

History, ruin and sacrament: the breaking of images and the breaking of the bread

Suzanne De Villiers-Human

Department of History of Art and Visual Culture Studies, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein
Email: humane@ufs.ac.za

The current renewed interest in the phenomenon of iconoclasm (a form of ruination) is a symptom of the re-thinking of the image in a medium-aware milieu. When the medium is attacked in iconoclastic acts, images endure and circulate more vigorously. In this article the focus is on the ambiguous historical moment of destruction; on the impending blow; on the hammer or sword in mid-swing – on the breaking of images as a moment of the dissemination and endurance of historical meaning. The metaphorical power of the ruin to evoke not only loss, but also completion or fulfilment, is exploited here to intimate a systematic distinction between allegory and symbol. Through the performative interpretation of a number of art works which stage ruination, destruction, deterioration or violence, the historical processes of the emancipation, transformation, translation and re-mediation of images is related to conflicted understandings of the meaning of history. I endeavour to show how diverse beliefs about the mystery of the meaning of history are related to the ways in which the world is made to signify in nuanced artistic ways, either allegorically or symbolically.

Key words: Allegory, Symbol, Ruin, Sacrament

Geskiedenis, ruïne en sakrament: die breking van beelde en die breking van die brood

Die hernieude kontemporêre belangstelling in die verskynsel van ikonoklasme ('n vorm van ruïnering) is 'n simptoom van die heroorweging van die beeld in 'n medium-sensitiewe omgewing. As die medium aangeval word in 'n ikonoklastiese handeling, oorleef beelde en sirkuleer dit meer drasties. In hierdie artikel is die fokus op die dubbelsinnige historiese oomblik van vernietiging; op die voorgenome slag; op die hamer of swaard terwyl dit swaai – op die aftakeling van beelde as die oomblik waarin historiese betekenis oorleef en versprei word. Die ruïne se metaforiese vermoë om nie alleen verlies nie, maar ook volheid en voltooiing te suggereer, word hier gebruik om aspekte van 'n sistematiese onderskeid tussen allegorie en simbool te laat deurskemer. Deur die performatiewe interpretasie van 'n paar kunswerke wat ruïnering, vernietiging, aftakeling of geweld voorstel, word die historiese prosesse van die vrymaking, transformasie en re-mediasie van strydende beelde, verbind aan konflikterende insigte oor die betekenis van die geskiedenis. Ek onderneem om aan te toon hoe uiteenlopende aannames oor die geheimenisse van die betekenis van die geskiedenis, nou verbonde is aan die genuanseerde maniere waarop kunswerke of allegoriese of simboliese betekenis genereer.

Sleutelwoorde: Allegorie, Simbool, Ruïne, Sakrament.

Aspectrum of nuances lies between the ruin's ability to prompt a sense of loss and transience, on the one hand, and hopes of completion, future fulfilment, ultimate sense, or redemption on the other. Whereas the back of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History (Arendt 1999: 249)¹ is turned to the future in melancholic contemplation of the immanence of the hurled rubble of history, the ruin may also launch thoughts on potential historical sense and the meaningful contiguity of past, present and future. These disparate cultural strands associated with the meaning of the ruin are not oppositional, but constitute possible traditions among others, of making sense of history beyond the suffering and disconnectedness of catastrophic lived history.

It may be asserted that the postmodern concentration on loss and on the lack of the real is linked to its predilection for allegory. With allegory, according to Paul Ricoeur (1967: 16), a translation takes place between a signifier and its meaning, and once this hermeneutic process has been performed, the disguise is rendered useless and can be discarded: "In other words,

allegory has been a modality of hermeneutics much more than a spontaneous creation of signs". Ricoeur (1967: 16) introduces, on the other hand, the concept of donation where the symbol is concerned. The symbol is "donative" in that it precedes hermeneutics and presents, evokes or suggests its meaning "in the opaque transparency of an enigma" rather than by translation. The "cosmic ground" (Ricoeur 1967: 11) of symbolism is opposed to allegory which is hermeneutically produced meaning. Allegory is not premised upon the assumption that things are meaningfully sustained in their contingency. In the postmodern era allegory is promoted in the face of the loss of faith in inherent meaning which is presupposed by the symbol. Jörn Rüsen in a recent book *Meaning and representation in history* (2006: 40) admits that "There is hardly anything as outdated as reflecting on the sense of history..." In my following interpretations of images from various eras I endeavour to show how beliefs about the mystery of the meaning of history are related to the ways in which the world is made to signify artistically in diverse and nuanced ways, as allegory or symbol. This article endeavours to make an oblique contribution to current debates on the crisis of re-presentation when the principle that art is a secondary response to, or an aesthetic encounter with, a meaningful world which was there first, is questioned. By highlighting nuanced differences in the understanding and modes of artistic signification of the meaning of history over centuries, current understandings of history are interrogated.



