Character and characterisation in the visual arts: Nunology's punning characters

Louisemarié Rathbone
Lecturer: Art history
North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus
louisemarie.combrink@nwu.ac.za

Colette Lotz
Lecturer: Graphic Design
North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus
colette.lotz@nwu.ac.za

This article presents an interpretation of the nun-like figures in Ian Marley and Wessie van der Westhuizen's artist's book *Nunology*. The nun-like figures, all with names that suggest puns of some sort, comprise the cast of characters in this book. We interpret aspects of the characterisation of the character *Ranunsel,* and also reference the characters *Nunguni* and *Mununtant* as examples of a whole array of these characters that appear in the book. The article makes use of an interdisciplinary approach in which the narratological concepts of character and characterisation are applied towards a visual narratology, which is a branch of postclassical narratology. The theoretical exposition of character and characterisation is presented both with reference to their literary narratological definitions, which are expanded into possible visual application. This is followed by an interpretative section where the concepts are applied to the selected nun-figures or characters. Identity through character narration and portraits as a facet of character guide the discussion, as does the notion of a mental representation both of character and of storyworld. This article contributes towards the expansion of visual narratology, and also towards the scholarship pertaining to the practice-led research project *Reflective Conversations* of which *Nunology* formed part.
Keywords: (postclassical) visual narratology, character, characterisation, *Nunology*

Karakter en karakterisering in die visuele kunste: Nunology se woordspelingskarakters
Hierdie artikel bied 'n interpretasie van die non-agtige figure in Ian Marley en Wessie van der Westhuizen se kunstenaarsboek *Nunology*. Die non-agtige figure het almal name wat 'n tipe woordspel aandoen, en wat elk 'n hoofkarakter van hierdie boek uitmaak. Ons interpreteer aspekte van karakterisering in van die karakter *Ranunsel,* en verwys ter toeligting ook na *Nunguni* en *Mununtant* as voorbeelde van 'n hele rits karakters wat in die boek verskyn. Die artikel het 'n interdissplinêre benadering waarin die narratologiese konsepte van karakter en karakterisering aangewend word in die konteks van 'n visuele narratologie, wat op sy beurt deel uitmaak van die breër postklassieke narratologie. Die teoretiese uiteensetting van karakter en karakterisering word aangebied in die letterkundige narratologiese definisie daarvan, en verder uitgebrei na visuele toepassingsmoontlikhede. Hierna volg 'n interpretasiegedeelte waar die konsepte van toepassing gemaak word op die geselekteerde non-agtige figure of karakters. Identiteit en karaktervertelling sowel as portretkuns as karakterfaset rig die bespreking, terwyl die idee dat die leser 'n beeld deur die geestesoog konstrueer van die karakter en haar storiewêreld ook inspeel op die interpretasie. Die artikel dra by tot die uitbreiding van visuele narratologie, sowel as tot navorsing met betrekking tot die praktykgeleide navorsingsprojek Weerspieëlings en weerklanke waarvan Nunology deel uitgemaak het.
Sleutelwoorde: (postklassieke) visuele narratologie, karakter, karakterisering, Nunology

I n this article we present a reading of the narratological concepts of character and characterisation with reference to the nun-like figures in the artist's book by Ian Marley and Wessie van der Westhuizen entitled The concise encyclopaedia of Nunology (2013). This book was exhibited as part of the exhibition of the large-scale interdisciplinary practice-led research project entitled Reflective Conversations: Typography, Topography, Typology (the

exhibition ran from 9 May – 21 June 2013 at the North-West University Gallery, Potchefstroom, South Africa).

This artist's book is a beautifully laid out object, and includes text, characters as well as extensive paratextual elements. What strikes the reader is the whimsical, humorous nature of the book in which the main features are a series of nun-like figures (hence the title "Nunology"). These figures are based on a series of word-plays or puns that all take the word "nun" as starting point. The puns are embodied, or given visual shape, in the form of comic nun-like figures. The figures are all named, with the name hinting at the pun represented – and a text at the back of the book gives more detail as to the nature of each nun. Examples of names are Nun Sense, Annunciation, Ranunsel, Conundrum, Holy Nuns and Nunguni – all wordplays with a tongue-in-cheek aspect.

Apart from conceptually and visually representing some silly or absurd puns, these figures are also based a strange morphing of a hot cross bun with nun-like features, most notably the nun's habit, with minimal variations (see for example figure 2, figure 4 and figure 6 below). The morphed product looks blob-like, almost like a fat ten-pin bowling pin, with the appearance of a nun's habit – and also, the figures usually have one eye with an unfocused, bashful stare. Most of the figures wear shoes that complement the reference to the specific pun, and some are represented in an environment that provides clues as to their "nun-pun" status. They have the appearance of individual portraits in a "family" – and they are variations of nuns/puns.

As a whole, the book's illustrations as well as the written sections are (nun)non-sensical, rather absurd and mischievous. For example, in the preamble of the book Nunology is rather dizzyingly described as the "schizophrenic dialectic concept, which oscillates between the objective state of the bun and the ecclesiastical state of the nun" in which this "transformative binary opposite result in an evolutionary spectrum that exists in the purgatorial dimension" (Marley & Van der Westhuizen, 2013). The obvious silliness of the entire project, its light-hearted fun-poking appearance and content, make this a very enjoyable artist's book and caution against interpreting the contents of the project in a serious light.

The current article's interest in reading these nun-figures as characters, and as portraits, sprouts from the sense that the book, as well as the nun-puns contained in it, function like narrative instances. In other words, apart from the illustrated textual (written) narrative of the pre-amble, the nun-figures themselves appear like little narratives each with a central protagonist: these narratives are "told" by means of the communicative qualities of the characters' appearance, their names, their gestures, their verbal descriptions and the puns they infer. Through these devices the nun-figures gain a sense of narrated identity. It is a case of the "subject of the narrative is the subject" (see Kemp 2003: 74); the identities that are narrated in the shape of the nun-figures constitute the narrative subject. It would appear that these figures function like characters in the context of the narratives.

The structure of the article will proceed as follows: in the first instance, we consider how character and characterisation as narratological concepts can be applied to the reading of visual images, with reference also to portraits as a form of character representation. Then a selection of nun-figures are interpreted as characters, with emphasis on how these characters come into being through characterisation and how they can be read as a type of portrait.

