

**The Persistence of Religious Iconography in the Secular  
Imagery of Filmic Culture – A Study of an Artist’s Source  
Material.**

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**I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own**

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## Thesis Outline

This text exists to feed my practice. I intend it to help me to compile and understand effects and devices that I can use to make my paintings of real events epic, seductive and moving. In a sense it constitutes a personal archive. The powerful effects and devices that I examine here come from both cinema and from 'proto-cinematic' European painting.

The text is organised to allow me to explore three archetypal atmospheric set pieces from Hollywood movies, and to analyse the way that they are constructed from individual effects and ideas which come originally from the canon of great paintings from European history. *The Psychological Interior*, *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* and *The Infinite Black Void* are the subjects of my three chapters. Each set piece triggers an emotional response in the viewer, be it empathy, disorientation, fear or awe. The styling that overlays the motif solicits the emotional response and is made up of specific colour, spatial and light and dark effects.

Although these Hollywood set pieces are largely dismissed as being manipulative and populist, I will claim that they are worthy of critical attention, being both visually sophisticated and extremely powerful. These set pieces move us despite our current facility to debunk their seductive and emotionally manipulative appeal. I will show how these enduring set pieces have their origins in 'Old Master' religious paintings where they were part of a persuasive visual language intended to 'sell' religion to an often illiterate audience. In the late twentieth century cinema has claimed them and kept them alive so that a new generation of artists, myself included, are able to re-appropriate them via the 'wash-cycle' of popular culture.

I have used analytical means drawn from semioticians' study of images to dissect complex images and filmic sequences and to identify the visual elements which convey certain atmospheres. Having isolated these elements, I can begin to analyse them and to sift through art history to find painterly predecessors.

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## Introduction

I have accumulated a large quantity of film and video stills, paintings, magazine advertisements, and movie posters on my studio wall. The material in my collection is extremely diverse and contains images from different periods and with widely different subject matter. In fact the only thing that the individual constituent images have in common is that I consider them to be moving, evocative and atmospheric. As a painter I am interested in such imagery, imagery that is compelling by virtue of the suggestion that there is something 'extra' that infuses the nominal subject matter. The closest general terms that I can find to describe this visual suggestiveness are 'atmosphere' or 'mood'. By 'atmosphere' I mean a visual formula that suggests felt emotion and which is applied to a scene or environment. The term 'romantic' is also apposite<sup>1</sup>. Despite the assertion by art historians such as Mario Praz in the book *The Romantic Agony* that 'the term has no meaning outside the circumference of historical periods (6)', the term 'romantic' is useful here as, taken in the broadest sense, it describes the way artists and poets fuse empirical observation with personal emotion. Quintessentially Romantic artists such as Friedrich and Turner placed their own sensibilities between the subject and the viewer. They produced paintings that described both a specific place and the vision or emotion of the painter who saw it via its specific atmosphere.

I have developed the habit of collecting atmospheric images from a range of sources with the intention of using in my own paintings the suggestive visual ideas and effects that they contain in order to manufacture my own moving, evocative and atmospheric scenes. These effects may be visual motifs (such as trees with twisty branches), atmospheric phenomena (such as mist or rain), light or dark effects (such as backlighting), symbols, organisational effects (the manners in which the elements within a picture are arranged across the picture surface and 'through' the implied depth within a depicted scene), particular viewpoints (such as a close-up or birds-eye view), textural effects (such as flat matte colour with no visual trace of the brushmark), or colour effects (such as a burst of red against black). I see the wall of

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<sup>1</sup> A term used most commonly to describe a specific literary and artistic movement of the late Eighteenth century and early Nineteenth century.

my studio as an ever-expanding vocabulary of these kinds of effect. My wall of images from diverse sources could be seen as an archetypal studio 'scene'. Many artists' studios have had similar walls of visual matter, which in some way constitutes a resource. As my collection has grown, I have begun to notice a number of echoes between the stills from movies and the postcards of atmospheric paintings, and in particular atmospheric religious paintings<sup>2</sup>, that I have also collected. Once I became aware of these echoes I began to notice more and more correspondences between contemporary spectacular imagery and paintings of the past in terms of motif, image construction and individual effects used. The written part of my research project came about because I wanted both to collect these enduring, powerful and emotionally moving effects and to find out more about them<sup>3</sup>. This writing, then, is a collection of atmospheric visual effects that are common to both Old Master religious painting and modern filmic culture, effects which evoke a sense of epic-ness, heroism or transcendence, even when used in a clearly secular context. Whilst writing this thesis I have tried to remain close to my original intention, which was to use the process to feed into my practice as a painter. The written element is faithful to my practice and I avoid overt rationalisation of the effects that I work with. This project is an applied and practical one. For this reason I have tried to keep my research more or less in the visual domain.

