express its absolute proximity, it also becomes, inexplicably, irremediable distance”. Here one is also reminded of Levinas. As Taylor (1986: 26) notes, for Levinas “[t]he proximity of the other is, paradoxically, closer than every presence yet more remote than every absence”.

The more I think about blindness, the more it seems to be a failure of thinking as much as vision. Since the Greeks, thinking and seeing have begun together, at the same moment in imagination. If I think about something, I reflect on it: that is, I imagine myself and the thought reflecting each other. It seems that thinking is imagining — and as the word suggests, the imagination is a place inhabited by images. All the principal metaphors for thinking, knowledge, and truth itself have to do with seeing: notions such as illuminating, casting light on a problem, being enlightened, insightful, clear, distinct, or brilliant are only the symptoms of this relation, which has become so deeply ingrained as thinking itself (Elkins 1996: 235).¹⁵⁶

Elkins (1996: 226) notes: “[L]ike seeing, thinking is intermittent, unreliable, and difficult. Both take place in darkness and both depend on light. Blindness is their constant accompaniment, the precondition of both thought and sight”. For Elkins (1996: 202), shaded by Warburg’s thought’s on reason and superstition, “human sight is not merely partial blindness or selective seeing but a determinate trading of blindnesses and insights”.¹⁵⁷

In this sense, Kentridge’s drawing and animation of *Felix in exile*, where Felix is both inscribed and erased by Nandi, both seeing her and blind to her, is marked by blindnesses and insights. The *process of drawing* itself marks, and is marked by, blindnesses and insights. Recalling Derrida’s (1993) self-reflexive meditation on the uncanny proximity between drawing, self-portraiture — auto- or otobiography, *otos* meaning ear — and blindness, Elkins (1996: 234) writes:

¹⁵⁶ See also Jay (1994: 1), who uses twenty-one visual metaphors in the opening paragraph of his introduction. He explicates these in a footnote: “Thus, for example, *vigilant* is derived from the Latin *vigilare*, to watch, which in its French form *veiller* is the root of *surveillance*. *Demonstrate* comes from the Latin *monstrare*, to show. *Inspect*, *prospect*, *introspect* (and other words like *aspect* or *circumspect*) all derive from the Latin *specere*, to look at or observe. *Speculate* has the same root. *Scope* comes from the Latin *scopium*, a translation of a Greek word for to look at or to examine. *Synopsis* is from the Greek word for general view. These are latent or dead metaphors, but they still express the sedimented importance of the visual in the English language” (Jay 1994: 1n1).

¹⁵⁷ One should add, however, that a too comfortable adoption of the “postmodern” trope of blindness over supposedly logocentric sight should be avoided, in order to prevent merely aestheticising the point or reifying one position over another. In his book *Downcast eyes*, Jay (1994: 591) coins the term “ocular-eccentricity” as a “synoptic” counterstrategy to a postmodern privileging of the trope of blindness. As he succinctly explains: “Ocular-eccentricity rather than blindness, it might be argued, is the antidote to privileging any one visual order or scopic regime. What might be called ‘the dialectics of seeing’ precludes the reification of the scopic regimes. Rather than calling for the exorbitation or enucleation of ‘the eye’, it is better to encourage the multiplication of a thousand eyes, which, like Nietzsche’s thousand suns [hanging, perhaps, affirmatively in the skies over Deleuze’s and Guattari’s a thousand plateaus], suggests the openness of human possibilities”.

There is also a blindness in the drawing implement itself, since the pencil [or the charcoal and pastel Kentridge used in drawing *Felix in exile*] does not have an eye to guide it along the paper. The pencil, its lead and its shank, and the hand that holds it are all blind, and seeing takes place only farther away, where the artist watches the drawing emerge. Artists do not look directly at their pencils or their hands but at the marks on the paper, and even then there is blindness because each look at the paper is also a look away from the model. At the instant a drawing is begun, the artist is often looking at the paper, so that, as one philosopher says, there is a double blindness — the artist sees neither the model nor the drawing that does not yet exist.

The above citation might also be used to refer to the temporal and spatial process or staging of drawing and erasure involved in the making of *Felix in exile*.¹⁵⁸ Each individual drawing of the film is engaged reciprocally and performatively with the film; while the artist is enfolded deictically with each drawing, in the process of making the film. The viewer/reader of the film, and of each specific drawing, is reciprocally enfolded within the dynamic process of making meaning of the temporal and spatial “flurries” of traces, additions and subtractions. The viewer/reader moreover extends to the writer, whose performative “looking we write about and with” (Bal 1999: 120), and who may also be struck with the “contemplative paralysis that arises from recognizing one’s inability to make contemporary words connect with historical images” (Holly 2002: 2). Each enfolding by necessity means both enhanced focus and greater obscurity, as additions are cancelled by subtractions, and subtractions give way to further additions. Moreover, one might see Felix and Nandi as allegorically self-reflexive or melancholically hypericonic figures, which, through their shifting proximity and distance from one another, *perform* the semiotic process of mark making and mark reading. In so doing they both enact, and draw attention to, “the material texture of the pictorial process”, as Damisch (2002: 13) writes. Felix and Nandi are thus material characters that

¹⁵⁸ Ollman (1999: 72f) observes: “The fluidity and contingency of drawing lie at the heart of all of Kentridge’s art of the past 20 years, not just his work on paper. In the films, however, an unusual, reciprocal dynamic comes into play between the drawings that comprise the visual fabric of the films and the films themselves. Unlike conventional cel animation, which fuses thousands of drawings into a slick, seamlessly continuous whole, Kentridge’s process is overtly raw and hand-wrought. For each film (all are under 10 minutes) Kentridge makes about 20 drawings, which undergo continual addition, permutation and erasure, the traces of which are plainly visible, yielding an impression of time and space as viscous, invariably altered by every arrival and departure. ‘You could look at the drawings as indicative of the process and the route to making the film,’ he says. ‘You can also see the finished film as the complicated way of arriving at that particular suite of drawings’”.

perform the shifting dynamics of seeing, representing, and reflecting; of figuring and disfiguring; of constructing and dispersing; of illuminating and obscuring; of touching and losing. Like language and memory, both Felix and Nandi — and correlatively, the viewer/reader/writer — become “the [material and shifting] scene or site of experience itself” (Richter 2000: 43).

But while Nandi momentarily and uncannily resembles Felix, as the name “Felix” uncannily resembles the word “Exile”, like the other corpses in the landscape she soon merges with the ground and disappears. Nevertheless, as Richter (2000: 245) writes about Benjamin’s corpus or corpse, in a way that simultaneously conjures Nandi’s corpus or corpse: “Benjamin’s corpus or corpse will not stay buried; it returns to haunt. To wrestle with the theoretical, historical, ethical, and political stakes of this haunting remains our responsibility today”. He adds thoughtfully: “our ability to witness this ghost is as frail as it is necessary. We see and we do not see the ghost” (Richter 2000: 245). We see and we do not see the melancholic absorption haunting representation.

3.5 Tracing the corpse, listening to the ghost

If Lacan’s mirror-stage is read as an allegory of knowledge, that is, as an allegory of the origin of self-consciousness, this fleeting moment of seeing the other-as-self in Kentridge’s film is then congruent with the fleetingness and instability not only “of the biographical historicity of the individual” (Benjamin 1998: 166) but also of historical knowledge or understanding proper.¹⁵⁹ Hence the recurring thematisation of the im-

¹⁵⁹ Cf Blanchot (qtd. Payne 1993: 202): “Understanding seeks what eludes it; it moves powerfully and constantly forward toward the moment when understanding is no longer possible, when the fact, in its absolutely concrete reality, becomes the obscure and the impenetrable”. The concept of understanding has of course been a recurring problem not only in theology but also in philosophy, from Kant and Dilthey to Benjamin. Kant saw “the parameters of possible experience” as “constituted by intuition, understanding, and reason” but “rigorously distinguish[ed] between the contributions made by each faculty to experience” (Caygill 1998: 2). On the other hand, “In his critique of Kant’s concept of experience”, writes Caygill (1998: 2), “Benjamin not only extended the neo-Kantian attempt to dissolve the distinction between

possible search for the origin and the resultant exile, which Kentridge relates allegorically and self-reflexively to the enterprise of drawing itself: by embodying it in the melancholic figure of Felix both absorbed in, and divorced from, his “dead” objects of contemplation. Felix’s “dead” objects thus also mirror the “dead” objects of art historical contemplation.

Paul de Man (1983: 165) wrote infamously: “[T]he bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars and revolutions”. In what way can one then speak of an ethical responsibility toward history if history is seen as illusory (cf de Man 1979: 92-3)? One might suggest such an ethics by turning to the depiction of corpses in Kentridge’s work, which one can read, in light of Michael Fried’s (1989) exhaustive reading of Thomas Eakins’s *The Gross clinic* (1875), as allegories of the material page of the text, or more precisely, the page of drawing.

The allegorical figure of the corpse appears regularly in Kentridge’s oeuvre. One thinks of the ghostly trace of Soho’s wife in the film *Sobriety, obesity & growing old* (1991), whose “absence fills the world”, as a corpse inscribed on the body of Soho. The sick body of Soho (whose melancholic head, bearing the traits of somebody mortally ill, resembles a death’s head) uncannily resembles the corpse of the man in the road in the film *History of the main complaint* (1996), and may thus be read as a corpse. There is the drawing of the Goyaesque corpses hanging from a tree, used in the animation for *Faustus in Africa!* (1995). In the etching *Casspirs full of love* (1989) the decapitated heads, piled

intuition and understanding, but went further in seeking a (expressly non-, if not anti-Hegelian) concept of ‘speculative experience’. This recast the distinction between intuition/understanding and reason into an avowed metaphysics of experience in which the absolute manifests itself in spatio-temporal experience, but indirectly in complex, tortuous and even violent forms”. Dilthey’s optimistic hermeneutics based on lived experience, expression and understanding may be situated somewhere in between Kant and Benjamin. Cf Schoeman (1996: 12-24, 109-129). The impossible politics of understanding, as allegorically figured in *Felix in exile*, bears traces of both Benjamin’s indirect, “complex, tortuous and even violent” notion of experiential understanding, and, in its oscillating materiality, of Blanchot’s idea of the impenetrable concrete. Taken together one might say that the perplexing problem of understanding the other, as figured in the uncanny relationship between Felix and Nandi, means seeing, and not seeing, the self and the other as complex and impenetrable materiality. Hence the economics and dialectics of melancholia and mournfulness that pervades the film’s “pulsing surface” (Menke 2002: 277).

into a makeshift shelf hammered together out of what appears to be an upright standing coffin, are metonymies and synecdochies of the corpse. In the theatre piece *Confessions of Zeno* (2002) there is the corpse of the father in bed, which is uncannily related to the melancholy body of his son, Zeno, played by Dawid Minnaar, in bed. The prostrate body of Soho in *Weighing ... and wanting* (1997-8) — in one scene sliding into a CAT scanner and, in another, his head resting on a rock — may be read as a corpse. In fact, any body lying down in Kentridge's work may be read as a corpse. Even the charcoal drawing of a bed enclosed in an arabesque cage from the film *Zeno writing* (2001), which was made for the theatre piece *Confessions of Zeno*, may be read as an allegory of the corpse. And if the corpse is itself an allegory, as Benjamin argues, then this drawing, as with so many of Kentridge's drawings, is an allegory of allegory; and allegorises itself as a corpse. The point may be underscored by looking at a specific drawing from *Felix in exile* (Figure 27) next to Mantegna's *The dead Christ* (after 1466) (Figure 28). The Kentridge drawing shows a corpse in close proximity to, slightly covered and defaced by, newspaper or pages of drawing, further inviting us to read the corpse and the newspaper¹⁶⁰ as analogous. In its allegorical transformation of corpse into newspaper, it stresses the intimate relationship between writing, tracing, scripting, printing, drawing, listing, adding and subtracting and the body/corpse — most vividly at play in Kentridge's Peter Greenawayian, picaresque-melancholic theatre piece *Confessions of Zeno*.

On the one hand, Benjamin sees the corpse as the emblem par excellence of allegory. On the other, he relates the corpse to the category of the expressionless — the sober and sublime imagelessness of humanity's ethical essence (Menninghaus 1993: 169), which is related in Jewish thought to anamnestic listening (Moses 1993: 181). In this sense the corpse — perhaps most fully embodied in the expressionless corpse of Christ¹⁶¹ — both

¹⁶⁰ And Benjamin (1992c: 90) writes: “[T]he place where the word is most debased — that is to say, the newspaper — becomes the very place where a rescue operation can be mounted”. This would be congruent with my allegorical reading of the redemption of the drawing-as-corpse or corpse-as-drawing.

¹⁶¹ According to Scholem (1982: 37) Benjamin himself was overwhelmed by the quality of the expressionless in Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, which would suggest an interesting link between Benjamin's Judaic — acoustic — notion of the imageless as informed by the Mosaic *Bilderverbot* and the apparently antithetical Catholic iconic crucifixion of Christ.

marks the allegorical gap between absence and presence, and represents the transition of the beautiful to the sublime. Moreover, according to Derrida (1995: 230), “the trace is the erasure of selfhood, of one’s own presence, and is constituted by the threat or anguish of its irremediable disappearance”. The figure of the trace is materially present in Kentridge’s work. Kentridge is known to mark the paper he draws or prints on in a variety of ways. These include: rubbing, hitting the paper with rope, having his children and dogs walk over the paper before he runs it through the printing press, staining, brushing, etching, projecting, inscribing and erasing, imprinting and cancelling, adding and subtracting, signing and effacing as in a palimpsest. All relate to the Derridean trace before the trace, the Freudian mystic writing pad, and the Warburgian engram.

If one then reads Derrida’s trace as synonymous with the emblem of the corpse, Kentridge’s self-reflexive rend(er)ing¹⁶² of the corpse as trace may then be doubly related to the violent, the pleasurable,¹⁶³ but also the melancholy desire to know the other-as-self, which in essence marks a form of sublime self-erasure. The corpse as uncanny emblem of the other-as-self is then also related to transgression, as in the allegorical transgression of the border between life and death, which is experienced as both pleasurable and angstful. As Helga Geyer-Ryan (1994: 113) points out, this transgression “is manifested as a fascination with the destruction of inwardness and autonomy as illusions, *and* as a mourning for their loss”. And yet it is precisely this mourning which results in the desire to redeem and restore, to re-animate the abject corpse as allegory and as drawing so to speak, thus linking it to Benjamin’s concept of the expressionless.

One can see such a process of mournful animation being performed in *Felix in exile* when Felix’s mournful contemplation of the abject pile of “dead” drawings in his suitcase shows Nandi animated into “real” life. Nandi, peering through a surveyer’s lens, is later

¹⁶² Cf Taylor (1991: 21): “Rend(er)ing ... rend ... rendering. Rending: tearing, cutting, splitting, dividing, lacerating. Rendering: paying, billing, returning, restoring, rend(er)ing, relinquishing, yielding, melting, memorising, clarifying, translating, depicting, reproducing, representing, especially by artistic means”.

¹⁶³ Kentridge (Christov-Bakargiev 1999: 19) himself speaks of “the pleasure of putting charcoal marks on paper”.

animated as an image — figured in a constellation of drawings pinned to the wall. Nandi's looking seemingly “animates” the crowd in the landscape, “the wretched of the earth” in Fanon's words, even transforming the crowd into the image of a flowing tap projected against the night sky. The flowing tap is then “realised” in the basin in Felix's room, linking the crowd to the flood discussed earlier, and the outside to the inside. At one point, leaning over a pile of papers with her eyes closed, Nandi appears to imagine or project a bundled corpse as constellation against the black starry heavens behind her (Figure 29). The image of the corpse is then followed by the image of a suitcase, drawn as a constellation in the sky, thus compounding Felix's looking into his suitcase of drawings as a contemplation of the corpse. At another point, while peering through the surveyor's lens, Nandi sees the constellational image of the head of a corpse, which is followed by the image of the head on the ground.¹⁶⁴

As argued before, Felix's and Nandi's constellational animations mirror not only Kentridge's own animation techniques, but also the viewer's animation of the “flurries” that move and shift across the surface. Felix's and Nandi's constellational projections mirror Kentridge's constellational projections, which in turn mirror the viewer's (and by extension, the writer's and art historian's) own constellational projections. In the process a mobile constellation is formed, or performed, in which the inside joins contiguously and constellationally with the outside, internal focaliser with external focaliser. The fact that something is lost or gets left over (Holly 2002: 3) in every animation, in every constellation, seems to be precisely what starts the mournful process of animation, again and again. This may once again bespeak of the idea of redemptive melancholia.

¹⁶⁴ This neo-Platonic, more precisely Ficinoesque, mirroring of the earth in the heavens, seeing what lies below reflected in what appears above, also appears in the work of Anselm Kiefer, a point I shall return to in chapter four. See, for example, Kentridge's painting *Light trap* of 1999 in which a heavenly constellation appears embedded in the archaic materiality of the earth, which faintly bears the ghostly imprint of a pyramid.

On the one hand, the corpses in Kentridge's work thus serve as allegorical emblems of drawing as an ambiguous¹⁶⁵ process of tracing and erasure, revelation and repression, insight and blindness, which in turn reflects the processes of knowledge. That is, in rend(er)ing and contemplating these corpses, Kentridge, like Felix pouring over so many fragmented drawings, allegorises his own enterprise as an allegory of allegory, as reflecting the melancholy knowledge of the absence of truth and of the ruination and loss of the origin¹⁶⁶ and the self. But, on the other hand, with this knowledge comes the concomitant desire "to redeem corporeality, materiality, sensuality" (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 201). While on the one hand the drawings of corpses merely "continue to be dust" (Benjamin 1998: 229); on the other hand, to quote Kentridge (Cameron *et al* 1999: 19) himself, "there is a simple alchemy in the transformation of the paper [as an allegory of the corpse] into something else".¹⁶⁷ This is specifically figured in *Felix in exile* every time a "dead" drawing/page/trace is animated into a mobile and shifting constellation — from dead matter to moving image.

3.6 Envoi

Felix in exile comes to an end. The mournful music, composed by Philip Miller, draws to a close. With his closed suitcase behind him, Felix is standing alone in a pool of water in a barren landscape, the site where Nandi's corpse, like Ana Mendieta's body, has

¹⁶⁵ An ambiguity or ambivalence that, as Michael Fried (1989: 66) writes, is an essential part not only of the sublime but also of the oedipus complex.

¹⁶⁶ Cf Blanchot (qtd. Taylor 1991: 22): "What the work says is the word beginning. But today the work is the work of art: art is its starting point. And it says 'the beginning' when it says 'art', which is its origin and whose essence has become its task. But where has art led us? To a time before the world, before the beginning. It has cast us out of our power to begin and to end; it has turned us toward the outside without intimacy, without place, without rest. It has led us into the infinite migration of error.... We appeal to art's sovereignty: it ruins the kingdom. It ruins the origin by returning it to the errant immensity of an eternity gone astray.... There before any beginning, the somber ebb and flow of dissimulation murmurs". Nevertheless, as Giles Peaker (2000: 75) writes, "[w]ithin allegory, nothing is what it is; yet allegory, as itself a sign, does promise a coincidence of sign and origin".

¹⁶⁷ It is then in this light of Kentridge's alchemical or allegorical transformation of a drawing into a corpse and a corpse into the expressionless that one might understand Benjamin's (1998: 229) citation of the seventeenth-century German dramatist Hallman's line: "That cruel alchemist, horrible death". See also Benjamin (1998: 229) on transformation as key to both allegory and alchemy.

disappeared into the ground, leaving behind a faint trace.¹⁶⁸ He is naked; his back turned to us, in an ambiguous gesture of closure that mirrors the suitcase behind him, read as mortified and expressionless corpse.¹⁶⁹ He faces inward, absorbed in his own material disappearance.¹⁷⁰ Nandi's singing voice still lingers like a ghost. So we come full circle: the film returns in ending, to the image of the barren landscape seen at the beginning of the film. In Kentridge's allegorical conception and imaging of history as catastrophe, this is the end of the beginning, while "[t]he end is also in the beginning..." (Buci-Glucksmann 1994: 86).

¹⁶⁸ I am thinking of, for example, Mendieta's *Siluetas works in Mexico* (1973-1977), where her corpse-like body, laid horizontally in what looks like an open grave or tomb, was obscured by flowers, traced in its absence in the ground by a wreath of leaves, marked in its absence by coloured pigment. The corpse-like body of Mendieta may also be related to the representation of the Hindu *shavasana* or corpse position in recent works by Anselm Kiefer, as in, for example, his painting *Stars* of 1995. Here the corpse position also signals a space for begetting, which would lend a "redemptive" element to the notion of mute materiality in both Mendieta's and Kiefer's works. For a characterisation of performativity in Ana Mendieta's work as an "aesthetics of disappearance" see Blockner (1999: 24). For a comparison between the tracing of the body in its disappearance in Mendieta's and Berni Searle's work see van der Watt (2003: 27). I return to Mendieta's work and to the aesthetics of disappearance in chapter five.

¹⁶⁹ One might dialectically situate the solitary and melancholy figure of Felix in the landscape, with his back turned to the viewer, in the historical context of German Romantic landscape painting. Buchloh (2000: 384) relates the "historic dynamism" of Caspar David Friedrich's paintings "to real situations of imposed restrictions and oppositions that did not permit the realization of subjectivity in actual life. Otherwise, how are we to explain that in Friedrich's landscapes, the figures turn their backs on reality (the reality of the viewer), and that one cannot see their faces, completely turned, as they are, toward the infinity of the landscape?" In this sense the figure of Felix, which mirrors the figure of the viewer/reader/writer, faces and is faced by the concrete specificity of South Africa's past and present. Felix is embedded, figured and disfigured, by an historical context, marked and marred by a politics of barbarism and totality in which the realisation of subjectivity was and continues to be imperilled. But though he has turned his back on, or is blind to, the reality of the viewer, Felix, as a "real allegory" — and, correlatively, the viewer as touched by Felix — may be seen to be in "an enfolded, entrapped relationship with the real world" (Bal 1999: 24). Felix is enfolded with the real world as it is figured and disfigured in the material world of signification.

