

Pictorial textuality: The imaginative reading of pictures

Dirk J. van den Berg

Department of History of Art, University of the Orange Free State, P.O. Box 339, Bloemfontein, 9300.

The notion of multiple, concurrent readings is used to explore the status of pictorial textuality as a model for the art of painting. Being encapsulations of materiality, visuality, artefactuality and narrativity, paintings require distinct modes and levels of reading. The value of the model is tested with reference to an extreme case of reading – Antonin Artaud's gnostic interpretation of a sixteenth-century painting of Lot and his daughters.

Die idee van meerdere gelyklopende lesings word gebruik om die status van pikurale tekstualiteit as 'n model vir die skilderkuns te ontleed. Synde enkapsulerings van materialiteit, visualiteit, artefaktualiteit en narrativiteit verlang skilderye verskillende vlakke en wyses van lesing. Die bruikbaarheid van die model word getoets aan die hand van 'n buitengewone lesing – van Antonin Artaud se gnostiese interpretasie van 'n sestiende-eeuse skildering van Lot en sy dogters.

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For Cal Seerveld *graduandus*, A.D. 1995

In every exchange of meaning the discourse is channeled through a mode of textuality, verbal as well as non-verbal.¹ Pictorial webs of meaning constitute one of many kinds of legible human utterance. Paintings too need to be read if the fictional worlds projected in the pictorial mode of textuality are to be realised in the imagination of prospective readers. Commentators seem ever ready, however, in the name of one or other critical shibboleth (aesthetic autonomy, visuality or figurality, for example), to buttress the

legibility peculiar to the art of painting against any encroachment by discursive regimes or to exclude painting from the precincts of theory (cf. Bächtmann 1977). These familiar stances ought to be reconsidered in the light of modified categories of textuality (cf. Coseriu 1981, Calabrese 1984, Vanbergen 1986, Jeanrond 1988, Knobloch 1990).

Paul Ricoeur (1979) links textuality closely with 'inscription'. In some respects this view con-

¹ Modes of 'textuality' should be distinguished from the other semantic macro-functions of exchanges of meaning, viz. the interpersonal and the ideational (cf. Halliday & Hassan 1985). My statement, however, highlights texts as instances of semantic facticity within normative frames of discourse. Cf. John Caputo's (1988: 7) critical comment on the shift towards deconstructionist notions of textuality and intertextuality: "In my reading textuality is a radicalization of the notion of facticity. Textuality does not uproot us from the world, but catches us up in the density of the world in a more radical way. The metaphor of 'radical' here takes on the sense, not of a firm foundation, but of the 'racinated', of a knotted root system, of a plant that had overgrown its container so that it is impossible to sort out one root strand from another."

finer the act of reading to the decyphering of graphic characters in written, printed or screened scripts, or to entities that could be construed as functioning like scripts. This is indeed the case with most structuralist models of semiotic reading. By contrast, certain 'dead' metaphors of reading offer viable alternatives to semiotic encoding and decoding, for instance those connoting the woven texture of fabrics or the harvester's bodily labour in the field. These perennial senses of reading entail a number of interpretative acts: the careful retracing of intricate patterns to glean and blend untold nuances of meaning; the relentless pursuit of promising allusions to gather connections into cohesive semantic wholes, despite the frustration of dead ends and labyrinthine choices; and the integration of referentially expanding configurations — unfolding incrementally as well as supplementally — around evolving thematic foci.

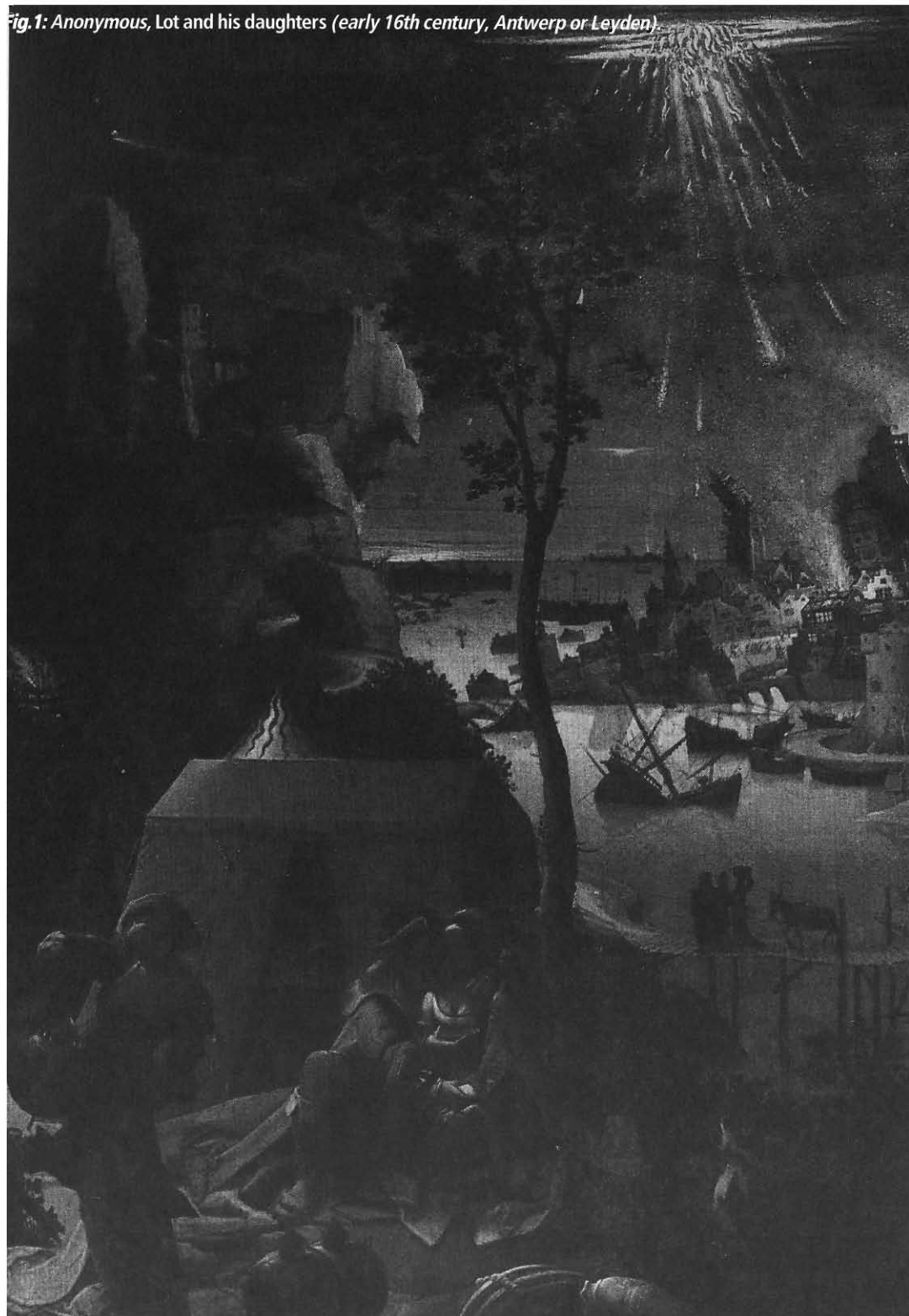
Reading in this enduring sense should not to be confused with 'anthology' notions of textuality. The latter evokes idyllic images of reading — wandering along meandering pathways and wooded byways, spontaneously picking choice flowers from the freely available abundance in nature, or fixed routines for the deliberate culling of stock nurtured in a greenhouse. Ultimately the selected and collected crop is arranged into the varied whole of a harmonious garland — the