Applying the concept of character to the visual arts

Character is not a term that is frequently used in art historical discourse. Art historians may tend, for example, to talk about sitters, or figures, or images with reference to a (usually human) agent in an artwork. On the other hand, the notion of character has been extensively theorised in narratological approaches, notably by Margolin (2007), Herman (2002) and Jannidis (2009). These approaches typically focus on character in a fictional literary text.

The definition of character is therefore borrowed for use in the present article from narrative theory. In this field, character has been defined as a: "text- or media-based figure in a storyworld, usually human or human-like"; characters are "participants in storyworlds created by various media in contrast to 'persons' as individuals in the real world" (Jannidis 2009: 14). A fictional storyworld, in turn, has been described as a "mental model, a rich projection of the entire, developing situation in which events, characters and their variously motivated actions are embedded" (Toolan 2013: 18). In literary works, characters are "mental representations" (Herman 2002: 116) and "creatures of the word" (Margolin 2007: 67). Furthermore, characters exist as "network[s] of character traits" (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 61).

In the visual arts, characters can also be seen as text- or media-based figures because they are created by means of the medium used by the artist and appear in the text that is the artwork. Furthermore, the storyworld can be defined in the visual arts as the physical surroundings or setting of the character: like in the literary arts, a storyworld in the visual arts can be understood as a "coherent, unified, ontologically full and materially existing geographical entity" (Ryan, 2014: 9). In a painting, the storyworld may entail be the setting shown in the painting itself as well as the represented world implied by the painting. In other words, the storyworld of a Vermeer painting may include both the represented environment as well as our understanding of seventeenth-century Dutch bourgeois existence.

One can draw a number of parallels between the literary conception of character and its visual counterpart in art. The portrayal of a character in the visual arts would also be a text-based (in the visual sense) interpretation of that agent. However, there is a central difference between character in the literary sense as a *mental* construct that is inferred by the reader, and character portrayed in the visual arts in the sense that the character in a visual image is made visible. Of course, one can mentally expand on a character that is portrayed in a visual image by adding imagined features such as voice or different facial expressions, but the central difference between a character in a literary work and a visual artwork is that the mental act of imagining what a character looks like based on textual clues is not inherent to character portrayal in the visual arts. There are exceptions to this rule: where a character is shown in an incomplete manner, or when a character is inferred but not shown, one has to mentally complete the character's appearance. Here one may think of Rembrandt's use of shadows that may obscure parts of characters, or where he portrays only some of the characters of a given story and leaves some members of the "cast" of a story to the viewer's imagination.

The notion that a character is an element that tends to be human or human-like (please refer to the definition by Jannidis, 2009 above) suggests that one can find corollaries for character in the visual arts by first exploring figurative art, where one can at least recognise an entity as human or human-like. Such an effort need not be limited to realistic portrayals, but it seems useful to look at artworks where one can distinguish agents that in some way stand in for figures in a recognisable way. It seems necessary to reiterate that character in the visual artwork would probably be conceptualised in terms of a figure or some sort of body. The importance of the

body in the definition of character can be highlighted with reference to Merleau-Ponty's ([1945] 1995: 167) argument that the body makes it possible to be seen as an object (of study, in this instance) but also to be a subject (with narratorial agency).

A character in the context of narrative studies of fiction can further be explained thus: a character usually has a name that does not change, he or she is told by means of a physical description, and he or she can be referred to by a personal pronoun (I, or she, for example) (Margolin 2007: 66). Characters are often incomplete beings and therefore they may have to be "coloured in", reception-like, by the reader whose imagination is activated to do so by means of inference. Inference, in turn, is based on one's general knowledge of types in the real world (Margolin 2007: 68, 77). Also, in the sphere of the literary consideration of character, it has been fairly firmly established that characters can usually be divided into flat and round ones (with reference to the novelist E.M. Forster's [1927] 1980 famous typology). Flat and round characters can usually be distinguished by their propensity to remain static (a flat character) or to dynamically develop over time (a round character) (see Margolin 2007: 73).

In the visual arts, such a division may refer to types (flat characters that represent stereotypical or social types – see Dyer, 1993 in Jannidis 2009: 26) as well as more complex, interesting and therefore round characters. A flat character, or type, could be associated with figures that operate as stand-ins for a variety of pre-texts: here one can think of allegories, symbolic figures (saints or angels) and other social types such as mothers, athletes (in the Greek tradition, for example) and so on. Usually we recognise these types by symbolic conventions that may be associated with either the literary pre-text (such as an image of the nativity) and/or with the history of the type (in iconographic terms). Specific symbolic objects may also serve, iconographically, to identify characters: such identifying symbols include halos for saints and a white lily to indicate Mary as the Mother of God. Associations like these are indicative of an important point regarding characterisation, namely the identity of the character – more about this in the section below.

Some characters in the western art canon are known for their peculiar signature *differences* or deviations from standard types. These deviations may suggest a "rounder", often more interesting and multifaceted version of a character that exists in a pre-text. For example, Donatello's (1386-1466) well-known bronze sculpture of *David* (1430-1440) shows the youth wearing a Tuscan hat – this seems slightly odd given his otherwise nude body. However, the hat is probably a reference to the city of Florence where Donatello worked. In short, an artwork may portray a character as a type, or as a fairly flat character, or it may present a more complex, rounded variation of a character's identity. In all events, the character is an agent inside the storyworld of the work, and characters or figures are very often the central subject of artworks.

In a further extension of the notion that an artwork portrays agents that one can interpret as characters, one can postulate that a character needs not be a human being; it does not even have be a complete figure. Indeed, many, especially modern, artworks reference a human or some other form in an abstract or metaphorical manner. For example, abstract sculptures such as those by Constantin Brancusi (1865 – 1957) may represent the movement and essence of birds, infants, fish and the like without "looking like" these beings. One could argue that lines, shapes and other elements – even in a completely non-figurative work – can be seen as "agents of action" in an artwork. The human mind helps to form character-like aspects here because, for example, the restfulness of a horizontal line is associated with restfulness precisely because it reminds of a human being lying down, with similar implications for vertical and diagonal lines or shapes that may even be felt to "move". Harmony, rhythm, tension, grouping – these

are all anthropomorphised qualities ascribed to formal elements like line, shape and so on in visual images (Ocvirk *et al.* 2009: 45-94). Likewise, qualities such as weight and dominance are allotted to shapes based on their size and impact – because of actual association of gravity with similar shapes in the imagination of the beholder (consider, for example, abstract paintings that evoke gesture or movement over the canvas, as Jackson Pollock's drip paintings do). In this manner, brushstrokes in a painting can, in themselves, be like agents and therefore act as "characters" in an artwork.