¹⁷⁰ Felix's material self-reflexivity here — wherein he is seen as performing, and performed by, the tracing of the page/text/corpse — may be allegorically related to the self-reflexivity of the Work, which "opens up writing to writing" (Blanchot 1986: 382), à la Mallarmé. Blanchot (1986: 384) writes: "With Mallarmé, the Work becomes aware of itself and so knows itself as something coinciding with the absence of the work, the latter then deflecting it from ever coinciding with itself, and dooming it to impossibility. A deviation in which the work disappears into the absence of the work, but in which the absence of the work always escapes the more it reduces itself to being nothing but the Work that has always disappeared already. [...] To write is to produce absence of the work (worklessness)". Hence the *désœuvrement* mentioned in footnote 3, and the enfolding of (autographic) inscription with the blank. It is also in this regard that one might reflect on the mournful sense of absence in *Felix in exile* as meaning the work's resistance to being wholly appropriated. Hence also the tantalising appearance and disappearance of "real" figures, such as Felix and Nandi, into the blank, empty, yet also *overfull*, place of signification, and into the primordial landscape of history, only to return again and again to haunt our desire for closure. This also returns to mind my earlier image of the debilitating flood of memory.

It was proposed at the beginning of this chapter that Kentridge's film *Felix in exile* be read as a self-reflexive allegory of art and history, intimately conjoined with the self-reflexivity performed in Benjamin's and Kiefer's allegorical work. As a theoretical object, always reciprocally activated by the reading of the viewer, and vice versa, it could thus be seen as reflecting theoretically on representation as this is dialectically marked by inscription and erasure; self and other; blindness and insight; construction and dispersal; origin and exile. In so doing, this chapter has tried to show how Kentridge reflects on, and stages, his own process of mark making: as an attempt at making, and un-making, the often precarious notions we have of self and other. Furthermore, it has been argued that in allegorically reflecting on the allegorical processes of representation, *in the process of enacting them*, Kentridge's film may be inscribed as an allegory of allegory. That Kentridge inscribes his work both allegorically and self-reflexively — more specifically, that Kentridge's animated drawing of *Felix in exile* performs itself in its own undoing, tracing and erasing itself — has correlatively prompted a performative approach to writing about this film.

Concomitantly, it has been argued that Kentridge's approach to representing history as catastrophe, while always rooted in the socially and politically concrete, is both allegorical and melancholic. At no point in *Felix in exile* is there easy or direct access to history, nor its objects and subjects. Instead the temporal and spatial inflections of the film, always circling around absence, suggests a melancholic doubt as to the adequacy of representation to do justice to what is being represented. By extension, the viewer/reader/writer inevitably succumbs to a similar sense of melancholic doubt. As Holly (2002: 3) notes: "Something remains; something gets left over". The historical material inevitably resists being appropriated into seamless understanding; while "[t]he distance between present and past, the gap between words and images can never be closed" (Holly 2002: 3). This is what keeps the wound open (Holly 2002: 3, Jay 1996: 22). But it has also been argued that this failure to wholly complete or restore the past holds a dim promise within itself; through the idea of redemptive melancholia the sick or dead body may be reanimated by the interminable idea of unfulfillable hope. This may be

linked to Derrida's (1993: 45) observation: "This heterogeneity of the invisible to the visible can haunt the visible as its very possibility".¹⁷¹

Key to Kentridge's approach, then, has been the recognition and staging of the impossibility of inscribing and containing the body, of seeing the body of the self and the other clearly, without blindness and loss, without being found wanting.¹⁷² But if this self-reflexive thinking/doing of what it entails to look is marked, then, by both figuration and disfiguration, presence and absence, illumination and blindness, self and death, it has been argued that this im-possibility is precisely the scene or site of a frail possibility. It is a frail possibility — inscribed with "[a] counterpropagandistic reticence" to quote Geoffrey Hartman (1999: 198) — directed against a Fascist aesthetics of totality, presence, and closure, though never fully free from the specter of its own latent Fascism.¹⁷³

Instead we have absence, perhaps a "non-absent absence" (Blanchot: 1986: 382), or at least an uneasy to and fro between absence and presence; we are faced with, and haunted by, the ghosts of precariously traced corpses. As Derrida (1994: 10) writes: "What does it mean to follow a ghost? And what if this came down to being followed by it, always persecuted by the very chase we are leading?" These corpses or ghosts may indeed always already be inaccessible and unreadable, but as expressionless, allegorical texts, which affect and touch our bodies as a prefiguration of our own deaths, they are also the ethical/acoustic sites for transformation and re-membrance — performed deictically, in the process of representation. Crucially this process of representation — intrinsically and ethically performative — refers as much to art and art-writing as to history. Such a suggestion does not aim at the mystification of history and art. History and art "are [not

¹⁷¹ My thanks to Maureen de Jager for bringing this line to my attention.

¹⁷² My choice of words here derives from the title of Kentridge's film, *Weighing ... and wanting* (1997), which has its origin in a dream image of Kentridge's, while its title is drawn from the Book of Daniel. See Ollman (1999: 75).

¹⁷³ Benjamin (qtd. Baudrillard 1994: 2005) recognised the terrifying proximity between fascism and anti-fascism, myth and anti-myth, when he pronounced the sentence: "Fascism is made up of two things: fascism properly so-called and anti-fascism".

to be] mixed together in a rhetorical promiscuity” (Nägele 1986: 16)¹⁷⁴ but are rather entangled, perhaps “preposterously” (Bal 1999), in a tense dialectic in which the one would critically engage the other. Hence the dialectical ground of the suggestion at the beginning of this chapter that in *Felix in exile* figures or corpses appearing and disappearing into the ground may be seen to allegorise both the processes of history as catastrophe and the process of drawing itself. Recognising the tantalising play of traits between these processes, both of which are haunted by temporal and spatial “flurries”, gaps and im-possibilities, is precisely what is at stake when we face the melancholic figure of Felix, again and again.

The next chapter returns to the melancholically absorbed figure of Felix, seen as a “mirror” of Dürer’s figure *Melencolia*, by projecting him in and as a melancholy constellation with various images of catastrophe from Benjamin’s and Kiefer’s work. The aim is to “think” the work of all three in and as a shifting constellation: seen from one perspective as interrelated stars, forming a fixed schema,¹⁷⁵ a thematic cluster, or discursive gestalt; seen from a slightly different perspective as a fateful image, recalling the shooting comet depicted in Dürer’s *Melencolia* print; and seen from yet another perspective as a pattern of points light in the dark. The celestial, conceptual, or graphic image that may be recognised briefly, “like the sudden appearance of a ghost, or a flash of lightning which suddenly illuminates the dark night” (Benjamin 1999: 163), depends on the shifting point of view of its projection — sometimes melancholic, sometimes preposterous, and sometimes apocalyptic. However the constellational image may shift, what remains constant is a conception of history as “written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience”, as Benjamin (1999: 177) writes in the book on the *Trauerspiel*.

¹⁷⁴ This would signal a critical engagement with de Man’s sophisticated and far-reaching valorisation of rhetoric. For an engaging critique of de Man’s “hypostatizing of language” see Handelman (1991).

¹⁷⁵ Benjamin (1999: 184) writes: “This is what determines the character of allegory as a form of writing. It is a schema; and as a schema it is an object of knowledge, but it is not securely possessed until it becomes a fixex schema: at one and the same time a fixed image and a fixing sign”.

Chapter Four: Melancholy constellations and the play of mourning

All contemplation can do no more than patiently trace the ambiguity of melancholy in ever new configurations. — Adorno (1994: 121)

In an attempt to knot together the various threads of this dissertation, as these relate to melancholy immersion and absorption in the experience of history as repetitive catastrophe, this chapter undertakes to configure the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge in and as a melancholy constellation. Constellation here is variously imagined as a graphic, virtual, celestial or conceptual figure or gestalt determined by, whilst simultaneously mapping, melancholia. Furthermore, although the constellation may be imagined as a fixed pattern, it shifts depending on one's point of view. Lastly, the theoretical and pictorial configuration of the work of a German-Jewish theorist from the early twentieth century, a contemporary German artist, and a contemporary South African-Jewish artist is premised on a converging thematic: the melancholy imaging of history as catastrophe.

Benjamin (b. 1889) lived through World War I and, in the face of imminent incarceration in a Nazi death camp, committed suicide in 1940. Kiefer (1945-) began working as a German artist after World War II, after the unspeakable atrocities of the Holocaust, and during a time in German history characterised by debilitating silence and denial.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ Writing with reference to Kiefer's peer Gerhard Richter, Robert Storr (2003: 207f) succinctly sums up the "voluntary collective amnesia" of the German people after 1945: "Historians and journalists showed scant enthusiasm for revisiting the Nazi years, much less investigating their connection to the present; school curricula minimized the period, and people generally held their tongues, except in the company of those who had shared their experiences and outlook, and even then little was said. Until Israel tried Adolf Eichmann for war crimes in 1961, and Germany followed suit by bringing a group of Auschwitz guards before the courts in 1963, public acknowledgment of the Holocaust was fitful at best, and individual admissions of complicity, much less atonement, were all but unimaginable. The proverbial question children asked their parent, 'What did you do in the war?' was for the most part met with evasion or silence. Returning to Germany, her homeland, in 1950, the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt, who later covered the Eichmann trial, and explained the massive slaughter supervised by that self-effacing 'little man,' as paradigmatic of 'the banality of evil,' wrote, "Everywhere one notices that there is no reaction to what has happened, but it is hard to say whether that is due to an intentional refusal to mourn or whether it is an expression of a genuine emotional incapacity".

Kentridge (1955-) has produced work during and after the horror of apartheid in South Africa, times characterised by anger and disavowal; and by feelings of hope and disillusionment. What is it that links the work of these three individuals? How is one to “think” this connection, without simply collapsing historical differences in the name of “theory”? And if it is true that the historical image of melancholia resonates with the work of all three, to what degree can the “melancholy writing” of their work, in and as a shifting configuration, escape the downward pull of hyper-subjective melancholia?

One way may be to think of the projected configuration as “preposterous”, in Mieke Bal’s neo-Baroque sense of the word. As such, it should not be seen as an attempt to elide the differences between historical times or contexts; but rather as an attempt at critical intervention in the supposed linearity of history, and as an immersive “transdisciplinary ‘art of conjecture’ (*ars conjectandi*)” (Stafford 1999: 125) premised on visual and theoretical analogies, not unlike the one projected by Leibniz in the seventeenth century.¹⁷⁷

Bal (1999: 6f) writes: “This reversal, which puts what came chronologically first (“pre-”) as an aftereffect behind (“post”) its later recycling, is what I would like to call a *preposterous history*”.¹⁷⁸ She relates her term to Freud’s notion of *Nachträglichkeit*:

Instead of classifying and closing meaning as if to solve an enigma, this study of what Freud would call *Nachträglichkeit* attempts to trace the process of meaning-production over time (in both directions: present/past and past/present) as an open, dynamic process, rather than to map the results of that process. Instead of establishing a one-to-one

¹⁷⁷ Barbara Maria Stafford (1999: 125) writes of Leibniz: “His vision was of a hyperworld: less a multitude of particular persons and more a system of relations in which any person might be put together with any circumstance. This jump to establish parallels between symbols, marks, characters, people, and cases dangerously transgressed disciplinary boundaries and organic and inorganic hierarchies”. Although Stafford privileges analogical thinking over the destructive operations of allegory, my appropriation of the figure of allegory does not preclude analogical thinking.

¹⁷⁸ Bal’s notion of preposterous history bears similarities with Miller’s deconstructive literalising of the term “preposterous”. As Norris (1993: 210) explains, “[t]hus: ‘preposterous’, from the Latin *praepostero*, is defined as the act of ‘putting before what normally comes after’, or reversing the commonplace (logical or causal) order of priorities through a trick of linguistic figuration”. My thanks to my colleague Michael Herbst for bringing this reference from Norris to my attention.

relationship between sign or motif and meaning, I emphasize the active participation of visual images in cultural dialogue, the discussion of ideas. It is in this sense that I claim art “thinks” (Bal 1999: 9).

Bal’s notion that art “thinks”¹⁷⁹ has an elective affinity with Benjamin’s *Bilddenken* or “thinking-in-images”; while Benjamin’s “thinking-in-images” seems “preposterously” prefigured by the art historian Aby Warburg’s *Bilderatlas*, conceived as a dynamic constellation or historical display of “moving images” (cf Michaud 2004).¹⁸⁰ From this perspective, and as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Benjamin’s “thinking-in-images”, which should also be related to the notion of the “theoretical object”, has special bearing on my discussion of Kiefer’s and Kentridge’s meta-pictorial imaging and thinking of history.

Moreover, I will adopt a self-reflexive and performative approach, in keeping with the self-reflexive and performative nature of Benjamin’s, Kiefer’s, and Kentridge’s meta-theoretical and meta-pictorial work. All three self-reflexively and performatively think in images, employing several “moving concepts” (cf Bal 2002, Deleuze 2001),¹⁸¹ or “elastic concepts” (Damisch 2005: 160), with which to preposterously and performatively think imaging of history (cf Bal 1999, Fugmann 1998).¹⁸² It is on the basis of these “moving concepts” — “each of them multiple and displaced in itself” to cite Žižek (2003: 278) out of context — that I will refer to my theoretical idea of melancholy constellation as

¹⁷⁹ Bal seems to derive her idea from Damisch’s (2005: 174) non-Kantian notion that art thinks, an idea that implies “that our relation to the work of art is in no way ‘disinterested’”.

¹⁸⁰ Cf Settis (1997) on Warburg’s idea of the image of art history as dynamic, as well as Diers (1992) on the critical relation between Warburg’s conception of art history, the critical thinking practiced by the *Frankfurter Schule*, and Benjamin.

¹⁸¹ Cf also Bersani’s (1990: 3) notion of “conceptual mobility” vis-à-vis authoritative immobility.

¹⁸² My notion of “the imaging of history”, which was suggested to me by Dirk van den Berg, and which features as a recurring problematic in van den Berg’s own work, bears similarities with Damisch’s (Bois *et al* 1998: 3) notion of “the perception of history”. Damisch’s perception of history, derived from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, “connects to darkness in the sense in which you find this in Lucien Febvre, or initially in Michelet: ‘l’histoire noire’”. Damisch notes: “[I]n the midst of a history that was narrative, discursive, something suddenly occurred ... a kind of silence. It would be, then, a matter not of narrating history but of seeing it”. However, the dark or “blind” seeing of, but also listening to, history that constitutes “l’histoire noire”, ought to be contrasted with “Plato’s [ocularcentric] movement from darkness to light into a visionary philosophy of history” (Taylor 1999: 12). For more on ocularcentrism and ocular- or iconophobia, see Jay (2004) and van den Berg (2004).

mobile. This move is further motivated by the historical image of melancholia as dynamically dialectical within itself (cf Pensky 2001).

Related to my projection of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge in and as a melancholy constellation that shifts is Bal's (1999: 25) elegant insistence that reading, viewing, or writing about art always "involves two mobile positions" (Bal 1999: 25), involving both activity and passivity.¹⁸³ And given that each shifting point of view affects the object of perception, whilst the dynamic fluidity of objects of perception also shift our point of view, to speak of a melancholy/mobile constellation implies polymorphic "constellations of textual [and visual] relationships subject to dissolution and replacement at one and the same time", as Jameson (2002: 4) writes of Lyotard's postmodernity.¹⁸⁴ This repetitive "dissolution and replacement" — self-reflexively enacted by way of the constant relay between the body of my text and its extensive footnotes — involves both Mercurial mobility and Saturnian melancholic acedia.

4.1 Thinking-in-images, imaging history, and performativity

Intricately related to the imaging of history is what Benjamin calls "thinking-in-images" (*Bilddenken*), an idea that involves our speculation or absorption in images, as well as the sentient or sensuous "thinking" that occurs in images (cf Mitchell 2006: 3).¹⁸⁵ Benjamin's "thinking-in-images" is a critical concept to bear in mind when enfolding (rather than collapsing) the putatively predominantly linguistic-discursive nature of Benjamin's work with the predominantly visual work of Kiefer and Kentridge. For Benjamin, similarly to Aby Warburg, the image (so crucial to Benjamin's textual production) is not that of a

¹⁸³ I discuss this dialectic or deixis in some depth in chapters one, two and three.

¹⁸⁴ Though this does not mean that my deployment of the theoretical concept of a melancholy/mobile constellation ought to be read as coterminous with Lyotard's postmodernity; rather, the latter should be read as part of the irreducible ensemble of multifarious constellations that make up this study.

¹⁸⁵ Benjamin's *Bilddenken* could also be figured in a mobile constellation with Deleuze's "images of thought". According to Rajchman (2000: 32), an "image of thought" "is not a picture or representation of something, it is not a *Weltanschauung*, but has another more complicated 'untimely' [cf Bal 1999] relation to its time. It can never be simply deduced from the contents or concepts of a philosophy, instead it is a tacit presupposition of the creation of concepts and their relation to what is yet to come". Cf also Snow's (1997: 15) reference to Cézanne's notion of "thinking in images".

reproduction, but rather that of a constellation (Weigel 1996: ix).¹⁸⁶ According to Benjamin (1999a: 462), “an image is that in which the has-been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation”. This materialised, embodied now, in which an image of the has-been becomes re-cognisable, is what Benjamin refers to as Messianic *Jetztzeit* or now-time, or what Bal rereads as the now-time of viewing and reading (cf Bal 2001a, Benjamin 1999a & 2003: 389-411, Weigel 1996).¹⁸⁷ In this light, thinking-in-

¹⁸⁶ For instance, Aby Warburg’s Mnemosyne project or *Bilderatlas* from the first decades of the twentieth century was composed by combining and displaying reproductive images from art history with contemporary mass media images — in visual constellations that Warburg shifted constantly. Van den Berg (2004) and Weigel (1996: 151) note that Warburg’s *Bilderatlas* heralded contemporary practices in visual culture studies such as intertextuality or cultural semiotics. Cf also Weigel (1995: 139) on “the differences and caesuras that separate our academic practice from a work in “Warburg’s Cultural Studies Library” [Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek]”. She cautions: “In fact, however, the reception of Warburg’s ideas today often exhibits aspects of a *reterritorialization* by re-erecting boundaries he had abandoned, be it in the form of a re-migration to an academic discipline or of the endeavor to undo the multiple exiles of the Warburg library”. She refers to Warburg’s own “famous turn of phrase about a ‘border police bias’”, and points out that “Benjamin, in his Bachofen essay, accordingly placed Warburg alongside Goethe and Bachofen in his ‘disdain for the established boundaries between the sciences’” (Weigel 1995: 140). It is also from the perspective of intertextuality, interdiscursivity and inter-imaging that Warburg’s *Bilderatlas* may be figured in a constellation with Benjamin’s *The arcades project* (cf Rampley 2001: 121-149), in which history is imaged in and as mobile constellations of dialectical images, bursting with now-time. Cf Weigel (1996: 10) on Benjamin’s concept “of a materialized, embodied now-time (*Jetztzeit*)”, “the Now of cognizability [*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*]” in which images become readable, and which “coincides with the Now of a corporeal representation or action”. Cf also Bal’s (2001a) rereading of Benjamin’s now-time as the present time of an embodied viewing and reading of images as material objects. In light of the above, one might counter Fried’s (2002: 234-239) somewhat one-sided assessment of the figuring of embodiment in Benjamin’s thought. On the one hand, he correctly surmises Benjamin’s aversion to the notion of empathy. See, for example, Benjamin’s (1999a & 2003: 389-411) critique of the role empathy plays in commodification and historicism. This would put Benjamin at a remove from the aesthetics of empathy, a particular tradition in nineteenth century German aesthetic philosophy — exemplified in the writing of Vischer, Wölfflin, and Schmarsow — on which Fried bases his reading of Adolph Menzel’s intense embodied realism on. On the other hand, Fried (2002: 238f) misses the mark slightly when he suggests that embodiment “has no role, certainly no positive one, in Benjamin’s thought”. In fact, one might argue that embodiment plays a crucial role in Benjamin’s thinking. One thinks particularly of his autobiographical writings, his “thought figures”, his reading of Baudelaire’s allegories of the experience of the modern city, Kafka’s mystical-modern parables, and the Surrealists’ experimentation with the corporeal limit experiences of the profane. His intense, dialectical interest in the Surrealists’ experimentation with intoxicated embodiment also carries over into his Arcades project, and Benjamin’s own experiments with intoxication, as documented in his protocols on hashish, attest to a heightened engagement with embodiment. See, for example, Benjamin’s (1999b: 673-679) deployment of emphatic projection in his essay, “Hashish in Marseilles”. In fact, Fried concludes his book on Menzel with a passage from Sebald’s *The rings of Saturn* (1995) which, in its surreal denouement of devastation, reminds one of some of Benjamin’s own Kafkaesque writings. For more on Benjamin’s corporeal and material engagement with texts and images see also Richter (2000).

¹⁸⁷ In light of the Baroque quality of much of Benjamin’s thought, and in line with Bal’s “neo-Baroque” or Deleuzian rereading of Benjaminian concepts, one might compare Benjamin’s now-time with Deleuze’s “now-here”. As Tom Conley (2001: xvii) explains: “The pleats and hems of the ideal Baroque home thus do not merely refer to a ‘nowhere’, as if prompting a mirror-reading of Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*, but also to a ‘now-here’ that is present whenever and wherever the concept of its space is taken up”. Cf Jameson

images would mean thinking with constellations, whilst the imaging of history would mean thinking, picturing or imagining history in shifting constellations, in the now-time of viewing or reading, “each time anew” (Bal 2001a: 122). I say “each time anew” precisely because each now-time is always dynamically marked and inscribed by *Nachträglichkeit*, the historical force whereby “the past creates itself retro-actively” (Kaufmann 1997: 41).¹⁸⁸ In this sense this chapter is itself self-reflexively defined by *Nachträglichkeit*, figured as it is in a constellation with the perplexing past — present in its absence (cf Runia 2006: 1, Jonker 2006, Ter Schure 2006).

Crucial to my thinking-in-images and thinking, picturing or imagining of history in melancholy/mobile constellations, in the Benjaminian now-time of embodied viewing and reading (cf Bal 2001a: xii), will be “an engagement with the process of art production and reception as *performative*” (Jones & Stephenson 1999:1):¹⁸⁹

Thus the artwork [or historical image] is no longer viewed as a static object with a single, prescribed signification that is communicable unproblematically and without default from the maker to an alert, knowledgeable, universalized viewer... The notion of the performative highlights the open-endedness of interpretation, which must be understood as a *process* rather than an act with a final goal, and acknowledges the ways in which circuits of desire and pleasure are at play in [a] complex web [or in mobile constellations].¹⁹⁰

(2002: 4) on Lyotard’s postmodernity as “a non-systematic ‘actuality’ stirring with a random coexistence of irreconcilable Nietzschean presents of time”.

