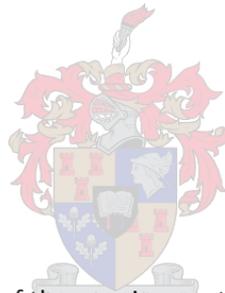


Liminality and Ontological Materiality:
An Investigation of a Dualistic Christian Grand Narrative, Governing Human Relationship with the
Natural World

By
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Supervised by Prof Elizabeth Gunter

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Declaration

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March 2017

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Abstract

This thesis is an investigation of the historical influence of Christianity on the grand narratives governing the human relationship with the natural world. It examines the role that certain central Christian metaphors have played in the moral conditioning of humans and especially the way in which particular Biblical texts have been constructed as a fantasy of mastering and escaping the natural world. The result is a problematic dualistic narrative that posits nature primarily as a flawed, temporary home from which escape is necessary, in direct contrast to an eternal spiritual afterlife which offers perfection and salvation. Humankind's ultimate dependence on the natural is denied, resulting in further alienation from nature.

Reductive and violent Biblical binary oppositions, become a trigger for my visual art and intuitive processes, through which I visually express a personal concern, engaging and challenging these largely uncontested monolithic narratives. I employ the postmodern concept of ontological materiality to emphasize and confront a deep rooted epistemological discrimination against the natural world. In my art installations, I use the idea of liminality, where the viewer is confronted with complex emotional experiences, which hopefully serve to evoke perceptual change.

My thesis is not an iconoclastic attack on Christianity, but a necessary investigation of its enduring influence on contemporary, secular grand narratives, like science, capitalism and politics. It is a humble attempt to contribute towards a new narrative and to provoke alternative views regarding the natural world.

Opsomming

Hierdie tesis is 'n ondersoek na die historiese invloed van die Christelike geloof op die meesternarratief wat die verhouding tussen die mens en die natuur beïnvloed. Dit ondersoek die rol wat sekere Christelike metafore speel in die morele kondisionering van mense en veral die manier waarop spesifieke Bybelse tekste gekonstrueer is as 'n fantasie van menslike meesterskap en ontvlugting van die natuurlike wêreld. Die gevolg is 'n problematiese, dualistiese narratief wat die natuur primêr voorstel as 'n gebrekkige, tydelike tuiste waarvan ontvlug moet word. Dit word in direkte kontras geplaas met 'n perfekte en salige hiernamaals waarin die mens ewiglik as 'n geestelike wese sal triomfeer. Die mens se absolute afhanklikheid van die natuur word sodoende ontken, wat dan tot verdere vervreemding en verwydering lei.

Simplistiese en aggressiewe Bybelse binêre opposisies dien as aansporing vir my visuele kuns en intuïtiewe prosesse, waardeur ek my persoonlike beswaring visueel uitdruk en hierdie grootliks onbetwiste monolitiese narratiewe bevraagteken. Ek gebruik die Postmoderne konsep van ontologiese materialiteit om 'n diep gewortelde epistemologiese diskriminasie teen die natuur te beklemtoon en te bevraagteken. In my kuns installasies gebruik ek die idêe van liminaliteit om die waarnemer te konfronteer met komplekse emosionele ervarings, wat hopelik perseptuele verandering teweeg sal bring.

My tesis is nie 'n ikonoklastiese aanval op Christendom nie, maar 'n noodsaaklike ondersoek na die blywende invloed daarvan op die kontemporêre sekulêre meesternarratiewe soos wetenskap, kapitalisme en politiek. Dit is 'n nederige poging om tot 'n nuwe narratief by te dra, en om alternatiewe oogpunte aangaande ons verhouding met die natuurlike wêreld te inspireer.

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Chapter 1: “God is dead”

An Orientation to this Thesis

1.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to give an overview of the most important theoretical ideas underpinning this thesis. In so far as my theoretical work is concerned, I aim to highlight two important post-structuralist/ modernist approaches in particular which have informed my work. Firstly, that of Christianity as a “grand narrative” which legitimises anthropocentrism and creates a problematic dualism between humanity and nature, and secondly the postmodern methodology of questioning the epistemological and ontological foundations of knowledge, language, symbolism and image.

As far as my art practice is concerned, I discuss some of the main theorists who have influenced my work, as well as the dilemma of the artist who wants to engage with a subject as serious as the looming environmental catastrophe without falling back on such discredited notions as “morality” or “truth”. More specifically, I discuss the idea of “liminality” as an attempt to move beyond existing institutionalized narrative constructs and examine “ontological materiality” as a way to both construct and question knowledge.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

“God is dead”, the madman proclaims in Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844-1900), *Gay Science* (1882). Here Nietzsche allegorises the end of claims to absolute knowledge, like that of the institutionalised epistemology of Christianity (Frodeman 2003: 59). The apparent insanity of the madman results from “the de-divinization and decentring of reason and rationality” (Williams: 263), and it is exactly this “de-divinization” that allows the theorists of post-structuralism and post-modernism to question the historical, social and psychological narratives within knowledge and language. By critically re-reading the Bible as an artificially constructed cultural and historical product instead of a God-given “Truth”, I therefore draw on a long tradition

of scholarship which rejects the notion of the Bible as an inviolable, self-evident essence and instead views it as *text*, irrevocably bound up in language, discourse and representation.

In his book *The Post-Modern Condition* (1984), Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924 -1998) uses the term “grand narrative” to describe all forms of institutionalised knowledge and ideology as a form of storytelling or narrative. Lyotard argues that Christianity is one such a metanarrative that is deeply entrenched in modern (especially Western) discourse. He argues that:

...narrative knowledge does not give priority to the question of its own legitimation and... certifies itself in the pragmatics of its own transmission without having recourse to argumentation and proof (1984: 27).

I draw directly on Lyotard when examining the Bible as a grand narrative voicing our fear and loathing of the natural. My reading of this narrative is firstly based on Biblical text, which I quote directly from the King James version of the Bible. I also take into account, amongst others, the work of theorists such as medieval historian Lynne White Jr, who argues that Christianity is by far the most anthropocentric of the world’s religions and that its story of creation has made it possible to “exploit nature in a mood of indifference” (1967: 2), as well as the work of the moral philosopher Peter Singer, who argues that the untold cruelty inflicted on non-human species and the reckless abuse of nature are legitimised by Biblical narratives such as the tale of Noah and the Flood (1975: 187-188).

In “deconstructing” the Biblical narrative of human superiority over nature and especially in investigating the “binary opposites” posited by such a narrative – that of heaven/earth; natural/spiritual; man/animal etc. – I draw on the theories of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004) who argues that dominant systems of thought are kept in place by language and rely on the exclusion of “the other”. In *Positions* he explains that

To ‘deconstruct’...is... to work through the structured genealogy of its concepts in the most scrupulous and immanent fashion, but at the same time to determine, from a certain external

perspective...what it cannot name or describe, what this history may have concealed or excluded (1972: 6).

In *The Animal that Therefore I am* (2008) he argues explicitly that what has most often been “concealed or excluded” in the field of philosophy is our relationship with animals, and uses his own neologism “limitrophy” to describe the problematic dualism between the human and the animal. He questions how philosophical study, by trying to understand human behaviour, considers all other species as a heterogenic other, and therefore claims that the only thing philosophy manages to understand is that we (humans) are not animals.

The animal, what a word! The animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to another living creature [a l'autrevivant]... What animal? The other (2002: 372).

In my investigation of the binary opposites within Biblical narratives which posit such concepts as heaven/earth, spiritual/natural and man/animal in a problematic dualistic relationship where the former is always privileged over the latter, I once again employ a close reading of Biblical text, like the Biblical story of man being made in God’s “own image” (Singer 1990: 187), whilst drawing on theorists such as Derrida, who speaks of an “oppositional abyss” between humans and animals (Atterton and Calarco 2004: 124) and Lynn White, who argues that Christianity gave man “effective monopoly” over everything spiritual (1967: 2).

Next, I consider the extent to which the “story” of Christianity has, even in an (arguably) secular Western world, influenced the modern discourses of science, politics and capitalism. I argue that modern discourse regarding human-caused climate change and ecological destruction is still, first and foremost, anthropocentric and that fundamentalist Christian views are hampering the implementation of “green” legislation. In this I draw on a wide range of sources: from Cambridge Geophysics Professor Robert White to veteran journalist Bill Moyers to contemporary websites and Christian blogs. I also show how the Christian metanarrative of human superiority over nature has, after the Age of Enlightenment, been translated into another metanarrative, which posits “Science” as the new salvation and emancipation of man. In making this argument I look at key figures in

the history of science: from St. Thomas Aquinas, to René Descartes, to Francis Bacon. Drawing on the work of, amongst others, Lynne White, Carolyn Merchant and Mark Dion, I show how Western science was “cast in a matrix of Christian theology” (White 1967: 2), which saw nature as “a source of secrets to be extracted for economic advance” (Foltz 2002: 41). Finally I examine how this narrative has influenced and legitimized some of the excesses of modern capitalism by drawing on the work of Roderick Nash, who shows how imperial Western civilization “created wilderness” in order to appropriate it. Peter Ling, who looks at the commodification of land in the United States; and MacCannel, who reads the formal gardens of Versailles as a coercion of nature which simultaneously express both political and economic power.

To wrap up: my second chapter deals with Christianity’s grand narrative about the relationship between man and nature, and aims to highlight the catastrophic results this narrative has had on the environment and our relationship with other species. However, it is important to understand that I investigate this issue not as an amateur theologian or post-modern philosopher but as an *artist*. Lyotard, in his book, *The Postmodern Condition*, argues that the contemporary world-view is moving away from grand narratives, which provide a framework for everything, and towards “little narratives” as Bennet and Royle mention in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*

Little narratives present local explanations of individual events or phenomena but do not claim to explain everything. Little narratives are fragmentary, non-totalizing and non-teleological...[and their] legitimation is... plural, local and contingent (2014: 282).

As a counter to the grand narrative that Christianity provides about mankind’s relationship with nature, I then offer my own ‘little narrative’ – my art. This narrative is deeply personal, fragmentary, non-totalising and questioning, but it is nonetheless meant as a direct challenge to the monolithic, powerful, and largely uncontested anthropocentric Christian grand narrative. In other words, I examine the Christian grand narrative so closely (in the second chapter of this thesis) because it has acted as a spur, a provocation and, in many ways, the goading impulse behind my own “little narrative”, which I discuss in the third and fourth chapters of this thesis.

1.3 Art Practice

With my art practice and visual investigation I explore the moral complexities and discomfort layered within our relationships with non-human species. According to Eileen John, moral complexities in art can provide knowledge through “experiential and emotional stimulation”. John argues that this

...stimulation is taken to be important to moral agents’ need to perceive morally relevant elements of experience, to have morally sensitive and apt emotional responses, and to take up morally challenging perspectives in imagination (Gaut and Lopes: 335).

The postmodernist view, however, is often critical or careful of intellectual offerings that are considered moral, real or true. Rather, a more useful idea might be to challenge perceptions and provoke alternative views. Lyotard talks about the discomfort created in art with the discovery of the “lack of reality”, or the “shattering of belief”. He warns that

...it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented (1984: 81).

So, although I am concerned with ecology and with the seemingly destructive dualistic human relationship with nature, I am careful of offering moral truths. Steve Baker suggests that one way of dealing with the problem of addressing issues pertaining to the natural in postmodern art is to focus on authentic experience,

... the experience of wonder or fear as antidotes to anthropocentrism ... to shed the “baggage” of Western thought (2000: 12).

I therefore draw deeply on my own personal experience when creating the “little narrative” of my art. This includes both my own childhood experience of Afrikaner Calvinism under apartheid and my adult experiences of everyday human callousness towards environmental degradation. My work further aims to elicit a very personal experience of “wonder or fear” from the viewers so that they too can create their own

“little narratives” – by re-imagining the natural outside the boundaries of the entrenched Christian paradigm.

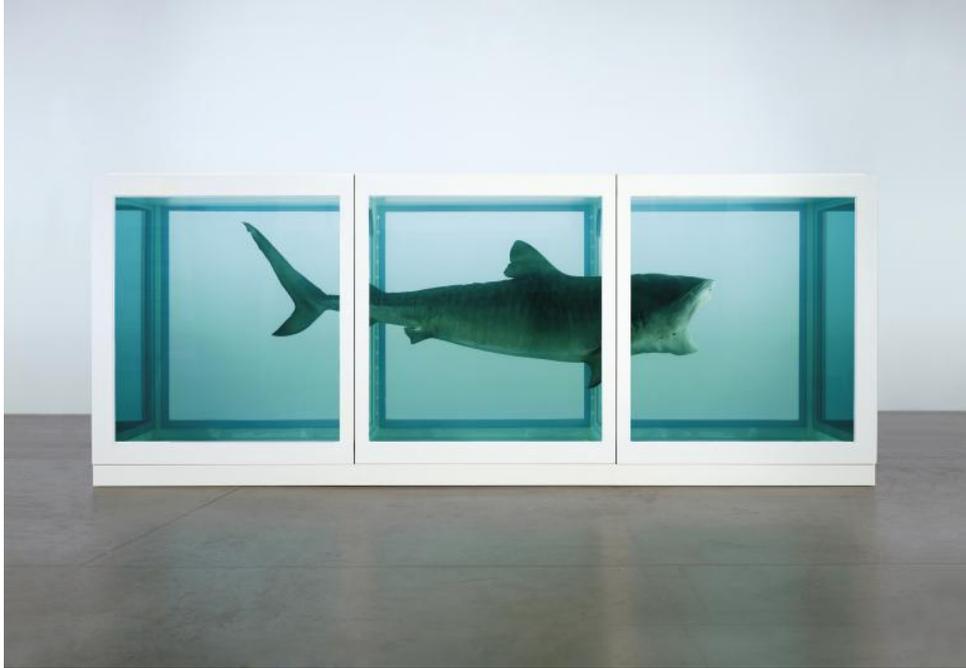


Fig 1: Damien Hirst. *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991).

In *The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Somebody Living* (see Fig. 1), Damien Hirst sardonically empowers the viewer over what Jaques Derrida calls the phenomenology of the fear of fear and the fear of death (1995: 54). Similarly, I am interested in addressing empowered and institutionalised anthropocentrism through evoking conflicting emotional intersections. By combining images and objects from nature with a simultaneous re-reading of Biblical texts, I attempt to create liminal complexities between fear and power; loathing and empathy; hate and pity; denial and culpability; subjectivity and objectivity. I thus acknowledge complexity in the experience of my art in a way that is completely consistent with postmodern discourse and methodology.

Like Nietzsche's madman, any deconstruction of tradition and institutionalised knowledge is complex and full of ambiguities. It is a process of positive change that inevitably involves some sort of trauma, angst and resistance. In my artwork I juxtapose images and objects that symbolise fear and loathing of the natural with Christian ritual to invoke a threshold of liminality. With the use of such Christian

rituals as prayers, hymn singing, chanting, appeasement and memorial services, I draw on anthropologist, Victor Turner's (1920 – 1983), theories of liminality. Turner's studies of liminality are, in turn, based on the Arnold van Gennep book "Rites of Passage" (1960). Turner describes ritual liminality as a crossing or aggregation of a cultural line or limit (based on the Latin word "limen", or threshold), achieved in three steps: Phase one is separation/death/detachment from a previous cultural "state"/structure/condition. Phase two is the ambiguous passing or passenger stage, now detached from the state, or towards "anti-structure". The final phase is a process of "reaggregation", "reincorporation" or rebirth into a new, changed state (Turner: 94-95).

Judith Westerveld in her thesis "Liminality in Contemporary Art", describes liminality

... as a middle ground, a space and time where transformations take place, a transitional state filled with ambiguities and contradictions (Westerveld 2011: 3).

With my art work, I aim to provoke the viewer to recognise his or her own uncertain place on the threshold between culpability, vulnerability and the flawed hope of external salvation. This liminality functions to disrupt the viewer's epistemological and metaphysical ontology, especially with regards to what is considered feared or loved, sacred or non-sacred.

Liminality itself forms a realm where questions instead of answers are raised and an inquisitive and critical attitude of one's surroundings is instilled. It forms the realm of creativity (Westerveld 2011: 15).

My visual process, aided by the tandem theoretical research, therefore aims to employ some of the principles of philosophical study by challenging that which progressed and that which we understand to be true (epistemology); understand to be real (ontology); know to be real (realism); experience as real (phenomenology); and experience as ambiguous (liminal). By employing principles that engage liminality of experience, I provoke and challenge deep rooted socio-religious and ontological constructs. Through troubling mixtures of visual stimuli I engage experiential ambiguity via combinations of spiritual comfort and a discomfort about reality; fear and hope; and loathing and empathy.

Lastly, I rely on the idea of “ontological materiality” to question and construct knowledge with regards to animals and nature. With my art making processes, I am concerned with materiality and the cultural epistemological constructs of image, material and objects. In her book *Art Beyond Representation*, Barbara Bolt argues that the image can transcend mere representation when the creative process involves the dynamic performance between the medium and the image:

In a materialist ontology of the work of art, materialisation is not just enacted discursively. More radically... materialisation implicates the life of the matter (2004: 173).

With the use of found material, objects and photographic documentation, I try to create a causal link between the signifier and signified, as well as between the ontological and the metaphysical experience of object/material/image. My work then not only invokes the reconsideration of visual language and iconology, but also of the representation of reality and the medium used to do so. My interest in materiality is to trigger our fear and (often simultaneous) malevolent response to object/material/image, as well as to emphasize a deep rooted epistemological discrimination against the natural.

To employ art making in order to challenge the way we view the natural world is also problematic because of the historical epistemological reading of animal and nature imagery. Mark Dion addresses these readings of the natural by questioning the anthropocentric and ideological power imprinted in the classification of natural and non-human species. Dion often criticises the scientific world, especially taxonomy, for trying to classify or order “messy and multifarious” nature into static form (Corrin et al: 47). His work, often in the form of installations, comments on museum culture. They illustrate

...movement from encyclopaedic, idiosyncratic displays of objects to a hierarchical model that has helped to construct our notions of knowledge, exploration and nature, and mediated our relationship to the world of living things (Corrin et al 2011: 38).

I am therefore particularly influenced by artists who use non-traditional media and who employ media in conflicting juxtapositions. Such media is chosen not to represent, but rather for its inherent and potential metaphorical qualities. These



Fig 2: Damien Hirst. *This Little Piggy Went to Market, This Little Piggy Stayed at Home* (1996).



Fig 3: Joseph Beuys. *Coyote: I like America and America likes me* (1974).