In summary, the notion of character in the visual arts is often but not always suggested by means of iconographic associations. Furthermore, character in the visual arts can be seen to parallel literary divisions such as flat and round character. Thus, types may be implied in an artwork, or a rounder version of a character can be suggested by means of unique qualities that render the character more complex. Furthermore, non-figurative dimensions of an artwork such as brushstrokes or other forms may be interpreted as character-like agents because of associations that the viewer may have with the direction and nature, for example, of the brushstroke.

In terms of characterisation in the visual arts, a few pertinent points can be made. Characterisation, broadly, refers to the manner in which the reader of a literary text, or as we argue, the viewer of an artwork, gathers an array of "character-indicators" and infers character traits from these indicators (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 61). For example, a literary description may outright refer to certain qualities of a character (e.g. "she was brave"). On the other hand, certain qualities of a character may be derived in light of less direct descriptions that describe a general way of thinking ("her thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines" – this reference occurs in Henry James' *Portrait of a lady* and is quoted by Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 62). When Rimmon-Kenan speaks of characterisation, she thus engages with textual material that gives the reader a sense of the character's inner character. She also notes external appearance (2002: 67); the tendency of people to associate appearance with personality traits can be traced back to the pseudo-science of physiognomy. Appearance is therefore part and parcel of the mental picture that a reader forms of a character; as are speech (the character's words) as well as his or her environment (ibid, 65-68).

This last character-indicator is simple to trace to the visual arts such as painting or drawing, especially as far as portraiture is concerned (performances and installations are likely to require a different approach). In portraiture, environments are usually shown as part of the character's surroundings. Speech, however, is absent from most visual art forms, unless one expands one's definition of visual art to include graphic novels where speech bubbles occur.

Besides those symbols or iconographic elements that are often associated with a particular character, one may also look at different objects, the character's space, his or her appearance, clothing and suggested action; these are further identifiers. External appearance as character-indicator is perhaps the most obvious characterisation device used in the context of the visual arts. This entails the physical "description" of a character. Thus Michelangelo's (1475-1564) *David* (1501-1504) is classically proportioned, nude and tensely poised; Donatello's *David,* on the other hand, is slightly effeminate, almost nude and quite youthful. The other two character-indicators discussed above – traits and manners – are more complex in the context of the visual arts, where braveness (a trait) or intricate thought patterns (manners) in a character would have to be inferred from implied actions, facial expressions, gestures and the like.

Actions as character-indicators are also important for the current discussion. Rimmon-Kenan (2002: 63) notes that habitual actions in a literary work reveal the unchanging aspects

of a character, while one-time actions evoke the character's dynamic aspect. This feature of characterisation may assist one in arriving at a distinction between overtly narrative and less overtly narrative works in the visual arts. For example, works such as the David sculptures referred to above portray one very important moment in the action of an incident that happened once (in Donatello's version, David has already slain the giant, while in Michelangelo's David, the young man is holding his slingshot before killing Goliath, contemplating his future actions). These works may be understood as portraying a significant moment in a pre-textual narrative (the "pregnant moment" famously used by the Enlightenment thinker Lessing). On the other hand, less overtly narrative works may be precisely experienced thus because they do not show an action of once-off significance being performed. Genre scenes, portraits and nameless athletes (e.g. in the classic Greek tradition) may be examples of these – although as an exception to this rule, a portrait commemorating a specific event such as a coronation is likely to combine the notions of significant action and "habitual" (i.e. conventionally portrait-like) action.

Up to this point, a broad overview was presented as to how character and characterisation as literary concepts can be applied to the reading of visual images such as portraits. Identifying the character by means of certain iconographic associations was noted as one way of establishing the "who" that is portrayed. The following section explores the notion of identity and character further, also with reference to portraiture.

In terms of exploring the notion of character in the visual arts, portraiture presents an interesting case. Portraits, it has been said, "famously make the absent present", since the sitter is not there, but his or her image is (Østermark-Johansen 2013: 347). A portrait is often associated with the idea of "searching for character"; i.e. an attempt by the artist at portraying the inner being and humanity of the sitter (Copplestone 1967: 13). When a portrait is painted of an actual person, the portrayal of this person as a character can be said to coincide with the portrayal of an actual person in biographical fiction. In other words, one may speak of Napoleon the actual person as well as Napoleon as a character in a fictional world (such as in Tolstoy's 1896 War and Peace or a painted portrait of Napoleon) – in which case it is understood that the fictional or painted Napoleon is both a reference to the actual person and a text-based interpretation, or even a fictional counterpart, of the actual person (see Schaeffer 2013: 17).

We argue that portraits present a category of character portrayal that requires special narrative consideration. Portraits usually do not obviously "tell" a story and may therefore seem to be less overtly "narrative" than painted subjects such as history painting or Bible stories. Like still-lives or genre scenes, for example, a portrait may therefore appear to be fairly low in narrative content (meaning that they do not necessarily purport to relate a story) – mostly because there is little evidence of sequencing of events in a portrait (see Ryan 2004: 140). Nonetheless, recent thinking in the field of narrative theory has begun to question the view that narrative is predicated on some sort of sequencing as a prerequisite for telling some sort of story (Steiner 2004: 146). Especially the narratologist, cultural theorist and recently also artist-curator Mieke Bal has argued that any object or element can be "narrativised" – in other words, something inside an artwork can be read as "a complex semiotic act of indexical signification" (Bal 1999: 137). Such narrativisation can be accomplished by means of a number of things such as a "telling" glance offered by a character in an artwork (Bal 1999: 252); by means of the (implied) transformation of space, or of another aspect (Bal 2010: 95); or even in the processual engagement of an artwork and viewer (Bal 2001: 219). Clearly, narrative activity is not lodged only in the actual act of telling itself – many aspects inside a visual artwork may suggest some sort of narrative possibility. This narrative possibility points to the useful concept of narrativity.