still life theme of countless flower pieces. Real anthologies, the original *anthologia Graeciae* for instance, suggest counter-images of reading. A case in point would be the Pauline image of brands rescued from the flames on the basis of grace, not good intentions, individual merit, free choice or careful planning. Rather than classic bodies of authoritative *dicta*, the reader's harvest thus yields *disiecta membra*, disparate fragments reprieved from dissolution and chaos, scarred and disfigured remnants of history's bloody conflicts redeemed under the sign of the rainbow — the *vanitas* theme of corruption in many still life paintings.

The effects of sin and grace in reading and in history become vital when texts and the world are approached in religious perspective. These thematic considerations decided the selection of *Lot and his daughters* (Fig. 1) as illustrative example.² In probing its pictorial text for traces of the inscrutable themes of guilt and mercy, I follow the interpretative reading of Oskar Bätschmann (1981), a leading exponent of pictorial hermeneutics. I differ from him in proposing that one of a number of world view traditions in which ultimate meaning has been, and is still being framed and read informs, the typiconic format of this painting. Conversion to the work's religious point of view is not essential but does assist understanding. As a rule, the *pacte de générosité*

² Oil on wooden panel, 48 by 34 cm. Paris: Musée du Louvre. Formerly thought to be by Lucas van Leyden, this painting is now generally attributed to an anonymous artist active in Antwerp or Leyden during the first decades of the sixteenth century.

Fig. 1: Anonymous, Lot and his daughters (early 16th century, Antwerp or Leyden).



between authors and readers³ enjoins us to heed the appeal of texts and the dictates of conscience, also at the level of ultimate commitments concerning order and change, fall and redemption in history.

1. Word and image

The strength of Bächtmann's approach lies in the way he manages to combine systematic questions and historical arguments (cf. also Bächtmann 1989). He begins his interpretation of *Lot and his daughters* by drawing a contrast between two opposing stances regarding the linkage between pictorial images and language. He sketches these rival positions by referring to two publications from the thirties, respectively by Antonin Artaud, the Surrealist playwright and producer, and Erwin Panofsky, the German art historian. Both positions have unmistakable repercussions on the ways that we frame and interpret historical cases of pictorial textuality. Apparently the painting of *Lot and his daughters*

first appeared on the critical horizon in 1931, playing a major part in a lecture by Artaud at the Sorbonne, with the title *La mise en scène et la métaphysique*.⁴ On this occasion he again challenged the domination of theatrical production by language, chiefly by rejecting the prevalent view in the West of the *mise en scène* as the staging of dialogues from literary texts. The first section of Artaud's (1931: 22-25) diatribe against logocentrism consists of an extended description of *Lot and his daughters*, the springboard for his subsequent 'metaphysical' or gnostic exegesis (cf. footnote 9 below).

Artaud reads the painting as a ritual staging of the events depicted from the Old Testament book of Genesis. The painting's antagonism to the "production of metaphysical ideas" by the discursive regime of language is thus akin to Artaud's own Theatre of Cruelty. He argues that "this painting is what theatre ought to be, if only it knew how to speak its own language." He means the 'language' of physical things transformed by ritual staging into dramatic acts of "In-

³ cf. Sartre's statement of 1947 on interpretative responsibility in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*: "Ainsi la lecture est un pacte de générosité entre l'auteur et le lecteur; chacun fait confiance à l'autre, chacun compte sur l'autre, exige de l'autre autant qu'il exige de lui-même." Stierle (1994: 866) shifts the burden of responsibility to the institution of interpretation: "Interpretation is always part of an ongoing discourse of interpretation which keeps texts that have become part of the common social identity present in cultural memory [...]. This means that the interpreter is not only responsible for the text, but also to the institution of interpretation in which his discourse is situated. Interpretation is a professional and institutionally bound activity which has to keep standards of reliability, thus assuring the necessary conditions for Sartre's contract of generosity between reader and work."

⁴ Chronologically the lecture on the painting of *Lot and his daughters* falls between two other key texts by Artaud — *Sur le théâtre Balinais* and *Le théâtre alchimique*. The first records that his ideas concerning ritual staging were inspired by a performance of the Balinese Dance Theatre that he attended; the second defines *gnosis* as the true meaning of 'metaphysical'. His concern with *mise en scène* should, in fact, be understood as an alchemical project: theatre as the alchemical crucible of dissolution, transmutation and resurrection (cf. Goodall 1989).

vocation". Bächtmann cites Nietzsche as one source of this position which grounds the autonomy of pictorial presentation in its radical opposition to the 'textual' discursivity of language.

46 Bächtmann next draws attention to the fact that 1932 saw the first publication of Panofsky's *Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildende Kunst*, a seminal text in the rise of iconology, till recently the dominant method in the non-formalist mainstream of art-historiography. Panofsky (1932: 92) at that time subscribed to Heidegger's view that interpretation has to bring 'Ungesagtes vor Augen' by the application of 'Gewalt'. In his subsequent, semiotically inclined presentations of iconology for an American audience, Panofsky gradually distanced himself from his brief flirtation with the hermeneutic project. Unlike Artaud who evidently favours rhetorical power, Panofsky understood 'Gewalt' in rational terms as a methodical disclosure of the *logos* hidden in images. He thus contributed to the expansion of the logocentric jurisdiction of language over the domain of images.