¹⁸⁸ The potentially melancholy shine of the signifying power of *Nachträglichkeit* or belatedness will be discussed further below. Cf Nägele (1991: 81).

¹⁸⁹ For more on performance and performativity see Bal (2002: 174-212). Bal adopts and extends Butler’s (1993: 2) understanding of performativity, “not as a singular or deliberate ‘act’, but rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names”. For more on the relation between performativity and citation see Bal (1999) and Richter (2002: 25) who cites Benjamin: “To write [or perform] history means to quote history. But the concept of quotation implies that any given historical object must be ripped out of its context”. This ripping out of context may then be coupled with Bal’s (1999: 13) notion of citation as supplementation, seen not as invention but as intervention. Supplementation in turn may be related to the operations of allegory. As Orton (1994: 115) writes, “[a]llegory takes over a truth or meaning and adds to it not to replace it but to ‘supplement’ it”. I discuss the performative enfolding of Bal’s preposterous history and Benjamin’s theory of allegory in chapters one and two.

¹⁹⁰ My thanks to Maureen de Jager for alerting me to this passage.

This is of a kind with Bal's (1999: 120) suggestion: "Art performs; so does writing; so does the looking we write about and with".

In this sense, figuring Benjamin's, Kiefer's, and Kentridge's performative, constellational projections,¹⁹¹ in and as a melancholy/mobile constellation would correlatively mean discursively mirroring their constellational projections with my own.¹⁹² It would mean, "being enfolded with" (Bal 1999: 8) "the explosive and performative potential" (Richter 2002: 18) of texts and images, where form mirrors content and content mirrors form,¹⁹³ in a textured,¹⁹⁴ shape-shifting constellation. Citing Benjamin, Menke (2002: 354n4) articulates this performative interrelationship as follows:

The relationship between reading (or reader) and what is read can also be formulated in a textual metaphoric: "What the constellation [*Gestirnstand*] effected [*wirkte*] in a human existence thousands of years ago, was woven in on the basis of similarity". ... The

¹⁹¹ "[E]ach of them multiple and displaced in itself" (Žižek 2003: 278).

¹⁹² I mean this not only in the sense in which I project various shifting constellations in my main text but also the constellations I project in these endnotes. Thus the above constellations would performatively and self-reflexively mirror those below and vice versa, all the while opening up spaces for further imagined or projected constellations — interlaced with my discussions earlier and interlaced with the work of others.

¹⁹³ Cf Weigel's (1996: 49f) citation of Benjamin's "Berlin childhood around 1900: "It taught me that form and content, the wrapping and what is wrapped in it are the same thing". Weigel (1996: 53) writes, "...Benjamin's [self-reflexive and performative] manner of writing and manner of thinking cannot be seen as separate... [H]is thinking-in-images constitutes his specific and characteristic way of theorizing, of philosophizing, and of writing, and ... his writings cannot be seen in terms of a dualistic opposition of form and content". I would proffer that the performativity of Benjamin's work is precisely what is also at stake in both Kiefer's and Kentridge's work, and by extension my writing on, or constellational unfolding of, the work of all three. This involves a mobile dialectic, or "entangled mobility" (Bal 1999: 65) between different timelines and/or nationalities rather than a "violent rewriting" (Jameson 2002: 40) of them. I am taking heed here of Jameson's (2002: 34) critique of the rewriting typical of "modernity" as a self-referential, "if not performative" trope, "a signifier that indicates itself, and whose form is its very content". Jameson (2002: 39) calls for a narrative restoration of "the social and historical meaning of the rewriting operation by positing it as a trace and an abstraction from a real historical event and trauma, one which can be said to amount to a rewriting and surcharging of the social itself in its most concrete form". I shall return to this point later in my discussion of the concrete or material self-reflexivity in the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge.

¹⁹⁴ My choice of words is derived from Elkins (2002: 44) who writes, "[h]istory should have the texture of what it describes and not just the restless rhetoric of modern academia". One might compare this to Deleuze's notion of "*texturology*: a theory or philosophy of the surface as skin ... of texture as the site of point of view" (Bal 1999: 30). Giving history texture and thus drawing attention to multiple and mobile points of view is precisely what seems to me to motivate a *performative* approach to writing (and art making); of course, the concept of performativity can itself become so much (ideological) rhetoric. For more on multiple and mobile points of view see Jameson (2002: 32) on "narrative options and alternate storytelling possibilities".

reading of constellation and the life that is similar become entwined in and as texture(s). Similarities that are read affect the reader as (ornamental) inscriptions, interweavings, interlacings of what is read and the reader/life.

The readability of this textured constellation is called “‘Stern-Bild’, the image given in the constellation” (Menke 2002: 356n19), propitiously imaged or figured in Kiefer’s painting of 1999, *Light trap (Lichtfalle)* (Figure 30), as well as in Warburg’s astrological analyses, interpreted as “Dialektik der Aufklärung”.¹⁹⁵

I might add here that my conceptual deployment of the figure of a melancholy/mobile constellation, as a means of linking the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge, seems to be on a par with the performative deployment or figuration of constellations in the work of all three. Rather than opting for a mythical constellation of eternity, all three emphasise mobility and transience; and rather than holding out for a metaphysics of truth, all three emphasise the shifting ground of multiple points of view, “each time anew” (Bal 2002: 122). As Menke (2002: 268) writes: “The ornamental structuring of the ‘figure’ cannot be definitively stabilized: the gaze sets up a constellation, reads a certain configuration from out of the texture of lineaments and its interlacings, and each time realizes a new relationship of figure and ground”. Transience and the shifting ground of multiple points of view ultimately evince both Mercurial mobility and the Saturnian acedia of melancholia; the latter projected similarly in Benjamin’s, Kiefer’s, and Kentridge’s work, as dialectical mourning over the catastrophic transience of all things worldly.

¹⁹⁵ Diers (1992: 32) writes insightfully: “Der ‘Pendelgang’ der Menschheit zwischen Affekt und Rationalität, zwischen Mythos und Logos bezeichnet eine der theoretischen Grundfiguren einer Warburgschen ‘Dialektik der Aufklärung’. Kultur ist nicht die durch Fortschritt ein- für allemal überwundene Barbarei, sondern ihr Revers, von dem sie nicht zu trennen ist. Daß Aufklärung in Mythologie umschlagen kann, das zeigten Warburg die Erfahrungen des Ersten Weltkrieges, für die er als Historiker in seiner (unausgesprochen zeitenvergleichenden) Studie über *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten* nach einer Erklärung gesucht hat”. Warburg’s reverse dialectic not only recalls Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s negative dialectic, it also sounds a distinctly similar note to Benjamin’s, if one recalls his now famous declaration: “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin 2003: 392). See Warburg’s (1999: 597-697) “Pagan-antique prophecy in words and images in the age of Luther” and Kristen Lippincott’s (2001: 151-182) meditation on Warburg’s text, “*Urania redux*: a view of Aby Warburg’s writings on astrology and art”.

4.2 Melancholy dialectics

One of the principal conjectures of this chapter, and of this dissertation, is to view the multifarious history of the image of melancholia as fundamentally dialectical, as a philosophical constellation with which, and through which, to dialectically read the image in Benjamin's, Kiefer's, and Kentridge's work as melancholy/mobile constellation. The classification of the image as a constellation in Benjamin's, Kiefer's, and Kentridge's work may be distinguished from James Elkins' attempt at grasping the "sub-semiotic" basis of visual material by way of the notion of *gramma*, a generic term that engages with J J Gibson's phrase "marks on a surface" and which indicates "a common origin in interlacings of writing, notation and picturing" (Elkins 1999, Van den Berg 2004: 161).¹⁹⁶ Image-as-constellation may be distinguished further from W J T Mitchell's notion of image as "likeness, resemblance, similitude" (Mitchell 1986: 10, Van den Berg 2004: 163), although the very notion of the image as a constellation seems based on resemblance (cf Weigel 1994: 23).¹⁹⁷

This section will linger with Kiefer's painting *Light trap*, read visually, intertextually and interdiscursively (cf Bal 1999: 10) in conjunction with related images from both Kiefer's oeuvre and Kentridge's *Felix in exile* of 1994. Firstly, as a means of reflecting on Benjamin's, Kiefer's, and Kentridge's work: seen respectively as complexly melancholic; and figured together as melancholy/mobile constellation. And secondly, as departure point from whence to reflect implicitly on the historical performance as a melancholy performance, which, as Martin Jay (1996: 22) and Michael Ann Holly (2002: 3, 10, 11) argue, "keeps the wound open"¹⁹⁸ — intransigently resisting current consolation and

¹⁹⁶ Although I read Kentridge's work in terms of the image as a constellation, the notion of *gramma* perfectly describes the calligraphic interlacing of marks on a surface that often times characterise it.

¹⁹⁷ This is precisely the impetus behind my discussion of Kiki Smith's image *Constellation*, in the conclusion to this chapter.

¹⁹⁸ Cf Taylor (1987: xxxi) on Lacan's insistence "that the impossibility of total satisfaction subverts the possibility of complete self-consciousness. Since there is always an Other 'within,' the subject can never coincide with itself and thus is forever split. What Lacan describes as the incomprehensible *reel* keeps the wound of subjectivity open". This has particular bearing on my discussion in section 4.3 of the inaccessibility of Nandi to Felix and of Felix to himself, as figured in *Felix in exile*.

symbolic closure.¹⁹⁹ For Holly (1999: 15), “[c]ontinuing curiosity about what the scholar will never be able completely to know seems to me to be the most noble, though undeniably melancholic, critical endeavour of all”. It is perhaps in this dialectically melancholy shadow that Hamacher (2005: 64) writes: “The desire for genuine history as well as the [melancholy] horror that it could be impossible have to be integral elements of the possibility of history itself”.

It is with the resistance to the “totalisation of the de-totalised” (Jay 1996: 7) in mind, coupled with the fascination in Benjamin’s, Kiefer’s, and Kentridge’s work with the cloudy materiality²⁰⁰ of objects and significations that inevitably resist complete appropriation,²⁰¹ that melancholy constellations will be traced by way of the figure of the ghost. As Holly (2002: 3) writes: “Something remains; something gets left over”,²⁰² the interminable ghost of the image before and after the image that we are materially faced with, in each present time of reading the similarities and differences of Benjamin’s, Kiefer’s, and Kentridge’s past, present, and future. It is the ghost of a disaster which appears preposterously “to come and to come-back”, to cite Derrida (1994: 98).

Bearing this ungraspable ghost in mind, let me then turn to Kiefer’s painting *Light trap*, a prodigious painting in which the ghost or Adornian non-identical remainder²⁰³ or apparition of the has-been, a Mayan temple or ruin, appears submerged in the ground

¹⁹⁹ Cf also Melissa Zeiger (qtd Sonstroem 2004) who speaks of a “refusal of consolation, maintained along with [a] refusal to dismiss the dead”. Sonstroem’s article addresses Freud’s famous distinction between “healthy” mourning, which has an end goal, and “pathological” melancholia, which returns obsessively to the lost object. In a similar vein to Jay, and contra Freud, Sonstroem holds out for a “healthy” or productive melancholia, through which marginalised groups may collectively mourn the dead — in an ongoing, multifarious, open-ended process.

²⁰⁰ I am appropriating Damisch’s notion of the cloud as “what is purely material or substance” (Bois *et al.* 1998: 4). As such the cloud is a theoretical object, “which is closest to ‘painting’, and thus it has an emblematic value”. It is “the emblem of pictoriality” as materiality.

²⁰¹ Cf Bal 1999, 2001a & 2002, Damisch 2002, Fried 2002, Holly 2002, Marin 1995, Pensky 2001.

²⁰² Cf Adorno on the non-identical remainder as ungraspable leftover (Leppert 2002: 34) and Taylor (1987: xxxiii) on “a remainder left after everything seemed finished”.

²⁰³ Similarly, the figure of Nandi in Kentridge’s *Felix in exile* may also be seen as ghostly trace or ungraspable remainder. See section 4.3 below.

against which a stellar constellation²⁰⁴ has been traced or figured in white. Punctuating the constellation are labels bearing the names modern astronomers have given the individual stars, “to describe their spectral type, luminosity and any other peculiarities” (Hartley 2000: 193). Kiefer has inscribed the German title of his painting, “Lichtfalle”, at the top left of the canvas. A rusty rat-trap has been attached just below the centre of the canvas, at the bottom of the line of golden paint running down the facing side of the submerged Mayan pyramid. Several shards of glass, lettered and numbered according to the stars, have been thrust inside the trap.

Kiefer’s painting was painted in response to Tintoretto’s *Origin of the Milky Way* (Figure 31), which according to Hartley (2000: 201) “was probably painted in the late 1570s in the early years of the modern, scientific era”. Hartley argues that, “[w]hat attracted Kiefer to this painting was the linking of the creation of the stars, of our universe, with human procreation, the mirroring of the macrocosm in the microcosm”. As such, Kiefer’s image registers a dialectical or allegorical thematics of bidirectionality, whereby what is below is mirrored above; recalling Ficino’s neo-Platonism, the archaic materiality of the earth²⁰⁵ is mirrored in the heavens, and vice versa.²⁰⁶ Accordingly, what is base or *materia prima* is alchemically transmuted into the lofty or noble (figured by the golden trail descending from the top centre of the ghostly pyramid). And what is fallen, as in an apocalyptic pun on the German “*Lichtfall*” or “light fall” (Hartley 2000: 196), allegorically refers forward toward the not-yet redeemed.²⁰⁷ Moreover, the historical and thematic bidirectionality in Kiefer’s painting preposterously opens up “the process of meaning-production over time (in both directions: present/past and past/present) in an open, dynamic process” (Bal 1999: 9).

²⁰⁴ With reference to stellar constellations, cf also Warburg’s (1999: 597-697) “Pagan-Antique prophecy in words and images in the age of Luther” and Kristin Lippincott’s (2001: 151-182) “*Urania redux*: A view of Aby Warburg’s writings on astrology and art”.

²⁰⁵ Cf Rosenberg (1987: 36) on Kiefer’s emphasis on “the primacy of the land before meanings were attached to it”.

²⁰⁶ I discuss neo-Platonism in relation to melancholia and bidirectionality as imaged in Benjamin, Kiefer, and Dürer in chapter two.

²⁰⁷ Cf the apocalyptic thought of Bloch with reference to the “not-yet” in Daniel & Moylan (1997).

Kiefer's painting visualises several thematic constellations, projected from different points of view. Firstly, Kiefer depicts the constellation of the Draco or the Dragon, "the name of a constellation at least since the time of the ancient Greeks" (Hartley 2000: 194).²⁰⁸ Secondly, when seen from a particular point, the dragon bears similarities with alchemy. As Hartley (2000: 195) writes: "According to Carl Jung ... the dragon lies at the very heart of the alchemist's vision. It symbolizes the chthonic, earthbound principle of the serpent [a recurring motif in Kiefer's work] and the airy principle of the bird. It was used as a symbol for mercury, which alchemists believed was able to turn base metal to gold or spirit". According to Jung (qtd. Hartley 2000: 195): "As a dragon it consumes itself and as a dragon it dies and is resurrected as the [Philosopher's] Stone" — emblem of higher human consciousness. Furthermore, as the product of transformation the alchemical notion of higher human consciousness is intricately connected to both the figure of allegory and the historical image of melancholia. As noted in chapter two, according to Benjamin (1998: 229) the figure of allegory is connected to alchemy, magical knowledge, processes of decay, isolation, spiritual death, and ultimately both material and spiritual transformation. Moreover, linking painting to alchemy, as something that matters both spiritually and materially, James Elkins (2000: 155) notes, "[a]lchemy is at home in depression, uncertainty, and melancholy".

If one shifts one's point of view slightly, a third constellation, that of the theory and discovery of black holes,²⁰⁹ is evoked by way of the rusty rat-trap, attached just below the centre of the canvas, playing on trapping the viewer or reader in the representation (cf Marin 1995: 148). Hartley (2001: 195f) notes that the rat-trap "is drawing light into itself and preventing it from leaving. The shards of glass are marked by letters and numbers indicating that they represent stars. Thus, the rat-trap becomes a black hole, 'a region of

²⁰⁸ The most commonly cited mythical origin of this constellation is that of the dragon, Lodon, who, after being killed by Herakles in one of the twelve labours Hera set him, was rewarded for his faithfulness by being set in the stars. Hera (or Juno to the Romans) set Herakles these twelve potentially lethal labours out of anger for being tricked by Zeus (Jupiter) into suckling the bastard son Herakles (Hercules). It is said that, "Herakles sucked so vigorously at her breasts that milk spurted into the sky to form the Milky Way". It is here that Kiefer's painting links up with Tintoretto's (Hartley 2000: 194).

²⁰⁹ Kristeva (1989: 88) speaks of the "black hole" of melancholy, an image that has particular relevance to Kiefer's *Light fall*.

space-time from which nothing, not even light, can escape, because its gravity is so strong”. Kiefer’s evocation of constellations of black holes refers to “their tremendous potential to destroy matter, even light” (Hartley 2000: 196). Yet, when figured in a mobile constellation with alchemy, this destructive power may also be read as intensely transformative — though the reverse is also true; in such a constellation alchemy may revert to the black bile of melancholia, destruction, and death.

This contradiction or melancholy dialectic of destruction/redemption is a recurring motif throughout Kiefer’s oeuvre, as figured, for example, in his painting *Nero paints* (1974) (Figure 32). Here the constellational figure, “hypericon”,²¹⁰ or emblem of a painter’s palette, prefiguring by *Nachträglichkeit* the stellar constellation in *Light trap*, floats above or against a burned landscape evoking the black bile of melancholia.²¹¹ As Nägele (1991: 81) writes with reference to Benjamin’s enunciation of the melancholy or dead park of allegory: “It is a landscape of *Nachträglichkeit*, whose shine comes from the reflection of vanished and vanishing things. It is the autumnal landscape of melancholy, as it presents itself after the harvest, but also after reading”. It is a melancholy landscape allegorically summoning the destruction of war and of allegoresis itself.²¹² In this sense, similar to several of Kentridge’s works, Kiefer’s melancholy landscape with palette may be seen to be both performative and self-reflexive. Given the bidirectionality at play

²¹⁰ Cf Mitchell’s (1985: 5-6) notion of the hypericon, which “involves attention to the way in which images (and ideas) double themselves: the way we depict the act of picturing, imagine the activity of imagination, figure the practice of figuration”. Mitchell’s hypericon may be related to Peirce’s hypo-icon (Bois 2005), Bal’s (1999, 2001 & 2002) notion of the theoretical object and Stoichita’s (1997) notion of meta-painting. Bal seems to derive her notion of the theoretical object from Damisch (cf Bal 2001a: 5n5). For Damisch (Bois *et al* 1998: 6) “the theoretical object [such as the cloud in the history of painting, or the hand of the Virgin in Piero della Francesca’s *Madonna del Parto*] is [first] something that obliges one to do theory”. Secondly, “it’s an object that obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it. Thus, if you agree to accept it on theoretical terms, it will produce effects around itself”. And thirdly, “it’s a theoretical object because it forces us to ask ourselves what theory is. It is posed in theoretical terms; it produces theory; and it necessitates a reflection on theory”. Damisch’s (Bois *et al* 1998: 7) understanding of the theoretical object as a detail that “raises questions”, suggests that Bal’s (2001b: 84-7) notion of the “navel detail”, which borrows from Naomi Schor’s *Reading in detail* (1987), may be registered as a theoretical object..

²¹¹ For more on the relation between black bile and melancholia, see Stoichita & Coderch (1999).

²¹² Cf Benjamin 1998, Buck-Morss 1997, Geyer-Ryan 1994, Handelman 1991, Schoeman 2003a & 2004. See also Hanssen (2002: 331n11) on “the disjunctive force of allegory’s negative dialectic”. Cf Benjamin (2003: 165 qtd. Richter 2002: 231) on “the destructive power of the allegorical intention”. Cf Weigel (1996: xvii) on the “distortion into allegory”.

within the historical image of melancholia, the palette — emblem of the heroic melancholy artist figured in Dürer's *Melencolia I* (cf Pensky 2001) — allegorises both the destructive and possibly redemptive²¹³ properties of the process of enunciation and negation. In his book *To destroy painting*, Marin (1995: 90) writes:

The act of negation [of author and enunciation] in and beyond the present subverts the temporal categories of both past and future in what is a decisive moment of truth; it is in the moment of negation that death is demystified and demythified as a result of myth itself. The mythical element resides in the promise that the deceased will be forever present in the form of an eternal constellation of stars.

In the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge — mapped as a triadic gestalt of shifting differences and similarities, of time and place — the mythic constellation of eternity is dialectically mobilised or ruined by doubt. For the deceased never stop moving; destruction and catastrophe do not cease. In this melancholy constellation, happiness never ceases to be sucked into the black holes of the past. The eternal constellation is transformed into a melancholy constellation that never ceases to ask of us to be present to the slim chance of redemption or happiness that flares up in every moment of danger, only to disappear again irretrievably, “never to be seen again” (Hamacher 2005: 65). In the melancholy imaging of history, “the one who could remember” (Hamacher 2005: 65) is figured in a labyrinthine constellation with eternal fleetingness (cf Buck-Morss 1997: 166 & 167); the unique, rather than eternal, promise of happiness that lies in the past.²¹⁴

Evidencing “the irreducible plurality of particular constellations” (Žižek 2003: 277f), a slight shift in point of view would prompt a “gestalt-switch” (Menke 2002: 269): Thus

²¹³ But if “the culture of redemption is the culture of death”, as Bersani (Dean *et al* 1997: 4, Bersani 1990) claims, then the notion of redemption, if not ultimately masking the urge to suicide as Bersani argues, is always already irreducibly knotted with death and failure. Yet if failure, as collapse and shattering, is a method for Bersani — against a culture of immobility and authority masking its own urge to self-destruct — then failure may be borrowed as a critical mobility within the notion of redemption, “endlessly repeated, or prolonged to infinity” (Silverman in Dean *et al* 1997: 3). This critical approach would certainly cast Benjamin's, Kiefer's, and Kentridge's various and varying melancholy love affairs with death and failed redemption in a different, more sobering light.