Fig 4: Berline De Bruyckere. *kreupelhout – cripplewood* (2012 – 2013).

artists often employ the reality of real animals and natural elements to streamline the questioning of epistemological reality. Damien Hirst, for example, in his scientific animal display *This Little Piggy Went to the Market, this Little Piggy Stayed at Home* (1996) (see Fig. 2), deliberates the humorous appropriation of animals and how they (animals) are mere food to us (humans). Joseph Beuys, in his performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) (see Fig. 3), spends three days in a room with a coyote. In a comment on America's malevolent history with indigenous cultures and animals, he tries to regain communion with the aboriginal coyote. Belrinde De Breuykere, morphs human flesh and bones into the "body" of an elm tree in her wax sculpture *Kreupelhout–Cripplewood* (2012) (see Fig. 4).

In this thesis and visual component then, I attempt to challenge the Christian, dualistic grand narrative that is still subliminally influencing human activity on earth. I show how I expose, acknowledge and challenge this narrative, by complicating the epistemological and ontological constructs of image, material and Biblical text. Through my art installation, I rely on an emotional, liminal rereading of image, material and Biblical text, to detach the viewer from pre-thinking, and stimulate a new personal relationship with the natural world.

Chapter 2: “Dominion over all the earth”

A Problematic Christian Grand Narrative

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I firstly draw on the work of Jean-François Lyotard to examine Christianity as a metanarrative governing our relationship towards nature, often in hidden ways. In his book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report to Knowledge* (1984), Lyotard views Christianity, just like other religions, not only as a dogma, but as a narrative or story. According to Lyotard, Christianity is also a so-called “grand narrative”: an ideology which forms part of institutionalised knowledge, casting a legitimised matrix according to which society functions. Such an institutionalised ideology is legitimised in all aspects of society, especially those which operate from positions of political and economic power. He argues that this kind of grand narrative excludes other forms of reality or phenomenal narratives. Within the logic of the grand narrative, I show how Christianity’s “story” about the relationship between humans and nature tells of man’s God-given “dominion” over nature as well as of mankind’s¹ original “sin”, the “fall”, and our subsequent punishment and banishment from “paradise” to a life of suffering and “hardship” on earth. In this vision of man’s origins then, the earth is regarded as a perilous and despicable place, one that needs to be mastered at all costs if man is to survive and thrive.

Secondly, I draw on the work of Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004) to investigate the binary opposites within Biblical narratives which posit such concepts as heaven/earth, spiritual/natural and man/animal in a problematic dualistic relationship where the former is always privileged over the latter. I examine how this dualistic relationship has its origins in the Christian idea of the earth as a mere temporary habitat for the physical, mortal body, a provisional dwelling that we have to endure until we are free to reach our true home in the afterlife. I show that this focus on an afterlife in heaven, rather than on our real life on earth, is deeply entwined with a fear of death, as well as the fear of our physical nature as manifested in the needs of the body (as opposed to the needs of the spirit). These fears, I argue, have led to the

¹It is important to note that I make deliberate use of the words “mankind” and “man” in this chapter, not to ignore the gender hierarchy issue, but to highlight the historical influence of binary oppositions.

Christian focus on a spiritual rather than a physical reality and have caused a consequent lessening of personal responsibility in regards to our role here on earth.

Lastly I show that the negative dualistic relationship conceptualised by the Christian narrative of “mastery” over nature, has not disappeared in a secular Western world, but has instead become invisible, infused and entrenched in the modern metanarratives of “Capitalism”, “Science” and conservative faith-based politics. I argue that the underlying story within this invisible and entrenched narrative is one of a deep-rooted dualism, disrespect and malevolence toward nature, and that it is therefore imperative to acknowledge and question its continued legacy.

This investigation into the problematic relationship between man and nature as framed by the Christian metanarrative of mastery over nature and expressed by the binary opposites of heaven/earth, spiritual/natural, man/animal is central to my own creative work as it underpins my visual deconstruction and reconstruction of such concepts, as discussed in the next chapter. However, it is important to note that my visual work is not purely iconoclastic but aims to invoke a liminal re-reading of these texts without the infused (negative) ideology as described in this chapter. This serves as simultaneous criticism of the historical matrix of the Christian human/nature hierarchy, and an acknowledgement of the phenomenological complexity inherent in the rereading of such texts in a different context. My intention is therefore not to insist on another violent reduction by simplistically blaming environmental destruction on the Judeo-Christian narrative, but to disrupt its subliminal influence on our behaviour and to provoke a reassessment of the role we play in the dualistic human/nature relationship. My own work, in other words, tries to both utilise the power of Biblical imagery and to break free from the entrenched Christian paradigm that sees humanity as the master of all (God’s) creations. As such my aim is to

...hearken to nature’s unfathomable depths, to the way its power outstrips us, to the alienness of a nonhuman gaze... Thereby ...recovering a certain anarchical sublime...[and] breaking definitively with pragmatic and utilitarian anthropocentrism (Toadvine: 162).

2.2 Christianity as Grand Narrative

2.2.1 Narrative as a Form of Knowledge

In his book *The Post Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard explains how ideas like capitalism, science, civil law, democracy, religion, etc., are forms of knowledge in society that are legitimised in different ways. He uses the example of civil law, where “...it states that a given category of citizens must perform a certain kind of action” and where “legitimation is the process by which a legislator is authorised to promulgate such a law as a norm” (1984: 8). He compares this to science, where legitimisation is reached through experimental verification and proof. Although scientific processes have long been accepted as providing knowledge and a verified report of truth, it is not the only form of knowledge. Nietzsche warned that scientific knowledge, “...does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in completion and conflict with, another kind of knowledge” (1984: 7). Lyotard calls this other kind of knowledge “narrative”.

According to Lyotard, narratives are stories like legends and myths told and shaped by societies throughout history. These stories or narratives are legitimated as knowledge over time as societies accumulate and instil it into their culture and social systems. When narrative knowledge becomes legitimated by institutionalising it into socio-political structures, it acquires incredible, often invisible, power. Christianity, like other forms of religion, is a form of narrative knowledge, where the only legitimisation is reached through faith and culture.

The Bible, of course, is an incredibly complex text, and its true meaning has been hotly debated (to the point of war, persecution and torture) for millennia. This is not a theological thesis, however, and my interest is not in attacking, defending or even finding the “true meaning” of the Biblical texts under discussion. Instead, my interest lies in examining the “story” – in a postmodern sense – that Christianity has been telling us about our place in regards to nature. After all, as Bennet and Royle point out:

For many centuries, millions of people in the West understood their place in the world largely through the stories of Adam and Eve, the life of Christ and other biblical stories (2014: 55).

2.2.2 The Christian Story of Man's Mastery over Nature

What then, do I mean when I argue that the Christian narrative, in essence, is one of mastery over nature? Perhaps the best starting point would be to look at the Biblical story of creation itself. In his book *Deconstruction of Christianity*, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that the Christian representation of creation and being, is and has always been “a necessary ... figuration and symbolisation of truth in the world” (277). Manes argues that it is a story told through language about humanism that “...veils the processes of nature with its own cultural obsessions, directionalities, and motifs that have no analogues in the natural world” (Oelschlaeger 1995: 44). In order to illustrate this point, I will let the original Biblical text speak for itself. The following is quoted from *Genesis (1)*, the first book of the *Bible (King James version)*.

²⁶ And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

²⁸ And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

²⁹ And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.

³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.

³¹ And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

In this narrative of creation, people are not a product, a part of, or in any way dependent on the natural world. Instead, the natural world is “given” to “man” as something to “have dominion over”. It is there for people to use, “subdue” and control. This overt legitimisation of man’s moral right to “master” nature was exactly the topic of the medieval historian Lynne White’s ground-breaking lecture in 1967, *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis* (which has since become one of the most cited pieces of writing within the theological debate about the environment). In his discussion of the Christian story of creation, he argues that, in contrast to other religions, Christianity is by far the most anthropocentric, and that it has created a worldview which has encouraged mankind’s aggressive attempts to dominate nature.

Christianity inherited from Judaism... a striking story of creation. By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes... God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image (1967: 1).

He argues that this story legitimised the idea that it is God’s will that man exploits nature for his own ends. He contrasts the Christian view of creation with that of ancient paganism, where:

... every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated (1967: 2).

By destroying the narrative of pagan animism, he argues, and replacing it with a story where an all-powerful God commands man to “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth”, Christianity made it possible “to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (1967: 2).

Another, slightly different but equally well-known Biblical creation narrative, concerns the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. This story too serves to legitimise the idea that nature is something that stands apart from man, and that man has the God given right to “dress and keep it.” I quote from *Genesis (8)*, in the *King James Bible*:

⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

⁹ And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁵ And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

Nature, according to Manes, is in this narrative once again voiceless and storyless – as opposed to animistic cultures, where nature (including plants, brooks, animals, rocks and wind are alive and articulate) is conceptualised as sometimes good, sometimes bad and sometimes even able to communicate with people, and whose voice and opinions should not be ignored. It is a story of “man”, as Francis Bacon said, “...as the centre of the world; in as much that if man were taken away from the world, the rest would seem to be astray, without aim or purpose” (Oeschlaeger 1995: 48).

The narrative continues with the story of the “fall”, when Eve seduces Adam to commit the original sin, resulting in the loss of paradise to Satan:

¹⁷ And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;

¹⁸ Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

¹⁹ In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

²³ Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

The extremely negative light in which nature is portrayed in this story is remarkable: man is banished from a pleasant and harmonious “garden”, a paradise created by God himself, and sentenced to a life amongst the “thorns” and “thistles” of untamed nature, to “sweat” and suffer until he returns to the “ground” from which he was taken. Because of his sin, man is exiled to a world where “the ground is cursed”, and where the food produced by this ground must be eaten in “sorrow”. As Paul Santmire points out, nature, in this tale, thus becomes a *punishment* to man – evil, hostile, imperfect and inharmonious (1985: 32 – 34). Far from a loving mother, nature is conceptualised as a terrible curse, an opponent to be feared and subdued. The eternal battle for human survival, through the lens of this narrative, becomes a battle to control nature, perhaps, in fact, even a battle *against* nature.

Peter Singer, the highly influential moral philosopher famous for his canonical work, *Animal Liberation* (1975) also examines Biblical narrative in an attempt to understand the way it has shaped our views towards the natural. He looks at another type of “creation” narrative: the story of Noah, where God punishes man for his wickedness by flooding the earth in order to, as it were, start over again with a clean slate. Except for Noah, his family and the animals that are saved on the ark, nearly all of creation is wiped out because of man’s “sin” (including, of course, millions upon millions of “innocent” non-human creatures). When the waters subside, Noah makes burnt offerings of “every clean beast” and “every clean fowl” to thank God for ending the flood. God responds by giving man another seal of “dominion”. I quote directly from Genesis (9), in the *King James Bible*:

¹And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.

² And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth *upon* the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered.

³Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things.

According to Singer (1975: 187–188), this “fear” and “dread” of man still echoes today in the untold cruelty inflicted on non-human species and the reckless abuse of nature – legitimised by Biblical tales such as these.

2.3 Violent Hierarchies in Christian Narrative

2.3.1 Binary Pairs and Deconstruction

While Lyotard sees society as shaped by myths, legends and stories, the modernist anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss, explains how, since the Neolithic period, ancient cultures viewed the world in binary pairs, and how these opposing binary structures are still part of modern thinking (Linsley 2012). This binary worldview is also integral to Christian narrative and the Bible is saturated with binary pairings: heaven/earth; light/dark; soul/body; eternal life/death; good/evil, etc. These binary pairings have had such an enormous influence on Western thought that they are immediately recognised and understood, even by those of us who have but the faintest grasp of Christian theology. So, although binary pairs are not exclusive or original to the Christian religion, it is worth examining some of these oppositions, especially as they entered Western civilisation as the definitive instruction or “word of God” in relation to our relationship with nature.

The philosophical lens of Jacques Derrida is particularly helpful here. In *Of Grammatology* (1976), Derrida differs from Lévi-Strauss, a key structuralist thinker, who argues that oppositional pairs are natural, balanced and stable relationships or hierarchies (Klages 2006: 60). Instead, he calls them “violent hierarchies”, as one concept within a binary pair often dominates the other (Zlomislic 2007: 49). When looking at the above-mentioned binary pairings, for example, it is easy to see the dominance or “violence” of the former concepts over the latter in the history of Western thought. The philosopher’s task, according to Derrida, is to “deconstruct” such violent oppositions. In this sense deconstruction can be seen as “a strategy of critical questioning directed towards exposing unquestionable metaphysical assumptions and internal contradictions in philosophical and literary language” (Prasad: 2007). According to Saul Newman, the aim of Derrida’s deconstruction of such binary oppositions is to expose socio-political abuses (2001: 4). In order to explain how violent hierarchies can lead to abuse in society, he cites Foucault who

showed that the “binary separation of reason/unreason is the basis for the domination and incarnation of the mad” (2001: 5-6).

My argument in this chapter is that the binary hierarchies in Christian narrative can also act to legitimise certain forms of socio-political abuse. This is particularly true when the Christian focus on otherworldliness (as expressed in concepts such as heaven/spiritual/the eternal, etc.) leads to the neglect or destruction of the worldly (as expressed in concepts such as earth/natural/the temporary etc.). In the following section I therefore examine three binary oppositions that are central to the Christian narrative – heaven/earth, natural/spiritual and man/animal – in an attempt to show how these “violent hierarchies” have negatively shaped modern Western views relating to the environment.

2.3.2 Heaven/Earth; Natural/Spiritual; Man/Animal

The binary pairing of heaven/earth is central to the Christian narrative. We have seen that the Bible fundamentally depicts the earth as a place of chaos, danger and sin. Not only is the very ground “cursed” because of man’s original sin, it is also the dwelling place of Lucifer and his demons, who were themselves banished from heaven:

And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out *into earth* and his angels were cast out with him (*Revelations 12: 8-9*; my emphasis).

In this demon-filled place of punishment and suffering, it is only logical that escaping from earth would be seen as the ultimate reward. And indeed, according to the Bible, God has promised to save the faithful in a moment of “rapture” from earth, to join Him for eternity in heaven.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord (*1 Thessalonians 4: 16-17*).

To be left on Earth after the “Second Coming” is to be ultimately and eternally rejected by God and is to suffer the wrath of God through his Apocalypse.

For, behold, the day cometh, that all shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch (*Malachi 4: 1-3*).

Within the logic of this story the earth becomes a mere temporary habitat, a provisional dwelling we have to endure until we are free to reach our true home in heaven. Happiness and salvation, according to this powerful narrative, lies away from earth, in heaven with God. Earth, our physical home, becomes unimportant and even disposable, a place God will destroy one day, together with all the sinners and other species living on it.

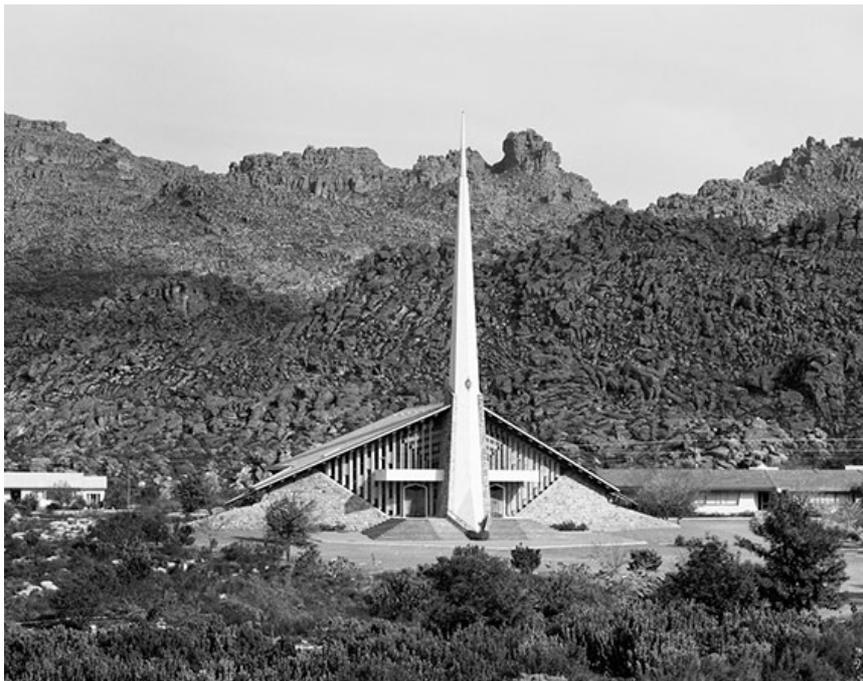


Fig 5: David Goldblatt. *Dutch Reformed Church, Op die Berg* (1987).

David Goldblatt’s “Dutch Reformed Church, Op die Berg”, (*Fig. 5*) beautifully illustrates how the longing for a better world, far from our local reality, has also been central to my own, Afrikaans culture. The photograph depicts a modern church building etched by the contrasting rugged surroundings of the Skurweberge (directly

translated as Rough Mountains). The angular building has a sharp spire that thrusts upward and draws the eye towards the heavens and away from the harsh and unforgiving surroundings. The architecture dominates the surroundings with an angular aggression, but it also speaks of a sense of fragile hope, a peace flag to God and a kind of bonfire to attract salvation on the island of Afrikaner castaways. Similar to my own “Rapture / Wegraping”, the almost lunar landscape, perpetuates the idea that earth is hostile and a temporary halfway house between paradise and heaven.

So why this violent hierarchy between heaven and earth? The reason, I would argue, is closely linked to another binary pairing central to Christian narrative: that of the natural, temporary body versus the spiritual, eternal soul. *Corinthians 4:18 – 5:1* tells believers:

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

What we see here is a clear opposition between the “temporary” and the “eternal”, “earth” and “heaven”, the “seen” and the “unseen”. In essence it is a fantasy of survival over death, and as such it is central to the narrative of the gospel.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (*John 3:16*; my emphasis).

This promise of eternal life is deeply seductive, of course. The fear of death is universal, human, and very understandable. Today, most people in the developed world lead lives where the reality of death is largely ignored, but this was not always the case. In Europe during the Middle Ages, for example, the life expectancy of the aristocracy was 42-43 for women and 46-48 for men (Woodbury: 2014). This number would have been significantly lower for the proletariat. People’s living standards were grim, and they lived close to natural threats like cold, hunger and sickness, as well as man-made threats like war and banditry. In such a world, with death often but a cough away, the explicit Biblical promise of eternal life, such as the one in *1 Corinthians 15: 54-55*, must have been almost impossible to resist:

So when...this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is thy sting?

O grave, where is thy victory?'

But how does one reconcile the undeniable physical fact of death with the fantasy of eternal life? The answer lies in the binary opposites of the natural, physical body versus the eternal, spiritual body – or soul – as created by biblical narrative:

42 So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption:

43 It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power:

44 It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body...

49 And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.

50 Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption (*Corinthians 15*).

