Tenebrism in the painting of Odd Nerdrum from 1983 to 2004

by

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Declaration

I declare that the writing and technical production of *Tenebrism in the painting of Odd Nerdrum from 1983 to 2004* is entirely my own work. All the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete referencing. Should the dissertation or sections from the dissertation be quoted or referred to in any form this must be acknowledged in full. This mini-dissertation is the copyrighted property of the University of Pretoria. It may not be reproduced or copied in any form.

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Summary

The hypothesis of this dissertation is that contemporary Norwegian painter, Odd Nerdrum (b 1944), uses *tenebrism* as a mode of beauty and a device to emphasise psychological states of being. Tenebrism is an effective kitsch device to create an impression of realism and so-called truthfulness while pointing to the deepest human sentiments and emotions.

I argue that Nerdrum's tenebrist art questions dark truths about modernity and its effect on the self. The darkness of his tenebrist style amplifies the emotional states of his human characters, and becomes a negative form of transcendence into absence and the power of its nothingness.

Nerdrum's paintings are a visual record of the human capacity to withstand self-destruction and strive for restoration from the inane. His physical act of painting opens and refines consciousness by slowing down time, for insight and contemplation.

<u>Key terms:</u>

Absence, avant-garde, beauty, darkness, death, destruction, emotion, empathy, existentialism, isolation, kitsch, loss, painting, realism, sublime, suffering, tenebrism, transcendence.

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INTRODUCTION

Tenebrism entails a mode of painting that exploits the darkness of chiaroscuro in an extreme way. Odd Nerdrum's work from 1983 till 2004 demonstrates that tenebrism can be a successful mode of beauty and can reveal psychological states in the persons represented in the paintings. It is my contention that Nerdrum uses tenebrism as a kitsch device to show humankind's inner derangement and suffering. The material nakedness of the figures is emblematic of the spiritual nakedness of the self.

Before 1983 the artist was concerned with society's 'underdogs'. He painted prisoners, social outcasts and the poverty stricken. A common trait was a focus on the individual personality while the viewer's compassion and sense of identification was solicited. Subsequent to 1984 Nerdum retreated from social commitment to more private and universal themes. Underlying his passage from social criticism to a criticism of civilisation is the need to articulate his feeling of alienation and a pervading distaste for modern civilisation. A dark tenebrist mood dominates his painting from 1984 onwards.

Nerdrum has been an outsider figure in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century context with its radical deconstruction of historical conventions and master-narratives (cf. Chapter 2.3), because of his persistent presentation of kitsch and melodramatic content as serious art. I argue that although the artist rejects the avant-garde in formalist terms (Nerdrum 2001:26-27), he colludes with the idea of the avant-garde expressed through his novel combination of kitsch and melodramatic iconography and his use of 'old master'[1] techniques such as Baroque tenebrism.

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[1] For the purpose of this study the term 'old masters' refers to the work of artists such as Rembrandt and Caravaggio. I am referring to techniques used by them such as glazings and rough sfumata to create a rich patina.

PREFACE

This research was prompted by my interest in the so-called techniques of the 'old masters' (in particular Rembrandt and Caravaggio). In the process of doing research for my own painting, I came across the term 'tenebrism' in a text by Donald Kuspit (2000:137) in reference to the work of Norwegian painter, Odd Nerdrum.

In the theoretical-component of this MA (FA)-degree, tenebrism is investigated in the work of Nerdrum. Bodies and emotions are laid painfully bare in the artist's tenebrist painting and images of lingering death, isolation and destructive abandonment and emptiness engages the viewer by putting them in a place that will engender emotion.

Nerdrum believes that oil painting engages the viewer emotionally, since the oil surface creates the illusion of seeing into mysterious depths, evoking a feeling of empathetic communion with the subject matter depicted. As a researcher in the contemporary field of Visual Arts, it is my belief that Nerdrum's work reveals a steady rise in the disorder worldwide due to a Postmodern condition of loss, alienation and collapse (cf. Chapter 2.3). Consequently, the artist's tenebrist painting evokes not just sadness, but a paralysing listlessness, dejection and self-depreciation, as well as an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and helplessness*.*

What specifically attracted me as a painter and photographer to the work of Nerdrum is a shared interest in ruin, contamination, contagion and corrosion, but also of transcendence. These aspects are evident in my creative work produced for the practical component of the MA (FA)-degree that was presented as an exhibition entitled, *Stone and silence,* held at Obert Contemporary from 18-28 August 2005. The exhibition consisted of paintings and photography that focused on an exploration of absence, loss and silence.

Today, anyone who takes up painting does so against his or her better judgement or to be provocative, since art from the late twentieth century

onwards tends to focus on installation, video and other new media. Throughout the visual and theoretical research, the contention is that painting is the ideal medium with which to articulate selfhood, because in striving for the absolutely 'spontaneous gesture' and the unapologetically 'personal idea' modern painting conveys the salient characteristics of the so-called true self (Kuspit 2000:4). Nerdrum's tenebrist painting restores subjectivity and humanism to figurative painting. These paintings are portraits of emotional states, and after the initial shock at their technical virtuosity and 'old master' sensuality, it is their impression of an inner life that holds the viewer's continued attention.

List of figures

It is the contention of this study that tenebrism is an effective technique for expressing the elements counted as realism[1] and what we imagine might be the 'truth' of the psyche. At the same time the artist seems to reveal the deepest sentiment and emotion in his humans. Through the device of tenebrism, the subject (viewer) is encouraged to feel empathetic but unsettled, rather than feeling the painting is for easy consumption or is simply mimicry of a reality.

DEFINING 'TENEBRISM'

The term 'tenebrism' is not commonly used. One of the very few sources that provides an explanation of the term is an article published by Maria Rzespińska (1986:91-112). In it she explores the use of tenebrism in Baroque painting. *Tenebrism*, or its Italian equivalent, *tenebrosa* refers to a style of painting characterised by high contrasts between light and dark to create dramatic effects (Rzepińska 1986:90). Tenebrism can be called a more intense form of chiaroscuro, founded on the mysterious *tenebra* – a shadow so deep no light is able to penetrate it. Frequently the main subjects of tenebrist paintings are illuminated by a single source of light, as if a spotlight were shone upon them, leaving other areas in darkness. Such paintings have been called 'night paintings' painted in a 'dark manner'.

The term 'tenebrism' is of Renaissance origin and is richly allusive. The concept developed from the study of chiaroscuro in which Renaissance writers[2], paraphrasing optical texts, distinguished shadow (*ombra*) from total darkness (*tenebra*e). In the Roman Catholic Church, *Tenebrae* refers to a ceremony performed to reflect on the period following the death of Christ on the cross when darkness descended on the world. The ceremony consists of a number of candles set on the hearse (a kind of candelabrum) that are extinguished one by one until only one remains. The last candle is hidden behind the altar, and in the darkness a noise is made, symbolising the convulsion of nature at the crucifixion.

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[1] The term 'realism' that is referred to here should not be associated with any particular style but rather the psychological reality of a society or of human life on the whole. The complexity of the term 'realism' will be dealt with in Chapter 2.
[2] Ghiberti wrote that "[t]enebra is a total absence of light; it is not possible to see in the *tenebre* it is in the shadow", and Leonardo da Vinci stated that "[s]hadow is a diminution of light; *tenebre* is the absence of light" (Verlag 2004, sv "tenebrism").

The most renowned tenebrists are Caravaggio, Michelangelo Merisi, George De La Tour and Rembrandt van Rijn. However, the concept remained largely untested until Caravaggio adapted it in his abrupt contrasts and blinding areas of illumination. An example of this can be seen in his *Judith beheading Holofernes* (1599)[1] (fig 1). Additionally, tenebrism (and chiaroscuro) almost instantly took on religious overtones, as the darkness became a metaphor for evil and ignorance in the eternal battle with the light of divine grace and knowledge.

Although the darkness of tenebrism has mainly been interpreted as a metaphor for evil and ignorance in the afore-mentioned context, Maria Rzespińska (1986:91-112) identifies intellectual currents in religion, science and alchemy in Renaissance Italy which suggest a positive value for darkness. The tenebrous state can be conducive to meditation and transformation.

From about 1600 onwards there is a statistical increase in Italian and Spanish paintings which use darkness to half fill the canvas[2]. Frequently the dark predominates over the light and spreads over two-thirds of the area of the canvas. This was to be a powerful European trend. The introduction of darkness as inseparable from light became an iconic and psychological factor of great significance.

Symbolically speaking, Rembrandt and Caravaggio believed that the subtle oscillation and tension between light and dark structures echoed emotional life. Reflecting idealised aesthetics, their aim was to embody real human emotion and suffering, and the artist's success was measured in the tears and ecstasies of the viewer. The pitch of emotion and religious fervour may seem foreign in view of current art making practice, but the shocking reality and directness of their work bear an obvious relation to Nerdrum's work. His violent use of tenebrism portrays his human beings as caught up in a self-conscious, mystically universe in which their survival is in some way threatened. To him

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[1] Caravaggio, *Judith beheading Holofernes* (1599). Oil on canvas, 145×195cm.
[2] These artists range from Caravaggio, Tintoretto, Giacomo Cavedone, Jose de Ribera and Francesco Del Cairo to name but a few (Rzepińska 1986:91).

apocalypse is the perfect description of the postmodern state. All history (in Nerdrum's case the history of suffering) is present simultaneously.

Postmodernist disillusionment may be described as mankind's inability to find redemptive meaning in the abyss of existence. This disillusionment is marked by the fragmentation and destabilisations of identity and the inner-world. Accordingly, this study proposes that tenebrism should be seen as more than the painted darkened or deepened shadows in the paintings of Nerdrum - it must also include the invitation by the artist that he and ultimately the viewer looks inward to the psychological state that the *tenebrae* point to.

NERDRUM'S OEUVRE

Nerdrum's oeuvre falls into two broad phases. The first encompasses production from the mid 1960s through to the late 1970s, with a strong socio-historical character. This early work is often indebted to the psychological hypersensitivity of Edvard Munch, Ibsen and Käthe Kollwitz and is mediated by the dramatic naturalism of Rembrandt and Caravaggio (Vine 1990:173). The second phase, is more stylised, theatrical and enigmatic. It presents stark atemporal scenes of an imaginary world, a wasteland of threat, where civilisation has been shattered. The primary focus of this study is on the paintings from about 1983 to the present. The paintings selected address the 'primordial nature' of human beings and their place in the universe.

SEMINAL THEORISTS

There is limited literature on the work of Nerdrum. Apart from the limited copies printed of the book by Jan-Eric Hansen entitled *Odd Nerdrum paintings* (1994), the only written accounts of his work are by Donald Kuspit and a few Internet articles. Recently, another book by Richard Vine, entitled *Odd Nerdrum: sketches, drawings and paintings* (2001) was published, bringing together his recent and earlier work.

Heidegger's notion of a primordial sense of nature and his poetical 'dwelling upon the earth', as well as the existential ideas of Sartre and Fromm, are particularly useful in the investigation of tenebrism in Nerdrum's work. For the purpose of this research, these existentialist concepts will be interpreted as the freedom and self-making of the human being and his/her insertion into the world, rather than as questions of logic or truth, or any kind of essentialist or empirical psychology. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), for instance, Sartre contends that human beings are forever trying to escape the anguish that is the result of freedom. This anguish is portrayed in the conspicuously demented figures of Nerdrum who find themselves confused about their identity and most vulnerable to the unsympathetic landscape.

The art critics, Hilton Kramer and Donald Kuspit, consider Nerdrum's radical anti−modernism, his deliberate adoption of 'old master' techniques and his use of allegory to comment on the human condition as visionary. Other critics, particularly in his native Scandinavia, are offended by his indifference to contemporary conventions (Vine 1991:170). By showing that 'old master' methods are still relevant and meaningful Nerdrum shows that however much human beings are suffering from annihilation anxiety, whether for individual or social reasons, the consummate artistry with which their suffering can be represented triumphs over it (Kuspit 2000:138).

The writing of Donald Kuspit, a theorist who has gained ground in the twentieth century by revisiting painting as a discipline with his innovative psychoanalytic interpretation of avant-garde art, is the keynote in this study. Kuspit (2000:8-9) argues that avant-garde art is a response to the conditions of modernity. He highlights the sense of many artists that the 'crowd' particularly undermines and destroys the artist's sense of self. The avant-garde artist uses psycho-strategies to restore his/her sense of self. Drawing from Kuspit's theory, my aim is to show that Nerdrum's tenebrist art turns tradition into a kind of kitsch, conveying a sense of the artist's permanent sense of the dystopia of the world.

NERDRUM'S USE OF TENEBRISM

The subject of the present study was prompted by the limited literature on tenebrism whether from an art historical, theological or psychological point of view.

The main argument of this study centres on the use of tenebrism in the work of Nerdrum as a positive value, active both iconically and symbolically, as a mode of beauty and of psychological realism. Light played a particularly important role in Baroque painting serving to present a scene at a specific time (night, day, dawn or dusk). Light also signified inner, spiritual illumination and divine presence pitted against its evil counterpart, darkness, moral degeneration and ignorance.

However, I suggest that the use of darkness, so characteristic of the visual structure in the vast majority of seventeenth century painting, becomes a kitsch stylistic novelty in the painting of Nerdrum. Although the scope of this thesis is confined to the use of tenebrism in the work of Nerdum, Baroque painting and its ideological background is discussed to contextualise his use of tenebrism.

In both my own and Nerdrum's work, beauty is used ambiguously. In my own painting, the 'beautiful delivery' of the subject matter depicted attracts the viewer by evoking a shimmering photographic sense of layered transparencies, while the blurred focus repulses the viewer in his/her attempt to focus the eye in vain.

Nerdrum uses tenebrism as a mode of beauty that sensuously enhances the archaic psychic phenomena he presents by making them seductive rather than repellent. Simultaneously, tenebrism defends against their irrationality. Beautified, Nerdrum's humans arouse less terror and draw the viewer into the painting, not only out of curiosity but also as participants. Nerdrum's work brings together various canons of beauty ranging from the sublime, Neo-romanticism, sensuality versus kitsch and painting as a mode of beauty to name but a few. In this respect reference will be made to the writing of Umberto Eco in *On Beauty: a history of a western idea* (2004).

In Chapter 1 tenebrism is investigated as a mode of beauty. This contextualises Nerdrum's turn towards tenebrism, as an alternative to the increasingly rationalised, institutional art of the twentieth century. Tenebrist beauty in the work of Nerdrum is inherently psychodynamic — the height of psychodrama — suggesting that the conflict between light and dark (libido and death) is inseparable.