Figure 1
Abraham ben Jacob. *Abraham and the idols*, from *Haggadah*
 (Amsterdam, Solomon ben Joseph, 1695). New York Jewish Theological seminary. (Mochizuki 2008: 118).

A seventeenth-century print in a Jewish *Haggadah* (Amsterdam, Solomon ben Joseph, 1695) (Mochizuki 2008: 118) depicting Abraham in the act of an iconoclastic attack (Figure 1) introduces my argument. The illustrated passage from the *Haggadah* is an expansion of the contents of Genesis 11 and relates how Abraham who was left in charge of his father Terah's idol shop, mocked the idolatrous clients and eventually destroyed the idols in a fit of rage. In the print Abraham is shown at the moment of the separation from his ancestors on the basis of his faith in a promised future. The violent act in the narrative is performed as a deed of transformation and reorientation towards the future. In recent research on iconoclasm destruction as a creative act or

as a transitional moment in the process of image-making is given more thought (e.g. Mochizuki 2008: 118 - 121). In this article I explore two diverse ways in which images are argued to be ever renewable, adaptable and transformable – on the grounds of either a picture’s presumed nature as a manifestation of absence, invisibility, incompleteness, insufficiency and lack (as allegorical meaning), or on the grounds of the power of the image to make “donative” or given meaning return in ever new ways (as symbolic meaning) in approximation of ultimate fulfilment. I focus on the changeability and proliferation of images as either a constant (allegorical) deferral of meaning or the comprehension of future (symbolic) redemption, as I endeavour to compare, contrast and analyse the processes of signification at work in selected art works struggling with questions about the meaning and mystery of history and the relationship between materiality and transcendence.



Figure 2
Andrea Mantegna. *St Sebastian*.
(Ca. 1470-80. Canvas, 255 x 140 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Web Gallery of Art)).

My first example of the association of the ruin with human suffering and the mystery of the meaning of history is from the Renaissance (Figure 2) when the ruin first appeared as a fully developed pictorial motif (Barasch 2006: 218). In Andrea Mantegna’s *St Sebastian* (ca. 1470-80) the martyred saint, eyes raised heavenward (Figure 3), is strapped to the ruin of an Antique Corinthian column and arch from which vegetation sprouts in several places. Growing plants on ruins (not necessarily Antique ruins) suggesting regeneration and rebirth most often appear in narrative representations of events related to the Incarnation, like Nativity scenes and scenes of the Adoration of the Magi where it refers to the succession of the Law of the Old Testament by the new Christian faith.



Figure 3
Andrea Mantegna. *St Sebastian*.
 (Detail. Ca. 1470-80. Canvas, 255 x 140 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Web Gallery of Art)).



Figure 4.
Andrea Mantegna. *St Sebastian*.
 (Detail of a fragment of a sculptural foot. Ca. 1470-80. Canvas, 255 x 140 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Web Gallery of Art)).

However, Mantegna exploits with typically painterly means, the motifs of fragmented relics of Antique sculpture and of architecture overgrown with vegetation, to thicken the meaning of his historical narrative. The pregnant moment of the narrative is the martyred saint's invisible transition from life to death i.e. the imperceptible moment of the passage of his soul to eternal life, when his wounded body becomes a corpse. The martyr dies in *imitatio Christi* and will receive a restored glorified body in the life hereafter. The wounded body of the saint is paralleled with the damaged ruins, the medium of which is harmed while the works continue to exist in the imagination of the spectator, just as the soul of the martyr is transported into eternity. With the self-conscious pictorial eloquence which the medium of painting had acquired during the Renaissance (Krüger 2001: 59ff.), Mantegna opposes the deterioration and damage of Antique sculpture to the after-life it attains through its remediation into the medium of painting. This painterly performance of the *paragone* debate is expanded in the placement (Figure 4) of a painted fragment of a sculptural foot which had been neatly cut from a life-size statue, right next to the painted bare feet of the martyr. The relic of the damaged statue contrasts with the integrity of the body of the martyr to juxtapose pagan decline with Christian triumph.