As regards his own position on language and images, Bächtmann wishes to retain the full weight of the contradiction between the positions of Artaud and Panofsky. As is to be expected from an adherent to the hermeneutic tradition of Heidegger, Gadamer and Boehm, he seeks to accommodate the antithesis in a dialectical methodology. The terms in the subtitle of his paper — *Metaphorik, Antithetik und Ambiguität* — function in part as systematic indices of his own semantically expanded, hermeneutic version of iconology (cf. also Bächtmann 1986: 120-31). These terms engage the painting itself in an elegantly nuanced yet curiously detached way.⁵ By contrast, Artaud's passionate rhetorical engagement with the central thrust of *Lot and his daughters* resonates most powerfully with the imaginary world of the painting and with the contexts of situation of audiences/spectators, confronting ultimate commitments professed in both these domains.

Significantly, Bächtmann omits two references of major import for the issues at hand — one related to Artaud and the other to Bächtmann himself. Artaud's position is closely aligned with that of Walter Benjamin, a pre-war contemporary in

⁵ Thus Bächtmann (1981: 179) concludes his reading with the following summary of the painting's metaphors, antitheses and ambiguities (cf. section 4 below):

"Im Bild wird die Frage nach der Wahrheit der Rettung entwickelt durch die Überlagerung der Sukzession der beiden Szene mit einer Antithetik von Katastrophe und Rettung, durch die Fragwürdigkeit einer Rettung, die mit dem Inzest zusammenfällt und eine Fortsetzung der Sünden von den Sodomitern bis zu Lot entstehen läßt, und durch den Kometen, der für die Katastrophe Zeichen des vergangenen, für Lot des künftige Unheil ist. In der vom Bild entworfene Zeitlichkeit der Erzählung der Geschichte Lots wird die Rettung negiert; die Antithetik erweist sich als zerreißbarer Schein, die Diagonale trennt nicht Untergang und Rettung, vielmehr berühren sich in ihr Katastrophe und Sündenfall und zerreiben zwischen sich die einstige Verheißung der Rettung."

the French capital. Along with some recent deconstructionists both are affiliated with a venerable tradition of 'mythologising thought' in Western philosophy (cf. Seerveld 1992) and associated world view frames for reading works of art.⁶ Artaud (1931: 22) reveals a typical bias of this tradition when he alleges that the painting "affects the mind by a kind of striking visual harmony, intensely active in the whole work yet caught at a glance." The latter phrase already hints at the presence of a typiconic frame of reading. The glance does not denote immediate accessibility as a permanent condition of pictorial meaning, nor the eventuality of an easy entry into the painting. In this case it alludes instead to the electrifying shock following divinatory readings of an obscure and difficult work's revelatory and transmuting power (cf. Goodal 1994).

Artaud's reading of the painting accentuates the 'alchemical logic' of *metanosis* (cf. Goodal 1989) and, apropos his theatrical interests, the effect of dramatic figures of *anagnorisis* between painting and spectator (cf. Cave 1988). Artaud (1931: 30) insists that theatrical *mise en scène* is capable of producing similar shocks of recognition, comparable discoveries of sublime danger: "the best way of producing this concept of danger on stage is by the objective unforeseen, not unforeseen

in situations but in things, the sudden inopportune passing from a mental image to a true image." Occult yet indomitable, the revelatory moment of transcendent meaning and the metanoic effect of *gnosis* corresponds closely with Benjamin's concept of *Aura* (cf. section 3).

Bätschmann also omits any mention of Michael Fried's (1981) *Absorption and theatricality*, a book based on his studies from the seventies on the absorptive tradition in modern French painting. Similar to Benjamin's *Aura* in denoting an initial refusal to communicate, 'absorption' nevertheless has different roots, associated with the anti-theatrical 'objecthood' of painting and receptive strategies of counter-fabulation developed in this regard in Denis Diderot's art criticism.⁷ The aesthetic self-closure of autonomous paintings supposedly threatens to reduce the spectators to *voyeurs* of the depicted scenes, their literal presence seemingly supererogatory. The absorptive tradition's anti-theatricality heralds the eighteenth-century rise of a medium-specific aesthetics of autonomy as well as ensuing modernist reactions against early modern painting's rhetorical strategies for spectator engagement (cf. Van den Berg 1993a: 51-3).

⁶ cf. Van den Berg (1993b: 21-22) for a schematic overview of this tradition as well as ample background and bibliographical references on the typiconic format of estoric images.

⁷ Artaud's critical reaction to *Lot and his daughters* is a clear case of counter-fabulation. However, like Heinrich von Kleist's enigmatic response in 1810 to Caspar David Friedrich's celebrated painting *The monk by the sea* (1808/10), it is cast in a mold distinctly at odds with the absorptive or scenic tradition of Diderot *cum suis* (cf. Flax 1984 & Traeger 1980).

In the context of a discussion of Artaud's theatrical discourse, Bättschmann's omission of any reference to Fried's brand of modernism seems to suggest tacit agreement with the anti-theatrical or non-literalist belief in the sheer visual, yet ambiguous, presence of works.⁸ Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' approach, on the other hand, decisively anticipates the recovery of rhetoric as well as a renewal of interest in theatrical models of *ekphrasis*.⁹ Taking advantage of rhetoric's full panoply of *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos*, his ekphrastic exegesis of *Lot and his daughters* deliberately projects into wider contexts of situation the reverberations of the unforeseen, awe-inspiring shock of recognition of the 'metaphysical' in the pictorial *mise en scène*.¹⁰ Artaud's reading strategies thus seek to incorporate overarching dimensions of textuality like *intentio auctoris*, *intentio operatis* and *intentio lectoris*, i.e. the prefigurative, configurative and refigurative categories of *mimesis*.

The preceding review of positions demonstrates some of the crucial constraints of reading that govern notions of pictorial textuality and read-

ers' ultimate commitments. The constraints include the ideological ramifications of alternative frames of reading, the object structure of texts and the event structure of interpretative reading, the referential expansion of acts of reading in the world beyond the frame and the surface of pictures, and their rhetorical efficacy in confrontation with basic stances regarding the issues of sin and grace.

