



## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION



### 1.1 Context and background information

The English wordsmith Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) — contemporary and friend of such literary figures as JM Barrie,<sup>1</sup> Hilaire Belloc,<sup>2</sup> Rudyard Kipling,<sup>3</sup> TS Eliot,<sup>4</sup> HG Wells<sup>5</sup> and George Bernard Shaw<sup>6</sup> — is surely “one of the most prolific writers that ever lived” (Maycock 1963:13). During a career of a little under forty years, he published nearly one hundred books and contributed to about two hundred others. In addition to these, he produced a vast number of essays for periodicals such as the *Daily News*, *The Speaker*, *The Nation*, *The New Witness*, and *GK’s Weekly*. From 1905 until his death in 1936, he wrote over a thousand essays for *The Illustrated London News* and somehow found time to also produce work for publications like *The Independent Review*, *The Optimist*, *Commonwealth*, *Black and White*, *The British Review*, and *The Bystander* (Maycock 1963:13). As if this were not enough, he wrote many letters and reviews, participated in public debates, and delivered a great many lectures and speeches. It is no surprise, then, that a great portion of this torrent of work was “composed ... on the run — in a tea room, on top of a double-decker bus, standing in the doorway of a shop, or leaning against a wall scribbling in pencil in a penny exercise book or sometimes just on his cuff” (Beuchner 2001:85). Chesterton was forever writing. The sheer volume of work produced by him rivals the amount of work produced by his one-time debating partner, the analytic philosopher Bertrand Russell, who is recognised as the most productive philosopher of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

I mention all of this to point out an obvious problem that faces any scholar who wants to tackle the work of this “tomboy among dictionaries, this philosophical Peter Pan, this humorous Dr Johnson, this kindly and gallant cherub, this profound student and wise master” (Hamilton, in Yancey

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<sup>1</sup> James Matthew Barrie (1860-1937) was a Scottish writer and dramatist who is best remembered today as the creator of Peter Pan.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Hilaire Pierre René Belloc (1870-1953) was a prolific Anglo-French writer and historian. He collaborated with Chesterton for many years and is perhaps best known for his influence on Chesterton’s distributist writings.

<sup>3</sup> Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) was a British author and poet, referred to by George Orwell (1945) as the “prophet of British imperialism”.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was an American born English writer. He won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1948.

<sup>5</sup> HG Wells (1866-1946) is, with Jules Verne, often considered the father of science fiction, but his writings include more than fiction. He was a scientific materialist and, like TH Huxley (1825-1895), a fervent Darwinian.

<sup>6</sup> George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was a prolific and successful Irish playwright and a dedicated Nietzschean.

<sup>7</sup> Chesterton and Russell (1872-1970) debated on the subject *Who should bring up our children?*, which was broadcast by the BBC on 16 November 1935 (Ker 2011:716).

2001:54-55). It is the same problem that faces someone who wants to undertake the awkward and perplexing task of eating an elephant, namely that it is difficult to know both where to begin and whether such a task is even possible. To me, the most practical solution to this problem, the fruits of which are evidenced in this thesis, is to eat the proverbial elephant one bite at a time, slowly and selectively.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately for any reader, while Chesterton did not bother to stick to any particular genre or subject matter, his immense perception is remarkably coherent and surprisingly accessible. Moreover, his dabbling in various discourses over many years resulted in a great deal of repetition. AL Maycock (1963:14) notices that “[h]e never minded repeating himself; in a sense he may be said to have gone on repeating himself all his life. Anyone familiar with his books will recall instances of the same idea cropping up again and again in this place or that, and being driven home with every variety of illustration and emphasis”. James Schall (2000:xiv) offers that when tackling the work of great writers like “Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Johnson, or Chesterton” one gains the “uncanny impression ... that everything that they knew and wanted us to know was somehow contained within a mere fragment of their work”. He then points out that “[a]lmost any essay in Chesterton’s early 1901 book *The Defendant* contains everything he stood for” (Schall 2000:xiv).

Despite being a polymath of formidable talent in many intellectual arenas, Chesterton tended to downplay his abilities and his importance. His constant stream of work had less to do with his own ambitions than it had to do with the fact that he loved sharing his interest in a great number of things with anyone who cared to know. Even in his *Autobiography*, we encounter “a self that reveals by effacing” (Paine 2006:11). He was utterly “unconcerned with renown” or literary immortality (Maycock 1963:14). For this reason, a great portion of his creative brilliance was given to addressing the ephemeral. In his own terms, he cared for nothing “except to be in the present stress of life as it is,” saying, “I would rather live now and die, from an artistic point of view, than keep aloof and write things that will remain in the world hundreds of years after my death” (in Maycock 1963:14). On one occasion, when he was told that he “[seemed] to know everything,” he responded, “I know nothing, Madam. I am a journalist” (in Finch 1986:175). On another occasion, someone called out for Chesterton to speak up while he was giving an address. Chesterton called back, “Good sister, don’t worry. You aren’t missing a thing” (in Ahlquist 2006:23). Setting this self-deprecation aside, there can be no doubt that Chesterton has been hugely influential far beyond what can be recorded here. For example, his ideas about national independence deeply affected the Irish revolutionary

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<sup>8</sup> Chesterton, although not exactly a pragmatist, is certainly practical in his own outlook. On one occasion, for example, Chesterton was asked, “If you were stranded on a desert island with only one book, what book would you want it to be?” His response was, “*Thomas’ Guide to Practical Shipbuilding*” (in Ahlquist 2006:23). I do want to note here that this particular quotation is not the only one in this thesis taken from a secondary source. Unfortunately, some of Chesterton’s writings, especially those works that are no longer in print and are not yet available online, have been inaccessible to me owing to financial and spatial constraints. However, such quotations are very few and far between. Moreover, they are never relied upon as primary sources for the arguments put forward in this thesis, but are used only to add spice to my interpretation of Chesterton’s other work.

Michael Collins<sup>9</sup> and the Indian nationalist Mahatma Gandhi,<sup>10</sup> and on the artistic, literary and philosophical fronts, Robert Farrar Capon, Neil Gaiman, Alec Guinness, Graham Greene, CS Lewis, Terry Pratchett, Dorothy L Sayers, JRR Tolkien and Evelyn Waugh can all be shown to having been significantly shaped by his writings (Giddings 2008:175; Griffin 2003:26; Milbank 2009a:viii; Reyburn 2007:27; Pearce 1996:10; Yancey 2001:44). Two critically acclaimed filmmakers, Ingmar Bergman and Orson Welles, have also acknowledged the impact of his work on their art (Giddings 2008:175).

