

Michelangelo: A Rage to Create

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Michelangelo, Vasari, and Their Contemporaries:
Drawings from the Uffizi

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MICHELANGELOO

A RAGE TO CREATE

MICHELANGELO, VASARI, AND THEIR CONTEMPORARIES: DRAWINGS FROM THE UFFIZI
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BY MARK DANIEL COHEN

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... the stern ethics which sparkle on his chisel-edge . . .

—Emerson

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Let every man who is here understand this well: design, which by another name is called drawing, and consists of it, is the fount and body of painting and sculpture and of architecture and of every other kind of painting, and the root of all sciences. Let whoever may have attained to so much as to have the power of drawing know that he holds a great treasure; he will be able to make figures higher than any tower, either in colours or carved from the block, and he will not be able to find a wall or enclosure which does not appear circumscribed and small to his brave imagination.

—Michelangelo

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Energy is Eternal Delight

—William Blake

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One might read Shakespeare; one might listen to Bach; one might do battle with Einstein, or with David Hilbert and G. H. Hardy. One might spend one's life doing it. Or, one might look at Michelangelo.

Lists are by definition assemblies of comparables, and—ideally and in the sense in which their elements are comparable—their elements are incomparable to all else. Those names that accompany Michelangelo's by a principle of appropriateness, by a decorum—and there are others to be added, but not an enormity—are incomparable in the sense that they hold nothing in common with anyone off their roster.

The decorum is genius, and it is the ultimate protocol of incomparability. It is the principle of the inhuman—or if one likes, the uncanny—for it has nothing in common with any of the defining characteristics of the human. One could well think that such as Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Beethoven do what others are capable of, only better, immeasurably better, but an element is omitted from the formula, the result is a mere compound, and the quiddity has been

missed. There is more to this than a difference of degree so extreme that it amounts to a difference in kind. There is something further, something of the essence without which nothing of genius would appear to be genius and would indicate the essential nature of genius. There is something beyond these considerations that is unlike all else.

The physicist Freeman Dyson recently spoke to the matter in attempting to describe the distinguishing characteristic of Einstein's work.



I don't know how to describe it except to say, "that's genius." An ordinary person who is also a great scientist, he's much cleverer than we are but still does things in roughly the same way. A genius does things totally differently, and that's what was characteristic of Einstein. He just was profoundly original. It's just like asking what was special about Mozart. You can't describe it. All you can do is just listen.

Genius does not solve problems, it does not answer questions, it does not devise ideas, for problems are mere symptoms, questions are simply mice, and ideas are only splinters. Genius knows nothing of these fragments, these piecemeals. Its curiosity is global, its grasp is comprehensive, its reach unimpeded by self-restraint, by self-doubt, by self-perpetuating inability. It does not address—it steps back and transforms. It does not inch; it hurtles. It takes every opportunity for discovery as an impetus to reconceive the world—as the chance to begin again. It takes all it receives of past advances as material for a completely new conception, as moments of insight that require a return to zero in order to deliver their promise. Genius deals only in axioms, never in theorems. It accepts nothing that was seen before, and uses everything that was previously known. It is intrinsically universal, for it thinks only in terms of the universe. Which is to say there is a sense in which genius creates, and it creates always in works of art, for, regardless of its field of endeavor, it deals only in comprehensive conceptions. Its works are worlds unto themselves—they are complete and self-contained acts of imagination.

And so, genius is in its nature original; its defining characteristic is to be unlike. It continues no one's work, except to employ its antecedents to idiosyncratic purposes, for its vision and its means are thoroughly its own, and its nature is alien. It is a sweep of the back of the hand across all that precedes it, a brusque dismissal of the inevitable folly of guesswork, make-do propositions, and bad stabs.

Adrian Stokes recounted the characterization by Donato Giannotti of Michelangelo's invitations to company:

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Donato Giannotti, the respected associate of both del Ricci and of Michelangelo, described in his two dialogues about Dante how that at the end of their discussions these close friends were unable to persuade Michelangelo to eat with them. He excuses himself on the grounds that he is more susceptible than anyone else of any time: on every occasion that he is among those who are skillful, who know how to do or say something out of the ordinary he is possessed by them, indeed robbed by them (*et me gli do in maniere in preda*): he is no more himself: not only the present company but anyone else at the table would separate him from a part of himself; and he wants to find and enjoy himself: it is not his trade to have much delight and entertainment: what he needs to do is to think about death: that is the only subject for thought which helps us to know ourselves, which may keep ourselves united in ourselves and save us from being dispersed and despoiled by relations, friends, geniuses, ambition, avarice, etc., etc.

Genius takes no companions, even when it desires them—it has no choice but to renege human society. It holds no compacts but with the widening perimeters of its wonderment, caught perpetually gazing at its inner suns, and the electric shocks by which it tempers its resolve and is recalled to its ambition. Genius thirsts for no ease and takes no rewards in rest. It has no investment in happiness, for the tirelessness of its dedication is to the final degree of fulfillment: self-completion. It seeks only to become what it is.

It is an exploding star, the spirit of thought. And genius fires from its center like solar flares, leaving immeasurable distances between itself and the surface lit comfortably tepid by the ordinary of inspirations. But as the radii course along their vectors, they gather monumental distances. They fan and spread like fingers stretching out into the midnight of the void, boosting the circumference along which they lie, and those possessed of genius are often at greater leagues from each other than they are from those they have left behind. And the further they progress, the more the growth of the expanses that separate them accelerates, the more rapidly they depart from the world, and from each other.

Even so, they are as like as they are unlike, for in everything but the material of their visions—in which each is distinct—in all but the universe in which each continually wraps himself, they are the stamps of each other. They partake of a single fate, which bears nothing of the common lot. And unknown as each ultimately is to the other, they have an instinct: that their brothers and sisters

are not to be located among the normal of the species. The species is not theirs. They are of each other alone.

And this fact compels us to reconsider the categories of our own orientations. Our interests in art, or in science, or in philosophy—the three fields to which, throughout the ages, genius traditionally flocks—are ignorant, sentimental, and self-congratulatory formulations. For the products of the imagination in their calibers do not group in that fashion. Michelangelo has more in common with Einstein and Newton, with Faraday and Maxwell, with Plato and Nietzsche, than he has with Bandinelli, Monet, and Rodin, with whom he shares nothing. Bach has more in common with Spinoza than he has with Gershwin, with whom he shares nothing. To consider Michelangelo an artist is to do ourselves the compliment of implying he is engaged in that in which we can accomplish something, but it is not so. In the truth of it, there is no point at which his orbit and ours intersect. We gaze upon his achievement as upon a nebula.

Genius groups with genius, within the list of incomparables. The otherwise artists, and scientists, philosophers, craftspersons, and on, may belong with each other by trade, but they do not belong with such as these. And we may think that our interests in these crafts—our fascinations for the sake of their transportive potential, their transformative capabilities, their magic and possibilities for invoking sudden realization and ruminative recognitions—are calibrated to the component parts of the genius effect and not the capacities of the practices its occasion partakes. It may well be that it is genius that takes us, and not art, for if the extraordinary is the matter, it is genius that is the essential category, and not art.

This is a matter much to the moment, as art over the past several decades has, clearly and by intention, become democratized. But genius is not so distributable; it does not divide, it does not rehabilitate its allotment. It will be where it will be found, and if “art” is to be re-distributed among all who wish to practice it according to the mere impulse to practice it, if one warrants the legitimacy of the designation by self-nomination, then the reason of its attraction to others will be fled elsewhere. For the magic is not pinned to the business card, and the nomination, regardless of what was named, was never the point, but the authenticity, and the effect. The more people who can legitimately claim to be making “art,” the less we have reason to care, and if the power to see right through was the principle of the attraction, then all along, it was genius we cared for. Art was merely one of the repositories where we once reliably found it, and nothing more, and all of aesthetics was the analysis, more accurately, of power of mind, and the Dionysian is what genius does.

All of which is why there is a clear and inevitable imbalance in “Michelangelo, Vasari, and Their Contemporaries: Drawings from the Uffizi.” The exhibition

contained two drawings by Michelangelo and nearly 80 drawings by other Florentine artists of the late Italian Renaissance, all coming from the collection of the Uffizi Gallery. The principal curatorial intent was to display drawings by the artists who worked on the redecoration of the Palazzo Vecchio under Cosimo I de' Medici when Cosimo moved his residence from the traditional Medici family home to the governmental headquarters of Florence, a move intended to affirm his absolute political power. The project of restoration of the Palazzo Vecchio was begun in 1555 under the direction of Giorgio Vasari, and the curatorial contention here was that drawing—*diseño*—was central to the planning of the renewal of the palace.

However, the curatorial contention can be said to have been followed loosely at best. There were drawings that relate directly to the frescos created in the redecoration of the palazzo, but frequently the artists who were involved in the restoration project were represented by drawings that had nothing to do with their works in the palazzo. Furthermore, the artists who worked on the redesigned palazzo constituted only one of three groups in the exhibition. The pertinent artists were presented as the second group, "Vasari and His Collaborators," which included Alessandro Allori, Benardo Buontalenti, Giovanni Stradanus, Santi di Tito, and Giovan Battista Naldini. The range of material was expanded by a first group—"The Great Masters," the predecessors of Vasari's artists, which included Michelangelo (who never would have worked for Cosimo I for he so loathed Cosimo that he moved permanently to Rome once Cosimo took power), Andrea del Sarto, Pontormo, Rosso Fiorentino, Francesco Salviati, and Bronzino—and a third group—"The Painters of the Studiolo," those who worked for the heir of Cosimo I, which included such late Mannerist artists as Girolamo Macchietti, Maso da San Friano, and Poppi.

It is of course impossible to estimate the curatorial contention from the material presented. There was no comparison, or possibility of comparison, of the *diseño* with the frescos to which they contributed, and in more cases than not, the drawings were not those that made the contribution, for in many cases, the artists were not those who made the contributions. It is argued in the press materials that all the artists in the exhibition contributed works to the Palazzo Vecchio, at one time or another, which is a somewhat different contention from the stated purpose.

What one found, ultimately, was an exhibition of late Italian drawings, representing a significant number of the Florentine masters of the period through drawings of a kind that rarely come to this country, and it would be absurd to say that is not enough. The mere presence of two drawings by Michelangelo significantly increased the percentage of works in this hemisphere by the ultimate master of the art. Besides, these concerns are scholarly ones, and they are fair enough, but they are categorically different



Francesco Salviati (Francesco de' Rossi) (1510-1563), *The Age of Gold*, (1543-48)
Pen and brown wash, white heightening over traces of black chalk
16 5/16 x 21 in. (414 x 533 mm)
Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi; 1194E

facing page, lower right
Baccio Bandinelli (1493-1560), *Portrait of Duke Cosimo dei Medici*, ca. 1544
Black chalk, stumped, 268 x 204 mm (10 9/16 x 8 in.)
Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi; 15010 F

from the aesthetic concerns that are under consideration here. What one had was what one saw: a large collection of works from one of the most extraordinary periods in art, executed by some of the most impressive artists to have worked in the field, executed in the medium in which the artist is most exposed and revealed, in which the artist is most reliant on innate ability and on the most personal technique, in

which the artist simply “thinks.” And one was thereby confronted by the most essential of aesthetic questions: among a display of sheer excellence, from one of the most “excellent” places and periods in art, one is compelled to consider, what is excellence worth? Aside from the pure dazzlement, what is accomplished? What does the genius of the excellent do?

To make this estimate, rather, one must first disabuse oneself of a contention that is wide-ranging in the study of art and is certainly assumed by this exhibition—that an astonishing number of the artists of the Italian Renaissance, and all the artists in this exhibition, were, in fact, excellent. An astonishing number were—enough that one must wonder on the very fact of a renaissance, on how such a moment can arise, how it has arisen in the arts and philosophy three times at least to our knowledge—but not as many as we tend to think, and not all that are represented here. Thereby the imbalance—despite Vasari’s claim in his famous book that Michelangelo had shown artists the means of excellence, and artists were then capable of producing what those prior to the master had been able only to work towards, we find that such excellence is not transferable, and the surface gloss of fine polish and studied technique does not institute the substructure of brilliant vision and conception. The genius of the thing lies elsewhere.

Simply, although there are many moments of astonishing execution here, there are also flaws that in many cases are outside the range of what one should expect in work of this renown.

Many examples found here are egregious and astounding once one prepares oneself to see them. For instance, the flaw in Francesco Salviati's *The Age of Gold* is a remarkable example of a figure getting away from the artist. Examine the woman in the middle left foreground, sitting on a rock and against a tree trunk, reaching up to a hand descending from the tree. The stomach on the figure simply does not work. The navel is off the axial of the chest, positioned somewhere to the figure's right side, if estimated from the position of the chest cavity. The planes that flow from the lower abdomen to the left hip make no sense—where we see a diagonal highlight indicating a plane that should face to the upper left of the drawing, the figure seems to drop away, as if a void appeared where mass should be, which is what happens when a plane does not seem to connect to those positioned next to it. What has happened, to all appearances, is that the upper and lower torso have not been properly established in relation to each other—each does not flow through the waist into the other; they simply abut, and at an angle that makes no sense. Or, more precisely, there is no waist—the upper and lower portions of the body just slam together, each facing in a direction slightly different from that of the other.



One might call this Mannerism, given that Salviati was a Mannerist. But there is a difference between bending the rules of figure composition and simply failing to observe them, between an altered arithmetic and a failure to lay out the parts so that they add up at all—there is a difference between a choreography of elements and an inability to dance. This appears not to be style—this appears to be a mistake.

A judgment similar to that regarding the distance between stylistics and ineptitude is called up with regard to Baccio Bandinelli's *Portrait of Cosimo I del Medici*, but here the question is the dividing line between accuracy of rendition and clumsiness of execution. Or, more simply, could he really have looked like that? There is no point in comparing this work with other portraits, for the question is not accuracy with regard to this sitter but credibility with regard to the human form. Or, more simply still, could anyone really have looked like this?

The answer is fairly obvious—no, for the disembarkations from the idealized human face are not so much violations of the principles of





Pontormo (1494-1556), *Two Studies of Male Figures*, (1521-21)
Black chalk and red chalk, red wash, heightened with white chalk (v.)-Red chalk (r.)
11 1/4 x 16 1/16 in. (285 x 408 mm)
Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi; 674OF

beauty as they are violations of the principles of anatomy. The pop-eyed face is not merely pop-eyed—the eyeballs are so distorted, they are no longer spherical, or not close enough to spherical. In throwing Cosimo's gaze forcefully to the left side of the sheet, Bandinelli has nearly pulled his eyes out of his head. And this is not quite surprising coming from the artist

whose sculpture *Hercules and Cacus*, which still stands in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence and a sketch for which is included here, was described by Cellini as resembling “an old sack full of melons propped up against a wall,” rather than a perfected architecture of rippling musculature.

Pontormo, whose *Two Studies of Male Figures* is just splendid, has problems similar to those of Salviati in *Eve’s Expulsion from Earthly Paradise*. The lower abdomen faces the wrong direction, the navel is positioned off the axial, and the function of the waist has not been thought through. The thighs seem to be too small, out of scale with the rest of the figure. And the application of male anatomy to a female figure lacks the finesse—or the clear deliberateness of a lack of finesse, which is finesse of a different order—of he from whom Pontormo obtained it: the master. Distinctly masculine formations of musculature seem to have been slapped on piecemeal, without having been conceived into a whole figure, a coherent form.

The inconsistency in the drawings of Vasari would be no surprise to anyone familiar with this work. His *St. John the Evangelist* is unerring, if ultimately unimpressive—there are no glaring technical flaws, there is clear and solid skeletal and muscular structure worked out, line weight is delicately modulated and used precisely. However, the figure is fairly inexpressive in posture, indicative of no clear attitude or action, and indistinctive in outline, in the flat, two-dimensional form it cuts. In that regard, it is rather blob-like.

Even so, this work is Vasari at his strength. His nadir is witnessed in such as *The Triumph of Cosimo I at Montemurlo*. Examine the faces of the figures, which distort in all manner of error. Several of the captives in the foreground,

which are situated in the lower third of the drawing, are inadvertently drawn along a curve—something that tends to happen when one holds the paper at an angle while sketching. The face of the figure immediately to the right of Cosimo collapses in on itself. Furthermore, the composition is done at deep perspective, but the perspective has not been worked through and is not carried out with consistency. The largest figures in the middle ground—found to the extreme right of the drawing—should be at a great distance, based on the scale. But there is nothing in the drawing that positions them so far away from the foreground—the orthogonal distance between the foreground figures and the middle ground figures has not been accounted for. They are not distant—they are simply too small. Given that, the line of figures extending back in the middle ground diminish by increments that are too small—there is no room for so many, they are bunched together too tightly, so tightly, the entire scene is not physically credible.



There are many other examples here of errors of execution comparable to these, and there are numerous instances of remarkable deftness and ability—demonstrations of what may be considered the ideal of the art of drawing, of what artists through the ages have labored and studied to achieve, instances of the paradigmatic of the mode. Notable in particular are Andrea del Sarto's *Studies of a Male Model Seated on the Ground* and, on the verso, *Study of Drapery*; everything by Bronzino; Girolamo Macchietti's *Head of a Young Man*; Alessandro Allori's male nudes; Giovan Battista Naldini's *Seated Male Nude*; and Poppi's *Four Heads*.

And then there are the two drawings by Michelangelo, and even in comparison to these paradigmatic examples of draftsmanship, the difference is categorical. His *Studies of a Male Leg* is, for Michelangelo, fairly unfinished—what qualifies as a “sketch” for the master: loose, quick, inconsistently detailed, as if he filled in definition only on those portions of one leg that concerned him at that moment. Compared to everything else here, the drawing contains, even in the loosest sections, a wealth of observation of musculature and integration of parts, as if Michelangelo took more trouble than any of these other artists—although one suspects it is more a matter of knowledge than of ready dedication. But there is something else to this, something other than the issue of accuracy. There is a distinctive ratio here of means to effect, of the amount of drawing done, the sheer number of lines committed, to the quality of solidity and density of form achieved. The efficiency of visual expression is stunning. The form seems like rock, or marble if one likes—it has congealed

Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), St. John the Evangelist
Black chalk
14 5/16 x 8 3/8 in. (353 x 253 mm)

Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, 14274



Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564)
Bust of a Woman, Head of an Old Man and Bust of a Child, mid 1530s
Black chalk
14 1/10 x 19 15/16 in. (357 x 252 mm)
Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi; 18719F

on the paper out of a delicate netting of an almost countable number of lines with a force that is difficult to understand. Compared to this, almost all the other drawings in this exhibition seem ghostly, as if one could pass one's hand right through what they render, as if the essential objective of drawing—to create the impression of a solid form out of an assembly of simple lines and tonal effects—had been only tepidly attempted.