Narrativity, according to Abbott (2014: 1), is "used in two senses: in a fixed sense as *the "narr*ativeness" of narrative and in a scalar sense as the "narrativeness" of a narrative, the one applied generally to the concept of narrative, the other applied comparatively to particular narratives." He continues that: "[A]s what one might call an 'adjectival' noun, narrativity suggests connotatively a felt quality, something that may not be entirely definable or may be subject to gradations" (Abbott 2014: 3). Narrativity refers to the inherent sense that something exudes narrative potential. Therefore, many aspects inside an artwork may be narrativised, and that this can be read in terms of the scalar understanding of levels of narrativity – being more or less narrativised, but narrativised nonetheless. Folds in clothing, gestures, facial expressions, spatial depth or the passing of time suggested by various devices can all possess narrativity.

In this article, we propose that portraits, like those in the Nunology project, may be understood as narrativised and therefore subject to narratological scrutiny. To return to the issue of identity and portraits in the context of character, it seems a truism that when looking at a character inside an artwork, whether a portrait or not (but perhaps more likely in the case of a portrait), one tends to ask "who" is portrayed in the work. This "who" question was addressed above with reference to iconographic associations that function of identifiers of characters. When looking at portraits, the "who" is the actual central issue in a work – this hinges on the notion of identity.

Identity can be understood as a complex construction (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka 2010: 82). Often expressive of issues of self and, in modern times, of individualism, until fairly recently the concept of identity used to be associated with a rational and stable self (ibid, 90). However, poststructural thought has challenged this coherent, unified concept of identity and instead identity has come to be understood as a range of multiplicities that may be associated with a single person (ibid, 91). Without exploring this fairly philosophical vein further, it would suffice to note at this point that a portrait in the visual arts as a portrayal of a "who" may also express, or be explored, in light of this notion of multiplicity. It follows that the "who" of a portrait may well be seen as a range of decentralised facets; diverse, heterogeneous and changing positions that reflect multiple aspects of the self (ibid, 108).

Portraits present a peculiar category of character with emphasis on the "who" – and this hinges on the notion of identity. As is the case with more recent conceptualisations of identity construction, this article argues that the heterogeneity, even instability associated with contemporary understandings of identity may also inform how identity is viewed in the visual arts. In particular, we are interested in looking at imaginary identity as expressive of concepts instead of an actual "who". In a similar vein, Fokkema (1991: 61-62) notes with reference to postmodern literary characters the dispersal of a stable character and the emergence of multiple selves.

A portrait is usually made of an existing person, and therefore has a referent in the actual world; it usually presents a likeness or resemblance to a person. However, one may also deal with an imaginary portrait, or indeed an imaginary character, in which the character portrayed does not reference an historical person or entity. Imaginary portraits may represent types, or ghosts, or ideas, but one cannot speak of mimetic likeness (Østermark-Johansen 2013: 348). In order to gage what the character is "like", both in cases of imaginary and actual historical characters portrayed either in literary texts or in visual artworks, one has to depend on characterisation. For purposes of the current article, the portrayal of character as portrait-like entities are explored with reference to specific instances from the artist's book Nunology.

Characters and characterisation in Nunology

The characters and characterisation dimensions of *The concise encyclopaedia of Nunology* are explored in the context of the book or "encyclopaedia" in which they appear. Despite the introduction alleging that the book is full of "nunsense", seemingly arduous academic language lures the reader/viewer into the make-belief world in which a ridiculous and audacious "scientific and ontological authenticity" (the nuns') is presented as given. For example, silly words like Bunology and Nunology are both qualified in what seems to be academic terms: they are, according to the text, assimilated into a "tripartite anti-alliance between positivism, ecclesiastic and constructivism" in a "state of nomadic liminality" (Marley & Van der Westhuizen 2013: unpaginated). The accumulation of academic terms purports to impress as much as it ridicules the very scholarly terms it uses.

To make matters more complex and/or laughable, depending on one's view, each nun or group of nuns is scrutinised by means of terminological analyses and a typological sample of nuns have been subjected to examination based on Dante's levels of Purgatory (see figure 1).
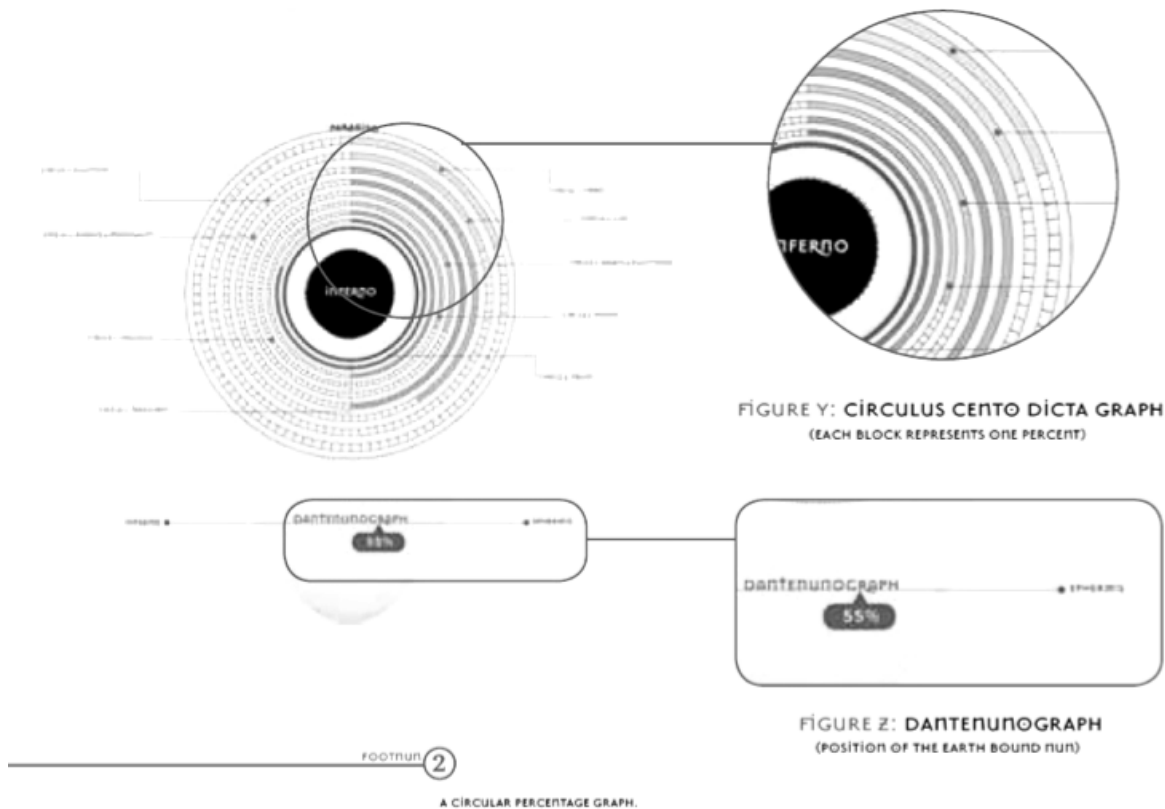