²¹⁴ Cf Nietzsche (*Gay science* qtd Bataille 2004: 4): “To those who see inside themselves as if into the immense universe and who in themselves bear Milky Ways, the extreme irregularity of these constellations is well known; they lead directly to chaos and to a labyrinthine existence”.

the black holes of Kiefer's *Light trap* recombine in his paintings of sunflowers, which evoke black, rotten or sick, melancholic suns. His *The famous orders of the night*²¹⁵ of 1996 (Figure 19), astutely visualises a sick sun or ideal sunflower. Approximating a constellation of foreboding black suns, the sunflowers seem to loom like a fatal augur over us, as if we were prostrate — perhaps lying akin to corpses on the ground. While the sunflowers reach up toward the sun they also wither and die. But vice versa: if one reads the inscription at the top right of the painting, 'For Robert Fludd', an allegorical, alchemical or Kabbalistic countermotion is put into play. By way of the name or rebus of the sixteenth- to seventeenth-century English Rosicrucian, the force of descending here increases another that is acting in the opposite direction.

In an attempt to image the dialectical relation between the sacred and the profane, Benjamin writes in the hermetic (1978: 312) "Theologico-political fragment":

If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom (Benjamin 1978: 312).

This sacred and profane image of bidirectionality, which may be productively mapped onto Ficino's cosmology, perfectly conjures Benjamin's messianic philosophy of history. At the same time, it perfectly bodies forth the dialectics that is at stake in Kiefer's mytho-historical paintings rooted in the Holocaust and Kentridge's evocative animations of landscapes and figures inscribed with absence and exile. And if the historical image of melancholia, and of melancholy history writing, which joins their work in and as a shape-shifting constellation, is essentially dialectical it may be imagined as this dynamic force acting in two directions: upward and downward.

²¹⁵ *Die berühmten Orden der Nacht.*

From yet another point of view, Kiefer's *Light trap* becomes part of a fourth constellation: that of the Holocaust.²¹⁶ This constellation is evoked by a closely related work Kiefer painted at that time, entitled *Light compulsion (Lichtzwang)*. The word "Lichtzwang" refers to the title of a book of poems by Paul Celan, the Jewish poet who is evoked in several of Kiefer's works referencing the Holocaust, such as *Shulamite* (1983) (Figure 33). Hartley (2000: 198) notes that "'light compulsion' refers to the enforced lighting around the camps to ensure no-one could escape under cover of darkness". He notes "the word can also be read as 'forcing light in, together, preventing it from escaping", hence linking back to the trap in *Light trap*, now evoking the ovens of the extermination camps. Thinking in the dark of *Lichtzwang* horrifically means thinking under the enforced lighting of the death camps.

In *Shulamite* Kiefer refers to Celan's "Death fugue" [*Todesfuge*] (1946), apparently written in a concentration camp. In the poem "Celan pairs and contrasts Margarete with Shulamith: [the German] Margarete's female Jewish counterpart, whose grave in the air the Jewish slave workers are forced to dig. At the end of the poem, after the Jews are apparently shot, Celan concludes with a synecdochic verbal image of the two absent women: 'your golden Hair Margarete/your ashen Hair Shulamith'" (Biro 1998: 183). In Kiefer's constellational image, which pairs and contrasts with several of his other works, the name Shulamith (inscribed as "Sulamith" at the top left of the canvas) evokes the melancholy absence or infinite exile of both women.

The repetitive indeterminacy²¹⁷ or self-reflexive ambiguity of Kiefer's works on the Holocaust "sits uneasily with the essentially spiritual reading of the alchemist's *opus*"

²¹⁶ Bernstein (2001: 373) cites Berel Lang: "[Holocaust] derives from the use in the Septuagint of *holokaustoma* ('totally consumed by fire') — the Greek translation of the Hebrew *olah*, which designates the type of ritual sacrifice that was to be completely burned". Bernstein adds: "The name 'the Shoah' equally possesses fitness and misdirection. In Hebrew *shoah* means, variously, destruction or wasteland; its Yiddish equivalent picked up the sense of a destruction of the Temples. 'Shoah' hence came to designate a destruction that was a 'breach or a turning point in history'". The destroyed, uncovered yet hidden Mayan temple in Kiefer's painting may then be figured in a constellation with the above.

²¹⁷ Cf Biro's (1998) characterisation of Kiefer's work as employing a hermeneutics of indeterminacy. Bal (2002: 92) preferences "infinite" over "semantic indetermination" or "endlessness", writing with reference to James Coleman's *Photograph* (1998-9): "It is this undecidability that Coleman's work not only

(Hartley 2000: 200). However, it is precisely the holding together of two contradictory ideas, without one negating the other that lends Kiefer's works their melancholy dialectics. For Pensky (2001: 246, 247) melancholy dialectics grants images a fragile redemptive power,²¹⁸ situated — retrospectively, by *Nachträglichkeit* — in “a space, albeit a terribly small one ... between antinomies”.²¹⁹ It is from the point of view of melancholy dialectics that one may figure Kiefer's *Light trap* in a thematic constellation with Kentridge's animated film *Felix in exile*, a work that figures the melancholy absence or exile of Felix and Nandi, in a shifting, melancholy constellation.

4.3 Self-reflexivity and the melancholia of absence and exile

One of the thematic focal points of this dissertation has been the configuration of absence, exile, and death in Benjamin's, Kiefer's, as well as in Kentridge's work, seen as

demonstrates and endorses, but also sacrifices and transcends — in order to give voice” (Bal 2002: 210). On the other hand, referring to the readability as well as unreadability of Benjamin's textual and imagistic figurations of ornaments, constellations, and flurries, Menke (2002: 269) speaks of “a *gestalt-switch*, an incessant oscillation of undecidable determinations, in which according to Benjamin all ornaments participate. The difference between figure and ground and background, whose erasure would make ornaments, images, and arabesques impossible, is blurred in the undecidability of a polysemy, which is due precisely to the fact that decisions must be made constantly and that decisions always already have been made”. Referring to the irreducible tension between readability and unreadability in Benjamin's texts, Richter (2000: 232) writes: “[T]he decisions that the reader must make in the act of reading are to be wrested from the act of experiencing an aporetic moment of something that cannot be decided, something that can neither be given in advance not once and for all”. For Richter, “Benjamin emphasizes the political importance of deferring a finite decision”. Emphasising “...Benjamin's understanding of the *infinite* process of decision-making”, he writes, “[f]or Benjamin, there can be no hope for transformation without the radical *keeping open* of future possibilities” (Richter 2000: 233). He cites Benjamin: “The task is therefore not to make a finite decision once and for all, but rather to decide at every moment. But to *decide*” (Richter 2002: 32). Richter's suggestion of the political importance of the infinite process of decision-making may in a sense be linked with Bal's notion of the political potential of undecidability. After relating polysemy with allegory, she writes, “[t]he question ... is whether the semiotically inevitable undecidability and plurality of meanings is really so free”. From the point of view of accountability she calls for the reinsertion of the political potential of Derrida's notion of undecidability within the theoretical discourse on art (Bal 2001b: 72). Cf Derrida (1981: 3) on undecidability and Derrida (1984: 8) on indeterminism: “[F]or some of us the principle of indeterminism is what makes the conscious freedom of man fathomable”. In the context of Benjamin's, Kiefer's, and Kentridge's *melancholic* approach to politics, history, and decision-making, see Pensky (2001) on the proximity between melancholia and indecisiveness in the baroque mourning play, and on the paradoxical attempt to overcome melancholia by way of a politics of decision-making.

²¹⁸ Cf Benjamin's (2003: 390) notion of a “*weak messianic power*”.

²¹⁹ The “spectral”, revolutionary-messianic space between is a recurring motif in Benjamin's thought, as in the multifarious figuring “of thresholds, transitions, and transitory acts and events”. As Richter (2002: 5) observes, “[t]his transitory quality of thought and of writing is for Benjamin always both a liberation and a liability”. Hence the irreducibility of what Pensky refers to as melancholy dialectics in Benjamin's work.

allegorically self-reflexive — that is, as involving a reflection on, or a questioning of, representation itself. As Mark C Taylor (1999: 24) writes, “[s]ince absence inevitably haunts representation, representations figure a lack that cannot be filled”. He notes, in similar vein to Marin (1995): “In the medium of painting [or drawing], the picture is the absence — perhaps even the death — of the thing” (Taylor 1999: 24f). For Taylor (1999: 35), “[t]he absence haunting representation repeatedly places the picture in question”. My notion of self-reflexivity is different to Taylor’s (1999: 57) critical understanding of “a self-reflexive circuit”, typical of modernism, wherein “all reference is self-reference, there is nothing outside the image or sign. The play of signs becomes as seamless as a web without holes, gaps, or rifts”.²²⁰

In my estimation, the self-reflexivity figured in various ways in the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge is precisely what *enunciates* or *opens up* (black) holes, gaps, or rifts, both in their representations and in our (self-reflexive) reading or viewing of it. Self-reflexivity is then also the result of the irreducible gap between signifier and signified — a gap figured or theorised at least since the time of the baroque, as Benjamin himself noted, and as has Bal since him.²²¹ The “baroque” self-reflexivity that occupies Benjamin’s dialectical philosophy of history resurfaces in Kiefer’s heavily encrusted artworks, as well as in Kentridge’s animated meditations on art and history. In their work it has the effect or affect of alerting the reader or viewer to the work’s own textured, allegorical weavings and flurries, as these are melancholically enfolded with their always already absent referents. This philosophical and textured self-reflexivity is what “keeps the wound [of art, history, and subjectivity, not to mention the question of the modern or the postmodern, GS] open” (Holly 2002, Jay 1996, Taylor 1987).

²²⁰ Jameson (2002: 92f) argues a similar case: “[T]his is at least one clear dividing line between the modern and the postmodern, namely, the refusal of concepts of self-consciousness, reflexivity, irony or self-reference in the postmodern aesthetic and also in postmodern values and philosophy as such, if there can be said to be such a thing”. He also notes: “[M]odernist works of art can so often be seen, implicitly or explicitly, to be allegories of their own production” (Jameson 2002: 159), something Michael Fried has brilliantly thematised. However, as Dilnot & Garcia-Padilla (1989) have shown, many pre-modernist artworks, such as Vermeer’s, may be read as self-reflexively allegorical of their own production; and surely the same can be said of many postmodernist works of art. Cf Stoichita’s (1997) book on the self-aware image.

²²¹ Cf also Dilnot & Garcia-Padilla (1989).

As a form of *en-folding*, to borrow from Taylor (1999: 59) slightly against himself, this allegorical self-reflexivity, which always refers the reader or viewer *elsewhere*, “interrupts the apparently closed circuits of self-reference and self-reflection”. The allegorically self-reflexive, and ultimately melancholic, questioning of representation within representation also bears on the representation of history — of things past, dead, or silent — a key concern of this dissertation. Taylor (1999: 28) writes: “That which is already missing constitutes something like an irreducible past — a past that cannot be re-presented. And yet, this past is at the same time the condition of the possibility of all presence and every present”, that is, of all representation or “*Darstellung*, which mediates between saying and showing” (Missac 1995: 28).²²²

Let me firstly contextualise Kentridge’s film, which stages and is inscribed with the very recent South African past. *Felix in exile* was made in 1994, shortly before South Africa’s first democratic general election. In this context one might see the figure of Felix as melancholically reflecting (on) the ambiguities of ‘Paradise Lost’, that is, of the supposed Paradise of the colonial-apartheid past. The film ends as it starts: with the naked Felix, with his back facing us, staring out over a barren landscape. The narrative that happens in between the end and the beginning involves the intricate interlacing and transformation of images and figures from the past and the present, images in the heavens and in the ground, images that spill from Felix’s suitcase. Ultimately the film is a melancholy meditation on the transience and loss that marks every representation of art and of

²²² Cf Levinas on the difference between “the said” (*le dit*) and “saying” (*le dire*). According to Levinas, “[t]he said is ‘always already said’. In a manner similar to Saussure’s *langue* and Lacan’s symbolic order, the said designates the structural totality of language which, existing prior to and independent of any particular subject, guides all rational thought” (Taylor 1987: 196). The said, according to Levinas, designates, passes judgement (Benjamin argues that after the Fall into knowledge all language passes judgement, arbitrarily). Saying, however, “goes beyond the said” (Levinas qtd Taylor 1987: 199); “saying can say what remains unspoken in the said only through a preoriginal saying, which is before sentencing” (Taylor 1987: 199). Saying says “‘the temporalization of time’ that signifies ‘the beyond of being and of not being’” (Levinas qtd Taylor 1987: 199). Taylor (1987: 199f) notes: “In contrast to the time of the said, the temporalization of saying cannot be assembled in the present. Saying says only in and through its own disappearance. The ‘appearance’ of this disappearance interrupts the present, thereby dislocating the presence of the said”. Cf my discussion below of caesura as rejuvenative interruption of the eternal-the-same present.

history, especially when this representation takes place in the shadow of flawed attempts at reconciling the past with the present, lies with the truth, and guilt with forgiveness.

Benjamin's understanding of knowledge as intertwined with allegory, which in his schema stems from the primordial fall into subjectivity and which is thus inseparable from guilt, can be a productive way to think of the ambiguous conscious-raising processes, which followed the elections and which culminated in the often irreconcilable traumas and differences experienced during and after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In this sense, the TRC represents the often terrible proximity between remembering and disremembering, innocence and guilt. Instead of resolving the contradictions and paradoxes of testimony, guilt, and forgiveness, and contrary to its desire for symbolic closure and consolation, the TRC as an event may be seen to open up the allegorical abyss of signification.

This allegorical abyss of signification, fraught with melancholy repetition devoid of telos,²²³ may then be knotted²²⁴ together with the melancholy dialectics at play in Kiefer's ambiguous works on the Holocaust, as noted above. Thus the historically specific South African melancholia, always already bidirectional, figured in *Felix in exile* may be "preposterously" enfolded with the historically specific Holocaust/German trauma figured in Kiefer's work. Moreover, Kentridge's repeated allegorical use of the visual language of Weimar Germany resonates with Benjamin's reading of the empty, inauthentic world of the Reformation (as formulated in his *The origin of German tragic drama*), which for him serves allegorically and dialectically as an expression of Weimar Germany. For both Kentridge and Benjamin, the catastrophe of the past, viewed from a German-Jewish or South African-Jewish perspective, allegorically pre-figures the

²²³ Devoid of the telos that characterises modernism and modernisation, the latter which, according to Jameson (2002: 166), "stands for the transfer and/or implementation of industrial technology already developed; for its replication rather than its invention...".

²²⁴ My use of the word or mobile concept of the "knot" is derived from Damisch's (Bois *et al* 1998: 7) interest in "the idea of knotting, which is to say nouage as opposed to nuage [cloud]. I fantasize about writing a Theory of /Knotting/ [*Une Theorie du /nouage/*], which would ask how Western art constitutes itself in relation to a fundamental knotting or linking with geometry in Greece or even in Egypt...". See also Bankovsky's (2004) use of the mobile concept of the knot in her article "A thread of knots: Jacques Derrida's homage to Emmanuel Levinas' ethical reminder".

ongoing catastrophe and darkness of the present. In their work the catastrophe of the present is partially located in culture's dark inability to overcome barbarism. Similarly, Kiefer's work repeatedly returns to the haunted/haunting site of the (German) past as a somber point from which to project the irreducible complexities of the present. One may refer here to Hamacher's (2005: 65) interpretation of Benjamin's characterisation of "history as in principle singular, that is, unrepeatable, repetition of what-has-been in a present Now":

Not only does every time therefore have a virtually corresponding time, in which it is recognized, and this means recognized as intending the latter; furthermore, this time is only a single one. What follows from this is: time is time only in the danger of not being time.

Thus the "preposterous" enfolding of the work of a German-Jewish theorist obsessed with history as catastrophe, with work thematising catastrophe by a contemporary German artist and a contemporary South African artist in and as a melancholy/mobile constellation should, on the one hand, bear witness to, rather than elide, the actual historical embeddedness of their respective work. It calls for a thinking of time. Benjamin lived through World War I and in a last desperate attempt to escape the death camps, committed suicide in 1940, in Port-Bau, Spain; Kiefer began working as a German artist after World War II (his first series of works, in which he mimicks the Nazi salute in various locations, is dated 1969); and Kentridge has produced his nuanced, catastrophe-based work both during and after apartheid in South Africa. Each individual's work reflects these different times and spaces, in *singularly* multifarious and vacillating rather than positivistic ways.²²⁵

²²⁵ For some the different timeframes that mark the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge would see Benjamin working within the context of modernism, whilst Kiefer's and Kentridge's work is often seamlessly characterised as postmodern. Nevertheless, numerous authors have pointed out that Benjamin's work pre-empts so-called postmodernism (for example, as in his critique of the concept of progress), and several have appropriated his work as such. Furthermore, as Jameson (2002: 1) has noted recently, much of so-called postmodern thinking harks back to modernism, suggesting "the return to and the reestablishment of all kinds of old things, rather than their wholesale liquidation". As suggested earlier, the dialectic between modernism and postmodernism is to my mind precisely what is at stake in my constellational enfolding of the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge.

However, what knots or links their work, even with the historical differences that inflect it, is the historical trauma that marks both European and South African history. In terms of “this accretion, this constellation of interests” (Rifkin 1999: 50), one may speak here, as Bal (1999: 7) does, of a “coevalness”, of a “shared time”.²²⁶ Crucial in this regard would be the recognition of the multifarious critique of “fascist aestheticisation” that characterises the work of all three, in a way that would emphasise “the need to recognize critically the legacy of the past in the present (Koepnick 1999: 8).²²⁷ On the other hand, in their different ways Kiefer and Kentridge visually, and Benjamin scripturally, image history allegorically and melancholically through “other” histories (cf Hanssen 1998); the historical specificity of their work should also be visualised, read and dispersed elsewhere (cf Bal 2001b). For, as Hamacher (1988: 175) writes, “[r]eading [and, by extension, the allegorical imaging of history, GS] is not the gathering of disparate things but rather that dispersion in which gathering alone is possible”.²²⁸ This enfolding and dispersion elsewhere is arguably what Benjamin meant when he spoke of the textured now-time in which different histories come together in a flash, only to disappear again.

Bearing the above in mind, I want to linger with two drawings from *Felix in exile*. In the first drawing (Figure 34) Nandi is traced and erased,²²⁹ enunciated and negated as in Kiefer’s *Nero paints*, in a constellation of drawings pinned to the wall of Felix’s room.

²²⁶ Similarly, speaking about her interdisciplinary and comparative look at “the shared legacy of settler colonialism and British imperialism in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, South Africa, and the United States”, as this relates to questions around the complex representation or narration of history and memory, belonging and identity, Annie Coombes (2003: 6) refers to “a shared past” in her book *History after Apartheid*.

²²⁷ Benjamin’s multidimensional critique of fascist aestheticisation and the Nazi spectacle resurfaces in the Kiefer’s work in ambiguous ways; while Kentridge’s concern with fascist aestheticisation and mass spectacle resonates with Benjamin’s and Kiefer’s work, though one ought not simply conflate Nazi aestheticisation and the aestheticisation redolent of the apartheid regime. There are important crossovers (both, for example, involve modernising functions, cf Koepnick 1999: 9), but also important historical differences. What is critical though, according to Koepnick (1999: 2), is that “Nazi aesthetics [and by extension, apartheid aesthetics of power, GS] remains fascinating today because postmodern culture similarly desires spectacles and mass-reproduced representations. An uncanny soulmate of the Nazi spectacle, postmodernism incessantly recycles images of the Third Reich as it seeks in its own ways to break down modern boundaries between politics and aesthetics and to turn life into a fantastic [commodified, GS] work of art”.

²²⁸ Cf Bataille (2004: 67): “In the end the face is dispersed. In the place where the fabric of things rips open — in the lacerating rip — nothing remains but a person introduced into the fabric’s texture”.

²²⁹ I discuss the melancholy dialectics of tracing and erasure in *Felix in exile*, in chapter three.

As constellation, she appears both asleep and, by virtue of the melancholy *Nachträglichkeit* self-reflexively performed during the course of the film,²³⁰ as a corpse. Whether asleep or a corpse, the ghostly figure²³¹ or trace of Nandi (a black woman) can never be wholly available to Felix (a white man). Coupled with Felix's own unavailability to himself,²³² this is what lends the film its self-reflexive sense of melancholia, its sense of loss, absence and exile.²³³ The fraught self-reflexivity performed in Kentridge's work "does not try to negate lack but deploys erasure to let absence stand forth in its withdrawal" (Taylor 1999: 77). By extension, it is this loss, absence and exile that have prompted me to adopt a self-reflexive and performative approach to this article,

²³⁰ I discuss Kentridge's self-reflexivity in chapter three, and below.

²³¹ In chapter three I refer to Nandi as ghost that haunts Felix and, by extension, both Nandi and Felix haunting the viewer/writer. As Derrida (1994: 10) writes: "What does it mean to follow a ghost? And what if this came down to being followed by it, always persecuted by the very chase we are leading?" Correlatively speaking, Cohen (1995: 63) cites the following French adage, with reference to the ghostly self in Breton's *Nadja*: "Dis-mois qui tu hantes et je te dirai qui tu es' (tell me whom you haunt, in the sense of *frequent*, and I will tell you who you are)". As Cohen (1995: 64) observes "The *I* becomes a series of ghosts of its contiguous experience rather than a centered self". For more on the haunted self in surrealism — a movement whose procedures, such as "automatic writing where attention is drawn to tracing letters [or figures, GS] on the page" (Cohen 1995: 133) and "free association", have certainly influenced Kentridge's work — see also Lomas (2000). Cf Caygill (1998: 54): "[T]he mourning play [perhaps here similar to surrealist art and writing, GS] is not the reflection of a higher life, but merely the reflection of a mirror in a mirror, and its continuation is no less shadowy that itself. The dead become ghosts".

²³² Cf Benjamin's (1999b: 810) statement in his essay on Kafka: "[T]he most forgotten source of strangeness is our body — one's own body". Earlier on in the same essay he writes, "[f]or just as K. lives in the village on Castle Hill, modern man lives in his own body: the body slips away from him, is hostile toward him". For more on Benjamin and the strangeness or unavailability of our own bodies, see Richter (2000). Cf also Freud (qtd Cohen 1995: 60): "[T]he unconscious [essential reality of the psyche] is as unknown to us as the reality of the external world". Similarly, Wilhelm Reich (Viola 2002: 222) said: "When I put my hands on the body, I put my hands on the unconscious".