The above text clearly shows how the Biblical narrative of salvation privileges the “heavenly” over the “earthly”. The “spiritual body”, we are told, is “raised in incorruption”, “glory” and “power” while the “natural body” is “sown in corruption”, “dishonour” and “weakness”. The message is clear: “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”. Eternal life is only possible for those who turn away from the natural and focus on the spiritual instead.

Of course, Christianity is not the only religion to rely on the natural/spiritual binary pairing. However, as White points out, other traditions, such as Paganism, saw the natural as one with the powers of the divine. Man was not the only being in possession of a spirit; the natural world was seen as filled with a spiritual dimension of its own. But, as Christianity gained momentum as an anthropocentric belief

system, White argues that it legitimised an indifferent and abusive relationship toward nature:

The spirits in natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man's effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed, and the old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled (White 1967: 2).

So, in defeating Paganism, and rejecting the body and nature as sacred, the Catholic Church, "...declared itself,... as the only gateway to the divine" (Geers 2010: 30).

Because the Christian narrative only allows man, of all beings on earth, to have a spiritual dimension, it is worth looking at how this narrative constructs the binary pairing of man/animal. To quote from *Corinthians* again:

³⁹ All flesh is not the same flesh: but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fishes, and another of birds (15).

Above we have seen how in the Biblical stories of creation, the creation of man is different in kind from the rest of the natural world, in that only man is created in God's "image". He is given "dominion" over all the animals, and promised that "the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth" (Signer: 187). In their book *Animal Philosophy* (2004), Atterton and Calarco argue that this "oppositional abyss between humans and animals", as created by "the biblical story of man being made in the image of god and having dominion over the animals" (xvii), remained a conceptual challenge to philosophers for centuries. They show how this idea, together with the Aristotelian classification of "man as rational" rather than just animal, influenced humanist philosophers to sustain the rational/irrational, reason/unreason "(déraison)", human/animal distinction right until the "death of god" and the birth of modern evolutionary biology. As a matter of fact, according to Michael Foucault (1926 - 1984) in his book *Madness and Civilisation* (1964), during the classical age, madness was considered a "state of nature" (Atterton and Calarco: xxi) or "zero point of human nature" (Atterton and Calarco: 79), where the mad were seen as untamed wild beasts who abdicated their "humanity" and "reason" (Atterton and Calarco: xxi).

Nowhere is this "oppositional abyss between humans and animals" as obvious as in the limited epistemology and ontology we have inherited through language and

symbolism in the interface between “man” and “animal”. David Wood calls this “linguistic violence”: he argues that the classification and the use of the word “animals” or “the animal” to refer to any and all living creatures is a kind of conceptual violence that expeditiously legitimises our actual violence towards non-human species (2004: 133). Derrida also critiques generalising language (similar to Nietzsche’s critique of the “cognitive damage” and “violence” of language when he uses the word “leaf” as reference to all leaves (Wood: 133). He deliberately uses the phrase “that which we call animal” instead of just the word “animal”, to point out the absurd reference to all living creatures that are not human (Higgs: 2). Higgs points out that Derrida scorns the “lumping together” of a cricket and a whale, a lion and a parakeet, a giraffe and a marmot, as a “reductive” and “dismissive” ontological postulation (3).

But it is not only the Biblical narrative of creation which has worked to establish such a clearly negative man/animal binary pairing in the Western mind. In the narrative of the “fall”, which I touched on above, the snake takes the blame for man’s sin. Singer (187), argues that the narrative of the “fall of man” was the key text sparking discrimination against women and animals as it blames Eve (women) and the snake (animals) for the loss of paradise:

¹⁴ So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, “Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.

¹⁵ And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

(*Genesis 3*)

Importantly, it’s not only the narrative of the Old Testament which creates this violent hierarchy between man and animal. As Saint Augustine (354 – 430) (a prominent author of early Christian theology so influential that he is often seen as one of the “fathers” of the church) points out, Jesus too seemed indifferent to the lives of non-human species and plants:

Christ himself shows that to refrain from the killing of animals and the destroying of plants is the height of superstition, for judging that there are no common rights between us and the beasts and trees, he sent the devils

into a herd of swine and with a curse withered the tree on which he found no fruit (Singer 1991: 191 – 192).

It is not difficult to see how this indifference towards the lives of animals, from no less an important figure than the Son of God, could have led believers to see such indifference as acceptable and morally justifiable.

2.4 The Enduring Legacy of the Christian Narrative of Dominion

2.4.1 Politics: Denying our Dependence on Nature

In my first chapter I quoted Nietzsche's famed declaration that "God is dead". This, of course, was not so much a description of religious views during the 19th century as a lament announcing the end of all claims to absolute knowledge. More than a century later, it is worth noting that while the grand narrative of Christianity might have lost its legitimacy as an absolute source of morality in the Western world, "God", in fact, is far from "dead". On the contrary, as an object of religious belief the Christian God is very much alive and well in the minds of millions upon millions of believers today. An opinion poll taken in the United States of America (2011), for example, showed that 56% of Americans still believe that God is in control of everything on earth, and that 44% further believe that the increasing regularity and severity of recent natural disasters is an indication of the end of days (Neroulias 2011). Another study found that 59% of Americans believe in biblical end time predictions (Gibbs 2002), and (rather alarmingly), 41% of Americans believe that the second coming of Jesus Christ will happen before 2050 – in other words in their lifetime (Pew Research Centre 2010).

In view of these statistics, it is not hard to see why the United States, who is both the world's most powerful economy and its biggest polluter, largely ignores warnings of an ecological crisis. After all, why would one save a forest, or stop polluting a lake, or reduce carbon emissions if God is going to destroy everything within the next 40 years? An extreme example of this kind of modern Christian thought can be found on the website *Rapture Ready*, a fundamentalist Evangelical Christian website that preaches the idea that the Biblical apocalypse will happen in our lifetime. The site is most famous for their "rapture index", which (according to

their founder, Todd Strandberg) is nothing less than a “prophetic speedometer of end-time activity”. This index counts down the days to the destruction of the earth in a spirit of breathless excitement and anticipation. To illustrate the mind-set of this group of believers, I quote an extract from a typical letter to this site. This is how a certain Camilla Smith describes her feelings about the approaching destruction of the earth:

I feel many believers in Jesus Christ are feeling this way now as we watch the world spiral downward and see things we never thought would happen. The longing for our permanent home becomes more real, more tangible, more desirable and almost unbearable. We yearn to finally, finally be home with our Lord who has gone and prepared our place for us (Smith: [sp]).

While this website might represent an extreme religious position, dismissing such believers as belonging to a fringe group is to miss the bigger picture, namely that people’s belief in the Christian narrative of the gospel, and the way it privileges the eternal spiritual over the temporary natural, is still shaping our world in important ways. In fact, it is not difficult to see how such a narrative can cause a very real conflict of interest between man’s physical needs (which are completely dependent on the earth) and man’s spiritual needs (which are completely dependent on God). The dilemma lies in the belief that the physical life of the body, on earth, is only temporary (and thus less important), while the spiritual life of the soul, in heaven, is considered eternal (and therefore more important). In his article *A Burning Issue* Cambridge Geophysics Professor Robert White argues that this focus on the spiritual (heaven; the spiritual; the soul), rather than the physical (earth; the natural; the body), has caused many Christians to look past or ignore the problems facing our physical, earthly world. He looks at why contemporary Christians still consider environmental issues of secondary importance to that of a personal spiritual relationship with God, and finds that this is mainly due to a focus on an otherworldly afterlife²: “If the earth will one day, maybe quite soon, be burnt to a frazzle, is it appropriate to put resources into long-term environmental policies?” (2007: 1). Bill

² Other problems mentioned are the perception that the Green movement is influenced by New Age spirituality and a discomfort with the fact that environmental issues are largely driven by secular movements. See also “*Resisting the Green Dragon: Biblical Response to One of the Greatest Deceptions of Our Day.*”

Moyers, veteran journalist and political commentator, agrees. As he explained when accepting the Harvard Medical School's Global Environment Citizen award, it is often fundamentalist Christian views that are hampering the implementation of green legislation because millions of fundamentalist Christians disregard environmental destruction or actively encourage it to hasten the second coming (Moyers: [sp]).

However, the problematic legacy of the Christian narrative concerning man's relationship towards nature stretches far further than the political influence of believers within America's so called "Bible Belt". This is because the idea of humanity as the master of all (God's) creations, did not disappear with the advent of Western secularism, but instead became entrenched in the modern metanarratives of "Capitalism" and "Science".

2.4.2 Science: Mastering Nature

Today, science is often viewed in opposition to religion – as forms of knowledge they are usually thought to be in conflict both methodologically and epistemologically. But Western science did not develop in a vacuum. According to White, all scientists from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment studied the workings of the natural world as if they were trying to gain insight into the mind of God. Even Isaac Newton described himself as a theologian and explained his work as a venture into a better religious understanding. In light of this, White argues:

The consistency with which scientists during the long formative centuries of Western science said that the task and the reward of the scientist was "to think God's thoughts after him" leads one to believe that this was their real motivation. If so, then modern Western science was cast in a matrix of Christian theology (1967: 3).

White further argues that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" (1967: 1) for the environmental destruction caused by science and technology as so many scientific ideas regarding the natural world were developed within the Christian framework of mastery over nature. Within the context of my argument, this is a key point to grasp. Of course, simplistically blaming modern environmental destruction on the Christian narrative as set out above is another violent reduction, and not my intention here. My point, instead, is that the grand narrative of "Science" was developed within an

environment where the violent hierarchies of heaven/earth; spiritual/natural; man/animal etc. were very much part of an entrenched pattern of thought. Although the narrative of science can provide proof to legitimise contributions to knowledge, Nietzsche already warned against the temptation of filling the void left by the death of Christianity by science as the new and only source of knowledge (Frodeman: 59). What's more, the modern temptation to view science as giving a "true", "neutral" or "objective" view of the natural overlooks the fact that after Christianity, as Karl Figlio argues, science became the vehicle in Western culture through which nature was encompassed via representation. But this representation is one of nature as a "visualisable", "non-contradictory complete form", one that is predictable, and therefore without autonomy (Robertson et al: 72-73).

For a specific example of how the Christian narrative and binary oppositions discussed above impacted the development of scientific ideas in the Western world, one needs look no further than the work of St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the most influential Christian thinkers of all time. Although the concept of natural hierarchy (Scala Naturae) was first conceived by Plato and Aristotle, it was St. Thomas Aquinas who first introduced the concept of the "Great Chain of Being" (Canterbery 2001: 16). This idea – which draws heavily on the Christian creation narrative – postulated a religious hierarchy starting with God and descending in importance so that man was positioned just below angelic beings. Animals, plants and minerals rated the lowest – and as "lower beings" were seen to exist solely for use by mankind. Derived from the biblical creation story thus comes a "scientific" "figuration" of "truth": "the Great Chain of Being", a new narrative which

in effect, created a fictionalized, or more accurately put, fraudulent version of the species Homo Sapiens: the character 'Man' (Manes: 48).

In *Cabinet of Curiosity: Theatrum Mundi* (1992) (See Fig. 6), Mark Dion investigates precisely the "fraudulent" scientific hierarchy that, since the time of Aquinas, placed man above the rest of the natural world in a "Great Chain of Being". His work questions the roots of epistemology and the influence of culture on research and the representation of nature in which, during pre-Enlightenment times, natural curiosities were organized and arranged into cabinets. These cabinets were the forerunners of modern science and museums, as most natural history museums have always displayed a sort of symbolic chain of being, where, as Dion explains,



Fig 6: Mark Dion. *Cabinet of Curiosity: Theatrum Mundi* (detail) (1992 – 1993).

Homo Sapiens seem to be the pinnacle of all life forms. Through naming, classifying and making groups, a seemingly logical hierarchy firmly seats man in the throne of the animal kingdom (Corrin et al 2011: 137).

He argues that research and science through museums, zoos, encyclopaedias, and books have supported a hierarchical knowledge system, an ideology that has profoundly influenced a cultural construct that gives man a superior place within the natural world and negatively influences our relationship with other living species (1997: 71). Dion's work investigates representations of the natural world as a construct, and shows how this construct was, throughout history, constantly reinvented, interpreted and communicated, and "how these constructions articulated cultural anxieties about difference that separated Homo Sapiens from other living creatures" (Dion: 47). In *Nature and the Theorizing of Difference*, Cheney argues that nothing can be understood outside of text or language and that no object can provide an empirical or transcendental alternative referent for language (Oelschaeger: 124). He claims that in not realising and ultimately respecting difference, "the logic of domination", so prevalent in society today, reveals a lack of respect for "the Other as Other" (124). He shows that deeply implicated in our

structures of epistemology and ontology there is an indulged disrespect for and domination of the other and the natural.

This indulged disrespect for the natural can clearly be seen in the work of the famous philosopher, scientist and mathematician René Descartes. Descartes drew explicitly on the Christian narrative of creation to absolve himself and fellow scientists from feeling any guilt in regard to their treatment of non-human species. Known to vivisect live animals to familiarise himself with anatomy, this “father of modern philosophy” argued that animals, unlike human beings, do not possess immortal souls and because of that, lack any sort of consciousness. His argument, in other words, rests entirely on the violent hierarchy of the natural/spiritual discussed above. Because they lack a “spiritual” dimension within the Christian narrative, he describes animals and other living things as mere machines or automata, and compares their functions to the workings of a clock:

Although they may squeal when cut with a knife, or writhe in their efforts to escape contact with a hot iron, this does not... mean that they feel pain in these situations. They are governed by the same principles as a clock, and if their actions are more complex than those of a clock, it is because the clock is a machine made by humans, while animals are infinitely more complex machines, made by God (Singer 1991: 200).

Sir Francis Bacon, considered by some as the father of modern science, is another towering figure in the history of Western thought who, influenced by the Biblical narrative of man’s mastery of nature, believed that man’s control and use of nature was a natural and God-given right. Carolyn Merchant discusses how Bacon saw nature as not just a “nurturing mother and womb of life”, but a “source of secrets to be extracted for economic advance” – one which had to be “bound into service” and made a “slave”, “put in constraint” and “moulded by the mechanical arts” (Foltz 2002: 41). In fact, throughout the Renaissance and Enlightenment the main thrust of scientific thinking was to dominate nature through aggressive investigation, mapping, dissecting, representing, and mining. In his book, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (2007), Oxford historian Peter Harrison argues that literal readings of the Genesis narratives of the creation and fall inspired and legitimated scientific activity in the seventeenth century as, for many scientists of that period, science was viewed as a means of reinstating man’s dominion over nature which

had been lost as a result of the fall. With paradise lost to Satan, it was the task of science to reclaim nature, order it and subdue it. Merchant goes as far as to describe Bacon's obsessive curiosity about nature as an attempt to reverse the original sin:

Although a female's inquisitiveness may have caused man's fall from his God-given dominion, the relentless interrogation of another female, nature, could be used to regain it (Foltz 2002: 41).

For Bacon, in his book, *The New Atlantis* (1900), the role of science was to "master" and control nature: perfecting it, making it new and better than the normal "vulgar" nature:

We have also large and various orchards and gardens, wherein we do not so much respect beauty as variety of ground and soil... And we make (by art) in the same orchards and gardens, trees and flowers to come earlier or later than their seasons, and to come up and bear more speedily than by their natural course they do. We make them by art greater much than their nature, and their fruit greater and sweeter and of differing taste, smell, colour and figure, from their nature" (Bacon 2014: 37).



Fig 7: Eduardo Kac. *GFP Bunny* (2000).

Without doubt, this obsession with mastering nature is still a major theme in the grand narrative of "Science" today. Man's obsessive quest to have "dominion" over life itself through the workings of Science, is the subject of the work of Eduardo Kac, who, with his *GFP Bunny* (see Fig.7), commissioned a laboratory to insert jellyfish DNA protein into an albino rabbit. His live installation offers a moral dichotomy to the

viewer by asking them to “play God” through switching on or off the ultraviolet light that makes Alba the bunny glow in the dark (Heartney 2013: 191). Through the alchemy of modern science, man can become “God”; he can create life. Alchemy, the original science and technology, bends nature, forces nature to serve man so that man can reunite his material body with his spirit. The son of God dies and rejoins Him – body, soul and spirit. Sin has split these things and science brings them together. But science also kills God in the process and nature with it. Tom Cheetham cites Carl Jung (1875 – 1961) here:

Whereas in Christ God himself became man, the ‘filius-philosophorum’ was extracted from matter by human art, by means of the opus, made into a new light-bringer. In the former case the miracle of man’s salvation is accomplished by God; in the latter, the salvation of transfiguration of the universe is brought about by the mind of man – ‘Deoconcedente’, as the authors never fail to add. In the one case man confesses ‘I under God’, in the other he asserts ‘God under me’. Man takes the place of the creator (Cheetham 2005: 43)

Although science today is broadly accepted as a legitimate research vehicle to contribute to knowledge and “truth”, it has to be acknowledged that it has developed in the marix of a Christian grand narrative. As we have seen, under the auspices of scientific progress it has been, and continues to be, responsible for great cruelty and abuse of the natural world and non-human species. In concurrence with White and Singer, I argue that unless we challenge our deep historic conditioning toward nature and animals, we will continue to wield scientific advance at the disastrous expense of the natural world.

2.4.3 Capitalism: Nature as Commodity

“Laissez Faire” is the motto that lies at the heart of a free market economic system where the aim is to do business unrestrained and unhindered and where the ultimate target is inequitable, irresponsible profit. Professor A.R. Dobel calls this an objective system, where any “discretionary collective” intervention is seen as disruptive and counterproductive, and where nature is merely viewed as “a handmaiden to humankind” and “a pool of resources for use in production”. Dobel calls it the

“religion of the market”, because it has become a system so universally accepted, especially in the Western world, that it equals the effect of religious dogma on pre-enlightenment society (1993: 5 - 8).

Just like its scientific ideas, however, the economic ideas underlying Western civilization did not develop in a vacuum. Lynn White argues that although the industrial revolution is usually viewed as the cause for the “unequalled rift” between nature and humans in the Western world, it is important to note that the culture behind the era was influenced by a predominantly Judeo-Christian narrative, especially in regard to our understanding of and negotiations with nature (White: 1). In 2.2.3 above we have seen how the Christian narrative of creation tells of a world planned by God “explicitly for man’s benefit and rule”, where no item in the physical creation has “any purpose save to serve man's purposes” (White: 2). Singer argues that it is exactly this kind of dominionist thinking that has allowed animals (as well as all other species, minerals, etc.) to become but another product in the capitalist system (1991: 200). He quotes the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant to explain how deep such thinking is entrenched with regard to the treatment of animals:

So far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious, and are there merely as a means to an end. That end is man (203).