FIGURE Y: CIRCULUS CENTO DICTA GRAPH
(EACH BLOCK REPRESENTS ONE PERCENT)

FIGURE Z: DANTENUNOGRAPH
(POSITION OF THE EARTH BOUND NUN)

A CIRCULAR PERCENTAGE GRAPH.

Figure 1
Dante's levels of Purgatory, from Nunology (unpaginated artist's book), (image: courtesy of the artist).

According to the descriptions in Dante's epic *Divine Comedy* as representing Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, it is generally accepted that these levels allegorically signify the journey of the soul after death involving suffering and spiritual growth. As such, the nuns are also here said to be scrutinised as to the extent of their holiness.

The nonsensical nature of the book is carried through into the chapter divisions which start with *Evolution: Part 1* (figuratively explaining the development of the bun into a nun) and move on to *Canto 1* (in general this would refer to chapter one, but in the context of Dante's *Divine Comedy,* reference is made to the principal form of division in epic poems.) The nuns are further categorised into subsequent chapters that contain nun groups: *Impactful nuns, Colourific nuns, Incognito – non de plume,* which conclude Part 1. *Evolution: Part deux* (2) shows the development of the nun into a (more) human form with chapter divisions such as *Scientifict(n) uns, Naughty nuns, Non commercial* (categorising "sampled and other nuns"), as well as the *Unclassified section.*

Not only is linguistic reference made to the divisions found in epic poems, but narrative divisions also come into play. The book is indicative of a storyworld, in this case the "world" of *Nunology.* This world (the textual world) suggests suspension in a liminal non-place since no clear indication of a tangible place is given, and likewise many of the characters that are portrayed seem liminal in nature. While many of the characters do not seem to dwell in a physical location (setting), possible textual environments are inferred through themes in the different chapter divisions. *Impactful nuns* include for instance *Nunzi* with clear reference to Nazi Germany (complete with swastikas and uniformed marching hordes) and *Buoynun* floating "some where [sic] over the Bermuda Triangle' (Marley & Van der Westhuizen 2013 unpaginated) – this mystical place its associations of disappearing; this reference reinforces the notion that the nuns are, and also are not, in an actual physical location. In other words, the nuns are neither here nor there, and they are neither nuns nor actual or existing fictional characters - although some like *Ranunsel* play on existing textual characters.. In *Scientifict(n)uns* reference is made to "scientology" and existence "within the bi-lateral science-nunosphere" (Marley & Van der Westhuizen 2013 unpaginated). Reference is thus made to the nuns as being both spiritually and biologically grounded (or rather suspended). *Scientifict(n)uns* seem quite extraordinary. They might be perceived as strange mutants or as having extra-terrestrial qualities. Their storyworld(s) exist somewhere between the impossible and an imaginative state of ("nun"- or) non-being. Indeed, according to the diagram based on Dante's levels of Purgatory *Specinun 2,* namely *Lununtic* (figure 2), has been found to be in limbo. This nun also seems to be possessed by the powers of the moon and turns into a werewolf – this becomes apparent considering the shadow it casts, where one sees claws for feet; together with the hairiness of the body. In other words, she mutates into a non-being. This relates to Fokkema (1991: 61-62) who propounded that characters in the postmodern do not suggest a stable identity, but rather represent incomplete, open-ended and even contradictory dimensions.

Specinun 3 (Mununtant), Specinun 4 (Abduction nun) and *Specinun 5 (Jaba the nun)* (Figure 3) all have a morphed, "otherworldly" appearance. Direct reference is made to their extra-terrestrial nature: mutant, abduction and Jaba (referring to the character in the Star Wars, movies by the same name).

The storyworld in which these characters function (a world in between scientific allegation and an otherworldly nowhere) thus function as dimensions of characterisation. Similarly, there are clues in their physical appearance that serve to characterise the nuns. Their physical appearance, also noted in writing in the section *Evolution Part 1*, makes it clear that the nuns are hot cross buns that have developed feet, tiny wings (that function like arms), with one central (perhaps a third intuitive) eye in what looks like the head (although no neck is visible). Except for physical traits that remind of humanness, other iconographic elements also prevail. Notably, most of the nuns in *Nunology* are equipped with a halo and a veil in one form or another. Habits and in particular veils are characteristic of nun's attire.

Figure 2
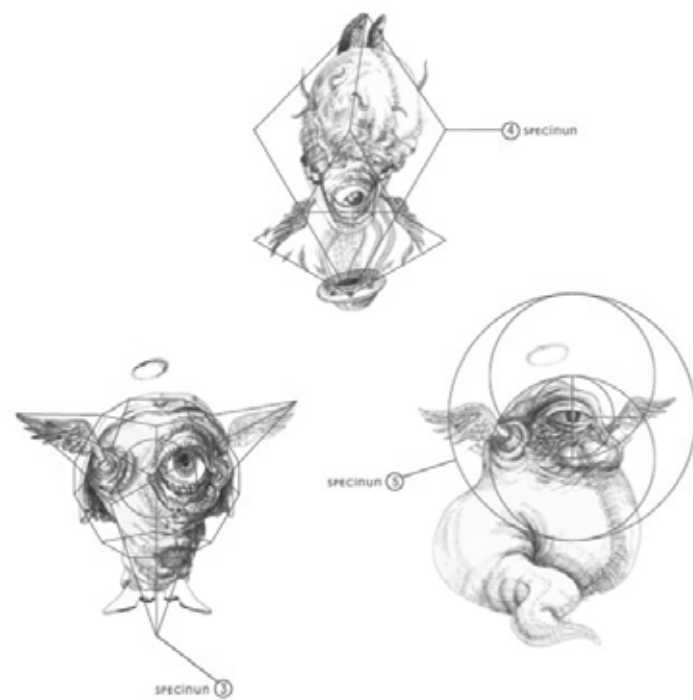**Lununtic, from Nunology (unpaginated artist's book), (image: courtesy of the artist).**

Figure 3
Specinun 3 - Mununtant (bottom left), Specinun 4 - Abduction nun (top) and Specinun 5 - Jaba the nun
(right) Nunology (unpaginated artist's book), (image: courtesy of the artist).