Chesterton is still widely read and quoted today. He even has a scholarly journal (*The Chesterton Review*), and two magazines (*Gilbert!* and *The distributist review*) dedicated to his thinking, writings and writings about him, as well as a high school (*The Chesterton Academy*) and a non-profit educational institute (*The GK Chesterton Institute for Faith and Culture*) that root their ethos in an understanding of the life of Chesterton. Robert Giddings (2008:184) offers that “one of the great attractions of Chesterton’s work to twenty-first century readers is its timelessness and uneasy relevance to the world we live in”. However, it is Chesterton’s preoccupation with Christian apologetics that seems to have attracted the most attention in recent scholarship. For this reason, and not unjustifiably, Chesterton is often regarded as a theologian (Griffin 2003:28; Nichols 2009:xi; Milbank 2009a; Wood 2011:12).

While this study takes his theological stance seriously together with his contributions to other fields of study, it presents a question that aims at a new approach to his work, namely the question of what the contemporary relevance of his writings may be to the field of visual culture studies in general and to discourse on visual hermeneutics in particular. To borrow the words of visual culture pioneer John Berger (1972:10), the answer is simply that his work provides a unique “way of seeing”.<sup>11</sup> Chesterton was certainly very visually minded, having initially chosen to become an artist before shifting his focus to literature (Ker 2011:39). His first book *Greybeards at play* (1900) is filled with his own illustrations, and even after becoming a fulltime writer his life was clearly enriched by

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Collins (1890-1922), the Irish revolutionary leader, played a crucial role in founding the modern Irish state especially in his positions as Minister of Finance for the Cork South parliamentary constituency, Director of Intelligence for the IRA and member of the Irish delegation during the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations that concluded the Irish War of Independence.

<sup>10</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1868-1948) paved the way for Indian nationalism in British-ruled India through non-violent civil disobedience. It may be suggested that it was an article by Chesterton in the *The Illustrated London News* (18 September 1909) on the importance of viewing democracy in terms of who rules instead of on the basis of who is permitted to vote that was the catalyst for Gandhi’s ideas surrounding nationalism (Stapleton 2009:106).

<sup>11</sup> According to Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell (1999:ix), the “emergent research field of visibility ... may be analysed in terms of four ‘levels’ or ‘orders’ of visual phenomena”: The first regards the practical, everyday experience and commonplace practices of representation; the second, of which this study is one example, considers various “interpretive problematics” that arise in the light of the fact that visual perception is not merely a structural or semiotic concern, but is a vital component of human experience; the third is more historical in its approach, taking into consideration the formation of critical theories around visibility; and, finally, the fourth is the “metatheoretical ... emergence of critical discourses concerned to question and deconstruct the history and implications of visually organised paradigms and practices, institutions, and technologies these have legitimated” (Heywood & Sandywell 1999:ix).

various artistic expressions in the form of his love for drawing, his writings on the visual arts and even in his lavish use of visual rhetoric. It is therefore not much of a stretch to say that, while Chesterton cannot formally be considered a visual theorist, his work offers a distinctive hermeneutic strategy for understanding the relationship of images to the meanings they conjure and the contexts within which they occur. As straightforward as this answer may first seem, it introduces a much more pressing question with a more complex answer: What, then, is Chesterton's particular way of seeing? It is the aim of this thesis to address this question, first by proposing what I understand to be the general structure or shape of Chesterton's perceptual lens along with discussions on his primary interpretive goal and tools in Part One, and then by applying this structure practically to the interpretation of a visual text in Part Two.

Broadly speaking, visual hermeneutics deals with theories regarding the interpretation of visual texts of all kinds. In line with philosophical hermeneutics, it assumes that "interpretation is never presuppositionless" (Westphal 2009:14), and that "[t]he way we see things is affected by what we know and believe" (Berger 1972:8).<sup>12</sup> All interpretative understanding inevitably involves various levels of prejudice (Gadamer 2004:272). Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004:273) explains that prejudice, which may also be referred to as bias or pre-judgment, "does not necessarily mean a false judgment," but instead points to the idea that interpretation is never neutral. If hermeneutics "[teaches] us to be suspicious of the glaringly self-evident" (Eagleton 2003:53), then it seems fair to assume that Chesterton is at least a kind of hermeneutic philosopher, albeit somewhat accidentally. After all, he is concerned not so much with the methods or methodologies of interpretations as with "what happens to us over and above" methodological considerations, to borrow Gadamer's (2004:xxvi) words. Just as he may be viewed as a prolific writer, he is as easily considered a reader, perhaps in a similar to the way that Jacques Derrida is described as a reader (Johnson 1981:x). He is a reader who constantly engages with texts around him through thought and experience. I would even say that Chesterton's career beginnings as a reader in Redway's publishing house and then as a literary critic may be taken as an analogy for his approach to his work in general: he reads in order to excuse his desire to offer his own opinions on much more than what he is reading (Ahlquist 2006:78; Ker

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<sup>12</sup> While hermeneutics emphasises the impossibility of objectivity and the inevitability of relativity, it by no means assumes that an "anything goes" approach is unavoidable (Westphal 2009:14). Such a conclusion can only be arrived at if 'objectivity' and 'truth' are conflated, and this is something that Chesterton does not do. Once, when asked if "Truth" is not merely "one's own conception of things," Chesterton responded: "That is the Big Blunder. All thought is an attempt to discover if one's own conception is true or not" (in Ahlquist 2006:24). Hermeneutical despair, which proclaims textual incomprehensibility, and hermeneutic arrogance, which assumes that there is only one correct interpretation, are not the only alternatives. For example, a hermeneutics like that of Gadamer allows for the possibility of better or worse interpretations, depending on the depth of dialogue between the reader and the text. Such a hermeneutics leaves room for various horizons of understanding and for different subjectivities to interact and fuse in order to contribute to a larger landscape of meaning in search for truth. The interpretive process, therefore, while being less a subjective act than it is a form of participation "in an event of tradition," is never complete (Gadamer 2004:291). The pursuit of truth in hermeneutics remains a priority, but always under the assumption that our human ability to reason through and understand truth must be recognised as being both limited and fallible.

2011:40). Although he would not use these words, it is my contention that he is concerned with the entire hermeneutic experience; that is, he is concerned with how each individual's approach to the world can bring about such radically different responses.

Hermeneutics warns that perception is affected by our historically-determined or historically-affected consciousness<sup>13</sup> and also profoundly grounded in human finitude. Significantly, this very idea underpins Chesterton's thinking on what it means to critique literature. He suggests that the art of literary criticism is generally treated in two ways.<sup>14</sup> The first uses chronology as its primary point of departure, where one dissects literature in the same way that one would "[cut] a current cake or a Gruyère cheese, taking the currants (or the holes) as they come" (VA).<sup>15</sup> The second uses a thematic approach; it divides the work "as one cuts wood — along the grain" (VA). However, Chesterton notices that both approaches are mistaken if they present the writer as someone whose work is isolated from "traditions and creeds" (VA). Julia Stapleton (2009:19) observes that "literature and tradition [are] intimately linked in Chesterton's outlook". Thus, Chesterton asserts that it is "useless for the aesthete (or any other anarchist) to urge the isolated individuality of the artist, apart from his attitude to his age. His attitude to his age is his individuality: *men are never individual when alone*" (VA, emphasis added).