Damien Hirst’s *This Little Piggy Went to the Market, this Little Piggy Stayed at Home* (1996) (see *Fig. 2*), comments on exactly this issue. It examines animals as commodities whose only purpose is to serve as food, objects of scientific research and, sometimes, entertainment. The work is a sculptural piece consisting of a real dead pig split in half, with each half clinically exhibited in glass boxes filled with formaldehyde, exposing the intestines. The title is a grim pun on the 1760 nursery rhyme, evoking a strange nostalgia for old ways and an uncomfortable interplay between pity and cynical scientific curiosity. With this piece, Hirst slyly comments on both our fear of our own mortality and our (often conveniently suppressed) knowledge of the animal suffering behind our neatly packaged food. Morality becomes relative and subjective: most people would not lock their pet dog in a cage its whole life before slaughtering and eating it – but they would do it gladly for bacon.

In *The Animal that Therefore I am*, Derrida discusses the binary oppositions between humans and animals as an “abyssal rupture” or “limit” in three parts: 1) that the “limit” or “border” has a multitude of folds and blurred lines without clearly visible lines; 2) that this division is folded throughout history, cast through anthropocentric narrative and language; and 3) that on the other side of human life, there is a heterogeneous complexity of life (not just animal life), or multiplicity of relationships between the living and dead (for to say just living, is to say too little or too much) (2002: 399). It is this “heterogeneous complexity” that is denied by a morality which gives man the uncontested right to treat “animals” as simple commodities – a morality which, as we have seen, is explicitly legitimized by the Christian narrative of dominion over the natural world (Atterton and Calcarco 140). Derrida also argues that this institutionalised rupture is to blame for sustained “violence”, “abuse”, “torture”, “annihilation” and “genocide” of animals (2002: 394 - 395):

However one interprets it, whatever practical, technical, scientific, juridical, ethical, or political consequence one draws from it, no one can deny this event any more, no one can deny the unprecedented proportions of this subjection of the animal. Such subjection, whose history we are attempting to interpret, can be called violence in the most morally neutral sense of the term...” (2002: 394)

Of course, my argument is not that Christianity is simplistically to “blame” for the excesses of capitalism and the way this system is consuming the natural world. But I am interested in how the Christian narrative of man’s mastery over nature has infused and morally legitimated different aspects of modern Western life today – from the way we treat animals to the way we exploit nature for commercial gain. Roderick Nash, for example, shows how imperial Western civilization “created wilderness” to name something that is “other” (than Western civilization). In doing so the declared “wilderness” can be appropriated and managed according to the prevailing Western ideologies so that Western culture, through appropriation and objectification, gains dominion over “otherness” and “nature”:

At the centre of the problem of Western culture’s incarceration of wilderness is its prevailing (mis)understanding of otherness as adversarial, as recalcitrant toward the law, as irrational, criminal, outlaw, even criminally insane (like the grizzly bear) (Oelschaeger: 144).

One of the clearest expressions of man's need to subdue "wilderness", may be that of the grid, so often used in town and city planning. For centuries, grids have been utilized as a way of applying mathematics and science to 'organize' nature. As Ling explains in his article *Thomas Jefferson and the Environment* (2004), the United States of America can be seen as a prime example of how grids were used in extreme form. Thomas Jefferson, America's Third President, most famous for drafting the Declaration of Independence, divided vast stretches of America into a system of square grids in the Land Ordinance of 1785. Land could henceforth be subdivided, sold and occupied according to a map of grids. This meant that the immense expanse of natural land – the greatest part of a continent, really – was treated like a commodity that could be neatly cut up and parcelled out and its effect, two hundred years later, sees a wilderness almost completely destroyed by farming and the concrete wastelands of an unending urban sprawl (Ling 2004: 1-9). Jefferson (who, like so many during the Age of Enlightenment, was deeply influenced by rationality and a worship of science) referred to development, power and control simply as "growth". Today we can still see his statue carved into the face of Mount Rushmore: another act of aggression and violence against nature, celebrating an environmental aggressor of his time (Ling 2004: 1-9).

Nowadays, the rift between humans and nature in modern capitalist societies has become so deep that most people in the Western world experience nature almost exclusively through the medium of privately or publically owned commodities such as gardens or parks. Francis et al argues that gardens are "cultural forms designed to shape and contain nature" (1991: 94). We can control gardens: organize it, give structure to it, prune it, trim it and shape it to our will. If we take care of it, it will behave the way we like it to – unlike the 'wild' which is frightening and chaotic and inherently threatening. The formal gardens of Versailles (see *Fig. 6*) can then be viewed as a prime illustration of mankind's celebration of control and dominance over nature. This hyper-organized grid of paths and topiary shrubs, manicured lawns and patterns is a striking visual illustration of man's need to rigidly control the chaos of nature. According to Dean MacCannell, control over nature is here symbolized by the coercion of natural elements in formal gardens – this coercion simultaneously expressing both political and economic power (94). The chaos of nature becomes subject to an almost paranoid sense of surgical control, constraint, balance and

geometric form, serving to dramatically display man's efforts to dominate and utilize the earth on which we dwell through reason, technology and culture.

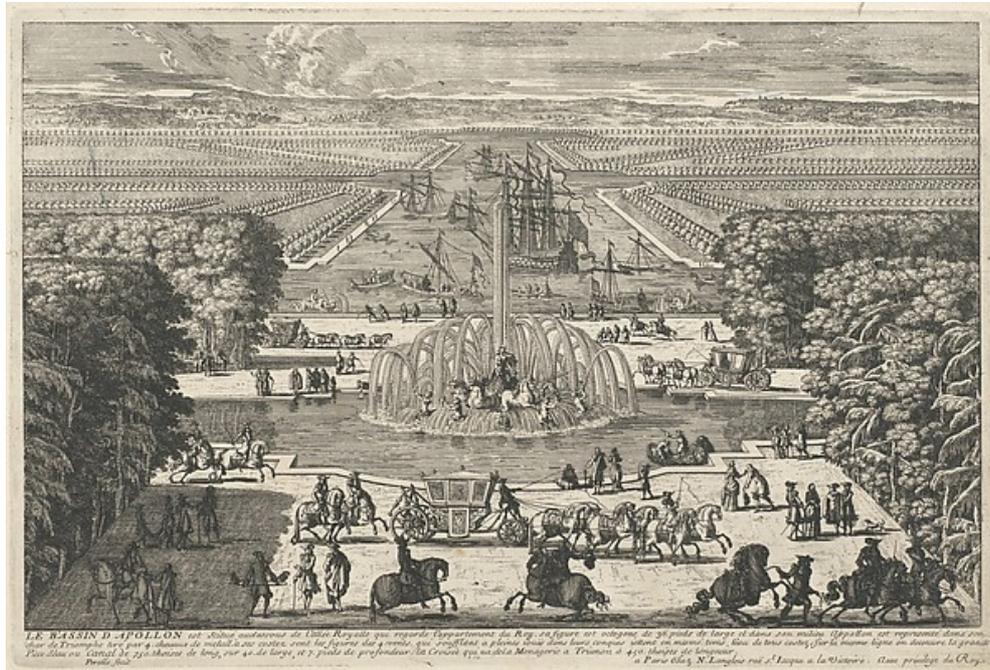


Fig 8: Adam Perelle . The Fountain of Apollo, Garden of Versailles (1680).



Fig 9: David Goldblatt. Saturday afternoon in Sunward Park (1997).

It is, however, not only the great structural gardens, such as those at Versailles, that illustrate our need to control nature in this way. David Goldblatt's work *Saturday afternoon in Sunward Park* (1979) (see Fig. 9), poignantly shows everyman's attempt at controlling chaotic nature by bringing order in the form of a garden. His photograph depicts a man mowing his lawn in a newly developed suburb of Johannesburg. With the grid in place, paving the way for 'growth' and 'development', a new garden is being shaped and manicured, in contrast to the wild grasses visible in the background. There is a 'place' for the wild, in other words, and a 'place' for human life, and those two spaces can never comfortably overlap. In the work of Roxy Paine, *Psilocybe Cubensis Field* (1997) (see Fig. 10), he comments on this very issue by placing a field of crafted poisonous mushrooms on a gallery floor. Through this act, he interrogates the conflict between our need to control nature and our awe of nature's serendipity (Heartney 2013: 184).



Fig 10: Roxy Paine. *Psilocybe Cubensis Field* (1997).

This obsession to control the natural also extends to our own bodies. In 2.3.2 above we have seen how the Christian narrative tells of a natural body that is “sown in corruption”, dishonour” and “weakness” while the spiritual is “raised in incorruption”

“glory” and “power”. Geers explains that under Paganism the body and all its functions and sensations were seen as divine and, together with nature, as temples through which one could connect to the gods. The Church contradicted this with teachings that rejected the body as a sinful, despicable and temporary vessel—teachings which, according to Geers, are still evident in the “Church of Capitalism” today. Once “the body was separated from its intrinsic divine nature” the body too could be commodified:

hating everything about our bodies, it would not be difficult to sell us any snake oil, toothpaste, deodorant, shampoo or holy water (2010: 30).

James Lee Byers’s *The Angel* (1989), focuses on exactly this tension between the physical the spiritual. “In Western traditions in particular, body and spirit are often regarded as opposing forces and spiritual growth requires struggling to subdue the body” (Heartney 2013: 284).

In this chapter, I exposed the Biblical narrative that legitimises humans as masters of all of nature. As the new grand narrative has shifted toward Science, Technology and Capitalism, although hidden, the historical influence of Christianity is still continuing. Within this context, White argued that, although we consider this the “post Christian age”, we “... continue today to live, as we have lived for about 1700 years, very largely in a context of Christian axioms” ([sp]). The anthropocentric inheritance of transcendence and dominance of human over natural, is, in my opinion, the root cause of the environmental crisis we face today. In the face of this crisis, there seems to be an an abdication of personal responsibility, and a trust in the ultimate salvation from post Christian grand narratives of science and technology, to fix the problem.

Chapter 3: “Hearkening to nature’s depths”

Visual Theories and Processes

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the key theoretical lenses of liminality and ontological materiality which inform my visual concepts and processes. I employ these lenses to deconstruct the epistemic baggage of reading text, symbols, objects and images. David Wood cites Derrida regarding the “violence” of naming and categorical distinctions that would obstruct the extension from, for example, human to animal (Atterton and Calarco 2004: 133). My art making and process is an attempt to grapple with key Christian oppositions, specifically those “violent” distinctions between heaven and earth; the natural and the spiritual and human and animal, as discussed in the previous chapter. The grappling constitutes the process and the art becomes a personal micro narrative, speaking against or deconstructing the “grand” Christian narrative (as discussed in Chapter Two) in which these oppositions play such an important part.

All art, I believe, is essentially created in that complex intersection between an artist’s personal history and the historical moment in which a piece of art is produced. My practical work is therefore also about remembering and witnessing on a very personal, even visceral level. This “remembering”, draws on my own experience of growing up in South Africa as an ‘Afrikaner’ under the socio-religious system of Calvinist Apartheid. It also involves my boyhood memories of playing in nature in a relatively under-developed country. The “witnessing” is a response to my current environment through collecting and documenting, while the “remembering” is achieved through the ritual of reassembling, re-shaping and juxtaposing those fragments of memory I still carry from my youth, such as recollected psalms, chants and prayers. The painful and aggressive intersection between the two aims to create a liminal space that challenges the viewer to become a witness to the present within their own set of religious and metaphysical memories. This liminal space positions the viewer between the present and past; between fear and hope, life and death,

repulsion and compassion, foreboding and present reality. As my work subtly references Christian and African fetish ritual, it ultimately aims to help viewers recognise their own uncertain place on the precarious threshold between culpability, vulnerability and the flawed hope of external salvation. In this I draw heavily on Victor Turner's (1920 – 1983) theories of liminality in cultural and religious rituals.

I am also particularly influenced by artists who use and combine a mixture of non-traditional media. Such media is chosen not to represent, but rather for its inherent metaphorical qualities, and it's potential to invoke a liminal experience. Artists that influenced me are, to name but a few, Joseph Beuys, Mark Dion, Belrinde De Breuykere, Damien Hirst, Cornelia Parker, Claire Morgan, Jang Huan, Kendell Geers, Wolfgang Laib and Wim Botha – some of whom are discussed in this chapter insofar as their work has influenced my art or process.

Finally, I would like to note that my discussion of the lenses of liminality and materiality as set out in this chapter is only meant as a theoretical background and by no means intended as a limitation or categorisation of my work. My fascination with animals, insects and other material is both a passion and a personal journey. My process is intuitive and not guided by categories. However, by making, shaping and visualising these obsessions, I ultimately hope to disentangle old narratives about our relationship towards our habitat, such as those offered by the Christian story of “dominion” over nature, and to renegotiate potential individual micro narratives which allow far greater nuances of thought and feeling towards the natural.

The entropy, perpetual death, or radical otherness of material nature exposes the limits that govern our familiarity and cognisance of the world we live in. Fixed knowledge of our world becomes obsolete in the liminal space where our perception-conception ends and the abyss of disorder and meaninglessness begins. It is in this liminal space that we reconsider what a relationship with the ‘earth’ can mean. This means defining and redefining ‘earth’ for every act of establishing some kind of relationship (Vickery 2012: [sp]).

3.2 Liminal Nature: Between the Things of Life and Death

The term liminality was first used by Arnold Van Gennep (1908 – 1960) and later by Victor Turner (1920 – 1983) to describe ritual rites of passage during anthropological studies done in Central Africa. According to Turner, Van Gennep explained transitional ritual passage as happening in three phases: separation (or detachment); margin (or limen); and reaggregation (or re-entering) (1992: 48). Turner continues to describe a limen as a “threshold” and the “state and process of midtransition as liminality”. “Liminalities”, those undergoing transition, are in state of “betwixt and between”, “not this or that, here or there, one thing or the other”, a kind of death to the old mundane structure or context and birth of the new (1992: 49). Although he bases most of his theories on tribal ritual, Turner finds similarities in contemporary society, for example the rituals of his own Catholic upbringing, and talks about death as a ritual where the faithful join God in Heaven.

James Sey cites Jean Baudrillard to argue that art is best experienced as “liminal”, in an anthropological sense, rather than as mere aesthetic iconic objects.

Our images are like icons: they allow us to go on believing in art while eluding the question of its existence. So perhaps we ought to treat all present-day art as a set of rituals, and for ritual use only; perhaps we ought to consider art solely from an anthropological standpoint, without reference to any aesthetic judgement whatsoever (2011: 66).

My personal view agrees with that of Baudrillard. Reading and experiencing art, I believe, is at its best a contemporary ritual that achieves relative perceptual change in the viewer. This process of change is never quite complete, but a constant liminal progression. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), Gilles Deleuze (1925 – 1995) and Félix Guattari (1930 – 1992) discuss the process of “becoming”, not as a cultural ritual, “but a line... [that] has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination...” (1980: 323). For me, the concept of liminality, as it applies to my own work, is an awareness of a universal naturalness, not just between human and animal, but even vegetable and mineral. It is, in a way, a “threshold” or “state” of “immanence”, in which “everything is implicated in

everything else ...a fiber [that] stretches from a human to an animal, from a human or an animal to molecules, from molecules to particles..." (Atterton and Calarco 2004: 103). It is a "becoming-other" that I am interested in, a threshold or state of forgotten and potential relationships without the usual ontological presuppositions or cultural baggage. Even more perhaps, it is an awakening of a suppressed awareness and compassion towards other species in a shared cause: survival on this planet. According to Christoph Cox, Deleuze and Guattari also teach us about a possible ethical "being and acting in the world" and that the process of becoming, "...increases our sympathies – and relationships – with our fellow creatures, who are no longer essentially other than us but creatures from whom we can learn about the true, the good, and the beautiful" (2005: 24).



Fig 11: Tertius Heyns. *die land van melk en heuning / the land of milk and honey* (2015).

Because of the complexity of liminal experience, I am always careful to avoid certainty and moral "truth" in my work, instead employing duality and opposites. After viewing my work *die land van melk en heuning / the land of milk and honey* (see Fig. 11), for example, people responded by saying that they felt deeply sad and full of empathy when witnessing the bee dying, while people responded with revulsion and horror to the heaps of dead flies in *Wegrapping / Rapture* (see Fig. 12). My creative



Fig 12: Tertius Heyns. *Wegraving / Rapture (detail)* (2014).

work is thus an assemblage and a juxtaposition of subjects and objects that agitate liminal becomings and does not aim to impose a moral lesson. My work, in other words, aspires to create an immanence to our animal-becoming or other-becoming and to hopefully stimulate sympathies and relationships towards nature that stretch far beyond the problematic narrative offered by Christianity or the reductive dualisms that this narrative presents.



Fig 13: Joseph Beuys. *Siberian Symphony Action* (1936).

In this objective, my creative thought and process have been directly influenced by the work of Joseph Beuys (1921-1986). Beuys is considered to be one of the first artist-environmentalists, not only because he was a founding member of the German Green Party, but because of his belief that art is a ritual act that can help to reconnect humans with nature and animals. According to Alain Borer, Beuys's actions with numerous animal and insect species, as well as natural elements, are performed to acquire bestiary knowledge. As an example he points to Beuys's excising of a dead hare's heart in *Siberian Symphony First Movement* (1963) (see *Fig. 13*) and then amplifying his own heartbeats in *The Chief* (1964) (see *Fig. 14*). Through such actions, he argues, Beuys is "... linking us back to our own lost animality [and this] is both the means and the end, learning from animals how to develop our senses and to be at one with nature" (1970: 25).

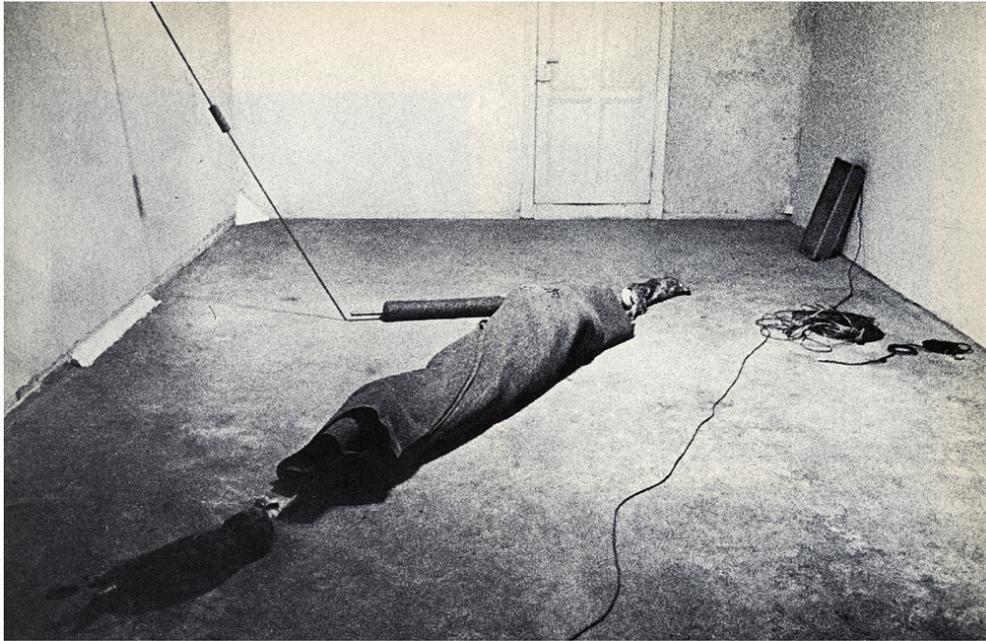


Fig 14: Joseph Beuys. *The Chief*. Fluxus Chant Action (1964).