In Chapter 2 tenebrism is investigated as a psychological form of representation through the use of realism. Nerdrum's use of the seemingly obsolete traditional style of painting, is to show that suffering is far from absolute and that art should articulate it in an empathetic, human way. Some of the leading concerns in discussing the use of tenebrism in the painting of Nerdrum are also explored.

In Chapter 3 the connection between tenebrism and the sublime is investigated through the postulations of the sublime and beauty by Eco (*On beauty,* 2004). In the painting of Nerdrum the sublime is expressed as a form of beauty that implies death. The tension in such paintings arises from the opposition between the symbolism of death and that of life. In an atmosphere of destruction, the force of life prevails.

CHAPTER 1: TENEBRISM AS A MODE OF BEAUTY

The use of diverse canons of beauty is evident in the work of Nerdrum. Some of the models of beauty addressed in this chapter are Baroque beauty, the beautiful representation of ugliness and suffering, sensuality versus kitsch and painting as a mode of beauty. This discussion is a general background to the canons and relates them to Nerdrum's use of tenebrism.

This chapter departs from the understanding that beauty can never be absolute and immutable. It will be argued that beauty takes on different guises depending on the historical period and the ideological undercurrents.

1.1 TENEBRISM IN BAROQUE PAINTING

1.1.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The darkness in the painting of the Tenebristi is a symbolic darkness. Just like the golden background in the Middle Ages was a metaphor for Divine Light, so the background of Baroque paintings is a metaphor which, depending on the context, can be understood as a 'mystic night' or as 'a dark place', the latter being the earth (Rzepińska 1986:90-91).

In Caravaggio's *Judith beheading Holofernes* (1599)[1] (figure 1) the impact of the scene is partly due to his skilful command of expression. It is, however, intensified by the grim countenance of Holofernes sinking in the surrounding darkness that bespeaks the physical and emotional strain of the scene. Such a treatment of darkness in painting cannot be explained solely by the influence of Caravaggio. Although he gives a particularly forcible expression, this tendency grew out of the general spiritual undercurrent of the epoch. At that time there was a powerful European trend that introduced darkness, inseparable from light, as an iconic and psychological factor of significance.

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[1] Caravaggio, *Judith beheading Holofernes* (1599). Oil on canvas, 145 ×195cm.

Fig 1: Caravaggio, *Judith beheading Holofernes* (1599). Oil on canvas (Wilson-Smith 1998:61).

The problem of light and darkness in Baroque painting was not purely artistic in character. It penetrated into the entire intellectual life of the time, into religion, philosophy, and natural science. This also seems to have been the only period in the history of European culture in which the phenomenon of shadow and darkness has aroused so much speculation and gained such an important position unheard of before or later.

In various historical periods there was a close link between the beautiful and the good. During the Renaissance, Vasari maintained that beauty had significance in terms of its affiliation with moral values. In *The lives of the artists* (first published in 1568), Vasari (1965:305) describes the painting of the *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1504) by Raphael, as showing "all the beauty that belongs to an image of the Virgin Mary: modesty in her eyes, honour in the brow, grace in the nose, and virtue in the mouth; not to mention that Our Lady's garment reflects her infinite simplicity and purity."

In such a spiritual context, darkness implied evil and immorality. The Baroque model[1] allows beauty to be expressed through ugliness, truth through falsehood, and life through death. The beauty of the Baroque period moves beyond good and evil. The theme of death, moreover, is obsessively present in the Baroque mentality as can clearly be seen in Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading*

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[1] The Baroque model mainly came out of the Italian Renaissance and Mannerism, and is broadly characterised by increased realism, dynamism, activity, drama and popular inclusion.

Holofernes. This change in mentality replaced the motionless and inanimate beauty of the Classical model with the beauty of dramatic intensity.

Scientific literature articulates and questions light whereas the question of darkness is seldom raised. Humanists and philosophers tended to treat darkness as a non-entity. The end of the sixteenth century, however, saw the formulation of the theology of darkness in its perfect and unsurpassed form in the writings of St. John of the Cross. The Jesuit and Carmelite orders recommended darkness as conducive to contemplation, giving it a positive value in spiritual life.

One of the most essential innovations in Baroque painting can be defined as the discovery of the beauty of darkness. The darkness in paintings, deepening from the late sixteenth century onwards, goes beyond the scenes called *notti*, in which the action takes place at night and is illuminated with a real source of light, a torch or a lamp. In the vast majority of religious paintings, the place and the time of the scene are undecipherable.

In tenebrist Baroque painting shadows of people and objects get lost in the darkness of poorly lit rooms. The source of light is frequently invisible, outside the picture, with only a shaft of brightness seen. When the light source does appear within the picture, the light emanates from the Child, the Holy Spirit, or the angels. This is a clear display of the metaphysical nature of light. An example of can be seen in Gerrit van Honthorst's *The adoration of the shepherds* (1620)[1] (figure 2).

Fig 2: Gerrit van Honthorst, *The adoration of the shepherds* (1620). Oil on panel (Thuillier 1993:204).

Importantly the symbolic meanings of light, ranging from dissipating ignorance to inner, spiritual illumination, are perceived only because they appear in extreme darkness.

[1] Gerrit van Honthorst, *The adoration of the shepherds* (1620). Oil on panel, size unknown.

The intensity of the light matches the degree of spiritual illumination, which is expressed over a wide scale. In some parts of the paintings darkness attains the depth of impenetrable black, but is apprehended as an artistically positive value. This contrasts with the naive belief of earlier critics that it was a means to cover up errors of drawing.

In order to understand how this artistic idiom can be linked to other branches of the culture of the time, with the attitude of mind, the stance on transcendence, and with the knowledge of nature and human beings, it is necessary to contemplate the medieval metaphysics of light (Rzepińska 1986:95). In the Christian world of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the symbolic meaning of light pervaded theology, cosmology and philosophy. Light was considered the first principle of being, prevailing in the entire world. Scholars and mystics viewed the earth as located in the centre of concentric spheres of increasing light which form the cosmic heaven. This heaven is the image of the spiritual heaven with the light emanating from God. In this luminous cosmos there was no room for darkness. Darkness and shadow, if accepted at all, carried a negative meaning. Darkness was associated with evil, negation, non-being and sin (Rzepińska 1986: 97).

During the early Renaissance scientific discoveries of the time, relating to the direct observation of the world began to influence artists. This realistic observation developed side by side with the existing spiritualism. It could no longer be ignored that every solid body produces and accepts a shadow. This observation began to interest both scientists and artists. Leonardo da Vinci, being part of both worlds, developed the science of light and shade (chiaroscuro) on an unprecedented scale.[1]

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[1] Leonardo's notes on light and shade are scattered in various codices and have been compiled by Francesco Melzi in the *Trattato della pittura*. The writings of Leonardo have been printed several times in various languages since the seventeenth century (Rzepińska 1986:97). Around 1490 Leonardo set out to write a *Book of shadows* of which only some traces of his theoretical studies survived (Casati 2003:168-169). On Leonardo's theory of shadows see the appendix to Baxandall, M. 1995. *Shadows and enlightenment.* Yale: University Press. For further reading on Leonardo and coloured lights see Kemp, M. 1990. *The science of art: optical themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat.* Yale: University Press.

Leonardo's use of light and dark can be regarded as the first stage between the mediaeval aesthetics of light and the Baroque aesthetics of light and darkness. The metaphysical effect that predominated religious painting of the seventeenth century, was always achieved by means of condensed light. Effectively the light appears to pass through a small aperture into a dark interior, for instance, through a slit in dense clouds as can be seen in Da Vinci's *The Virgin of the rocks* (1506)[1] (figure 3). It is impossible to achieve the effects of illumination of this kind without the introduction of shadows and of activating gloom. During the seventeenth century painted gloom became increasingly dense, sometimes leading to an impenetrable blackness in the background.

Fig 3: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the rocks* (1506). Oil on wood (Wilson 1977:46).

In the vast majority of Italian, Flemish, Spanish and French religious painting of the seventeenth century, darkness was used independently of reality. The painter introduced it with disregard for the circumstances handed down by tradition. The shadow of night frequently reigns in paintings, for instance scenes of the baptism of Christ or the sacrifice of Isaac, despite the inconsistency with Scriptures in setting these scenes at night. The favourite subject of the painting of this century, the ecstasy of the saints, is nearly always a nocturne, the divine

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[1] Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the rocks* (1506). Oil on wood, 189.5 × 120cm.

light falling in a beam of brightness from an invisible source. In numerous paintings the dense, impenetrable gloom takes up three-quarters of the canvas, whereas light brings out small fragments of a torso, hand, leg or drapery. The shadows bound to the object are so deep that they submerge the dark objects in the dark background, completely swallowing up their outlines and blurring their spatiality. The setting of these scenes is often non-specific; it is only known that they are laid in a *dark place*.

Later, in the eighteenth century, with the popularity of certain terms, including: 'genius', 'taste', 'imagination' and 'sentiment' a new concept of beauty is introduced. The idea of 'genius' and 'imagination' referring to the qualities of those who invent or produce a beautiful thing, whilst the idea of 'taste' denotes more clearly the qualities of those capable of appreciating it. Thus, in the eighteenth century these terms were not concerned with the characteristics of the object but rather the qualities, capacities or disposition of the subject (both the producer and the judge of beauty).

Following Eco (2004:277), beauty can be defined by the way the viewer apprehends it, by analysing the reaction of the person who pronounces a judgement of taste. The debate about beauty has shifted from a search for the rules of its production or its recognition, to a consideration of the effects that it produces. The idea that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, which is bound up with the senses and the recognition of pleasure, was dominant in diverse philosophical circles during the eighteenth century (Eco 2004:277).

This specific structuring of the paintings in which shadow and darkness are as important as light, and at times predominate over it, implies a new aesthetic. It was not formulated by the theorists of the time, and is absent in their work, as it was incompatible with the prevailing official classical aesthetics. Therefore this thesis chooses to contextualise the widespread use of tenebrism against other distinctive intellectual trends of the time outside of the then current official or institutional artistic expression.

1.1.2 DARKNESS AS A POSITIVE VALUE IN MYSTICISM, ASTRONOMY AND ALCHEMY

In the seventeenth century, darkness was the counterpart of light in a cosmological construct of holism, as it conditioned the brilliance and magnificence of the latter. The religious, cosmic, alchemic, and existential symbolism of light and darkness was expressed not through the iconographic subjects, but in the whole visual structure of the works by Tintoretto, Caravaggio, Georges De La Tour, Rembrandt and Spanish artists, going beyond the borders of countries, schools and patronages.

Treating darkness as a positive value indicated, firstly, a change in the type of religiousness and the wave of new mysticism, secondly, astronomy and the science of the production of the shadows, and thirdly, hermetic doctrines, above all, alchemy. In alchemy the physical, psychological and the spiritual processes were all treated through traditional erotic[1] categories. The harmonious union of the masculine and the feminine was regarded as a restoration of the original unity, whether in the context of the transmutation of metals, or in the metamorphosis of the psyche.

In Georges de La Tour's *Christ with St. Joseph in the carpenter's shop* (c. 1640)[2] (figure 4), the night scene seems to be a meditation on Joseph and his fate. De La Tour captured the very earthly nature of the old man incapable of perceiving the mystery of the Cross he is prefiguring. With all his doubt, struggling and groping, Joseph's inner condition and meditations at the time is made clear by the tenebrist mood.

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[1] The Platonic view of Eros can be traced in the *Symposium*, from Plato's mature period of 385-379 B.C. In Plato's view, the cosmic significance of Eros is important and the body is presented as a composite of opposites that demonstrate a need or desire to be combined or supplemented by 'the other' (Taylor 1960:218).
[2] Georges de La Tour, *Christ with St. Joseph in the carpenter's shop* (1640s). Oil on canvas, 137 × 101cm.

Fig 4: Georges De La Tour, *Christ with St. Joseph in the carpenter's shop* (1640s). Oil on canvas (Thuillier 1993:189).

Historians have devoted much space to the relationship between religiousness and art in the post-Tridentate[1] period. However, according to Rzepińska (1986:100), little notice has been taken of the introduction of the theology of darkness by St. John of the Cross in the late sixteenth century. In his doctrine darkness and night are treated as something positive. The soul's night is not the night of sin, it is not something negative; on the contrary, it is indispensable for the attainment of spiritual perfection on the way leading to God. In his treatises *Noche oscura* and *Subida del Monte Carmelo* the Spanish mystic distinguishes the following stages of the soul's progress: the active night of the sense, the active night of the spirit, and the passive night (Rzepińska 1986:100).[2]

St. John of the Cross repeatedly emphasises that faith requires that one should close one's eyes to everything that pertains to the senses and particular

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[1] The Tridentine period was during the sixteenth century in the orthodox Roman Catholic church, and is also linked with the history of the Council of Trent.

[2] In his *Way to the mount Carmel* St. John of the Cross says: "It is for three reasons that the progress of the soul towards its union with God is called night. First, because of the position from which the soul departs, as it must mortify all the lusts regarding the things it has in the world and abandons them. Such an abandonment and the lack of these things are a night for the human sense. Secondly, it is called Night because of the way or the means which the soul must use in order to achieve the union. Thirdly, it is called Night owing to the end, this end being God. In life on earth He is also a dark night for the soul" (Rzepińska 1986:100).

cognition. He quotes the words from the second Epistle of St. Peter: "[w]e have more sure evidence than the vision on Mount Tabor, and these are the discourses and words of the prophets, which bear evidence of Christ. Whereunto you do well that you take heed, as unto a candle that shines in a dark place" (Rzepińska 1986:101). St. John's comments on these words suggests that:

> [t]he statement that we should regard the faith preached by the prophets as a candle in a dark place indicates that we should remain in darkness, shutting our eyes to all other lights […] Reliance on other lights, on clear comprehension, leads us to abandon that dark light of faith, shining for us, according to St. Peter, in a dark place (Rzepińska 1986:101).

The *Exercicios spirituals* were officially recognised and recommended by the Church in 1548 and were published in that same year. They came to be widely read by religious groups and not only Jesuits. Amongst the ideas contained in them was the eulogy of darkness (Rzepińska 1986:101). The Reformed Carmelites (whose order was founded by St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross) frequently pointed to the night as a time suitable for pious concentration. The *Excercicios spirituals* were also read by artists, among them El Greco and Rubens.

The mystical doctrine of dark night was written in Granada between 1582 and 1585. It is noteworthy that the positive estimation of darkness in the transcendental, spiritual order coincides in time with the positive role assigned to darkness by the great physicist and astronomer Johannes Kepler. In his writings published in 1604 he praises darkness, shadow, and eclipses as the factors that give rise to astronomy (Rzepińska 1986:103).