While much more is said on Chesterton's interpretive awareness in the pages that follow, the above quotation introduces my basic contention and the foundation of this thesis, which is that Chesterton's hermeneutics is *dramatology*. As a neologism and thus a word that Chesterton does not use himself, *dramatology* is a notion that illuminates the kind of hermeneutic strategy that seems to underpin his work. This *dramatology* is related to Danie Goosen's (2007:20) notion of "*filosofiese dramatie*" (philosophical dramatology), which arises from a view that reality is a metaphysical drama that promotes and allows for hermeneutic continuity particularly in the face of the hermeneutic discontinuity of nihilism (Goosen 2007:10). It is a way of rethinking philosophy as a means for disrupting and dethroning those views within the landscape of modernity and postmodernity that result in the de-dramatisation of life. Any philosophy that is rooted in a sense of existential abandonment and a pervasive mystical poverty results in hermeneutic despair; but Chesterton, who pre-empted some of the problems in modernity highlighted by Goosen, is the megaphone of joy. He suggests that there is a fundamental problem rooted in a "monomania of rivalry" that causes modernist culture to be obsessed with the new instead of the eternal: "The

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<sup>13</sup> From the German "*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*" (Westphal 2009:74).

<sup>14</sup> I recognise, of course, that the visual and the interpretation of the visual cannot be treated in exactly the same way as literary criticism or literary interpretation. Nevertheless, in keeping with Nicholas Davey's (1999:8) observations, it would be absurd to think that a "strict division" between the conceptual domain of language and the perceptual domain of the image is possible. For this reason, I am treating the interpretation of literature as something that is comparable to the interpretation of images.

<sup>15</sup> Where page numbers are not indicated in this thesis, this is because an unpaginated electronic book is being referenced.

notion that every generation proves the last generation worthless, and is in its turn proved worthless by the next generation, is an everlasting vision of worthlessness” (in Ahlquist 2006:57). His intention, then, is to call for the restoration of a deeper sense of the value of human experience. He notices that “a good many things in the modern world ... seem ... to be dead, not to say damned, and yet are considered very spicy,” and suggests that there is always a need to reclaim the true “spice of life” that can only be found in recovering the “joy of living” (ID:377-378). This recovery of joy is arguably the core value of what I am calling *Chestertonian dramatology*.

The word *dramatology* is rooted in the Greek words *drāma*,<sup>16</sup> referring to the singular *act* and to the plural *actions* (Schindler 2006:184), and *logos*, meaning both *word* and *discourse*. Dramatology implies a number of crucial ideas that form the basis of my application of Chesterton’s worldview as a (visual) hermeneutics. It serves to draw attention to “the fact that Chesterton’s hermeneutics is rooted in a dramatic understanding of the nature of being” (Reyburn 2011:61). This connection is borrowed from David C Schindler’s (2005:19) assertion that drama may be thought of as “*the expression of the structure of Being*” (emphasis in original).<sup>17</sup> Drama is not just an analogy for being, although it clearly is this as well, but somehow describes the very nature of being.

In general, hermeneutics concentrates on language as an event of disclosure that comes from being itself (Gadamer 2004:470). This gives rise to the task of hermeneutics, which is to integrate this disclosure “into one’s life” (Schmidt 2006:96). This explains the shift from hermeneutics as a methodology to hermeneutics as an experience of being. Chesterton’s dramatological vision is still grounded in the centrality of being (human), but emphasises the idea that the goal is not just to integrate interpretive understanding into one’s life, but to find oneself positioned within a much larger drama. For Chesterton, the self remains “more distant than any star” until it is comprehended within a bigger story (HO:257, 282). The idea of dramatology is used to stress the fact that his hermeneutics is in no way derived from or dependent upon “the hermeneutical tradition of

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<sup>16</sup> Schindler (2006:184) observes that “the [Greek] term [*drāma*] refers more commonly to life or theatrical performance involving tension and conflict that stirs the imagination and evokes the passions”. Thus, *drāma* implies both a singular action as well as the theatrical interplay of a number of words and actions; consequently, the word *drāma* holds a paradoxical tension between singularity and complexity, and between part and whole. There can be no drama without this tension. Abraham Heschel (1955:301) observes that it is “impossible to understand the significance of single acts, detached from the total character of life in which they are set. Acts are components of the whole and derive their character from the structure of the whole”. Throughout this study, I use the word *drama* to mean multimodal discourse that involves the interplay of character, action, setting and narrative. I specifically treat drama as something that is viewed from the inside, where participants have access to the direction of the story without necessarily having a total perspective on the complete narrative.

<sup>17</sup> Schindler’s contention here is rooted in his interpretation of the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1988:265), who observes that theatrical drama “grants us an insight, however limited, into the world’s embracing horizon of meaning” thereby allowing meaning to “interject itself into the concrete world [in such a way] that unites both actor and spectator”. This is to imply that for von Balthasar, and, as is my contention, for Chesterton, transcendence as that which breaks into the materiality of existence is “essential to the possibility of drama” (Schindler 2005:22). This ties in with Chesterton’s observation that by insisting that God is inside man, man must always remain “inside himself. By insisting that God transcends man, man has transcended himself” (HO:340).

Continental Philosophers like Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) and should therefore, in my view, be treated as a separate discourse” (Reyburn 2011:61). While much of Chesterton’s dramatology complements the hermeneutics of Gadamer that it precedes, any overlaps and similarities between their interpretive processes can be taken here as being as purely coincidental.

In addition to the above, dramatology mirrors two notions expressed by Schindler. Firstly, it refers to the use of drama as argument or discourse with reference to Schindler’s (2004:587) idea of the “drama of reason,” which acknowledges that much of reason involves engagement with a drama that is both in and beyond itself. This presupposes an irreducibility in the dramatic structure of being that is crucial to understanding Chesterton’s perception. Cutting the entire drama down to the size of any discourse is simply not possible. To attempt to do so would be as sensible as attempting to reduce a living person to a diagram. But this does not mean that discourse about the drama should not be permitted. If anything, the immensity of the drama of being should promote more dialogue, not less. Then, secondly, dramatology deals with conventions of narrative construction like narratology, but, unlike narratology, assumes that the conventions of narrative are applicable to the “dramatic nature of life,” to borrow another of Schindler’s (2006:183) phrases. In other words, dramatology references the analogical relationship between life and drama, pinpointing the way that Chesterton intends his ideas to be deeply connected to rather than remote from human existence. Ralph Wood (2011:43) suggests that Chesterton is a “Liberal in [the] precise existential sense” that declares the “acquisition of truth [as] the result of effort and struggle and engagement, of mistakes and wrong turns and dead-ends — in sum, of *experience*”.