Mantegna succeeds in fictionalizing the painted sculptural ruins into an aesthetic experience to act out and pictorially deepen the meaning of the historical narrative so that the meaning of

the image as image is performed in the medium of painting. The incomprehensible passage from life to death is acted out as the essential paradox of all images - of making visible the invisible. The painting functions as an eye-opener of spiritual vision and the painterly performance of the painting's image-ness is in resonance with the theme of the mystery of the meaning of time and history. Human suffering, bodily damage and the deterioration of sculpture and architecture are given meaning through the history of redemption, the *Heilsgeschichte*, because ultimately the breaking of the body of the Saviour constitutes the meaning and redemption of history. Although Christ's incarnation has been the justification for image-making for many centuries, it is the abject damaged body of the crucified Christ which exemplifies the redemption of history. After this example the abject and self-negating portrayal of the suffering body of the martyr is iconoclastic in spirit and meant to train the eyes to see beyond the image (Koerner 2004: 12).

Thus, in Mantegna's painting the mediating function of the image is conceived of in terms of a dualistic separation between the spheres of materiality and immanence on the one hand, and invisible transcendence on the other. The ruins and the wounded body of the martyr are metaphors of the lack and loss of this world which needs mediation in order to participate in a transcendent world which can be understood spiritually. In this respect the painting can be compared to the Roman Catholic transubstantiated Eucharistic wafer which mediates between dualistically opposed carnality and spiritual understanding. History and time are understood to emanate from God, but earthly history and transcendental time or eternity, are understood to be separate.

This dualistic (symbolic) conception of the relationship between matter and transcendence in the process of signification in Mantegna's work can be contrasted to a Protestant conception of their (symbolic) unity. If Mantegna exploits the themes of destruction, negation and replacement to turn his *St Sebastian* into a spiritual eye-opener in the medium of painting, this function is transformed by Rembrandt. I refer to Rembrandt's painting (Figure 5) of an episode in Abraham's life a number of years after his destruction of the idols, his arm raised once again, in *The angel withholding Abraham from sacrificing Isaac* (1635). Rembrandt rendered this bewildering instant of averted violence in different media a number of times in his oeuvre. A comparative discussion of this painting in the Hermitage and a drawing (Figure 6) - which probably comes after the painting (Schwartz 2006: 346) - in the British Museum, *Abraham withheld from the sacrifice of Isaac* (ca. 1635), divulges the intensity with which Rembrandt meditated upon the varied nuances and implications of this episode.

I argue that Rembrandt's introduction of another element in the rivalry among the arts, apart from the *paragone* between sculpture and painting as in the case of Mantegna, suggests a different approach to the transcendent meaning of history. The invisible voice of the angel proclaiming the will of God is the crux and imperceptible catalyst of Rembrandt's composition in my analysis. The Word of God becomes embodied in the voice of the Angel and Abraham is seen to hear and react to it. The visual noise in the area above the angel's head and right hand, at the top left in the drawing - the excessive and animated strokes in red chalk which denote the angel's right wing - (Figure 7) initiate the impression of vigorous spiral forward-movement continued in the three bodies seemingly tiered in space as a result of the distribution of patches of light and shade. These repetitive chalk lines may inversely be read as re-directing the eye in continuing spiral movement from the lower front of the picture plane - from Isaac's body, through the touching bodies of Abraham and the Angel - beyond the top edge of the picture from whence the speaking Angel (by whom all action in the painting is instigated) supposedly hails. The visual noise, movement and light perform the animating Voice of God entering like a breath or wind (*Odo*) to initiate Abraham's *peripeteia*.



Figure 5
Rembrandt. *The angel withholding Abraham from sacrificing Isaac.*
 (1635. Canvas, 193 X 133cm. St Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum. (Schwartz 2006: 344)).