The written element of my research project takes the form of an investigation into three particular atmospheric situations or set-pieces taken from my studio wall, that appear in both Hollywood movies and Old Master religious painting, and the way that

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<sup>2</sup> These religious paintings did not only illustrate biblical events, but suggested spirited themes that elude representation. They did this not only through symbolism, but by using lighting, darkness and other atmospheric effects.

<sup>3</sup> Artist David Hockney describes a similar project in his book *The Secret Knowledge, Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters* Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters the record of his quest to prove that the use of lenses and other optical devices underpins certain paintings from the late fifteenth century onwards. His investigation began with a wall-display of postcards of paintings that he had amassed over the years. From this heterogeneous display he began to pick out paintings that were 'unfeasibly realistic' in comparison to near-contemporaneous pictures. He then separated off these paintings, and from this reduced selection he noticed certain recurrent visual characteristics. Prompted by this discovery he proceeded to investigate these characteristics further, eventually identifying them as the unexpected consequences of the use of lens technology. The visual characteristics that Hockney identified within images from different countries and different centuries included effects such as a soft focus and a flattening of depth.

they are constructed from individual effects of the kind that I have listed above. By 'set-piece' I mean a dramatic and atmospheric setting that stands alone and that relates to older images. Many recent Hollywood productions are structured around a handful of elaborate set pieces that are given great emphasis<sup>4</sup>. Set pieces (such as the enchanted garden or the misty 'Gothic' graveyard at twilight) are long established in the Western collective visual vocabulary. They form part of an inherited visual language. When they appear in Hollywood blockbusters they retain most of their original features, but here and there they will have been adapted, and it is the new additions that keep the audience interested. Set pieces are in a sense narrative constructs that re-echo throughout cultural history. Within painted set pieces a familiar motif or number of motifs, effects and atmospherics come together in a familiar form that is atmospherically suggestive. In Hollywood productions atmospheric set pieces are created by cinematography, art direction, placement and movement of camera and actors, lighting, and other visual elements in a given scene.

The three particular set pieces that I will be exploring in my writing are *The Psychological Interior*, *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle*, and *The Infinite Black Void*. *The Psychological Interior* of my first chapter represents the medium shot; here we are in the room, enclosed by its borders. *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* of the second chapter represents the long shot in which we see from a distance a maze-like urban environment, often swarming with crowds. And *The Infinite Black Void*, which is the set piece central to my third chapter, corresponds to the long-distance establishing shot; here we are viewing the huge expanse of our universe from a great distance.

These powerful and enduring archetypal set pieces can be found widely within popular culture, and especially in Hollywood movies, where they are able to move us emotionally despite our present tendency to debunk their seductive and emotionally manipulative appeal. To my mind lasting set pieces such as these are worthy of critical attention, as they are both visually sophisticated and extremely powerful. I will show how these three set pieces are constructed from specific individual effects, effects that cumulatively construct mood. I will argue that these atmospheric formulae

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in *The Two Towers* (2002) Fangorn Forest constitutes a set piece as it echoes and evokes innumerable older primeval forests from imagery of the past.

come originally from religious paintings, where they were used to suggest spiritual themes in a compelling manner. It is from these links that they derive their strength.

In my own paintings I create environments or vistas that are atmospherically suggestive. I see myself as a kind of one-man film production unit in charge of camera angle, lighting, set-design and employment and organisation of extras. The environments that I paint are taken from documentary source materials. For me the documentary images that I work from depict a kind of extraordinary moment, a moment of significant human drama. I see these images as forgotten or disregarded testimonies to the human spirit in the face of adversity. However, the documentary images themselves are often black and white and rather un-atmospheric.

In order to express the feelings that I have about the subjects when I look at these photos, and to make these images emotionally moving and entertaining for other people, I exploit the sense of religiosity, fantasy or mystery that comes with certain visual formulae that are common to both atmospheric movie sequences and paintings of the past. I want the viewers of my paintings to be swept away by amazement at the scene that they are looking at. I want my paintings of real moments in people's lives to be as exciting as really powerful filmic sequences and as permanent, emotionally moving and grand as Old Master paintings.