However, Michelangelo's *Bust of a Woman, Head of an Old Man, and Bust of a Child* is another matter still. The work is so polished, so finished, so refined and intricately detailed, so far past the qualities and intrinsic limitations of the apparatus of drawing, that one wants to say this is not a drawing at all, aside from the mere fact that it is. The principal element, the head of the woman, is fully realized, completely congealed on the paper—a seemingly solid object. Particular portions of the head appear impossibly present. The ear and the eye are as completely real as the finger one points at them in amazement. The tonality across the cheek and jaw is constantly modulated, following a surface that just has to be there, rather than the flat paper one knows—sort of knows—is there in fact.

This work is reminiscent of nothing so much as another drawing by Michelangelo—*Studies for the head of Leda*, c. 1530—which is not here but one wishes were, in some sense other than the sense in which one wishes there were nothing in the world but works by Michelangelo. The Leda drawing is in the Casa Buonarroti in Florence, and it is the most astonishing demonstration of drawing technique this writer has ever witnessed. The distinctly Leonardo-like head is in a posture similar to this one—left side facing us in nearly complete profile. The cheek and jaw are similarly shaded, one naturally presumes by Michelangelo working the “tooth” of the paper: brushing his implement across the paper with varying pressure, picking up the texture of the paper in apparent dots of varying size and darkness, to modulate the surface from light to dark, defining the shadows on the face. There should have been no other way to achieve that effect, and for any other artist there would not have been. But, on close inspection, it turns out there is little “tooth,” or texture, to the sheet. Michelangelo evidently created the textures on the face by stippling the sheet—making each dot manually, one at a time—controlling the size and density of each dot, one at a time, by hand. It seems humanly impossible to execute, aside from the mere fact that it is—perhaps. Michelangelo created the work in a manner no one else would have, or, one suspects, could. In short, he did the thing “totally differently.”

Given the crowds at the exhibition under consideration here, one could only marvel at what miracles of dexterity were demanded by this head of a woman.

The purpose of observations such as these is not to trash reputations or to be dazzled into unknowing and substitute breathlessness for some measure of understanding. It is rather to observe the staggered nature of achievement and to note the internal consistency of capability—more to the point, the internal consistency of conception, of vision, of imagination. There is an identifying stamp to the work of any artist, and any thinker, a manner of formulation, a style, and it is fractal—it is seen complete in every piece and portion of the conceiver's work.



And not only is this as I tell you, but there is another wonder which seems greater, namely, that if a capable man merely makes a simple outline, like a person about to begin something, he will at once be known by it—if Apelles, as Apelles; if an ignorant painter, as an ignorant painter. And there is no necessity for more, neither more time, nor more experience, nor examination, for eyes which understand it and for those who know that by a single straight line Apelles was distinguished from Protogenes, immortal Greek painters.

—Michelangelo

With every line, with every line of thought—if Michelangelo, as Michelangelo; or as Einstein; or as Bach. For the principle at issue is a formal principle, the principle by which form is generated, by which structure is constructed. It is a principle of build, of growth, of implication, of how commissions entail, and combine to make a whole, and the principle of what manner of whole will be made. It is the principle of the quality and the caliber of the idea applied, and it is a principle of mind, for it is distinct as the mind that is brought to bear on the generation of the idea, and is as written into the idea as is that which the idea concerns.

This is why such observations matter. For what is at issue is not the quality of the reproduction but the integrity of the form. It is not the accuracy of appearances represented that is of significance in drawing, but the specificity and comprehensiveness of the form created. For the form is the idea, the thing foreseen and then committed, and the integrity of form is the result of and remark upon the clarity of inner vision and of the following through of implication.

Thus, this is not a principle of mind but the principle of thought itself. To think at all is to begin with and to follow through a form, a structure—a shape. The

form is the manner in which one thing leads to another—the “track” upon which the development of the thought proceeds, the turning riverbed through which it flows. To think is to proceed with thought, for to think, one thing must lead to another. To think at all, to proceed with thought, is like running one’s finger along the edges of a geometric model—at certain points, the direction shifts, a sudden implication follows.

The way one thing leads to another is a formal property—not logic, but “a logic,” a property of resonances, a form by which things resolve together, like an overlay of wave patterns, a structure, a shape emerging out of the mists of random imaginings—a principle of implication, of the possibility of one thing relating to another. The principle is present in the first thought—like a seed crystal, the specific possibility of structure is innate and, from there, branches, ramifies. It is there from the beginning, as it is in the single straight line that is distinguished from all others by the imprint of its author, by the specifics of the mind that makes it. And when we say that something resonates with us, we speak better than we know.

From the period that preceded Michelangelo, from Leonardo, we are told that the human body is the standard of measure for formal integrity—the hub of the balance, the paradigm of integration and center for the development of the thought. It remained so, for it is, in every study and visual thought we see here, the foundation for the composition, for the idea. It is the body and the manner of its rendering as the organizing principle, and not the quality of the reproduction, that is the issue. From formal integrity in a new vision, new implications follow, new ideas emerge, spontaneously, like a crystalline growth, burst forth. And the measure of the formal integrity of a new thought is the wealth of thought that extends from it, the measure is the wealth of implication, of that which inevitably follows.

II

A drawing is a thought, or rather, the beginning of a line of thinking—every thought is the beginning of a new line of thinking, for one who thinks well enough—and the sheer power of Michelangelo’s manner, of his *style*, is freighted with the capabilities of the reconceptualization of the world, with the capacity of genius. His style is the mark of, and the means by which, he saw a new vision, a new meaning to things: an alteration of all we know, or more precisely, an alteration of the most essential things we know, those things by which we understand all else.

It is often the case with genius, and perhaps reflective of something deep in the fate of genius in the world, to be best appreciated and suddenly illuminated by its opponents, by plaintiff observations that condemn the very thing they

should celebrate—to be revealed by that which sees it least well. Such is the case with Michelangelo, through a remarkably incisive notation made by probably the best mind to appreciate him worst: that of John Ruskin.

In his book *Mornings in Florence*, in discussing the significances of meaning in the methods of rendering drapery in Renaissance painting, Ruskin observes in an aside: “The relation of the two modes of composition was lost by Michel Angelo, who thought to express spirit by making flesh colossal.” (section 115) There is a tone of chortling mockery clearly written into the phrasing. Obviously, the observation is intended as a rank criticism, as if the proposition were self-evidently absurd. And even those who do not share Ruskin’s dismissive estimation of Michelangelo can acknowledge that he has something of a point—at the least, he has his facts straight. Massiveness and sheer strength of physicality are evidently Michelangelo’s visual cues for spiritual presence. And the code is as distinctly his as Ruskin implicitly accuses it of being.

Considering Ruskin’s particular love of Giotto and the general trend of coding in much Renaissance fresco painting, one can recognize and appreciate Ruskin’s taste. His was a preference for delicacy of expression, in bodily gesture and face, the incisive presentation of inner life through the sheer humanness of the appearance and what one might call a radiance of personality in the figure. One sees in the Sistine Chapel most evidently the contrast of approach between what Ruskin admired in early Renaissance painting and what he loathed in Michelangelo. Along the lower walls, one can find the Ruskin formula in full flourish in frescos by Perugino and Pinturicchio and Botticelli. Examine two by the entryway in particular—*Temptations of Christ* and the *Purification of the Leper*, and the *Baptism of Christ*—and compare them to the colossal Christ figure nearby in the *Last Judgment*. The opposition of means in the styles and devices for response is obvious. There is a bluntness and almost a brutishness to the Michelangelo Christ; the figures, of Christ and all, in the other frescos comparatively seem to glow with a spirituality and a preternatural gentleness—with a physical grace.

Yet, the response, the Ruskin seeing, is but momentary, and highly conventional. That the delicacy of rendering, in style and depiction, is signatory of spirituality is a coding of implication as arbitrary as is the gross physicality of Michelangelo. The essential fact is that there is no natural coding for the rendering of spirituality through physical expression. The essential fact, more precisely, is that “natural coding”—a concept upon which Ruskin’s criticism of Michelangelo completely depends—is a contradiction in terms: no coding is natural; it is all by definition conventional. Any method used will be metaphoric, and arbitrary, because the project at issue is to render the invisible through the language of the visible. The convention at the heart of the visual language of those who preceded Michelangelo is obvious: the spiritual is signified by a

reduction and a distancing of the physical. That is the reason for the feel of the physical delicacy, one might even say the effeminacy, of the figures; they are to be seen as moving their entire bodies with a lightness of hand. That is also the reason for the preference for thin figures, especially among the holy personages. They lack any grossness of the physical, any feel of beefiness. The balance has shifted in such figures, away from the physical and, thus it is presumed, more toward the spiritual. The operative principle then becomes observable: the metaphysical abhors a vacuum—between the opposites of flesh and spirit, the less of one, the more inevitably there must be of the other.

One might therefore accuse such conventions of simple oppositional thinking, of treating the mystery of spirituality through the oversimplification of merely contrasting the physical with the spiritual. But the accusation would not be fair, not because the simple opposition isn't engaged—it is—but because the simple opposition lies at the heart of the matter, it is the very gist of what is at issue. Spirituality is a concern, a pressing concern, for Schopenhauer's reason: we are all going to die. When one dies, the body deteriorates and dissolves. It is demolished. The issue, and the only reason anyone should, or does, so deeply care over the spirit, is whether there is such a thing as an enduring soul that is not the body, that has no part in and may preserve and prevail after the body's destruction. If one refuses to oppose the spirit to the body, one is just being coy about the reason the questions of spirituality are asked, are worth asking, at all.

Thus the coding of reducing physicality to imply spirituality is natural enough. And the formula has been carried through in many other arenas. There was, at the end of the nineteenth century, the extreme taste for seeing consumption—tuberculosis—as the outward sign of the artistic temperament. In essence, emaciation was the mark of being not of this world. The silliness in this is self-evident, but it is the silliness of the extremity, the exacerbation, not of the essential idea.

More than that, it is the silliness of literal-mindedness, as if to be truly emaciated meant to be truly spiritual. The equation—spirit equals drained physicality—is a question of the valency of metaphor, not natural fact. Natural as it may be, it remains that all coding is arbitrary, it can be used in any way one can make effective, but it must be used consistently. That is where one finds the flaw in the Ruskin formula, for it is inconsistent: it takes the lack of physicality as metaphoric, but the physicality itself as literal. Physicality is a sign of physicality, but lack of physicality is a sign of something other than simple lack of physicality. With Michelangelo, one finds the act of thoroughness. And it is the typical gesture of genius: the discovery, or simple assumption, that everything one has at one's disposal is metaphor, nothing is to be intended literally, all literal-mindedness has been left behind. For Ruskin's accusation is right. For Michelangelo, colossal flesh is the signature

of the spiritual. But the implied absurdity is no absurdity. With all coding arbitrary, physicality as signal for spirituality is as apt as any formula, the relationship between vehicle and tenor cannot be prescribed and is proscribed by nothing other than efficacy. Ruskin's error is to see the rendered flesh as, well, flesh, and so ask: how can it mean spirit? And beyond denying Michelangelo the prerogative of specifying his own symbolisms, Ruskin abrogates the central trope of religious art, even as he distinguishes between the better and worse of the modes. For this wide metaphor is built into the very nature of religious painting, not to say religion itself, and here is also demonstrated the simplicity of genius. Essentially in religious painting, human figures, physical figures, are used to express the spiritual. Michelangelo simply explodes the formula for the scale of his ambitions. His approach is an admission that religious painting is the use of rendered physical figures to express spiritual states; that is the heart of the business. That one aspect of physicality (muscles) has been traded on another aspect (delicate and often inwardly turned expression) hardly adds a degree of absurdity, or rather is no more absurd than is religion in its very premise and promise. But the quality of the spiritual has been changed.

In fact, Ruskin, whether he knew or not, was insisting on a specific variant of the physical metaphor—more precisely, of the subjectivity of the physical being, as gestured by the figure—for there is at stake a significant difference of import. His preference is implicit in the reduction of physicality: spirituality is like contemplation. In such paintings, perhaps as often as not, Christ and Mary cast their gazes downward, nearly lost in thought. Actions are never extreme; figures are always balanced, and the most religiously significant figures are generally those closest to passive. The religious figure almost always thinks more than it acts. The model for this is clearly the monk, but the metaphor is natural and old and other models are many: the Greek peripatetic philosopher, the Buddha, the yogi, the ascetic anywhere in the world. It is likely that this is most people's conception of spirituality: it is something like rumination. Or, it is something like prayer.

Michelangelo's metaphor is a different one, accounting for the difference in visual coding. It is likely different from that of most people, which may be more of an answer to why most people are not Michelangelo than most people would like to admit. Spirituality is not like contemplation; it is like will power. Spirituality is an active force, it is a dynamic principle, not a principle of duration, endurance, survival, promise of the future beyond the evident loss of this existence, but an existence of action, generation, exercised strength—a principle of power and creation, and destruction.

In his work, in every act of his mature work—which may be considered everything after the Vatican *Pietà*, everything commencing with the *David*—Michelangelo committed his reconceptualization of the world, or, for his time



and place, of the fundamental and defining element of the world and of life: he redefined the nature of the spirit. What had been a permanence beyond time, and beyond the end of time, becomes power—an active force that is the essence of things, of us, of all, that is the truth behind appearance, that is the implicit promise not of timelessness but of

the eternal, for the spirit is not beyond time but is time itself. It is the action of change, of progression, of that which follows: of implication.

Consider God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: he is never still, he is violently in motion, constantly in action. Being spiritual, he acts, and the inner quality of action is like spirituality. It is the vision of a sculptor, of one who smashes stone, not an artist who gently daubs paint. God carves the world. An inner strength—not so much character, as in Giotto, but power—is his chisel.

And consider further: only Michelangelo had the nerve, the spirit, to draw God, to confront God with his art. No others come to memory, not before or since. Not the son of God, but God—the God of the Old Testament, of the Torah, the God from whom a son would have come, without whom there could be no son—the God presumed. This is the God, not of judgment, or of forgiveness, but of power—creative power, destructive power. Others confronted judgment—judgment enacted or judgment suspended, revoked—for it is the same. The denial of the thought implies and imports the thought, for the sake of its meaningful revocation—judgment suspended is still judgment, only suspended. But Michelangelo confronted, not judgment revoked, but pure potency. This is something else.

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"—a statement so odd to find in the New Testament, it has such an Old Testament caliber about it. That is the vision of God not as a judge and not as merciful, but as a nuclear furnace, as an exploding star, as galaxies in collision. That is God as the power that engines the universe: God as creator. That is what Michelangelo shows us; that is his art. And with the corpse now buried in Santa Croce, with the biographical fact of him 500 years gone and immaterial—with the name

signifying, as it does with all artists, the body of work and not the body in the ground, the corpus and not the corpse—that is what his name now means. Look it up in the lexicon of the imagination—Michelangelo: (n) sheer power; sheer destructive force; sheer creative impulse. Look it up: Michelangelo: (v).

That verb is a name: for a thunderous elegance, a furious grandeur, a monumentality of rage. Nothing before or since ever burned so hot. In much of his work, you can see it in the eyes—in the *terribilité*, the look in the eyes of the David, which can be found in the eyes of Moses, of God on the ceiling, of Il Cristo, of Brutus, the human of them captured in the moment before action, in the incipience of the dynamic, and so frequently looking to the left, to the sinister.

It is in the eyes of them all, for the power is not just the principle of the initial creation. It is not just a principle of cosmogony, of the proposition by which the universe came into being, but of its being, of its continuity, in specifically the spiritual sense, meaning in the sense in which, as a foundational proposition and a central (explanatory) truth, we have intuitive insight into the heart of the very physics of things itself—by thinking, we see into that which we are not, for in truth, we are, and in the end, that physics is not physical. Spirituality is, in essence, the *a priori* synthetic—the discovery of truths without investigation of the external world, solely by mental inquiry—the only one we know other than mathematics, geometry, the principle of formal integrity. The power, the *terribilité*, is mind, and it is the truth of things universally, in all instances—it is the truth of us, what we are behind the mere appearance of being ourselves. The terrible power, power so great it can account for the creation of an entire universe, the power Michelangelo knows spirit to be, is not merely the first Creation—it is creation *per se*, the constant making and unmaking of all things, it is our power, our rage to create, and our rage to destroy. We are the making and unmaking, the germination and immolation of all things, of ourselves.

One might easily take that power to be the darkness, the sinister, the tearing away at the web of the human fabric, for genius has no consort but itself, and by its very nature must turn from the crowd, and people take their umbrage there, and it is now long known that the average loath excellence—they see in it a personal rebuke. But, more than that, we live now in the days of belief in weakness. It is the faith of the time, perhaps the only faith any longer in practice: that the agreement with what is, placidity in the face of presence—“acceptance” regardless of what is being accepted—will be our salvation, as if the lack of power will keep us safe, will put us at peace, will bring us to agreement and cooperation, will deliver us from the physics of energy consumption, from the consequences of gluttony, of rampant consumerism, of self-indulgence, of the wasting of resources that has been caused by nothing other than the wasting of life on petty pleasures: as if passivity were the same as peace and prostration the same as redemption; as if peace, in itself, were

an inherent good. We live in an age of mutual dependency, thinking it will make us free of our fears rather than maximizing them. We listen to preachers who tell us it will, and promise to deliver it to us—if elected, if given power, the power that we are remiss to adopt. It is a logic of exhaustion, a logic of slavery, a failure to acquire the maturity of self-direction—a fundamental diffidence, a general collapse of moral will.

But we should know better, because we have been told better. We've been told by the few who knew, but we've been told time and again.



Energy is Eternal Delight

—William Blake

Power is not the dismay and it is not tragic—it is disruption, the stone in the pool of the stagnant. It is energy, vigor, the surge of enthusiasm, the erupting force of life—the willingness to live, the willfulness to live, the insistence of existence. It is the indignation at the wrong, the refusal of the unacceptable, and it is the rage to be free.