Abraham's *contraposto* posture, face turned towards the Angel and each arm connected in this forward- and reverse-spiral movement, acts out his conversion in the presence of the proclamation of God's Word. Abraham's soul is moved by listening to the Voice as he is interrupted from performing a human sacrifice.



Figure 6
Rembrandt. *The angel withholding Abraham from sacrificing Isaac.* (Unsigned, undated, ca. 1635. Black and red chalk, wash, 19.4 x 14.6 cm. London, British Museum).



Figure 7
Vigorous spiral forward-movement continued in the three bodies seemingly tiered in space.
Rembrandt. *The angel withholding Abraham from sacrificing Isaac.* (Unsigned, undated, ca. 1635. Black and red chalk, wash, 19.4 x 14.6 cm. London, British Museum).

When we now return to the painting we notice that the blinding, bleaching light which accompanies the Angel, and which falls from left and right in the painting and the drawing respectively, is concentrated upon Isaac's body in each. The white light renders his swaddled body corpse-like, pre-figuring the body of Christ to whose sacrifice Isaac's body has pointed allegorically since early Christianity. In the painting a successive symbolic replacement of Isaac's body is performed by the rendition in paint of his pale body to resemble an opaque bread-like substance which draws attention not only to the materiality of paint but also to the significance of bread as sacrament and body of Christ who instituted the Eucharist. Through the transfigurative power of painted light, paint is transformed to remind of bread. Thus the materiality of paint is symbolically exploited to open the eyes spiritually, just as the physical presence of the Eucharistic bread points to a reality that we cannot grasp fully.

Whereas Mantegna couched his historical narrative of the transition of the soul in the *paragone* between painting and sculpture, Rembrandt's exploitation of the rivalry between speech (Word) and image according to the *ut pictura poesis* formula enables him not to only to translate the invisible voice in visible terms, but also to perform in the medium of painting the function of the image as a site of reconciliation between the material and the transcendental worlds, as in the Protestant Eucharist. What is revealed is the process of symbolic transformation of physical reality through spiritual vision, rather than the mediation between two dualistically separated spheres, as in the Mantegna painting. The act of painting becomes the metaphor for the breaking of the bread comparable to the liturgical performance of the protestant Eucharist, where through the eyes of faith the materiality of the created world is related to the Creator. Abraham as the Father of Faith to the faithful spectator is transformed by the Voice of God, and acts out the constant renewal and conversion of the faithful through the proclamation of the Word in specific contexts, just as the bread is continuously broken in liturgical performances of the Eucharist to proclaim that in Christ everything holds together. In an old established reformational tradition which Calvin follows (Devries 2002: 15) preaching is understood to be a sacrament. Abraham is portrayed as acting out the new meaning which history has attained and which is gradually revealed in the *Heilsgeschichte* or history of redemption. The unfolding of a history of redemption (represented by the references to Isaac's body, Christ's body and the substance of bread) is shown to be an effect of human conversion and decision-making on the strength of the proclaimed Word. For this reason Paul Ricoeur calls this Biblical outlook on history the rediscovery of history as a crisis (1965: 84, 85).

In Søren Kierkegaard's (1985) philosophical meditation upon Abraham's faith in *Fear and trembling* (1843) the narrator Johannes *de silentio*'s very name brings the opposition of silence and voice into play. The pseudonym of the not so silent author of the treatise, John the Silent, suggests that genuine faith cannot be put into discourse. Abraham's silence and inability to inform the affected parties, Isaac, Sarah and Eleazar about his intended action, is repeatedly invoked in *De Silentio*'s fourfold description of the events. Kierkegaard aims with the treatise to demonstrate how impossible it is to understand Abraham's deeds according to Hegelian principle of *Sittlichkeit* or 'the ethical life'. No language, he claims, suffices to explain or justify Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son in defiance of all human ethical standards or the Hegelian 'universal' well-being of society as a whole. From the Enlightenment perspective Abraham's faith in the hidden meaning of his deed remains incomprehensible: "Anyone who saw this would be paralysed... Anyone who saw this would become blind", (1985 (1843): 55) Johannes *de silentio* exclaims.