Owing to the great revival of Biblical studies in Hebrew the representatives of the church and Orders were able to become acquainted with Judaic mysticism, where God 'dwelled in darkness' and where darkness was His attribute just as light was. The new astronomy stressed the phenomena of solar eclipse and of the phases of the moon as the point of departure for the geometric system. All these signs of the times, though scattered and apparently independent of one another, show a concurrence that cannot be accidental.

The gloom of the Tenebristi can be interpreted as the sign of dark faith in its theological bearing, but it can also denote the alchemists' *nigredo* which is likewise a positive value, as it gives rise to a new life. Since all symbols are equivocal, it is not always possible to read the artists' intentions (frequently subconscious anyway). Many of them surely associated darkness with negation. However, in the paintings of the Tenebristi darkness appeared as a positive value, active both iconically and symbolically, thereby creating a new aesthetic.

Tenebrism in Baroque painting was a development that had no hierarchy between centre and periphery, between a dramatic suffering facial expression and the hem of a dress, of reality and dream, in a reciprocal reference to the whole and the detail. Tenebrist painting did not only contribute to make the light shine out all the more, but was used symbolically and iconically by artists as a positive mode of beauty.

1.2 THE BEAUTY OF SENSUALITY VERSUS KITSCH

Nerdrum uses tenebrism in his painting as a mode of beauty that sensuously enhances the painted figures by making them seductive rather than repellent. The melodrama and other forms of overtly expressive gestures, inherent in the painting of Nerdrum and many Baroque paintings, relate to notions of kitsch[1].

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[1] The term 'kitsch' originated in the nineteenth century. One of several suggested etymologies is that the word is German for *smear* or *playing with mud,* and toying with this, one might speculate that the *mud* in question is emotion and mucking around with emotions inevitably makes one *dirty.* It is also widely held that the word originated in the Munich art markets of the 1860s and 70s, used to describe cheap, hotly marketable pictures or sketches (Kulka 1996:8-9). Kitsch appealed to the crass tastes of the Munich bourgeoisie who, with their newly found riches, thought they could achieve the status they envied in the traditional class of cultural elites by emulating, however clumsily, the most apparent features of their cultural habits. The word eventually came to mean *to slap (a work of art) together*. Kitsch became defined as an aesthetically impoverished object of shoddy production, meant more to identify the consumer with a newly acquired class status than to a genuine aesthetic response. Kitsch was considered aesthetically impoverished and morally dubious, and to have sacrificed aesthetic life to a pantomime of aesthetic life, mostly in the interests of signalling one's class status.

1.2.1 'OLD MASTER' SENSUALITY

Nerdrum's figures are often reduced to nothing but their flesh, that is, the bare minimum of existence, or what Kuspit (2000:135) refers to as "the destructive abandonment of human being into nothingness". Yet, however severely injured by the world, his figures experience their injuries as sensually gratifying.

A dead male body, for example, is portrayed with an erection as in *Dying couple* (1993)[1] (figure 5). In this painting the two figures lie facing in opposite directions and seem to be in the throes of death. His aroused state alone gives him real pleasure. Nerdrum's sensual handling of flesh is usually juxtaposed with dark backgrounds, emblematic of mortality and the apotheosis of absence.

Fig 5: Odd Nerdrum, *Dying couple* (1993). Oil on linen (Hansen 1994:315).

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[1] Odd Nerdrum, *Dying couple* (1993). Oil on linen, 245.5 × 274.5cm.

The power and transience of flesh is heightened by Nerdrum's perfect relation between the movements of the brush and the tactile sense of the body. This ability to show the body in slow motion is the very process of philosophy, the careful consideration of minute detail. The act of painting itself opens and redefines consciousness by slowing down time as it focuses the eye. The sensual body is always juxtaposed with its tenebrous and hostile environment.

Postmodernism is under attack by Nerdrum because it upholds camp taste, that only appreciates kitsch in terms of the irony of a failed seriousness. Nerdrum argues that kitsch should in fact be looked at as a real, sincere expression of beauty. In order to fully understand the pitch of emotion and subjective response that Nerdrum's paintings demand of the viewer, Immanuel Kant's treatise on aesthetic judgement has to be considered. In *Critique of judgement* (1790), Kant defines aesthetics as a separate philosophical discipline where art and beauty are considered an independent category with its own rules and values. Kant discusses and defines the demands and criteria of proper taste, in order to reach universally valid judgements of the beautiful. According to Kant (1982:41):

> … [i]f we wish to decide whether something is beautiful or not … we … refer the presentation to the subject and his feeling of pleasure or displeasure … this reference designates nothing whatsoever in the object, but here the subject feels himself, how he is affected by the presentation.

For Kant, the beautiful or the ugly is not recognised in any property of the object under judgement, but by the feelings of pleasure or displeasure in the judging subject. The beautiful gives rise to pleasure and comfort, the ugly to displeasure and discomfort. Those who experience the beautiful should communicate these experiences to others:

> … [f]or we judge someone refined if he has the inclination and the skill to communicate his pleasures to others and if he is not satisfied with an object unless he can feel his liking for it in community with others (Kant 1982:41).

For Kant the characteristics of the beautiful are disinterested pleasure, universality without concept and regularity without law. What Kant means by this is that the viewer can enjoy the beautiful thing without necessarily wanting to possess it; we see it as if it were perfectly organised for a particular end,

whereas in reality the only end to which that form aspires is its own existence. Therefore, we enjoy it as if it were the perfect embodiment of a rule, whereas it is a rule unto itself (Eco 2004:294).

Pleasure is for Kant a criterion of experiencing the beautiful, which requires taste, while displeasure follows the ugly. Exalted expressions of feelings when contemplating paintings and sculptures can in themselves come to be considered as outward signs of the artistically valuable and of good taste. Works of art can be considered as outer signs of inner conditions in the life of artists, and the emotional art experiences of the beholder as signs of sympathetic participation in that life.

Nerdrum's (2001:66) main critique of Kant is his disparagement of craftsmanship and the sensual in favour of intellectual reflection. The concept of 'art' (developed by Kant) is something that pleases in itself, as opposed to craftsmanship that Kant perceives as toil and struggle, and as an expression of greed for money. That which pleases must remain free from sensual perception. The pleasing is pure contemplation. If the assessment of a work of art is connected with sensual perception, it is considered bodily orientated and thus inferior (Nerdrum 2001:66).

Fromm's formulation on the human's fear of freedom and self-destructiveness bears a close resemblance to the work of Nerdrum. Fromm (1963:7-8) maintains that:

> … [t]he isolated and powerless individual is blocked in realising his sensuous, emotional, and intellectual potentialities. He is lacking the inner security and spontaneity that are the conditions of such a realisation. This inner blockage is increased by cultural taboos on pleasure and happiness, like those that have run through the religion and *mores* of the middle class since the period of the Reformation. Nowadays, the external taboo has virtually vanished, but the inner blockage has remained strong in spite of the conscious approval of sensuous pleasure.

In Nerdrum's *Isola* (1983-1984)[1] (figure 8) the isolated figure conveys a visual record of the human capacity to withstand self-destruction and strive for renewal. Yet, whatever this individual is doing or feeling, she is irreparable

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[1] Odd Nerdrum, *Isola* (1983-1984). Oil on linen, 208 × 173cm.

alone, "lacking the inner security and spontaneity" (Fromm 1963:7-8) derived from her inner blockage in realising her sensuous, emotional and intellectual potentialities. *Isola* expresses the phenomenon of emotional withdrawal into isolation.
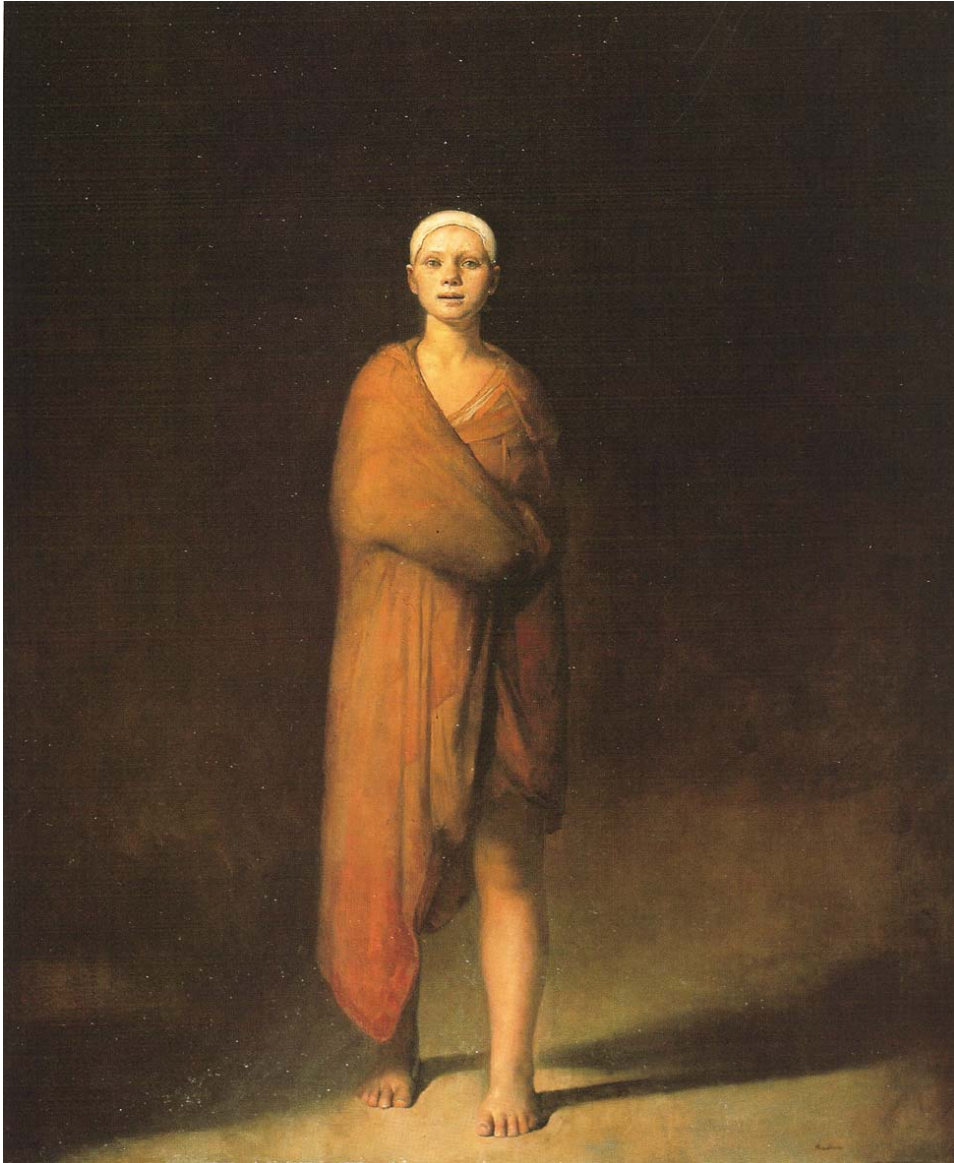
Fig 6: Odd Nerdrum, *Isola* (1983-1984). Oil on linen (Hansen 1994:167).

In his painting, Nerdrum uses beauty simultaneously to attract the viewer by evoking a surface patina of depthless intricacies, and to arouse less terror in the viewer at the sight of the archaic psychic phenomena he represents. The nature of kitsch is such that even at it's most horrifying (as is evidenced by the presence of death in *Dying couple*), it is made to be beautiful. Nerdrum's definition of beauty entails "[t]he presence of substance, the wonderful presence of matter when light strikes the darkness. When light rips the darkness from the

naked bodies, then this beautiful expression appears." (Nerdrum 2001:16). This view with its strong emotional expression, surely, goes against the demonisation of traditional figurative art by modernism.

1.2.2 KITSCH AND THE AVANT-GARDE

"Kitsch is a horrifying picture painted so beautifully that people take pleasure in it. When you say my paintings are not representations of beauty, it's because you're hung up on the motive" (Nerdrum 2001:15).

Kuspit (2000b:72-80) argues that the avant-garde Modernist artist uses psycho-strategies in order to restore his/her sense of self. These include, firstly, a close identification with his/her medium, which becomes a "signature substance" (Kuspit 2000:73) into which he/she escapes; secondly, the making of hallucinatory art in which the avant-garde artist shows his/her insanity, which becomes a way of escaping the pseudo-sanity of the crowd; or, thirdly, the attempt to transcend the crowd altogether by escaping into a world of abstraction.

While the avant-garde established itself in the beginning of the twentieth century, it would not allow other equal or secondary forms of expression. On the contrary, it was radically totalitarian, and there were repercussions when it became the art of the establishment. For in establishing itself, it utilised the strategy of radical definition that sought to exclude and annihilate its other. One of these strategies was an elitist orientated demonisation of figurative art with a strong emotional expression. This art was no longer to be understood as art, but as kitsch. This derogatory term for a simple, down-to-earth, vulgar aestheticism was expanded to encompass most of what was until then considered great art. An example of a kitsch Modernist work can be found in the painting of Edvard Munch, such as *The scream* (1893)[1] (figure 7).

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[1] Edvard Munch, *The scream* (1893). Oil, tempera and pastel on cardboard, 91 × 73.5cm.
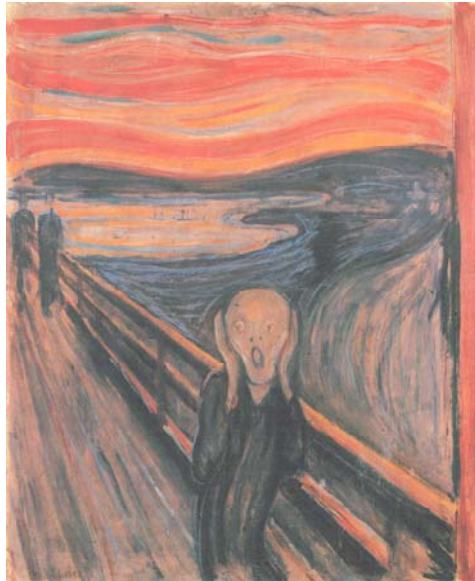
Fig 7: Edvard Munch, *The scream* (1893). Oil, tempera and pastel on cardboard (Bischoff 1990:53).

The avant-garde have repeatedly, and in various ways, used the term kitsch in order to exclude traditional portrayals of humanity. They were especially sensitive to strong feelings such as grief, pain, joy, longing and love to name but a few. Even the postmodernist philosopher, Jean Baudrillard (1994:145) leans far in this direction with his concept of obscenity. The obscene is to him, the ultra-realistic exposure of what is hidden and private, and the way it is sometimes expressed as a desire to make suffering transparent. According to Baudrillard, it is this obscenity that appeals to common emotionalism, set apart from what is tasteful, refined and reserved.