Wilhelm Worringer, in *Abstraction and Empathy*, speaking of Michelangelo's slaves:



In contradistinction to this, with Michelangelo the compactness of matter is rendered perceptible not from without, but from within. In his case the strictly terminal limits of matter are not factual but imaginary, yet we are nonetheless clearly conscious of them. We cannot touch them, but we feel them with their cubic compactness. For it is only under the invisible pressure of this cubic compactness that the dynamism of Michelangelo's formal language acquires its superhuman grandeur. Within a closed cubic space a maximum of movement; here we have one of the formulas of Michelangelo's art. This formula comes alive for us when we recall the incubus, the oppressive dream, that lies over all these figures, the tormented, impotent desire to tear oneself free, which lifts every creation of Michelangelo's spirit into a realm of profound and gigantic tragedy. Thus whereas the compactness of matter is physically tangible in the archaic figure, with Michelangelo we feel only the invisible cubic form in which his figures pursue their existence. The goal is the same in both, however, namely to approximate the representation to material individuality and closed unity.

Each of Michelangelo's slaves is attempting to tear himself free of the stone, just as each of the works of the *terribilité* is trying to tear himself free, free of the stone and of something else, something suffocating and insufferable. And one may see the drawn figures as tearing themselves free of the sheet, the male torso with its rippling musculature, with its inner force pressing to the surface, and the woman's face in its near sculptural solidity, its near architectural reality, congealing into itself, emerging from the paper. All are moving to freedom out of some inward power, some force innate.

And so the force, the drive within, the rage to create is the rage to be free—the rage to create oneself. And it is right, and a profundity, a vision perhaps found nowhere else in visual art, naturally coming from the most forceful artist in our tradition, for this is what anger is—anger is the impulse to freedom.

“

There is an “aspect of hatred . . . [which] one would describe in Western philosophical terms as an urge or instinct toward individuation,” for its function is to destroy participation mystique by separating and settling apart an individual who had previously merged, identical with loved ones.

—Sylvia Brinton Perera, quoting C. G. Jung

And so what each of Michelangelo's figures is trying to escape is the surrounding, smothering mass of others, of humanity, of human mediocrity, of the tepid ordinary of inspirations—of the willingness to be a slave. What each bristles at and struggles to break off is the amoeba nature of the compact, of the uncritical engagement with the uncountable oncome of others, of the pressing protoplasmic ingress of society, the pillow over the face that is the unfiltered mass of the mob. And Michelangelo begged off company to stay at home to think of death. And the look in the eye is the internal nature of genius, the invisible pressure of its cubic compactness; the look in the eye is what genius does—genius wants to break free.

And so it is not surprising that these are as well the principles of Nietzsche, for there is a summary nature to them, an internal consistency beyond logical implication, that any good reader of Nietzsche would have caught. The heated, explosive center of all things, the Heraclitean furnace behind the appearance of stability and the promise of existence, the cauldron of sheer urge to exist and then to subsume again, is Nietzsche's ontology, his Will to Power, and Michelangelo's vision is as pagan and as indifferent to Christian principles of right and wrong, as past such valuings—as beyond good and evil—as Nietzsche's.

As is Michelangelo's will to be, to emerge from the stone, from the strangulating imprisonment of society, for the will to be is only a contradiction in terms if one thinks it too neatly. The very idea is a becoming, for the very idea is forceful—an insistence, a demand, a headlong hurtle into supremacy over all that would be chaining. In the end, the will to power is inevitably and in primary one thing: a fire in the belly.

For the matters of the mind are not what they appear to be. The truth of a thought—the principal run of its implications—is in the human imperative of the thought, in the reason it was thought, in the purpose that is served and the matter fulfilled that it may break free. The thought of a dynamism is, itself, a felt dynamism, and it serves a need, and that need served is what leads to the next thought—it sets the implication. Meaning is personal. One thinks of force out of the urge to force one's will; one thinks becoming in order to become, in order finally to be, rather than to be absorbed, and there is no contradiction in that. In the end, meaning is psychological, not logical. Everything is the need it serves. And it was the Nietzsche of the philosophy of eternal becoming, of the philosophy of power relations and of perspectivism who wrote: "Neither rule nor obey." It was the Nietzsche who wrote that all things are intertwined who was one of the great authors of independence of spirit.



None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free.

—Goethe

III

Strength plus pity.

Nabokov estimated art to be "beauty plus pity," but Michelangelo has no portion in standard beauty, or perhaps it's more pointed to say he is targeted elsewhere, aimed in his deepest capacity for dreaming forward always on an insight into some truth, and the redolence of poignancy that signals its presence—the bracing rush of fresh, clean air of the imagination, the jolt of a sudden openness, of an abrupt, releasing expansiveness, that signals the presence and power of pure vision—rather than on the pleasures of the senses.

Michelangelo's vision is of the sublime, in a focused sense. It is an ontological insight, but conducted within spiritual dimensions, in that the insight is achieved through an inward vision, through sheer thought, but thought less like speculation than like willing—a vigorous inner exercise, an intimate mental exertion. It is not strictly a vision of the truth of the universe beyond the

horizons of human, earthly existence, because there is on such distinction in this, no distance between the human interior and the breadth of the Creation. To speak of one is to speak of the other—to see into one is to see into the other. There is a human imperative to his thought, and it is not, finally, limited to an expression of freedom, the will to be, and a revolt against the smothering constraint of the very presence of the rest of the species. The personal impulse broadens into the human vision, and the truth the master witnesses is ours.

Look at Michelangelo's subjects: there are those of strength and those who are stricken, all in combat, but there are none stricken for evident cause, none bear wounds, none struck by enemies, none wear the weight of their own, their personal torment—except for the figure of Christ in the Pietàs, and that wound, hard and clear, is not strictly a wound. The stricken figures—Dawn, Night, the Slaves—harbor hidden, conditional wounds. The pain is their state. They have taken no hit but are touched by an agony, universal and permanent. Their pain is an abstraction, a distillation from the general condition. And the figures of strength—David, the Genius of Victory, Il Cristo, Dusk, Day, and Moses—crouch or arise in strength, in emerging power. They are incipience of force, but not of dominion. Force in Michelangelo is not the force of Simone Weil, not the force she defines as “that *x* that turns anyone who is subjected to it into a *thing*.” For Michelangelo, force is that which humanizes, and in his universe, in the universe that is Michelangelo, the opposite of force is not powerlessness—the opposite of force is force. It is a Newtonianism of the spirit—a system of equal and opposite reactions. For Michelangelo's force, like that of Shakespeare, is not dominion but rebellion. And his rebellion, even when fostered by a departure from his own kind, even when representative of a withdrawal from humanity, is life-enhancing, life-affirming, life-protecting. Michelangelo's universe is a universe of inverse proportions, a universe of redefinitions, a universe of revaluations, of Nabokovian “moments of irrational insight”—a perfectly coherent system of flagrant contradictions. It is a universe of genius.

The figures of strength reveal themselves as protectors in every instance. David raises himself to dispel a people's enemy; the Genius of Victory vanquishes the city's foe; Dusk and Day are watchful and cautious, as turned to the general state of existence as are their counterparts; Il Cristo looks to the hard, distant truth of the promise and warning he has brought to all humankind, all life; and Moses turns in fury, in rage, on the self-destructive energies that are the internal enemy, capable of being stalled only by being destroyed. These figures give us Michelangelo the Father, or rather the father in Michelangelo, whose only purpose, whose single passion, is to shelter, to guard, to fortify.

The parental sense has emerged in these forms as a refinement, a distinguishment, in the capacity to bridge by deep feeling from one person

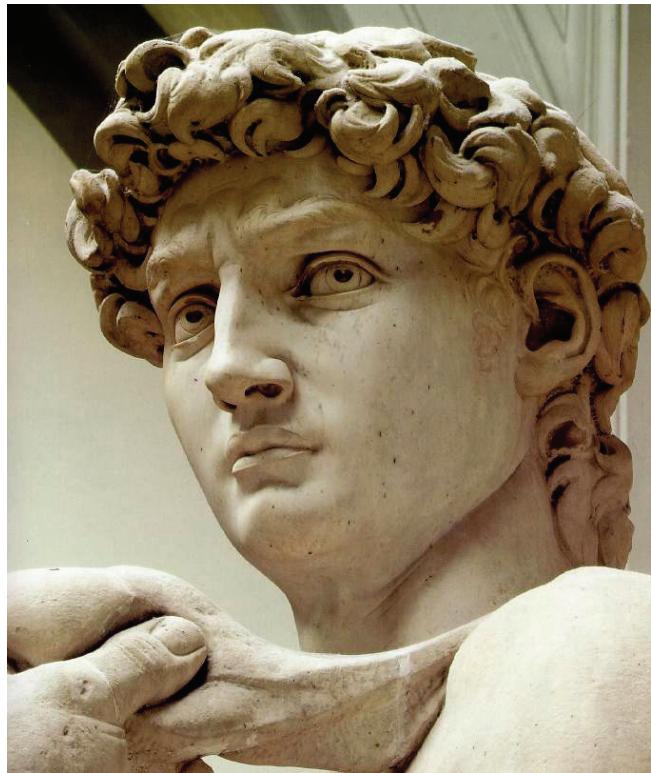
to another. Michelangelo, the fine carver, the finest carver, has finely cut his way between hunger and pity. Donatello, in his bronze David, found the cunning, bestial hunger, the animal appetite. In his David, in these other guardians of the soul—for that is clearly what they are—Michelangelo located an alternative: the urging forward of concern. Both are essential drives that draw people to and into each other. And there is a subtle but substantial difference—between wanting something and wanting to protect something, between wanting someone and wanting to care for someone, between needing someone and needing someone's welfare. It is the difference between heat and warmth, between food and life, between fullness of heart and goodness of heart. It is the difference between desire and love. The sense of the father in Michelangelo's work is love without desire. It is the purification of the impulse, Michelangelo's Alexander cut, the first carver's stroke of all, by which this later sculptor cleaves the stone of the human heart like a diamond, commits the absolute cut with the fury of Moses, to purify it of its rapacious half and open the heart to its core, fanning forth the crystalline spectral lines of courage, custody, and sympathy.

That is a portion in the feel of Michelangelo's work: sympathy, coupled to the evident strength, the titanic heaving of its passion. The strength turns with anger on the enemy's threat; the sympathy agonizes and writhes the common pain.

This is the other half to the distance of genius, and to Michelangelo's force—the power to heal. There is a touch to these works, to all imaginings of genius, that stretches straight to the core, that presses its way to the heart, that installs a sense of wholeness, of completeness, through the wholeness that is the hallmark of genius—that creates in those sensitive enough to know such work the prosthetic soul: the fulfillment of all that is lacking, that is damaged, that is void.

It comes, like an infection of health, through the sense of rightness about these works. When faced with a Michelangelo, a Bach, an Einsteinian theory, there is a feeling—the most salient of their characteristics, the defining aspect—that all is right with the world. There is an undeniable feeling that life is not a mistake—that something of life succeeds. It comes regardless of the content. It is not a function of the message, or the story, or the argument, but of the art in the work—of the *style*. Of course, it is a result of the harmonic resolution of the work, of the completion of every gesture, of the resolving of every fraction, of the measurement of the portions in relations such that every internal connection divides down to an integer, of proportions that balance to leave no embarrassing remainder, that harmonize—of the wholeness into which the parts of the work add up, of the musicality of it. It is a result of the integrity of the form.

This is what restores the mass of humanity, what touches them, regardless of the gulf between such as these and such as they. Each becomes a model for those they have left behind, for the crowd of the human that they will and can afford to have nothing to do with; each is a universe of "stern ethics," of exemplary propriety, an internally discovered understanding of what must be, a determination to make things right that is self-contained, hermetically sealed within its own world, but distantly brilliant. Each becomes a polestar by which others may steer their lives, each is like a solar flare that breaks off its umbilical connection to the earth of humankind and stands in the heavens like a new sun. And the definition of genius is disclosed and glows like a star: it is the force of humanity, maximized—raised to its highest power. And its lesson is to instruct out of the heart of its own example, out of the soul of its mathematics—to teach the final equation: excellence = freedom.



“

All works of genius have this in common: even when they demonstrate and make us perceive the inevitable unhappiness of life, even when they express the most dreadful despair, they nevertheless comfort the noble soul that finds itself in a state of depression, disillusionment, nullity, boredom, and discouragement, or in the most bitter and deadening misfortunes. Such works rekindle our enthusiasm, and though they treat and represent nothing but death, give back (to us) that life that had been lost.

—Giacomo Leopardi

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Ohne Musik wäre das Leben ein Irrtum.
—Nietzsche

Michelangelo, DAVID

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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

MICHELANGELO
POETRY

A SELECTION OF POEMS IN TRANSLATION

TRANSLATED BY MARK DANIEL COHEN

"I'HO GIÀ FATTO UN GOZZO IN QUESTO STENTO"

I' HO GIÀ FATTO UN GOZZO IN QUESTO STENTO,
COME FA L'ACQUA A' GATTI IN LOMBARDIA
O VER D'ALTRO PAESE CHE SI SIA,
C'A FORZA 'L VENTRE APPICCA SOTO 'L MENTO.

LA BARBA AL CIELO, E LA MEMORIA SENTO
IN SULLO SCRIGNO, E 'L PETTO FO D'ARPIA,
E 'L PENNEL SOPRA 'L VISO TUTTAVIA
MEL FA, COCCIANDO, UN RICCO PAVIMENTO.

E' LOMBI ENTRATI MI SON NELLA PECCIA,
E FO DEL CUL PER CONTRAPESO GROPPA,
E' PASSI SENZA GLI OCCHI MUOVO INVANO.

DINANZI ME S'ALLUNGA LA CORTECCIA,
E PER PIEGARSI ADIETRO SI RAGROPPA,
E TENDOMI COM'ARCO SORIÑANO.

PERÒ FALLACE E STRANO
SURGE IL IUDIZIO CHE LA MENTA PORTA,
CHÉ MAL SI TRA' PER CERBOTTANA TORTA.

LA MIA Pittura morta
DIFENDI ORMA', GIOVANNI, E 'L MIO ONORE,
NON SENDO IN LOCO BON, NÉ IO PITTORE.

"I'HO GIÀ FATTO UN GOZZO IN QUESTO STENTO"

A LREADY GOT THE GOITER FOR MY PAINS,
LIKE WATER BREEDS IN CATS IN LOMBARDY
OR ELSE SOME OTHER COUNTRY IT MAY BE,
IT'S GOT MY BELLY DANGLING FROM MY CHIN.

MY WHISKERS WIPE AT HEAVEN, AND MY BRAIN
IS SLAPPED INTO MY SPINE, GOT HARPY'S TEATS,
THE BRUSH IS OVER MY FACE CONSTANTLY,
DRIPS TURN IT TO A FLOORING RICHLY STAINED.

MY LOINS ARE ELEVATED TO MY CUT,
FOR COUNTERWEIGHT, I HANG OUT MY BEHIND,
AND BLINDLY, VAINLY SHUFFLING ON I GO.

IN FRONT OF ME MY LOOKS ARE STRETCHING OUT,
IN BACK, I'M PLEATING UP, I'M IN A BIND,
IT'S SERIOUS, I'M DRAWN JUST LIKE A BOW.

AND SO, IN FALLACY AND STRANGENESS GROW
THE JUDGMENTS THAT MY MIND MUST CARRY ON,
BECAUSE ONE SHOOTS BAD WITH A SCREWED UP GUN.

AND MY DESIGNS ARE NOW COME MORIBUND,
THEM AND MY HONOR, GIO', PLEASE ADVOCATE,
I'M IN A LOUSY SPOT, AND I CAN'T PAINT.

"SI COMMA NELLA PENNA E NELL'INCHIOSTRO"

SI COMMA NELLA PENNA E NELL'INCHIOSTRO
È L'ALTO E 'L BASSO E 'L MEDIOCRE STILE,
E NE' MARMI L'IMMAGIN RICCA E VILE
SECONDO CHE 'L SA TRAR L'INGEGNO NOSTRO;

COSÌ, SIGNOR MIE CAR, NEL PETTO VOSTRO,
QUANTE L'ORGOGLIO È FORSE OGNI ATTO UMILE;
MIA IO SOL QUEL C'A ME PROPIO È E SIMILE
NE TRACCO, COME FUOR NEL VISO MOSTRO.

CHI SEMINA SOSPIR, LACRIME E DOGLIE,
(L'UMOR DAL CIEL TERRESTRE, SCHIETTO E SOLO,
A VARI SEMI VARIO SI CONVERTE),

PERÒ PIANTO E DOLOR NE MIETE E COGLIE;
CHI MIRA ALTA BELTÀ CON SÌ GRAN DUOLO,
NE RITRA' DOGLIE E PENE ACERBE E CERTE.

"SI COMMA NELLA PENNA E NELL'INCHIOSTRO"

AS JUST THERE ARE IN PEN AND IN THE INK
THE HIGH, THE LOW, THE MEDIOCRE STYLE,
IN MARBLE IMAGES BOTH RICH AND VILE
ACCORDING TO WHAT WITS ARE IN US THINK;

SO, MY DEAR SIR, WITHIN YOUR BREAST DO LINK
PERHAPS AS MUCH IN PRIDE AS HUMBLE WILE;
BUT I BUT WHAT IS PROPER TO AND LIKE
ME DRAW, AND OUTWARD IN THE FACE BESPEAK.

WHO SOWS THE SIGH, THE TEARS, THE PLANGENCY,
(ON EARTH RAINS ON HIGH HUMOR, SOLE AND PURE,
TO VARYING SEEDS VARIOUSLY CONVERTS),

REAPS AND GLEANS IN SORROW AND THE HURTS;
WHO SIGHTS HIGH BEAUTY GRIEVING GRANDEOUSLY
PORTRAYS THE PLANGENT PAIN SO SHARP AND SURE.

"AL COR DI ZOLFO, A LA CARNE DI STOPPA"

AL COR DI ZOLFO, A LA CARNE DI STOPPA,
A L' OSSA CHE DI SECCO LEGNO SIÈNO;
A L' ALMA SENZA CUIDA E SENZA FRENO
AL DESIR PRONTO, A LA VAGHEZZA TROPPA;

A LA CIECA RACION DEBILE E ZOPPA
AL VISCHIO, A' LACCI DI CHE 'L MONDO È PIENO;
NON È GRAN MARAVIGLIA, IN UN BALENO
ARDER NEL PRIMO FOCO CHE S'INTOPPA.