I believe that Chesterton’s dramatology provides a response to a particular, large-scale problem that is found in both modernity and postmodernity, namely what Robert McKee (1999:17) calls “the decline of story”.<sup>18</sup> In Chesterton’s own time, many modernists were attempting to come up with a whole range of new unified theories, thereby often usurping the story of faith presented by Christianity. These theories came in a variety of guises. Therefore, Communism, Darwinism, eugenics, fascism, liberalism and pacifism were embraced alongside the feminism of the Suffragettes, Schopenhauerian egocentrism, Nietzschean existentialism, overconfident jingoism, a renewed

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<sup>18</sup> McKee (1999:17), far from implying a certain end to storytelling on the whole, contends that “[t]he [primary] cause for the decline of story runs very deep. Values, the positive/negative charges of life, are at the soul of our art. The writer shapes story around a perception of what’s worth living for, what’s worth dying for, what’s foolish to pursue, the meaning of justice, truth — the essential values. In decades past, writers and society more or less agreed on these questions, but more and more ours has become an age of moral and ethical cynicism, relativism, and subjectivism — a great confusion of values. As the family disintegrates and sexual antagonisms rise, who, for example, feels he understands the nature of love? And how, if you have a conviction, do you express it to an ever skeptical audience?” (McKee 1999:17). The loss of moral value that McKee addresses here is undeniably the consequence of the modern and postmodern incredulity towards metanarrative discussed further on (Berger 2003:xii). To be clear, this thesis does not attempt to address the various complexities of modernism and postmodernism as a whole, but only seeks to hone in on this one issue, namely the distrust of metanarrative.

interest in pagan spiritualism and varied forms of syncretistic or comparative religion. Scientistic atheism, forged in the fiery false dichotomy of faith and reason, also gained prominence in the culture of this time.

Thus, ironically, the unifying theories of the time became irrevocably divisive forces, caused largely by their neglect of narrative in favour of propositional essences. The resulting fragmentation, indicated by moral, political and intellectual instability during both the Edwardian (1901-1910) and Georgian (1910-1936) ages during which Chesterton wrote, may be referred to as a kind of cultural crisis (Coates 1984; Spiers 2006). In part, this crisis arose because the utopian dream that was embodied in the ideals of British cultural imperialism resulted only in ideological discord and social-cultural disharmony.<sup>19</sup>

To many it was an age of comfortable optimism, but for Chesterton it was an age of misguided enthusiasm. In his view, older, truer ideas were frequently rejected in favour of newer, weaker ideas. He explains that the upshot of “modern thinking” is found in that people invent new ideals, because they “dare not attempt old ideals. They look forward with enthusiasm, because they are afraid to look back” (WW:30). Here, Chesterton infers that a central problem with modernism is not merely the prevalence of a plurality of ideas and philosophies, but with the absence of a larger, more human story to give such ideas a suitable context. Owing to a frenzy of fads, fashions and a cultural obsession with the new in the wake of the industrial revolution, a sense of the historical backdrop or context of human understanding seemed to have been misplaced. This fits with the observation that modernism rejects history in favour of differentiation (Berger 2003:x). In addition to this, Chesterton contends that the problem of modernity is that “minor innovations [break] out all over the place” without ever properly tackling the “root and reason of anything” (IS:350). Modernity “is mimicry; it does not see the deeper difficulties in the things it adopts or spreads; it does not grasp their disadvantages or even their real advantages” (IS:350).

As the spectre of modernism, postmodernism also has its fair share of ideological discord and socio-cultural disharmony. The philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (2003:259-260) suggests that the postmodern condition, if explained via an oversimplification, is that which resents and even rejects

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<sup>19</sup> The diversity of ideas and worldviews that were prevalent during this cultural crisis are reflective of the *Zeitgeist* of progress and freethinking that was so dominant in the post-Victorian era. Drawing from the impetus of the industrial and highly industrious Victorian era (1837-1901), it was a period in which the upper echelons of British society were supremely self-confident in their colonial accomplishments. It was the opinion of British aristocrats at the time that there had never been a greater empire in the history of humankind. They even had a slogan to support their arrogance, namely the claim that the “sun never sets on the British empire” (McGrath 2004:257). Chesterton was highly critical of this imperialism, stating the following, for instance: “To Imperialism in the light political sense ... my only objection is that it is an illusion of comfort; that an Empire whose heart is failing should be especially proud of its extremities is to me no more sublime a fact than that an old dandy whose brain is gone should still be proud of his legs (WW:66).



metanarratives in favour of multiple smaller narratives.<sup>20</sup> However, James KA Smith (2006:64) notices that a “bumper-sticker reading” of Lyotard’s conception of postmodernism has led many to believe that he is speaking of “grand, epic narratives (*grand récits*) that tell an over-arching tale about the world”. Such a bumper-sticker reading is found in Andrea Branzi’s (1986:25) suggestion that a “disintegration of the legitimizing Great Tales” results in innumerable opposite poles, which in turn result in the loss of purpose in favour of chance and luck, leading to a state of being in which coincidence replaces significance.<sup>21</sup> But what Lyotard is offering, as Chesterton would probably agree, is that such opposite poles are precisely the result of legitimising metanarratives. A similar (mis)reading is provided by Slavoj Žižek (2008:1) when he claims that that in the postmodern era, “although the ideological scene is fragmented into a panoply of positions which struggle for hegemony, there is an underlying consensus: the era of big explanations is over”.

The problem with such readings of Lyotard’s idea is that they are inherently self-defeating and even self-negating. To suggest the end of metanarratives in such a way is to assume a new legitimising metanarrative, albeit a negative one, namely that the distrust of metanarratives has become the new metanarrative. In the same way, suggesting that the age of ‘big explanations’ is over is to offer a new big explanation, namely that there is no big explanation. And, whatever Lyotard’s postmodernism may be, it certainly cannot be an outright attack on reason, especially in that it is presented by means of the tools of reason. If anything, it is that which is hyper-aware of the limitations of reason, and it therefore considers where reason, when taken as absolute, has failed.

A misreading of Lyotard assumes that it is large-scale stories, such as the narrative in the Christian scriptures, that postmodernism opposes. But this is not necessarily what Lyotard is saying. He is not referring to the scope of narratives, but to the nature of the claims made by such totalising schemas, especially in the arenas of scientific discovery and rationality. Put differently, “the problem isn’t the stories they tell, but the way they tell them (and, to a degree, why they tell them)” (Smith 2006:64). Thus, Lyotard offers that postmodernism provides a fresh perspective on modernism’s absolutist stance on the legitimating role of rationality, but without necessarily propagating absolute irrationality as an alternative. He is therefore echoing Gadamer’s concerns about the employment of scientific approaches to the human sciences. Moreover, his postmodernism still contends for the vital importance of story as a means for people to travel beyond the narrowness of

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<sup>20</sup> I am not in any way suggesting that modernism and postmodernism are merely opposites or that the array of discourses embedded in these broad periods of time can be reduced to a neat definition. My focus remains solely on the distrust of metanarrative, as well as the way that Chesterton’s dramatology speaks into this distrust.