²³³ In his discussion of "the Lacanian moment of the imaginary vs. the symbolic", Bert Olivier (2004) notes that the (maternal) imaginary provides the child with an illusory sense of wholeness, an illusion with both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, the imagistic fantasy of wholeness is what provides the child with a sense of self and a sense of well being. On the other hand, the identification with an (illusory) other is based on misrecognition, and may result in regression and anxiety, rooted in a sense of loss. One might add here that in the context of Kentridge's *Felix in exile*, Felix's imaginary identification with (the maternal) Nandi, is precisely what produces his sense of melancholia, given that she is always already lost to him. For, as Missac (1995: 5) notes, "there is always something inaccessible about the woman [or man] one wants to love"; "the beloved turns aside — is different from me" (Bataille 2004: 71). (Perhaps this relates to the myth of the origin of painting: Butades tracing the shadow of her lover who is departing for war — "a declaration of love destined for or suited to the invisibility of the other" according to Derrida (1993: 49) —, her back to him or his back to her; their gazes simply not meeting?) It may therefore be argued that Lacan's notion of the imaginary is intricately linked to melancholia; something Kristeva (1989) implies in her book *Black sun*. See also chapter three for a reading of the enfoldedness of Felix and Nandi in relation to Lacan's notion of the mirror-stage, as well as the intertwining of sexual desire and knowledge, guilt, loss, and melancholia in Kentridge's *Felix in exile*. And to cite Ecclesiastes 1: 18: "For much knowledge is much sadness and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow".

given that, as mentioned earlier, the object of the art historian's analysis is always already a lost object (cf Holly 2002). To follow Richter (2000: 161), representation as allegorically performed in *Felix in exile* is thus figured as a self-reflexive and self-critical act of mourning over the unavailability of the other's body that the corpus of the text, drawing or film enacts. Richter (2000: 158) writes:

The body prevents its reading from being organized into a closed hermeneutic system. In the moment of reading, it is in a certain sense already a corpse. This corpse registers its multiple and heterogenous affinities with absence and finitude.²³⁴

In the same drawing referred to earlier the naked Felix is shown with his back to us, a stance that prefigures his stance at the end of the film, thus setting up a cyclic or repetitive motion — or better yet, a loop.²³⁵ His head partially overlaps with Nandi's head, which is strongly suggestive of his seemingly embodied projection of her as a melancholy extension of himself,²³⁶ and as an image or constellation on the wall. The term “image” denoting Nandi might be enfolded here in a constellation with the wide range of different combinations and contexts in which the term appears in Benjamin's writings. Following Sigrid Weigel's (1996: 23) unpacking of the term, Nandi may thus be seen as graphic image (*Schriftbild*), dream-image (*Traumbild*), image of history (*Bild der Geschichte*), mnemonic image (*Erinnerungsbild*), thought-image (*Denkbild*), and dialectical image (*dialektische Bild*).²³⁷ Moreover, Felix's somatic, imagistic, and constellational

²³⁴ Cf Fried (1987) on the body's uncanny similarity with the corpse qua text, and my reading of the body/corpse/text/trace in *Felix in exile* in chapter two.

²³⁵ Margot Bauman (2004) notes that, “the loop, as a temporal form, functions either as a closed cycle, or a form that while apparently repeating itself is always differentiated”. She writes: “Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe a loop folding back on itself, while not returning to its place of origin. Jacques Derrida uses this failure of origins to structure a system of ethics grounded in the elusion of the eternal return of the same”. The failure of the loop to return to its origins seems to be a felicitous conceptual key to an understanding of the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge. The work of all three returns obsessively to the same (melancholy) concerns (or missed origins), while always with a difference. Moreover, whilst Kentridge doesn't actually deploy the loop as filmic apparatus, the visual proximity between the beginning and ending of his animation *Felix in exile* is suggestive of a loop.

²³⁶ Bodily extension may indeed feature in *Felix in exile* in terms of a loss of self (cf van Alphen 1998), but it may also be reread in Bersani's (Dean *et al* 1997: 17) terms, “as an effect of reaching toward one's own ‘form’ elsewhere”. According to Bersani, “[t]his self-dissolution is also self-accretion; it is self-incremental”.

²³⁷ See also van den Berg (2004) for a schematic summary of different image types, as listed by Gibson (1980: xv-xvii), Elkins (1999), and Mitchell (1986: 10).

projection, in turn, mirrors the viewer's/writer's own somatic, imagistic, and constellational projections.²³⁸ Thus Felix is enfolded with the allegorical image or polysemic constellation of Nandi, and the viewer/writer is somatically enfolded with both him and Nandi, as well as with the various, mobile constellations figured paradigmatically and syntagmatically in the film. This multifarious enfolding sets up what Bal (1999: 7) refers to as “a vision that can be characterized as a vacillation between subject and object of that vision and which changes the status of both”.²³⁹

In the second drawing (Figure 29), Nandi holds a pile of papers similar to the pile of drawings Felix pores over earlier on in the film. She looks up at the black heavens, appearing to imagine or project a bundled corpse as constellation against the black starry heavens²⁴⁰ behind her, which conjures again Celan's (2001: 31) melancholy line, “we shovel a grave in the air where you won't lie too cramped”. In a reverse mirror image of the first drawing, her head overlaps slightly with the constellation of the bundled corpse traced or figured in white against the night sky punctuated with white stars. Similar to the dialectical play in Kiefer's *Light trap*, the white here does not cause the black night sky to recede but rather to advance all the more.²⁴¹ Thus this drawing may be figured in a constellation with the first drawing, once again suggesting a bidirectional or deictic thematics in which Nandi mirrors (but also disfigures, cf van Alphen 1998) Felix, Felix

²³⁸ Cf Fried (2002: 14) on the “mysterious faculty of projection in the activities of both artist and viewer”.

²³⁹ In fact, Bal's notion of reciprocity and her emphasis on the agency of the object bears similarities with Heidegger's narrative of representation, in which “the object may be said to produce the subject (rather than, as with the *fiat* of a Fichte or a Schelling, the other way around)” (Jameson 2002: 48). For both Bal and Heidegger, representation as construction with “narrative context” entails “the production of the subject by the object and the object reciprocally by the subject” (Jameson 2002: 49). And for both Bal and Heidegger, “narrative context” offers multiple perspectives, multiple points of view, multiple stories. Cf also Elkins (2002). Nevertheless, what distinguishes Heidegger's narrative of representation from Bal's is that for Heidegger, *Vorstellung* (representation) is *Herrschaft* (domination) (Jameson 2002: 49) — object by subject and vice versa.

²⁴⁰ The starry heavens in Kentridge's drawing as well as in Kiefer's *Light trap* recalls Edmund Burke's evocation of the “magnificence [of] the starry sky” (Eco 2004: 290) as an example of the sublime. As I argued before, the (expressionless-)sublime marks the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge alike, in multifarious ways. Moreover, the concept of the sublime is always already enfolded with melancholia, and vice versa.

²⁴¹ In relation to the constellations of white stars against black skies or ground in both Kiefer's and Kentridge's work see Marin (1995: 162f). He writes: “Putting a white spot on a black background makes this spot advance or stand out in relation to the black surface, but it does not make the black background recede. On the contrary, the black advances all the more as a result”.

mirrors Nandi, and corpus mirrors corpse.²⁴² Both drawings may then be figured in a constellation with Kiefer's *Light trap*, with the aim of highlighting the deployment of a Benjaminian self-reflexivity whereby "a certain representation of death refers to the process of representation as death" (Marin 1995: 87).

4.4 The dialectical face of melancholy writing

As a form of "melancholy writing" (Pensky 2001: 5), the performative or preposterous imaging of history in the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge may be read as always already entangled with a dialectical or allegorical rhetorics of transience, disappearance, loss, ruin, obscurity, impossibility and failure. This has bearing on my own melancholy writing on melancholia. Pensky (2001: 5) notes:

Yet, insofar as writing about the incommunicable, about melancholy, could only "mean" its intention as it springs from its object, '*melancholie redet sich selber*': melancholy always speaks and writes itself. The horizon beyond the interiority of melancholy is withdrawn as insistently as writing approaches it. The Thing, the unnameably, irretrievably withheld, whether the messianic day or the mother, absolute truth or eternal peace, establishes the impossibility and necessity of melancholy writing by its very absence. In this sense, the cultural critic who writes through/about melancholic culture is, for all perspectival achievements, perhaps even more savagely thrown back into the radical immanence of depression.

Pensky (2001: 5) then asks: "What, in other words, would it mean to write critically 'about' melancholia?" Pensky introduces his book on Benjamin with these remarks, and then goes on to project the historical image or constellation of melancholia as fundamentally dialectical: meaning both diabolical illness and privileged insight, both radical pessimism apropos meaningful, political action and messianic hope apropos not-yet, future fulfilment. He concludes his book by arguing that it is the dialectical

²⁴² Similar to the melancholy or neo-Platonic bidirectionality at play in Kiefer's *Light trap*, in *Felix in exile* the chthonic or telluric corpse is mirrored above as uranic constellation, and vice versa. Cf Hanssen (1998: 94) on telluric matter and materiality and uranic spirit and spirituality, and chapter one on "the alchemical transmutation of lead into gold, the transcendence of mute matter into spirit".

oscillation within the image of melancholia that may produce or reveal — retrospectively, by *Nachträglichkeit* (cf Pensky 2001: 246 & 7, Kaufmann 1997: 41, Nägele 1991) — the most productive criticism, one in which contradiction and impossibility is both loved and used. It is from the shifting perspective of Pensky’s melancholy dialectics, in which contradiction serves a productive, dialectical and critical purpose, that the writings of Benjamin and the visual images of Kiefer and Kentridge may be imaged or projected in and as a *critical*, melancholy constellation.²⁴³

More specifically, in the imaging of history as endless catastrophe in the work of all three, one gets a sense “of the radically restricted range of the politically possible, and a concomitant heightening of the sense of the mournful, historically exiled, and imperiled contents of human experience”, to cite Max Pensky (2001: 42) on Benjamin. In this regard, Benjamin’s written, and Kiefer’s and Kentridge’s visual, imaging of history as “l’histoire noire”, as catastrophe, may be mutually related to the Baroque mourning play, and to the Jewish understanding of history as endless exile, danger and catastrophe (Pensky 2001: 18), both of which are characterised by a dialectics of melancholic repetition rather than resolution (cf Caygill 1998: 53, Jay 1996: 12. Repetition or looping here includes the idea that melancholia is both the origin and result of the longing for (historical) knowledge and meaning. At the same time, the deployment or performance of repetition marks Benjamin’s melancholy writings, and Kiefer’s and Kentridge’s melancholy images, as “profoundly different” from artworks or theoretical works “that

²⁴³ Cf also the dialectics of contradiction in the melancholy writing of Kierkegaard (cf. Fried 2002: 174) and Adorno (cf Leppert 2002). For Adorno, “Kierkegaard’s melancholy inwardness thus becomes the truest expression of the phenomenology of the bourgeois *intérieur*, as well as the dialectical moment in which this phenomenology is referred to the idea of reconciliation” (Pensky 2001: 142). Similarly to Benjamin’s dialectical reading of failure in Kafka, for Adorno the “failure” of Kierkegaard’s thought dialectically refers to its immanent, future reconciliation. Kierkegaard’s veneration of contradiction on the grounds of the inward-turned self, as in inward-turned melancholia, may then be projected towards the “moment in which the strength of the individual is capable, through sacrifice, of harnessing the historical and personal forces that define his sorrow” (Pensky 2001: 246). Instead of thereby wholly abandoning melancholia, for rendering us impotent (as in so-called left-wing melancholia), melancholia may be redeemed, in Benjaminian vein, for the critico-historical potential of its internal dialectics. See chapter two on redemptive melancholia in Kentridge’s *Felix in exile*.

have ‘The End’ inscribed in them” (Bal 2002: 200).²⁴⁴ As Thain (2004), paraphrasing Deleuze, notes, “what is repeated in repetition is difference itself”.

Following from this, Benjamin’s dialectical reading of the infinite polysemy of allegory,²⁴⁵ as both expression and transposition of melancholic or fallen knowledge, supplements the historical image of melancholia as fundamentally dialectical: signifying, for example, both illness and insight.²⁴⁶ For Benjamin, “[m]elancholy vision ... necessarily precedes allegorical technique. The assignation of meaning onto unredeemed elements of a natural-historical stage, a ‘petrified, primordial landscape’, presupposes the tremendous alienation from immediacy, from the quotidian, that the melancholic experiences” (Pensky 2001: 116).²⁴⁷ Benjamin’s *visualised* dialectics of allegory and melancholia — wherein the one presupposes the other — may be seen to be especially pertinent to understanding both Kiefer’s and Kentridge’s work. This is so given the allegorical and melancholic suggestion in the work of all three that “a return from exile

²⁴⁴ In chapter two I wrote that while for Benjamin the anamnestic concepts of the sublime and the expressionless may ethically put an end to the dialectic of ascendance and descendance, both within allegory and melancholia, it could be suggested that this idea is itself enfolded with melancholia. For in Dürer’s *Melencolia* print, as read through Benjamin’s melancholy writings and Kiefer’s melancholy artworks, univocal knowledge is always already bound to the *gravitas* of impossible endings. Whether inflected by theology or materialism, Benjamin’s philosophy of history indeed holds out for an interruption of the mythic, Nietzschean eternal recurrent of the ever-the-same, of history as repetitive catastrophe (cf Missac 1995: 111-113). But this interruption, caesura, reversal or redemptive/apocalyptic blasting or flashing of history is always already infinitely delayed; weakened or dimmed by the fact that history-as-catastrophe continues to haunt the present. One might say it serves, melancholically, as a “weak” retroactive force that opens up a tiny space for the not-yet. Cf Benjamin’s (2003: 390) notion of the “*weak* messianic power” conferred by the past on the present, as mentioned above.

²⁴⁵ Benjamin (1998: 175) writes: In allegory “[a]ny person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else”. Entangled in both finitude and infinity, one might say that allegory, as a figure of speech, is “concerned with what is not shown, what cannot be represented, what must go missing”, to cite Elkins (2001: 201) out of context. Richter (2002: 3) writes of Benjamin’s work: “To the extent that any truth can emerge from his writings at all, it is one that the reader must seek in what the text does not say on the surface, not even between the lines, but in an elsewhere that remains open to discussion. Indeed, the truth of his writings *is* this elsewhere. Cf Buci-Glucksmann’s (1994: 39) suggestion that Benjamin’s work “continually refers us elsewhere”. If allegory — with its dialectical emphasis on surface materiality and on the spaces or gaps between words and things — is seen as the mobile link between Benjamin’s, Kiefer’s and Kentridge’s work this characterisation may also apply to the latter two.

²⁴⁶ Cf Nägele (1991: 81): “The landscape of melancholy shows its autumnal face in the park of allegory, said to be dead. Like reading, this face has two sides: an outward side of melancholy and an infolded side of vision; both are contained in the German word *Gesicht*. In the vision, what is seen is transformed; sense and meaning are reconstituted out of the ashes of things”. Both Kiefer’s and Kentridge’s work may be literally envisioned as materially and conceptually *performing* or *en-acting* the (alchemical) reconstitution of (historical) sense and meaning “out of the ashes of things”.

²⁴⁷ As discussed in chapters two and three.

can never be a homecoming” (Weigel 1995: 140). The circle always loses its way (Bankovsky 2004).

This infinite and melancholy exile may be given a dialectical face by way of another constellation, this time figured in a drawing by Kiki Smith, entitled *Constellation* (1996) (Figure 35). What I have in mind here is an embodied reading of her constellation as an allegory of the autumnal resemblances between Benjamin’s, Kiefer’s, and Kentridge’s work. The three faces in her drawing — each face resembling the face of the other — may be read as enfolded in a mobile and melancholy constellation — that is to say, as a single face, which appears in a flash.²⁴⁸ According to Benjamin (qtd. Weigel 1996: 125f), the perception of resemblance or similitude²⁴⁹ in now-time “offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars”. He writes dialectically:

[E]verything is a face: each thing has the degree of bodily presence that allows it to be searched — as one searches a face — for such traits²⁵⁰ as appear. Under these conditions even a sentence (to say nothing of the single word) puts on a face, and this face resembles

²⁴⁸ The Benjaminian flash may be messianic, apocalyptic, violent, erotic, ecstatic (cf Bal 2001a), but always occurs as an imagistic-acoustic caesura in time that is rejuvenative. As Benjamin (1999b: 244) writes in his essay on Proust: “But this very concentration, in which things that normally just fade and slumber are consumed in a flash, is called rejuvenation”. Cf also de Jager (2004), Moses (1996) and Weigel (2002) on the caesura. For Benjamin, the image-as-constellation flashes up for an instant, only to disappear irretrievably. It is like “the flash, perhaps, with which one takes photographs at night” (Missac 1995: 118), an apt metaphor for a writing or seeing of “l’histoire noire”. However, Benjamin’s notion of the flash ought to be distinguished from Karl-Heinz Bohrer’s conservative notion of the “suddenness” of the moment, “where the now-dominant form of the moment declares its independence from the synchronic as well as the diachronic texture of history [cf Elkins (2002) discussed above] and historical temporality. This is the point at which the concept of the moment can be autonomized as that of ‘aesthetic appearance divorced from being ... [and] bought at the price of the surrender of historical categories’” (Jameson 2002: 190). Benjamin’s notion of the flash does, however, bear a special affinity with “the centrality of [sudden] incandescence to modernist writing [and art]” (Alter 1994: 439). One thinks, for example, of Breton’s (qtd Cohen 1995: 112) Surrealist (Nietzsche-inspired) notion of the sudden flash of insight: “This is the most beautiful night of all, the *lightning-filled night* [*la nuit des éclairs*]: day, compared to it, is night”. Cf also de Certeau (qtd Cohen 1995: 112): “[E]lements boldly brought together [*rapprochés*] [in a melancholy/mobile constellation, GS] to insinuate the flash [*l’éclair*] of something else in the language of a site and to strike the receiver”. My thanks goes to Dirk van den Berg for prompting me to elaborate on Benjamin’s flash.

²⁴⁹ Weigel (1996: 176n11) notes that “Benjamin’s use of the term [similitude] is associated with his concept of the image, not as reproduction, but, in an older tradition, as likeness, resemblance, Latin *similitudinem*”. Similitude encompasses “the meanings ‘likeness, resemblance’, and also, pertinently, ‘counterpart’”.

²⁵⁰ Cf Derrida’s deployment of the *trait* in *Memoirs of the blind*, where its use, as the translators (Brault & Naas 1993: 2) note, suggests a range of meanings: “from a trait or feature to a line, stroke, or mark”. Derrida’s (1993: 45) suggestion that “[t]he heterogeneity between the thing drawn and the drawing *trait* remains abyssal”, resonates with Benjamin’s theory of allegory as abyssal. See also Schoeman (2004, n6).

that of the sentence standing opposed to it. In this way every truth points manifestly to its opposite, and this state of affairs explains the existence of doubt.²⁵¹ Truth becomes something living; it lives solely in the rhythm by which statement and counterstatement displace each other in order to think each other (Benjamin 1999: 418).²⁵²

The “irreducible inadequacy” (Bankovsky 2004) of figuring this spectral, dialectical face of doubt, once and for all, is what knots together Benjamin’s, Kiefer’s, and Kentridge’s melancholy imaging of history as catastrophe. Coevally, it means there can be no consoling conclusion, no “The End” to the textual, performative flurries with which we attempt to configure their work — in and as a melancholy/mobile constellation.²⁵³ As hypertext author Shelley Jackson (qtd Sonstroem 2004) writes, “[w]e are nearly all of us bad or disorderly writers; despite ourselves we are redundant, looped, entangled; our transitions are awkward, our conclusions unsubstantiated”. All we are left with is the melancholy but also endlessly mobile realisation that “every text [or artwork] must fail” (Bankovsky 2004) if it is to speak — give face or do justice to the infinitely exiled and ruined — other. In this autumnal light, every representation must fail in order to face, and do justice to, the expressionless death in and of representation. Then and now, the failed, melancholy text or artwork that images and thinks the catastrophe of history haunted by restless corpses, “[acts] counter to our time and thereby [acts] on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come”, as Deleuze (1994: xxi) cites Nietzsche in his book *Difference and repetition*.²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ Hence the melancholy doubt that is at the heart of my constellational enfolding or intertwining of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge.

²⁵² This passage from Benjamin’s *The arcades project* relates felicitously to van den Berg’s (2003) discussion of the *prosopon* and *antiprosopon*. See also Richter (2000: 103) on de Man’s notion of *proposopeia*: “‘The figure of *prosopopeia*,’ de Man writes, is ‘the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech’. Through this tropological manoeuvre, the absent subject ‘assumes mouth, eye, and finally face, a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope’s name, *prosopon poiēn*, to confer a mask or face (*prosopon*)’”.

²⁵³ Cf Taylor (1987: xxxviii) on “the uncertainty of conclusions and the impossibility of conclusions”. This uncertainty and impossibility is typically characteristic of melancholia.

²⁵⁴ Perhaps this is what Bal (1999: 24) has in mind when she speaks of “the plurality of [impossibly, GS] ‘possible worlds’”. Bataille (2004: 101) writes: “From the multitude of life’s difficulties flows infinite possibility”. And Jameson (2002: 26) observes: “[I]t is not sufficiently understood that the future exists for us not merely as a Utopian space of projection and desire, of anticipation and the project: it must also bring with it that anxiety in the face of an unknown future and its judgements for which the thematics of simple posterity is a truly insipid characterization”.

It is then to the expressionless abyss of the corpse, that which denies “both form and meaning” to cite Robert Alter (1984: 434) writing on the apocalyptic abyss opened up by radical Jewish Messianism, that the next and final chapter of this dissertation turns. If the preceding chapters concern themselves with the melancholy imaging of history as loss and catastrophe in Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge, and with the concomitant dialectical absorption in absorption, it seems fitting to conclude this dissertation on the imaging of history as catastrophe with a meditation on images of death.