A good example of the intimate ways in which Beuys interacts with nature can be found in his performance piece, *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) (see Fig. 3). For this piece he spent three days in the René Block Gallery in New York, locked in a room with a wild coyote. In his travels to the gallery, he ignored all contact with the American soil or American people, to spend all his time with the “spiritual-physical” powerful animal. David Adams quotes Beuys:

The spirit of the coyote is so mighty that the human being cannot understand what it is, or what it can do for humankind in the future (1992: 7).

This ritualistic action is a symbolic attempt by the artist to heal the rift between modern American society and both Native American people (to whom Coyote is a major mythological figure) and wild nature. His actions are complex, almost abstract, and therefore far from mere naive wishful thinking. These ritual actions, conversations and noises, in fact, become semiotic negotiations for improved future relationships between the human and the natural.

Beuys’s work as an environmentalist, as well as his work with material and ritual, has had a significant influence on my thought process. In a later, more detailed analysis of my artwork, I will discuss how I rely on the rereading of Biblical texts to provoke relative liminality and change. These texts are bound in the use of spiritual ritual like

commands, chants, prayers, laments and songs. However, here the texts are not intended as an escapist or spiritual chant, but as a Beuysian tool to bridge the human/nature gap. In *Psalm 130* (see Fig. 21) for example, the ritualistic rhythm of the text evokes escapist emotion, whilst simultaneously reversing its spiritual rejection of animals. The smallness of the text draws the viewer closer to the detail rich images of the dead bees, creating an emotional connection between them. I rely on the viewer's own existential fear of death and need of salvation, echoed in the reality of bees' plight, hereby attempting to reduce the rift between the two species. Most of my work relies on emotional instigators like fear, revulsion, sadness and pity, as well as religious and cultural memory to spark liminality. Using a church as a gallery to exhibit my work is therefore a carefully considered decision reflecting my belief that going to view art in a gallery can be compared to going to church: a liminal ritual of entering, changing and leaving transformed.



Fig 15: Berlinde de Bruyckere. *Takman* (2008).

Another artist that greatly influenced my ideas regarding liminality is Berlinde De Bruyckere. With her disturbingly morphing sculptural figures, she negotiates the theme of death, metamorphosis and rebirth – themes that deeply resonate with my own thinking. Her work communicates a constant liminal cycle, where the distinctions



Fig 16: Berlinde de Bruyckere. *We are all flesh* (2011-2012).

between life and death; the corporeal and the poignant; humans and other species, are obliterated without ever making a conclusion. Her powerful piece *Takman* (2008) (see *Fig. 15*), for example, is nothing less than an existential wrestle between human and tree body parts, while in *We are all Flesh* (2011) (see *Fig. 16*) animal and human bodies become a singular carcass, awakening our empathy for our fellow creatures waiting in solitude in the slaughterhouse queue of the meat industry. The mute presence of the carcass in the gallery space triggers a silent moment of lament for the dead animal, and becomes a reminder of our very close anatomical similarity to and connection with another species. Mine Haydaroglu sums up De Bruyckere's work as being "...exposed to layers of sensations reminiscent of the experience or anticipation of loss, a ritualistic passage through other bodies and souls, in which hints at repressed feelings and acts were abundant" (2012: 286). In *We are all Flesh*, there is no spiritual quickening or trance state. Liminality is achieved through conflicting emotions of revulsion and familiarity; despair and awe; estrangement and reality. John Maxwell Coetzee, intellectual muse of De Bruyckere's *Kreupelhout* exhibition at the 2013 Venice Biennale, comments as follows on her work:

Her sculptures explore life and death – death in life, life in death, life before life, death before death – in the most intimate and most disturbing way. They bring illumination, but the illumination is as dark as it is profound (2013: [sp]).

As mentioned above, connecting our personal anxieties about death, pain and suffering with that of animal lives is also important in my work. In my film, *die Land van Melk en Heuning / the Land of Milk and Honey* (see Fig.11 and 32.), for example, the act of acknowledging a single bee in its anxious last moments of life evokes a response of distress in the viewer. This anthropomorphic projection is required to awaken the suppressed compassion towards other species that lies at the heart of my creative project. In everyday life the buzz of a bee strikes instant panic and phobia into the hearts of many, who often believe these ‘pests’ are best sprayed with insect killer. But (as I will elaborate on later) bees are a paramount species as a pollinator and an alchemical maker of golden honey. Furthermore, the bee is a symbol of a forgotten god, and of a bountiful and beautiful habitat. My aim with this work then, is to create a liminal moment where we stand and stare, witnessing the transition from life to death. This moment recognizes our own hopelessness in the face of death, yet it is also a Beuysian call to acknowledge and respect another species, just like we respect our own.

Previously, I have described a Christian grand narrative that presents a human/nature dualism through binary oppositions, where the one prevails over the other through domination and violence. I have also discussed Derrida’s acknowledgement of the “abyssal rupture” between humans and “that which we call animal” and his challenges to us to concede a “heterogeneous multiplicity of the living”, a “multiplicity of organizations of relations between living and dead” (Atterton and Callarco: 136). My interest is to acknowledge this duality and divide but, at the same time, to challenge those “violent” oppositions by visually provoking a liminal experience. My work evokes, like that of Beuys and De Breuykere, an uncomfortable experience where the viewer is ritualistically confronted with fear and pity; loathing and love; life and death. The deployment of liminality in my art aims to unblock our suppressed compassion towards that which we classify as non-human. Like so much in Christian ritual, it strives towards transcendence – but unlike the Christian

objective, this is a transcendence which leads us not away from earth, but back towards it.

3.2 Ontological Materiality: The Life and Death of Things

3.2.1 “Truth” to Material

The thingly in the work (art) should not be denied out of existence; rather given that it belongs already to the work-being of the work, it must be thought out of that work-being. If this is so, then the path to the determination of the thingly reality of the work runs not from thing to work but from work to thing (Heidegger 2002: 18).

This thesis is inspired by a lifelong fascination with and adoration of nature. It is influenced by hours spent staring at black house ants; feeding house flies to dwarf chameleons; mimicking turtle dove calls and picking up pumpkin shells on long beach strolls. It is a still continuing ritualistic pastime of seeing, finding and collecting shells, feathers, stones, bones, seeds, etc. These objects were never meant as metaphors, yet their realness instantaneously reminds me of the moments and the places where I found them. This thesis then, is also a continuation of an intuitive personal way of seeing things from this physical world (as opposed to a spiritual world; a world not from this world). The “thingly” reality in my art pierces through the comfort of otherworldly fantasies, and provokes a possible new way of seeing in the viewer. A dead fly on display in an art gallery connects the viewer to another species in a way that may not be possible outside the gallery. Through anthropomorphic projection, the reality of its carbon-based body reminds us of its earthly life essence, which may not be so extremely dissimilar to our own earthly life essence, our own carbon based bodies.

Amanda Du Preez advises not just to consider art “in terms of its content (what it means), but ...to take into account the vehicle or materiality through which it manifests itself (how it matters)” (2008: [sp]). The medium, in other words, changes what art means. Since the post-war era many artists have elevated found material to art objects. According to Ian Wallace, the term “found object” is translated from the

French term, “objet trouvé”, which refers to a non-art object used in an art context (2014:[sp]). Instead of depictions of objects, artists prefer the use of real material and objects for their ability to instantly provoke and intrigue. According to Amanda du Preez, Marcel Du Champ’s (1887 – 1968) found and readymade art objects changed the way in which the material with which the artwork is made is seen: the material is also considered to be the message (2008: [sp]).

Because the “thingly” is so important in my art, I have been influenced by artists such as Damien Hirst who, with works involving real dead sharks, cows, pigs, flies, butterflies, etc., makes paradoxical statements about morality and the human relationship with non-human beings. Hirst trivialises his use of real animals in his art as “...just a way of making art real... [it] is not a representation it is a real thing” (Cashell 2009: 166). Kieran Cashell discusses Hirst’s refusal to depict or represent, rather opting for the use of actual animals in his work. “[G]oing for the real thing” is more effective or shocking because “it insidiously stimulates the phobia of death (what is not there) by producing a compulsive emotional reaction to what is there” (178). The “real thing” evokes real emotion.

I am interested in both found material or objects shaped by natural processes and discarded derivatives of human activities. Often, because they are found by chance and collected in and around urban environments, the objects have, in some or other way, been affected by human activity. Most of the objects are dead or dying non-human species, and the effect which human activity has had on them might not be instantly visible. They are powerful for their immediate provocation of anthropocentric ambivalence toward the natural on the one side, and anthropomorphic likenesses on the other. Once again, these materials and objects are often discovered by chance and intuition, and not necessarily intended to be useful for their simplistic symbolism.

In this my thought process has been influenced by Steve Baker, who examines Joseph Beuys, Mark Dion and Robert Rauschenberg’s use of animals in art as useful for its “pressing thingness” and not necessarily for its symbolism (2000: 82). For Baker symbolism is an anthropocentric construct which enables us to give meaning to animals – meaning that inevitably gives us comfort. It is the “face of the real” animal in art that defies classification, symbolism or comfort, and it is therefore the task of the postmodern artist to offer an “other-than-anthropocentric” view of the

animal body by “taking the animal (and the human) out of meaning” (2000: 83). I am also influenced by the ideas of Jeff Malpas, who looks at the coming together of materiality, objectivity, metaphor and phenomenology in an artwork. Malpas argues that the nature or materiality of an artwork transcends ontological baggage or expectations as the merger of object and metaphor becomes in the viewer a phenomenological experience.

The material objectivity of the artwork is the medium for the work in that it is that in which the working of the artwork – its self-articulation, its self-disclosure, its self-transcendence – occurs, but what occurs is also the working of that very objectivity and nothing else (Parry 2011: 71-72).

Just like Malpas’s phenomenological experience, the unexpected juxtapositions of material and biblical text in my work triggers liminality of experiential transcendence. What I mean with this is that the reality and objectivity of the materiality is transcended, and the ontology of the material questioned. Although the material is transcended and transformed into metaphor in an art context, the reality and objectivity remains. The object/material/thing is what it is.

Daniel Miller argues that historical anthropological studies have somewhat trivialised material studies as artefacts of human cultures. Cultural narratives are therefore shaped through the discovery of artefacts fashioned by intelligent and innovative crafters, rather than by examining the influence which the exterior environment and objects had on their cultures. In other words, culture is described by how humans shaped their environments and not by how the environment shaped human culture. He calls it “the humility of things” in a “material culture” and explains that “much of what we are exists not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us” (2005: 5). He describes this as the “capacity of objects to fade out of focus and remain peripheral to our vision and yet determinant of our behaviour and identity (2005: 5). In a similar vein, Karl Marx argues that material exists inside and outside of the body and consciousness, therefore things exist whether we are aware of it or not, and whether we are shaping it or it is shaping us (Miller: 73 – 74).

Miller also suggests that materiality is either seen as artefacts of an increasingly materialistic culture, or as a transcendence of the dualism of subjects and objects. In other words, to diminish, or blur the gap between the two. He considers rather the potential of the latter: “the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological, and the theoretical” (2005: 4). He questions the translation of the object as a crude and one dimensional artefact or commodity and encourages acknowledging its pluralism or dialect. He cites Georg Hegel (1770-1831), who in his book, “Phenomenology of the Spirit” (1807), proposed that there can be no distinction between humanity and materiality, and that we are in a constant cycle of creation and reflection of our material constructions (2005: 8). It becomes a certain “culture” – we make what we are and we are what make.

In my work, materiality means bringing the natural into a human environment. There is a phenomenological indulgence and simultaneous discomfort in their presence: their death, rejection and destruction reminds viewers of their culpability and own material fragility. Their bodily presence challenges our self-proclaimed species superiority and exposes the culturally destructive relationship we have with the natural world.

3.2.2 A Complicated “Truth”: Ontological Complexities of Materiality

I am referring to the crisis of representation, in which an essentially realistic epistemology, which conceives of representation as the reproduction, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it – projects a mirror theory of knowledge and art, whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy, and Truth itself (Lyotard 1984: viii).

In Chapter 2, I mentioned Derrida’s criticism of the “violent reductions” inherent in language. This is certainly true – in a very literal sense– for me: in trying to coerce my intuitive processes into the structured, theoretical language necessary for this thesis, I have often felt as if I’m violently reducing the complexities underlying my ideas. But language is not the only phenomenon which allows such violent reductions: just as we often use and read language without question, we rarely

question ontological postulations in our reading of material objects – especially when it comes to natural materials and non-human species. This, in my opinion, has to do with our pre-set understanding of our relationships with non-human species, especially when such relationships are built on fear, repulsion, disrespect or indifference. For example, when buying packaged meat at the supermarket, most people are completely indifferent towards the suffering or death of the animal whose flesh they will be eating. Similarly, when flies hover around the kitchen where we prepare the meat, we feel perfectly justified in killing all the flies with one satisfying spray of insect killer. When we sit at our wooden kitchen tables to eat, we rarely wonder in which forest the tree grew before it was harvested for use as furniture. Our relation to objects and material is therefore a constant reminder of the man/nature binary opposition where, as discussed above, the one term always dominates the other. With the use of true material, and especially the real bodies of insects and animals, I am interested in complicating the “truth” of material by testing our responses to the materiality of non-human species. By confronting the viewer with such materiality in an art context, I aim to undermine pre-set ideas, classifications, feelings and expectations. Although I am relying on the presence and reality of materiality, its assemblage in an art context, as well as the simultaneous rereading of escapist biblical texts, challenges regular readings of the material. Therefore, what becomes important is not just the immanence of material³, but an immanence of a phenomenological experience that transcends the obvious limited and problematic ontology.

Derrida also warns about the “abyssal rupture” between “we men” and “what we call animals” (2004: 136). Our understanding of existing or possible relationships with animals, according to David Wood, relies on skewed historical guidance, where “our relationship with this cat, or this snake, rides on the whole human record of our dealings with animals” (2004: 136). It is this skewed guidance that my art aims to challenge. Béatrice Han-Pile, draws on Heidegger’s analysis of master paintings to show that the reality of the artwork opens up or articulates an “ontological structure” or window to the world. Through their phenomenology they transcend simple

³ I use the word “immanence” in reference to Deleuze and Guattari, to describe “...a reality that contains no negotiations or boundaries, but only differences and ‘thresholds’, in which everything is implicated in everything else (Calarco and Atterton: 103).

historical and cultural lineaments (Parry 2011: 153-154). Although Han-Pile's argument is based on a discussion of seventeenth century Dutch paintings, it is relevant to me as my artwork both describes an ontological structure, and at the same time, transcends it. To reject the ontology of material is to reject, as Derrida called it, a "reductive" and "dismissive" ontological postulation (Higgs: 3). I would like to recall my discussion above of the influence of the Christian creation narrative of St. Thomas Aquinas's *Great Chain of Being*; and of *Cabinet of Curiosity: Theatrum Mundi* (see Fig. 6), where Mark Dion reminds us how representations of nature are false, reductive and static postulations. Dion's work reminds us that, through science, we still try to organise and classify and that "...nature is constantly reinvented by humans as a series of artificial constructs" (1997: 48).

The materiality of my visual work then aims to transcend the reductive artificial construct of "nature" as posited by the grand narratives of religion, science, capitalism etc., and instead to "open a new window" which allows the viewer to conceptualise the natural in a completely new way. According to Steve Baker in his book *The Postmodern Animal* (2000), it is also the form of material or animal bodies in art that need to be "released" from their previous state, where, like in Deleuze and Guattari's, "becoming-animal" through art, it is "to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all meanings" (2000: 136). It is an expunging of all "species identity, and the rejection of any pre-given transcendent form of nature or teleological trajectory" (2004: 102). "[B]ecoming-animal", therefore, is "to think and affirm a radical order of immanence, a primordial ontological domain in which free-form creative synthesis operates unimpeded by the proprieties and boundaries of pre-set identities" (2004: 102).

Karen Von Veh uses Foucault's "ontology of the present" to explain how our Western way of looking at and reading of symbols, images, and objects, has become complacent and in need of disruption (2011: 174). She calls it "...an ontology of the particular historical conditions that result in the truths and values underpinning our society today". By visually creating a new ontology, artists can shock the viewer into the re-evaluation of the symbol and into questioning their own preconceptions. Von Veh refers to the explanation of McHoul and Grace:

To produce an ontology of the present involves detaching oneself from one's cultural surroundings. It poses a series of questions intended to undermine the familiarity of our present, to disturb the ease with which we think we know ourselves and others" (2011: 74).

Similarly, Ted Toadvine explains Merleau-Ponty's term "radical reflection" as a phenomenological experience "...to describe our relationship with nature from the perspective of explicit reflection, our reflection conditions what we find, without our ever being able to capture in reflection that by which reflection has already been conditioned" (2009: 163).

Materiality for me, in a Deleuze and Guattarian sense, is to "...contest any supposedly originary self-identity", and to "...liberate it from all determination by the traditional synonyms for being" (2004: 102). To contest material ontology is to become, not just animal, but all other matter, even "becoming-molecular" (2004: 104). The questioning of presupposed ontology of materiality through its immanent reality is "becoming". It is an awareness of the continuum between human and animal/nature. This "becoming" "reveals the ontological primordially of the "in-between" (2004: 108). Materiality, for me, is the link to create this "in-between", "becoming" or "liminality". The rejection of the Christian inspired matrix of duality between heaven and earth; man and animal; human and nature is the first step to truly "becoming-animal".

In this I am reminded of Mark Dion's, *Library of the Birds of Antwerp* (1993) (see *Fig.17*), where he mocks the Judeo-Christian influenced tree of knowledge and the tree of life. Using Ernst Haeckel's (1834 – 1919) *Evolutionary Tree* (1874) (see *Fig.18*), Dion criticises the idea that humans are the dominant species on earth, as well as our flawed historical knowledge of nature (Bryson 1997: 92). His tree of knowledge is diseased and rotting, precariously filled with an assortment of objects like books; bird cages; taxidermied birds; chemical containers and nets. Bryson says that:

Dion's work raises the possibility that in the era of managing resources now recognised to be limited, knowledge itself may be the resource whose historical limits we most urgently need (1997: 97).