However in Rembrandt's visual interpretations of this episode from the life of the Father of Faith, he puts into action the eloquence of the concrete materiality of creation (paint and

bread) to point to a transcendental reality on the basis of the illuminating and vivifying power of the incarnation. He gives protestant substance to the artistic rivalry between word and image, or sight and sound, which had been based on the revival of the Horatian *ut pictura poesis* formula since the Renaissance. Whereas Catholic authors in the Low Countries abided by the neo-Platonic priority of sight and image, Protestants gave precedence to the ear and the proclamation of the Word on the strength of St Paul (Emmens 1981: 69). In Rembrandt's drawing and painting Isaac's covered face remains empty; Isaac remains blind and deprived of the mutual gaze of human recognition. But this vacuum is exploded and filled with transforming meaning at the entry of the Voice or breath of God in the form of the Angel whom Abraham faces. The materiality of Isaac's opaque body in paint, like the sacramental bread, thus becomes the very site of both the convergence of light and the dispersal of the spiritual power of the Word. Matter is thus reconciled with a transcendental world rather than exploited as a mediator between materiality and transcendence, as in Mantegna's painting. This testifies to a difference in nuance in the understanding of the meaning of history.

Another area which draws attention through visual noise where meaning is thickened in both drawing and painting is the central space around motif of the free falling knife. In the Hermitage painting the suspension between father and son (Bal 1991, Held 1991) of the beautifully wrought curved knife of multi-coloured metal against the backdrop of an atmospherically receding landscape is staged, because it has a foil in the finely filigreed and bejeweled sheath strapped to Abraham's hip. The suspension of the beautiful artefact for a critical moment in the painting may have the narrative function of conveying averted violence, but on the other hand the almost fetishistic isolation of the crucial tool conveys its importance as a self-reflective image of human work. As such the knife introduces an array of layered meanings related to the artist's craft, *poiesis* in the sense of human cultural production, but also of the poetic work of compressing, augmenting and transforming the world into art, the making of art history, the transmission of traditions, the practise of art history writing and the sense or meaning of history.

I will confine myself here to the fact that the knife directs attention to my self-aware art historical interpretation of all the images I have discussed so far. The rethinking of the image which is currently taking place in image theory and art history has spawned a proliferation of performative viewings of so-called meta-pictures and self-aware images arguing about their own existence and history, as images and media. The vogue is to interpret images allegorically in order to demonstrate their ability to self-produce self-reflectively, emphasizing the power of the human mind to hermeneutically produce images which constantly migrate (Belting 2005) among various media. In this process the "donative" or given meaning of a richly symbolic world could be downplayed. I have exploited this current trend of performative viewing of self-theorizing images, but have highlighted the historical depth of this medium-awareness as an aspect of all artistic images. Whereas the increased self-awareness and the theoretical relevance of art in the modern era is often portrayed as typically modern and in compensation for the dwindling interest in the spiritual function of images, I want to rather inversely emphasize that modern art's theoretical self-revelation does not exhaust its meaning, but that this self-theorization is related to fundamental shifts in notions about the spiritual sense of history.

My interpretations of works highlighted varied nuances and struggles in understandings of how materiality is seen to symbolically harbour transcendental meaning. We have witnessed Abraham, arm raised in the violent act of iconoclasm, as portrayed in a Jewish *Haggadah*, and we have witnessed how his arm raised in the averted act of human sacrifice was re-presented and appropriated by Rembrandt, to reveal a transformation or conversion of the understanding of history, a modification of what motivates from the depth of the past and the discovery of a

new memory. In the raised arm of Abraham the breaking of images and the breaking of the bread are linked. The ambiguous historical moment of destruction; the impending blow, is shown to be the moment of the dissemination and endurance of historical meaning. The ruin has the metaphorical power to evoke not only loss, but also redemption.

In my interpretation of the next two respectively modern and postmodern works by Barnett Newman and Gerard Richter, I analyse the allegorical processes of ruination (as opposed to the symbolic processes discussed above) by means of which the given meaning of history is refused and shattered. However, I conclude with the discussion of a postmodern work which reintroduces the cosmic surcharge of inexhaustible meaning which is the basis of all symbolism (Ricoeur) and which links the symbolism of all cultures - an installation by Pippa Skotnes staging ruination and deterioration, as well as translation and transformation. Through the interpretation of these contrasting processes of allegorical and symbolic signification, the historical processes of the ruination, transformation, translation and re-mediation of images is related to conflicted understandings of the meaning of history.