A LA BELL' ARTE CHE, SE DAL CIEL SECO
CIASCUN LA PORTA, VINCE LA NATURA,
QUANTUNCHE SÉ BEN PREMA IN OGNI LOCO;

S'I' NACQUI A QUELLA NÉ SORDO NÉ CIECO,
PROPORZIONATO A CHI 'L COR M'ARDE E FURA,
COLPA È DI CHI M'HA DESTINATO AL FOCO.

"AL COR DI ZOLFO, A LA CARNE DI STOPPA"

A HEART OF SULFUR, OAKUM FOR THE MEAT,
WITH BONES OF BRITTLE TINDER, AND A SOUL
WITHOUT A GUIDE WITH BIT TO CUT THE FLOW
TO FIERCEST PASSIONS, BEAUTY'S FURTHEST REACH;

A REASON BLIND AND HOBBLING AND WEAK
TO NOOSES, LIMES WITH WHICH THE WORLD IS WHOLE;
IT'S NO GREAT MARVEL, IN A FLASH IT COALS
WITH THAT FIRST FIRE IT STUMBLES OUT TO MEET.

AN ART OF BEAUTY, IF THAT EACH ONE BRING
THE THING FROM HEAVEN, NATURE VANQUISHING,
THOUGH IT IMPRINT ITSELF AT EVERY TURN;

IF I WAS BORN FOR ART, NOT BLIND, NOT DEAF,
MY SCALED HEART TO THE BURNING THING AND THIEF,
THE SIN'S THE FLAME'S WHO I WAS MADE TO SERVE.

"NON HA L'OTTIMO ARISTA ALCUN CONCETTO"

NON HA L'OTTIMO ARISTA ALCUN CONCETTO
C'UN MARMO SOLO IN SÉ NON CIRCONSCRIVA
COL SUO SUPERCHIO, E SOLO A QUELLO ARRIVA
LA MAN CHE UBBIDISCE ALL'INTELLETTO.

IL MAL CH'IO FUGGO, E 'L BEN CH'IO MI PROMETTO,
IN TE, DONNA LEGGIADRA, ALTERA E DIVA,
TAL IS NASCONDE; E PERCH'IO PIÙ NON VIVA,
CONTRARIA HO L'ARTE AL DISIATO EFFETO.

AMOR DUNQUE NON HA, NÉ TUA BELTATE
O DUREZZA O FORTUNA O GRAN DISDECNO
DEL MIO MAL COLPA, O MIO DESTINO O SORTE;

SE DENTRO DEL TUO COR MORTE E PIETATE
PORTI IN UN TEMPO, E CHE 'L MIO BASSO INGEGNO
NON SAPPIA, ARDENDO, TRARNE ALTRO CHE MORTE.

"NON HA L'OTTIMO ARISTA ALCUN CONCETTO"

H AVE MASTER ARTISTS EVEN NO CONCEPT
THE MARBLE OF ITS OWN WON'T CIRCUMSCRIBE
IN ITS ACCRETION, SOLELY WHAT ARRIVES
UNTO THE HAND WHICH MINDS THE INTELLECT.

THE AIL I FLY, THE SAKE THAT I SELECT,
IN YOU, DEAR GRACE, TRANSCURED AND DIVINE,
LURKS; IN THAT I AM NOW NO MORE ALIVE,
CONTRARY ARTS MY SINISTER EFFECT.

LOVE THEREFORE CAN NOT BE, NOT YOUR BEAUTY
YOUR ADAMANTINE, FORTUNE, RIFE DISDAINS,
OF MY ILL GUILT, NOR LUCK NOR DESTINY;

IF WELL WITHIN YOUR HEART MERCY AND DEATH
ARE WORN AT ONCE, AND MY BASE GENIUS BRAINS,
IN ARDENCY, TO DRAW NOTHING BUT DEATH.

"CARO M'È 'L SONNO, E PIÙ L'ESSER DI SASSO"

CARO M'È 'L SONNO, E PIÙ L'ESSER DI SASSO,
MENTRE CHE 'L DANNO E LA VERGOGNA DURA;
NON VEDER, NON SENTIR M'È GRAN VENTURA;
PERÒ NON MI DESTAR, DEH, PARLA BASSO.

"CARO M'È 'L SONNO, E PIÙ L'ESSER DI SASSO"

MY TREASURE SLEEP, AND MORE, MY BEING STONE,
WHILE HURT AND THE HUMILIATIONS LAST;
AND SIGHTLESS, SOUNDLESS, IS TO ME THE BEST;
SO DO NOT RAISE ME, SPEAK YOUR MEANINGS LOW.



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Out of the Heart of Light

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Julie Hedrick: Awakening

Hyperion, Volume III, issue 3, June 2008

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



**Out of the
HEART
of LIGHT**

Julie Hedrick: Awakening

Nohra Haime Gallery, New York

April 29 – May 24, 2008

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Those who believe our thinking is free of the constraints of mythological patterns have not bothered to observe the bars on the cage—or have not been driven to. Those who take the inevitable sensation that we are free in our thoughts as hard evidence, who believe the thing must be what it seems to be from within, are captured in category confusion and attempting to create a Möbius strip of a proof. An element of a system cannot stand as an uninflected observation of the status of the system—it is impeached by whatever indicts the system as a whole. Every thought is biased by what thinks it. It rolls with the tilt of the lawn. One will feel free if one is, or if one is compelled to, and the difference will be undetectable—from the interior.

No thought can reliably assess its own nature. However, thoughts can be taken as samplings of the system. They are evidence as example, although not as conclusion—one can think about thought, all thoughts but the one in which one considers the nature of thought. *That* thought stands ever and inevitably behind its own back, or behind the eyepiece of its own microscope, never under its own gaze. Which is to say that we can estimate the nature of thought by recalling what we have thought, taking it as symptomatic, as behavioral, and looking for the pattern.

The patterns of thought appear to be narrative. Regardless of the manner of thought examined, there is a meaningful sense in which we are always telling stories. Even logical arguments, fugitive mullings, reveries, mathematical proofs, and a series of paintings communicate more effectively and compellingly the more they approach the structure of a story. (It is a thing good writers know: that reader interest is dependent upon suspense, upon establishing a desire to see how things end—there must always be a drive towards a strong finish, a final payoff for the writer’s audacity in demanding the reader expend continuous attention on accumulating information.) The story need not be, and essentially is not, the telling of a yarn—it is rather a formal device, an organizing principle, a pattern for the arranging of information of any kind. What matters is that a circle is closed, that a conclusion is reached, that a promise embedded at the beginning of the dispensation of data is returned to and fulfilled at the end, which is the determining characteristic of an end. It is the same as saying that all thought works in the form of a mystery, and the thought is complete when the solution to the compounding of clues is disclosed.

Even so, the structural patterns of information exchange are naturally filled in by the imagination with narrative content, with basic stories laid out in broad strokes, or more, story themes that are the essential forms of imagination, of comprehension: creation, apotheosis, deterioration, the descent into chaos. These are the mythic patterns, the essential forms that structure our thought. And the stories appear to be limited in number. In essence, we keep telling the same stories to ourselves. We tell them, over and again, in everything we think.

Half a century ago, Northrop Frye published a seminal work of literary analysis, *Anatomy of Criticism*, in which he proposed a theory of archetypal criticism that had all of world literature falling into a circular pattern of four forms, forms that make a single system. The forms or essential stories relate to four stages of human life: birth, marriage, old age, and death. They relate as well to the four parts of the day—morning, noon, evening, and night—the four seasons, beginning with spring, and four literary modes—comedy, romance, tragedy, and farce. Taken together, they constitute a cycle, each form leading into the next, and ultimately, beginning again: night leading into morning, winter leading into spring, farce leading into comedy—death leading into life. Taken together, they constitute a single story: the story of an individual life, of a society, of human civilization—of the life cycle. Taken together, they constitute the one story we keep telling ourselves in all we think, the story of life aging into mortality and then rebirth—the track along which our thoughts run, our essential myth.

Of course, there is no suggestion that we travel, even imaginatively, around the lap of the circadian, seasonal, transcendental circuit—only that, in everything we think, conceive, dream up, we tell a story that lies somewhere along the circumference, and that all the mental products of civilization, compounded together and by now, this far into civilization, do not exhaust the possibilities of expression but, instead, complete the circle. (For Frye is not a Post-Structural theoretician but now stands as one of our best alternatives.)

The point of the circle is not that we complete the round. Rather, it has no point, it is a descriptive, not a prescriptive, category—a scientific concept. But there is the tendency to move ahead along the lap, to go on to some part of the next stage when a culture—thinkers, which is often what we mean by that word—feel(s) an imaginative, artistic, even philosophical mode is exhausted: tragedy does tend to be followed by the chaos of farce (whether comic farce or dark, whether Dada or *Moby Dick*), romance leads toward tragedy (*Romeo and Juliet* contains the movement in itself), farce tends to move into comedy (Aristophanes being followed by the New Comedy of Menander), and so forth.

The Frye model thus may be employed to see where we are, and what the more likely next alternatives are. So, where are we? In visual art, over the last

50 years, we have moved from abstract painting to the varieties and vagaries of Post-Modern art, and with artists such as Julie Hedrick, we are seeing something new, something that makes perfect sense along the verge of the Frye system.

The method and function of abstraction is to disassemble the world, to dissolve its appearances—to take it to pieces. It is a tragic movement in the purely descriptive sense, which is Frye's sense—form breaks down into formlessness. But the emotional tonality follows of necessity from the formal execution, and we should recall that, in a jointly written statement, Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman observed: "There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless." If one does not sense the tragedy of standing before the works of these artists—the tragedy of "human destiny before the infinite," as Ramez Qureshi wrote of Rothko's art—one has not learned to see Abstract Expressionism.

As abstraction moved to color field painting, as the gestural elements became removed and the flat tonal expanse became the articulation, the imaginative sense of things shifted from tragedy to farce—one could feel the thrashing about falling away, like a swimmer going under. It is not a judgmental and certainly not a pejorative term—it is purely descriptive: of the immersion in formlessness, and in chaos, which are imaginatively to be taken to be the same thing—absurdity and nothingness, the absence of coherent definition. Frye gives a short list of natural images for each of his formal modes. The natural, automatic images for farce are the surface of the ocean (*Moby Dick*) and the snowfield (end of *Frankenstein*)—featureless expanses. Readily, one can add the color field and, at the extreme, Monochrome Painting, or Radical Painting, as it, rather appropriately in this context, came to be known.

Farce is also the preparation of the ground for re-emergence, something that ought to be kept in mind in considering the stage the art world entered next. Pop Art—and to some degree the attendant other movements of the time and still, but none quite to the degree of Pop Art—enacted the other aspect of farce: chaos. Pop Art is the equalizing of everything, the leveling of all priority, the reduction of all preference, and the extirpation of all honor. It opens the proposal—among its adherents as much as its opponents—after the austere subject matter of Abstract Expressionism, that anything might be the subject of art, that any attitude might be its attitude, and with Warhol's Brillo Boxes, indistinguishable from real ones, that anything might be considered a work of art. With no innate defining characteristics, with essentialism put aside, art could then promise no defining output: the aesthetic experience might also be anything at all. This is, of course, Duchamp stood on his head (who was pointing to an ultimately philosophical problem with the very idea of "art"). But order is priority, the pattern of prioritizing, and so Pop Art amounts in its

implications to the loss of order, the absence of any reason for one thing rather than another, in any context. It is the celebration of there being nothing to celebrate, giddiness in place of mindfulness, the party at the end of the world, the Satyricon, the happy riot, the smashing of the crockery (with Julian Schnabel, at a later stage, the matter finally become literal), the breaking of the toys, the ridicule of everything. It is the mockery that encompasses all, an impossibility of seriousness, of respect, of belief—a world gone mad. And it is what tragedy naturally leads to, following the breakdown of order as surely and sensibly as the Greek farce followed the tragic trilogy, as Aristophanes is the innate next step after Aeschylus.

And then comes the next step after that, as predictable in its eventual emergence as are its characteristics. Rebirth follows ridicule, the growth of new order, as organic as a flower, follows nothingness, and nothing is exhausted, as the Post-Modernists would have us worry. It just keeps turning over—eternally, it would seem, as we have been told elsewhere.

There are few artists who take this following step, who engage the necessary implication of what has preceded this moment, as clearly and forthrightly as Julie Hedrick, which makes her one of the more significant artists at this time—one of the few artists committed to what needs to be done next, to what follows the exhaustion of exhaustion, the nothingness at the end of the celebration of nothingness. She is one of the few contemporary artists looking to the return of moral will.

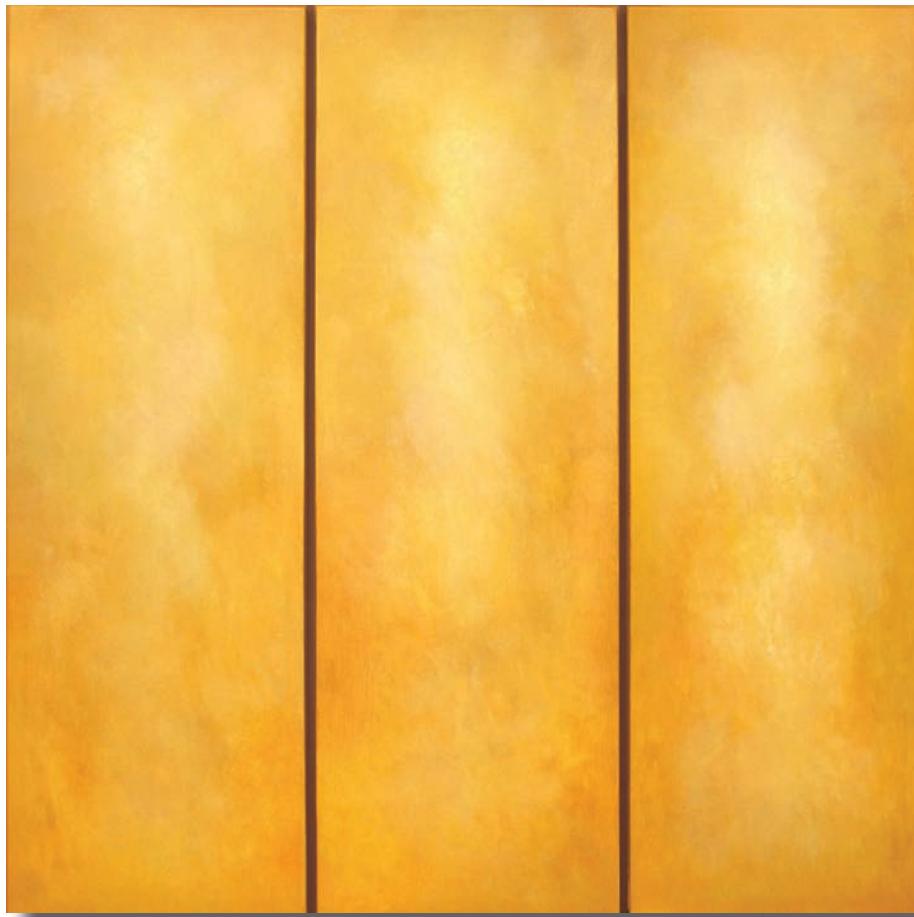
Hedrick's paintings are abstract works, glowing fields of tonal light spread across the canvas like atmospheres of mood-infused illumination. Renderings of pure incandescence, they are churning expanses of cloud-like patterns of dark and luster, quiet thunderheads of shadow and luminescence, silent ruminations brewing in a time before the separation of matter and void. In all of her mature works, light breaks from a dim background like an inspiration, building up in thicknesses of paint to, at the greatest density, a broken surface, a scumbling that is like mass emerging from pure energy. It is almost as if paint were fashioning itself out of light, formulating itself like volcanic rock, coagulating out of the magma that is the raw art of painting, as if the first work of painted art were a spontaneous eruption, creating itself before your eyes, creating itself out of a smoke-like luminosity, out of inherent principles of craft that will become a tradition and the skill of a master craftsman—as if thought were becoming form.

Technically, Hedrick's paintings are color field paintings, virtually monochrome paintings, which show and apply the re-emergence of the brush stroke in a tonal expanse. In a painting technique that the artist has said she obtained under the influence of Rembrandt, Artemisia Gentileschi, and the frescos of Pompeii, Hedrick works into the field inchoate formulations that come not of

intellectual exertions or symbolic organizations but the arsenal of painterly techniques. Her surfaces are catalogues of the gesticulations of brushwork, and even given her roster of influences, they appear to resemble no one so much as Monet in their gestural encyclopedia. The manner is a subspecies of the bravura style, and it ranges from the cauldron of strokes upon strokes to the caking up of beginning impastos, from the overt demonstration of deliberated strokes, laid like drawing lines, to the near burial of the stroke with the gesture of the hand in evidence through the movement from dark to light. Without the foundation of subject matter, what one sees is the thought of paint—every moment drawn from the dictionary of painting, from the compendium of available gesture, in every moment, the authentic artist doing what the paint wants to do, just as the authentic writer draws more from the dictionary of language than from accomplished works that precede him and obeys the vector of the desire of the words.

There has always been the sense of something arising in Hedrick's works, but in this exhibition of nine paintings from 2007 and 2008, there is something more occurring, something new happening, and the title of the exhibition, "Awakening," is precisely right. In the press materials distributed by the gallery, Hedrick says that these paintings are a departure for her. Her previous works she characterizes as "interior and reflective." These are the result of "a meditation on nature."

Hedrick's attention has turned outward, from the inward focus of rumination to the reflection on the world, and one does not require her statement to recognize it. The indicators of it are difficult to isolate. But they are tangible presences, subtle suggestions of a change of orientation, felt implications like



Julie Hedrick, *Ochre, Rising Pale*, 2008
Oil on canvas, triptych, 61 x 61 in. 155 x 155 cm.



Julie Hedrick, *Blue Awakening*, 2007
Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in. 91.4 x 91.4 cm.

These works lean more towards the monochromatic than has been the case with Hedrick prior. The colors are more distributed among the individual works than across individual surfaces, as if the impression at hand has been allotted to the works in coordination, as if they were of a piece—as if they made a story.

And as one walks through the gallery space, the realization comes. The paintings add up, and one realizes what one is witnessing is a new Creation myth. Emergence has always been implicit in Hedrick's art, but the aligning of the colors, the ordering of the color compositions, has created a segmenting, a distribution and ordering, of the thought of her art. The paintings in "Awakening" are distributed almost entirely in three colors: those from yellow to white, those in blue, and those in green, with one painting—*Rose is Rose is Rose*, 2007—in the titular tone, the single exception. The three colors take emergence in three directions and acquire a symbolic valency, a sense of something specific rising up, coming into existence.