The word "habit" is derived from the Latin word *"habere"* (meaning *"to be"*). The noun "habit" has developed into "outward condition" or "appearance", and eventually it came to refer to the clothes that religious orders wear as a sign of their religious consecration. A "*habit*", therefore, characterise nuns. Nuns are women of prayer who have dedicated themselves to a life of prayer, penance and sacrifice. So a *"religious habit"* is a visible manifestation that these are people who have dedicated their lives to a life of devotion and higher purpose. The seriousness of this association stands in direct contrast with the silly playfulness of the nuns portrayed in *Nunology.* These nuns seem slightly freakish, instead; they seem to recall the idea that nuns are often the butt of silly jokes.

In the images halos are present in nuns who are in the process of evolving from a nun into a human (*Evolution Part 2*), but these halos do not afford *Nunology's* nuns the serious sacredness of, for example, haloed figures in medieval art. In religious art, sculpture and iconography this ring of light is conventionally portrayed above the heads of subjects that are perceived to be holy, enlightened or celestial beings – again something that becomes a playful part of the nuns in *Nunology*. Playful also are their small wings and squat demeanour, which make them seem incapable of being suspended high above the earth as winged angels might do. As a result these droopy-eyed, funny shoe-bearing figures don't attempt to represent the sort of seriousness rather conventionally associated with nuns.

Due to the lack of representative clues in the environments in most of the nun characters (often just a white space) the question arises if these illustrations might be perceived as portraits of imaginary identities conceptualised in the eyes of the beholder. For the purpose of this investigation it has been decided to sample three nuns from three different categories in order to explore some narrative possibilities and aspects of characterisation. We consider literary concepts such as settings (indicative of storyworlds), the external appearance of the characters that hinge on them being portraits as well as the written material in the book to explore them as characters that demonstrate aspects of characterisation.

Character and characterisation: A reading

Three different chapters in the book *Nunology* were considered for this investigation based on the distinctive themes revealed within the titles of chapters and nuns. The flirtatious aspect of the characters known as *Naughty nuns* attracts initial attention; among these *Ranunsel* captured our attention (figure 4).

The storyworld of this artwork obviously revolves around the pre-text of the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales, specifically the story of Rapunzel. *Ranunsel* is thus linked to Rapunzel through wordplay – the "nun" replaces the (intended) "pun". Various versions and adaptations of the story exist, but conventionally the fairy tale of Rapunzel entails a damsel in distress, locked away in a tower by an evil witch only to be saved by a brave prince. In the tradition of portraiture or more specifically children's book illustration, Rapunzel is portrayed as frail, a sad figure in need of salvation (see figure 5).
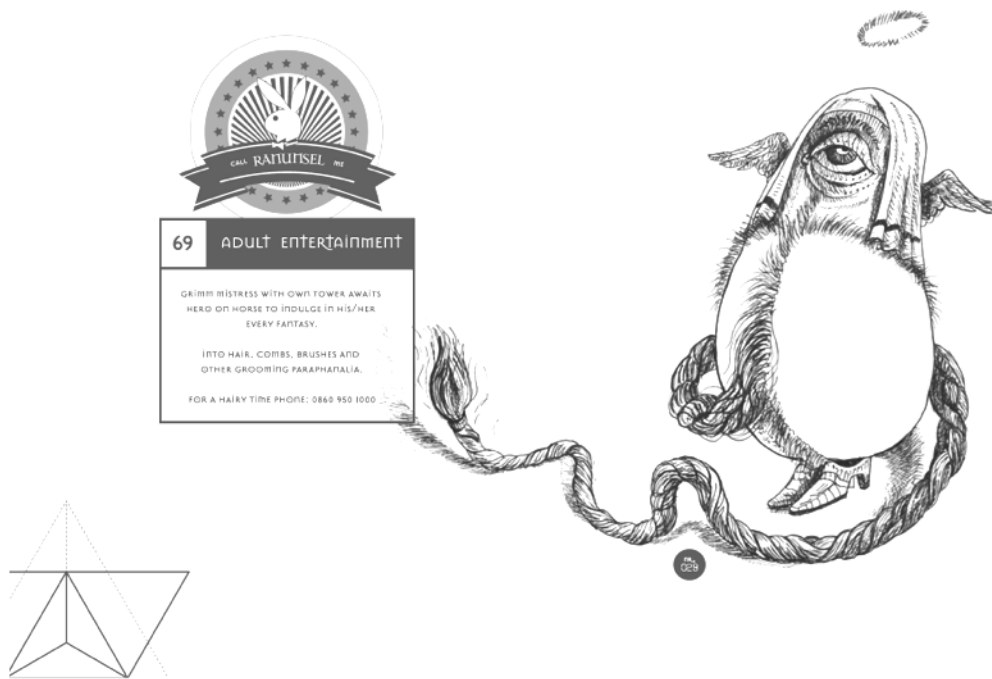
Figure 4
Ranunsel, from Nunology (unpaginated artist's book), (image: courtesy of the artist).

Figure 5
Illustration of Rapunzel in the children's book series Storieman (1984: 239).

Iconographical, the long braided hair is the only trait shared by both the pre-textual character as well as the nun-figure. Rapunzel is not known to have wings, a halo or only one eye, but is usually portrayed as a beautiful young (human) girl (see figure 5). The plot of the story lends a certain kind of vulnerability to the character of Rapunzel. One expects *Ranunsel* to display the same helplessness of the original character. However, the upward slant of the eye of the nun and the slightly turned position of her body that does not confront the viewer head-on reveal a demeanour of dismissiveness, oblivious to the gaze of the viewer. This might also be interpreted as putting herself on display, almost like posing for a portrait and showing her most distinctive traits for viewing. Her long braided hair does not find its origins underneath her veil as would

be expected. Rather it grows from beneath her "belly" in an area where one would expect her sexual body parts to be – as if her body hair mutated strangely.