2. Multiple readings

Gadamer (1979: 30) is a most eloquent advocate of reading as the key hermeneutic action:

*In dieser Weise scheint mir in der Tat 'Lesen' ein Prototyp für die Forderung, die an jede Betrachtung von Kunstwerken, gerade auch von Werken der bildenden Kunst, gestellt wird. Es gilt zu lesen, mit all diesen Vorgriffen und Rückgriffen, mit dieser wachsenden Artikulation, mit diesen sich anreichernden Sedimentierungen, so daß am Ende einer solchen Leseleistung das Gebilde in all seiner artikulierten Reichhaltigkeit dennoch wieder zur vollen Einheit einer Aussage zusammenschmilzt.*¹¹

Like his firm belief in the cultural unity of a single grand tradition, Gadamer's conviction that read-

⁸ cf. Fried's celebrated phrase 'presence is grace'. To be applicable in Artaud's case, this credo has to be reformulated as 'hidden presence is destiny'.

⁹ Krieger (1992: 93-114) designates the theatrical model of *ekphrasis enargeia II* (defined as "nature's transcendence of the natural sign") in contrast with *enargeia I* (the illusion of natural signs by verbal representation).

¹⁰ The choice of *la métaphysique* as a non-technical term is confusing. In a more precise sense Artaud (1931: 33) speaks of "a religious, mystical meaning our theatre has forgotten". His sense of 'metaphysical' corresponds with 'anti-logocentrism' as it became known after Derrida launched the deconstruction project. Artaud's reading of a pictorial text would not be restricted to the impassive disclosure of an image's hidden *logos*, the 'symbolic forms' associated with Panofsky's neo-idealism.

¹¹ Roughly translated: In this way 'reading' indeed seems to be a prototype of what is demanded from any response to works of art, specifically also works of visual art. Reading calls for anticipations and retroceptions, for growing articulations and for increasing sedimentations of meaning. At the conclusion of a performance of reading the formation with all its articulated variety fuses yet again into the full unity of its intrinsic meaning.

ings could consummate an authoritative unity of meaning sounds an overly optimistic note. It calls to mind the anthology notion of textuality and garland figure of reading. Nonetheless, the tradition which he represents in hermeneutics left a generous legacy of thought on the issue of reading. It concerns the interpretative interconnections, the inextricable interlacings, the unavoidable interferences, the figurative projections, the personal embodiment, the *Lebenswelt* rootedness, the sociocultural situation and the worldview orientation of reading and seeing. In this tradition Graeme Nicholson (1984) probes imaginary processes of focalisation and projection, or foregrounding and backgrounding at work in seeing as well as in reading; Paul Ricoeur (1979) explores the projective schematics of imaginative fictionalising operating in metaphorical figures of semantic innovation as well as emplotment figures of narrative innovation; Christopher Collins (1991) does exciting work on the effects of imaginary vision in reading the written image.

Such open notions of what is involved in the reading of texts can enrich our understanding of the historical elaboration of rhetorical *enargeia*

into aesthetic *Anschaulichkeit* (cf. Willems 1989; Van den Berg 1993a: 57-9). Imaginary vision's fictionalising effects are induced by reading the allusive play of nuances of meaning in pictorial works of art. Rather than static spatial forms vying with the spectator's receptive spontaneity,¹² pictorial texts invoke temporally separated acts of semantic co-operation¹³ and imaginative participation and bonding performed between painters and spectators in each other's absence. Pictures are mediated 'exchanges of meaning' within specific contexts of situation.¹⁴ As works of art they solicit deliberate 'efforts of meaning' from their readers. Pictorial texts anticipate the essential responses for realising the imaginary worlds projected by paintings.

An imaginative response to the allusive legibility¹⁵ of paintings embraces concurrent readings at multiple levels of structure, corresponding to the heterogenous makeup of paintings as encapsulations of material, visual, artefactual as well as, for instance, narrative components.¹⁶ Configured in terms of structural ambiguities and interlaced constraints, pictorial texts elicit direction-conscious responses from readers. Essential for realising and situating the fictional worlds

¹² cf. Mitchell (1986: 95-115), Krieger (1992: 44-64) and Vos (1992) about this conception in the tradition of Lessing.

¹³ cf. Kepnes (1992) on the hermeneutics of mediated 'dialogues' or 'conversations'.

¹⁴ cf. Halliday & Hasan (1985) for Michael Halliday's definition of texts as semantic events of discourse habitually transpiring below the threshold of consciousness. O'Toole (1994) discusses many examples of its application in the visual arts.

¹⁵ Not restricted to verbal or nonverbal texts, legibility and reading embrace the interpretative dimension of human responses generally to the order of the world, society and history, as suggested by Hans Blumenberg (1981).

¹⁶ Apparently committed to Alberti's periodic concept of pictorial *compositio* for Renaissance narrative painting, O'Toole's (1994) concept of ranking of homogenous units (i.e., categories of 'work', 'episode', 'figure' and 'member') does not, in my opinion, do justice to the semantic complexity of pictorial texts as encapsulated wholes.

of texts, readings yield variously directed articulations of biased but cohesive semantic wholes. The innate thrust and the partiality of textual meanings are directed towards readers for critical assessment in terms of world view commitments (cf. Jeanrond 1988: 64-72).

The following review of the special kinds of reading involved in the material, visual, artefactual and narrative dimensions of a painting's heterogeneous structure is focused on the religious depth-dimension of structure and genesis in the pictorial textuality of *Lot and his daughters*.

3. Materiality

Being framed surfaces covered with layers of pigment bearing the marks of a makers' hands or tools as well as traces of contact with subsequent users, paintings exist primarily as aggregates of shaped material. Often contrasted with the immateriality or the semantic ideality of texts, the materiality of paintings demand an indexical reading for tracking physical traces. Carlo Ginzburg associates the rise of the philological and critical concept of textuality with the history of printing.¹⁷ He notes the "progressive dematerialization of the text, which was gradually purified at every point of reference related to the senses; even though a material element is

required for a text's survival, the text itself is not identified by that element" (Ginzburg 1989: 107).