In the works of white to yellow, such as *Ochre, Rising Pale*, 2008, *Light Sequence*, 2007-8, and *Bright, Light, Bright*, 2008, the coagulation appears to be of pure light, illumination formulating of its own, as if there were nothing to

tendrils of intimations stretching through the gallery room, lacing through the paintings, drawing one from each near realization to the next, like a finger running along the articulate veins of the nerves, along the network of a sensation that is also an intuition. You feel something overwhelming up, something different from what this artist has shown us before, something just breaking through like a shoot pressing the earth from below.

Perhaps the one overt matter here is the handling of color.

illuminate, as if before there were anything to illuminate, as if all there were to see were the characteristics of light generating itself out of mists of nothing: the shifts of densities, of shimmers, of half-created to manifested brilliancies. In two of the works—*Ochre, Rising Pale and Bright, Light, Bright*—the brightest areas are coalesced, unusual for Hedrick, into near forms: embryonic,

only partially present, they seem something like flames, rising up the center of each composition, revealing themselves dimly as light in the center of fields of light, or as pillars of fire. At the center of each composition, but not of each work, for all three works are organized as triptychs, as sets of three individual compositions. Hedrick says in the press materials that the multi-part works here (others are composed of more than three panels) are intended to be reminiscent of Renaissance altarpieces, and thereby is announced the intention of a sense of creation more specific and targeted than that of aesthetic creativity.

In the works of blue—*Blue Awakening*, 2007, *Dawn, Blue and Gray*, 2008, and *River, Breath*, 2007—the symbolic valency of the imagery is clearly sky. A created world is forming, a separation of heaven and earth, as well as the separation of the inner world and the outer, for another implication of the blue—one knows it purely out of impulse, for no reason one can cite, perhaps out of the vision of the concrete creation of immateriality, perhaps by the “logic” of the color itself—is thought itself. And the condensing center of *Blue Awakening* feels like light in the steaming formlessness lacing itself together with an awareness, like a ghost present in the void, like an eye opening—a forming world knowing its witness is there to observe it: looking back.

In the works of green—*Ode to Temair*, 2007-8, and *Green, Rising, Green*, 2007-8—the symbolic implication is as inevitable as it is in the blue works. It is life, vegetation, the creation of the living presence in the world. And one obviously may include *Rose is Rose is Rose* in this. And the entire exhibition itself—the story it makes—becomes a triptych. And “Temair” is Gaeilge (the native language of the Irish) for the Hill of Tara in Ireland, the mythical dwelling



Julie Hedrick, *Ode to Temair*, 2007-8
Oil on canvas, 48 x 72 in. 122 x 183 cm.

place of the gods and the entrance to the otherworld. And the implication—the story—is complete.

And the next turn in the larger story is clear. This exhibition is the myth of spring returning, of the world re-arising, of new life forming itself out of the wreckage of the old. It is Genesis, come again.

That is its story. Its nature is the aesthetic conviction, the aesthetic mission, of Julie Hedrick in all her work: the re-emergence of art, art returning to the creation and conveyance of a world of its own, as large and extensive, as varied and rich, as the world we discover around us—art as the observed world transformed, as the vehicle of the fusion of the inner and the outer. Art as honor, not the spite of ridicule, and thus as much the expression and impulse of self-respect as of respect and serious regard for the world we encounter, for the life around us. Art as the opposite of mockery, and smug self-satisfaction. Or, more simply, art as life. And Hedrick rediscovers it, here as in all her work, precisely where T. S. Eliot wrote it would be found and always will be harbored: along the surface glittering “out of heart of light.”

a review of

Anselm Kiefer / Paul Celan: Myth, Mourning and Memory

by Andréa Lauterwein

Hyperion, Volume III, issue 3, June 2008

a review of



Anselm Kiefer / Paul Celan: Myth, Mourning and Memory
Andréa Lauterwein
Thames and Hudson, 2007

by Kevin Hart
The University of Virginia

My thought is vertical," says Anselm Kiefer, "and one of its planes was fascism. But I see all its layers. In my paintings I tell stories in order to show what lies behind history. I make a hole and I go through" (28). One could meditate on these four sentences for a very long time. The verticality that Kiefer evokes is not that of Roberto Juarroz, a stretching up into the heights of the imagination that is also, simultaneously, a reaching down into its depths. The contingencies of history are rigorously excluded in the beautiful, unsettling lyrics of Juarroz's *Poesía Vertical*; yet those same contingencies brood over Kiefer's paintings and sculptures. It is more telling to say that Kiefer's best art is closer to what Husserl called genetic phenomenology: the study of how something gains sense through time. All cultural objects have many sediments of sense, and a genetic phenomenology seeks to show how this sense is given to us in relation to the different horizons against which an object is constituted, and by way of passive and active syntheses. In this lush volume, the object in general that most concerns Kiefer is "being human" as it appears after the Second World War in Germany, and the horizons that press on his work are National Socialism and, barely distinct from it, the Shoah.

Yet when Kiefer looks at one of his particular objects—an attic, a field, a winter landscape, railway tracks, a book—he sees "all its layers," the mythical as well as the historical, the distant past as well as the years leading up to the reign of the Third Reich. So one must expect to find allusions in his paintings to the deep pasts of Germany, to Norse myths, the *Nibelungenleid* and all that Wagner evokes in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Tannhäuser*, for example. His canvases tell stories, as he says, or—more precisely—stories about stories. You might say that they stage a conflict between two political narratives about Germany. There is the grand, monumental narrative, abstracted from any concrete history and put to dark use in the years of National Socialism and those leading up to them, of a heroic Germany whose great men, suitably made up for the part, include Luther and Frederick II, Bismarck and Wagner, Nietzsche and Hitler. And there is the shorter counter-narrative, a story of cultural criticism and political correction that was repeatedly related after the defeat of Germany in 1945, one that features Heine and Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno. Kiefer sees—and this is a glory of his art—the different, sometimes dislocated layers of how something is constituted as meaningful. What is "behind history" is not a supposedly ahistorical essence, a *Wesen* that would belong only to a logic or metaphysics that can be conducted without reference to history, but the diverse starting points—ideas, ideologies, impressions, acts, failures to act—that, in retrospect, we can see as having led to a particular reality, and that still hover

behind it when we bring it sharply into focus. Kiefer does not render history transparent so that we can reach back into it and touch its actors. Rather, he de-sediments the difficult period of history through which he has lived (he was born in 1945; his father was a German army officer), a time of survivor guilt and shame, denial and moral posturing, and quietly points to dangers that may well press upon the present or the future if we ignore the past.

It is also worth underlining that, for Kiefer, art is *thinking*, and that it too has uneven, dislocated layers. Not all his work takes place at the same level, no more than it works with the same media. In his sculptures, watercolors, installations, and great sprawling canvases, Kiefer thinks differently because each medium demands different things of him. The same is true of his subjects: each demands a thinking that is appropriate to it. The thought required by modern history, as in the work represented in this book, is not the thought that is proper to the cosmos, as is represented in much of his more recent work, let alone the more anguished religious themes of a contemporary installation such as *Palmsonntag*. In the paintings and sculptures considered by Andréa Lauterwein, Kiefer can be seen to enter history at a particular point, and indeed much of the art that he practices turns on choosing the right angle of entry and, once behind history, making his way along its dark side to find what best to expose. If history is a tapestry composed of many threads that historians and politicians ask us to view in different lights, Kiefer's mature works in this book are invitations to look behind the tapestry and see its hanging system, its loose threads, its evidence of having been constructed over time and under certain conditions. His art, we might say, involves turning the tapestry around and around.

Unsurprisingly, then, Kiefer's canvases, some of which are very large indeed, include photographs, straw, ash, clay, charcoal, string, and dirt; his sculptures use lead, glass, and dead plants. If we are tempted to call Kiefer's work "neo-symbolist," we must do so in the full awareness that it is a symbolism that rebels against the spirituality of nineteenth-century symbolists such as Caspar David Friedrich and Edvard Munch. In terms of its media, Kiefer's art is one with the detritus of the world about us, which means that it makes no attempt to transcend history, let alone to present the ineffable or to fascinate us by its formal perfection as an artwork. Its religiosity is as palpable as it is unorthodox, especially in the work that comes after the period that is surveyed by Lauterwein, but it is neither confessional nor filled with hope. One might say it is Vatican I Catholicism developed in negative: what was light appears dark. And yet the metaphor limps. For what was dark then has become darker now. In terms of tonality, the silence in Kiefer's canvases is not that of a world lifted momentarily out of time but of a time after the screams of the dying can no longer be heard. We are in an attic where Jews have been hiding, but they were found, cornered by the Gestapo, and have been murdered now. We are walking along railway tracks towards the horizon and a blank sky, but

the cattle trains crammed with Jews have long passed by. The silence of the works is the silence of mourning.

"Quotation within Kiefer's work becomes a true working method" (15), observes Lauterwein, and with good reason: it is essential to his art. More accurate, though, would be the statement that it is a method that works in several ways and to various ends. One can use quotation for pedagogical purposes, to distance oneself from something said, to use something, to mention it, or to use it and mention it at the same time, and so on. Consider *Occupations*, the collection of photographs that first drew attention to the young artist, and that generated fierce, angry discussion of his intentions. In the Summer and Fall of 1969 the young Kiefer traveled to Italy, Switzerland, and France, and stood before or on well-known cultural sites and natural vistas in a military uniform with his arm raised in the *Hitlergruss* or Nazi salute. Photographs, taken from various angles and elevations, of him standing in this transgressive pose constitute the artwork. Clearly, Kiefer is quoting a gesture from the 1930s and 1940s, Goebbels's *Sieg Heil*, which has been outlawed in Germany since 1945, although whether he is also "disquoting" the gesture (detaching it from another and using it himself) is not at all clear. Far from being plainly satirical, as in Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) or in Billy Wilder's *Stalag 17* (1953), the Nazi salute in *Occupations* allows the viewer to regard it as an act of brute rebellion against the post-1945 political order.

When we see Kiefer standing before the Coliseum in Rome, his arm raised at a forty-five degree angle, are we meant to see a correlation between the *pax Romani* and twentieth-century Italian fascism? Are we to recall the cheap holidays in Italy taken by ordinary German families in the 1940s, vacations made possible by the Reich's leisure organization, the *Kraft durch Freude*? Are we to see him, wearing his hair too long and too unkempt for a soldier, as a young man of his day, not himself, perhaps, but one who is nonetheless affirming solidarity with the fascists of an earlier age or at least acknowledging the fascination of Nazi party rallies? Or are we to take the photograph as a statement that Germans have not fundamentally changed, not even after the *68er-Bewegung*, and that the National Socialist ideology of the 1930s and early 1940s still presses on their consciousness? Yet again, are we meant to recall the sixty-eighters of Heidelberg in the student revolt shouting at their professors *Hier wird nicht zitiert!* ("No quoting here!") in a naïve attempt to break totally with the past? Or are we to view the subject of the photographs as a pathetic figure, disheveled, tiny and alone, and to see this as a deflation of Nazism and neo-Nazism? It is this uncertainty, this under-determination of context with respect to image, that makes *Occupations* as disturbing now as it was when first viewed by his professors at the Fine Arts Academy in Karlsruhe on his return from his travels in central and southern Europe and as seen when it appeared in the art magazine *Interfunktionem* in 1975.

When we quote someone we present a state of affairs as grasped by that person. Modern art has long seen the value of quotation as a technique of self-alienation, in one or more senses of the word: T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) showcases his practice of "quotation without quotation marks," while quotation and self-quotation have long been common in music. (Brahms quotes Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in his *Liebe und Frühling*, for example, while Puccini quotes the "Mimi" theme from *La bohème* (1896) in *Il tabarro* (1918).) One consequence of Eliot's practice is to break down the integrity and authority of the lyric "I," to assemble fragments of culture in order to show that the unity and energy of western culture have been fatally compromised, and that we are spiritually exhausted. Yet Brahms pays homage to Mozart's genius, and Puccini transposes the "Mimi" theme in *Il tabarro* so that the song vendor offers a commentary on the fate of the lovers ("Poor Mimi, who died for love"). In postmodern works, quotation is, if anything, freer: we find quotations from popular culture as well as high culture, and with no suggestion of a hierarchic difference between them. Here there is less of a sense of claiming the authority of another than of regarding the past as a huge basement with all its many artifacts just thrown together from which bits and pieces may be selected at will to make new works. More specifically, we may talk of artists whose quotations use other works in order to make substantive claims, and others whose quotations mention other works without using them: they evoke a color, a form, a conceptual structure, perhaps with parody in mind, perhaps not. So when Algernon Swinburne quotes (by paraphrase) Boccaccio's *Decameron* X. 7 in his double sestina "The Complaint of Lisa" (1870) he is using the older work, but when John Ashbery quotes "The Complaint of Lisa" in *Flowchart* (1993) by retaining the terminal words of the double sestina while weaving his own poem around them he is mentioning Swinburne's poem but not using it.

The sort of quotation that Kiefer mostly favors does not place him among the ranks of postmodern visual artists—Joseph Kosuth, Sherrie Levine, and Mark Tansey, for example—who like to straddle the divide between use and mention, and sometimes to play endlessly with mentioning. The reanimation of symbol, not pastiche, is Kiefer's artistic concern; his muses are pain and loss, not theory and humor; his interest is in thick textures, not monochromatic flatness. Of course, like many visual artists, from time to time Kiefer alludes to other paintings. As Lauterwein notes, the photograph of Kiefer giving the Hitler salute to the sea quotes Casper David Friedrich's 1818 painting *Wanderer above a Sea of Mists* (35). (It also alludes, perhaps, to the legend of Canute the Great attempting to fight the oncoming waves of the sea with a sword.) Far more pressing, though, are Kiefer's quotations from literature, especially poetry: Ingeborg Bachmann and Velimir Chlebnikov, among others, and above all the early poetry of Paul Celan. In this volume the poetry of Celan frequently gives Kiefer the point he needs to "make a hole" and "go through" to the back of history. Here we are not dealing with pictorial quotation, as in Dirk Hager's

woodcut *Paul Celan*: we do not find images of the poet's face on the canvases, for example. Sometimes the quotations seem to be what philosophers call "propositional quotations": the painting in question states that Celan has said something important. And indeed many of Kiefer's canvases point us to what is made manifest in Celan's poems, especially those in *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (1952). Yet we must take care. A poem such as "Todesfuge" states very little while also evoking a great deal. Certainly "der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland" [death is a master from Germany] is a statement, yet far more important to Kiefer are other lines from the same poem: "dein goldenes Haar Margarete" [your golden hair Margarete] and "dein aschenes Haar Sulamith" [your ashen hair Shulamith], which at best only border on statements. Ungrammatical phrases like these have no use-function when quoted.

Nelson Goodman in his essay "On Some Questions Concerning Quotation" (*Monist* 58 (1974)) tells us that quotations not only refer to something but also contain it. So when Kiefer quotes "dein aschenes Haar Sulamith" in the title of one of his works from 1981, while also writing those words at the top of the canvas, he is referring to Celan's "Todesfuge" and containing the four words. Yet those words are not simply self-contained on the canvas, they are not just repeated in another context, nor are they merely mentioned, for they now participate in the life of the canvas: the dark letters are one with the lines of black paint, white paint and charcoal that thickly cross the canvas. Kiefer is showing how the reality of the Shoah manifests itself to him, and is using Celan's disclosure of the Shoah in "Todesfuge" as an exemplary manifestation of the same grim reality, one that has allowed him to make the Shoah manifest in his own way. As Robert Sokolowski says, in a very fine essay on quotation (and drawing here upon an insight of John Searle's), "It is not the case that presenting a representation is to present *only* the mind of another; the mind of another is itself the manifestation of something in the world" ("Quotation," in *Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions* (1992), 30). Important artistically in a work such as *Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith* is not just *what* is presented but *how* it is presented. Were this not so, we would regard the canvas as merely parasitic on Celan's poem, as though it were art about art. Instead, we directly recognize it as art about the world in which we live.

In seeing that Kiefer passes from what to how in his paintings and sculptures we recognize a phenomenological impulse in that work. It would be profitable to see the various ways in which that passage occurs in different canvases and even in the same canvas. In the writing of "Margarete" or "Sulamith," for example, we would say that being appears drained of being; while in *The World-Ash* (1982), with its tension between the mythical Norse tree Yggdrasil which stands at the origin of the world and a post-Holocaust landscape, we would say that being—here the being of horror—is given to us in an excessive way: the artwork is saturated with intuitions that cannot be held together. Equally, it would be instructive to regard Kiefer's mature pieces, as given in

this book, as offering hospitality to literature, especially poetry, and to media that are usually taken to be alien to visual art. I am thinking in particular of “hospitality” as Jacques Derrida resets the word for new use:

“ ”

Hospitality—this is a name or an example of deconstruction. Of the deconstruction of the concept, of the concept of concept, as well as of its construction, its home, its “at-home” [*son chez-moi*]. Hospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home; deconstruction is hospitality to the other, to the other than oneself, the other than “its other,” to an other who is beyond any “its other.” (“Hospitality,” *Acts of Religion* (2002), 364).

Derrida is speaking here of works, especially literary works, as offering hospitality to *la différence*. No poem, story, play, or indeed anything written, belongs fully and completely to its genre; it is always and already able to participate in other genres. It can always be lifted from one context and situated in another, and then it will take on new senses and functions.

Of course, this way of thinking about art as hospitality can justify the assemblages of a Robert Rauschenberg, making him a forebear of postmodernism in the visual arts. This is a very long way from where Kiefer wishes to stand. His heavily textured paintings, his forceful perspectives, his relentless symbols and insistent, somber quotations show us something utterly different. He wants to give us art as experience: an art that has barely escaped an exposure to peril, and that lets us glimpse that exposure and the narrowness of that escape. Time and again, Kiefer tells us that we cannot expect ever to be “at home” in the world, and that the desire to be “at home” in a land, a language, and a history, is itself a courting of danger. Another passage from Derrida, this time from his early *Edmund Husserl’s “Origin of Geometry”: An Introduction* (1962) indicates a better direction for understanding this formidable artist. “A phenomenology of the experience is possible thanks to a reduction and to an appropriate de-sedimentation” (50). Kiefer’s finest works as given in Anselm Kiefer / Paul Celan, and there are a great many of them, perform a reduction—a bracketing of our default understandings of history as linear, as determined by “great men,” as narrative, as progress—and offer us the very feel of the sediments of our past. They show us how the sense of our recent past is built up over time, in concrete moments of action and inaction, and how, with the Shoah, this sense rises to a sharp point in horror itself.