Clement Greenberg (paraphrased in Kulka 1996:14), saw the emergence of kitsch as more or less simultaneous with that of modernism and claimed that "[k]itsch is a product of the industrial revolution". Authors who are more concerned with its art-historical, stylistic, and aesthetic aspects consider kitsch to be the offspring of the Romantic Movement. Hermann Broch (paraphrased in Nerdrum 2001:101) maintains that every form of kitsch owes its existence to the specific structure of Romanticism, with its emphasis on dramatic effects, pathos and overall sentimentality. The two perspectives support each other since they claim roughly the same starting point for the appearance of kitsch.

Kulka (1996:15-16) identified the genre's principal characteristics as a lack of originality and of consequent art-historical significance because of a debilitating preoccupation with the archetypal, rather than socio-historically specific, forms and themes. Kitsch, in his account, works in a parasitic fashion in its imitation of well established historical styles, and strives for instant accessibility through standardised tropes that induce highly predictable feelings and thoughts. They are at most, Kulka (1996:15-16) claims, reminders of great works and great issues, summoning up only stock emotions, not genuine incitements to experience either art or life anew.

A good deal of avant-garde art is made by projective identification with a material. Kuspit (2000b:125) maintains that the medium gives the artist consummate pleasure, and by working with it he/she is able to work through his/her conflicts, even the deepest conflict fundamental to being human, indeed, the conflict humankind must learn to master to be human − the conflict between the life instincts and death instincts. Sometimes, for the avant-garde artist, his/her relationship to the material of the medium becomes the primary relationship, while his/her relationship to the world becomes secondary. The substance of the medium invigorates the artist with a sense of his/her own substantiality, and its tangible presence becomes a symbol of the artist's self.

Nerdrum (2001:27) believes that:

> … [k]itsch is the opposite of the public space, of the public conversation, of the demand for objectivity and functionality. Kitsch is the intimate space, ourselves, our love and our congeniality, our yearnings and our hopes, and our tears, joys and passion. Kitsch comes from the creative person's private space, and speaks to other private spaces. Kitsch deals therefore with giving intimacy dignity.

Nerdrum's relationship with the oil-medium as a 'primary substance' involves a grandiose and exhibitionistic image of the self. His numerous self-portraits as the prophet of painting or a re-incarnation of Rembrandt attest to this archaic supremacy. Nerdrum's tenebrist painting is a subtly creative way of making the best of an alien world, for the material is a piece of it. Thus the avant-garde artists (to which Nerdrum ultimately conforms) remains realistic in spite of themselves. Kuspit (2000b:77) states that regression from representation to

materiality is the basic avant-garde psycho- strategy for dealing with the modern world and the anxiety it arouses.

Another psycho-strategy by the avant-garde artist is to "flee from the crowd" (Kuspit 2000b:77) by discrediting or criticizing the crowd in an effort to find and affirm one's sacred self. Nerdrum does this by his kitsch, and even 'sweet' style of painting coupled with emotion in a clichéd way. In the work of Nerdrum a psychic 'crippledness' overtakes his human beings in a hostile environment. Rather than merely trying to 'save' himself from the crowd by absorbing himself in his medium, he attacks the crowd (modernity) as a place of the living dead.

Kuspit (2000b:79) further contends that "[a]vant-garde hallucinatory pictures are haunted by a feeling of inescapable, irreversible universal insanity − insanity made tangible in atmosphere and image." The artist relieves them of his/her feeling of insanity by hallucinating it, but the relief is only temporary. In Nerdrum's work the human suffering is so unrelieved and pervasive that it appears to deny the simplest act of kindness, let alone mercy.

The aspects of the object relevant to a judgement of beauty can include sensuous properties in isolation such as the pure luscious quality of a certain colour or texture, or the translucent properties of a painting. They also include concepts of the object when the object gives pleasure because the viewer anticipates the personal benefits he/she would enjoy on owning or engaging in some way with the object (Gaut & Lopes 2001:232). In the tenebrist painting of Nerdrum, pleasure is taken in the sensuous for its own sake.

Nerdrum often pushes the dialectic of style and feeling right up to the threshold of kitsch, yet, on the other hand, the visual impact of his paintings is always owing to their exploration of the human condition. Nature, as the only source of strength and place of transformation is mostly the subject of his paintings. A painter using the old master style is sensual. Postmodern practices, at the best of times, entail markers of indifferent handiwork deriving value only from a calculus of critical theory and economic exchange. Old master sumptuous surfaces appeal shamelessly to our tactile appreciation. In doing this, Nerdrum is not protected by his time.

A comparison can be made between the painting of Nerdrum and the video work of Bill Viola. Human emotions are the subject of *The Passions* (2000-2003), a series of twenty video works exploring the power and complexity of emotion by depicting the faces and the bodies of the models. Both artists show an interest in older art (especially the devotional painting of the Middle Ages and Baroque painting) and in archetypal dream patterns, universal cycles of time, and processes of life, growth and death. Whereas Nerdrum's figures carry an emotional life that is expressed in their crippled flesh and self-defeat, Viola creates an emotional life within the actors that is then expressed outwardly. Like the paintings that inspire Viola's video work, they are vivid, lifelike and silent. Unlike the paintings, they are never still, but always changing.

Silent mountain (2001)[1] (figure 8) by Viola is a study of the onset and aftermath of an explosive emotional outburst as it courses through the human body. It is a visual record of the human capacity to withstand self-destruction and strive for renewal (Walsh 2003:128). A man and a woman are seen next to each other on two adjacent screens in silent companionship oblivious to each other. A
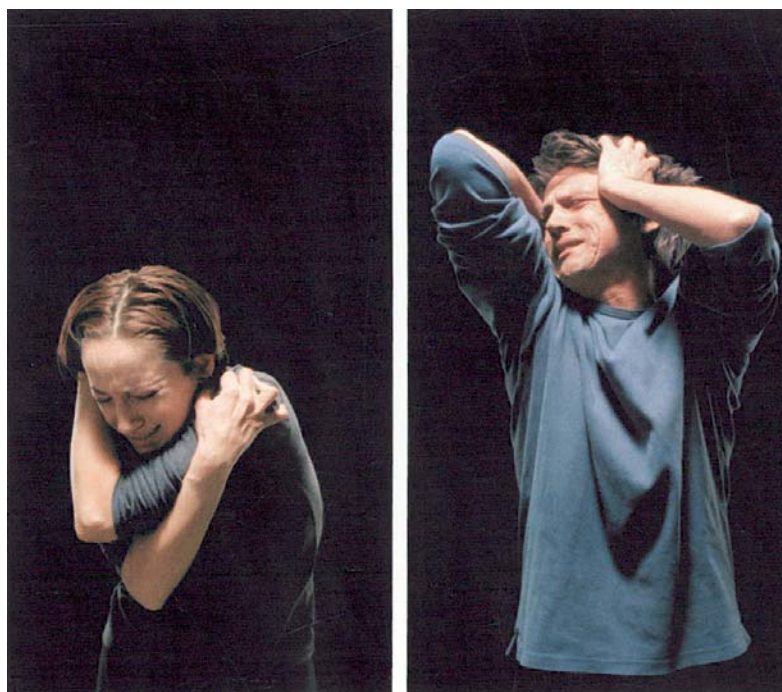
Fig 8: Bill Viola, *Silent mountain* (2001). Colour video diptych on two plasma displays mounted side-by-side on wall (Walsh 2003:44).

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[1] Bill Viola, *Silent mountain* (2001). Colour video diptych on two plasma displays mounted side-by-side on wall, 102.1 × 121.9 × 8.9cm.

mounting wave of inner stress and emotional pressure causes them to suddenly burst out with a violent, explosive scream. Their facial expressions and gestures (hands and arms) are melodramatic and exaggerated in a clichéd way. The delivery of the subject matter is (similar to the painting of Nerdrum) done in a beautiful way with Viola's use of chiaroscuro, pathos, dramatic intensity and swelling sculptural forms.

The quintet of the astonished (2000)[1] (figure 9) similarly explores five individuals' experience of rising emotional energy, leaving each person drained and exhausted. Like Nerdrum's protagonists, Viola's actors experience the wave of intense emotions independently of each other. Though they inhabit the same physical space, they bear their pain in isolation.

Fig 9: Bill Viola, *The quintet of the astonished* (2000). Video still (Walsh 2003:35).

In my own practical work, such as *The geography of the void* (2006)[2] (figure 10), a similar kind of melodramatic mood is present in the theatrical pose of the classical figure and the technological blurring of the image. The harsh grain of the printed image on silver foil is reminiscent of the flickering of a television screen or surveillance camera.

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[1] Bill Viola, *The quintet of the astonished* (2000). Colour video rear projection on screen mounted on wall in dark room, 140 × 240cm.
[2] Johan Conradie, *The geography of the void* (2006). Digital print on silver foil, 85 × 120cm.

Fig 10: Johan Conradie, *The geography of the void* (2006). Photograph by author.

As a self proclaimed "kitsch painter" (Nerdrum 2001:12), Nerdrum considers himself as an outsider to the postmodern art world, although his work is certainly postmodern and kitsch. According to him today's critics are trained to think differently; in their rush towards the new, critics approach a work of art with ironic distance and see things from a dual perspective, discreetly withholding any tears or emotions (Nerdrum 2001:16). In the twentieth century art became the metaphysical applause for the new sciences.[1] A painter like Nerdrum, using the 'old master' style is sensual in that he expresses a beauty devoid of recondite meanings, glad to be alive and to show itself as is evident in *The seed protectors* (1987)[2] (figure 11). The pleasure in Nerdrum's beauty, it seems, is as if he has discovered some profound truth about the world and the nature of being. His aim is to become engrossed in his work and skilfully render life's eternal moments without prejudice.

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[1] From Cezanne's breakthrough in depicting space to Cubism, Conceptualism and photo-Realism.
[2] Odd Nerdrum, *The seed protectors* (1987). Oil on linen, 285 × 356cm.

Fig 11: Odd Nerdrum, *The seed protectors* (1987). Oil on linen (Hansen 1994:208).

Nerdrum's return to what used to be unblushingly called the great tradition of western art, particularly as epitomised in the work of Caravaggio, Rembrandt and Goya, perhaps manifests itself best through a contemporary counter-current embodied most effectively in Nerdrum himself. Probably no other painter today would dare to portray themselves as the re-incarnation of Rembrandt, which Nerdrum has done repeatedly in works like *Self-portrait* (1998-1999), or to put himself forward as nothing less than the *Prophet of painting* (1997-1998). Nerdrum seems to have rejected everything about the Modernist avant-garde, except its romantic myth of the artist as exalted spiritualist.

With his fondness for self-dramatising cloaks and posed attitudes, he primarily wishes to encourage an appreciation of the past as a state of thought and social transformation. Consequently, it is a common error to view him as a mere melancholy painter wanting to return to the past. Nerdrum promotes an appreciation of the past, but, in the current moment, a type of present consciousness.

Nerdrum's painting demands a response that integrates emotion and cognition. That is to say, his work commonly provokes a response to the subject itself, the person represented, and elicits memories of our own emotions and experiences, mundane and profound: childbirth, parenthood, ageing and death. It is not a form of response that the contemporary language of formalist criticism is equipped to deal with, though it is my purpose to suggest that it is as valid to our understanding of Nerdrum's work as any informed perception of art historical resonance.

It can be said that Nerdrum clearly cherishes his sense of separateness from the art world, even while he recognises its limitations and feels acutely its pains of exile. In his prophetic self-election as the king of kitsch he launched an attack on the entire history and philosophy of *advanced* art since the eighteenth century.[1] Nerdrum's dilemma is, according to Vine (2001:79), a classic case of psychological and linguistic turn-about.

Moreover, in Nerdrum's desire to subvert current notions on kitsch, he is actually deconstructing and presenting kitsch in a serious way. Nerdrum's challenge to the post-Kantian, concept-driven art world is that art and kitsch are two sides of the same coin.

Kitsch does not inspire morality and taste. Neither does it demand pure faith, an open heart or originality. From the moment the beautiful and the good came to be associated with art and the creative impulse behind the making of a painting and the emotional beholding of it, the new art world needed a concept for the unethical and anaesthetic. It seems that the concept of kitsch was born the moment that kitsch became the object of disgust that the Romantics needed in order to have something to demonstrate their good taste and high moral against. Art needs kitsch in order to be art.

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[1] In the December (1997) issue of *Verdens Gang* Nerdrum declared himself the "King Kitsch" (Vine 2001:78).

CHAPTER 2: TENEBRISM AS A MODE OF REALISM

As described in the previous chapter, Nerdrum often pushes the dialectic of style and feeling right up to the threshold of kitsch, yet on the other hand, the visual impact of his images is always owing to their exploration of the human condition. Thus, in the work of Nerdrum there exists an irony in the reality of his painting as an 'idealised mode of representation' versus the reality of the 'human condition'. Trauma or visible suffering encompasses a range of responses including anxiety, shock, fear, empathy and compassion.

Since contemporary realism manifests in many guises and defies any single definition, this chapter investigates tenebrism as a mode of realism in the work of Nerdrum.

2.1 A COMMITMENT TO BAROQUE REALISM

Historically, the strength of realist art has been psychological. It has been a way to enable the individual artist to point to something deep beyond surface appearances, but through recognisable and naturalistic form. Due to the impact of virtuality on perceptions of the real, no one is really sure of where the *surface* lies anymore. Beneath the gimcrack surface of much contemporary living, Nerdrum portrays quite a dismal and catastrophic vision of the future due to the breakdown of a utopian ideology, pessimism and an apocalyptic consciousness that is inherently part of much Postmodern thinking.

Nerdrum's realist art sees the human being as a physical, psychological and individual entity in which he combines direct studies of the human being in a style informed by historical traditions. For Nerdrum the moral task of the artist can be equated with depicting essences – of character, of action but above all, of our shared and desperate exile from nature.

Nerdrum often appropriates melodramatic and exaggerated poses used by Baroque painters such as Caravaggio. Though Caravaggio made use of posed and made-up attitudes in his painting, the affective impact of his *Judith*

beheading Holofernes (figure 1) is grim and effective in its shocking way. Choosing a distinct moment in the narrative from the biblical story, Caravaggio boldly represented Judith slicing Holofernes's neck with his sword. This choice of the climax must have challenged him to consider the question of exactly how a woman decapitated a strong man and to reconstruct the physical as well as the emotional experience. A few lines disturb Judith's smooth brow, while dark shadows partially obscure her eyes fixed on Holofernes, and her lips are slightly parted. That she is deeply troubled and even repelled by this act is heightened by the arc traced by her body, curving back from her victim at the shoulders and at the legs where her skirt is swept up. In this narrative realism of the scene, Caravaggio conveys the psychological ambivalence that endows Judith with the stature of a tragic heroine.