Figure 8

**Barnett Newman. *Stations of the cross, Lema Sabachthani*.
(14 panels. 1958. Oil on canvas, 198.1 x 152.4 cm each. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.).**

The black and white ash tones of the entire cycle of fifteen paintings by Barnett Newman *The Stations of the cross* (1958) (Figure 8), together with the unanswered question of the subtitle: *Lema Sabachthani* (Why hast Thou forsaken me?) links the Crucifixion with Old Testament sacrifice, as well as with the catastrophic history of the twentieth century (cf. Saltzman: 2005: 37ff.). Mark Godfrey (2004:40) argues that the audience is meant to identify with the despair and loss experienced by survivors of the Holocaust. It could be argued that Newman's use of stark and empty abstract formats is an iconoclastic act against representation, acknowledging that the extent of human suffering referred to is beyond representation or even beyond our senses and exceeds our capacity to capture it in our imagination. It is only in their minds that the audience can transcend the ambiguity and catastrophe of concrete history, as in the Kantian sublime. In viewing the painted cycle the spectator has to move from painting to painting as if in secular ritual procession remembering Christ's human suffering on the way to the cross. The cycle refers the moved and moving audience back to itself to experience the sublime of ineffable and incomprehensible human agony. By reducing Christ's suffering to the sublime human experience of pain and anguish, any transcendental sense of the contiguity of past, present and future is iconoclastically rendered useless and discarded. An allegorical translation is hermeneutically produced as lack and loss are contemplated, back turned to the future, as Benjamin's Angel of History does, when neither humanistic Progress, nor an understanding of the mystery of the meaningful contiguity of history remains an option.



Figure 9

Titian (Tiziano Vecellio). *Annunciation*.

(c. 1535. Oil on canvas, 166 x 266 cm. Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice. (Web Gallery of Art)).

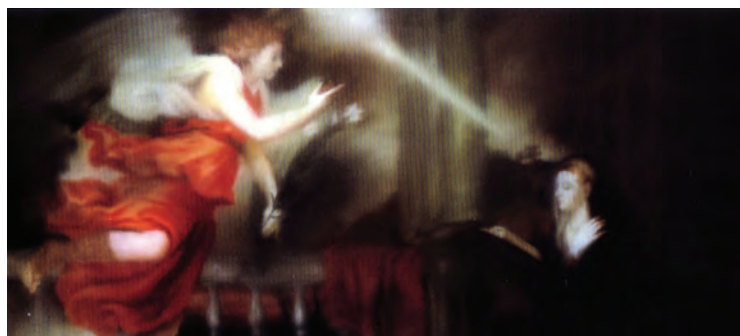


Figure 10

Gerhard Richter. *Annunciation after Titian*.

Second version. (1973. Oil on linen, 125 x 200cm.

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.).

In Gerhard Richter's postmodern work the changeability and proliferation of images is suggested to be a constant allegorical deferral of meaning. His five versions of copies of Titian's *Annunciation* (c. 1535) (Figure 9) produced during the 1970's (of which the second is reproduced here) (Figure 10) manifest his fascination with this process. His choice to reproduce the *topos* of the *Annunciation* - the depiction of that imperceptible moment of the gift of God's presence to humankind - is significant. The swirling movement of the entering angel in both Titian and Richter is acknowledged by the slight movement of the Virgin's hand suggesting that she is stirred, but not protesting and is consciously offering her body as receptacle of divine conception (Krüger 2001: 46ff.). While movement and the sound of the Angel's voice are captured in the stillness of clouded and blurred paint in Richter's painting, the obvious theme is the paradox of the manifestation of the invisible in the visible. It pushes to the borders of what can be seen with the naked eye. But in this sense the painting thematizes its own insufficiency. Richter explains about his copies: "To start with I only meant to make a copy", "...simply because I liked it so much". "Then, my copy went wrong, and the pictures that finally emerged went to show that it just can't be done anymore, not even by way of a copy. *All I could do was to break the whole thing down and show that it's no longer possible* [My italics]." (Storr 2003: 104). In order to partake of an invisible spiritual sphere an endless progression of reproductions and representations are needed in compensation for the original lack of meaning and the inadequacy of its manifestations in the sense of the Lyotardian "melancholic sublime". For Richter the ineffable can be conceived but its significance can never be understood.