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Sacrificial Simulacra from Nietzsche to Nitsch

by David Kilpatrick

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Sacrificial Simulacra



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SUMMARY

This paper explores the sacrificial rite as the quintessential mythopoetic gesture (in the absence of myth). Kristeva's understanding of sacrifice as socially and symbolically foundational is consistent with the findings of social anthropology, but is contrary to the explorations of sacrificial imagery as an antidote to the modern condition. Nietzsche collapses the ontotheological significatory system through the sacrifice of its transcendental signified. After a brief overview of sacrifice in Nietzsche, discussion turns to how this informed Bataille's understanding of the sacred, as well as the failed sacrifice of his Acéphale project. The paper concludes with a discussion of sacrifice in Hermann Nitsch's Orgien-Mysterien Theater as decontextualized ritual.

TEXT

Perhaps no act better represents modern civilization's supposed other, the savage, than the ultimate mythopoetic gesture, the ritual of sacrifice. As Julia Kristeva claims in *Revolution in Poetic Language*: "sacrifice designates, precisely, the watershed on the basis of which the social and the symbolic are instituted" (1984: 75). But for the myth-less modern man (who equates myth with lie), the bloodless death of Socrates and the crucifixion of Jesus render the barbarity of such rites obsolete, clearing the way for a more pacified sense of the holy than the horrifying means of religious communication among peoples (and, perhaps, the divine) offered by more archaic sacred sensibilities. In the Euro-American conflation of the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian, the ontotheological significatory system, the violence of sacrifice is discharged with the symbolism of the Mass, and then ignored altogether in the progressive name of reason. It is with the transgressive words of Nietzsche, "God is dead," that this significatory system is itself sacrificed. My purpose here is to explore how Nietzsche engages with the simulacra of sacrifice as an antidote to the modern condition, how his exploration of this thematic motif is understood by Georges Bataille, whose theoretical obsession with this theme involved attempts at ritual practice, and how the ultimate status of contemporary post-theological sacrifice as decontextualized ritual is perhaps

best exemplified by Das Orgien-Mysterien Theater of the Viennese Actionist, Hermann Nitsch.

The first stirrings of Nietzsche's diagnosis of the absence of the sacred at the heart of modernity are found in his first work, *The Birth of Tragedy [Die Geburt der Tragödie]* where he notes that myth "is already paralyzed everywhere" (1968: 111). Arguing that tragic myth must be the response to this paralysis, and that this can only be done through an artwork that brings Apollinian structure to Dionysian insight, he concludes the book in the fictitious voice of an "old Athenian [. . .] with the eyes of Aeschylus," who encourages the reader to, "follow me to a tragedy, and sacrifice with me [*opfere mit mir*] in the temple of both deities" (1968: 144). This closing image, this first shift from the author's voice to the voice of another (a shift to drama), leaves the reader to question: what will be sacrificed?

In *Human, All Too Human [Menschliches, Allzumenschliches]*, Nietzsche returns to the question of the sacrificial when he contemplates an archaeological display of sacrificial utensils (in section 112). The sight causes him to note the difficulty for the modern mind to appreciate the "combination of farce, even obscenity, with religious feeling" (1984: 84). What had been held sacred is now identified with the profane, the reconstitution of the sacred as holy recognized as a historical loss. Taking an objective position on the sacrificial objects and their decontextualization, Nietzsche observes that, "some feelings are disappearing: the sensibility that this is a possible mixture is vanishing; we understand it only historically that it once existed, in festivals of Demeter and Dionysus, at Christian passion plays and mystery plays" (1984: 84). Nietzsche associates the sacrificial objects with celebrations to the feminine deity and the feminized male deity—the chthonic and the tragic—as well as the theatre and drama of medieval Christianity. Even though these dramatic works share in the Christian, anti-Dionysian worldview, there remains a trace of the Dionysian in their theatricality. It is difficult to determine if this passage is a lament, comment, or celebration. Are we to look forward to the time in which this blend of sacred and profane is no longer understood or have we cooled off too much, the fire in need of rekindling?

The question becomes more problematic with the next section (113) of *Human, All Too Human*. Reacting to the sound of churchbells, he questions the persistence of Christian belief in an age of reason. Like the sacrificial utensils, "the Christian religion is surely an antiquity jutting out from a far-distant time" (1984: 84). As he makes a list of tenets of faith he perceives as absurdities, he cites the sacrificial core of Christianity: "a justice that accepts the innocent man as a proxy sacrifice; someone who has his disciples drink his blood [. . .] the figure of the cross as a symbol, in a time that no longer knows the purpose and shame of the cross. [. . .] Are we to believe that such things are still believed?" (1984: 85). Nietzsche seems here to share in an

Enlightenment view of the sacrificial as a barbaric embarrassment from the all-too-dark (sub)human past. In the light of scientific progress, he appears to suggest, how can anyone shun the better conscience of reason and believe in such uncivilized superstition? One imagines that these two sections call for an end to all religious sensibility, that the appetite for sacrifice should become as useless as an appendix, from an evolutionary standpoint.

However, a far different view of the sacrificial is offered in section 138. Imagining a state of extreme excitement and tension, directed outside oneself at another (an enemy), Nietzsche touches on a theory of catharsis. Man, when "brought into a state of extraordinary tension," is faced with the possibility of not only destroying the other but himself as well: "Under the influence of the powerful emotion, he wants in any event what is great, powerful, enormous, and if he notices by chance that to sacrifice his own self satisfies as well or better than to sacrifice the other person, then he chooses that. Actually, all he cares about is the release of his emotion; to relieve his tension" (1984: 96). This desire for catharsis finds its ultimate release in the willful transformation of not only a subject for an object, but one's subjectivity given over to objectness. While the sacrificial may be what is "great, powerful and enormous," the sacrifice of one's self is what is most great, powerful and enormous. Nietzsche goes on to say that, "a divinity that sacrifices itself was the strongest and most effective symbol of this kind of greatness" (1984: 96). He is careful here to use the past tense. His awareness or concern for the efficacy of a symbol becomes problematic when one compares his earlier comment in *Human, All Too Human* on the symbolism of the cross with this comment on auto-deicide. What divinities does he have in mind here as "the strongest and most effective" symbolically? His earlier mocking comment on the symbolism of Christian sacrifice relates to the ignorance of adherents to the associations of humiliation and shame when the cross was employed as an instrument of capital punishment. Nonetheless, Nietzsche couldn't argue that the Christian reconstitution of the symbolism of the cross has been ineffective. Its efficacy is undeniable but, Nietzsche would argue, its effects are in a state of deterioration. The sacrificial deity that (for Nietzsche) symbolizes greatness, Dionysus, does so through an affirmation of life, rather than its metaphysical denial.

The sacrificial trail that runs through *Human, All Too Human* reaches its conclusion in section 620, with the statement, "If there is a choice, a great sacrifice will be preferred to a small one, because we compensate ourselves for a great sacrifice with self-admiration, and this is not possible with a small one" (1984: 257). But what great sacrifice does Nietzsche have in mind?

In *The Gay Science [Die fröhliche Wissenschaft]*, he gives a suggestion, with the declaration of the death of God. Rather than a statement of simple atheism, his madman claims, "We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his

murderers" (1974: 181). This sacred violence of the death of god brings about a ritual necessity, as the madman asks: "what festivals of atonement, what sacred games will we have to invent?" (1974: 181).

It is perhaps odd that sacrifice, the quintessential religious act, should play such a prominent role in the thought of one whose work seemingly negates the religious instinct. But the announcement of the death of God does not render the symbolism of Christianity (reconstituted metaphysically by the Church) null and void; on the contrary (as he suggests in a fragment published as section 874 of *The Will to Power* [*Der Wille zur Macht*]), it frees the image, for with the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, "an image of God was spread which was as far removed as possible from the image of the most powerful—the god on the cross" (1954: 440). Collapsing this significatory system recovers the most powerful symbol, using the most powerful symbol against its static simulacrum, for the crucifixion mimetically seals the sacrificial from its threat of contagion, the Mass a solemn parody of the most mythopoetic rite, killing myth.

In section 53 of *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*], Nietzsche makes it clear that he reconstitutes the religious experience, and that the death of God promotes its renewal: "It seems to me that the religious instinct is indeed in the process of growing powerfully—but the theistic satisfaction it refuses with deep suspicion" (1968: 256). This refusal is described in section 55 as the last step in a "great ladder of religious cruelty" (1968: 257). Nietzsche distinguishes three stages in this ladder, beginning with "human beings to one's god, perhaps precisely those whom one loved most. [. .] Then, during the moral epoch of mankind, one sacrificed to one's god one's own strongest instincts, one's 'nature'" (1968: 257). The sacrifice of human beings, the finest and most beloved, was replaced during the reign of the ontotheological significatory system with the destruction of that part of one's self that is most intimately connected with the earth. By annulling one's physicality, one sought to identify one's self with spirit. Nietzsche's deicidal words mark not only the end of that epoch, but the next stage in a sequence:



Finally—what remained to be sacrificed? At long last . . . didn't one have to sacrifice God himself and, from cruelty against oneself, worship the stone, stupidity, gravity, fate, the nothing? To sacrifice God for the nothing—this paradoxical mystery of the final cruelty was reserved for the generation that is now coming up: all of us already know something of this. (1968: 257)

Here we see most clearly how for Nietzsche the announcement of the death of God bears witness to a sacrifice of the highest proportions, for the “final cruelty” is a world-epochal event of sacred violence.

We may mythologize Nietzsche and cite his descent into madness in the Turin square as his own sacrifice. This is reinforced by the names with which he signed his letters shortly thereafter, “Dionysus” and “The Crucified” (1996: 345). Still, the question from *The Gay Science* remains: what sacred rites must be invented to atone for the final cruelty?

A sincere attempt to respond to this question can be found in the work of Georges Bataille. Although Bataille began reading Nietzsche intensely in the early 1920’s, this influence did not appear in his writing until the 1930’s, especially in the journal *Acéphale*, which was the mouthpiece for a secret society that was, as he later described, “religious (but anti-Christian, and essentially Nietzschean)” (Hollier 1988: 387). In “Propositions,” an essay published in the second issue of the journal, he links the group with Nietzsche’s deicidal conception: “The acephalic man mythologically expresses sovereignty committed to destruction and the death of God, and in this identification with the headless man merges and melds with the identification with the superhuman, which IS entirely ‘the death of God’ ” (1985: 199). The methods used by the group to attain this tragic goal remain a subject of speculation. Little is known of the collective, for, as Maurice Blanchot claims in *The Unavowable Community*, “those who participated in it are not certain they had a part in it” (1988: 13). In his introduction to Bataille’s *Visions of Excess*, Allan Stoekl notes that, “There was even talk of an actual human sacrifice being performed, but it was never carried out” (1985: xx). The sacrifice remains an enigma, a point of contention among readers of Bataille who dare approach the subject. In his biography of Bataille, Roland Champagne mentions the group simply *en passant*, claiming “the group performed strange rituals, including the sacrifice of a goat (none of the members would volunteer to be a human sacrifice)” (1998: 13). Patrick Waldberg’s account supports this view, as he recalls:

“ ”

At the last meeting in the heart of the forest, there were four of us and Bataille solemnly requested whether one of the three others would assent to being put to death, since this sacrifice would be the foundation of a myth, and ensure the survival of the community. This favour was refused him. Some months later the war was unleashed in earnest sweeping away what hope remained. (Brotchie 1995: 15-16)

Sylvère Lotringer offers an alternative view to that of Bataille as an all-too-willing sacrificer of others, as he attempts a more detailed explanation of this act that defined the community as its project and as its impossibility:

“

The little sect . . . met secretly at dusk, in the forest of Marly, near Paris. [. . .] It was agreed that their secret community would be sealed by a symbolic act, violent, irreversible, collectively shared, a “section” executed with implacable rigor that would separate them from the rest of society and raise them to the level of myth. This was the essence of the sacred. It was only recently [. . .] that the “sacred conspiracy” was finally disclosed: Bataille himself had volunteered to be murdered. But no one in the group offered to do the deed . . .
(1999: 76)

The question is one of performance: what exactly was the rite and (why) was(n’t) it staged?

The month after the last issue of *Acéphale* was published, at le Collège de Sociologie, Bataille claimed that, “men more religious than others cease to have a narrow concern for the community for which sacrifices are performed. They no longer live for the community; they only live for sacrifice” (1998: 252). An attempt at creating the sacred games desired by Nietzsche’s madman is thwarted not only by impending war, but also by the inability of the group to commit to the sacrificial rite, which would give birth to their myth. Bataille’s interest in sacrifice was greater than any community that the rite would ensure.

Far from dismissing the rite as impossibility, his first work after the group’s dissolution reaffirms his commitment to a Nietzschean conception of sacrifice. In *Inner Experience* (the first volume of *La Somme athéologique*), he explains: “That ‘God should be dead,’ victim of a sacrifice, only has meaning if profound” (1988: 133). The reduction of the phrase “God is dead” to mere statement of atheism reduces it to banality. The destruction of the concept of God is the refusal of its utility, its safeguard against temporality, that is, existence. To surrender its significatory status is to sacrifice signification itself, collapsing the object that grounds all subjectivity and fixes all identity. This is the ultimate destiny of the Western will-to-knowledge: “the supreme abuse which man ultimately made of his reason requires a last sacrifice: reason, intelligibility, the ground itself upon which he stands—man must reject them, in him God must die; this is the depth of terror, the extreme limit where he succumbs” (1988: 134). All of thought’s metaphysical comforts are lost, for this Nietzschean inversion of a Hegelian *Aufhebung* accomplishes the finite transcendence

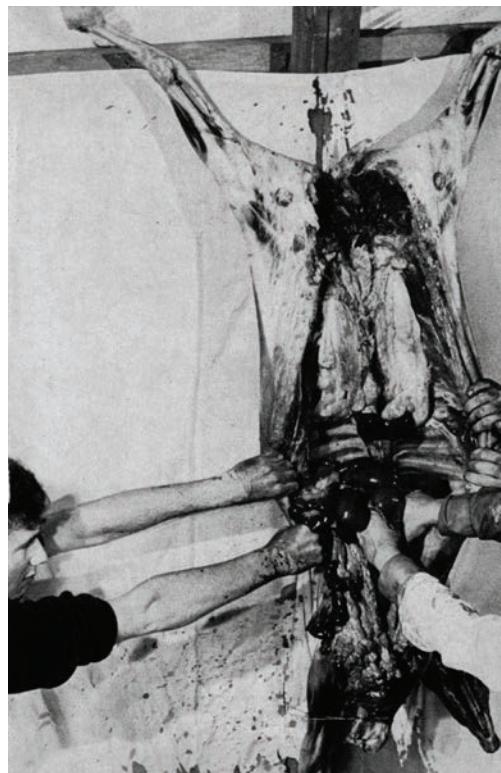
of tragic ecstasy as historical necessity, re-exposing consciousness to time as wound.

Perhaps by way of a justification for the failure of an Acéphale sacrifice, Bataille contends that if sacrifice is reviewed, "it is in image form" (1988: 135). Rather than continue with his pursuit of a new/old rite which would atone for the death of God, he takes recourse to a method of meditation he terms "dramatization," using, for instance, photographic images like those of an attempted assassin's torture by dismemberment (*Leng Tch'e* photos) he obtained from psychoanalyst Jacques Borel to provide him with the mimetic provocation to ecstatic states of consciousness. But this drama does not dare stage itself beyond the imaginary.

It is the work of Hermann Nitsch that best responds to the call for new rites in the wake of the death of God. His work has long reflected the influence of Nietzsche (in fact he spoke on Nietzsche at the Institute of Philosophy at Vienna University two weeks prior to this conference). I will avoid an overview of his career and focus briefly on two of his first "actions," performed in Vienna in 1962, his reception at the campus of the State University of New York at Binghamton in October 1970, and his latest, the *Six-Day-Play*, performed at Schloß Prinzendorf in lower Austria, from August 3rd-9th, 1998.

His "painting action" of 4 June 1962 was part of an exhibition entitled "The Blood Organ" [*Die Blutorgel*], held in conjunction with Adolf Frohner and Otto Muehl, in Muehl's cellar apartment in the Perinetgasse. After secluding themselves for three days, one of the cellar walls was knocked down to allow the public to visit. What they witnessed from Nitsch was a slaughtered and flayed lamb nailed head down, as if crucified, on a wall. Red paint was tipped and sprayed over a white canvas, and bloody innards and intestines placed on a white tablecloth, which Nitsch poured blood and hot water over, trickling down across the tablecloth and on to the floor (Green 1999: 131). Though this was his seventh painting action, it marked the first time that he poured blood on a canvas.

Nitsch published his "O.M. Theatre Manifesto" to coincide with this exhibition. In it he claims that his disembowelment of a dead lamb is "an 'aesthetic' substitute for the sacrificial act" in which "histrionic means will be harnessed to gain access to the profoundest and holiest symbols through blasphemy and desecration" (Green 1999: 132). Using a blend of Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytic theory, he explains his conception of sacrifice



as an “abreaction” that provokes both a release of tensions and a collapse of individuality in which the subject ceases to identify with the ego but with existence itself. The influence of Nietzsche is suggested when he notes: “the dionysian signifies the need for abreaction, whose awakening leads, with a relentless inevitability that stems from the economy of inner urges, to orgiastics, to the longing for pain, sacrifice, the cross” (Green 1999: 134). This need is met through the staging of actions that re-present mythical scenes, as listed at the end of the manifesto as:



the analytic leitmotif of the orgies mysteries theatre, concerning situations stemming from the primal excess

- I. transubstantiation, last supper (behold, this is my flesh, this is my blood)
- II. mount of olives
- III. crucifixion
- IV. orgiastics and sacrifice of dionysos, his rending
- V. killing of orpheus
- VI. adonis's mutilation by the boar
- VII. isis and osiris
- VIII. attis, agdistis
- IX. blinding of oedipus (castration symbol)
- X. ritual castration
- XI. animal sacrifice in general (animal sacrifice as a substitute for human sacrifice and as object of identification)
- XII. totemic meals (the rending of the totemic animal)
- XIII. the primal excess (the evisceration of the lamb in the o.m. theatre is an allegorical substitute for the primal excess experience), likewise liturgical painting penetrates to the primal excess (Green 1999: 134)

This list blends ancient Egyptian and Greek myths with those of Christianity in a manner that decontextualizes all. The desire to stage actions based upon these thirteen myths and rites creates a theatrical necessity that was not met by this exhibition, which presented the results to an audience.