For what can be more absorbing, disenchanting and disfiguring than images of death, images of perfect absence? What image can better figure our complete immersion in the thingness of images, than the image of death? And if melancholia means being dead to the world, and if melancholic absorption means absorption in this deadliness, then the state of melancholia may perhaps find its most precise depiction in images of dead things. To be melancholic means to be corpse-like. What remains to be seen is to what extent melancholic immersion in images of corpses, in corpse-like images, may involve dialectical reanimation. For if Hand Belting is correct in saying, “[t]he dead person exchanges his body for an image; that image holds a place for him among the living” (Wood 2004: 371), then one can surmise that images of death, and especially photographic images of death stained by the “has been”, retain at least some semblance of life. They are uncannily dualistic.

Chapter Five: What Remains: Photographs, the corpse, and empty places

Seen from the point of view of death, the product of the corpse is life. It is not only in the loss of limbs, not only in the changes of the aging body, but in all the processes of elimination and purification that everything corpse-like falls away from the body piece by piece. It is no accident that precisely nails and hair, which are cut away as dead matter from the living body, continue to grow on the corpse. There is in the physis, in the memory itself, a memento mori.... — Benjamin (1998: 218)

I wrote at the beginning of this dissertation that art history is essentially a melancholy science, given that it busies itself with images both obscure and out of reach. In the absence of fixed things, art history turns to reflect on itself. In this regard, this dissertation is a self-reflexive meditation on various images that seem to prefigure the melancholia of art history. It is my feeling that writings of Benjamin, and the images of Kiefer and Kentridge, provide special instances of thought and imagery that concern themselves with the dialectical melancholia of making sense of things in the face of their inevitable disappearance. Thinking melancholia through their imaging of melancholia has finally led me to a contemplation of images of death. What will follow is an attempt to read/see images of death, more specifically, photographic images of death, as allegories of the dialectical melancholia of absorptive reading/seeing that defines art history. In my interpretation, photographs allegorise the melancholy writing of art history — as writing with light in the dark.

According to Michael Ann Holly (1999: 1), the discipline of art history “is constitutionally fated to suffer from a quiet melancholic malaise”. For “[t]he distance between present and past, the gap between words and images, can never be closed. In Freud’s phrase, it is melancholy, or unresolved mourning, that keeps the wound open”. The discipline of art history tries to salvage something from the oblivion of the past, yet something remains lost, someone remains missing, “a visual clue remains unseen” (Holly 1999: 1). One of the melancholy reasons for this insurmountable loss might be accrued to the blindspot that haunts our seeing and writing, particularly when we are face-to-face

with the spectre of death in and of representation. It is death that is left over, when all is said and done, perhaps visible in art history writing only as an anamorphic stain.

This is the catastrophe of writing and imaging art history: every artwork resists complete appropriation “either by the cleverness of historical explanations or the eloquence of descriptive language” (Holly 1999: 1); contra Hegel, no text devoted to artworks can culminate in the wealth of universal remembrance (cf Pensky 2004: 188). Writing and imaging art history is the writing and imaging of a disaster, to borrow Blanchot’s phrase — the disaster of endless ends. As Blanchot (1986: 28) wrote: “I call disaster that which does not have the ultimate for a limit: it bears the ultimate away in the disaster”. If anything, this disaster is what ties together the writings of Benjamin, and the images of Kiefer and Kentridge, in and as a melancholy constellation.

According to Benjamin (1999: 462), “image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation”. And as Pensky (2004: 186) writes, “this constellation, in turn, forms an image” — “not in the intuitive sense of a visual image (which would be, in the field of art, a mosaic and not a montage), but precisely in the sense of a new, *necessary* interpretation of the fragments’ relationships with one another”. In the context of this thesis, the fragments Pensky speaks of would be the fragments that define the work of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge: all three return again and again to the fragmentary, the unassimilated and the heterogeneous (cf Pensky 2004: 195). Benjamin privileges the fragment, and his writings are indeed fragmentary at best; Kiefer’s and Kentridge’s artworks time and again give visual expression to the fragmentary and heterogenous traces or remainders left over after the incomplete work of mourning has been done.

What is left over? What remains? It is the fragmentary or heterogenous image of the expressionless-sublime corpse. It is a visual image that resists visibility; ceaselessly challenges representation; interrupts the beautiful appearance of totality. As such, the corpse consistently compels us to rethink the conjunctions with which we aim to make or totalise meaning. The imageless image of the corpse thwarts every system and every

representation; it is an emblematic trace, both present and absent, which questions our desire for cohesive selfhood and totality.

More specifically, the emblematic corpse haunts Benjamin's texts, as well as Kiefer's, and Kentridge's images. In Benjamin's writings it appears as a dialectical image in which time stands still, and as the expressionless, a force of petrification that strips the artwork of its semblance of beauty, and interrupts the mythic flow of historical progress. In Kiefer's work, the corpse appears as the allegorical petrification of history, as the fragmentary or the exiled name (Shulamith, Lilith, Brunhilde, Elisabeth of Austria, Adelaide), and as the melancholy impossibility of complete reconciliation. In Kentridge's work the corpse (human or animal) oftentimes marks and ruins a barren landscape, conjures a torturous past, and characterises a melancholic and absorptive figure such as the naked Felix. In the work of all three, the corpse is the emblem of allegory per excellence: "[L]ight to shadow, peak to abyss, fullness to void. ...it is the falsehood of truth, and the truth of falsehood", to cite Umberto Eco (2001: 161) in another context.

If the corpse always remains in excess of representation (hence the malaise that the representation of art history is afflicted by), it seems necessary then to trace it self-reflexively: the telluric and uranic²⁵⁵ corpse in and of representation inevitably involves a meditation on representation. As lack, the corpse tortures the claims to fullness that representation always makes; and as void, it opens up representation's strange production of presence (cf Gumbrecht 2001). As a means of opening up a path to the corpses in Benjamin's, Kiefer's, and Kentridge's work, that is, as a way of obliquely returning to their work in a circle that may lose its way, this concluding chapter will explore the photographic work of the American Sally Mann, the South African Berni Searle, and the Cuban-American Ana Mendieta in relation to the tracelike emblem of the corpse. The aim is to project their work in and as a constellation, through which to refract the imaging of corpses — that is, the melancholy imaging of history as catastrophe — in the writings of Benjamin, and in Kiefer's and Kentridge's imagery.

²⁵⁵ Hanssen (1998: 94) speaks of "telluric matter and materiality" and "uranic spirit and spirituality". Whether seen from a theological or philosophical perspective, the corpse seems to be an emblem of both.

Focus will firstly be placed on selected images from Mann's recent book of photographs *What remains* (2003), read in conjunction with Searle's series of self-portraits *Looking back* (1999) (Figure 43 – 44), as well as her site-specific *A darker shade of light* (1999) (Figure 40). Using the wet-collodian process, commonly practiced in nineteenth century photography, in order to create images that are at once painterly, illusionistic, weathered and photographic Mann's photographs of anonymous corpses dialectically supplement Searle's performative meditations on the precarious constructions of the self as other.²⁵⁶ Secondly, Searle's deconstructive self-portraits *Not quite white* (2000) (Figure 46), in which the artist is smothered in white pigment, and *Waiting* (2003) (Figure 53, 54), in which the artist is caught floating in deep water, will be related to Mendieta's *Imagen de Yagul* (1973) (Figure 45) and *Untitled (Creek)* (Figure 52) (1974) respectively. Mendieta's photographic images feature the artist's own partially obscured body: in a grave and in water. What seems to be at stake in these photo- and performance-based works is the precarious, historical fixing of the fluctuating appearances and disappearances of the body and of the self. Thirdly, I will reflect on Iranian Shirin Neshat's haunting photograph *Women without men* (2004) (Figure 56), a multi-layered photograph of a woman floating in a river, which I interpret as a monad that crystallises past, present, and future. What joins the work of Mann, Searle, Mendieta, and Neshat is a remarkable sensitivity to the inevitable loss that accompanies the recording or representation of life in history.

5.1 The photograph as living corpse

The corpse or corpse-like body in both Mann's and Searle's work can be read as an allegory not only of the body as inevitably subject to decay and disappearance but also as an allegory of the photograph itself — as paradoxically entangled with both the desire for fixation and with transience (cf Bal 1999: 169f). Moreover, the photograph seems to be the most evocative medium with which and through which to think and practice art history writing as melancholy writing. This would be one way to grasp Benjamin's

²⁵⁶ Searle is a "coloured" South African artist, whose work oftentimes confronts the uneasy entanglement of geographical, political, and personal identity.

(1999: 507-530) absorptive “Little history of photography”, an essay that performs the writer’s incredible melancholic ambivalence toward the past photographically recorded in black and white, light and dark. Moreover, in Benjamin’s essay the photograph is read as a crime scene in a manner that prefigures Sally Mann’s haunting photographs of human bodies decomposing at a forensic study site, in *What remains*. Bearing in mind that Mann’s photographs may provide a way to think about art history as a process without an object, what follows is an attempt at entangling the technology of photography with the melancholy process of art history writing, both of which are haunted by images of and as death.

The skin of the body and the skin of the photograph (as image and as object, cf Mitchell 2005: xiii, Wood 2004: 371) ages: it creases, bruises, folds, and wrinkles (cf Bal 1999: 170, Cohen 2002: 105). The metonymic fragility and activity of the skin of the corpse-like body and of the photograph is thus indexically enfolded with time — with complex memory processes; with absence and the fleetingness of presence; with distance and proximity; with desire and violence; with longing and loss.²⁵⁷ Marked by temporality and historicity, the corpse-like body in and of the photograph, as staged in the work of Mann and Searle, presents the viewer-reader-writer with the haunting presence of “evidence” that is always already inadequate. This inadequacy bears on representation itself and, correlatively, tortures our sense of identity.

In chapter three, I linked the uncanny corpse (cf Fried 1987: 93) with what Walter Benjamin calls “the expressionless”: “[T]he moment in which life is ‘petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment’” (Benjamin 1999: 340 qtd Felman 1999: 217). According to Benjamin (1996: 340), “[t]he expressionless is the critical violence which, while unable to separate semblance from essence in art, prevents them from mingling. It possesses this violence as a moral dictum”. Benjamin goes on to note that “the sublime

²⁵⁷ Cf Bal (1999: 30) on “the image’s skin” as an “occasion for what Deleuze termed *texturology*: a theory or philosophy of the surface of the skin ... of texture as the site of point of view”. I discuss Richter’s painting *Reader*, in conjunction with Christensen’s Polaroid *The passing of time*, with reference to the surface of an image as skin in chapter one. In chapter three I refer to the depiction of corpses in Kentridge’s work as allegories of the material page of drawing, skins stained by touch.

violence” of the expressionless “interrupts expression”, shattering “the false, errant totality — the absolute totality” proffered “in all beautiful [or mythic, GS] semblance”. He writes dialectically: “Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol” (Benjamin 1996: 340).

Moreover, Benjamin sees the corpse as the emblem par excellence of allegory. Allegory, in Benjamin’s view, interrupts or shatters the false appearance of totality embodied in the idealist-Romantic symbol, and as such it is intimately related to the sublime, imageless or bloodless²⁵⁸ violence of the expressionless (cf Menninghaus 1993: 169). The category of the expressionless and the figure of allegory may thus be conceptually enfolded as a means to evince the peculiar, seemingly paradoxical status of the photograph as “this wrecker of unitary being”, to cite Krauss (1999: 290).

As a heterogeneous theoretical object (cf Krauss 1999: 295),²⁵⁹ or expressionless figure of allegory, the photograph presents the viewer with an irreducible aporia. It participates “in the structure of the trace, the index, and the stencil” (Krauss 1999: 290), all of which bear a “concrete, existential proximity to [their] meaning[s]” (van Alphen 1998: 104). As such, the photograph bespeaks past and present, absence and presence, visibility and invisibility, dead and alive, at one and the same time. Something must have been there in order for the photograph to be, to be seen by us, here and now. But that something is no

²⁵⁸ Cf Derrida’s (1992: 62) uneasiness with Benjamin’s recourse to the category of divine violence as bloodless (vis-à-vis the bloodiness of state-sanctioned violence), given the terrifying proximity between this divine violence and the violence of the Nazi gas chambers.

²⁵⁹ Damisch’s (Bois *et al* 1998: 7) understanding of the theoretical object as a detail that “raises questions”, suggests that Bal’s (2001b: 84-7) notion of the “navel detail”, which borrows from Naomi Schor’s *Reading in detail* (1987), may be registered as a theoretical object. Bal prefers the concept of “navel detail” over Barthes’s concept of the *punctum* — as it is less violent. However, violence and death is precisely what is at stake in my reading of the photograph as living corpse, and thus I opt to retain Barthes’s concept as a potential theoretical object — the “unexpected detail”, which Fried’s (2005: 545) links “to the all-important current of antitheatrical thought and pictorial practice”. In fact, Fried already drew attention to this “unexpected detail” in his book *Realism, writing, disfiguration*. Citing a well-known passage from Stephen Crane’s *The red badge of courage*, Fried (1987: 94) speaks of the “unexpected detail” of the dead soldier’s shoes, which “had been worn to the thinness of writing paper”. Fried’s absorptive-allegorical equation of the horizontality of the corpse with the horizontality of the page of writing has bearing on my own absorptive-allegorical equation of the photograph with the corpse, and with art history writing.

longer there. In the instant in which the photograph is taken something has passed, and this something passes by both photographer and the future viewer of the photograph. Moreover, for the modern art historian, seen at least since Aby Warburg as bearing a resemblance to a photographer, this passing by characterises every imagistic constellation that attempts, but fails, to figure “unitary being”.

Barthes claims that all photographs, despite being absolutely unique, and “virtually regardless of subject matter, are potentially carriers of the *punctum* of time and death” (Fried 2005: 561), which prick us after the fact.²⁶⁰ As Fried (2005: 560) observes, “something being past, being historical, cannot be perceived by the photographer or indeed by anyone else *in the present*. It is a guarantor of antitheatricality²⁶¹ [or absorption, GS] that comes to a photograph, that becomes visible in it, only after the fact, *après-coup*, in order to deliver the hurt, the prick, the wound, to future viewers”. As such, we have to be so absorbed in a photograph so as to be essentially blind to it — “in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes”, to cite Barthes (in Fried 2005: 555). Or as Kafka (qtd Fried 2005: 555) noted: “We photograph things in

²⁶⁰ Cf chapter three on *Nachträglichkeit* or taking cognisance of something retroactively.

²⁶¹ This relates to Fried’s (2005: 546) ongoing concern with the antitheatrical tradition, which goes back to Diderot, wherein a fundamental distinction is claimed “between seeing and being shown”. He writes: “The *punctum*, we might say, is *seen* by Barthes but not because it has been *shown* to him by the photographer, for whom it does not exist”. Fried argues that Barthes’s book would suggest that photography is essentially theatrical, and yet he points out that this does not imply the literalism that he decried in his 1967 essay “Art and objecthood”. According to Fried, Barthes’s argument suggests a link with the antitheatrical tradition in writing and representation, though he himself was not able to take cognisance of it. At the conclusion of his essay on Barthes’s *punctum*, Fried himself notes that any attempt at a *radical* antitheatricality in photography is bound to fail, given the theatricality inherent to the medium. Similarly, Fried has argued that Courbet’s attempt at radical antitheatricality also failed — though failure here should by no means be interpreted as failure to achieve the effect of absorption *tout court*. Amounting almost to a rebuke of Fried’s claims, Hannah Arendt (in Silverman 2000: 130) wrote: “Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator*.” However, Fried’s argument is structured around the acknowledgment that the denial of spectatorship *is a supreme fiction*, one that nevertheless grants us a glimpse of authenticity. The denial of the beholder dates back to Renaissance art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with its reliance on the representational frame, which provided the beholder “with a view into a parallel reality that does not acknowledge the presence of the spectator in the world in front of the frame” (Ndalianis 2004: 157). Damisch (1994) argues, contrary to the popular claim that the beholder of a Renaissance picture was situated at a fixed position outside of the picture, that the Renaissance beholder was situated inside the picture. This suggestion is not dissimilar to Fried’s (1990) identification of a “quasi-corporeal merger” of the painter with his painting in Courbet’s work, as an attempt at radical antitheatricality. Damisch regards the Renaissance painting as a stage set or theatrical mechanism; but instead of being an external spectator the Renaissance beholder is seen as a participant inside the painting as painted theatre.

order to drive them out of our minds”. Does this not have special bearing on photographs of corpses, or corpse-like bodies or, indeed, of photographs as living corpses? And does this not have special bearing on art history as melancholy writing — as photo-graphy of dead things?

5.2 Dying light

Two photographs by Sally Mann seem to “theorise” the curious dialectic of photographing things in order to fix and drive the passage of time out of our minds. The title of her photograph *Last light* (1990) (Figure 36) itself conjures up “the inexorable passage of time” (Fried 2005: 561), and light. Braided together, both the passage of time and of light relate to life and death. Bal (1999: 169) writes: “Light is not a given but a live being, a friend or an enemy, an ally or an opponent, an aid or an impediment, that lives in time”.²⁶² But living in time also means dying in time. Furthermore, if light is the source of life it is also the source of a photograph: it is the capturing of light that produces a photograph. *Last light* thus speaks not only of the last light of the living being but also of the photograph itself; both may thus be allegorised as living corpses, and as such, they also have a special relationship with art history writing as a melancholy writing about things dead as well as alive.

Yet what makes this dialectic of last light particularly poignant or piercing is the fact that here it is early youth that is seen marked or stained by inevitable death. This becomes intensely clear when we read or view *Last light* in conjunction with an untitled photograph from Mann’s most recent book *What remains* (Figure 37). The latter photograph shows the blurred, erased or rubbed out face of a child²⁶³ — an anonymous, de-faced face that recalls similar faces in installations by Christian Boltanski. The androgynous child in *Last light*, seemingly poised on the borderline between innocent

²⁶² Elsewhere, Bal (2001: 65) speaks of light as “a typical parergon”.

²⁶³ Cf Fried’s (2005: 561) translation of the French word “gommé”, a word Barthes uses in *Camera lucida* in relation to the *punctum* in contemporary photographs. The English edition to the book translates it as “blurred” but Fried notes that it might be better translated as “erased” or “rubbed out”.

exhaustion and the violence of abuse, between intimacy and restraint, appears already latently present in the photograph, and vice versa. It is as if the face of the child in *Last light* has been magnified to such a degree in the photograph that he/she has been flattened or “worn to the thinness of [photographic, GS] paper” (Crane qtd Fried 1987: 93). I am reminded here of Barthes’s (2000: 96) evocation of a photograph of two little girls looking at an airplane: “They have their whole lives before them: but also they are dead (today), they are then *already* dead (yesterday)”. Like the two girls in Barthes’s photograph, the two children in Mann’s photographs are dead to the degree that they are merely stains or traces of life once lived — flat or thin as photographic paper, “dead for having been seen” (Dubois qtd Metz 2003: 140).²⁶⁴

Two more photographs from Mann’s *What remains* enunciate a similar dialectic; both from the chapter “Matter lent” (Figures 38 & 39). What we see, or don’t see, are two corpses, one on each side. The corpse — or, more fittingly, still or stilled life — in both photographs has been erased. They are both expressionless ruins, discarded remains, only barely separable from the material surface of the photographic paper they have been indexed onto. The decomposing or torn bodies in these two photographs are present as well as absent to the viewer, too distant and too proximate all at once.²⁶⁵ They have been reduced to discomfiting and defamiliarising traces of traces — scratched, stained, smeared, and besmirched in life as in death. What we are left with, what remains, are these ultra-thin blurs of life that have all but merged with the ultra-thin surface of the photographic paper itself. It is in this regard that one might allegorise the photograph

²⁶⁴ Christian Metz (2003: 140) notes that “[p]hotography is linked with death in many *different* ways. The most immediate and explicit is the social practice of keeping photographs in memory of loved beings who are no longer alive. But there is another real death which each of us undergoes every day, as each day we draw nearer to our own death. Even when the person photographed is still living, that moment when she or he *was* has forever vanished. Strictly speaking, the person who *has been photographed* — not the total person, who is an affect of time — is dead: ‘dead for having been seen’, as Dubois says in another context. Photography is the mirror, more faithful than any actual mirror, in which we witness at every age, our own aging. The actual mirror accompanies us through time, thoughtfully and treacherously; it changes with us, so that we appear not to change”. With “the ever-present association of the photograph with death” (Dexter 2004: 17), it would perhaps be fitting to associate the photograph with the still life.

²⁶⁵ Cf Baecker (2003: 18): “[D]istinctions between distance and closeness must endlessly mirror themselves, with each pole constantly reappearing in the other: if one approaches closeness, motives are found that refer to distance; approaching distance, one nevertheless remains aware of the near-at-hand material techniques that make it visible”.

itself as corpse — creased, bruised, folded, and wrinkled. Ruined from the very beginning; ruined “from the moment of the first gaze” as Derrida (1993: 68) writes in a different context.

But the photograph is also a living corpse; for “the past that matters has a curiously living presence” (Cohen 95: 193). One might recall here de Man’s notion of the prosopopeia: “the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech” (de Man qtd Felman 1999: 217). That is to say, prosopopoeaic speech attributes “consciousness and voice to an inanimate body”, a “voiceless cadaver” (Fuss 2003: 1). Of course, this is a supreme fiction, because dead objects cannot speak for themselves; as Bal (2002: 8) writes: “We surround it, or *frame* it, before we let it speak at all”. It is in our intersubjective interaction with dead objects that these objects speak back, thus participating, willingly or unwillingly,²⁶⁶ “in the production of meaning that [art historical] ‘analysis’ constitutes” (Bal 2002: 9).

As mentioned in chapter one, Suzanne Human has intriguingly suggested to me “that Aby Warburg provides an alternative to Barthes’ clichéd notion that photography is mortifying”. She notes that “[f]or Warburg it preserves and transmits the energy of past experiences”.²⁶⁷ Human is referring to Warburg’s notion of the “engram”, which he borrowed from Richard Semon. In his intellectual biography of Warburg, Gombrich (1986: 242) observes that “[a]ny event affecting living matter leaves a trace which Semon calls an ‘engram’. The potential energy conserved in this ‘engram’ may, under suitable conditions, be reactivated and discharged...”. According to Warburg, “[i]n the life of

²⁶⁶ Fuss (2003: 25 & 26) caveats: “[P]lease do not assume that what the dead really want is to return to the living. [...] These dead are fundamentally irrecoverable; bringing them back to life would entail nothing less than a violent occupation and displacement that would kill them of all over again”. Cf Jessica Evans who in discussing the “tragic” photographic self-portrait of Jo Spence dying of cancer makes the following observations: “She seems to make death meaningful and thus restore to it a sense of its being part of a life. But in making this image was she really finding meaning from the void of death, the place where you cannot be? Or was she pointing to the inadequacy in the end of metaphors of ‘control’ which are based on a fantasy prevalent in much of our culture — that death can be made good, that we can get something positive out of it, and so avoid the terror, anger and confusion that death evokes?”