Ricoeur, too, considers 'inscription' a basic condition for legibility. In his view the material autonomy of scripts underpins the relative semantic autonomy of texts. Due to the texts' hermeneutic 'distanciation' from the immediate conditions of situational access and pragmatic involvement, he is further able to adopt the model of textuality in other fields marked by a surplus of meaning. In the social field human actions thus have repercussions that transcend the intentions of the actors and passing situational conditions. Actions attain a degree of independence through sedimentation in enduring social patterns that can be read like documents with semantic depth-structures (cf. Ricoeur 1971).

Ritualisation is a quasi-liturgical way of arresting action and forging fixed social patterns. For Artaud dramatic action is ritualised by the *mise en scène* as a 'language of physical things, and not fixed by the literary text of the dialogue. It transforms the reading of such actions, often the repetitious, sometimes even boring passages of a theatrical production, into shattering experiences of mystical "Invocation". Ritual actions, however, have no audience. The presence of an audience of non-participants disrupts the performance of rites. One can only participate as an

¹⁷ Text in this context refers to the reproducible semantic whole of a work, cf. Martens (1989).

initiate of the mystery. Artaud's approach does not recognise outsiders; the *mise en scène* of the Theatre of Cruelty obliterates any hermeneutic distance or aesthetic disinterestedness (cf. Lyotard 1977).

The fact that the debate about 'art or script' (cf. Bouissac 1994) features prominently among students of 'prehistory' and 'posthistory' bolsters Ginzburg's evaluation of the status of painting within material culture, especially in conditions of extreme underdevelopment or overdevelopment. Regarding the archeology of prehistoric cultures, the title of Tilley (1991) shrewdly summarises the uneasy outcome of current debates: *Material culture and text: The art of ambiguity*. The soundness of this conclusion is confirmed by the experience of archeologists of Southern African rock art (cf. Van den Berg 1993b: 6-9). At the other extreme of development, the technological progression from printed to photographic and from video to digitalised reproduction of images confirms the value of Walter Benjamin's (1961) notion of a loss of *Aura* in the era of the artwork's mechanical reproducibility (cf. Mattick 1993). Reproductions cannot replace immediate bodily contact with the physical presence of originals. Reproductive processes divest paintings of their *in situ* material existence, obliterating physical dimensions and provenance, localised effects of ambient light and other conditions of accessibility.

Processes of material deterioration due to physical entropy are irreversible. Experienced in close proximity, the physical presence of works of art reveal authenticated originals to be decomposing or ravaged ruins — timeworn and decaying like fading icons or damaged relics. To distinguish anthropogenic marks from the effects of natural wear and tear, and to read such physical traces as clues about bygone human intentions, social customs or cultural beliefs thus require a forensic and archeological hermeneutic of suspicion. The sleuth with a looking-glass or the white-coated laboratory assistant represents this level of reading or this class of readers. Artaud wants these readers of material culture to be overwhelmed by the suddenness of a fateful face-to-face encounter with the 'metaphysics' of the *mise en scène* (cf. Bohrer 1994) and be confronted with apocalyptic visions as mythical recapitulations of primeval catastrophes.

Reproductions additionally call for a technological hermeneutic of suspicion, a guarded awareness of industrial forms of displacement, trace erasure, radical deframing and manipulation of imagery, pervading practices in the mass media industries. The apparitional or virtual subsistence of transmitted reproductions in the 'museum without walls' — André Malraux's *musée imaginaire* of the mind — attenuates certain nuances of painting's referential potential and augments other nuances. In line with the concept of intertextuality, reproductions are often described

as existing in an intermedial, even interimaginal zone (cf. Calebrese 1984 and Vos 1992). But even the most melancholic reproductions or post-auratic ruins, according to Walter Benjamin's mythologising way of thinking, can unexpectedly turn into well-nigh magical vehicles for powerful eruptions of truth, instantaneous, messianic revelations in the *Jetztzeit* of history (cf. Niethammer 1993). Artaud describes his experience of *Lot and his daughters* in this volcanic mode. Suddenly, 'at a glance', distance becomes proximity, absence is transformed into presence, and presence into a crisis of fateful origin, mythical transgression and final upheaval. Artaud's experience can be regarded as a significant pointer towards an appropriate reading of the ideological direction and typiconic format of this painting. It also presses for including the material carriers of meaning in the semantic whole of pictorial texts.

4. Visuality

Terms like *image* or *Bild* are utterly equivocal. They refer to a wide range of 'imagery' from dissimilar fields in which iconicity has been a perennial problem. One need only mention the optical images in visual perception, the graphic

depictions or pictorial images made by human hands, the reproduced images created by photographic or other advanced techniques of reproduction, the metaphorical images of figurative discourse or the curious fictions of imaginary vision.¹⁸ Typically aroused in the 'mind's eye' by entoptic, eidetic or synaptic phenomena, Artaud's invocatory imagery is of a kind experienced in the visions of oracles, seers and mystics — powerful images or, better still, image powers that precipitate short-circuits in differentiated systems or classes of imagery or iconic signs (cf. Van den Berg 1993b).

The pictorial definition of retinal images which Kepler advanced at the time of the Renaissance radically shifted the ever puzzling ratio of culture and nature obtaining for imagery. Proposed by a natural scientist, this definition was influential in entrenching 'picture theories of perception' and predisposing later theoreticians of perception and historians of the visual arts to misconstrue relations between distinct categories of imagery. 'Pictorial textuality' is preferable when referring to the graphic imagery among which paintings can be numbered. In general, it concerns depictions made by human hands, in particular the imagery artists compose in pictures to engage the imagination of spectators in inter-

¹⁸ Mitchell (1984: 505) divides the family of images into five categories: graphic (pictures, statues, designs), optic (reflections and projections), perceptual (sensory data, species, appearances), mental (dreams, memories, ideas, phantasmata) and verbal (metaphors, descriptions, texts). Gibson (1980), on the other hand, distinguishes between ten kinds of visual image: solid images (statues and other three-dimensional objects), mirror images or reflections, retinal images, optical after images, memory images, mental images, camera images or projections, photographic camera images, arrested images and pictorial images.

personal communication.

The order of picture surfaces, pictorial imagery and imaginary semblance should be distinguished from the order of optical fields, retinal images and visual illusions. Analogies — similarities in differences — between these separate orders of iconicity are nonetheless undeniable. Ultimately the analogies stem from the subliminal presence of metaphorical processes in both visual and pictorial perception (cf. Nicholson 1984). Thus no qualities of visual perception can be said to be inherently pictorial or particularly prone to pictorial *mimesis*. Nevertheless, under certain conditions these sensory qualities furnish the art of painting with a unique window of opportunity for the culture of crafted acts of imagining,¹⁹ a structure determining the type of textuality found in paintings.