<sup>21</sup> This contention is echoed in the way that postmodernism, at least as it is sometimes outlined, is constantly caught up in a frenzy of looking back through the lenses of eclecticism, nostalgia, quotation, pastiche and parody (Jameson 1991:16,20,141; Lyotard 1984:76). However, these lenses divorce meaning from context, resulting in what Frederic Jameson (1991:25) calls a “crisis in historicity”: an incoherent experience of spatial and temporal logic. Again, as in the modernism of Chesterton’s day, meaning is de-dramatised and therefore frequently divorced from context.

egotism towards other possibilities of being. For example, Lyotard (2003:260) especially acknowledges the inescapability of narrative in the process of cultural formation and the transmission of tradition. This relates to Alasdair McIntyre's (2003:557) observation that "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth".<sup>22</sup> McIntyre (2003:557) argues that there is "no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources".<sup>23</sup> This recalls Kenneth Burke's (1973:293) idea that stories may be thought of as equipment for living. Any critique of metanarrative, then, is merely there to problematise any appeal to universal reason apart from the central importance of human relationships. If anything, it emphasises the need for the very same intersubjective discourse that is promoted by story over the hegemony of metanarrative. In the light of this, Richard Kearney (2002:11) suggests that postmodernism "does not spell the end of story but the opening up of alternative possibilities of narration".

While Chesterton may provide fuel for Lyotard's conception of postmodernism as a critique of modernism, especially in his emphasis on the importance of story, it would be a mistake to suggest that he is necessarily a postmodernist, especially if postmodernism is understood as being primarily anti-religious, cynical, nihilistic, pessimistic, sceptical, solipsistic and allergic to depth (Baudrillard 1994:2; Bywater 2004:236; Eagleton 2003:191; Manicas 1998:316; Taylor 1987:6). Moreover, if postmodernism is characterised by what Frederic Jameson (1991:25) calls a "crisis in historicity" — an incoherent experience of spatial and temporal logic (Derrida & Ferraris 2002:6) — then Chesterton would want nothing to do with it. It would be more accurate to call him a number of other things, including, perhaps, a medievalist or a romantic. But it is my view that he is better referred to as a dramatologist, as a reader who wants to find his place within a larger drama. His dramatology is one that pronounces the Fall to modernism, but also the distinct possibility of redemption. Even when he critiques the failings of his era, he does so with a strong sense of how to improve things. In his view, after all, it does not help to simply tell people "what is wrong" without pointing to "what is right" (WW:17). For him, there can be no drama, no story, without a sense of moral purpose.

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<sup>22</sup> This quotation, with its use of *man* to represent *human beings*, as well as its use of *his* and *he*, introduces a particular usage that is maintained throughout this thesis. To avoid constructions that distract the reader's eye (as in the case of the annoying alteration of *she* and *her* with *he* and *him*, the monotonous *he and/or she* and *him and/or her*, the cumbersome *s/he* and *her/him*, as well as the grammatically incorrect use of *they* and *them* as neuter pronouns), I have chosen to stick to the nonexclusive use of *man* with the pronouns *he*, *him* and *his*. This decision is simply intended to keep with Chesterton's usage and is in no way meant to incite a riot on such an issue as the problematic nature of gender biases in language.

<sup>23</sup> Narratologist Mieke Bal (1985:220) observes that while not everything can be called narrative, "practically everything in culture has a narrative aspect to it". Narrative is not only confined to literature or storytelling in the traditional sense, but a means for examining any object, process or a line of reasoning and its place among other cultural and cognitive processes. Moreover, Bal (1985:222) suggests that narrative, and the examination thereof, is a useful means for "uncovering cultural attitudes".

By placing moral purpose at the heart of his work, Chesterton's philosophy almost always takes on a narrative form. Even his most philosophical discourses have the characteristics of narrative. Chesterton does not merely expound or analyse ideas, he tells a story. Alison Milbank (2009a:11) observes that in Chesterton's eyes "everything is waving madly at us to indicate its divine origin and its storied character". This parallels Dorothy Sayers' (1952:9) contention that "his gift was naturally dramatic". However, as I aim to demonstrate in this study, Chesterton's mindfulness of narrative is at once orthodox and anarchic; it affirms the power of story as a unifying agent while simultaneously challenging the hegemonic rule of metanarrative. In other words, it manages to avoid the violence of dialectics as well as the reign of difference, both of which, as John Milbank (2009b:112) notes, are "bound in the same set of modern assumptions". Milbank (2009b:112) argues that "[t]he alternative to both is *paradox* — which one can also name 'analogy,' 'real relation,' 'realism' (regarding universals), or (after William Desmond) the 'metaxological'".<sup>24</sup> It is this way of reading, with paradox at its centre, that Chesterton's work represents. His dramatology creates a subtle interplay between indeterminacy and determination and between mystery and revelation that I believe invites further study and dialogue.



## 1.2 Aim, objectives and outline of the study

Bearing the above in mind, therefore, it is the aim of this study to present an overview, explanation (in Part One: Dramatological structure) and application (in Part Two: Dramatological application) of Chesterton's dramatology within the context of visual culture studies and visual hermeneutics. This is intended to represent Chesterton's desire for the retrieval of a clear view as being applicable to a reading of the visual today. A few argumentative objectives may be set out to fulfil this aim. In the first place, I provide a foundation to Chesterton's dramatology: an overview of his philosophy via a discussion about his cosmology, epistemology and ontology. This is tackled in Chapter Two with reference to his play *The surprise*, which acts as an analogy for the relationship between the unseen Creator God and his visible creation, as well as the consequences of this relationship for what it means to understand the drama of being. Obviously, the picture presented in this chapter stresses the way that Chesterton grounds his own opinions in a particular worldview, that of a specific understanding of Catholic theology.

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<sup>24</sup> As can be seen in Chapter Four, while I do treat paradox as something that is most certainly related to analogy, I do not regard paradox and analogy as synonyms in the same way that Milbank does here.