Nerdrum's refusal to work from any photographic reference[1] shows his commitment to Baroque realism and painters such as Rembrandt and Velázquez. Inherent in Baroque realism is a symbolic exchange, whereby the painted figure is seen to draw life from the painter's action, traced onto the canvas. In Baroque realism, from Caravaggio onwards, the representation of the body's materiality points indirectly to its spirituality (Prendeville 2000:189). In the seventeenth century, the idea of the incarnate soul was still culturally dominant, as it steadily ceased to be in subsequent eras; if it is recollected in painting; it is as an absence or diminished shadow.

The Baroque painterly realists addressed the paradox that a painter can only make a figure or object appears solid − and in that sense *real* − at the cost of making it remote: it is on the other side of the painted surface, withdrawn into the pure visible. Painterly practice entailed both creating this effigy and endowing it with life through intimation of movement, suggestion of texture and allusion to non-visual senses, as well as by exploiting the tactility of oil paint and its suggestive colouristic richness.

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[1] Apart from the flatness of the image, Nerdrum also objects to the mechanical and technological implications of the process. Nerdrum's workshop is still operating like a seventeenth century workshop, in which apprentices prepare pigments, sizes, varnishes and so on.

Nerdrum, keenly aware of such issues, tries to slow down and frame the passing images for longer and more intimate attention, portraying the subtle body in all its registers, from the emotional to the imaginary and the cultural. As in Baroque's frieze-dried pathos, Nerdrum's work seldom shows movement; bodies are fixed in thought. Even when they dance, they seem frozen as evident in *Man bitten by a snake* (1992)[1] (figure 12).

Fig 12: Odd Nerdrum, *Man bitten by a snake* (1992). Oil on linen (Hansen 1994:288).

Psychological tenebrism is one of the most powerful tools Nerdrum employs. His paintings are drenched in darkness and, therefore, intensify the emotional states his figures embody. In *Self-portrait with eyes half closed* (1993)[2] (figure 13) his physical self lurches from feeling clumsy to insubstantial. The figure retreats from the viewer (into darkness) in its introspective unhappiness and self-destruction. Apart from the physical tenebrist mood, Nerdrum is caught in the act of closing his eyes to the light, therefore, pointing to a spiritual life with a higher coefficient of reality.

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[1] Odd Nerdrum, *Man bitten by a snake* (1992). Oil on linen, 236.6 × 267.5cm.
[2] Odd Nerdrum, *Self-portrait with eyes half closed* (1993). Oil on linen, 92 × 81cm.

Fig 13: Odd Nerdrum, *Self-portrait with eyes half closed* (1993). Oil on linen
(Hansen 1994:311).

In Baroque realism the scene is normally lit by a real visible source of light (a torch or a lamp) but sometimes remained invisible, outside the painting. In Rembrandt's *The adoration of the shepherds* (1646)[1] (figure 14) for example, light shines forth from a real source in the form of the shepherds' oil lamp. There is, however, a combined use of light since light is also emanating symbolically from the Child. In the work of Nerdrum, the sun is usually just below the horizon, leaving the sky slightly lightened in a clear denial of any

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[1] Rembrandt, *The adoration of the shepherds* (1646). Oil on linen, 97 × 71cm.

metaphysical presence. The light's origin comes from the earth itself. In *Man with catfish* (1992)[1] (figure 15), for example, their exists an ambiguity between the symbolic dimmed light coming from the earth itself and the artificial studio light that Nerdrum uses for executing his paintings. Both sources of lighting co-exist in a time-free dimension.

Fig 14: Rembrandt, *The adoration of the shepherds* (1646). Oil on linen (Van de Wetering 2000:80).
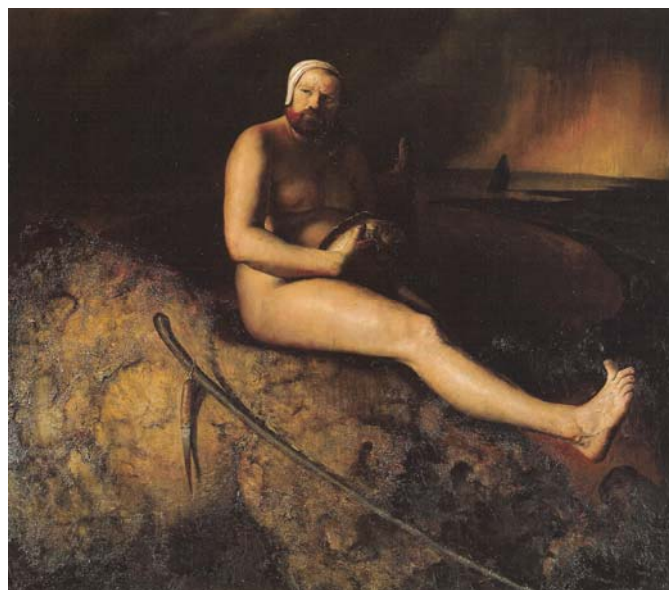
Fig 15: Odd Nerdrum, *Man with catfish* (1992). Oil on linen (Hansen 1994:285).

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[1] Odd Nerdrum, *Man with catfish* (1992). Oil on linen, 183.3 × 209cm.

There is an inherent psychological conflict built into Nerdrum's portrayal of himself as the romantic myth of the artist as exalted seer and, simultaneously, as an anxious being trying to make sense of his contemporary life world. He advocates a seventeenth century workshop style approach to art production; yet in person he plays the romantic part of a solitary artist committed to his craft to perfection.

Richard Vine (2001: 20) sees Nerdrum's non-conforming public persona as an extended form of performance art. According to Vine (2001:21) it is impossible to know the real Nerdrum in-between his poses and controversies, any more than we know the real Rembrandt.

Nerdrum's human beings endure suffering in a mythical portentous survivalist wasteland. Isolated people inhabit volcanic and desolate landscapes and seem to turn on themselves, and each other, in their attempt to make sense of their life worlds. The characteristic of the encountered trauma in his painting is that it incites affect. But this affect is not (as is commonly supposed of the emotional response) opposed to the thinking process; that is, it does not supplant critical inquiry with a passive bodily experience. Far from foreclosing on thought and simply placating the subject, it agitates it, compelling and fuelling enquiry. There is then an element of unsettlement here.

To envisage the impact of trauma in this way is to think through the ways in which the world is inhabited in the wake of loss and devastation, and to conceive of individual experience in terms of an 'out folding'. In such a model, space is conceptualised as a locus of transition. But by focusing on the dynamics of inhabitation, we might also understand space as a locus of placement or displacement, and of differential terms of occupation.

2.2 NERDRUM'S ESCHATOLOGY

In *The threshold of the visible world,* Kaja Silverman (1996:23) makes a distinction between idiopathic and heteropathic identification, derived from the German philosopher Max Scheler. Scheler's model of idiopathic identification describes the form of identification based on shared identity − what Silverman

(1996:23) calls the "self-same body". Motivated by seeing the self in the image of another, idiopathic identification operates along a trajectory of incorporation; that is to say, it entails an assimilation of the other to the self so that the other's experience is interpreted with reference only to one's own prior experience. In this process, unfamiliar experience is never directly confronted and the other is effectively annihilated; as Scheler puts it, "completely dispossessed and deprived of all rights in its conscious existence and character" (Silverman 1996:23).

The subject who makes an incorporative identification with the trauma of another deals with the unfamiliar experience not by attempting to understand it on its own terms − the terms of the one experience this is − but by considering 'what it would be like if this happened to me'. In seeking to redeem a productive form of identificatory relationship, Silverman (1996:23) argues that heteropathic identification forestalls the problem of crude or superficial empathy because it entails identification at a distance with a body that one knows to be alien, in some sense. For Scheler, this promotes a profound form of sympathy since it is predicated on a genuine encounter with an other, and an openness to a mode of existence beyond what is known by the self (Silverman 1996:23).

Nerdrum believes that the need to represent human emotions and the reality of the world around us is a permanent and enduring concern, which remains above the shifting and merely topical interests of the art world (Nerdrum 2001: 8). When modernism in art gradually gained acceptance and hegemony during the last century, it was recognised that this occurred with a break in tradition.

The capacity to locate oneself within the body of another is fundamental to the ability to witness the pain of an other. Silverman (1996:26) describes a specular panic that arises when a subject is forced to witness the presence of a body that can make no claim to what, in our culture, passes for the ideal body. When one is faced, for example, with the spectre of the homeless the body in front of one might be too far removed to engender empathy. Although they share with one the same public space, the terms on which they inhabit this space render them alien.

Pain or suffering lifted into the visible world runs the risk of becoming detached from its subject. Pain effectively becomes visible through the structuring of proximal relationships between bodies within a designated space. The space that Nerdrum's human beings inhabit is at once a mythical space and a physical wasteland that resembles the barren Icelandic landscape as is evident in *Dawn* (1990)[1] (figure 16). The mythical character of his paintings stems from the removal of a realistic time-space dimension and the use of archetypical themes and symbols. Despite the figurative realism, the mythical spaces these figures inhabit represent a space beyond reality. It is a space that is a synthesis of fantasy and reality.[2]

Fig 16: Odd Nerdrum, *Dawn,* 1990. Oil on linen (Hansen 1994:267).

In addition to the formal techniques, is the use of space as the bearer of an idea or psychological projection. This space that Nerdrum's figures inhabit is the same: a deserted, abandoned and endless landscape that is often depicted under a dark sky. It is an emotionally as well as physically sterile eternity insofar as it merely repeats itself endlessly. There is no escape from here.

Donald Kuspit writes that the space aspect in the work of Nerdrum is "much more eschatological: a black, thick, gloomy substance, in which 'experienced

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[1] Odd Nerdrum, *Dawn* (1990). Oil on linen, 194 × 284.6cm.
[2] The synthesis between fantasy and reality in the work of Nerdrum is in part achieved by a combined use of nature study and studio light.

distance' disappears. Nerdrum's tenebrist use of blackness borders on what Kuspit (2000:80) calls "transcendental abstraction". The materiality of these black surfaces expresses the artist's feeling of alienation. As a psycho-strategy, these surfaces have little to do with the crowd's sense of reality but, rather, they bespeak the artist's alienation that he feels from the crowd. There is no more 'life amplitude', vital space is narrowed, space is desociali[s]ed" (Kuspit 1994:3). Kuspit links Nerdrum's use of tenebrist backgrounds to a branch of theology concerned with the end of the world. This association is in fact realistic in the space of Nerdrum's world, since this shows the normal consequence of the psychosocial catastrophe that has befallen it.

When not in total darkness, his figures are isolated in a barren landscape, sometimes marked with roads that are the relics of civilization as evidenced in *The night guard* (1985-6)[1] (figure 17). These desolate settings are both internal and external, both a version of the modern world and an alternative to it. In existential terms, this destitute landscape conveys a threat of immanent non-

Fig17: Odd Nerdrum, *The night guard* (1985-1986). Oil on linen (Hansen 1994:189).

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[1] Odd Nerdrum, *The night guard* (1985-6). Oil on linen, 265 × 336cm.

being; its void objectifies a profound feeling of abandonment. His paintings seem to illustrate the proverb that we are our own worst enemy. In *The night guard* the main protagonist (middle) watches and waits in the void for a death that is already present in the post-apocalyptic landscape. They alone are alive in it. Significantly, there is no growth around them and the landscape is devoid of any representational time dimension.

Isolation has turned the figures in upon themselves, and twists them out of emotional shape. Nerdrum often portrays a physically misshapen, tormented body that is reflective of the human being's inner condition. Fromm (1963:16) argues that fear of isolation is the primary fear, but in Nerdrum's paintings isolation is no longer feared, it has become a fact of life. Indeed, it seems that his people can only survive in isolation, for when they are together they tend to be indifferent towards each other, or judge each other harshly, or even destroy each other.

Fromm's (1963:154) formulation on destructiveness suggests that it is rooted in the unbearableness of individual powerlessness and isolation. According to Fromm (1963:154-155):

> Destructiveness … aims not at active or passive symbiosis but at elimination of its object … [T]he destructive impulses are a passion within a person, and they always succeed in finding some object. If for any reason other persons cannot become the object of an individual's destructiveness, his own self easily becomes the object. When this happens in a marked degree, physical illness is often the result and even suiside may be attempted.

In *One-armed aviator* (1987)[1] (figure 18) Nerdrum illustrates objectively the aviator's want for wholeness in his depiction of amputation. The aviator is portrayed bare-chested with only a stump where his right arm should be, scanning the empty sky above. It is as though Nerdrum translates the aviator's emotional crippling into a physical crippling. The tenebrist sky is dark and gloomy offering no light. The cap he is wearing implies a needed protection but also serves as an acknowledgement of his mentally deflected state. The aviator, like many of Nerdrum's characters, turns his eyes skyward, as if searching for a never found deliverance.