Figure 11

Pippa Skotnes. Horse skeletons with inscriptions. *Lamb of God* Installation. 2004 – 2009. (National Museum of Art, Lithuania; Cultural History Museum, Oslo, Norway; Centre for the Humanities, Michigan University, USA; Michaelis Gallery, Cape Town. (Skotnes 2009). <http://www.cca.uct.ac.za/curations/?lid=142>.

I conclude my interpretations of images with three skeletons of horses, inscribed with hand-written texts, embossed and gilded, like the covers and pages of medieval manuscripts - the central objects of an installation by the contemporary South African artist Pippa Skotnes, titled *Lamb of God* (2002) (Figure 11) (Skotnes 2009). These horse skeletons have also been exhibited separately, and were recently shown at the Everard Read Gallery in Johannesburg, as part of the exhibition *The Horse. Multiple Views of a Singular Beast*, curated by Ricky Burnett.



Figure 12.

Pippa Skotnes. Horse skeletons with inscriptions. *Lamb of God* Installation. 2004 – 2009. (National Museum of Art, Lithuania; Cultural History Museum, Oslo, Norway; Centre for the Humanities, Michigan University, USA; Michaelis Gallery, Cape Town. (Skotnes 2009). <http://www.cca.uct.ac.za/curations/?lid=142>.

Each skeleton, held intact by its spine (Figure 12), resembles a book and the three volumes exhibited together are related in their diverse contents by the life, work and experiences of the artist. One skeleton is inscribed with texts related to her father's experiences in the Second World War, the second to her Roman Catholic upbringing as a result of a promise made by her father during this time, and the third is inscribed with texts from the 1870's by Lucy Lloyd and Wilhelm Bleek transcribed from oral accounts in the now obsolete Bushman language of their *IXam* teachers. The main part of this legacy of texts is held at the *Centre for Curating the Archive* at the University of Cape Town where Pippa Skotnes has contributed a great deal to expose and investigate the archival resources.

In the horse skeletons Pippa Skotnes embraces enigmatic ruins; fragments of the cosmos; the materiality of dead bones, in which the mystery of the passing of time is condensed. By inscribing it, she releases an infinite symbolic discourse, linked in its mythic, symbolic and poetic roots. She starts out with a full anthropocosmic symbolism (Ricoeur) of several layers of experience. The inscribed bones not only refer to the western medieval heritage of reliquary shrines and pilgrimage routes – a heritage of images “before the era of art” (Belting 1990). But that western memory and understanding is complicated and transformed by the introduction of parallels among image understandings manifest in popular legends regarding the magical powers of the Roman Catholic Eucharist (fragments of which are inscribed on the bones of one horse), and image understandings in *IXam* culture, manifest in transcribed texts on another skeleton. In her inaugural lecture as Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Cape Town, titled *Real Presence*, Skotnes (2009: 32) compares these popular legends and practices surrounding the Roman Catholic Eucharistic doctrine of transubstantiation, with *IXam* experiences of the “contraction of time implied in many of the[ir] narratives and the perceptions of a continuous present”. This comparison rekindles the mythic dimensions of symbolism - what Paul Ricoeur (1967: 11) has called the “cosmic ground” of all symbolism - and reshapes, complicates and thickens western memory based on the opposition of near and far, or western and non-western cultures. The rolled up copies of archival texts in phials attached to the spines, not only reference the history of the process by which classical literature has been transmitted from the ancient world to the present, from oral tradition, to written roll, to codex (Weitzman 1947), but the phials also connote the remnants of magical practices in medieval religious devotion. Thus the rediscovery of mythic dimensions of western thought transforms the understanding we have of ourselves in relation to other cultures. It not only reveals the common basis of the symbolic traditions of diverse cultures, in a meaningful cosmos, but also suggests how this meaningful surcharge has found diverse traditions of signification, related to diverse beliefs about the mystery of the meaning of history.

Notes

1 “A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel

would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.” (Arendt 1999: 249).

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Suzanne Human holds an M. A. degree from the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, did doctoral research at the Philipps-Universität in Marburg, Germany, and received a Ph. D from the University of the Free State in 1999. She is associate professor and departmental Chair of the Department of Art History and Visual Culture Studies at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. Her current area of research is the translatability of cultures and image theory.