The diminutive size of cabinet pieces — *Lot and his daughters* measures a mere 48 by 34 cm — calls to mind the notion of miniaturization, a prime metaphor for painting according to Norman Bryson (1981: iii). He alludes to the fact that paintings are the products of reductive processes. In comparison with ordinary visual perception, paintings emerge from a crafted diminishing of natural dimensions, movements and intensities of colour and tone contrasts:²⁰

Far from yielding less than the original, pictorial activity may be characterized in terms of an 'iconic augmentation', where the strategy of painting [...] is to reconstruct reality on the basis of a limited optic alphabet. The strategy of contraction and miniaturization yields more by handling less. In this way the main effect of painting is [...] to increase the meaning of the universe by capturing it in the network of its abbreviated signs (Ricoeur 1979: 42).

The actual measure of success for any increase of meaning is entirely dependent on the imaginative reading of paintings, on processes of pictorial perception thematically supervised by the sensibilities of the artist and the spectators. Imaginary vision thus guides the rapid scanning of painted surfaces, the sensitive retracing of compositional motifs by the mobile optical focus and shifting peripheral vision of eyes on the lookout for pictorial cues to allusive configurations of meaning. On this level of eye work, acts of reading could be searching glances, scrutinising gazes or meditative beholdings of pictorial imagery. Registering motifs depicted by graphic marks, and articulating pictorial worlds of semblance from compositions of coloured shapes and shaded tones, the retentive visual memory and protentive visual fantasy support the anal-epic and proleptic processes of thematic reading.

¹⁹ In her semiotic approach to the picturing of Dutch culture, Svetlana Alpers (1993/4: 158) refers to this perceptual window as the 'reality effect' of the pictorial mode of representation.

²⁰ The supposed rhetorical 'defects' of the art of painting (i.e., the pictorial qualities of stillness, lifelessness and silence which painters have to master, according to comparisons of the visual with the literary and performing arts in *paragone* literature) originated from the inevitable reductions attending the processes of miniaturization, cf. Morrison (1988: 196-325).

On viewing the painting of *Lot and his daughters* the reader notices that the diagonal axis from the lower right-hand to the upper left-hand corners divides the landscape composition into two rectangular triangles. The scene in the triangle on the right depicts the catastrophic fate of Sodom and Gomorrah; the scene on the left depicts the subsequent events of the intoxication and seduction of Lot by his daughters. The two scenes are juxtaposed in a composition governed by intense pictorial contrasts — distance and proximity, light and dark, cold-yellow and sultry-red illumination. Artaud's scenic eye for the 'physical language of things' fathoms the metaphoric root of these contrasts:

Sometimes, when we are watching exploding fire-works some details of the landscape stand out against the darkness in the ghostly light [...]; trees, towers, mountains and houses appear in relief before our eyes, their colour and appearance forever remaining associated in our minds with a notion of ear-splitting noise. There is no better way of conveying how the various aspects of the landscape conform to this fire revealed in the sky, than by saying that although they possess their own colour [...] they remain related to it like muted echoes, like living points of reference born within it, put there to allow it to exert its full destructive power.

Besides, there is something horribly forceful and disturbing about the way the painter depicts this fire, like active, changing features in a set expression. It makes little difference how this effect is achieved, it is real. One has only to see the painting to be convinced of it" (Artaud 1931: 23).

Artaud's astute metaphoric fusion of the image

of a sudden burst of fire with the image of the cast of a malevolent facial expression exactly describes the momentary rhetorical effect of the painting's astral *Farbgestalt*, typical of this tradition's lasting typiconic format. Readers wishing to enter the fictive world of the painting have to recognise the auratic omnipresence of this incandescent physiognomy in the painting's imaginative format.²¹

5. Artefactuality

As makers of artefacts, painters are in command of materials and instruments, comparable perhaps to 'literacy' as the mastery of an alphabetic script. Yet pictorial designs are not simply utilitarian products, mere technical objects, tools or devices (cf. Dipert 1993). Every humanly designed or fashioned product exists for us — *pro nobis* — for a community of users, destined to satisfy the anticipated, or the customary, or as yet unforeseen human purposes. Since they mediate interpersonal exchanges of meaning Mikel Dufrenne even conceives of works of art as quasi-subjects. Distinct from other artefacts, works of art engage the user's imaginative or playful 'knowing-how' rather than his or her technical 'know-how' about pragmatic actions in the face of mutable purposes and changing situational exigencies.

²¹ Regarding Artaud's theme of the *mise en scène*, Barbara Stafford (1990) explores the early Greek distinction between imagery from *skenographia* and from *skiagraphia*. Historical reactions to this distinction contributed to the development of several traditions of 'fantastic images'.

Pictorial qualities that prompt reading viewers to enter into playful yet serious acts of make-believe can be said to constitute the 'allure' or the play summons of a painting. Primed for imaginary play and sensing that a pictorial game is afoot, responsive readers are ever ready to participate in the strange worlds of fiction that paintings 'image' for the imagination. The movement of play carries spectators along in unforeseen directions and into unknown territories. Exploring intuited possibilities and random options, spectators gradually uncover the rules obtained from each pictorial game. The reading of games typically asks for a readiness to play, to play along provisionally or even to be played with. It requires an adventurous eagerness to accept challenges and an extemporising keenness to improvise with the barest minimum of givens. These imaginative competences govern the reading of pictorial texts at the artefactual level of participation (cf. Iser 1989 and 1990). The event structure of textuality manifests itself at this level where reading takes the form of performance.²²

Though certainly appropriate to the allure of *Lot and his daughters*, Artaud's reading exposes the reader to a particularly hazardous species of transcendence, unknown to Iser (1989) when he adopts Caillois' typology of games. The gamesmanship of Artaud is a perilous venture. It transforms mere dangerous play into ritual cruelty in

order that the ominous qualities of the uncanny can explode into sublime revelation. It is also a game of intoxication, as that depicted in the left-hand scene of *Lot and his daughters*. Participants engage in it, initially with ritual restraint, before declining into orgiastic oblivion. The role of Lot's daughters, according to Artaud's 'metaphysical' exegesis of the story, is thus comparable to the sacred carnality of temple prostitution. A number of artists and movements in the mythologising tradition are known to have resorted to Dionysian rapture as a path towards visionary enlightenment. The typiconic format of this painting thus concerns a peculiar alliance of *le jeu et le sacré* (cf. Chastel 1955) — awful meaning lurks mysteriously below the surface, hidden like a wild animal ever ready to launch its fatal attack on the unwary.