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[1] Odd Nerdrum, *One-armed aviator* (1987). Oil on linen, 115 × 89,5cm.
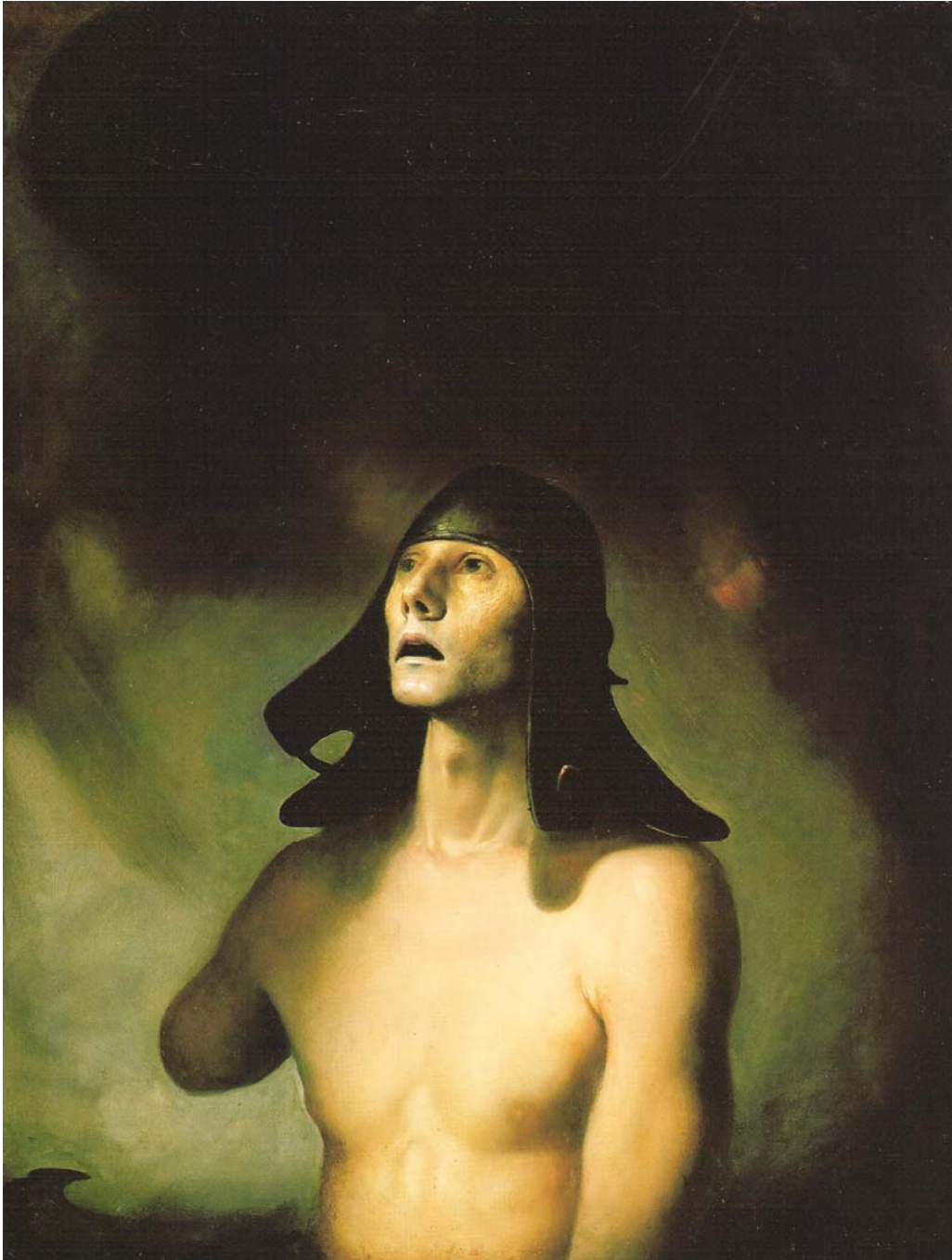
Fig 18: Odd Nerdrum, *One-armed aviator* (1987). Oil on linen (Hansen 1994:215).

The mythical dimension is most clearly expressed in the absence of a realistic organisation of history and time into past, present and future. If his paintings are viewed from an eschatological perspective, acknowledgement of the collapse of technology and the ruin of civilization prevail. Others, like Jan Åke Petterson (1988:188-9), have interpreted the paintings as an expression of longing for a prehistoric condition in which his figures are interpreted as being idealised

fantasies of the golden age; as atavistic dreams. In this sense the paintings are origin myths.

In less radical interpretations, emphasis is placed on the fact that they represent an idealisation of primitive, pre-industrial societies. His reference to primitive peoples, such as the Inuits and the Vikings of the Middle Ages, point in this direction. Nerdrum's strong fascination with the Icelandic landscape and ancient Icelandic culture plays an important role in this respect.

2.3 NERDRUM'S POSTMODERN REALISM

During the late 1960s and 1970s Nerdrum first opted for a narrative, even anecdotal, figurative realism. Those works were infused with social commentary at a time when abstraction and conceptualism were the hallmarks of advanced and acceptable art. Nerdrum's critique against the prevailing modernism entailed, firstly, that the exponents of it had abandoned the great humanistic themes in favour of an all pervasive irony. His second criticism was that they have also forsaken not only the hard-won techniques of figurative realism but the very notion of quality standards *per se* (Nerdrum 2001: 21-5). Though these comments by Nerdrum may be conservative in nature[1], they do highlight his commitment to a narrative impulse and obsessive attention to craftsmanship.

The approaches to realism that have been most characteristic of painting in the decades following Pop art have in fact been decidedly oblique. The painter's source material has, typically, been itself an image, often photographic. In its nineteenth century beginnings, photography, like the practice of painting from nature, was linked to the pursuit of a lifelike representation of 'external' reality. The nineteenth-century photograph was analogous to the pictorial framed view. During the 1960s photography became important not in so far as it was truthful

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[1] Nerdrum often criticises contemporary art for its lack of craftsmanship. There might be some truth to the notion that the conceptual sometimes is over-emphasized at the cost of the execution of the work of art. However, to group all contemporary art production under this false stereotype makes Nerdrum guilty of fallacious argumentation. With film, text, video, computer and digital photography a great demand of technical proficiency is also required. I do, however agree that the absolute dictatorship of any genre −as long as it does not look like painting − is ultimately academic, modish and tiring

but rather − given its mimetic power and vividness − because it was seductive and compelling.[1]

Developments in art history, criticism and art theory since the 1960s have diversely discouraged the belief that the meaning or the *truth* of a painting lies within it. Feminist and psychoanalytical approaches invite us to look at paintings with suspicion; semioticians encourage the viewer to read paintings more than to look at them; social historians direct us to the historical conjunctures in which both painting and viewing have taken place (Prendeville 2000:158). All, in different ways, focus on the work done by the viewer. Accordingly, realism, illusion and imitation have been pervasive concerns in painting, and have arisen within very disparate forms of practice.[2]

Photorealists of the 1970s are surface-conscious depicters of surfaces. The *reality* their paintings represent is usually itself artificial both physically and culturally. Photorealism promises a photographic view into depth, which it simultaneously cancels through its preoccupation with the superficial.

In postmodernity, there is no 'oneness' of the universe toward which to transcend. Rather than transcendence, the artists have focused instead on what is at hand; immanence, or the artist's own self and the 'other', by which is meant another person or object in the natural world.

Existentialism arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger recoiled at the grand scientific systems of thought that treat human beings as members of a species and therefore, in their opinion, overlook the uniqueness of each individual. Nietzsche and Heidegger discarded generalisations and began their

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[1] The primary task of painting before the invention of photography was to invoke the concept of imitation, and to achieve relationships of resemblance. With the invention of photography in the 1830s, it served as a threat to painters and a rival to them for commercial markets. Photography, according to some so-called advanced theorists, is more appropriate to the machine age and surpasses painting in capturing likenesses. Since the advent of photography, it cannot be the task of painting (or of art in general) to document what is going on in the world anymore, as the press and other media do so adequately and intensively.

[2] German artist Gerhard Richter, for instance, believes that Duchamp's creation of the ready-made amounted to 'the invention of reality', and that reality in contrast with the view of the world image is the only important thing'. Rather than affording a view of reality, painting is itself reality (produced by itself)' (Richter paraphrased in Prendeville 2000:167).

studies by giving a detailed description of the existence of concrete individuals. They declared that one creates one's essence through actions made by free choice, rather than by being assigned an identity as the member of a group.

The Existentialist emphasis on introspection led the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre to provide a theoretical foundation in his study of consciousness, *Being and nothingness* (1943), in which he described consciousness (nothingness) as directed toward objects in the world (being). He also declared that what is unique about the mind of humans (as opposed to lower mammals) is that it is capable of reflecting on its own thought process. This self-consciousness allows one, for example, not only to read this page but also contemplate your reading of it.

2.5 PAINTED REALITIES

The critical potential of painting has frequently resided in the productive tension between the content/subject matter of the depiction and the depictive elements of the painting itself. When standing in front of a painting, the viewer is asked to consider not only the subject of the painting and its painted surface, but also the dynamic interaction between the two. Painting, as a medium, can itself be seen as reality (produced by it). A painting is bound both by the physical limits of the medium and by the contrast between the world it creates and the world out of which it is created.

For Nerdrum, the relation between these different realities; the reality of the painting as an imitation of a reality, the reality of the empirical world, and of a new reality of the artwork that possesses its own intrinsic significance, still remains sufficiently productive to allow him to address issues of substantive critical interest through the medium of paint. Amongst the new reproductive technologies, however, painting's very handmade quality, its slowness of execution and the artist's laborious reliance on brushes, oils and primers, make it seem a relic from an earlier era.

The 'collapse' of painting, and with it the genre of the 'last painting', is constantly repeated in Postmodernity[1]. By the final decades of the twentieth century, it seemed to many artists and critics that painting was "a shape grown old"[2], condemned to an increasingly conservative rehearsal of strategies and gestures that had lost their original significance (Perry & Wood 2004:89). Those who announce it dead, do so to affirm their own vanguard status, as though the death of painting means the birth of their own superior idea of art. *Advance* came to mean *advance beyond painting,* at whatever cost to art itself, and to the psyche. The great loss to both suggests how catastrophic the consequences of the compulsion to be avant-garde can be.

Nerdrum's severe critique against the Modernist avant-garde in formalist terms entails that any geometric or gestural abstraction, conceptual exercise or deconstructive parody constitutes a betrayal of human solidarity and perceptual truth. According to Nerdrum,[1] nature alone can redeem us. The avant-garde can be seen, as a kind of neurotic phenomenon, from Cézanne onwards to Warhol since it indicates a society gone progressively mad through boundless political, mercantile and scientific hubris (Vine 1990:170). In Jungian terms neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering. By legitimate suffering Jung meant existential suffering – the pain that is inherent in existence and that could not be legitimately avoided. Human beings, according to Nerdrum, must be admonished, through visual parables, so that we cannot finally transcend human flesh and its insistent, ritualised needs. Nerdrum understands that presenting an inward-turning world, as painting had might continue to be of

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[1] With the development of the mass media at the end of the twentieth century, painting became elitist once and for all. As a result of the enormous increase in media technology over the last thirty years, and in particular, since the digital revolution of the nineties, painting seems once and for all to have assumed archaic traits. It has become too sluggish and too opaque to be able to keep in touch with the world around us. Moreover, a painting has become the commodity par excellence – a venal symbol of the commercial degradation of art. Painting has become elitist entertainment, a status symbol, and an investment property – everything except the sacred object it purports to be (Kuspit 2000:2). Painting belonged to the male dominated Western world and came to symbolise power and wealth. The enormous importance given to a work of art as a precious object, that is advertised and known in connection with its price, is bound to affect the consciousness of a culture. It stamps the painting as an object of speculation, confusing the values of art.

[2] The phrase "a shape of life grown old" is taken from the preface to G.W.F. Hegel's *Philosophy of right* (1821). The full quotation read: "When philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk".

[1] Odd Nerdrum in conversation with Vine 1990:78.

interest to an inward-looking public, that is, a public concerned to understand the inner life world.

Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, delivered in Berlin between 1818 and 1831, are of vital importance to some of the most critical aspects of Nerdrum's work. Hegel believed that changes in the relation between art and society, and, above all, the loss of art's earlier religious and spiritual functions, had led to an irreversible transformation in the very meaning and status of art (Perry and Wood 2004:94). Central to his teachings is the fact that in the highly reflective culture of modern civil society, understanding had replaced feeling as a primary mode of access to works of art, thereby breaking the relation of immediacy that had previously sustained our relation to art.

Realism today often means real objects, or a concentration on real and verifiable concrete qualities[2]. This kind of realism is an existentialist realism rather than an illusionist, counterfeit realism. Even the hyper-real descriptive art of the last few decades is driven by impersonal observation and an unsparing factuality. Nerdrum's realism restores subjectivity and humanism to figurative painting. Psychology is the essential new informant of our contemporary readings, replacing political, mythical or religious constructs. These paintings are portraits of emotional states, and after the initial shock at their technical virtuosity and 'old master' sensuality, it is their impression of an inner life that holds our continued attention.

Nerdrum uses realism to epitomise the dominance and even cruelty of the technological age. His images of defenceless, amputated and vulnerable bodies, far from rendering us powerful as viewers, induce the viewer instinctively to question his/her own inadequacies. His characters' reality is excessive. Their bodies are naked and abandoned into themselves in a way

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[2] In the previous century, art was defined by an extensive attempt to overcome mimesis; the ability to imitate. During the 1990s artists became bored with process-based art and had a sneaking desire to explore digital- and installation art. Obsessed with removing the hand of the maker, the Ricteresque blurred images became the sexy fast track. The pseudo process painting of Gary Hume and Ian Davenport mined the Modernist seam while Mark Francis, Brad Lochore and Paul Winstanley chased the beautiful surface (Price 1998: [0]). Painting, as a form, seemed a limited and reductive option.

that reminds of Nerdrum's statement, that human beings will always be subjugated to their own sex and physique; that humans are dependant upon a body that is bound up to the earth.

CHAPTER 3: TENEBRISM AS A MODE OF THE SUBLIME

Notions of the sublime rely on what it means to be human, because it is the response of a human − physically, emotionally, and intellectually − to the expansiveness of literature, art, or nature, that brings about a state of transcendence. Nature as a source of strength and place of transformation is the subject of most of Nerdrum's creative output. Nature manifests in his painting as a primal mode of consciousness and is grounded in the archetypal, rather than the social. The sublime in the work of Nerdrum posits itself as an incomprehensible darkness that reason can never dispel. My interpretation of the sublime in Nerdrum is that it manifests as the apotheosis of absence, where loneliness has become blatant and uncompromising, through his use of tenebrism.

3.1 CHANGING CONCEPTS OF THE SUBLIME

In the paintings of Nerdrum the sublime expresses itself as a form of beauty that implies death. Death does not only occur physically in the landscape and his human protagonists, but also in his eschatological tenebrist surfaces. His paintings are allegories that deal with life and death.

In many ways the Postmodern sublime is really an oxymoron or contradiction in terms. There can be no sublime present in Postmodernism in the traditional sense. Postmodernism does not really deal in such concepts as the grandeur that bursts through the surface in a gust of frenzy as in the Romantic sublime. The characteristic of the Postmodern sublime comes in different guises and has a somewhat arbitrary ability to designate it wherever the artist, theorist or philosopher wants.

3.1.1 THE SUBLIME AS AN EFFECT OF ART

Though the concept of the sublime was developed in the mid-eighteenth century, the first written account can be found in the writing of Pseudo-Longinus, an author who probably lived in the first century AD (Eco 2004:278).

In Pseudo-Longinus's view, the sublime is an expression of grand and noble passions that bring into play the emotional involvement of both the creator and the perceiver of the work of art. The noble passions he was referring to are like those expressed in Homeric poetry or in the great Classical tragedies. With regard to the process of artistic creation, Longinus accords the maximum importance to the moment of enthusiasm: in his view the sublime is something that animates poetic discourse from within, thus leading the listener or the reader into transports of ecstasy. Longinus believed that the sublime is reached through art.