²⁶⁷ Personal correspondence, 14 January 2005.

civilizations it is the *symbol* which corresponds to Semon's 'engram'. In the symbol — in the widest sense of the term — we find preserved those energies of which it is, itself, the result" (Gombrich 1986: 243).

Hence Warburg's notion of "cultural memory", a concept Bal (1999: 66) takes recourse to in her discussion of Serrano's *The morgue* series (1992) (Figures 41 & 42). She writes: "Instead of 'influence', the past is present in the present in the form of *traces*, diffuse memories. ... Cultural memory is collective yet [correlatively, GS] subjective by definition. This subjectivity is of crucial importance in this view, yet it does not lead to an individualist subjectivism".

Bearing in mind Benjamin's critical distinction between symbol and allegory, I propose a dialectical intertwining of Barthes's, but also Benjamin's allegorical, notion that photography is mortifying with Bal's suggestion that photographs are "epidermically" both dead and alive: they affect, touch, and change us as much as we affect, touch and change them. This "entangled mobility" (Bal 1999: 65) "puts the subject at correlative risk" (Bal 1999: 63). For Bal (1999: 66), "[t]he past lies just outside the grasp of the photograph, but its relationship to it is here for us to see". This means that the photograph implies memory as *activity* but also as loss (Bal 1999: 66); paradoxically it is precisely the latter that reactivates the former, mobilising the community to rejuvenate "the erased culture for a future in which it can finally come into existence" (Bal 1999: 74).²⁶⁸ Hence for Bal the "ageing" that is at work in the photograph qua corpse is entangled with the rejuvenating force of intersubjective remembrance, something which is also at stake in art history writing.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ Cf Fried (2005: 560) on the "future viewers that Barthes evidently craves". My colleague Michael Herbst has reminded me of Derrida's suggestion that a letter can never be received by its addressee. At the same time he reminded me of Žižek's dialectical rereading of this. The latter suggests that whilst this letter may not be received by its initial addressee, it will always arrive at some future addressee — perhaps unforeseen by the sender at the time. This also recalls Fried's (2005: 560) reading of Barthes's notion of the *punctum*, which cannot be seen by either the photographer or by anyone *in the present*, but always pierces us after the fact.

²⁶⁹ Similarly, in his essay "On the image of Proust" Benjamin (1999: 244) speaks of the dialectic between ageing and remembrance. He writes: "This is the work of *la mémoire involontaire*, the rejuvenating force which is a match for the inexorable process of aging. When that which has been is reflected in the dewy

Nietzsche (qtd Michaud 2004: 239) wrote: “To understand historically is to revive”. One might say that this precarious, intersubjectively auto-biographical, historical revival is precisely what is at stake in Berni Searle’s *A darker shade of light* (1999) (Figure 40) — a series of digital prints featuring the artist’s own body. Discussing the bruising effect that the black Egyptian henna, metaphor for deep, precolonial African origins, has on

fresh ‘instant’ [of the photograph, GS], a painful shock of rejuvenation pulls it together once more...”. He notes: “Proust [who, Benjamin implies, writes in “photographic” images, GS] has brought off the monstrous feat of letting the whole world age a lifetime in an instant. But this very concentration, in which things that normally just fade and slumber are consumed in a [photographic, GS] flash, is called rejuvenation”. Cf also Missac (1995: 118) on “the flash, perhaps, with which one takes photographs at night”. The important point to bear in mind here is that for Benjamin mortification is always already *allegorically* dialectical: it always implies its opposite. One might phrase this Benjaminian dialectic as follows: “We can either train on it [the photograph] the withering gaze of the baroque allegorist who further immobilizes an already petrified landscape; or else we can contemplate it with the longing eyes of the ‘angel of history’ who yearns to piece the débris together” (Wohlfarth qtd Cohen 1995: 20n8). In my view Benjamin’s philosophy compels us to do both (cf Geyer-Ryan 1994). Though Benjamin radically distinguishes allegory from symbol (the former signifying transience, the latter eternity), his allegorical-dialectical notion of mortification/rejuvenation bears similarities with Warburg’s engrammatic notion of the mnemonic symbol. Furthermore, if for Barthes the photograph is “literally an emanation of the referent”, it would seem to have the *possibility* of being freighted with “the energy of past experiences”, however melancholy, ghostly or cloudy. Barthes (qtd Cohen 1995: 71) writes: “In the realm of the imaginary, the Photograph ... represents this very subtle moment where, to tell the truth, I am neither a subject nor object, but rather a subject who feels itself become object: I then live a micro-experience of death (of parenthesis): I become truly a ghost”. But would this invest the photograph with what Marx characterised as “the ghostly objectivity that ideological products possess” (Cohen 1995: 23)? Most certainly, and yet perhaps one could take recourse to Benjamin’s “allying [of] the theoretical procedure releasing the positive potential of [ghostly, GS] ideological projections with what he called ‘awakening’” (Cohen 1995: 25). In terms of this allegorical/dialectical/alchemical transformation of ideological “detritus into an index of vital social energy” (Cohen 1995: 25), Benjamin again sounds similar to Warburg. Both Benjamin and Warburg seek to “awaken” from the phantasmagoric ideology or myth coiling around cultural artefacts, detritus or fossils — such as the alluring photographs in our family albums — though both attempts are ambiguous and even ambivalent. The ambiguous/ambivalent way in which Benjamin (1999: 507-530) calls for an “awakening” from the alluring aura of the bourgeois photograph and bourgeois past in his essay “Little history of photography” is a prime example. So also the ambiguous/ambivalent language of desire in his *The arcades project* (cf Stoljar 1996). But one should bear in mind here that Benjamin, contra Adorno, inflects ambiguity with dialectics: “[A]mbiguity is the imagistic appearance of dialectics...” (Benjamin qtd Cohen 1995: 48) — that is, an imagistic dialectics of “unevenness” (Althusser qtd Cohen 1995: 49) and mobile contradiction negated in Hegelian dialectics. Thus the mythic ambiguity or phantasmagoric ideology of the (fleeting) image of the past is dialectically turned inside out, but not unequivocally dissolved. And yet Benjamin nevertheless holds out for a univocal end to mythic ambiguity, as in his notions of the expressionless and the messianic caesura of homogenous time. This contradiction is inherent to his critico-theoretical production, which some have termed Janus-faced. See also Gombrich (1986) on Warburg’s ambiguous/ambivalent excavation of/desire for myth, madness, superstition. Cf Castle (1995) and chapter one on the dialectical entanglement of reason or enlightenment and madness or fate. Cf also Eco (2004) on the deep-rooted ambivalence in the discourse of the Enlightenment: between, say, faith in Reason and melancholy sorrow for the transience of life, between Beauty (qua lucidity) and the Sublime (qua obscurity).

Searle's body, Rory Bester (2003: 26) notes that "the henna on these especially intimate parts of her body introduces a sense of trauma to readings of Searle's body. And it is especially the stained soles of Searle's feet²⁷⁰ (Figure 40) that have 'an ambiguous reference to people who no longer exist'". Bester observes the resemblance between Searle's images and Serrano's *The morgue* series, an observation rooted in the uncanny proximity that Searle's body has with a corpse. By extension, Searle's body also bears a resemblance to the flattened faces and corpses in Mann's *What remains*, where the viewer is faced with the seeming merger of the body with the thinness of the photographic paper — wrinkled, cracked, discoloured, bruised and folded.

But if *A darker shade of light* consists of a series of "flattened" self-portraits, all of which attempt to revive the precarious biographical historicity of the artist's personal past, a past characterised by the trauma and catastrophe of colonial dislocation and discolouration, this bears on every viewer's past. If Searle is tracing her own "that has been", to cite Barthes (2000: 96), she also bruises, pierces, and wounds us with the knowledge of our own "that has been". As Barthes's (2000: 97) observes poignantly: "[E]ach photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death", a sign that paradoxically hurts me after the fact, after seeing it. To revive our very personal past, at the same time that we attempt to revive our collective past, means to be always already bruised by loss.²⁷¹ For just as Searle's body is absent even to herself, so we are absent to ourselves (as I discussed in chapters three and four). Expressed slightly differently, "[t]hese 'ghost voices' [these speaking dead, GS] refuse reanimation *through* reanimation" (Fuss 2003: 24). They remain other to us.

Benjamin (qtd Felman 1999: 217) writes: "I alone remain". This seems a fitting epigraph or epitaph to Searle's *Looking back* (1999) (Figures 43 & 44) series of self-portraits,

²⁷⁰ This particular photograph of the soles of Searle's feet also bears a remarkable resemblance to Mantegna's *The dead Christ* — both works suggesting a dialectics of death and resurrection. In chapter three I drew a similar connection between Mantegna's image and the image of a corpse in Kentridge's *Felix in exile*. Here one can add Rembrandt's *Anatomy lesson of Dr Joan Deyman* (1658) to the register of image as dialectical death and resurrection.

²⁷¹ And yet, as Agamben (1999: 153) writes: "What cannot be saved is what was, the past as such. But what is saved is what never was, something new".

coloured and discoloured by spices, loaded and subtle metaphors for colonial traffic, that “are at once seductive and deadly, carrying with their opacity an implicit threat of suffocation and burial” (Smith in Bester 2003: 16). Presenting her self as part-body/part-corpse, Searle’s expressionless face defaces or shatters our attempts at totalising her as well as ourselves. What remains is a “complexly dialectical theatrical strategy to achieve antitheatrical results” (Pippin 2005: 585) — that is, to allegorically create “a space of stillness” (de Botton 2005: 4) in a colonial and postcolonial world where “*even the dead* will not be safe” (Benjamin 2003: 391) from being deprived “of their singularity and distinction” (Fuss 2003: 27).²⁷²

In the context of photography, here seen as *particularly* evocative of what is at stake in art history writing as melancholy writing, the emblem of the expressionless corpse is thus an entirely self-reflexive one. The expressionless, if speaking, corpse operates allegorically, as a figure for photography itself, a dead voice” (Fuss 2003: 30) that remains and returns to wound us (art history writers and readers), after the fact. For what haunts the practice of art history more than the realisation that even the most “truthful”, in other words, *photo-real*, recording of life in and of the historical past is marred by profound and inescapable loss, at the same time that it is “enlivened” by “imaginary ontologies” (Wall in Tumlir 2001: 115)?

5.3 Empty places

The emblematic trace of the corpse has been a recurring, and uncanny, figure in this dissertation — as an allegory of the written text or page of drawing; as an expression of the expressionless; and as the sober and sublime imagelessness of humanity’s ethical

²⁷² Cf Flusser (2000: 82): “The task of a philosophy of photography is to reflect upon this possibility of freedom — and thus its significance — in a world dominated by apparatuses; to reflect upon the way in which, despite everything, it is possible for human beings to give significance to their lives in face of the chance necessity of death. Such a philosophy is necessary because it is the only form of revolution left to us”.

essence (cf Menninghaus 1993: 169).²⁷³ Moreover, I've argued that as a figure which interrupts the false appearance of absolute totality (cf Benjamin 1996: 340; Menninghaus 1993: 169), the corpse is an emblem per excellence of allegory²⁷⁴ — a figure with an absence or emptiness at its origin and at its end (cf Marin 1995: 40). As such, this figure of absence and emptiness seems to literally embody the absence and emptiness that is to be found at the heart of art history writing as melancholy writing.

But if absence or emptiness marks the origin and the end of the corpse as expressionless and as allegory, representations of corpses are transformed into meta-representations. An image of death has an unnameable absence or emptiness at its heart; and in lieu of something being there, the image reverts to auto-representation. Images of death, which often take the shape of meta-images, lay bare the process whereby enunciation is denegated at the moment in which enunciation takes place (cf Marin 1995: 26f). An image of death is an impossible image; it is an image of the imageless, a saying of the unsayable. As Louis Marin (1995: 84) writes in his meditation on Poussin's *Arcadian shepherds* (*Et in Arcadia ego*): "For we know all too well that the cogito of death, like my death, is unsayable".²⁷⁵ But death, as the guarantor of representation,²⁷⁶ tortures all representation, and perhaps, most tellingly, art history representation, from the start.

Previously I referred to photographic images of death by Sally Mann and Berni Searle as self-reflexive images. Marked by temporality and historicity, the corpse-like body in and of the photograph, as staged in the work of Mann and Searle, presents the viewer-reader-writer with the haunting presence of 'evidence' that is always already inadequate. This inadequacy bears on representation itself (perhaps especially art history representation) and, correlatively, tortures our sense of identity. The corpse-like figures in Mann's and

²⁷³ Cf Benjamin (1999: 132): "Moral character is a thing without expression [*ein Ausdrucksloses*]." Cf Hanssen 1998: 95.

²⁷⁴ Benjamin (1998: 218) writes: "[T]he corpse becomes quite simply the pre-eminent emblematic property."

²⁷⁵ Similarly, Bal (1994: 307) writes: "[T]he most frightening aspect of life and the most urgent motivation for, yet challenge to, representation: death. Death is a challenge to representation, for it is a moment that nobody can describe, an event that nobody can escape, a process that nobody can narrate. As Foucault said: One cannot say, 'I am dead'."

²⁷⁶ If one is to follow Hans Belting. See Wood 2004: 371.

Searle's photographs appear to be "worn to the thinness of [photographic, GS] paper" (Crane qtd Fried 1987: 93). The photographic image of the cadaver is thus itself cadaver-like: "creased, bruised, folded, and wrinkled"; "expressionless ruin, discarded remain[der]"; flattened death (cf Fried 2005: 561).²⁷⁷

I wish to extend this reading of the photograph of the corpse as itself corpse-like, in order to address the "aesthetics of disappearance" at play in select images by Ana Mendieta and Berni Searle. To this end, and for the purpose of returning to the bidirectional thematics of absorption in Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge with which I began this dissertation, I will focus on the ambiguous interlacing of photography and performance — ambiguous because of the proximity between theatricality and antitheatricality, visibility and invisibility in both spheres. In this regard, Michael Fried's (2005) identification of an "unconscious" desire to overcome theatricality — putting oneself on show — by theatrical means in Roland Barthes' meditation on photography proves fruitful when read adjacent to performance theorist Peggy Phelan's suspicion of visibility.

According to Fried (2005: 561), "something being past, being historical, cannot be perceived by the photographer or indeed by anyone else *in the present*. It is a guarantor of antitheatricality [or absorption, GS] that comes to a photograph, that becomes visible in it, only after the fact, *après-coup*, in order to deliver the hurt, the prick, the wound, to future viewers". For Fried (2005: 546), the sting of time and death is not *shown* to the beholder by the photographer, "for whom it does not exist"; rather the beholder sees it only after the fact, after having turned away from, or closed his or her eyes to, the visible.²⁷⁸ Similarly, instead of a fetishism of visibility, Phelan proposes "a possibility of being or becoming 'unmarked', an 'active vanishing' that 'refus[es] ... the pay-off of

²⁷⁷ Mondzain (2005: 2003) writes that, originating in the Catholic belief in the veracity of the Holy Shroud and the Holy Face, "[p]hotography is the modern tool of transubstantiation par excellence"; in it "the cadaver becomes a sign of life, the shadow becomes a source of light, the invisible is promoted to visibility, and art is one with nature." And yet, by the same stroke, she writes: "The figure of death cannot reveal itself in the negative to become, miraculously, the figure of life. It can only lose itself in another figure, that of the death of death, in that other night of which Blanchot wrote: 'It is the death that cannot be found.'"

²⁷⁸ "[W]e have to be so absorbed in a photograph so as to be essentially blind to it — 'in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes'", to cite Fried (2005: 555) citing Barthes.

visibility” (Smith in Phelan 2003: 293). For Phelan, transience and mortality are fundamental to the experience of embodiment; as dematerialisation is to materiality and invisibility is to visibility.

Theatricality and antitheatricality, visibility and invisibility, materiality and immateriality consistently mark Mendieta’s and Searle’s images — both artists foregrounding the female body as the site of violence (cf Rogoff 2000: 125). Mendieta’s *Imagen de Yagul* (1973) (Figure 45) coupled with Searle’s *Not quite white* (2000) (Figure 46), makes this apparent. In Mendieta’s image the body of the artist is present in its absence (cf Runia 2006: 1), partially visible in its invisibility; both absence and invisibility generating meaning (cf Damisch 1994: 312). This is an image of a performance of disappearance in which Mendieta laid her body, partially obscured by flowers, in a Mexican tomb. The actual performance is not visible; its time is lost to us except as a photographic trace. If Mendieta is tracing the performance of her “that has been”, to cite Barthes (2000: 96), she also bruises, pierces, and wounds us with the knowledge of our own “that has been”.

Likewise, in the photograph by Searle we are faced with an after-image of the “performance” of the artist as other — as not quite white; neither quite dead nor wholly alive. Coloured and discoloured by white pigment, Searle’s partially obscured self-image carries with it a “threat of suffocation and burial” (Smith in Bester 2003: 16) that recalls the mimicking or rehearsal of burial and disappearance in Mendieta’s image. Searle is absent to herself, absent to the precarious biographical historicity of her personal past, and she is absent to us; she is visible only in her invisibility. As such, “she becomes ‘us’ while becoming ‘it’” (Bal 1994: 315). What remains is a “complexly dialectical theatrical strategy to achieve antitheatrical results” (Pippin 2005: 585) — the beholder seeing without having been shown fully.

Both Mendieta’s and Searle’s “staged” or “performed” images of violence and death are self-reflexive images: images that stage their own processes of coming to be, by reflecting on the processes whereby the body ceases to be, or whereby the lived body is transformed into a thing-body (cf Fried 2002: 197). Images of the body present in its

absence, images of the body in the process of disappearing or transformation reflect on their own dialectics of fixity and transience. It is as though they visualise what is essentially invisible to us: our own thing-bodies (cf Fried 2005: 197). As “theoretical objects” that think themselves,²⁷⁹ these self-reflexive images of death are deeply paradoxical. They are images “of what died yesterday and remains alive today”, images “of what will live always, despite everything that annihilates us today” (Mondzain 2005: 2001). As such it is these images that most vividly transform the technology of art history writing into melancholy writing.

5.4 Time the Destroyer

And yet, “living always” also translates as “dying always”; it means never ceasing to die. A vivid thematisation of this dialectics of ceasing and never ceasing may be seen in Francesco Traini’s (documented 1321-63) fourteenth century mural, *The triumph of death* (c. 1340) (Figure 47). Situated in the Campo Santo cemetery in Pisa, Traini’s mural flanks the burial ground. A flowing narrative that culminates in the three open graves at the bottom left of the picture, which reveal the thing-body in successive stages of decay, Traini’s painted reminder of death in life also includes in the narrative what is pertinently absent in pictures of death: the stink of rotting flesh. The viewer of *The triumph of death* beholds this stink in the faces of humans and animals alike, both of which are clearly horrified and petrified by the horrific sight and stench of human remains (Figure 48).

The stink of death, which would have been present in the burial ground in the courtyard, thus sticks to the painting, contaminating it (cf Bal 1994: 314 & Bal 2000). It is as though the smell of rotting flesh assists the actual decay or ruin of the image, over time. Thus the painting of death is transformed into a body rotting with time — a body composed in its decomposition.²⁸⁰ What Fried writes with regards to Adolph Menzel’s Bohemia

²⁷⁹ On the theoretical object, the hypo-icon, the hyper-icon, and metapainting, cf Bal 1999, 2001 & 2002; Bois 1995; Bois *et al* 1998; Mitchell 1985; Stoichita 1997.

²⁸⁰ Cf Elkins (1999: 32): “Yet if every picture is a picture of the body, and if ‘distortion’ is an adequate word for the means of representation, then pictures are continuous refusals and repressions of the body:

watercolours, *Two dead soldiers laid out on straw* (1866) (Figure 49) and *Two dead soldiers in a barn* (1866) (Figure 50), may hold true here as well. By way of a process of empathic seeing or projection,²⁸¹ we are as if transported into the decaying image of death, an image that now figures our own imminent deaths — albeit abstractly (cf Fried 2002: 202).²⁸²

But images of “disfigured and decayed human bodies” (Fried 2002: 202) are images of absence as well as presence, of presence in absence, of visibility in invisibility. If we project ourselves into them we project ourselves into an “irremediable void” of “absolute solitude” (Kristeva 1989: 189). We project ourselves hopelessly into the deathly silence of our own future graves. In the process images of death are allegorically transformed into burial sites — like the burial site in Jeff Wall’s composite photograph *The flooded grave*, (Figure 51) which I discuss below — that reflect on their own processes of coming to be: the death and disappearance of the body; the emptying out of place in the past and in the future. It is in this sense that one can say: time, as “duration in traces” (Marin 1995: 69), sticks abjectly to the image in and of art history.

Self-reflexive images or metapictures of death, like Jeff Wall’s *The flooded grave* (2001) (Figure 51), make present something that is essentially absent or invisible: the hole of death in the past and in the future. Wall’s seamless montage of an open grave, with sea

they are ways of controlling the body by fixing an image of what it is not. The positive doctrines of the pictured body, in that respect, are nothing more than shores against its ruins, and the task of a history of the represented body is to say what has not been shown, and to explain why it is absent”.

²⁸¹ Juliet Koss (2006: 139) writes of the initial conception of empathy or *Einfühlung* by Robert Vischer: “This reciprocal experience of exchange and transformation — a solitary, one-on-one experience — created, as it were, both viewer and object, destabilizing the identity of the former while animating the latter.” Koss associates a critique of the notion of empathy as bourgeois, with amongst others Wilhelm Worringer and Bertolt Brecht, and one can add here Walter Benjamin’s vehement criticism of empathy as bourgeois interiorisation. Nevertheless, simply categorising empathy as bourgeois in the twenty-first century seems regressive. Today there appears to be little hope for the mobilisation of the masses by anti-solitary art; rather, it can be argued that the experience of art (visual or otherwise) is by definition a solitary experience, and all the more intense for it. Solitude need not immediately translate as asocial, isolated, or divorced.