As an agent in the adult entertainment world, classified through the chapter title *Naughty nuns,* her attributes are explained as "Grimm mistress with own tower" (figure 4). Through this description she is described in terms that suggest a powerful and assertive modern woman, directly contrasting the young innocence of the traditional Rapunzel character (although of course the actual nun-figure does not approximate this description). The nun-figure of *Ranunsel* inverts both the Rapunzel story as well as the written description given to her. Her description also implies that she is not in need of a hero to save her, but awaits one "to indulge in his/her every fantasy" (see description in figure 4). The implied setting changes from the Grimm medieval storyworld to a contemporary space of sexual innuendo, a laughably ridiculous world constructed in the mind of the viewer. *Ranunsel's* braided hair does not function as a means of escape from her tower, but lures the fantasy seeker into her tower of naughty pleasures. Strangely, she interacts with the "outside" world by means of a contact number provided in her description (figure 4) – and this adds a further layer of meaning: she is a call girl.

Various narrative possibilities emerge in this character analysis; one could suggest that, although it seems outrageous to imagine a sweet fairy tale character as part of the *Naughty nuns*, *Ranunsel* is quite obviously very different from her fairy tale counterpart. The irony suggested by this character is lodged in the fact that she is a "provocative" entity, not at all a pious nun-type. Characterisation of the *Naughty nuns*, and specifically of *Ranunsel,* relies on a merging of pre-textual elements – in this case that of the Grimm fairy tales and prostitution (she may be seen to offer sex for sale). Through processual engagement a rounder and more complex identity is divulged in a light-hearted, imagined world where innocence is lost and a nun doubles as a call girl.

Illustrative of the techniques used above to arrive at a reading of *Ranunsel* through indulgence into the way in which character and characterisation reveal information about this portrait, another two artworks will be shortly referred to.

Specinun 3 (Mununtant) (bottom left of Figure 3), as mentioned under the heading "Characters and characterisation in *Nunology*", has a morphed appearance with extra-terrestrial qualities. Amongst others, this character portrayed in the section on *Sciencefict(n)uns* functions in a world in between scientific contention and an ethereal void. The form of this "specinun" is different than most of the nuns in *Nunology*. Instead of a heavy body, the bottom part of the nun is wrinkled and thin evoking compassion when considering that *Mununtant* possibly represents an experiment gone wrong. A description next to the figure in *Nunology*, relates possible genetic bindings (figure 6).

Included in the diagram connections is made with *Nunification* from the section *Incognito nuns*, *Jaba the nun (Sciencefict(n)uns)* and *Nunconformist (Naughty Nuns)*. Associations made through the exploration of these characters provide clues as to the identity of *Mununtant*. *Nunification*, for instance, is incognito through means of bandages covering the body in a mummified manner and thus concealing his/her true identity. In the same way *Mununtant* might be an "under cover" agent concealing a secret identity. *Jaba the nun*, a brawny reference to the Jabba the Hutt-character in the Star Wars movies, represents science fiction in general (genre of the movie) and connections to the underworld (in terms of the character traits. *Nunconformist* (figure 6 top) on the other hand, relates a sense of rebellion and individualism. A halo of chains, piercings and a tattoo, as well as a blasé, laid-back demeanour, heighten the perception that

this character is no conventional nun. It might be assumed that the peculiar and diverse genetic makeup of *Mununtant* gives rise to a schizophrenic identity; iconoclastic in nature, but all is not what it seems. The name *Mununtant* also implies its mutating nature, thus suggesting also that identity cannot be fixed and reflect multiple aspects of the self. In line with this notion Cherie Allan refers to postmodern identity as being "in process and will never reach completion" (2012: 75). Through characterisation, clues as to the probable identity of this nun have been recognised, but a multiplicity of meanings can be connected to this character. In other words, one should expect the unexpected – and mental representations or ideas that are not shown, can be imagined (see Herman, 2002: 116).
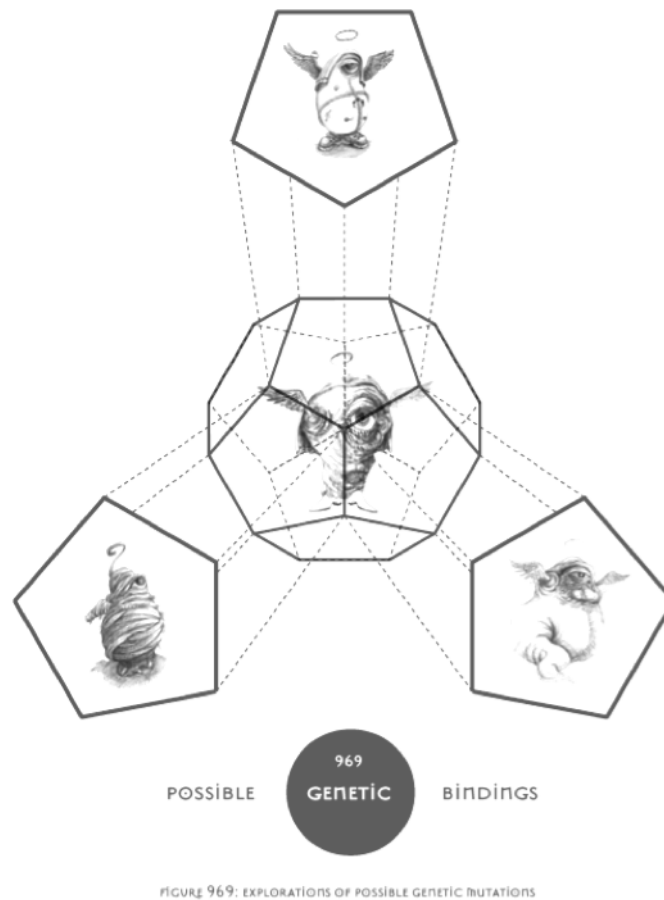

Figure 6
Figure 969: Explorations of possible genetic mutations, from Nunology (unpaginated artist's book), (image: courtesy of the artist).

Another group of nuns seem to conceal their original identities. The *Incognito nuns* all appear to be under-cover agents, pretending to be something that they are not. Contributing to the intrigue is the improbability of them being conventional nuns. *Nunguni* (figure 7) is a typical one-eyed nun with a halo and rather woody wings. Contradictory to these attributes various other clues are presented that reveal that all is not what it seems.