Nerdrum's tenebrist painting, emotional and dramatised, articulates the sublime through a physical darkness that is non-accommodating and existentially sterile. This darkness remains stubbornly immediate and is a constant reminder of death. Conceptually speaking, painting as a dexterous art which takes time to make − time indelibly marked in its own skin − and is the ideal medium to restore duration to images of death. A medium like photography, for instance, does not allow the viewer to contemplate death. In order to do that, duration must re-enter the equation, for without a measure of time's passage the depiction of time arrested becomes tautological and senseless. The existential contradiction between painting's slowness and photography's speed, between the viewer's condition, which allows one to spend time, and that of the subject for whom time has ceased to exist is important in my own work.

The tension between the photographic and the painterly is a leading concern in my own practical work as can be seen in *Cathedral* (2005)[1] (figure 19). Every photograph reifies something already old; whatever is photographed becomes instantly old and petrified. Death is the *eidos* – the essential form– of photography, the French critic Roland Barthes (1980:15) has maintained. In witnessing a picture taken of a particular person or thing at a precise instant one witnesses what Barthes (1980:15) calls "the that-has-been", the unrepeatable moment that in reproduction can be infinitely multiplied. While a painting may seem lifelike, a photograph never does. Unlike painting, which is a synthetic fiction even when it is based on observation, the fact of the photograph's static quality is always at odds with the fact (actual or potential) of movement.

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[1] Johan Conradie, *Cathedral* (2005). Encad pearl satin print, 175 × 125cm.

Fig 19: Johan Conradie, *Cathedral* (2005). Photograph by author.

The "that-has-been" of Barthes (1981:15) reminds us that the photograph cannot testify to what is (for that is no longer certain), only to what has been; what the photograph offers us is reality in a past state. Painting, conversely inasmuch as it may be stripped of its indexical character, exists purely in the perceptual present: our mode of contemplative engagement with painting might well be framed by our perception of its *presence;* its existence in the here and now. In my own practical work the viewer is continually confronted by the play of perception between these two orders of temporality. The work oscillates between the photographic and the painterly, between the virtual space of representation and the material surface, between past and present, that which has been and that which is.

For Longinus, therefore, the sublime is an effect of art and not a natural phenomenon. This is further determined by a convergence of certain rules and whose end is the procurement of pleasure (Eco 2004:278). Longinus believed

that genuinely sublime beauty is something that always pleases everyone. The first seventeenth century reflections on the work done by Longinus referred to a 'sublime style' and therefore to a rhetorical procedure appropriate to heroic topics and expressed through elevated language capable of arousing noble passions. According to Longinus (paraphrased in Eco 2004:279) the five genuine sources of the sublime came from the command of full-blooded ideas, the inspiration of vehement emotion, the proper construction of figures (figures of speech and of thought), nobility of phrase and cause of grandeur.

3.1.2 THE SUBLIME IN NATURE

There is for third-millennium human beings, nothing more natural than artifice. And among the most artificial of constructs imaginable, is the idea of 'nature', as defined by Nerdrum or anyone else. Modern anthropology maintains that no unmediated relationship to nature is possible since culture always intervenes. Indeed, culture − a combination of human products, material and conceptual − is not an intrusion but human beings most inevitable, most truly natural link to the world. It would be impossible to live without it, or without each other.

The sublime is something that points outside of itself. It has no didactic or specific meaning. It has no intention. To acknowledge the sublime is to admit that there is something, God or in Nerdrum's case nature, defines and transcends human culture and what it means to be human. Nerdrum's belief in the emotional, serves as an acknowledgement that there are more things on earth than human philosophy or the purely conceptual.

According to Kant (1982:103-104):

> … [s]ublime is the name given to what is absolutely great … Nature … is sublime in such of its phenomena as in their intuition convey the idea of infinity. But this can only occur through the inadequacy of even the greatest effort of our imagination in the magnitude of an object … [T]rue sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging Subject, and not in the Object of nature that occasions this attitude by the estimate formed of it.

Kant distinguishes between two kinds of sublime in his *Critique on the faculty of judgement* namely the mathematical and the dynamic variety. A typical example

of the mathematical sublime is the sight of the starry sky. The viewer has the impression that what he/she sees goes far beyond his/her sensibilities and is induced to imagine more than is actually there. Human reason induces the viewer to postulate an infinity that is not only beyond the grasp of the senses, but also beyond the reach of the imagination, that cannot manage to harness it to a single intuition. Accordingly, a negative pleasure arises that reminds the viewer of his/her own subjectivity.

A typical example of the dynamic sublime is the sight of a storm as can be seen in Turner's *Snow storm: Hannibal and his army crossing the Alps* (1812). The imposing factor on the human psyche is not the impression of infinite vastness, but that of infinite power. In this case too the individual's sensible nature is left humiliated and, again, this becomes a source or a feeling of unease, compensated for by the individual's sense of moral greatness, against which the forces of nature are powerless (Eco 2004:294).

Thus, even for a philosopher like Kant who influenced so much transcendental idealism, the sublime reflected overwhelming natural energies. In the eighteenth century the notion of the sublime established itself in an entirely new way. The sublime entailed an experience we feel about nature, and not art. Romantic painters portrayed the impression of the sublime one feel upon witnessing the spectacles of nature by putting the viewer in place of the artist. In Friedrich's *Wonderer above a sea fog* (1818) for example the explorer is showed from behind as he observes the sublime. More than portraying nature in a moment of sublimity, the painter has tried to portray how the viewer feels on experiencing the sublime.

The eighteenth century was an age of travellers anxious to get to know new landscapes and new adventures, not out of a desire for conquest, as in previous centuries, but in order to savour new pleasures and new emotions. This led to the development of a taste for things that were exotic, interesting, curious, different and astounding. Boundless stretches of land, glaciers and impermeable cliffs hold a fascination to the traveller bold enough to venture new territories. These are demonstrated in the painting of Caspar David Friedrich

like the well known *Wonderer above a sea of fog* (1818) and *Shipwreck* (1824)[1] (figure 20).

Fig 20: Caspar David Friedrich, *Shipwreck* (1824). Oil on canvas (Eco 2004:282).

While some artists were appreciated in the seventeenth century for their beautiful portrayals of ugliness, formlessness and painful things, the phenomenon in itself (like a stormy sea) could not be beautiful. A stream that runs down within its banks was a beautiful object; but when it came rushing down with the impetuosity and noise of a torrent, it became a sublime one. Towards the eighteenth century the world of aesthetic pleasure split up into that of beauty and the sublime. These two were not entirely separated, because the experience of the sublime acquired many of the characteristics attributed previously to that of beauty. There was a direct appreciation of nature and all things that hint at infinity together with all things that are too big for human comprehension.

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[1] Caspar David Friedrich, *Shipwreck* (1824). Oil on canvas, size unknown.

The differences between beauty and the sublime at the time were addressed in Edmund Burke's *A philosophical inquiry into the origin of our ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* of 1756. In this work Burke opposed beauty to the sublime in that beauty, for him, was primarily an objective quality of bodies for which they arouse love that acts on the human mind through the senses. Burke was directly opposed to the idea that beauty consists in proportion and harmony, and maintained that typical aspects of the beautiful were variety, smallness, smoothness, the gradual variation, delicacy, grace, elegance, purity and fairness of colour (Eco 2004:290).

Burke's view of the sublime differs in that it implies vastness of dimensions, ruggedness and negligence, solidity, even massiveness, and darkness. The sublime comes into being with the unleashing of passions like terror, it flourishes in obscurity, it calls up ideas of power, and of that form of privation exemplified by emptiness, solitude and silence (Eco 2004:290).

The relationship between humankind and earth play a central role in most of Nerdrum's paintings. In *Sleeping couple* (1991)[1] (figure 21) and *Sole Morte* (1987)[2] (fig 22) this relationship between human beings and earth is strengthened and emphasised by the presence of black holes in the earth.
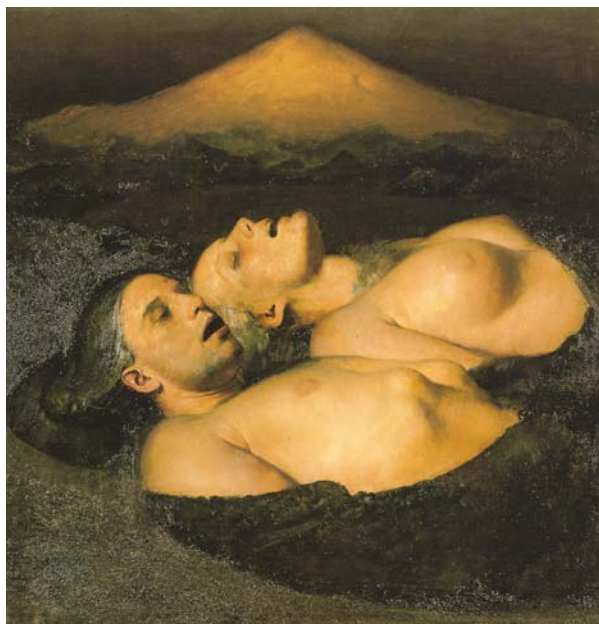

Fig 21: Odd Nerdrum, *Sleeping couple* (1991). Oil on linen (Hansen 1994:279).

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[1] Odd Nerdrum, *Sleeping couple* (1991). Oil on linen, 110 × 100cm.
[2] Odd Nerdrum, *Sole Morte* (1987). Oil on linen, 205.5 × 226cm.

These holes seem to (physically and symbolically) correspond to the shape of the human figure and can be seen as an inflection of the close relationship between man and earth. Nerdrum's rendering of the earth is of particular significance in this regard. The earth is most often portrayed drenched in heavy, dark matter. Viewed in this manner it becomes a picture of the darkness of matter.

Fig 22: Odd Nerdrum, *Sole Morte* (1987). Oil on linen (Hansen 1994:221).

This notion of humankind and matter is an organic part of Nerdrum's regeneration and transformation symbolism. The close relationship between human beings and matter that is suggested here indicates an organic understanding of matter. Parallels to this idea can be found in archaic religious and in pre-mechanical natural philosophy in Western culture. This is especially clear in a natural philosopher like Paracelsus who treated matter as the living womb that gives birth to all living things and to which all things return. According to Hansen (1994:58), "matter is both an image of destruction, dissolution and death in the guise of a *regressus ad uterum*; a return to the womb. But it is also an image of life's origin, transformation and rebirth insofar as it is the mother, *mater, matrix, matter* of all things."

Water plays a central role in both the sublime and the work of Nerdrum. In Nerdrum's *Five persons around a water hole* (1992)[1] (figure 23) the water symbol brings an element of hope into his universe of destruction and decay. Water is a universal symbol of fertility, life and rebirth. Water is the source and the origin of all life, which means that it has all life as its potential. In the work of Nerdrum water is the counterpart to the desert, drought, lifelessness, and the wasteland.

In *Five persons around a water hole,* the scene is charged with an atmosphere of heightened gravity. The five figures are standing as though being part of a sacred ceremony. The prototype for water symbolism is 'the living water' or 'the water of life' that restores, heals and promotes fertility and eternal life (Hansen 1994:48). Yet, in *Sole morte* the tenebrist water seems to be connected to decay and death. A man is lying in a foetal position in a pond with half of his head under water. A dark cloud hovers over him in the sky that can be interpreted as a symbol of both destruction and decay.

Fig 23: Odd Nerdrum, *Five persons around a water hole* (1992). Oil on linen (Hansen 1994:291).

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[1] Odd Nerdrum, *Five persons around a water hole* (1992). Oil on linen, 240 × 290cm.

Sole morte can also be linked to the Narcissus myth. In this context, the rock behind the figure can refer to Echo who has turned into stone. In addition, the mirroring effect in the painting reflects the echo and reflection themes of the myth: the cloud is reflected in the shape of the pond in the same way that the figure is reflected in the water. Similarly, the man's shape is also reflected in the shape of the rock. The theme is one of regression and death, but this 'death in water' can be interpreted as a stage of metamorphosis, and therefore, of water as a symbol of life.

Nerdrum's concept of 'nature' that is depicted in the works of 1983 till the present day is closer to that of Sigmund Freud − a realm of incompatible necessity and desire − than to the bucolic imaginings of nineteenth century Romanticism. Human beings, in Nerdrum's world, will always be subjected to their sex and physique and will always struggle with this − that they are dependent upon a body that is bound up to the earth.

3.1.3 THE SUBLIME OF RUIN AND VITALITY

During the second half of the eighteenth century a new appreciation for Gothic architecture and ancient ruins developed. The Renaissance was passionately enthusiastic about the ruins of ancient Greece because through them it was possible to descry the complete forms of the original works; the Neoclassical movement attempted to reinvent these forms (Eco 2004:285). In the late eighteenth century, however, ruins were appreciated precisely for their incompleteness, for the erosion due to the passing of time, for the wild vegetation that covered them, for the cracks and the regeneration.

This taste for ruins and the Gothic also spread to literature populated by dilapidated castles, monasteries, nocturnal visions and horror stories. While some represented gloomy landscapes, spectres and terrifying situations, the idea of pleasure and delight that had been previously associated with the experience of beauty had suddenly been replaced with the experience of horror. Graveyard poetry and funeral elegies flourished and could be described as "a sort of mortuary eroticism" (Eco 2004:288).

My art exudes a nostalgic and provocative stillness in which the viewer's intellect and emotions can be stimulated in equal measures. Nostalgia often implies the presence of something dead, if not yet emotionally over with – something that endures in memory, and, while it no longer shapes the living moment, unconsciously influences the sense of a life as a whole. Nostalgia is a positive way of processing the past without ever letting go. Nostalgia in my work manifests as a longing for traditional craftsmanship and the mediation of memory and existential suffering through the act of painting. I believe in a responsible non-deletion of the past, but nevertheless a crossing out that must lead the past to the present with a difference: absolute detachment from the past is impossible within the structure erasure.

The simultaneous depiction of painterly, photographically and digital surfaces on the same pictorial field, comments on how the transparency that once grounded both painting and photography is now frustrated by the collapse and collusion of both systems into a catalogue of copying techniques. My working methodology involves dissolving graveyard and religious imagery before the viewer's eyes, driving and painting out their visibleness as seen in *Lingering silence 5* (2005)[1] (figure 24).

Fig 24: Johan Conradie, *Lingering silence 5* (2005). Photograph by author.

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[1] Johan Conradie, *Lingering silence 5* (2005). Encad pearl satin print, 60 × 90cm.

Imprecision and ghostliness are the result of blurring, the images haunt through pigments and solvents and spookily evade the viewer like old, but fond memories that can no longer be brought into focus. The ambiguity of passageways and transitional spaces are used to construct an aesthetic of anticipation. The immaterial, allusive details offer only a framework of associations, signifying states of change.

3.1.4 NEW SUBLIMITIES

In the nineteenth century the introduction of a pious morality often signalled the increasing Christianisation of the subject. This sublime maintained its ties with the older sublime through its stress on the human's insignificance in the face of God's terrible power. The sublime was being absorbed into a religious, moral, and frequently nationalist concept of nature, where the artist's status as a useful member of society was enhanced. The older sublime was an aristocratic reflex of romantic thought. The Christianised sublime, more accessible to everyone, was more democratic, even bourgeois.