To make my paintings emotionally moving and visually sensational I inject numerous effects during the process of transcribing the photograph into paint<sup>5</sup>. Some of these effects have become a characteristic part of my working process. Others change from picture to picture. By layering these effects onto the image I hope to transform these forgotten moments into something significant and monumental. In their glossy

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<sup>5</sup> When I make a painting I will begin with a black and white documentary photograph that appears to me to be worthy of 'glorification'. I will then make a huge wall display of images that contain effects that I can use to manufacture a suitably seductive and exciting atmosphere. As I create my layered painting many of the effects from this display will be used. For example, in an early painting of mine entitled *Picking Season* (2003), based on a photograph of olive picking in a disputed area of Palestine, I used saturated colours taken from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), a form of stylization from Samuel Palmer and a swing motif from *Finding Neverland* (2004) amongst other effects from other sources to create an image with a fantastical mood - a wonderland.

surfaces, their mimicking of TV and cinematic phenomena such as movement and backlighting, and their superabundance of atmospheric effects, my paintings present real events as they might have looked if they had been given the Hollywood treatment and then freeze-framed on TV. In a sense I am trying to create an ad or an atmospheric filmic sequence in a single layered image.

Many of the effects that I use to make the scenes that I paint exciting, affecting and epic come from contemporary 'spectacular' imagery. My working process involves collecting stills from movies, ads and pop videos and breaking them down into their component parts, that is working out the specific means of manufacturing atmosphere. In this way I compile a kind of vocabulary of special effects that I can then use in my paintings. Borrowing special effects from such imagery helps me to manufacture high levels of excitement and articulate my sentiments towards the scene using a commonly shared visual language. Of course these sentiments are both emotionally approximate and knowingly sentimental. This dual position of earnestness and self-consciousness that I occupy is reflected in the stylistic qualities of the pictures themselves.

As many of the visual effects that I use to build up atmosphere are commonly utilised in the mass media, they have a proven 'track record' of effectiveness on the viewer. However, the manner in which I use these visual expressions or special effects is often extremely unsubtle, my intention being both to seduce the viewer into my romanticising world-view and to provoke awareness in the viewer of the actual methods of this seduction.

But I also take ideas from Old Master religious paintings<sup>6</sup>. Such borrowing enables me to exploit a deep reservoir of accrued emotional 'clout' (the power to direct, shape or otherwise influence things.) Referencing paintings from art history adds 'depth'

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<sup>6</sup> For example, in a recent series of paintings about excavations and mining I looked first at sixteenth and seventeenth century paintings of Infernos and took from them two particular space systems that kept reappearing. One was the idea of separating the picture plane into several compartments in which different things are happening; the other was the vortex. The vortex arrangement was also used in the Hollywood film *Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) in the sequence where we first see the Orcs' city. The compartment idea can be seen in the subterranean nightclub in the film *Strange Days* (1987). Aspects from all these images and many more get injected into my paintings.

and 'gravitas' to my somewhat glitzy visual spectacles. Painting itself, in my view, has the power to arouse a viewer's sentiments in a unique way, which relates to the weighty history of the medium. Although painting now occupies an extremely marginal position in terms of the dissemination of ideology, its former power over us should not be underestimated, and vestiges of this remain. Painting once occupied the position that the Media now dominates. Just as is the case with the Media today, things in the distant past only became important once they had been represented through the medium of paint (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Jacques-Louis David *The Death of Marat* (1793)

I want to produce work that brings together the past and the present and painting does this automatically. Through our continuing use of it, painting links both past and present in an unbroken thread. Many great paintings from the past have taken real human history, human endurance and suffering and transformed it into something amazing, moving and spectacular (figure 2).

The history of painting is also the history of human inventiveness. In fact, one of my reasons for painting is that I want to tap into this legacy of human invention as evidenced in art history. Although painted images from the past have been accused of promulgating ideology, they also demonstrate - more profoundly - positive human attributes such as skill, commitment and belief.



figure 2. Albrecht Altdorfer, *The Battle of Alexander at Issus* (1529) (whole and detail)

In visual material there has been a gradual shift in focus from a religious subject matter to a subject matter that depicts secular human activity. In my writing I will show that both religious and secular works are connected by a vocabulary of visual effects and motifs that link them together. By tapping into this same language of effects I seek to link my own paintings to this kind of earlier imagery. But I do so via cinema. It is this intended connection back through cinema to paintings that had a religious content, which makes my work - with its emphasis on human endeavour, human spirit and endurance - distinct from many other contemporary practices. Where other practices also borrow visual effects from art history, yet seek to distance themselves from the essentially 'religious' sensibilities that brought them into being in the first place, I want to keep these aspects in play. Where other artists evacuate heroic meaning, I seek to exploit it in order to allow for a kind of transcendence of the contemporary- albeit an obviously quoted one, without the actual religion.