Six months later, Nitsch staged his first “proper” action, in which a living moving body is employed, rather than simply inanimate (or ex-animate) objects. *Action 1* was staged at Muehl’s flat at Obere Augartenstraße on 19 December 1962. Nitsch himself, dressed in a white habit (to emphasize his priestly role) was tied to the wall of a room in a crucifixion position. Blood was then poured and squirted over his head, the results of which were captured by photographs, the bloody shirt transformed into a relic/*objet d’art*. The mechanical reproduction of these radically singular events becomes another feature of Nitsch’s work, presenting a challenge to Benjamin’s notion of the withering of aura in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1968: 224). Nitsch noted after the action that he was “particularly impressed after seeing the photographs” (Green 1999: 135). Indeed, photographic and cinematic documentation of the O.M. Theatre play a fundamental role in not only familiarizing the public with Nitsch’s work, but the spread of his taboo imagery, like a contagion, in a way resembling the effect the *Leng Tch’e* photos had on Bataille.

It is then interesting to note that the arrival of the O.M. Theatre at the campus of the State University of New York at Binghamton (SUNY) in October 1970 was at the invitation of the Film Department (rather than the more obvious programs in theatre, art history or comparative literature). There, Nitsch (and the films of Peter Kubelka) caused a great stir, with students, faculty and the local community arguing (in the pages of the student newspaper, *Pipe Dream*) over the relative brilliance or perversion of the O.M.T. (Givlano 1970: 11; Klempner 1970: 5; Rachlin 1970: 7). The event (promoted as a precursor to an eventual six-day-play) on 14 October involved a dead lamb, hung in a crucifixion position, then disemboweled and stomped on by the audience (several of whom consumed it after the performance). Among the charges against Nitsch and the SUNY authorities were accusations of animal killing, though, in keeping with the Manifesto of 1962, Nitsch only used animals that had already died of old age or had to be put down. But this raises a significant obstacle to the full realization of what he came to term the “primal excess”: since the corpses that were employed were already dead, the most powerful element of the sacrificial rite was missing, the death of the other. The very thing that his most vehement opponents had accused him of was that which he had not (yet) dared to do.

Among the appeals of the manifesto of 1962 are the closure of Vienna’s Burgtheater and the expropriation of its state funds for the development of a permanent home for the O.M.T. in Prinzendorf. This dream of a permanent theatre there was realized in 1971, when his (now, late) wife Beate purchased the Schloß there with her inheritance. This would allow him not only the freedom to experiment and perform without complications from various authorities, but to stage his ultimate creative fantasy, a six-day play (*Das 6-Tage-Spiel*).

This did not occur until August 1998, from the 3rd through the 9th. In addition to 100 actors and 180 musicians, materials used included “1,000 kilos of tomatoes, 1,000 kilos of grapes, 10,000 roses, 10,000 other assorted flowers, and 1,000 litres of blood” (“6-Tage-Spiel Overview” 1998: website). Numerous pigs and sheep were disemboweled, killed at a local slaughterhouse. However, the limit that others had accused him of crossing was, at last, crossed with the sacrifice of three bulls, the first at sunrise of the first day, the other two on the third and fifth days “by professional butchers under veterinary control” (“6-Tage-Spiel Overview” 1998: website).

The fundamental *raison d'être* for the O.M.T. remains the same since the manifesto of 1962, the language altered only slightly. The list of the “analytical leitmotif” becomes the “mythical leitmotif,” modified to set of twelve:



- transubstantion, communion
- the crucifixion of jesus christ
- the rending of dionyos
- the blinding of oedipus
- the ritual castration
- the murder of orpheus
- the murder of adonis
- isis and osirus [sic]
- the emasculation of attis
- the ritual regicide
- the killing of the totem animal and the totem animal feast
- the sado-masochistic primal excess, fundamental excess
(Nitsch 1998: website)

In his “Provisional, Non-Binding Overall Conception of the 6-day play,” Nitsch claims that through the use of:



- mythical leitmotif and suitable sequences of actions, the dramaturgic attempt will be made to plumb the depths and trace the path from the symbolic, sublimated eucharistic

sacrifice of the Christian church back to the early forms of religion, of excessive totemism. This exploration is in the sense of an archaeological analysis of religion. (Nitsch 1998: website)

Video documentation (available on the nitsch.org website and displayed at various galleries, such as White Box in Manhattan, from 7 October 1999 – 22 January 2000) depicts the various actions of the play. Perhaps the most startling is that of blindfolded actors strapped to crosses, paraded through the festival crowd to a sacrifice, where they are covered by the blood and entrails of a bull as it is disemboweled. Such actions are designed to lead the participants to a discovery of “the condition of BEING, the intoxication of being” (Nitsch 1998: website). Through the use of the most powerful symbol, reconstituted from its various manifestations in diverse mythological systems, Nitsch attempts a revelation of the grounds of being in a manner that language could never approach, necessarily, for the signifier employed—bereft of any stability afforded by a socio-cultural signified—exposes the receptor to a pre-significatory state, the condition for all signification.

The work of Hermann Nitsch provides us with a uniquely appropriate example of exploration of the dramatic powers latent in sacrificial imagery in this post-theological contemporary context, in the wake of the declared death of God, which now at the century’s cusp seems—perhaps—not so radical and revolutionary as it was and more a statement of cultural fact, as the O.M.T.’s performances have become a cultural artifact, with relics framed in museums and citations in histories of art and performance (even a reference in the liner notes of the 1995 David Bowie concept album, *Outside*). Indeed, Nitsch’s actions are arguably not as shocking now as they once were for, as Roselee Goldberg points out, “In the early days, the police often stopped the deeply unnerving events; thirty years later, they are watched with the reverence accorded to art works of historical significance” (1998: 116). Surely if the performances of the O.M.T. are no longer shocking, there can scarcely be anything left to shock. For four decades, Nitsch has ritualized this simulacra in a way that—following Nietzsche and Bataille—engages with the most powerful sign as empty signifier, denying its transcendental signified as guarantor for any mythological construct, even that which identifies itself as non-mythical. Doubtless, this transgressive trail from Nietzsche to Nitsch presents a unique challenge to semiotics.



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a review of

The Fragment:

Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre

by Camelia Elias

Hyperion, Volume III, issue 3, June 2008

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The Fragment:

Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre

Camelia Elias

Peter Lang, 2004

**by Sophie Thomas
University of Sussex**

Fragments are “the natural setting of the philosophic mind,” David Morris tells us in his book on Alexander Pope.¹ They are important tools for thinking, indeed for thinking about thinking, and for representing the way we think about thinking. It is no accident that many of the most decisive theoretical interventions of recent centuries directly engage either the question or the form of the fragment—from the theory of literature advanced and enacted by the *Athenaeum Fragments* of the German Romantics to poststructuralism’s endorsement of rupture and discontinuity as one of the defining, and inescapable, features of textuality. Nor that so many writers have been fascinated by the signifying possibilities of the fragment, to the extent that, as Friedrich Schlegel claimed, “Many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written” (*Athenaeum Fragment* 24).² On the one hand, the fragment is identifiable—a thing, as its etymology suggests, that has been broken into pieces. On the other, fragments (slipping into the plural) are disturbing entities. They play upon the imagination by promising or at least suggesting more than what they are, while reminding the viewer or reader that this putative “more” can never be recovered or fully experienced. Fragments thus simultaneously raise and resist the possibility of totality and wholeness, exhibiting a presentational force that can never be exhausted. And in this sense the *conceptual* problem that the fragment represents never really goes away.

On the face of it, the absence until very recently of a systematic study of the fragment in the Anglo-American context suggests that these dilemmas are nevertheless not a leading cultural preoccupation. In English literary criticism, there have been important studies of the fragment within a particular period (such as Marjorie Levinson and Thomas McFarland’s work on the fragment in Romanticism), and work on related forms such as the ruin and the unfinished, alongside the occasional collection of essays (such as that edited by Lawrence Kritzman for New York Literary Forum in the 1980s). In France and Germany, by contrast, numerous studies have tackled the fragment more systematically, often addressing both visual and textual material. Perhaps this relates to the importance of the fragment in the continental philosophical tradition (Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Benjamin) and more pointedly to the investment in the fragment by such writers as Barthes and Blanchot. Elias’s study can thus lay claim to being the first of its kind to be published in English, and in its focus on the fragment as such, it is both ambitious and inclusive (its chapters cover material from antiquity to postmodernity, from Heraclitus to Derrida, though clearly it is heavily weighted towards the twentieth century). Since its publication, three further works of interest related to the

¹ Alexander Pope:
The Genius of Sense
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 165.

² *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow, foreword by Rodolphe Gasché (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 21.

fragment have appeared: Christopher Strathman's *Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative* (SUNY, 2006), a study that considers the genealogy of an ironic Romantic poetics of the fragment from Schlegel and Byron through Joyce and Blanchot (reviewed by Camelia Elias on this site in October 2007); *Fragments: Architecture and the Unfinished*, an extensive volume of essays dedicated to Robin Middleton, covering the fragment in theory, landscape, architectural history, and modernity more generally (Thames & Hudson, 2006); and Daniel Watt's *Fragmentary Futures: Blanchot, Beckett, Coetzee* (InkerMen Press, 2007), which investigates the "recasting" of the Romantic fragment, principally through Blanchot, in contemporary writing.

Elias's study of the fragment is based on what is perhaps an inescapable paradox. She brings out with great care the nature of the fragment as something dynamic, shifting, subversive—a relation or a *force*, rather than a thing to be categorized. And yet, her book is structured around a complex categorization of the fragment, into 10 types. This urge to taxonomize has been a feature of nearly every study of the fragment. Marjorie Levinson's *The Romantic Fragment Poem*, for example, distinguished between the true, the deliberate, the completed, and the dependent fragment. Elizabeth Wanning Harries's *The Unfinished Manner* addressed explicitly the difference between works planned and presented as fragments, and those that become fragments for other reasons. Interestingly, taxonomies and distinctions speak for a certainty about what fragments might be that the fragment itself disavows, as Elias herself notes when she comments that much of the appeal of the fragment actually "relies on the fact that one can never be sure of what exactly constitutes a fragment" (2). Can the fragment be categorized, one might ask, without becoming categorical?

The taxonomy of the fragment that Elias devises, however, is strategic, as the emphasis is not so much on what a fragment *is*, as upon what it *does*, though as the book demonstrates these facets of the fragment are really inseparable. Elias distinguishes further between the fragment as text, as a "form" existing in all periods, and the critical discourse "on" the fragment that, from roughly 1800 onwards, has considered it as embedded in acts of writing and reading. In either case, the fragment is a "text" in its own right, but arguably what interests her more is the fragment as "meta-text," which is to say that while her study does not entirely neglect the literary history of the fragment, she is more interested in the place of the fragment in the "metatextual" discourse in which it so frequently participates. What is at stake here is, Elias claims, a shift of emphasis, from understanding the fragment in relation to the dichotomies of form/content or part/whole to seeing it "pragmatically" as functional, as *performative*, in a variety of identifiable ways. She asks: "what is a fragment when it is not a matter of form or content but a question of function, a philosophical concept, a manifestation of a theory, or a self-labelled 'thought'?" (4).

Elias offers 10 different types of fragment that operate, from a functional perspective at least, generically (the question of genre is one I shall return to below). These fall into two broad categories, which structure the book around two parts, according to a distinction between *being* and *becoming*. In the former state, the fragment exists as text, and manifests a certain agency: these types are labelled coercive, consensual, redundant, repetitive, and resolute. In the latter, the fragment is taken up by an agency outside itself and becomes what it is through a process of theorization in (critical) discourse. The five types of fragment identified here are ekphrastic, epigrammatic, epigraphic, emblematic, and epitaphic. They point, Elias suggests, not to how a fragment is historically constituted but to its representational functions. The overall distinction is important to Elias because it enables her to take into account the slippage between the fragmentary text and the critical discourse that "mimics" it (where overlap is inevitable), and to advance the idea that the fragment is inherently performative. That is, it only acquires a name when it is performed; "the fragment is only when it is something else" (63). Moreover, the dichotomy between *being* and *becoming* is not meant to be a rigid one but is deployed in order to elaborate a poetics of the fragment that is "a poetics of intersection *par excellence*" (353).

Those historically constituted fragments addressed in the first part of the book, as only latently performative, cover instances from the ancient world (principally Heraclitus), Romanticism and Modernism. With the fragments of Heraclitus, Elias attends, in the absence of a theory of the fragment, to their rhetoric and their later reception. These fragments privilege philosophical content, which "coerces" its readers, who in turn "coerce the fragments into displaying incompleteness as a formal trait" (22). With the Romantic fragment, represented principally by Schlegel, we observe the first full-blown theory of the fragment, which Elias discusses alongside emerging theories of interpretation. His fragments are deemed "consensual" insofar as "wit mediates between authorship and form" (73); they reveal the fragment to be a function of writing, which, through *Witz*, consents to interpretation. By engaging with, indeed producing their own theory, the fragments of Schlegel and the Jena Romantics inaugurated, as many have argued (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Literary Absolute* is a key text here), a theoretical discourse that casts its shadow over all subsequent theorizations of the fragment. In her chapter on the modernist period, Elias examines how Gertrude Stein, Louis Aragon, and Emile Cioran *stylistically* orient the fragment towards theory: in their work, style constitutes its own form and function—by fragmentary means. The fragment, though calculated and constructed, opens onto potential meaning, a potentiality marked by repetition (in Stein), redundancy (in Aragon) and resoluteness (Cioran). These three are singled out from other modernist writers because they are concerned "with the *idea* of a difference between the fragment and the fragmentary, which they then

analyze, scrutinize, and dismiss with grand style" (121).

In the second part of the book, where the focus is on fragments that enact themselves formally in the critical discourse of which they are also the object, Elias moves toward articulating a poetics of genre. Using examples drawn from postmodern and poststructural contexts, the fragments in question here are *manifestly* performative. Genres such as ekphrasis, epigram, epigraph, emblem, and epitaph are seen to mediate actively between the fragment's state or mode as both fragment ("being") and fragmentary ("becoming"). The first kind she identifies is the ekphrastic fragment. Examined largely through Mark Taylor's *Deconstructing Theology*, the ekphrastic fragment functions as the verbal representation of its own graphic representation—where graphic is understood as implying visuality and/or "intertextual correspondence" (161). It is further subdivided into three types (the fold, the syllogism, the portrait) that are seen as traces of the baroque operative in the postmodern. By grounding the fragment in "both the deconstructed text and the verbalized image of theology," Elias argues that Taylor articulates a relationship between theology and deconstruction (162).

The epigrammatic, epigraphic, and emblematic fragment are all treated together in one long chapter that hinges on an "aesthetics of *kenosis*," which principally involves a process of emptying out and re-connection. Here, the fragment exceeds performativity by taking on the characteristics of an event (30), but the central question Elias wishes to ask is, "is the aesthetic of the fragment compatible with the effect that the fragment produces as an event?" And moreover, "how does authorial representation negate its own (dis)claiming?" (209). The epigrammatic fragment operates like an impresario in Marcel Bénabou's *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books*, by performing the question of beginning (to write). Elias argues that if one reads "for the epigram" instead of for the plot, the ontology of the work, in the form of a "nonbook," is disclosed (213). The overall problem of how both postmodern writers and literary theorists use fragments to speak about the fragmentary is taken forward into discussions of the work of Gordon Lish (*Epigraph*) and Derrida (*The Postcard*), whose works are considered epigraphic because, enacted paratextually (perhaps even a-textually), their fragments perform *en-abyme*. Elias observes: "the fragment contains the fragmentary, the fragment explains the fragmentary, while the fragment itself remains outside definition" (243). What we begin to perceive is "a theory of the philosophy of the fragment" (272), which is further developed through the motif of the emblem.

Elias's "emblematic" fragments are explicitly poised between literature and philosophy, and her key examples, Avital Ronell's *The Telephone Book* and Nicole Brossard's *Picture Theory*, are situated "within the difference between the fragment and the fragmentary" (273). Ronell's book is a work of theory that nevertheless contains pointedly literary elements, whereas Brossard's

“novel” broaches Wittgensteinian philosophy (Brossard, whose work receives less attention than it deserves, is a distinguished master of the theory-novel). Both texts are concerned with theoretical representation (one could take that both ways), and the emblem is interposed here by Elias because of its capacity to represent *and* interpret, describe *and* explain (299). *Picture Theory* is held to work insofar as it both represents and enacts its fragments, which in turn, operating emblematically, configure the distance between object and meaning—chiefly, it would seem, by breaking open reality, and exposing it to fiction. *The Telephone Book*, by contrast, is held to theorize connectivity, to call (fragmentarily) for completion through emblems of continuity and flow.

Elias’s “categories” of fragment are in fact quite difficult to summarize succinctly. It is not always clear how her analyses at the microlevel, which are often deft and detailed, really support the larger project; relations between the two can seem arbitrary and forced. While the imaginative aspects of the typology do enable fresh perspectives on the fragment and make it possible to ask questions not thought of before, one also wants to ask, for example, why Brossard’s fragments in *Picture Theory* are not also ekphrastic (a possibility Elias only briefly concedes), or why *The Telephone Book* isn’t also epigrammatic; do these categories not blur at the borders? Elias’s amusing suggestion that the fragment is a kind of *flâneur*, wandering between these categories while also constituted by them, is intriguing in this regard. But returning, late in the book, to the question “what is a fragment?,” she argues that it cannot exist apart from its predicate: ekphrastic, epigrammatic, etc., “*ad predicam*.” The modifier, rather than the fragment, is the constant; “what the fragment does is necessarily make things fragmentary” (301). The relationship between the fragment and the fragmentary, one of the central questions of the book, is summarized thus: “the constant modifier mediates modification constantly, in order that the fragment receives a name which can defend the fragment’s inherent autonomy and sovereignty” (301). And so, put in a marginally more straightforward manner: “the fragment is what it is because it aspires to definition in a potential mode” (302).