6. Narrativity

As an example of early modern history painting, the most elevated pictorial genre of the Renaissance, *Lot and his daughters* falls within a particular category of pictorial texts.²³ It is, in fact, one of the earliest examples of a free pictorial narration of the story of Lot, neither serving as illustration of illuminated manuscripts nor programmed as serial element in architectural decorations. Panofskian readings find the iconographic identity of the painting in its novel

²² cf. the convincing arguments Dipert (1993) advances for the artefactuality of performances.

combination of scenes into a narrative whole. The separate motifs are associated with familiar types. A burning city was a popular motif in Netherlandish pictures with a number of military, catastrophic, apocalyptic, infernal or chaotic themes. An elderly male embracing a younger female figure is a familiar motif in pictures on the proverbial theme of unequal love. The motif of a man consorting with two women often appears in pictures with a venal theme depicting an amorous couple with a procuress (cf. Reau 1956, Kauffmann 1971).

In this narrative combination of existing motifs, the partitioned composition and the play of contrasts between the two main scenes disrupt the episodic sequence of a continuous spatial narrative. A narrative progression from right to left is suggested in the lower right-hand corner by the motif of the diminutive figures of Lot and his companions fleeing from the blazing city. The overriding effect of the compositional antitheses generates peculiar ambiguities in the temporal order of the narrative. These warrant special attention in the light of Ricoeur's (1979) study of the function of narrative in shaping fictional as well as non-fictional interpretations of history.

Metaphorical processes govern the pictorial narrative in the scene of Lot's intoxication and se-

duction. Artaud noticed that the meaning of the actions of the characters is made visible through the *mise en scène* of wine flasks and tents. The pairing of the two tents in the background and the two flasks in the foreground reprises the coupling of Lot and one daughter, thus excluding the second daughter with her separate flask and tent. The triangular opening of the tent echoes the pyramidal grouping of Lot and the first daughter. The formal repetitions of comparable shapes in the scene accomplish subtle displacements of meaning. Together with the reiteration of paired motifs these enable the depiction to imply more than is strictly shown, and thus to narrate a pictorial succession of events.

Placed above the pair of flasks in the foreground and in front of the dark opening of the tent, the glowing shape of the red knee of Lot is reiterated in the peak of the tent and in the dark opening of the grotto visible in the background. The metaphorical interplay of shapes frankly conveys the sexual intercourse of the first night. The isolation of the other woman with her flask and tent foretells the coming repetition of the events during the second night of drunkenness. By reading the metaphorical interplay of forms the viewer initiates the unfolding of a semantic process in which the depicted motifs imaginatively convey the future course of the story.

²³ cf. note 14 above. This kind of pictorial text is most amenable to O'Toole's (1994) system of semantic ranking in terms of 'member', 'figure', 'episode' and 'work', similar to Alberti's pictorial transposition of periodic syntax into a compositional hierarchy of 'member', 'body', 'action' and narrative *istoria*. Though dealing with a Renaissance painting and using levels of pictorial narration comparable to O'Toole's ranking, the emphasis of my analysis is pictorial rhetoric.

The implicit play of pictorial metaphors emblematises the torrid sexuality of the story for the reader's imaginary vision. Its *enargeia* effect is greater than that of subsequent paintings on the same subject in which, as a rule, the figures are depicted in the nude. Artaud responds to the painting's compelling suggestion of repeated acts by perhaps deviating from what is actually depicted and reading into the picture a cyclical order of perpetual recurrence, thus transforming the course of events into the primordial but recurrent sphere of mythical history:

And in fact [the daughters] strut about, some mothers, others Amazons, combing their hair or fencing, as if they had never had any other object than to please their father, to serve as his creatures or play-things. Here we see the deeply incestuous nature of this old subject which the artist has developed in sexual imagery, a proof that he has fully understood all its deep sexuality in a modern way, that is to say as we would understand it ourselves (Artaud 1931: 22-3).

Turning to the right-hand scene, the nocturnal sky opens twice — once in the foreground and once near the horizon in the background — pouring fire and sulphur on the doomed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Like a faraway clap of thunder being amplified as its resounding rumble approaches, the contrasting magnitudes again narrate a chain of events. But the cataclysmic nature of the events also suggests that temporal order itself is collapsing. Shaken by an earthquake, the blazing city falls apart as it sinks beneath the water in the foreground. On the strangely calm, yellow-green water ships come apart without

any visible cause. This catastrophic trial by fire, water and earth points to an antitype — the future and final judgement described in the apocalyptic colon of Luke 17: 28-30. Typological exegeses by patristic authors also explain Lot's flight as a prefiguration of the fate of the righteous at final judgement (cf. 2 Peter 2: 6-9).

The painting thus succeeds in combining allegorical type and antitype from redemptive history with a unified depiction of contemporary details from a sixteenth-century scene. The typological congruences gain actuality by engaging still undecided issues in the mind of sixteenth-century viewers — their fears for the impending downfall and their hopes regarding the imminent redemption of the world. For sixteenth-century readers the actuality of the events narrated in the painting thus converges in the present as historical fulcrum between past and future events which encircle this moment in concentric fashion.

The history of Lot's incest manifests a *skandalon* for biblical faith. There are surviving examples of late medieval manuscripts in which the pertinent passages in the book of Genesis carried marks prohibiting their reading. The scandal prevailed in spite of the prefigurative allegorising of these passages by patristic exegetes who interpreted Lot as a figure of the coming law and his daughters as figures of the future Samaria and Jerusalem who prostituted the law of God (cf.

Reau 1956, Kauffmann 1971). Martin Luther's *Über das Erst buch Mose predigete, sampt einer vnterricht wie Moses zu lesen ist* (Wittenberg 1527) contains a contemporary sermon on the history of Lot (cf. Bätschmann 1981: 178-80). The reformer struggles to assess the economy of sin and grace in the history of redemption. He shifts the emphasis from allegorical explanation to questions about the divine sanction of Lot's incest.²⁴ The painting too, by the ironic ambiguities of the antitheses on both sides of the diagonal line, seems to call into question the justice of God's actions regarding Lot. But the painting does not explicitly prescribe a particular sixteenth-century doctrinal position regarding the mystery of divine providence.