With this basic foundation in place, the second objective of this study is to answer the question of what Chesterton's primary dramaturgical task is. This objective is tackled in Chapter Three under the assumption that for Chesterton's dramaturgy to be taken as a coherent whole, one clear point of departure and arrival needs to be pinpointed. While the second chapter grounds Chesterton's thinking in theology, this third chapter argues that he plays the part of a moral philosopher — an ethicist deeply shaped by his orthodoxy. The third objective of this study, which is addressed in Chapter Four, is to examine his rhetorical strategies as the elements by which he manages to present his philosophy as a unifying, but not totalising narrative. The fourth and final objective is to apply my own understanding of Chesterton's dramaturgy to a particular visual text. This objective is undertaken in Part Two of this study, in Chapters Five and Six, where I offer an analysis of Terrence Malick's film *The tree of life* (2011). The study ends in Chapter Seven with a summary of chapters, an outline of the contributions of the study, limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.



### 1.3 Literature review

As noted above, it is no small task to tackle Chesterton's oeuvre in order to illuminate the nature and relevance of his dramaturgy. His work does not fall within any specific genre, nor does it stick to any particular subject. As both a help and a hindrance to this task, a great deal of secondary literature exists on Chesterton, a fact that is unsurprising considering the personality of the man and the prodigiousness of his work. Not all available literature is mentioned here, although an attempt has been made to indicate those works that are regarded widely to be of particular significance in contemporary Chesterton scholarship.

By far the largest number of books on Chesterton are biographical, including (in chronological order) Maisie Ward's *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (1943), still widely regarded as an unsurpassed work, Dudley Barker's *GK Chesterton: A biography* (1973), Alzina Stone Dale's *The outline of sanity: A biography of GK Chesterton* (1982), Michael Ffinch's *GK Chesterton* (1986), Michael Coren's *Gilbert: the man who was GK Chesterton* (1990), Joseph Pearce's *Wisdom and innocence: A life of GK Chesterton* (1996), Dale Ahlquist's *GK Chesterton: The apostle of common sense* (2003), William Oddie's *Chesterton and the romance of orthodoxy: the making of GKC (1874-1908)* (2008), and Ian Ker's formidable contribution, *GK Chesterton* (2011). There are many other biographies available on Chesterton, such as WR Titterton's personal reflection on his friend in *GK Chesterton: a portrait* (1936) and Kevin Belmonte's *Defiant joy: The remarkable life and impact of GK Chesterton* (2010),

but the ones mentioned above are the best both in terms of scholarship and scope. While these biographies do manage somewhat to bridge the divide between Chesterton and his work, I have made no attempt to do the same in this study. While I have taken fair heed of the cultural and historical climate in which Chesterton lived, I have in no way desired to digress into the sort of hermeneutic psychologism that tries to make sense of an author's work by reconstructing his persona. There can be no doubt that Chesterton was a witty and jovial character, and even that there is a deep connection between his work and his persona, as is observed by Hilaire Belloc (1940), but my focus in this study remains on his witty and jovial writings. I am following Chesterton's lead here. He writes on one occasion that it is more sensible to engage in "such superfluous trifling as the reading of [Shakespeare's] literary works," which we have access to, than to study Shakespeare as an actor, to whom we have no access (ID:149).

In addition to the various biographies on Chesterton, a number of works have been produced that attempt to wrestle critically with his writings, including the essay by Belloc (1940) and books by Cecil Chesterton (1908),<sup>25</sup> Julius West (1915), Hugh Kenner (1948), Christopher Hollis (1970), JD Coates (1984), SL Jaki (1986), Mark Knight (2000; 2004), Vigen Guroian (2005), Donald Williams (2006) and Julia Stapleton (2009).<sup>26</sup> Hugh Kenner's *Paradox in Chesterton* is particularly important for the present study in that it makes an attempt to engage with some of the philosophical implications and foundations of Chesterton's work. Then, a few recent books are particularly noteworthy for this study. James Schall's *Schall on Chesterton: Timely essays on timeless paradoxes* (2000) is a collection of essays inspired by Chesterton's essays. In dealing with Chesterton's work thematically, it is, as the author explains, the result of "[allowing] Chesterton to let me think" (Schall 2000:ix). This idea is reflected in the present study in that it also presents thinking guided by Chesterton. Stephen Clark's *GK Chesterton: thinking backward, looking forward* (2006) examines the influence of Chesterton's ideas on science fiction writing over the last hundred years. It outlines some of the central themes of Chesterton's fiction, but it does not connect these themes to a wider view of Chesterton's interpretive perception. Dale Ahlquist's *Common sense 101: Lessons from GK Chesterton* (2006) offers the reader a chance to "[look] at the whole world through [Chesterton's] eyes" (Ahlquist 2006:9). It is not, as he explains, a book about Chesterton, but a book about "everything else from a Chestertonian perspective" (Ahlquist 2006:9). It therefore, to an extent, precedes my own inquiry into Chesterton's dramatology. In a similar manner to Schall and Clark,

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<sup>25</sup> The authorship of *GK Chesterton: A criticism* has been attributed to Cecil Chesterton and cannot therefore be considered with any kind of absolute certainty.

<sup>26</sup> Stapleton's (2009:3) book *Christianity, patriotism, and nationhood* is particularly significant for the way that it addresses the importance of Chesterton as a "political 'myth-maker,' a teller of persuasive stories at the center of which was the English nation" — a subject that is neglected in other Chesterton scholarship. Stapleton (2009:3) also emphasises the fact that Chesterton is not interested in myth-making that pretends to be objective or is in any way "unhistorical". This is a helpful insight for coming to terms with Chesterton's dramatology.

Ahlquist tackles Chesterton's work thematically. While such an approach is helpful and perhaps even inescapable, rather than treating Chesterton's work primarily thematically, my aim has been to examine his work in terms of its overarching narrative and hermeneutics. If thematic considerations come into play here, it is because they contribute to understanding the shape of his interpretive lens.

Alison Milbank's *Chesterton and Tolkien as theologians* (2009) masterfully accounts for the correlations between the theological standpoints of Chesterton and JRR Tolkien, and does both writers the favour of staying true to their literary roots. Milbank's book, with its focus on the way that literary considerations exemplify and dramatise theological meaning, is particularly significant for how it expounds the implications of Chesterton's views on fiction and reality, and stresses the importance of his use of defamiliarisation. Then, Aidan Nichols' *GK Chesterton, theologian* (2009) examines the nuances of Chesterton's theological stance. It provides an excellent introduction to what Nichols (2009:55) calls Chesterton's "metaphysical realism". Finally, Ralph Wood's *Chesterton: The nightmare goodness of God* (2011) presents a simple but potent thesis, namely that "Chesterton makes his deepest affirmations about God and man and the world in the face of nightmarish unbelief — the abiding fear that God's seemingly wondrous universe is, instead, devoid of divinity, that it is in fact a well-populated Hell unrecognized as such" (Wood 2011:2). Wood acknowledges the prevailing lighter side of Chesterton, but argues that the majority of his work is the result of conflict. This is indisputable. In many ways, Chesterton can be seen as a man at war with his time; a man who presented everything as a cure for nihilism, reality as an antidote to illusion, awareness as a solution to nightmare, and sanity as a remedy for despair (Medcalf 2004:1).