The inherent contradictions of the book are, if not resolved, at least played out more persuasively in the final chapter, which proposes a further form of performative fragment, the “epitaphic”—fitting indeed for a conclusion. The epitaphic fragment describes that moment in all texts when it announces its truth, a moment that always stands out and apart in its address to the reader. From an insightful reading of *Titus Andronicus*, to a consideration of David Markson’s novels (from *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* to *This is Not a Novel*), Elias explores the “graveyard of genre,” a place where the text (for Markson at least) is allowed to look at itself “as a dead text” (349). The fragment here is epitaphic, and functions in relation to its text in a manner akin to what in medieval times was called allegory, or in the Romantic period, ideation: since it is “made to emerge from the text that encompasses it because it

³ *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 63.

⁴ *Interruptions*, translated with an introduction by Georgia Albert (State University of New York Press, 1996), x.

exhibits a unique trait which reveals not the text's truth but the idea of truth and the question behind it, [it] is also that text's epitaph" (309). When we read epitaphic fragments such as Markson's we read "a *topos*, a graveyard of genre" (350). Writing about the "truth" of such fragments surely introduces further levels of complexity, for, as Karen Mills-Courts puts it in her book *Poetry as Epitaph*, "criticism becomes the epitaph of epitaphs" (344); but this, perhaps wisely, is not something Elias pursues in relation to her own project.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, writing in *The Literary Absolute* about Schlegel's fragmentary "Ideas," comment rather aptly that "while the history of fragmentation undeniably moves toward a certain deepening, it is not at all certain that it proceeds in the sense of a clarification."³ This points to a fascinating aspect of the fragment that all those who write about it face: its dynamic, ambivalent effects make a mockery of acts of containment, while also leading one into a conceptual cul-de-sac, a point of exhaustion (one feature of the fragment's affinity with the sublime). Writers who tackle the fragment are often self-conscious about how their own performance shapes, shadows, and even negates the force they wish to convey. Hans-Jost Frey, in *Interruptions* (one of the very few studies of the fragment Elias neglects to mention) goes so far as to assert the fundamental incompatibility of the fragment and any form of literary scholarship. The fragment, as that which interrupts meaning, and whose structure is an "inexplicable interruption," destabilizes distinctions that criticism depends on, such as a clear sense of the limits and borders of texts—of what is inside or outside a text, of what marks it off for the purposes of study.⁴ The encounter between the fragment and scholarship, then, is inherently paradoxical—and generally comes at the expense of the fragment. Understanding the fragment "is precisely the suppression of fragmentariness, since it creates context where every relation breaks off" (26).

Elias's own fragment-rhetoric is engaging in this context. Happily, she avoids the self-conscious performativity of Frey's "criticism," although there are times when her writing is unduly entangled in the conceptual subtleties of its subject. Put positively, however, assertions that can be maddeningly opaque also function epigrammatically and may be seen (or heard) to strike key thematic notes that reverberate throughout the work. In this, aspects of the study participate actively in its larger subject—extending the question of performativity, if occasionally at the expense of clarity, to the study as a whole. Moreover, the relationship between "theory" and "literature" is one that the book handles particularly well, and the strength of the material in the second part, where Elias is markedly more relaxed and witty, suggests that she is more at home with postmodern literature and theory. Inevitably, perhaps, this concentration of the book in the theoretical and literary concerns of the

twentieth century does have the effect of undermining its claim to provide a history as well as a poetics of the fragment. It must be said that for all their variety and nuance, the detailed readings in this book do not engage with the materiality of the fragment, nor at any length with its “functions” on an historical, political, or cultural level (with the exception perhaps of the suggestive argument for a link between the baroque and postmodernity). Although Elias’s study does have implications for art history, philology, theology, and the history of ideas, it is not in fact overtly interdisciplinary: its material is exclusively textual, and its real—and very substantial—contribution to the field of “fragment studies” is primarily as a work of literary theory.

Just as Elias ends with a set of fragmentary theses that re-present, in inverted prefaces, the thrust of each main fragment type identified in her study—a set of theses she immediately repeats in expanded form—I too shall end epigrammatically:

“

For fragments, destined partly to the blank that separates them, find in this gap not what ends them, but what prolongs them, or what makes them await their prolongation—what has already prolonged them, causing them to persist on account of their incompleteness. And thus they are always ready to let themselves be worked upon by indefatigable reason, instead of remaining as fallen utterances, left aside, the secret void of mystery which no elaboration could ever fill.

(Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*)

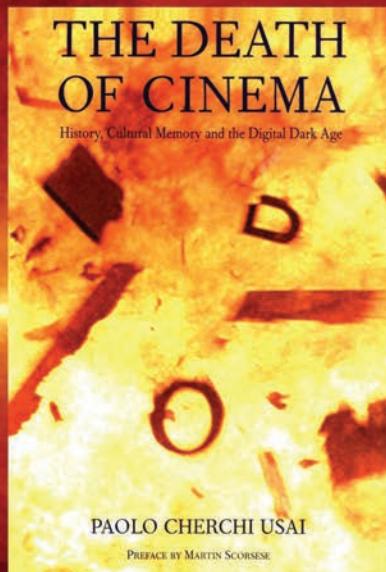
a review of

The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age

by Paolo Cherchi Usai

Hyperion, Volume III, issue 3, June 2008

a review of



***The Death of Cinema:*
*History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age***
Paolo Cherchi Usai
British Film Institute Publishing, 2005

by Joshua David Gonsalves
Rice University



A Last Judgment is Necessary because Fools flourish
A Vision of The Last Judgment (William Blake)

Usai's book of aphorisms exemplifies a rhetoric of apocalypse. *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age* is a *cri du coeur* from an archivist prophesying the inevitable exhaustion of the surfaces we use to record, preserve, and enjoy cinematic representations. Usai refers to the digital present as a "dark age" not out of any nostalgia for a Classical or Golden Age of the Cinema, but to warn his readers against their immersion in a dominant illusion: the belief that we have invented a recording surface that will never grow old. One need, of course, only think of the matrices the cinema has exhausted in its short history to recall the fundamentally transitory quality of image preservation, an art of conservation commonly identified as the precinct of the archivist. For Usai, to be an archivist of the "Cinema is," on the contrary, to be versed in "the art of moving image destruction": "For cinema is the art of destroying moving images" (6-7). Just as one frame of film succeeds another, destroying what came before for the spectator at an unseeable rate of 24 frames (or 30 or more in the case of digital "frames") per second, so too, most moving images are not preserved; i.e., surveillance footage. Images succeed images with no end in sight except an endless loss of objects and the continuously replenished depletion of the viewing subject's visual pleasure: "In India alone," the world's largest film industry, "several hundred films are made a year, and only a tiny portion of them end in the archives. Television in developing countries is produced on videotapes that are erased every few months" (111).

Usai's book is apocalyptic, then, in that it is a hyperbolic admonition vis-à-vis the false comforts our technoscapes provide as well as a prediction that we are heading into a dark age of digital indifference. (Usai is especially bothered by the over-saturated re-release of old prints restricted to a tiny canon at the expense of the unpopular, obscure, and unknown films allegedly neglected by orthodox archivists and their sponsors.) The form of his book contributes to this apocalyptic tone, for it is written in aphorisms accompanied (almost always without commentary) by fascinating images from the history of cinema, say an employee of the Douglas Fairbanks Studio "chopping up 'useless' film," or Alexander De Large (Malcolm McDowell in *A Clockwork Orange* [1971]) staring at a screen, his eyes tortuously pried wide shut by metallic clips. The reader has to connect the aphorisms, which are numerically hyperlinked to

each other, to every other aphorism and their respective images according to a paratactic strategy without a master plan. Aphoristic and apocalyptic. What could be more Nietzschean?

The ultimate question Usai poses is a vexed and relevant one: what is the social role of film history?—a question that can only be approached if we figure out what he means by the model image. What I mean to say is that *The Death of the Cinema* requires active interpretation, and for that, as Zarathustra says in “On Reading and Writing,” “one must have long legs”: “In the mountains the shortest way is from peak to peak: but for that one must have long legs. Aphorisms should be peaks” (Trans. Kaufmann). And so I will read what Usai means by the model image without in the least pretending to know if that is indeed what he intends to say.

Canonical archivists are, according to Usai’s polemical intervention in a longstanding debate, motivated by the fantasy of a model image that they believe they can re-create by reconstructing either the original intent of the director or an originary viewing experience. These archivists insist on defying the tagline to Gaspar Noé’s *Irréversible* (2002)—“Le temps détruit tout”/“Time destroys everything”—each time they clean up a long lost print, or splice together rediscovered footage. Is it possible, Usai asks, for the “cinema” to be “a potential object of history,” if it is an art dedicated to indiscriminately destroying images? His answer is “Yes. The Model Image is its ideal type” (10-11). This ideal was once, Usai playfully suggests, actual in the Golden Age of the Cinema, when it was “usually perceived as a totality even when some of its parts” were “forever unknown to the viewer’s experience of it. Film history proceeds by an effort to explain the loss of cultural ambiance that has evaporated from the moving image in the context of a given time and place” (31).

Since the accompanying image is of a Douglas Fairbanks Studio employee hacking film to bits, we can assume that this mythic era is that of the Hollywood studio system, or a fantasmic time when viewers were “conscious of nothing but the Model Image” (45). Usai gently parodies this idealized model of lived experience as “an original and unrepeatable entity. ‘No such thing as two identical viewings. Films sometimes as brief as the twinkling of the eye. Programs of shorts continuously shown. Spectators indifferent to when the cycle begins or ends. Audiences who happily cheer, stomp, eat and make love in front of the screen! . . .’” (47). The image placed alongside this aphorism is of an entranced crowd at a Friulian Cineteca circa 01935, the zero evidently there to remind us of the archivist’s unvanquishable enemy—empty vistas of empty time (see Fellini or Tornatore’s *Cinema Paradiso* [1988] for a nostalgic sentimentalizing of this self-same idealization of a cinema teeming with affective life).

Yet this Model Image is the reconstruction of a phantasm that was never enjoyed in any time or place, a lack of actuality that results not only from the “empirical impossibility” of “recaptur[ing] the experience of its first viewers,” but a lack that is produced by Usai’s Romantic understanding of “perfect vision” as an aesthetic experience of the cinema that “has no duration and is not durable. This axiom is at the heart of the notion of film history” (29). The accompanying film still for this gnome is the famed image of a blade cutting an eye in Buñuel and Dalí’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), a scene that always forces me to blink no matter how many times I see it. I can describe the scene, its effects, and multiple significations to you, but I cannot watch it, an unseeing that is differently experienced each and every time. In spite of an all-too-human insistence on “the pleasure of repeating an experience of pleasure” indefinitely, the intoxication of a Model Image that can only be enjoyed once seems irrecoverable (99).

Another aphorism, entitled “The urge to create visions,” complicates Usai’s recourse to the visionary demiurgy of the Romantic imagination. I cite the text in full to convey a sense of the difficulty of reading *The Death of Cinema* as a social event:



Visionary cinema has no other subject matter than the transformation of the image itself, for otherwise it would have nothing to exercise itself upon. Whether the outcome is cheerful or tragic (but also in the lack of a narrative pattern), the event that results is a self-obliterating illusion that is doomed sooner or later to fade into the realm of memory (33).

The ultimate matrix in question is the oldest one in the world (if the cosmos itself isn’t a multitrack recording surface for some inscrutable reason or other): human memory, a storage bank constitutively in need of supplementation by mnemotechnical surfaces, such as writing, registration apparatuses, celluloid, etc. (Viz. Derrida’s *Archive Fever [sic]*). The perfect vision cinematic experience produces has, then, no duration, and is akin to the editing cut that can never be seen *per se*, as *Un Chien Andalou* forces us to see without, of course, being able to make this reminder remain or remainder remind. We must fail to see it again and again (Cf. the [in]visible sword of Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill* as an allegory of the creative act of editorial cutting).

An example: I have seen David Lynch’s visionary sister/brother films, *Lost Highway* (1997)/*Mulholland Drive* (2001), two times each on a big screen where the destruction of the image cannot be stopped by pausing, rewinding, or retardation of any kind. Each film is half-constituted by a narrative that

the male or female protagonist hallucinates or invents in order to deny or overcome either the loss of a loved one or a murderous violence inflicted upon the same. The first time we watch *Lost Highway*, we are blind, thinking that everything we are seeing is diegetically real, whereas the second “half” of the film is fantasized by the lead protagonist (played by two different actors). The first time I watched *Mulholland Drive*, on the other hand, I walked away convinced I had half-perceived the “aura,” allegoresis, or point of the film, yet the second time I realized I had missed the moment when Naomi Watts’s character, an actress, shoots herself. How could that be? My eyes were riveted to the screen. Was I so caught up in her desire to unsee her loss that I unsaw or half-created the loss her refusal to accept this loss begot? Was this unseeing, then, the Model Image of the film, not in the sense of an image an archivist could reconstruct, but in the sense of a “self-obliterating illusion”: a total identification with feminine desire, or a sympathetic loss of myself in the other’s loss “that is doomed sooner or later to fade into the realm of memory” as the melancholy “I”/eye returns to the prison of the male gaze (33).

Yet isn’t this analysis too characterological and subjective, too subjectified by the sovereignty of “tragic” posturing and ideological “narrative[s],” if, as Usai’s aphorism maintains, “Visionary cinema has no other subject matter than the transformation of the image itself, for otherwise it would have nothing to exercise itself upon”? The facing image is a spiral whirling in (or is it out?) of a close-up on the eye of a Kim Novak (Madeleine/Judy) double at the beginning (or is it the end?) of the credit sequence to *Vertigo* (1958). The “transformation of the image itself” alludes, then, to the purely plastic play of images set into motion by Saul Bass’s famous *générique* to Hitchcock’s film, a “lack of narrative pattern” based on the ostentatiously non-diegetic spirals produced by experimental film-maker John Whitney Sr.

This plasticity of the image denotes, in the meantime, nothing more than the ideological cliché of Romantic love actualized by the diegesis of *Vertigo*: one begins to lose it when one looks deeply into the eye of another. Any cinematic experience of this memorialized loss can only be a seeing of what is already or almost lost, “doomed sooner or later to fade into the realm of memory.” A sense of time destroying all things is also at the heart of Noé’s meditation on temporal irreversibility. *Irréversible* runs in reverse, painfully dwelling on the brutal rape of Monica Belluci, only to end up with her happy as can be in a park, an image of bliss (Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony reverberates as the camera spirals) that we know to be already destroyed by time, if not by the cinema as an Romantic act of “creative destruction,” or the art of destroying moving images. So too, no matter how many times *Vertigo* is seen, the sheer unreality of Madeline fascinates even though we are aware it is an illusion, a futile stopgap either to temporal inevitability (of the narrative or of Time itself) or to the *jouissance* the idiotic male gaze takes in vicariously enjoying Jimmy Stewart’s loss (twice!).

The enjoyment of loss as loss might be a preliminary definition of the Model Image, yet Usai also puts forth a definition custom made for a contemporaneity distended by non-discrete images—images, that is, deprived by the state of distraction in which we live from even the promise of an inaccessible totality (a scenario in which the fantasy of knowing the whole—a.k.a. “globalization”—stands in for this impossibility):

“

Whenever the quantity of moving images available to a given community exceeds the actual or presumed need (aesthetic or otherwise) for their consumption, and the community endorses the display of non-discrete images—that is, images that form and vanish without being seen in their entirety—there would then be another kind of Model Image, one displayed through electronic or other non-photographic means (53).

What, then, is the relation between a self-obliterating, and hence self-encrypting, Model Image and the socio-historical conditions for this evanishing sense of self? As an archivist, Usai wants to preserve “an ethics of vision” grounded on the “Moral Image” (105): “Moving image preservation will then be redefined as the science of its gradual loss and the art of coping with the consequences, very much like the physician who has accepted the inevitability of death even while he continues to fight for the patient’s life.”

How to define the conservator’s task in this landscape of death? “As their preservation and decay arise from the conditions under which such images are produced and exhibited, an effort to evaluate the way in which those conditions affect the aesthetic and pragmatic nature of the viewing experience ought to be made” without any intentional “disfigure[ment] by value judgments and self-projected intentions” (15). Instead of dismissing the non-director’s cut, explore how it transforms the experience. Instead of fetishizing the director’s cut, explicate how this residual reconstruction of the “Model Image” continues to reinscribe idealism into the history of cinema. This idealism is suspect in that it withdraws attention from a model image that is hopelessly subjective, phenomenologically speaking, or buried deep within what Abraham and Torok call the interminably (un)decipherable temporality of the ego as crypt. Lastly, archival idealism distracts us from the sheer heteroglossia of moving images on the verge of being ingested by Chronos. “Make him vomit” summarizes, in other words, the radical archivist’s relation to Time.

To end on a high note, consider an apocalyptic statement: the internet is slowing down, due, for example, to torrents of downloading (i.e., entire seasons of TV shows from transitional transnational sites that die every

day), a never ending increase of human/programmed users and the constant stream of video flowing out of yahoo.com, youtube.com, youporn.com, etc. The archive isn't disappearing or being destroyed, it is accumulating at an incomprehensibly blinding rate, an accumulation that is also a target of Usai's apocalyptic screed. We have lost the aura of film consolidated by that brief late 50s-to-early 80s period when leaving the house to go see a movie from beginning to end was the order of the day—that is to say, we no longer (un)see films at 24 frames a second. Is a film a film on an iPhone, a computer panel, or a TV? Usai insists that we cannot dismiss this question as an unutterable nostalgia, which is not to say that we can stop the accumulation of data without end. We would have to change all our habits of attention, data processing, and image filtering, stop channel-flipping, remix-hunting, and web-surfing, listen to an album from beginning to end even if it is on a CD or Windows Media Player. Or as I overheard an undergraduate habituated to our non-present present say the other day: "I had 85 windows open when it crashed."

This crash will not, however, occur. The lonely instance of apocalypse never comes. Yet if we imagine time as a circle—say, an eternal return—then we are already dead, and will live and recur in this postapocalyptic circle eternally. And if we are dead—now, me, 'speaking' to you—then there can be no death of the cinema. There is, instead, what Derrida calls a "hauntology," a being haunted by images, simulacra, ghosts, and memory screens. Usai's pragmatic response to this historical situation of spectral archivality is for us to be haunted otherwise: to archive what is ignored and to establish the "Model Image" of what remains—an image that the "Moral Image" shows to be a necessary illusion wrinkled deep in time, yet an image that survives, in the meanwhile, on the inside.

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