The two scenes of the painting ostensibly refer to the antithesis of divine judgement and grace, or of catastrophe and redemption in history. Next to the fire and sulphur descending on the right, a prominent tree ascends in the left-hand scene. Some pictures of the story of Lot have two such trees which then denote the genealogy of the offspring conceived by Lot's daughters — the tribes of Moab and Ammon as future enemies of Abraham's offspring. In this composition, however, the central axis is dominated by the sinuous stem and dark crest of a single tree that ambiguates the sharp antithesis of the diagonal axis. As a dark, rising motif it actively op-

poses the downpouring flames of divine wrath. The enigmatic tree shields Lot and his daughters from the fate of the two cities. Yet its shadow simultaneously becomes the setting of the incest scene. By emblematising both Lot's escape from divine judgement and his subsequent fall into sin the tree functions in imaginary vision as an entrapping *mise en abyme*. The pictorial narrative reveals the redemption of Lot to coincide with his drunken incest, thus rendering the certainty and trustworthiness of divine grace questionable.

The mystery of corruption and redemption in history is furthermore concentrated in the ill-fated sign at the top left-hand corner of the painting. Here a distant comet looms in the night sky, exactly on the diagonal axis dividing the two scenes. In sixteenth-century astrology the advent of comets was valued as fearful harbingers of destruction. Humanist authors expanded the astrological *dicta* of Seneca and Aristotle into veritable catalogues of woes which comets were believed to not only forecast, but cause as well — calamities like floods, droughts, famine, earthquakes, conflagrations, war and the death of powerful persons. Early modern authors of world histories even constructed their chronologies on the basis of comet appearances. In this regard the star of Bethlehem was reinterpreted as a sign of the coming passion of Christ rather than a call for festive joy at the birth of a new king.

²⁴ cf. Romans 9: 29 for Paul's insertion of Isaiah's cry — "If the Lord of hosts had not left us children, we would have fared like Sodom and been made like Gommorah" — in a key biblical text for Luther's discovery of redemption through faith.

Being positioned on the ambivalent diagonal of the composition, the faultline dissecting preceding and succeeding events in the narrative, the comet installs ill-fate into the very heart of the concentric amplification which projects the disquieting meaning of the story forward and backward into the course of history. Besides auguring the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the comet also heralds the fall of a great man (the incest of the barely saved Lot), the future enmity between the offspring of Abraham and Lot (the tribes of Israel and the Moabites and Ammonites) and the drunkenness of Lot (the promise of a good vintage was the only beneficial effect of a comet welcomed in the sixteenth century).

The hidden portents of extraordinary natural phenomena like comets were exegeted by mantic divination. A multitude of fortune-telling practices — for instance, astromancy, geomancy, chiromancy and oneiromancy — survived the gradual rise of hermeneutic disciplines. Apart from the widespread exploitation of popular superstition and magic, the serious spiritualist practice of mantic divination is based on mythologising views regarding an occult world order and the genetic finality of the historical recurrence of transforming events. Artaud championed the mantic model of textuality or the mediumistic model of reading associated with this world view. Though the comet is only a minute detail in the pictorial narrative, it further

corroborates evidence with respect to the direction of the spirituality the painting projects toward the reader.

The focalising of the narrative as well as the rhetorical turn towards the reader in the pictorial apostrophe of spectator engagement evolves from the very centre of the composition. Not localised in any specific motif, like the tree or the comet, nor constructed geometrically as the central point in the virtual space projected by a perspective system, the focalising rather concerns the heart of the concentric expansion of the narrative in the historical directions of the past and the future. Deictic retrospection and prospection of the narrative past and future does not in this case tell of the cosmic course of history from creation towards *eschaton*, and of a temporal order in which each 'now' is marked by the 'already' and the 'not yet' of redemption. Instead, mythologising narratives tend to collapse past and future, to fuse creation and catastrophe, a characteristic notion of *posthistoire* (cf. Niethammer 1993).²⁵

Notably, the strangely elevated point of view from which the imaginary *Anschaulichkeit* of the pictorial narrative and the disturbing tenor of its address are achieved implies an uncanny role for the reader — at once soaring above and suspended over an abyss. From this lofty but precarious purview the master trope of the sublime

deploys its strategies of veiling and unveiling, blindness and insight, paradox and reversal, excess and rapture — all transpiring “at a glance” according to Artaud. The painting represents an early modern stage in the historical development of sublimity, linking a rhetorical trope to a modern aesthetic mode and to a pathological condition, reputedly postmodern (cf. Lyotard 1990; Payne 1993: 212-33). As demonstrated, the painting has to be read in a counter-sublime

mode “where one is at a temporal remove from sublimity and comes to some insights into its hidden functionings, its tropings” (Schoeni 1992: 175). In the absence of such counter-strategies, warily deployed in concurrent readings at multiple levels of structure, the transgressive twists of meaning in the depicted calamities may have catastrophic consequences for the reader of the painting.

²⁵ In his fascinating typology of catastrophe, Kohler (1995: 82-3) makes the following four points about the gnostic endurance of history viewed as at once both catastrophic and utopian, the view tellingly presented by the painting:

“Erstens wird die Vorstellung einer finalen Katastrophe nicht verabschiedet, sondern maximal aufgewertet.

“Zweitens wird das Unglück, die katastrophale Normalität, nicht als gerechte Strafe angenommen, sondern als unverdientes Schicksal verworfen.

“Drittens wird auf der Möglichkeit und baldigen Wirklichkeit des wahrhaft Besseren und Guten beharrt. Und weil der Mensch nicht konstitutiv verdorben ist, kann er nach dieser überirdischen Wirklichkeit streben und die Bedingungen seines derzeitigen Hierseins überschreiten.

“Dazu braucht er aber, viertens, ein Denken der Hoffnung und der Transgression, das die ständige Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit des Katastrophischen aufnimmt und umformt zur Weise, wie das Erlösende, ganz Andere sich ankündigt und einzig erscheinen wird: in der finalen und singulären Katastrophe des letzten Umbruchs, das sich das Novum des noch nie Gesehenen und die eigentliche Heimat der Seele enthüllt.”

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