For the nineteenth century American landscape painter, Thomas Cole, the sublime resided in silence, through repose and an appreciation of silent energy (Novak:1995:39). Silence in the older sublime was unsettling, even awesome. Cole's concept of the sublime was essentially mystical and was linked to the central silence of the soul. In this peaceful and tranquil landscape, light has often been used in conjunction with water to assist spiritual transmutation, either dissolving form or rendering it crystalline.

In the twentieth century the abstract expressionists adapted the sublime in their monochrome or near-monochrome paintings. The works of Malevich were especially dominant in this development. His *Black square* (1913) is a painting of the pictorial surface itself, an icon of a creative membrane from which figures might magically arise. This was the great modernist icon of the Sublime in that it exceeded representational strategies. The surface became a picture in itself, pointing to nothing outside of itself.

Deconstruction …Derrida (1987:127) maintains that:

> … [t]he beautiful and the sublime present a number of traits in common: they please by themselves, they are independent of judgments of the senses and determinant (logical) judgments, they also provide a pretension to universal validity, on the side of pleasure, to be sure, and not of knowledge. They both presuppose a reflexive judgment and appeal from their "pleasing" to concepts, but to indeterminate concepts, hence to "presentations," and to the faculty of presentation.

Derrida (1987:127) is questioning the opposition between the beautiful and the sublime since an opposition could only arise between two determinate objects, "having their contours, their edges, their finitude." In Derrida's (1987:127) account, the sublime is to be found, for its part, in an "object without form" and the "without-limit" is "represented" in it or on the occasion of it, and yet gives the totality of the without-limit to be thought. Thus the beautiful seems to present an indeterminate concept of understanding, the sublime an indeterminate concept of reason.

In contemporary theory, the sublime has been emptied of meaning as a word. According to Beckley (2001:53) the sublime seems mostly to have survived in commercial media rather than high art. Films by Stanley Kubrick such as *The Shining* (1980) are a salient example of this with its emphasis on nature (the mountains, the snow and the stately creepy house) and the horrific (terror-sublime).

Contemporary artist, Damien Hirst, deals with the sublime in his rotting heads. In these works, like *Some comfort gained from the acceptance of the inherent lies in everything* (1996)[1] (figure 25) beauty and poetry of death are examined. He presents a higher truth understood through the mortal limitations of fear, religion, fatalism, awe and humour. Though more disguised, his work surely fits neatly into the Morbid sublime as do the work of Henry Fuseli.

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[1] Damien Hirst, *Some comfort gained from the acceptance of the inherent lies in everything* (1996) (detail). Steel, glass, cows, formaldehyde solution and 12 tanks, 200 × 90 × 30cm.

Fig 25: Damien Hirst, *Some comfort gained from the acceptance of the inherent lies in everything* (1996) (detail) (Saatchi 2003:21).

Contemporary artist, Fred Tomaselli, uses the word 'sublime' without apology when referring to his own work. His interest in the sublime manifests itself in intricate abstractions often by studding a canvas with prescription drugs as can be seen *13,000* (1991)[1] (figure 26). *13,000* links up with the chemical sublime where ecstatic states and the risk of overdose seem like the perfect metaphor for the sublime.

Fig 26: Fred Tomaselli, *13,000* (1991). Pills, acrylic, resin on wood panel (Richer, F & Rozenzweig, M [eds] 2006:375).

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[1] Fred Tomaselli, *13,000* (1991). Pills, acrylic, resin on wood panel, 121 × 119.3cm.

3.2 THE SUBLIME OF THE EXISTENTIAL STRUGGLE

Death and suffering have always been an artistic theme. Death claims every human being, but it is an individual not universal phenomenon, and though it operates as a leveller it does not bind humans to each other but instead separates them categorically and definitively.

Where Sigmund Freud posited a duality of life and death instincts, Erich Fromm (1964:50) posited a choice between them. Death is not the inevitable victor over life. According to Fromm (1964:50) the "death instinct" is a "malignant phenomenon" that grows and takes over the extent to which *Eros* does not unfold. Freud reduced human behaviour to two opposing forces: *Eros* and *Thanatos*. By *Eros* Freud meant the urge to live and grow. This force is not merely psychological; it is embedded in every cell of our bodies. And by *Thanatos*, named for the Greek personification of death, Freud meant much more than an overt desire to die; he meant every neurosis and character disorder. Ultimately he meant all that is in us that seeks to avoid life, to avoid reality and the existential suffering inherent in life. From this point of view, Nerdrum's paintings are about the failure of *Eros* and the success of destructiveness in the contemporary life world, which is why it has become a wasteland full of 'isolates'.

In *Dying couple* the death symbolism is dominant. Two naked figures are stretched out on the earth facing in opposite directions and seem to be at the throes of death. Necromania is generally defined as a morbid desire for a dead body or bodies. In the work of Nerdrum, necromania sometimes overlaps with necrophilia that can be seen as a sexual deviation, or kind of sexual attraction to a dead body (Martin 1998:437). Nerdrum's figures embody the world's cruel indifference in their crippled flesh, even if their bodies are aroused by their own ruined state as can clearly be seen in *Dying couple*. However, much of their arousal confirms their self-hatred, an ironic version of the world's hatred.

Nerdrum's paintings can be seen as existential allegories. In his *Iron law* (1983-1984)[1] (figure 27) and *The night guard* the protagonists – given psychodramatic form – are caught up between the life-instincts and death instincts, subtly evident in the body, and taking their toll on it. Kuspit (2000:137) recalls a type of "medieval psychomachia" (a medieval type of miracle play) evident in the almost Gnostic battle between biophilia and necromania.

Nerdrum's human beings are radically defective. Indeed, many of his figures lack a limb or two, a physical crippling that symbolises psychic crippling. The figures in *Iron law* and *The night guard*, while physically whole, seem psychically disturbed, even mad. Nerdrum's use of extreme Northern tenebrism, rather than the more harmonious, softer beauty of the Renaissance Italy, enhances the psychodrama of the scene. The Icelandic landscape with its barren features is an expression of loss, and of a detachment from society and civilization.

Fig 27: Odd Nerdrum, *Iron law* (1983-1984). Oil on linen (Hansen 1994:169).

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[1] Odd Nerdrum, *Iron law* (1983-4). Oil on linen, 210 × 272cm.

Iron law features a flat, barren landscape near the sea, where one man clutches his head and bends worshipfully forward to be struck with a rod by a second man, whose exposed genitals seem to visually echo the rod. The bow serves as a sign of submission by the culprit to the law of strength, potency, and brute will in an inhospitable world into which a third figure, framed by the pair, retreats in the distance like Adam banished from the gates of Paradise. For Nerdrum, being driven out onto the plains means coming back to the essential, to the stating point.

In the *Iron law* and *The night guard* the actions of the awkward and theatrical figures are frozen in a liminal zone where beauty and ruin freely overlap. The dark background, emblematic of mortality, and the light shed on the protagonists by the returning sun represents a conquest over the wasteland.

A deepened cynicism has discounted utopian thinking and yearnings and alternatives. The sublime in Nerdrum manifests as a lingering death and silence encouraging the viewer to express genuine feelings that arise from an invented situation. The result is not merely an engrossing group of images but, for many viewers, the quality of slowed time that causes them to absorb those images and ponder their personal significance.

CONCLUSION

The act of painting has always been charged with shamanic energies. Using bits of animal bone, hair, and sinew, mixing them with earth, and applying them steadily with great concentration to a cave wall, a parchment, or a human face is an act of calling or recalling, reflecting on the past and the future. The act itself opens and refines consciousness by slowing down time. In contrast with technology's moving image (film and video), painting remains still and meditative. The external world becomes internalised by being rendered visible, suspended in time, and silent.

Yet, painting today appears to have changed its position. Nowadays, painting has less to do with the history of painting than with the history of the media. Painters (and artists in general) encode and construct, experiment and generate in every channel. Painting resorts to codes, which it encodes in turn: painting does not begin with the interface between reality and code, but at the borders between the various codes, the zones in which every meaning becomes suspicious.

According to Verlag (2003:37-38) the place to which painting has moved can be described with the idea of the model. Verlag (2003:38) maintains that "[t]he examination of programs and codes proves that painting today works less with reality than with the models and moulds that generate it." While the picture represented something that already existed, the model is something that does not yet exist. The picture has always been in the sphere of the visible. The model, conversely, operates on a visible level: it determines the extent of what a picture allows the viewer to see (Verlag 2003:38).

In contemporary painting, painters construct realities that show evidence that painting has changed from the order of the picture to that of the model. However, the model is no longer perceived as a pre-form of a reality, of which it is a smaller representation, but as a factor that generates that reality. It is not orientated towards reality, which does not yet exist; reality orients itself towards the model that is constructed. A model is not about logical representation, but

maintains purely calculated relations with reality. According to Verlag (2003:38) painting today works with models of pictures rather than finished pictures; because it no longer creates, but translates; because it no longer refers to something, but encodes; the question it poses is no longer a hermeneutic one (about meaning), but an economic one: about profit and loss.

There are clear parallels between Nerdrum's paintings and the currents of the times: disillusionment and withdrawal together with an introduction of mythological elements and an eschatological awareness. In combination with this, is an underlying criticism of civilization on behalf of nature. Yet, a closer comparison of the relationship between the work of Nerdrum and Postmodernism creates a number of problems. From a content point of view − a clear hierarchy of values and a portrayal of the figure that seems to presuppose the subject's self-image − argue for a disassociating with Postmodernism's destructive irony. There also exist many parallels in the historical references, a renunciation of scientific or technological rationalism, and the mythical turn of the themes. The American art historian Richard Vine (1990:176) has therefore gone as far as to characterise Nerdrum as the postmodernist question itself.

Nerdrum's paintings go beyond a depressing sense of obsession, loss and despair, associated with postmodern disillusionment with modernity and secularisation in all its aspects. He has chosen to make his paintings a site of frequently renewed provocation − a challenge to pure formalists, cultural ideologies, critical theorists, trend seekers, nationalists and cosmopolitans alike. His painting is hardly traditional. Though his painting technique is refined as a dexterous art, the tenebrist content of his work is sheer atavism. His darkly elegant paintings appeal directly and shamelessly to the viewer's sensuous appreciation.

Tenebrism, as a mode of beauty, is active in the work of Nerdrum although almost everything he shows in his painting suggests disaster and hopeless despair, everything he does − by composing so thoughtfully, by painting so well − testifies to the real possibility of a renewed respect for high civility, beauty and technical grace.

Another important consideration when confronted with Nerdrum's provocations, such as his self-declaration as a kitsch painter and his opposition to modernism and the avant-garde in formalist terms, is his own personal gain from such 'bad-boy' antics. After all, in the art world, notoriety is profit − especially for those who purport to oppose the very system that rewards them. In postmodern business art society, madness and eccentricity has become a social stance; a form of role-playing. Nerdrum may still believe he is a seer and prophet − it is no doubt narcissistically comforting for him to think he is − but the larger society no longer does.

In every credo, like every artwork, there is a construct − a calculated device whose effects are nevertheless authentic, since they elicit from their audience real thoughts and vivid emotions. By dignifying kitsch Nerdrum implies that its contrary, namely art, has already been irredeemably debased by its champions in the modernist camp. In postmodernism, however, kitsch has become avant-garde. Nerdrum's persistent theme, modernism's abandonment of common humanity, deserves global consideration. As a direct result of modernism and conceptualism, Nerdrum believes that contemporary art making is completely divested of any connection to the real emotions of everyday people. Instead, artists devote their work to abstraction (both conceptual and formal), victim-group protest, or mockery.

Tenebrism is psychologically realistic as it conveys the depths of the psyche as no other mode of beauty does (Kuspit 2000:272). Nerdrum's painting shows the epidemic of depression (the sense of the utter futility of existence) that pollutes modern life as well as the destructiveness that both follows from and attempts to break out of it. Through the use of tenebrism, Nerdrum creates characters who are at once timeless soul-types and distinct individuals with specific features and histories.

Realism in all its rich and fertile guises will always be part of the visual vocabulary of our times. Nerdrum's reliance on suffering − the artist as exalted seer − can, however, be criticised for his stylised delivery of it. Emotive power cannot accrue to a staged anecdote. As such, his frozen images signify nothing

but his own cherished separateness and prophetic election from the art world and the pains of exile.

Nerdrum's insistence on the idea that beauty bypasses the mind as it streaks directly to some deeper faculty (spiritually or emotionally), links up with the traditional Christian idea of the soul as a centre higher than the mind, that deals with matters of internal importance only. But in order for something to become meaningful or significant, the mind needs to be involved since it is the organ that provides meaning.

Active darkness in the work of Nerdrum functions both on an artistic and psychological level. It is indispensable for displaying the possibilities of light. It introduces an element of mystery, ambiguity and understatement into the painted world of his canvases. This darkness becomes undecipherable in his painting and is reminiscent of Italian, Flemish, Spanish, and French religious painting of the seventeenth century. The setting of his and their scenes is frequently unclear; it is only known that they happen in a dark place.

Nerdrum's works do not confront or traumatise viewers at first sight. The transformative mode of the paintings places them beyond, rather than in, the moment of trauma. A violent separation from nature, each other and the self is represented through the use of a symbolic tenebrist beauty. The sense of finding oneself in a world made strange, devoid of familiar reference points, is pushed to its limits where the viewer cannot distinguish between past, present and future. His characters are participants in a universal psycho-drama that unfolds in a time-free dimension set utterly apart from modern society. Nerdrum challenges the notion that trauma and suffering eludes representation by reflecting on its impact, both as subjective and global event.

Nerdrum's tenebrist art can be seen as a luminous Gnostic revelation in itself since he questions dark truths about modernity and its effect on the self. Indeed, the critical bite of his darkness not only subverts the emotional state of his human characters, but becomes a fearless negative transcendence, a symbol of the artist's insight into absence and the power of its nothingness.

Empathy − that peculiar combination of affect and intellectual inquiry − must pursue experience itself rather than feelings of mere affinity or identity. It is in this sense that Nerdrum's painting is emblematic of a new kind of art that deals with the subjective impact of events, with affect and trauma, but in a manner that insists that the viewer engage with the trauma of others. It is, in this sense, an art practice that promotes a profound form of emotional response. By displaying other human beings and thus ourselves in extremes, Nerdrum bypasses the rational intellect and effects through the device of tenebrism the sort of disturbances against which the viewer is normally well defended. Disturbed, the viewer is no longer a mere spectator.

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