²⁸² Elkins (1999) draws a distinction between two kinds of pictures of the body: pictures of pain and pictures of metamorphosis; the latter appeals to the mind, whilst the former causes a visceral reaction. Traini’s painting pictures the visceral reaction caused by the stink of death, but the sensation it causes in the beholder remains an intellectual or abstract one. The same can be argued of Mendieta’s and Searle’s images of death.

water and sea life at the bottom,²⁸³ leaves something undisclosed, “something that cannot be seen in the viewing of the world [or work] but can be experienced or sensed — sensed as unseen” (Wall in conversation with Rawlinson 2006: 14), some time in the future. Without fully seeing, we sense our own imminent deaths in the flooded grave of the image. The image of absent and present death in a cemetery, which roots us to the past, thus operates like a memory of the future (cf Krapp 2004: 32); the photograph “is a prophecy in reverse: like Cassandra, but eyes fixed on the past” (Barthes qtd Prosser 2005: 49).²⁸⁴

What matters here, in terms of the transformation of art history writing into melancholy writing, is as Marin (1995: 69) writes with reference to *Et in arcadia ego*: “Now that you have encountered the signs of mortality, you can no longer escape them; you have been condemned to the sphere of memory and history”. In other words, the art historical absorption in images of death, images in and of the past, translates as a potentially dialectical immersion in the death of the life that is yet to come. Art history writing becomes melancholy writing because, even as it looks toward the redemptive or reanimative future, it is condemned by the distortions of the past.

5.5 “Like a body under water focused on breathing through a straw”²⁸⁵

The condemnation to the sphere of memory and history, the sphere of distortion, is perfectly bodied forth in images of death in water. But, as Benjamin (1999: 303) writes: “Water as the chaotic element of life does not threaten here in desolate waves that sink a

²⁸³ In an interview with Jan Tumlir (2001: 216), Wall observes: “I knew that red anemone and purple urchins were common to the area. The anemone, urchins, crabs, and starfish were shot first, since they are slower-moving creatures and I could use them as a sort of base layer for the composition. They’re slow, but they move a lot, so each day the situation was quite different. It took maybe a week and a half to get enough pictures of these creatures and to move to the quicker species, the fish. Fish are very hard to control, so I made a point of trying to shoot almost every fish I have in every conceivable position in the tank, in order to make sure I have a good selection for the montage. Despite that, I still had to go back several times during the computer work to shoot additions.” Wall’s image was constructed as a digital montage from around 75 different images.

²⁸⁴ Schlegel somewhere speaks of the historian as a prophet with eyes fixed on the past.

²⁸⁵ Viola 2002: 209.

man; rather, it threatens in the enigmatic calm that lets him go to his ruin". Recalling the enigmatically calm water that ambiguously ruins Felix in Kentridge's *Felix in exile*, water as the calm, distorted and distorting origin²⁸⁶ is what binds Mendieta's *Untitled (Creek)* (1974)²⁸⁷ (Figure 52) to Searle's lithographs *Waiting* (2003) (Figures 53 & 54), both recalling video images of the body disappearing in water by Bill Viola — as in, for example, *The crossing* (1996) (Figure 55). The analogy is productive because of the dialectics of visibility and invisibility, appearance and disappearance, death and transfiguration, self and the loss of self that animates Viola's video projection.

In Mendieta's image, the naked body of the artist seen from above, back turned to us and facing away, is barely visible, present only as a Barthesian, photographic and dynamic trace of "that has been" (Barthes 2000: 96). What we encounter in the image is the suggestion of the artist's body once there during a performance, now apparently eternally drifting away in time — lost to us. Similar to Mann's ultra-thin images of death, in which the cadaver seemingly merges with paper, in Mendieta's image the naked body of the artist appears paper thin — figure inseparable from mottled surface.

It is an enigmatic image of memory and of history, of deterritorialisation (cf Rogoff 2000: 125), mutually personal and social, summoning forth an intense feeling of the drift of time and the flattening of death. Mendieta's image haunts us with a sense of time slipping away, at the precise moment that we attempt to freeze it. It is precisely the image's hovering between movement and stillness that animates our recognition that time unfailingly thwarts our desire to fix and possess life.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ In his interview with Jan Tumlir (2001: 116), Wall observes, "everything is distorted when seen through water."

²⁸⁷ Still from Super-8 colour, silent film, 3 min. 30 sec. The work was executed in San Felipe, Mexico.

²⁸⁸ Cf Amelia Jones (2003: 259): "But the individual photograph paradoxically points to a telescoping series of unfulfilled desires: our desire for, desire to know, desire to have, desire to make. We desire these things in order to make ourselves feel coherent, independent of others, and those closer to transcendence and immortality. However, the photograph, documenting the 'that has been,' also ultimately ends up indicating nothing other than our mortality."

Echoing Mendieta's image, Searle's lithographs present us with the body of the artist, seen from below, submerged in deep, calm, crystal clear water, gracefully floating or hovering as if in time — *in vivo* and *in vitro*. What we see is a Baroque-like fragment of a body, without gravity and without consciousness,²⁸⁹ brilliantly coloured in flowing and folded red and white cloth,²⁹⁰ seemingly carried away by water. That it proves to be the body of the artist, carried away and deterritorialized by the stream flowing between two irreconcilable places, Morocco and Spain, only furthers our sense that aesthetics fails time and again, at the moment in which it attempts to sublimate time. We are faced with the beauty of disappearance enfolded with an encounter with the sublime horror of being left alone in the oblivion of death. Searle's image thus recalls another image, strikingly conjured up in T S Eliot's *The waste land*: that of shoring fragments against our ruins.

Mendieta's and Searle's faceless and expressionless images of Opheliaesque death, both beautiful and violent, recall Shirin Neshat's haunting *Women without men (Untitled #1)* (2004) (Figure 56), an image that vividly cites and relocates John Millais's Pre-Raphaelite painting *Ophelia* (1851-51).²⁹¹ The body of a woman in a white shroud (perhaps the body of the artist herself) floats in Neshat's absorbing and absorptive image, illuminated by diffused light streaming in from the left, like the light in so many images by Rembrandt and Vermeer. The surface of the image, inseparable from the surface of the water in which the body floats, is composed of multiple points of view (cf Bal 1999), or what Heinrich Theissing²⁹² calls the entirety of time, made present in an image as multiple layers or beds of time. Every pictorial fragment of the image, every dimmed or heightened reflection seems to denote a different space of time. In this sense, the body of the woman seems to float in different beds of time — of past, present and future —

²⁸⁹ In this regard, Searle's body has escaped the bungling force of gravity and consciousness decried by the pre-eminent German Romantic and melancholic, Heinrich von Kleist.

²⁹⁰ Searle's colour use tellingly recalls Andres Serrano's: both set the "red of death's violence" (Marin 1993: 180) off against the transcendental purity of white. Mendieta's repeated use of the colour red — in several *Siluetas* works — has clear violent undertones; as much as her use of white flowers in a *Siluetas* executed at Old Man's Creek in Iowa (1977), conjures a sense of innocence and purity.

²⁹¹ Neshat is currently directing a feature length film entitled *Women without men*.

²⁹² As cited by Yalçın (2004: 182f) in his book *Anwesende Abwesenheit*.

represented as multiple reflections within reflections. It is as if the image monadically crystalises “the entire span of historical time within it” (Pensky 2004: 193).

The body of the woman in Neshat’s photograph, floating as if in the mist of time, appears to be transcending the gravity of catastrophe. But the ambiguous title of the work *Women without men*, poses several questions relating to transcendence: are women without men transfigured by this absence, liberated from the daily violence inflicted by men on women, free in the manner of spirits;²⁹³ or are women without men cast adrift in limbo, without life and without redemption?²⁹⁴ It seems as if liberation in Neshat’s image is not complete, for the violence of men is tellingly present in its absence. Neshat’s image may thus be read as a metapicture: one that allegorically makes present the absence that worries our conceptions of life lived in history.

Similarly, the images of lifeless bodies in Mendieta’s and Searle’s work hover between absence and presence, redemption and non-redemption, transcendence and non-transcendence, death and living on.²⁹⁵ They are also images of women without men; women simultaneously liberated from, and lost to the violent presence of men and the disaster of time; women both visible and invisible. Never fully escaping this double bind, they are expressionless, essentially antitheatrical, images of loss and death in which we recognise ourselves (cf Benjamin 2003: 391). As such, they are images which *weakly* “brush history against the grain” (Benjamin 2003: 392).

What remains is the question of melancholy absorption. At the beginning of this chapter I suggested that photographic images of corpses, or of corpse-like figures, self-reflexively and allegorically refer back to the melancholy imaging of history as catastrophe, as it is allegorised in the writings of Benjamin, and in the images of Kiefer and Kentridge. Moreover, when read as allegories or dialectical metapictures, photographic images of

²⁹³ Benjamin (1998: 217) writes: “And if it is in death that the spirit becomes free, in the manner of spirits, it is not until then that the body too comes properly into its own.”

²⁹⁴ Dostoyevsky experienced the dead body in Holbein’s *Dead Christ* as a terrible image without redemption or forgiveness. Cf Kristeva 1989: 188f.

²⁹⁵ As in Aby Warburg’s *Nachleben*, cf Didi-Huberman (2005: 5).

death conceptually embody what is at stake in melancholy art history writing. Photographic images of death body forth the im-possibility of completely (photo-really) grasping or representing the lived moment, given that they retreat from, or deny the beholder precisely when they assume, as indexical traces, the enigmatic status of living things, of things that lived once and are still present today.

Perhaps what the essentially antitheatrical photographic works of Mann, Searle, Mendieta and, finally, Neshat reveal, when retrospectively seen in light of Richter's photo-realistic painting *Reader*, which I discussed as a *Leitbild* of absorption at the beginning of this dissertation, is the inescapable cloudiness of the object of desire and lack — that is, the object of (art) history. When read in and as a meta-constellation that supplements and shifts the constellation named in the title of this dissertation, the work of the artists discussed in this last chapter may serve as thinking images: images in which we reflect, and images that themselves dimly reflect (on) the melancholy loss and desire that founds art history writing as melancholy writing. For, as the melancholy imaging of history as catastrophe in Benjamin's writings, and in Kiefer's and Kentridge's images, continuous to suggest, any absorptive or attentive exchange with the past involves "the problem of the possibilities and limits of meaning", as well as "the threat of finding oneself at the point of irrecoverable loss and empty silence" as LaCapra (1994: 66) writes with reference to the representation of the Holocaust.

Conclusion

Images of corpses may be read as ruins, which have become allegories of history where “history does not assume the form of the process of eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay” (Benjamin 1998: 178 in Arasse 2001: 274). This process of irresistible decay, traced throughout this dissertation on art history writing as melancholy writing, is figured absorptively in Kiefer’s *Lilith’s daughter’s* (1990)²⁹⁶ (Figure 57) — an image of ruin that seems fitting as a theoretical object of beginnings and endings, of “a beginning again and/or elsewhere”, to cite Foster (2002: 129) on our present “making do with what-comes-after”.

I say that ruin is figured absorptively in this image, with the aim of continuing a central thread of this dissertation — that of antitheatricity as opposed to theatricality. On the one hand, this image by Kiefer, like the other images by him discussed in this study, appears theatrical in terms of the prodigious scale of the canvas it is painted on as well as in terms of the cosmic scale of its theme. It seems to impose itself on the beholder, in a manner that Fried (1998b) would describe as the artwork’s forceful declaration of its own objecthood. On the other hand, the very emptiness of the image, the haunting absence of life at its centre, would deny beholdership. There is nothing animate in the image that directs itself at the beholder; we are faced only with sublime ruin and petrification, with deadness itself. But in denying the beholder, the empty image draws us closer; its vast surface, intricately textured and thickly encrusted, seemingly envelops us, thus compelling us to animate it from within.

By way of a preposterous analogy, one might visualise this absorption of the viewer in the image as it appears in two paintings by Richter from 1993, both entitled *I. G.* (Figures 58 & 59). We are faced with the naked back of a man — reminiscent of the naked back of Felix in *Felix in exile* — whose shadow falls across a similarly monochromatic empty field or Rothkoesque background as the one rendered in Richter’s *Reader*. The shadow

²⁹⁶ *Liliths Töchter*.

cast by the man in *I. G.* anticipates the shadow that the beholder of an image casts across its surface; it also pre-figures the shadow that art historical interpretation casts across an art historical object. As such, these images of a solitary figure absorbed in a room allegorise the process of looking into the dark of an image — as something which is already “sensed” in the image itself, and as something which occurs in the shadow of another image. Concomitantly, they allegorise our absorptive thinking about an image as “thinking-in-the-dark”.

Moreover, Kiefer’s expressionless image, of empty ash-covered dresses or fossilised clothes fixed to a cracked surface, dialogically evokes Benjamin’s constellation of ruins, allegory and melancholy. For this melancholy image, in speaking other, allegorically figures the dead in their present absence, in their full emptiness or resplendent ruin. Here, perhaps as with Bachofen’s revelation of the judicial and archeological “image as a message from the land of the dead” (Benjamin 2002: 16), something or someone is being summoned up, recollected from the oblivion or ruin of forgetting.

Lilith, a night creature or vampire, said to haunt the wilderness of stormy weather, and said to be dangerous to children (others’ as well as her own), hangs suspended against a petrified surface that figures the telluric ground of history’s deep, mythic or chthonic origins — as in Kafka’s swamp-like, prehistoric world of guilt (cf Benjamin 1999: 810). Two melancholy aeroplanes, recalling the bidirectionality of Kiefer’s guilt ridden *Melancholia* (1989), as well as the bidirectionality of Benjamin’s image of sacred and profane history, have been fixed on either side of Lilith’s dress: wings dialectically signifying flight and acedia, inspiration and debilitation. Like Paul Klee’s *Angelus novus*,²⁹⁷ this frozen angel “sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at [her] feet” (Benjamin 2003: 392).

²⁹⁷ Kiefer’s painting works retroactively as a mnemonic afterimage of Klee’s painting (cf Foster 2002: 67); whilst the latter may be seen to prefigure the shape of its subsequent elaboration by Kiefer (cf Holly 1996: xiii).

In rabbinical writings, Lilith is supposed to have been the first wife of Adam — the one, after God, endowed with the gift of naming the world for the first time. But here, in Kiefer’s multi-layered painting, the gift of naming and procreation is cast as destructive, allegorical force of ruination. What is shown in the prehistorical light of commemoration and discourse is the night of vanity and empty speech — that is, following Benjamin (1998: 224), arbitrary signification or allegory “prevented by guilt from finding its fulfilled meaning (*Sinnerfullung*) within itself”. In Kiefer’s painting Lilith, the “night-monster” wife of Adam, looms like “the empty spirit of understanding or not understanding”.²⁹⁸

Thinking in the night of this bidirectional image of the Fall from unity and sense, of ruined origins and impossible enlightenment, an image which recalls Goya’s allegorical “thinking in the dark” *The sleep of reason produces monsters*, conjures ever more images of destruction and decay — backwards and forwards. Kiefer’s melancholy image of *Ursprung*, of destruction and of fleeting eternity is informed by the primordial breaking of the vessels — as in the Kabbalistic notion of divine plenitude dispersed in ever new heterogenous and dark configurations.²⁹⁹ What follows, according to the Kabbalah, is exile or *Galuth*, that is, life conceived “as Existence in Exile and in self-contradiction” (Scholem 1995: 249).

And it is precisely this break at the beginning, this ruin at the origin that defines history as catastrophe. Forming the theoretical basis of my reading and enfolding of Kiefer’s and Kentridge’s visualisation of the processes of history, Benjamin’s philosophy of history — whether inflected by theology or materialism — may hold out for an interruption of the mythic, Nietzschean eternal recurrence of the ever-the-same (cf Eliade 1989), of phantasmagoria, and of history as repetitive catastrophe (cf Missac 1995: 111-113). But this interruption, caesura, reversal or redemptive/apocalyptic blasting or flashing of history is always already infinitely delayed; weakened or dimmed by the fact that history-

²⁹⁸ To cite Schlegel’s reaction, in a letter of 1799, to the severe “judgements” on his ideas which Schleiermacher offered (in Rabinbach 1989: xxiiif).

²⁹⁹ Cf Pizer (1995: 52) on *Ursprung* as infinite heterogeneity.

as-catastrophe continues to haunt the present. One might say the notion of caesura, as in the messianic *Jetztzeit*, serves, melancholically, as a “weak” retroactive force that opens up a tiny space for the not-yet — an idea perhaps visualised in Kiefer’s re-membrance of the name “Lilith” in the title of his painting, which is also inscribed on the painting’s surface.³⁰⁰

Faced with this exile, ruin, destruction, and self-contradictory surfacing of discontinuous time in Kiefer’s painting, we cannot but recall the dialectics of melancholia: here black bile has been twinned with dark inspiration. Something has been lost; yet something or someone remains — the hair attached to Kiefer’s canvas being a particular haunting, abject remainder.³⁰¹ As Derrida (qtd Foster 2002: 135) writes in a different context, what remains figures “*both* a dead man [or woman, GS] who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again”. Following Levinas and Derrida, what remains otherwise than Being is ash or cinders: “[T]he trait or trace of that lighting of spirit which resists ... historical incorporation” (Rapaport 1993: 229).

Enfolding the remainder of the “what has been” with the “Now”, Kiefer’s painting is an image of metapictorial ruin and fragmentation: it is a thickly encrusted allegory of appearance in disappearance; of bidirectional melancholy frozen in the folds of time. When all is said and done, this corpse-like apocalyptic image figures as a *memento mori* to the catastrophe of history’s ongoing decay. When intertwined, as an afterimage, with the absorptive images discussed in this dissertation, Kiefer’s spectral painting reads like a melancholy constellation that, in the now of recognicability, monadically produces the fleeting image of cloudy, autumnal lack and desire. As such it images the catastrophe of a revelation infinitely obscured, always already mournful and belated, dialectically accessible and inaccessible. As Wallace Stevens (qtd Bloom 1982: 78) wrote:

³⁰⁰ One might say that the notion of a “preposterous” history is a secular version of this interruption in the linearity of time, in which the present “affects” the past as much as the latter does the former.

³⁰¹ Kiefer’s melancholic use of hair recalls the Columbian artist Doris Salcedo’s mnemonic and melancholic weaving of human hair into mute, antitheatrical sculptures that hauntingly recall the presence of the dead in their unspeakable absence. For a sensitive reading of muteness and mourning in Salcedo’s work, see de Jager (2005).

It is difficult to read. The page is dark.
Yet he knows what it is that he expects.

The page is blank or a frame without a glass
Or a glass that is empty when he looks.

Stevens's melancholy lines return me to the self-reflexive and enclosed image of the absorptive reader figured in Richter's monadic *Reader*, with which I began my reflection on the dark objects of art that haunt art history, and which serves as the preposterous prefiguration of the other seminal figure of absorption — Dürer's *Melencolia I*. It may be difficult, or even impossible, to read either image completely; but then this difficulty or impossibility is precisely what is so tantalisingly pre-figured in both. As such, these dark images or dark pages preposterously and portentously refer not only to their own illegibility, but also to the illegibility of images of and from history per se. As theoretical objects or metapictures, these dark images and dark pages dialectically “sound” the errant origin of thinking-in-images as melancholy thinking and writing.

Moreover, like the backward glance of the art historian the backward glances of Benjamin, Kiefer, and Kentridge manage a similar dialectic of insight in non-sight, blindly absorbed as they are in the uncannily forward-looking things of the past. Benjamin (2002: 14) wrote that for Johann Jakob Bachofen “death was the key to all knowledge”. Benjamin's ambiguous insight retrospectively illuminates and animates not only his own work, but also the work of Kiefer and Kentridge. But one should bear in mind that if death is the key to knowledge, knowledge is the root and result of guilt: that which, according to Benjamin (1999: 224), prevents the allegorically significant “from finding fulfilment of its meaning within itself”. What comes after this melancholy and allegorical configuration of guilt, then and now, remains unforeseeable.

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Abstract

This dissertation is a study in representation. More specifically, it is a study in the representation of art and of art history as melancholy representation. The latter is produced or opens up, because objects of art — pictures, images, or *Bilder* (read “likenesses”) — have a tendency to withdraw or turn away from view. Objects of art, which may be thought of as “thinking objects” or “living images”, that is, as quasi-subjects, negate complete ownership. Like living things, objects of art are infinitely incomplete; they arise out of an ongoing process of becoming and disappearance. As such, our relationship with them may be said to be one of “mutual desire”, want and lack.

Moreover, as Michael Ann Holly (2002) has argued, the study of art history is bedevilled by lost, obscure, or obsolete objects; cloudy, shadowy, ghostly, even corpse-like objects that deny total acquisition or last words. It is in this sense that one can say art history — perhaps like any history — is a melancholic science. It is also from this melancholy perspective that this dissertation reflects, in various ways, on the imaging of history as catastrophe or as catastrophic loss — as this is figured in the work of Walter Benjamin, Anselm Kiefer, and William Kentridge.

How then do we write about art and the history of art, when the objects of our study are both too close and too far away, mutually absent and present — fleeting, yet seemingly permanent? How can one “image” the catastrophic debilitation of melancholic disavowal or death of self, without succumbing to its debilitating attractions? Following on from Max Pensky’s (2001) tracing of the historical image of melancholia as dialectical, the aim of this dissertation is to delineate a discursive space for perception and reflection; a critical space within which to think of the melancholic im-possibility of representation qua possession, as essentially negatively dialectical: futile and heroic, pointless and necessary.

Finally, this dissertation asks: how can one write about the imaging of history as catastrophe, as this is figured from within different historical frameworks: that of an

early twentieth century German-Jewish philosopher, a late twentieth/early twenty-first century German artist, and a late twentieth/early twenty-first South African-Jewish artist? How can one hope to relate their essentially melancholy work without becoming culpable of ahistoricity or even pastiche? No easy answers have been forthcoming during the writing of this dissertation. However, it is my delicate contention that reading and picturing their work in and as a melancholy constellation whose parameters shift depending on one's point of view, as opposed to submitting their similarities and differences to rigorous systematic analysis, has revealed surprising and enlightening elective affinities. In the final analysis, visual and philosophical analogy has the last say. And this seems fitting, especially where one encounters a writer and two artists whose thinking in images tirelessly challenge our thinking "logically" in words alone.