Fig 17: Mark Dion. *Library of the Birds of Antwerp* (1993).

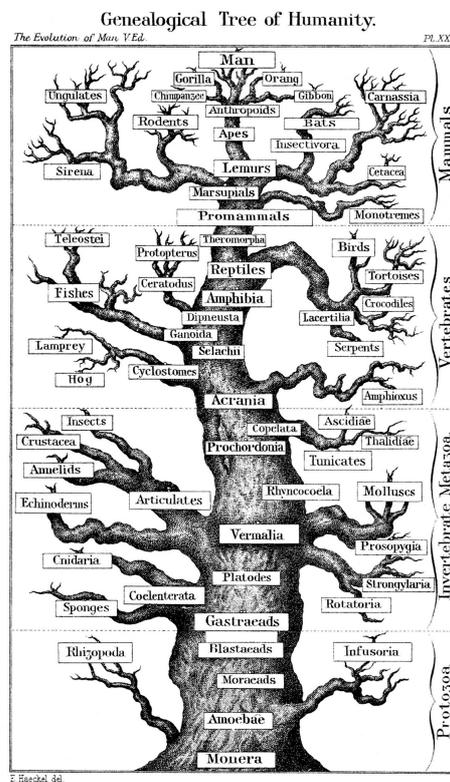


Fig 18: Ernst Haeckel. *Genealogical Tree of Humanity: The Evolution of Man*.

3.2.3 Materiality: message, metaphor and narrative

The story of objects asserting themselves as things is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation (Bill Brown 2014: 58).

Zahng Huan's, *Smoking Buddha* (2007) (see Fig. 19), epitomises his affinity for materiality and narrative. Huan, famous for his large scale sculptures and paintings, uses incense ash collected from Buddhist temples around Shanghai to create his ash pieces. His use of material focuses on the inherent narrative of the medium as well as representations of historic photographs. Not only does the material itself have a history of place and tradition, it also tells of the ritual and process of his art making, especially the weekly collecting of temple ash. His use of materials and objects can thus be contrasted with that of someone like Hirst's, whose work refuses both representation and narrative.



Fig 19: *Smoking Buddha* (2007).

Huan believes that “ash remains speak to the fulfilment of millions of hopes, dreams and blessings ...[I]t carries unseen sedimentary residue, and tremendous human data about the collective and individual subconscious (Huan 2007: 1). According to him, incense ash has a long history in Chinese culture and is still believed to bridge the gap between ancestors, spirits and devotees, bringing good luck and fortune as well as quelling fears and anxieties etc. (Huan 2007: 1) In *Free Tiger Returns to Mountains* (2007) (see Fig. 21), Huan employs more artistic expression as part of his narration, instead of his usual realistic referencing photographs (Pace Gallery 2010: 1). This series of ash paintings speaks of his concerns for the Chinese Tiger, one of the most threatened species on earth. Here, the ash speaks of cultural and spiritual reverence for the species and for nature, yet also warns of the fragility of this species as well as our increasingly tenuous connection with nature.



Fig 20: Zhang Huan. *Free Tiger Returns to Mountains : No.66* (2010).

Similar to Huan’s layered employment of ash, I am fascinated by the dual ability of material to be both “real” and symbolic. As mentioned above, I rely on the “pressing thingness”, reality and eminence of things/material/objects, yet at the same time I am excited by how such things/material/objects can transcend their ontological limitations via metaphor and narrative. For Joseph Beuys, according to Julie Luckenbach (*Material as a Metaphor*: [sp]), objects extend from the elemental materiality to the metaphorical. So, in Beuys’s art, the object becomes a metaphor when it transcends its materiality: when, in other words, the signified (metaphor)

transcends the signifier (object/materiality). Similarly, for me, when the object or material (when it is not technically an object) is chosen or used in an art context, it is an attempt to make visible its status of existential (Heideggerian) (non-human) being-in-the-world; to elevate its narrative in a world where such a narrative is mostly silent or invisible. In the simplest form, such objects are now symbolic “things” because they are presented in an art context. Just viewing them as symbols, however, does not give justice to the entirety of their existence. It (thing/material/object) is there, presented in the physical form, because it exists, or has existed and is now dead and only visible as an exoskeleton, derivative, photograph or video. In *Coyote: I Love America and America Loves Me* (see Fig. 3) for example, Buys deliberately travels to meet the native coyote in America in order to intensely highlight its narrative. On the other hand, in *The Impossibility of Death in the Eyes of Someone Living* (see Fig. 1) Hirst deliberately excludes the shark’s narrative: especially ordered, caught, bought and shipped from the coast of Australia. The narrative inherent in the material can thus either be highlighted or suppressed, but it can never be completely erased. Slavoj Žižek extends Jacques Lacan’s “object petit” or “object small” to when

a quite ordinary, everyday object that, as soon as it is elevated to the status of Thing ... [becomes] ...a surplus of the real that propels us to narrate... and project our fantasies, even if that fantasy simultaneously attracts and repels us (Hudek 2014: 173).

Hirst’s deliberately clinical display might exclude the real narrative of his specimens, but it also has the power to illicit a multiplicity of narratives through our morbid fascination with the ‘thing’ on display.

Jean-Luc Nancy theorises the topic of existence as that being exposed by the body:

The existence of a body is a free force which does not disappear even when the body is destroyed and which does not disappear as such except when the relation of this existence to another and destructive existence is itself destroyed as a relation of existences, becoming a relation of essences (Rugo 2013: 56).

I present things/material/objects as bodies real and bodies dead: a physical body or object of nature. In Christian narrative, as we have seen, the body is of matter, a temporary vessel and host to the eternal spirit. Earthly bodies are bound to earth and excluded from heaven and eternal life with God. According to the Bible:

We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord (*King James Bible 2 Corinthians 5:8*).

With my collection of and work with objects and material, I contest this “absence” by telling the story of these objects. They are represented through their bodies: exoskeletons, carcasses, landscapes, wood and ash. I try to acknowledge the lives, the places and the struggles of these creatures, objects and material, by putting their bodies in an art gallery. The gallery where I exhibit has a history as a church, a building that represents a rejection of such bodies as earthly dust. In this church, I tell the story of an unknown and unwinnable battle with the human species so that the display of these bodies, even though small and abstract, makes the viewer a witness to his/her own (and my own) culpability.

3.2.4 Conclusion: Ontological Materiality

My use of the term “ontological materiality” thus constitutes a complex interplay between the words “ontology” and “materiality” to refer to a) the “truth” inherent in material, b) the ontological constructs which underlie such “truths” and c) the metaphors and narratives elicited by it. By focussing on the ontological materiality of the objects in my work, I intend to deconstruct the continual violent reduction of non-human species as simple, stable and inferior. I do this in line with the post-modern discourse of relaying a micro-narrative, acknowledging complexity and rejecting structured postulations.

With my art, I thus try to amplify the complexity of mundane natural derivatives by acknowledging their existence and narrating an essence of communal life and death on earth. For Marcel Duchamp’s (1887 – 1968), “mundane” implies that a thing is ordinary, not worth mentioning or noticing. It also implies that a thing is an uncomplicated, simple and stable thing. It exists only in its reductive historical,

epistemological and ontological constructs. Yet, Duchamp elevated found objects to art by placing them in art galleries, thus complicating its apparent stability and ontology (Wallace: [sp]). This recalls Derrida's "limitrophy" and "violent reductions" discussed above. David Wood argues that this "violence" not only refers to the conceptual limit of language, but "expeditiously legitimates our actual violence" (2004: 133). The emphasis on ontological materiality which characterises almost every aspect of my work, aims to complicate that which is simple and stable and to challenge the violent reductions of our thoughts towards the natural in an attempt to problematize both the conceptual and actual "violence" towards nature in the mind of the viewer.

Chapter 4: A Discussion of My Own Work

4.1 Process and Technique: Materiality; Photography and the Rereading of Biblical texts

Against the slanderers of nature. – I find those people unpleasant in whom every natural inclination immediately becomes a sickness, something disfiguring or even contemplative – they have seduced us into the belief that man’s natural inclinations are evil; they are the cause of our great injustice toward our nature, towards all nature! (Nietzsche 2001:167)

4.1.1 Materiality

In the previous chapter, I discussed my interest in the “ontological materiality” of the “things” I use in my art. I elaborated on the method of using natural things/material/objects to challenge historical ontological postulations. I have also explained how, for me, seeing, collecting, documenting and ultimately displaying natural materiality is a continuation of a compulsive lifelong interaction with nature. It is a way of giving presence to materiality in a micro-narrative that, in a post-modern sense, challenges the Christian dualisms of heaven/earth; man/animal and spiritual/natural as well as the narrative of man’s mastery over nature. To avoid duplication, after a brief elaboration here I will limit further discussion of materiality and progress to other areas of process and technique, specifically photography and the use of Biblical texts.

Although my process regarding materiality is intuitive and often driven by chance, there is a general way of looking at and finding things that is useful for highlighting the abovementioned themes in this thesis. My use of dead specimens, feared, unwanted and discarded objects and material is a reminder of this continuing dichotomy between humans and nature. Flies, pigeons, invasive and alien species, ash, etc. represent the real and the symbolic in my work. They are used with a narrative intent, combined and juxtaposed in an installation in the gallery space. Although found material has a sculptural element, its use in a mixed media

installation is also intuitive and flexible. This way of working challenges the idea of artistic mastery and deconstructs the violently dualistic grand narrative which is the subject of this thesis.

The architecture of the Gallery of University Stellenbosch (GUS), an old Lutheran Church, is also significant to me. The gallery in itself is an object/thing/material, which, with its clay bricks, pine wooden floors and pointed arched windows, echoes the old and still lingering dualistic Christian grand narrative which posits humans as nature's master. In previous exhibitions at this gallery, I have responded to this architectural visuality, and have experimented with it as part of the composition. In my exhibition for the practical component of this thesis, I intend to respond to these historical Christian echoes, not only visually but also thematically.

4.1.2 Photography

Photography is an integral part of my process of looking, finding, collecting and documenting. My photographs, however, are not primarily intended as autonomous art objects as I choose to use it as part of an installation. Combining photography with found material and biblical text, reconstitutes the absent referent, and brings it to life in the gallery. In some cases, it even reveals a sculptural quality. The simultaneous presence and absence of reality and photographic referent can, in the viewer, trigger a liminal experience.

Kaja Silverman describes photography as “radically anti-Cartesian”, and argues that it “shows us that there really is a world, that it wants to be seen by us, and that it exceeds our capacity to know it” (Silverman [sp]). Just like the reality of materiality, photography allows me another way to document and show “reality” or earthly immanence. Photography presents a captured reality that allows me to bring the outside in –“things” which cannot be brought into the gallery like, for example, landscapes or decaying carcasses. What is important to me is that the realistic referent, or the punctum⁴ of the photograph invokes a sense of similitude in the

⁴ Punctum is a term originally given by Roland Barthes, to describe the visual trigger in a photograph. (Le Grange: 104)

viewer, a realisation that we are not a transcended species, but deeply connected to everything on this planet.

According to Silverman, photography

...also shows us that the world is structured by analogy, and helps us find our place within it. Photography shows us that ...[e]ach of us is connected through similarities that are neither of our making nor our choosing to countless other beings. We cannot extricate ourselves from these relationships ... [and] ... [t]here is also nowhere else to go (Silverman: [sp]).

She continues to explain that photographic analogies “destabilise all of our hierarchies”, and reminds us that “there is another kind of relationality”, which is ultimately “ontologically democratizing” (Silverman: [sp]). The “photographic image is an ontological calling card—the vehicle through which the world presents itself to us, and reveals us to ourselves” (Silverman: [sp]).

Photography is a tool that enables me to witness, document, and then to present a rich reality of the referent in its absence. Just like the reality of things and objects, the reality of the photographs connects the viewer to this world, and through an emotional, liminal response, creates an ontological neutral ground between the human and the natural world.

4.1.3 Rereading of Biblical Text

There is a wide general consensus that the Bible is one the world’s most printed and distributed books. The Guinness World Records estimates that between 1815 and 1975, more than 5 billion Bibles were printed (Best Selling Book of all Times: [sp]) and, as discussed above, its influence on Western culture has been so great as to be almost immeasurable. Interestingly, it is often referred to as the “holy” or “living” Bible, which suggests that it is both a sacred document and a vital part of everyday life as a supposed earthly companion. In other words, it echoes the spiritual/natural dualism described above: the word “living” suggests transcendence over death, so

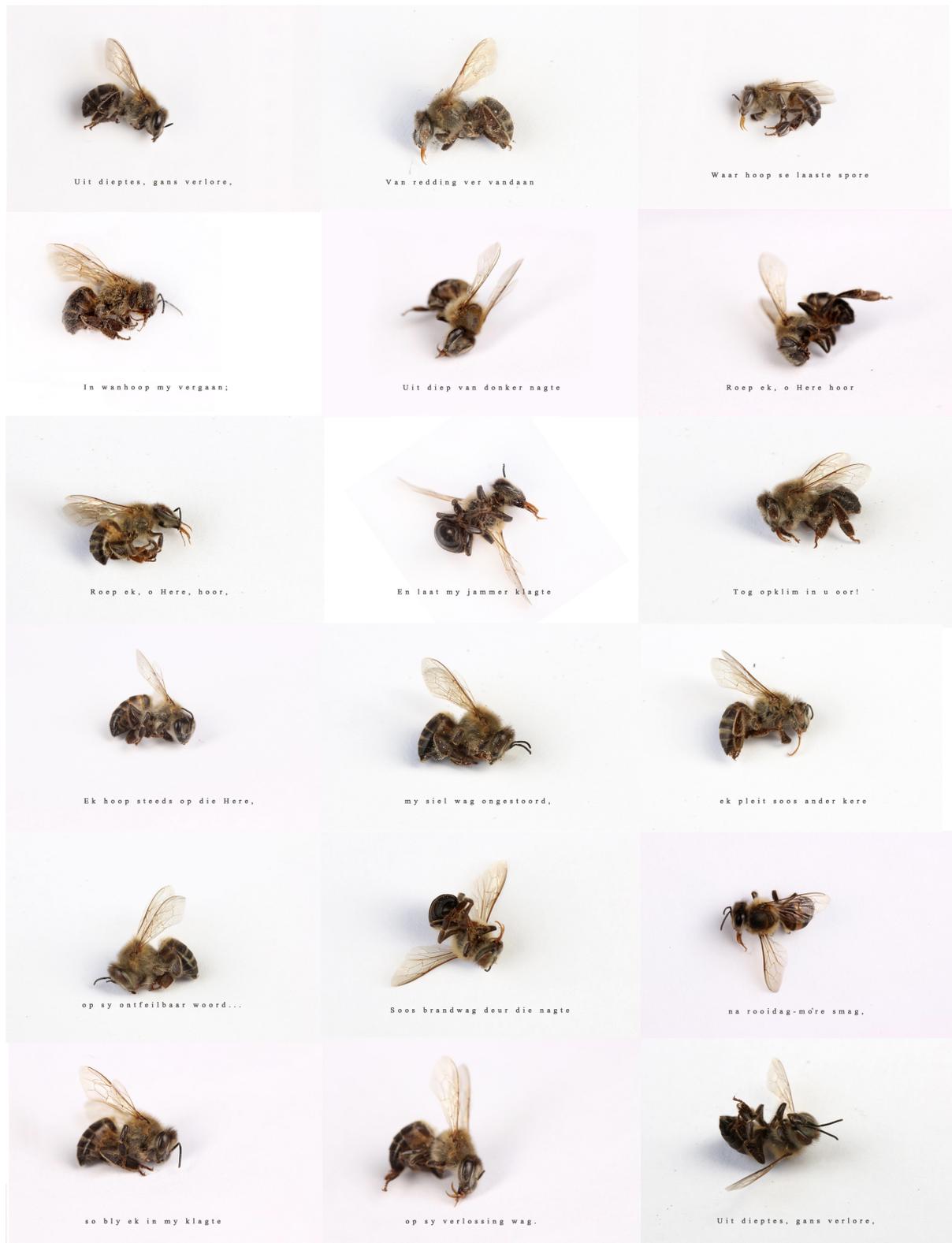


Fig 21: Tertius Heyns. *psalm 130* (2016).

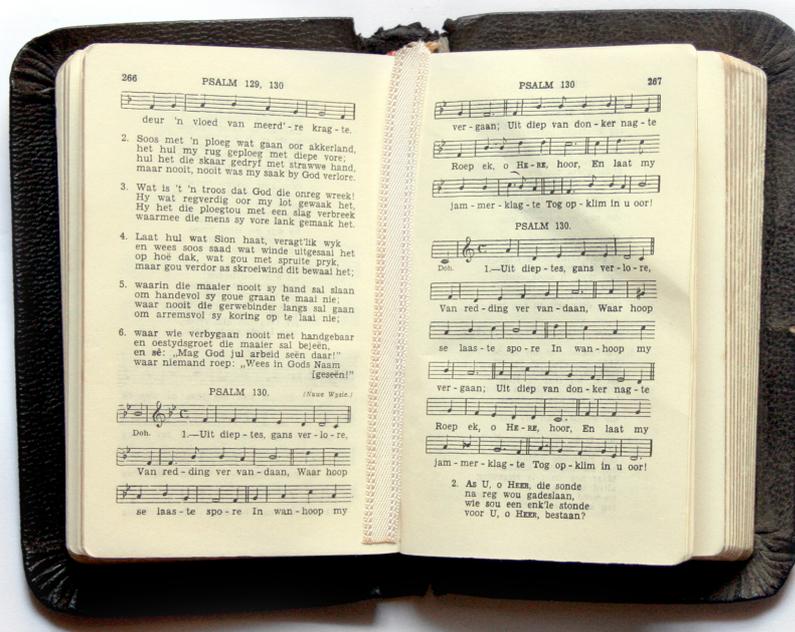
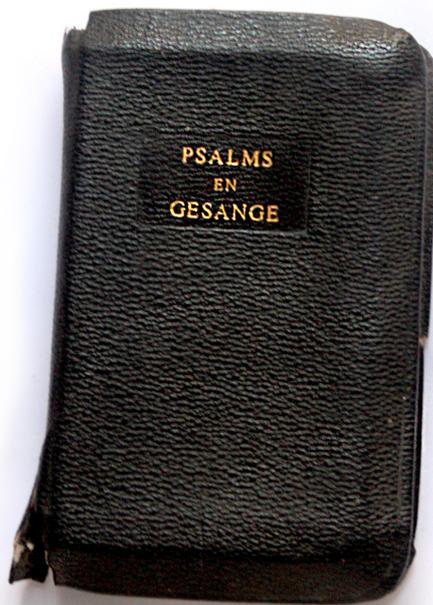


Fig 22: Die Berymde Psalms (1969).

that the Bible is both “living” on earth with our physical, mortal bodies, and at the same time the immortal, spiritual “Word of God” in heaven.