Figure 7
Nunguni, from Nunology (unpaginated artist's book), (image: courtesy of the artist).

Except for the indexical tail and spotted fur, it is inferred that a set of horns is concealed underneath the nun's veil. These are all cow-like traits and especially traits of the Nguni cattle breed. Characteristics of the Nguni cattle are, amongst others, their resistance to diseases and their fertility. As tradition holds these cattle are also used as a bride's dowry. All these traits are indirectly adopted by the *Nunguni* nun and although the original identity, already tainted by the irony of being a nun, is being concealed, it is inevitable that a merger of identities takes place. The juxtapositioning of good and evil iconographical elements contributes towards the sense of conflicting identities. The snakeskin shoes might have an obscure connection to the serpent whose temptation gave rise to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and the condemnation that followed. In the same light the implied horns under the nun's veil also seems to conceal evil, because horns might sometimes be perceived as devilish. In short, the characterisation of *Nguni* seems to highlight a trait that manifests in the nuns in general - a struggle between divinity and the malevolent. Through the use of human and animal characteristics, multiplicities of identity are communicated in a quirky and humorous manner.

All the nun-like figures are "creatures of the word" (see Margolin 2007: 67) as much as visual representations – perhaps their reliance on the word is dominant because the pun is essential for interpreting them.

Conclusion

This article explored selected nun-like figures from the artist's book *Nunology*. A selection of nun-figures (*Ranunsel, Nunguni* and *Mununtant*) was interpreted as portraits of characters, with emphasis on how these characters came into being trough characterisation. An investigation into individual portraits in the nun-family gave rise to a better understanding and enjoyment of

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how character and characterisation can contribute to a visual narratological reading of the book *Nunology.*

Briefly, the theoretical apparatus used in the article was borrowed from narratology, which is a field that has conventionally been concerned with the interpretation of literary narratives but which has expanded over the last two decades under the umbrella term postclassical narratology to include visual narratology, among others. Explications of the concepts of character and characterisation as by a number of literary scholars were found to be useful: these include Foster ([1927] 1980 – flat and round characters); Jannidis (2009: 14 – character as a participant in a storyworld); Toolan (2013: 18 – a storyworld is a "mental model"); Margolin (characters are "creatures of the word"); and Rimmon-Kenan (2002: 61 – characterisation entails a "network of character traits"). Narrativity according to Abbot's (2014: 3) formulation as well as Bal's (2004: 4) use of the term pre-text assisted setting up a theoretical framework by means of which the reading of the nun-figures as characters could proceed.

The names of the nuns, in most cases, hint at a specific pun that she represents. Titles such as *Ranunsel,* and *Nunguni* has direct reference to existing characters or types, thus implying shared identities, whereas *Mununtant* stands for a multiplicity of meanings that suggest open-endedness due to the variety of possible genetic bindings. As participants in storyworlds, the nuns can be said to represent specific traits that contribute to their implied identities. *Ranunsel*, through intertextual reference, evolved from a flat storybook character into a rounder representation of an unlikely agent of sexual innuendo. *Nunguni*, who is quite the undercover agent, can be said to hint at the struggle between good and evil, highlighting the reference to Dante's levels of Purgatory (figure 1) and most probably the (primary) pre-text (Bal's 2006 term for the literary text that predates an artwork) for the *Nunology* book. *Mununtant* reveals mutating, morphing identities in a more pronounced manner than the other examples, but in all, the nun-figures are narrativised elements that all speak of transformations – from the sublime, often, to the ridiculous.

This article set out to demonstrate the usefulness of applying the narratological concepts of character and characterisation to the interpretation of visual images, and in this manner hopes to contribute towards the expanding postclassical narratological sphere of specifically visual narratology. Engaging with the characters from a delightful artist's book made this pursuit not only narratologically gripping, but also contributed towards the scholarship associated with the broader practice-led research activities of our research niche (Visual narratives in the South African context).

Notes

1. Practice-led research entails various approaches to research in the creative fields, and engages with creative work as research across performing and creative disciplines (including fine arts, different types of design, performing arts, creative writing), usually but not necessarily together with written research outputs (Combrink & Marley, 2009: 181-182).

2. The term pre-text is used here in Bal's (2004: 4) sense of the word; it refers to an existing source text, or a thematic counterpart, or a surrounding context. In other words, it refers to the story "behind" the artwork – such as a Bible text, or an allegorical or mythical relation, or to historical events as contexts.

3. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's famous treatise on sculpture (called Laocoön: An essay on the limits of painting and poetry, was first published in 1766). In this publication, Lessing argued that

an artwork is purely spatial; that temporality is the domain of poetry, and that one "takes in" an artwork at once ([1766] 1962: 19). Furthermore, the artwork portrays one climactic instance, the pregnant moment, from the story (or in Bal's 2004: 4 terms, the pre-text) it illustrates. Rosalind Krauss (1977) was among the modern theorists to thoroughly take issue with Lessing's thoughts; his ideas nonetheless remain a foil for various explorations of parallels and differences between the visual arts and literature (see, for example, Ryan, 2004: 23-26).

4   See, for example, Monastery of the Angels Cloistered Dominican Nuns, 2012.

5   Jabba the Hutt is a criminal type gangster character in the Outer Rim Territories in the movie Star Wars. The Hutt is notorious for a number of criminal activities – slavery, gunrunning, spice-smuggling, extortion and more. He represents a worm-like slug, with a legless, tapered body coated in slime (Lucasfilm Ltd. 2012).

6   See for example ZZZ Nguni Cattle: Nguni cattle South Africa, 2008.

7   In many Southern African traditional ethnic groups it is customary to give a dowry in the form of cattle. This term refers to the payment made by a prospective husband to the father of his bride to be (ZZZ Nguni Cattle: Nguni cattle South Africa, 2008.)

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Colette Lotz is a lecturer in the subject group Graphic design at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University. She teaches illustration art. Her MA in Fine Art focused on postcolonial studies with emphasis on the work of Penny Siopis. As an artist she has participated in various exhibitions.

Louisemarié Rathbone is a lecturer in Art History at the Potchefstroom Campus of the NWU. She is interested in interdisciplinary fields and is currently working towards her PhD in Art History in which she applies a narratological interpretative approach to the installation artworks of the South African artist Jan van der Merwe.