Other authors are referred to here who engage with Chesterton's thought even if only in passing. These writers include Mark Armitage (2007), Robert Farrar Capon (1990; 1995; 1997; 2004), William Desmond (1995; 2003), and Marshall McLuhan (1939; 1948), as well as authors of various introductions and postscripts to republications of books by Chesterton. Authors like David Bentley Hart (2004) and Evelyn Underhill (2005) are referred to here only because of particular conceptual overlaps with Chesterton's work. I have also elected to focus in particular on the work of Slavoj Žižek, whose writings are regarded as being of some importance for visual culture studies. He makes references to Chesterton particularly in his books *The puppet and the dwarf* (2003), *In defense of lost causes* (2008), *The fragile absolute* (2009), *Violence* (2009), and his collaborative books *The monstrosity of Christ* (2009), which also has contributions by Creston Davis and John Milbank, and *God in pain* (2012), which includes additional essays by Boris Gunjević. However, as Milbank (2009b:124) rightly points out, Žižek does occasionally misinterpret Chesterton. Nevertheless, his engagement with Chesterton's work is helpful for demonstrating how a dialectical, Hegelian reading of Chesterton can undermine the more paradoxical nature of his dramatological vision.

Then, with regard to writings that take Chesterton as a thinker whose works may be applicable to the study of visual culture, I seem to be in dialogue with only myself at this point. My own MA dissertation *Heroism in the Matrix: An interpretation of Neo's heroism through the philosophies of Nietzsche and Chesterton* (Reyburn 2007) deals at length with Chesterton's views on the ethics of heroism as apposed to the views of the German philosopher Frederich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Having now come to a more nuanced understanding Chesterton's work and ethos, I could probably write a fairly lengthy and scathing critique on this older work, but I would rather gratefully acknowledge that an understanding of Chesterton's work would not have been possible apart from this earlier study. I have also recently offered two minor contributions to peer-reviewed scholarship on Chesterton in visual culture studies in the form of an article, *Chesterton's ontology and the ethics of speculation* (2011) and a chapter, *The death of the feminine and the homelessness of man: A Chestertonian perspective on Shutter Island (2010) and Inception (2010)*, in a book edited by Juliana Claassens and Stella Viljoen called *Sacred selves: essays on gender, religion and popular culture* (2012). In many ways, this thesis forms the context for these contributions and acts as the point of departure for what I hope will be a number of fruitful possibilities for further study.

However, ultimately, my primary source remains the work of Chesterton himself. While taking the wider corpus of his work into consideration, the following study refers to *The defendant* (1901), *Twelve types* (1902), *Robert Browning* (1903), *The Blatchford controversies* (1904), *GF Watts* (1904), *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), *The Club of Queer Trades* (1905), *Heretics* (1905), *Charles Dickens* (1906),<sup>27</sup> *The man who was Thursday* (1907), *All things considered* (1908), *Orthodoxy* (1908), *Tremendous Trifles* (1909), *George Bernard Shaw* (1909), *The ball and the cross* (1910), *William Blake* (1910), *Alarms and discursions* (1910), *What's wrong with the world* (1910), *Appreciation and criticism of the works of Charles Dickens* (1911), *The innocence of Father Brown* (1911), *A miscellany of men* (1912), *Manalive* (1912), *The Victorian age in literature* (1913), *Magic* (1913), *The flying inn* (1914), *The wisdom of Father Brown* (1914), *The appetite for tyranny* (1915), *The crimes of England* (1915), *Utopia for Usurers* (1917), *A short history of England* (1917), *Irish impressions* (1919), *The superstition of divorce* (1920), *The new Jerusalem* (1920), *Eugenics and other evils* (1922), *What I saw in America* (1922), *The man who knew too much* (1922), *St Francis of Assisi* (1923), *William Cobbett* (1925), *The everlasting man* (1925), *The outline of sanity* (1926), *The incredulity of Father Brown* (1926), *The Catholic Church and conversion* (1927), *Robert Louis Stevenson* (1927), *The secret of Father Brown* (1927), *The return of Don Quixote* (1927), *The poet and the lunatics* (1929), *The thing: why I am*

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<sup>27</sup> This biography on Dickens was considered by TS Eliot and Peter Ackroyd, among others, to be the "best book on Dickens ever written" (Ahlquist 2006:286). It was responsible, in part, for reviving interest in Dickens' works, both on popular and scholarly levels.

*Catholic* (1929), *Christendom in Dublin* (1932), *St Thomas Aquinas* (1933), *The well and the shallows* (1935), *The scandal of Father Brown* (1935), *The way of the cross* (1935), *Autobiography* (1936), and posthumously published books *The end of the armistice* (1940), *The common man* (1950) and *The surprise* (1952). I also refer to collections of essays, such as the *Illustrated London News* collections, as well as *In defense of sanity: the best essays of GK Chesterton* (2011).

Unfortunately, I have not been able to access some of Chesterton's work, especially some of his essays. This limitation, however, is has not been a hindrance to the present study. To be clear, I am not aiming to do the impossible by trying to represent everything that Chesterton has ever written. This, then, is more a slice of Gruyère cheese, holes and all, than it is a study along the grain, to borrow Chesterton's metaphor (VA). Instead, I am simply trying to present, with as much precision and argumentative dexterity as is possible in a qualitative study, my own hermeneutic interpretation of Chesterton's work. In essence, I am more concerned with the makeup of Chesterton's thinking than with the specifics of his particular opinions on all things, although his opinions on many things do come into play in the pages that follow. In all of the literature to date, there is none that explicitly suggests that Chesterton's approach is a kind of hermeneutics, nor is there a discourse that suggests that Chesterton's writings may be illuminating to visual culture studies. Therefore, it is to such discussions that this study aims to spark conversation and also offer a contribution.

Then, as noted above, the visual text to be discussed via Chesterton's dramatology is Terrence Malick's *The tree of life* (2011). While I have taken various opinions and debates surrounding this unique film into consideration in preliminary research, I have chosen in the end to isolate the film from those debates mainly for the sake of keeping a sharper focus. After all, the goal here is to argue for a Chestertonian reading, not for an amalgamation of such a reading with an array of other opinions. In the end, the only text referred to as a means to guide the reading of this piece of contemporary cinema is Malick's (2007) original screenplay for the film. However, since the final film does deviate somewhat from the original screenplay, only those parts in the screenplay that illuminate what we actually see are considered. While I have discovered, through sideline research, that Chestertonian dramatology does have applicability to other visual texts, *The tree of life* was chosen mainly because of the way that it echoes and complements Chesterton's interpretive outlook. As a richly layered and sometimes ambiguous cinematic drama, it invites a variety of interpretations. This makes it ideal for a Chestertonian reading. To explain why a Chestertonian reading of any film is of any value, this study is situated within the discourse of visual culture studies.