With the use of biblical texts in my art, I reference the Bible and Psalm books as iconic material objects. The rereading of biblical texts is also an important part of my work. This is done by the juxtaposition of these texts with photographs or material installations, prompting a simultaneous, “against the grain” rereading. Here, I use the term “rereading” in a post-modern manner to refer to the deconstruction and challenging of Biblical narrative, especially with regards to human transcendence: our supposed mastery over other creatures, nature and even death.

Psalm 130 (Fig. 21), is a good example of how I incorporate Biblical texts into my work. I use Afrikaans Biblical texts, rather than, say, the English or Latin versions, in order to remain true to my own personal micro narrative. (Most of my textual inspirations come from reading a small antique family Psalm book.) Drawing on my memories of reading, singing hymns and praying in church, I try to re-evolve a simultaneous sense of melancholy and hope, sadness and salvation. My thinking in this regard is so layered that I find it easiest to convey it in bulleted format:

- The texts act as chants of existential angst, escapism and repentance. When reading them simultaneously with the photographs of dying insects, they offer those insects the same comfort provided by spiritual ritual that is normally only reserved for humans.
- The ritualistic reading of biblical texts, juxtaposed with natural material and realistic photographs, triggers a liminal state in the viewer. Through a complex mixture of emotions, our own fear of death is anthropomorphically projected onto the dead “things” on view.
- Texts of appeasement, repentance, or prayers of salvation, trigger existential uncertainty that nullifies our special species status, and challenges the myth of eternal life.
- These texts are used to complicate our feelings toward nature, by invoking fear and phobia of the natural. In, for example *Wegraping / Rapture* (see *Fig 30; 12 and 31*), the burnt landscape and dead flies are juxtaposed with escapist Psalms, invoking our ambivalent relationship with nature through ugliness and revulsion.

- Through the deliberately blasphemous juxtaposition of Biblical texts with lowly, despised and “soulless” earthly creatures, the artwork takes a transgressive turn. This is useful because shock disturbs a regular reading of the Bible, and exposes the “violence” inherent in the Christian dualistic narrative as discussed above.

4.2 Art and Installation



Fig 23: Tertius Heyns. *Sapiens Dominabitur Astris* (2013).

It might be useful to start my discussion of the art making process that first led me to this thesis with an examination of a piece of art which I created in 2011 titled, *Sapiens Dominabitur Astris* (see Fig. 23). Mainly constructed from found oak, wood and nails, the piece expresses the tensions between humans and the natural environment. The blackened burnt-out core of a tree dominates one side of the sculpture: a reminder of the violent and destructive force of the natural element of

fire. The burnt side serves as an ominous warning about the immensely fragile nature of our existence on earth. On the other side we find nails hammered into the undamaged piece of the wood, suggesting the human element of destruction, violence and the scarring of the landscape inherent even in “constructive” human endeavours such as the erection of buildings and cities. At the edges of the work the many nails seem to be scattered chaotically, much like the millions of people overpopulating our planet. At the centre, however, the nails are organized to spell out the words “Sapiens Dominabitur Astris” – an alchemical saying referring to Humans as the master of all God’s creations. In the way that the many individual nails in my piece come together so that the whole forms a triumphant Latin motto, I have tried to evoke the way we as people huddle together in cities and towns. Thus, safely removed from nature, we are free to construct grandiose beliefs about our “special” status on earth, all the while stubbornly ignoring the way our actions are destroying the complex ecosystem of the planet we live on. In realising our fragility, we thus respond with a kind of “flight or fight” response – either through “spiritual” escapism or a physical “attack” on the very planet on which we, as a species, are completely dependent for our survival.



Fig. 24: Tertius Heyns. *We Fear None but God!* (2013).

In another early work involving experimental photographic darkroom printing, I referenced Acacia thorns juxtaposed with the Christian motto, “We fear none but God!” (see *Fig. 24*). This typographic chant of appeasement seems entangled

and overgrown by a rendering of Acacia thorns. Although Acacias had their uses (for example, their bark, gum and seed pods were often used in cattle feed) they were mostly seen as a hindrance to agriculture and as pests that were tough to root out. They are common in the semi-arid area of Northern Namibia, and are well-known for their ferocious pen-like thorns, formed to reduce water loss and to ward off omnivores. By juxtaposing the vicious Acacia thorns with a Christian motto, this work examines the existential angst which originates from our deep-rooted fear of nature and the desperate hope for salvation from our “hell on earth”. In Chapter 2, we have seen that the Bible tells about the creation of a garden, Eden, where there were no thorns, only fruit bearing trees. After the “original sin” was committed by Adam and Eve, however, thorns became synonymous with lost innocence, sin and suffering on earth:

Grief, pain, suffering and sorrow are what you reap when you sow the seed of sin...thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you (*Gen.3: 17*).

Another biblical narrative which refers directly to thorns is, of course, the story of the crucifixion, where Christ was made to wear a crown of thorns to symbolise the suffering our earthly bodies must endure before we can, through death, leave this earth and go to heaven. In this narrative, Christ pays for our sins by wearing the thorny crown in our place (along with other forms of tortuous suffering), thus absolving us from all accountability. The image hints at both these narratives while the text also cross-references the old Recce (South African Special Forces) motto, used during the border war in Angola. The fear of an enemy and the constant mortal danger are visualised in the metaphor of Acacia thorns designed to become a coat of arms. The oval scope-like view subtly references an antiquated telescope viewed on an old television, while the static and disturbances suggest that this “broadcast” to heaven, is troubled and unsuccessful. All doubt and fear, however, is then dismissed with the angst-full yet stubbornly aggressive motto which now becomes an emblem, a badge, a flag, a culture.

Another of my works which deals directly with the issue of death and resurrection is *Heilige Pes / Holy Pest* (see *Fig. 25*), a photographic triptych of a dead pigeon. In this series of photographs I documented the death of a juvenile turtle dove, killed by my



Fig 25: Tertius Heyns. *heilige pes / holy pest* (2013).

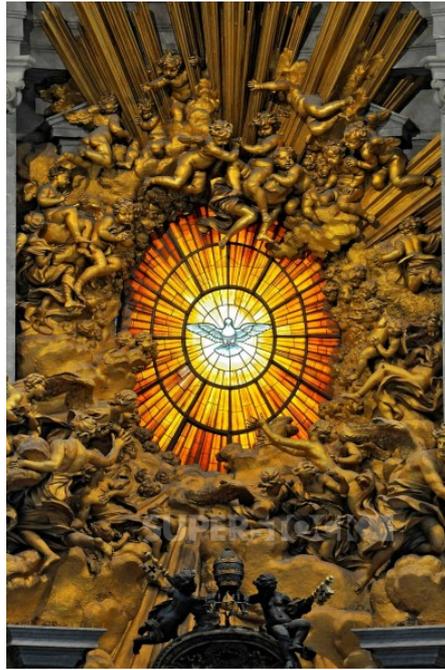


Fig 26: Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Stained Glass window (detail) above the Chair of St. Peter.*

cat. The dead dove was photographed while my cat was still playing with it, which had the effect of something akin to the pigeon's last, desperate, pathetic and angelic flight. This is clearly no Biblical white dove, rising to heaven, and yet it plainly references the Christian Holy Spirit which is depicted in hundreds of Christian images like, for example, the famous stained glass window above *The Chair of St. Peter* in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (see Fig. 26).

Unlike Christian art such as the piece above, however, my work aims not to comfort with fantasies of eternal life, but to confront viewers with their own mortality as well as evoking pity for the creature's loss of life. The documentation of a real dead creature is an attempt to pause the viewer in a moment of lament for an innocent yet insignificant creature; to take time out from the daily distractions in order to feel, for an instant, the horror, pity and finality of death. Yes, the pigeon is "resurrected" in its flight-like posture, but this brings no real comfort. Instead, unlike Bernini's dove, the pathos of the dead bird subtly suggests the desperation at the heart of the Christian hope for a spiritual journey that outlasts life itself. This desperate clinging to an illogical hope is emphasized by the Afrikaans version of the Biblical verse of *Psalms* 121:

Ek slaan my oë op na die berge, waarsal my hulp vandaan kom? My hulp is van die Here, wat hemel en aarde gemaak het. (I lift up my eyes to the mountains, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.)

Heilige Pes / Holy Pest II (see Fig. 27), a photographic triptych of a decomposing adult rock pigeon, is a continuation of this topic. The dead pigeon was found by chance in a street gutter near my house in Cape Town and immediately caught my interest as a dual symbol: both of earthly pestilence and spiritual escapism. More robust than the turtle dove and with stronger, almost “angelic” wings, it seems more capable of transcending death in its holy spiritual flight. But this is not to be. Grounded by its less-than-gracious posture, there is no otherworldly place where this creature can escape its mortality: death’s “sting” is as undeniable as the grave’s “victory” (1 Corinthians 15: 55)

The triptych subtly references the Christian idea of the Holy Trinity, but this is a trinity unified in death, with no spiritual refuge to escape to. It wistfully continues the naive story of transcendence over death even as it declares it a failure, and thus mocks our faith in a spiritual afterlife while at the same time understanding it. The dove, of course, is one of the very few revered animalistic symbols used in Christianity, which reminds us that this religion’s powerful stories are still subliminally influencing our harmful relationship with nature. As a narrative, it is deep rooted, legitimated and still largely unchallenged in our culture.

Simultaneously holy and pest, this image speaks to the complex relationship we have with nature. Today, there are an estimated 400 million pigeons worldwide (Pigeon Control: Facts and Figures: [sp]). For rock pigeons, tall buildings are perfect surrogates for cliffs, which means that human cities have become the perfect artificial breeding grounds for these creatures as they provide both nesting areas (buildings) and food (human waste). Despised for soiling buildings and cars as well as carrying disease, these “vermin” are often killed by pest control companies. *Heilige Pes / Holy Pest II* (see Fig. 27) aims to reject the Christian narrative (which sees such slaughter as natural and unproblematic because it allows man alone a spiritual dimension with the unquestioned right to master his environment) as a flawed and false fantasy. At the same time it wants to add to a new narrative, a story told from Darwin to Dawkins,

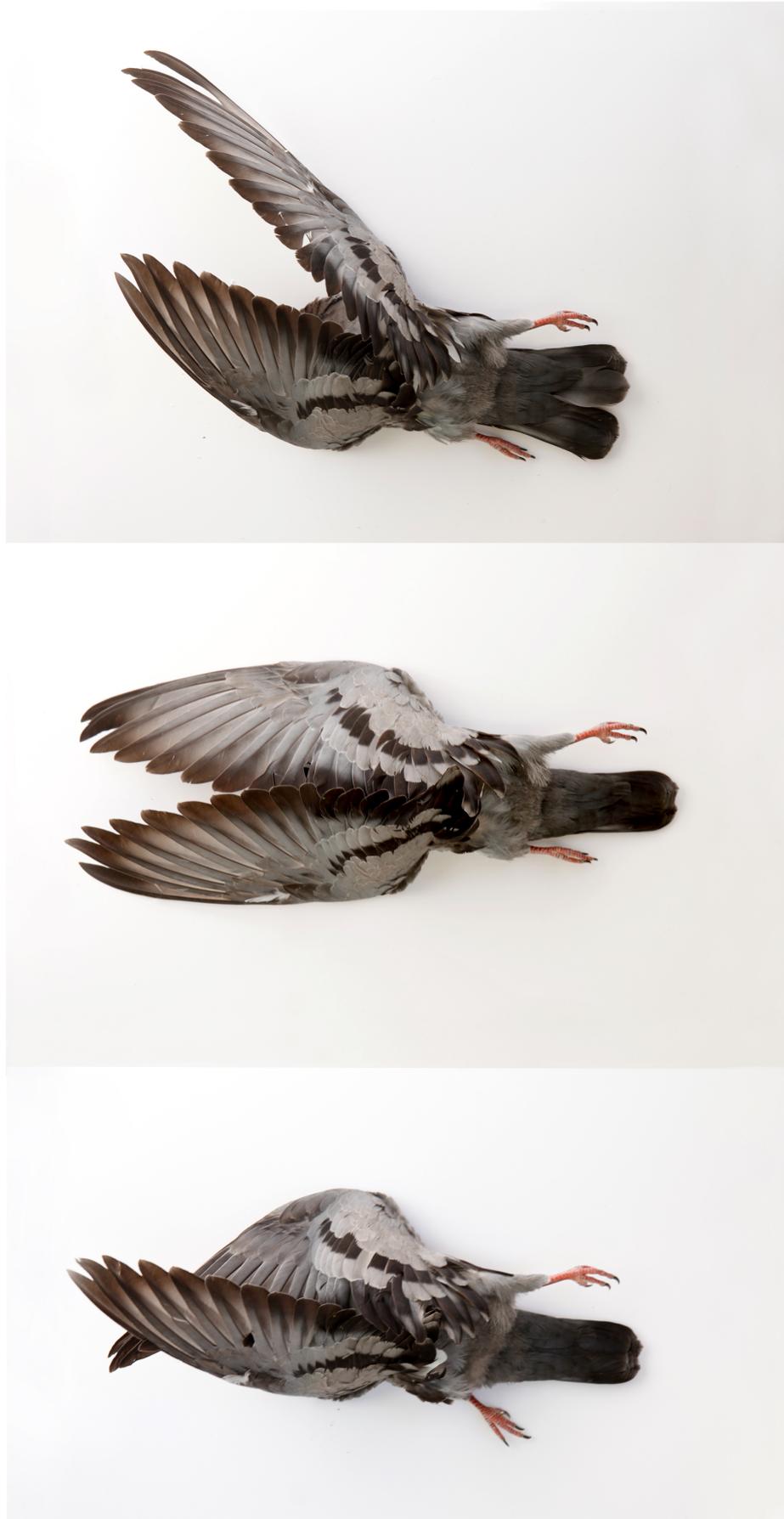


Fig 27: *Tertius Heyns. heilige pes / holy pest II.* (2016)

which sees people as just another species on earth and which finds an almost transcendental beauty in the natural – including the death of a “pest” such as this pigeon.

But pigeons aren’t the only victims of the human obsession with controlling our environment. In Chapter 2 above we have seen how there is a very narrow and circumscribed “place” for the natural in the modern Western world (mostly through the consumption of capitalist commodities such as gardens and parks) and that, under the influence of Christian narrative, most people believe they have an uncontested right to control or “master” the wildness of nature. In our homes, we maintain a sterile and safe zone around ourselves on both a micro level (when we remove and kill species like mice, rats, spiders, flies, cockroaches etc.) and a microscopic level (when we clean and disinfect our homes to remove dirt and kill micro-organisms like germs and bacteria). This obsession is often exploited by a multitude of domestic insecticides, chemicals, sanitizers, etc., with slogans like: “Kills all bugs dead”; “Kills all known germs” and “It’s not clean until its germ free”.



Fig 28: Tertius Heyns. *Excummunicabe eas* (2016).



Fig 29: Mark Dion. *Museum of Poison (Biocide Hall)* (2000).

In my work, I often question these anthropocentric obsessions by involving pestilence and vermin species like flies, bees, rats, pigeons, snakes and in other cases, alien and invasive trees like Bluegum, Pine, Oak, etc. In *Excommunicate eas* (see Fig. 28), for example, I present the viewer with a yellow glue fly trap that is covered with blow flies. The narrative behind the work is reasonably mundane: this fly trap was brought back after a weekend spent at a Breede River cattle farm, when an enormous amount of flies were trapped by this strip in just two days. However, it also references another, more complicated and perhaps problematic narrative: the story of St Bernard of Clairvoux, who excommunicated a swarm of flies for their disruptive behaviour in a monastery church. After shouting “excommunicate eas”, flies fell to the floor in such quantities that they had to be removed with shovels (Evans 2013: 10). Until today there is a French saying, “the curse of the flies of Foigny”.

The piece recalls Mark Dion’s *Museum of Poison (Biocide Hall)* (see Fig. 29). Here, a vitrine is stocked with vintage canisters of branded industrial, farm and domestic poisons, used to eradicate vermin, pests and weeds. Dion involves museum style display, as he often does, to communicate a long tradition of aggressive and dangerous techniques used to control unwanted species from farms and homes. By displaying it in this way, he reminds us of the artifacts of a past civilisation, “now extinct”, to warn that the overuse of such items might lead to our own demise (Heartney 2008: 173) – a man-made “apocalypse”.



Fig. 30: (a) Soil surface, showing the presence of rocks and sparse vegetation.



Fig. 30: (b) Soil surface, showing the presence of rocks and sparse vegetation.



Fig. 30: (c) Soil surface, showing the presence of rocks and sparse vegetation.

Fig 30: Tertius Heyns. Weggraping / Rapture (2014).



Fig 31: Tertius Heyns. *Wegraping / Rapture* (2014).

In *Wegraping / Rapture* (see Fig. 12; 30 and 31) I used large amounts of flies to engage with the idea of apocalypse. Three heaps of soldier flies and maggots seem to fall and pile up underneath three photographs of burnt landscapes. The flies play a part in a series of narratives which aims to confront our regular epistemological and ontological reading of non-human species. The immediate response of most viewers to the sight of hundreds of dead flies and maggots is one of shock and revulsion. When the viewer is drawn to have a closer look, they will also be confronted by their earthy smell. Provoked and reminded of death and decay through sight and smell, the viewer is challenged further, to read the heaps of flies as part of a complex narrative of image and text.

The installation formed part of a group exhibition held in 2014, and presents a visual paradox between ecological catastrophe and biblical prophecy. In this work I question mankind's obsession with spiritual otherworldliness ("heaven") and the consequential neglect of our worldly habitat ("earth"), as discussed in Chapter 2 above. It appears as if the flies have been falling out of these images, and over time, piled up against the wall. On the wall, fine lines of fly detritus dust their way down from the images towards the floor, connecting the fantasy of "heaven" with the reality of "earth". The burnt landscapes suggest the outcome of God's wrath on earth through an apocalyptic final destruction of earth by fire. The title is a direct reference to a famous Biblical text, one of many that predict the coming apocalypse:

² For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. ³ For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape (*1 Thessalonians 5*).

The work is an attempt to negate a feeling of ecstatic “rapture” about this event, by instead evoking emotions of fear, sadness and pity – for ourselves and the earth. I also aim to create tension between the Christian rejection of earth and the deep but suppressed sense of love and oneness with nature that many of us feel, in spite of Christian teachings. By being confronted with images of desolation, it is hoped that viewers will become aware of their allegiance to earth, even if it is through pity and remorse. The triptych (again, subtly alluding to the Holy Trinity) also intends to create a feeling of shock and anger at God’s malevolence (not benevolence) and violence against man and our habitat.