#### 1.4 Theoretical paradigm and research philosophy

We live in an era that may be referred to as “ocularcentric” in that it is “dominated” by the visual sense (Jay 1993:3). Many shifts in media and culture, too many to discuss in any detail here, have brought about this ocularcentrism. Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999:1) argues that human beings are more affected by visual media in the electronic age than they have been in any previous age. However, inasmuch as this gives rise to a “wealth of visual experiences,” it does not necessarily produce an equal wealth of ways to comprehend such experiences (Mirzoeff 1999:3). The fairly new discipline of visual culture studies seeks to counteract possible misunderstandings of this wealth of visual experiences, as Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell (1999:viii) suggest, by proposing various ways to investigate the complex “textures of visual experience” that are embodied in an array of “historical, political, cultural and technological mediations of visual human perception”. This investigation is carried out “in the context of a more ‘holistic’ and ‘reflexive’ theory of the human condition” (Heywood & Sandywell 1999:viii). The fundamental aim of visual culture studies is therefore to provide insights into how visuality contributes to a broader understanding of our human reality.

Visual culture studies exists to bridge the gap between representation and reality, between meaning and context, and between experience and understanding. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2000:14) writes that “[v]isual culture ... examines the act of seeing as a product of the tensions between external images or objects, and internal thought processes”. It accepts that images present messages that originate from particular frameworks in order to communicate with specific exterior realities (Mirzoeff 1999:7). However, it also stresses that the act of perceiving is an act of influencing what is perceived by means of one’s own subjectivity. Thus, the physical or virtual visual object must be considered as something that is in dialogue with the thoughts, worldviews and emotions of the spectator. Inasmuch as “men are never individual [even] when alone,” so no image is really ever isolated from the playing field in which it may be found (VA). Meaning is only meaning within a context.

Visual culture takes place within a drama; that is, within what Kearney (2002:9) calls the “presentation” or manifestation “of action”. Therefore, as crucial as dialogue is to understanding Chesterton’s dramatology, it is just as important for understanding visual culture studies, which is a “multidisciplinary enterprise formed as a consequence of a convergence of ... a variety of disciplines” (Chaplin & Walker 1997:1). It is a field of study that engages with other fields of study, such as anthropology, archeology, art criticism, cultural studies, design history, film studies, linguistics, literary criticism, Marxism, media studies, philosophy, semiotics and structuralism (Chaplin & Walker 1997:3; Mirzoeff 1999:4). This list reveals that there has been a bias against or perhaps an indifference towards employing theological reflection in visual culture studies, but by considering

Chesterton's work, it becomes clear that this bias cannot be satisfied here. However, I am only interested in Chesterton's theology insofar as it affects and informs his interpretive lens. For better or worse, debates about his truth claims or the place of his theology within a larger theological discourse, such as those attempted by Nichols (2009) and Wood (2011), must be reserved for a different platform.

If a theoretical paradigm may be defined as that which guides the ordering of statements, then visual studies as a comparative paradigm is adopted for this study. This is particularly appropriate in that the ordering of statements here is geared towards the analogical relationship between a discourse and an example (Agamben 2009: 18). To provide an example, as I do in the form of an application of Chesterton's dramatology to the text of *The tree of life*, is an involved process by which the ordinary context of Chesterton's work is given new life and a fresh perspective. This does not mean that the original context and meaning is deactivated or discarded, but rather implies that the original context is expanded to offer new shades and tints of meaning. The fact that Chesterton's work is brought into conversation with the paradigm of visual culture studies emphasises the fact that this paradigm ought not to be taken as given, static and immovable. Rather, with its ethos of hospitality towards the interaction of different disciplines, it is always something involved in a dance of becoming. The paradigm itself is a creative, generative process of interpretation, re-interpretation and self-reflection. By placing Chesterton's writings alongside a cinematic text and within the framework of visual culture studies, something new is exposed that resonates with what has been previously known.

The paradigm of visual culture studies works in concert with the impetus of philosophical (visual) hermeneutics, which acts as the primary philosophical paradigm for this study, first with regard to the interpretation of the structure of Chesterton's dramatology in Part One and then, in Part Two, with regard to a dramatological analysis of *The tree of life*. One basic hermeneutical principle has guided this research process, namely the prioritisation of Chesterton's writings above secondary literature. I recognise and even applaud the fact that a completely objective reading of Chesterton would be impossible, and even undesirable, and that any interpretation or quotation of his work would, in terms of deconstruction, be a misquotation and a misinterpretation. Chesterton himself was sceptical of so-called impartiality, because he recognised that "[e]xperience and imagination and well-grounded conviction are required for discerning the real" (Wood 2011:4). Yet, I have followed the above core principle by trying to ensure that Chesterton's hermeneutics remains, at the very least, internally consistent. This is to say that I have let Chesterton's writings act as main

instruments by which his other writings are interpreted even while recognising that what follows remains my own subjective reading.<sup>28</sup>

I have therefore taken Gadamer's (2004:298) call for a considered suspension of prejudices very seriously as a guide for interpretive practice. Gadamer (2004:298) argues that this suspension of prejudices "has the logical structure of a question" and that "the essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open". Visual hermeneutics follows this advice in its stress upon opening and extending rather than reducing and closing meaning (Heywood & Sandywell 1999:x).

Understanding, after all, is not "what we aim at, it is what we do" (Davey 1999:5). This study, therefore, is not principally a criticism of Chesterton's writings. It is more concerned with the thoughts that underpin his dramatology than with whether or not his interpretive outlook ought to be adopted, discarded or changed. Therefore, even where my stance has differed from Chesterton's, I have attempted to let his opinions carry far more weight than my own and those of other writers.

As shown above, there is a great deal that has been and is being written on Chesterton and his work. Therefore, this study is simply the addition of one voice to a much larger ongoing conversation. For this reason, while the title of this thesis — *Chestertonian dramatology* — suggests a new discourse, both with regard to visual culture studies and to Chesterton's work, an invisible subtitle — *An introduction* — may be added to clarify that this is really only the beginning.



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<sup>28</sup>William Griffin (2003:31) explains that it is "safe to say" that Chesterton's work is open to multiple different interpretations, especially since it is so richly layered, literally, allegorically, morally and analogically. Griffin (2003:31) pinpoints three dimensions of Chesterton's work, namely "Paradoxy, Hilarity, and Humility" in his own interpretation, explaining that "[t]hese are three, but certainly not all, of the hallmarks of his writing," as well as "the three highlights of his spirituality". While Griffin's approach is certainly valid and even helpful, it is not the approach that I have taken, simply because, to me, it restricts his horizon of understanding more than is useful for gaining insight into his interpretive lens. I am sure that others will find other faults with my approach, but it is the approach I have taken nonetheless.