On closer inspection of the work, the viewer is drawn to the small text underneath each photograph, illustrated in the close-up below (see *Fig. 30*). The words are quoted from the Afrikaans version of *Psalms 23*, reading:

Die Here is my herder, niks sal my ontbreek nie; hy laat my neerlê in groen weivelde, na waters waar rus is, lei hy my heen; al gaan ek ook deur ‘n dal van doodskaduwee, ek sal geen onheil vrees nie.

The English version, quoted from the *King James Bible*, reads:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want; He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

The blistering irony of these words in the face of the destruction depicted in the photographs is complicated by the beautiful natural imagery used in the psalm. The “green pastures” and the “still waters” betray a deep sense of belonging and love for the earth, a love which is at odds with the unquestioning acceptance of an afterlife as being the only “real” life that people will know. The aim of linking these words of hope with the destruction depicted on the photographs is thus also to suggest that earth is

a paradise after all, and that rejecting and abusing this paradise may well turn out to be the ultimate or 'original' sin.

The photographs of this triptych were taken at the infamous District Six area in Cape Town, a site that is usually exclusively discussed in terms of Apartheid's devastating forced removals campaign. My initial focus was on the terrible physical, political and social scarring left visible on this traumatised piece of land, but the apocalyptic nature of the final photos made me realise that even the horror of social injustice fades when viewed through the bigger lens of our habitat's destruction. The local setting remains important, however, as it reminds us of the uncomfortable political realities that so often motivate environmental destruction. The background narrative concerning the flies is also notable. The blow flies are a resultant pestilence of cattle farming, and the soldier flies are waste products from experimental fly protein farming. Interestingly, I collected the flies and maggots from Agriprotein, who do groundbreaking work related to sustainable farming, where waste food and sewerage are fed to maggots, which are then turned into protein pellets for cattle, poultry and aquaculture. This muted reference to sustainable farming brings hope to an otherwise bleak environmental outlook, adding another layer of complexity to the installation.

Pesticides have had a profound effect on plant, insect and animal species worldwide and have also been linked to health issues in humans. But, in the last decade, a dire situation has developed in the mysterious worldwide bee population collapse, or what scientist call, colony collapse disorder (CCD). Because bees are used as pollinators for commercial crops, they are in constant, sublethal contact with pesticides. According to Jennifer Holland, a 45 percent increase in hive losses was reported accross America during the Winter of 2013 ([sp]).

Bee die offs are also increasing in South Africa, with the advent of CCD, American Foulbrood infection and Zombie fly parasite. Over the last three years, I have been watching a bee hive in a wall cavity of an Anglican Church on the campus of CPUT (Cape Peninsula University of Technology), where I work. This was after I noticed large numbers of dead bees around the building in the mornings and subsequently started collecting and documenting them. Often, they were still alive and displayed unusual and erratic behaviour. According to Joseph Castro, *Apocephalus borealis*, a



Fig 32: Tertius Heyns. *die land van melk en heuning / the land of milk and honey* (2015)

tiny parasitic fly, lays its eggs in bees. This erratic behaviour happens when the borealis fly eggs hatch and bees become disorientated (2012: [sp]). The Borealis fly, originally only found in America, is now devastating hives in South Africa. The hive that I have been watching over the last three years is not showing any more activity.

The photographic documents in *Psalm 130*, and my multimedia film, *die land van melk en heuning / the land of milk and honey* (see Fig 12 and 32.), are all of bees from this hive. *Part of Place*, a group exhibition held in 2015, is an intimate and poignant documentation of a single bee in its last dying moments. The two minute long film shows the bee in stages of diminishing action, from its initial wriggling with strange seizure-like movements and convulsions, to its later state, lying still on its back, with only the rhythmical abdominal movements now visible. With this film, I attempt to make the viewer witness the symbolic dying of a paramount species. This is a warning that, if the earth's most prolific pollinator disappears, the human race, together with many other species, will be under severe threat.

Bees often occupy a mystical place in ancient cultures, especially because of their godlike ability to create honey, as well as for their worrier-like ferocity. An ancient Hindu belief, for example, uses honey in a ritual to unite departed souls to bees, their spiritual vehicles (Ransome 2004: 289). The Bible often uses the metaphor in reference to Israel, the Promised Land:

Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it; that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily, as the LORD God of thy fathers hath promised thee, in the land that floweth with milk and honey (*Deuteronomy 6:3*).

Even today, it is commonly used as an allegory for a metaphorical Paradise, reminding us again of how entangled the Christian narrative is with language and contemporary Western culture. The title is used as a paradox to the Biblical metaphor and to describe natural beauty and bountiful excess. The viewer is therefore confronted, while witnessing the death of a small, but paramount species, of the dwindling beauty and fragility of our earthly promised land. The sadness and pity for the bee, enables a liminal becoming-bee. Being emotionally present with the bee in its last moments, proves in some way the undiscovered moral complexities in our relationships with even insects, and like Derrida points to the false abyss between humans and animals and suggests the potential “being with” rather than “being alongside” animals (Oliver 2009: 206).

Although bees are revered as agricultural pollinators and producers of a sweet delicacy, they also strike a mortal phobia into people. Feared for their painful sting (sometimes dangerous to those who suffer allergic reactions), the work complicates the viewer’s response. While our sadness grows for the bee in its desperate losing battle for life, we are confronted by the overwhelming drone of thousands of bees, causing a retraction to a guarded emotion, even evoking deep suspicion and angst. Sylvia Plath’s poem, *The Arrival of the Bee Box*, eloquently describes the phobia triggered by a mass buzzing of bees:

How can I let them out?
It is the noise that appals me most of all,
The unintelligible syllables.
It is like a Roman mob,

Small, taken one by one, but my god, together! (Sylvia Plath: [sp])

Working as a split installation between vestry at the front and gallery at the back, *die land van melk en heuning - the land of milk and honey* (see Fig. 12, 31, 32, 33) , is also a good example of my atypical use of the architectural interior of the gallery. The film (representing “heuning”) is shown in the small vestry room and at the extreme opposite end, the raised gallery is utilised for “melk”. Hidden from obvious view, large tree branches are stacked up against the rose window. The branches - cut, engraved with text, and painted with dripping white paint, complete the installation. The whitewashing of the wood has the appearance of tortured bone, ready for the funeral pyre. Yearning for the light of the rose window, the purifying “milk”, still reveals its darker, snakelike undertones. I have included further experiments with branches (see Fig 34 and 35), showing how the installation might change, but still echoing the compositional and conceptual possibilities of the gallery. Laid out rhythmically, invading the sanctum of the Church floor, they are displayed to invoke a sense of viewing lime washed corpses in a mass grave. Exposed to the judgement of the righteous, they are granted one last appeal before God and Man, to prove their soul and use.

The wood, found on municipal refuse sites, often chopped down for being invasive or overgrown, speaks of discarded amputations of a mediated nature. Negotiating between nature’s usefulness and wildness is part of our urban narrative. Its strange reality enacts the ambivalent and alienated relationship we have with nature, yet reminds us of our dependence on trees as key oxygen producers and a habitat for millions of other species. Similar to *De Bruyckere’s Takman* (see Fig. 15 and also 4), the similitude with bone connects our body parts with the body parts of trees, reminding us of our counter-instinctive and counterintuitive actions. The carving into the wood (see Fig. 33) communicates a layer of references like the branding of cattle; vernacular tree graffiti; biblical text; noughts and crosses. Superstitiously branded and washed by the Word of God, it is now fit for human dominance



Fig 33 Tertius Heyns. *die land van melk en heuning / the land of milk and honey: Milk* (2014).



Fig 34: Tertius Heyns. *die land van melk en heuning / the land of milk and honey* (detail) (2014).



Fig 35: Tertius Heyns. *Untitled*. Experimental installation with branches (2015).

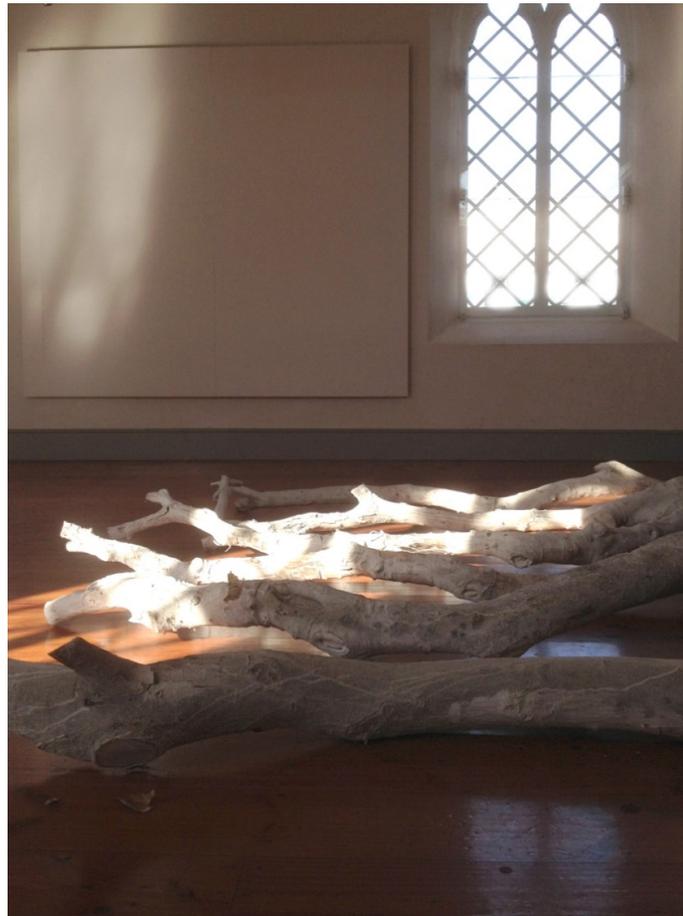


Fig 36: Tertius Heyns. *Untitled*. Experimental installation with branches (2015).

We are passively digesting dire warnings from scientists, whilst sitting on our self-proclaimed podium of the master species. This abdication of responsibility still echoes the hope of heavenly salvation. The questioning of the historic influence of the narrative of spiritual dualism to nature is continued with my use of ash. Our existential angst materialises in our natural bodies. According to the Bible, our bodies become dust and remains on earth, while our soul returns to God in Heaven.

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it. (*Ecclesiastes 12:7*)

Most of the common use of the term “ashes to ashes” is influenced by the funeral rite and the grave site committal ritual found in the *Book of Common Prayer*. While the coffin is lowered into the grave, the Celebrant casts earth onto the coffin and says:

In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our *brother*; and we commit *his* body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless *him* and keep *him*, the Lord make his face to shine *upon him* and be gracious unto *him*, the Lord lift up his countenance upon *him* and give *him* peace. *Amen*.

(Book of Common Prayer:
<http://www.bookofcommonprayer.net/buriall.php>)

These words are most comforting in the face of death. We shall live on in eternity without the fear of eternal corporeal death.

Wherefore my heart is glad, and my spirit rejoices;
my flesh also shall rest in hope.

(Book of Common Prayer :
<http://www.bookofcommonprayer.net/buriall.php>)

As part of the installation of *Heilige Pes / Holy Pest* (see *Fig. 25 and 27*), I pile heaps of ash underneath each photograph. This visually echoes the heaps of flies in *Wegraving / Rapture* (see *Fig. 12 and 31*). I have collected ash left over from my

fireplace and barbeque fire over the past three years as well as incinerator ash containing animal carcasses from farms and veterinary waste material. This is relevant in my work, as it layers the narrative of the materiality of the ash. While it is perhaps not as provocative as the incinerator ash, my own ash does contain fat and other derivatives from chicken; fish; sheep; cattle; and numerous vegetables. The bulk origin of the ash is from the wood of Port Jackson, Blue Gum, Pine, and Acacia trees. Although I use ash as a vehicle to criticise wasteful and abusive human action on earth, by using my own waste ash, I confess and embrace my own culpability. This is an attempt to commit to an honest, sincere and responsible new narrative, which will be at best, layered, complex and imperfect. In a Deleuze and Guattarian sense, I suggest that, united through the ash, becoming-animal, -vegetable, -mineral and -tree is possible. In the face of dwindling beauty and environmental degradation, I hope my work can offer a liminal trigger for positive change. We still have a chance to change, but change is needed before it is too late. Like the Afrikaans proverb warns, “as is verbrande hout”. Hindsight is futile.

As we have seen above, my art is not so much making things, but rather assembling things into a narrative, critical of humankind’s largely uncontested dualistic and destructive relationship with nature. Integrated into the work, I rely on Biblical texts to implicate a historic and still deep rooted Christian grand narrative subliminally guiding and shaping our socio-cultural behavior in relation to our natural habitat. My art is never stable. It changes because the things in it change. My art is also not intended to comfort or to offer moral truths. Instead, its intention is to provoke and challenge. The Bible tells an important story of humanity’s place on earth. Things from this earth, living or dead, tell their own story.

5. Conclusion

True, God was dead; but that ought only to make man feel more self-reliant, more creative, prouder. Undoubtedly God was dead: but man could now hold himself responsible for himself. He could now seek a goal in manhood, on earth, and one that was at least within the compass of his powers. Long enough had he squinted heavenwards, with the result that he had neglected his task on earth (Ludovici 1914: 63).

I started the first Chapter of this thesis with Nietzsche's madman shouting "God is dead". His book, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1911), sparked profound challenges against the institutionalised Christian dogma and its influence on knowledge and cultural behaviour at the time. Of course, one might ask whether there is anything inherently wrong with this belief in a God and an eternal life. Surely people should be free to comfort themselves with the idea that a spiritual part will survive the inevitable decay of their physical selves? What harm can there be in this very understandable search for comfort in the face of impending death?

The problem, I believe, lies in the fact that this focus on a spiritual reality is causing many of us to look past or ignore the problems facing our physical, earthly world. The physical, in other words (including the beauty of nature, the life of animals, the purity of our air, the freshness of our seas, the splendour of the night sky, the joy of a healthy body) are all seen as temporary and thus less important than the spiritual (subjective, individual) relationship with God – because it is only the latter that will guarantee an eternal life in paradise.

In hindsight my personal experience of going to church, singing Psalms and praying, were rituals of fear, not so much that of death, but rather the fear of eternal damnation. For centuries an important part of appeasing God regarding this fear was through ritual, chant, sacrifice and burnt offerings. Sheep, goats, sons, witches and heretics were burnt to appease God and thereby to ensure eternal life. All these offerings finally culminated in the sacrifice of his own son, thereby absolving humankind of all responsibility for their 'sins'. The nagging question one is now left with is this: is the callous dismissal of the environmental crisis we face perhaps a

new kind of sacrifice? Are we today burning our very planet– the only world we have – in the desperate hope of attaining the fantasy of eternal life?

Chapter two thus questions the historical influences that Christianity has had on Western culture, and how this has shaped (and still is shaping) human behaviour towards the natural world and non-human species. I have used the theories of Lyotard, who argues that Christianity and other religious dogma's are stories that have been legitimised through culture and time. Based on White's thesis, I argue that the Biblical story has become a grand narrative which has shaped an anthropocentric worldview that is ambivalent, exploitative and even destructive towards nature.

In Chapter two, I also analyse the philosophy of Derrida with regards to binary oppositions, where the one is always dominant over the other. I use this theory to highlight the Biblical hierarchies of heaven and earth; natural and spiritual; human and animal, all so central to Christian teaching. Throughout this chapter I refer to certain Biblical texts to highlight the governing Christian views regarding humanity's relationship to the natural world. Furthermore, in this chapter I look at the enduring legacy of the Christian narrative of human dominion over nature through politics, science and capitalism.

In chapter three, I discuss the theories informing my visual work and processes. I employ Turner's theories of ritual liminality to engage the viewer through emotional and perceptual change. I employ Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of becoming-other, to extend liminality beyond just a response to art, towards a realisation of a complex and layered personal relationship with nature, without the baggage of pre-thinking.

In the second part of this chapter, I discuss the principle of ontological materiality. Here I was influenced by Von Veh's theory of disrupting complacent and static ontology of symbols, images and objects. In my visual work, I employ images and material for their ability to provoke feelings of fear and loathing towards nature, exposing a deep rooted ontological baggage within the viewer. I also discuss the work of artists, who similarly use natural material, objects and even live animals in their art. I analyse how these artists utilise the inherent "truth" of material to elicit

hidden metaphors and narratives to challenge the reductive ontological constructs underlying them.

Finally, in chapter 4, I discuss my art and processes which form part of the practical component of this thesis. Here, I describe an intuitive and often chance driven process of observing, collecting, documenting and displaying natural material, derivatives and objects. As I have described in the introduction, I don't speak as a philosopher or an amateur theologian, but as an artist. I see my artwork as a personal narrative against grand narratives which structure and govern human / nature relationships.

The only thing I know for sure, is that I (we) will return to the earth as "dust" and "ash". But I will refrain from making moral judgements, because, like Nietzsche's death of god, morality should also die (again putting it crudely). What I mean, is that morality is the result of historical ontological pre-thinking, just another simple, static construct.

To the preachers of morals – I do not want to moralise, but to those who do...if you want eventually to deprive the best things and situations of all their worth...[p]lace them at the top of your morality and talk from morning till night about the bliss of happiness, the tranquillity of the soul, about justice and immanent retribution ...

Sometime you should try a different prescription...withdraw from the mob's acclaim and their easy currency; make them once again the hidden modesty of solitary souls; say that morality is something forbidden! That you might win over...the kind of people who alone matter; I mean the heroic (Nietzsche 2001:163-164).

Environmental concerns today are still governed by humanity's desire to be intellectual, spiritual or moral. Most dealings with nature, are seen as "issues", and aim to fix (intellectual), heal (spiritual) or embrace (moral), nature. In my opinion, it all fails, because it remains a reductive anthropocentric approach, where humans are still considered the only species, capable of crafting, healing, even saving the planet. With the help of many theorists regarding this topic, I argue that complexity should be acknowledged. With my art, I attempt to show that there is no singular and static

emotion, therefore there is no singular, structured approach or an ultimate answer. Yet, there are our own, individual experiences and attempts to bring about change without the baggage of pre-thinking or the limitation of formalised structure.

Although we live in an arguably secular world, God (Christianity) is certainly not dead, as is evident in current world Bible sales. Nietzsche's madman instead proclaims the death of institutionalised grand narratives that are based in anthropocentric falsehoods. As we have seen, these words inspired many influential post-modern philosophers, writers and artists, interested in addressing the human relationship with nature.

My own interest is of similar concern. Against the problematic Christian binary oppositions of heaven/earth, natural/spiritual and man/animal, I use my art as a little narrative, to visually voice my concerns and confront totalising and uncontested grand narratives, still governing culture today. I attempt to contribute towards a new narrative and to provoke alternative views and relationships with the natural world.

We are after all, natural.

We are after all, animal.

God is dead!

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