My paintings bring cinematic history into the story of painting. Although obviously paintings continued to be made during the twentieth century, I see film as being the dominant art form of the era. Cinema during this period was infinitely more human, relevant and social than painting (the films of Robert Bresson and Pasolini for example continue a tradition that valorises human struggle and toil in the manner of Velasquez or Caravaggio,). Cinema was the inheritor of those aspects of painting that

are most important to me as an artist. In their employment of cinematic devices (many of which are updated painterly devices,) my paintings propose a history of art that accepts films as the emotionally moving narrative pictures of the twentieth century.

The boundaries of painting are also important for me. Although my paintings are pushed towards film in the sense that I have devised a painterly method that mimics many of the seductive devices of cinema, they still remain as paintings, with painting's limits and reticence. One of the most inherently moving and emotionally affecting aspects of painting – and one that to my mind cinema lacks, despite its recent return to layering and rendering with the invention of Computer Generated Imagery - is the visible trace of rendering. When I look at paintings I get absorbed into my sense of the artist lost in the earnest attempt to describe something in paint. The painting itself reveals - in its brushmarks - the actual process of making, the struggles and the surprises that happen. Painting is rarely really systematic and this makes it fascinating and affecting. Even if the artist has a sense of the outcome at the beginning he/she invariably gets lost in the process and there is a struggle. The visual trace of struggle and effort and failure makes the painting human and involving. As well as being visible in my paintings with their layering that reveals each stage of the making and preserves it under a laminate of transparent resin, the idea of struggle is also central to my work in a thematic sense.

My motivation in undertaking this research then, is for it to feed directly into my own paintings. I intend it to help me to collect and compile effects and ideas that can be 'applied' or 'injected' during the process of transcribing documentary images into paint in order to make the scene depicted more moving and compelling. Such effects include colour effects, tonal effects, spatial or depth effects, eye-catching effects or a number of other visual effects. The textual element is a resource for me as an artist, it is therefore necessarily partial. The accumulation of visual research gathered here describes my concerns as an artist. In my paintings I use visual effects taken from movies and other sources, which come originally from religious paintings belonging to our collective past and that still hold vestiges of their former power over us, to inject a sense of heroism into images of people and the real events that they experience. It needs to be stated from the outset, then, that for this thesis, the paintings themselves are both the end product and embodiment of the research process. The text

element of this thesis indicates the process by which I have developed new visual resources for my practice as an artist, and hope to offer some perceptions as to how a painter might respond to the richness of contemporary visual culture.

In the sense that I dissect complex images and filmic sequences in order to borrow individual visual 'units' within them which carry atmosphere I am continuing a methodology that has always been used by artists. In the twentieth century a variation of this 'system' has become linked to the analytical principles of semiotics as applied to images. In semiotics the 'units' that I identify and mix in my paintings would be seen as signs. However, although I am interested in ideas of borrowing and quotation, I do not wish my paintings to appear just as empty accumulations of signs. Rather, I want to construct something positive with my borrowing. I do not want my pictures to be about the emptying out and denial of the potency of signs (as was the case with the depthless, glossy borrowings of postmodernity as characterised by many theorists such as Frederic Jameson for example). Rather, I wish to emphasise and exploit in my paintings those vestiges of emotional depth that they continue to hold, even now that they have been through the wash-cycle of commercial cinema, (an emotional depth that comes largely from their links to older paintings.) My work occupies a particular position in relation to the immediate past in art history as it combines both elements of pastiche (as associated with postmodernism), with the construction of atmosphere, depth and emotion. It oscillates between quotation and expression, between playfulness and optimism, between irony and earnestness.

In my practice as a painter I seek out individual effects and ideas from a wide range of visual material, effects and ideas that act as emotional triggers. These I appropriate rather than interrogate. In my writing equally, I intend to analyse imagery without putting forward an explanation of an ultimate or definitive 'meaning'. I cannot hope to, nor do I desire to explain precisely how these effects and ideas work. This does not strive to be a hermeneutic text, but is a multi-voiced exploration of images. Nor is it an attempt to produce a comprehensive theory of meaning in respect to the effects that I discuss. In the terms of this thesis I see the images that I will discuss as being a resource. They provide me with a reservoir of moving, compelling and seductive visual ideas and effects that are linked to religious sentiments (sentiments which still embody a common cultural vocabulary in European civilization, even though religion

has lost its dominance in most European's day-to-day lives,) and that I use in my paintings to render epic or to monumentalise real and forgotten human dramas in a Hollywood kind of way.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that I do not feel able to employ a singular model of meaning in a conventional way to analyse my visual research, I acknowledge that semiotics is a useful tool for my project, and in particular C. Peirce's idea of the sign. Peirce offers three types of sign, 'icons', 'indices' and 'symbols' rather than just one. He defines the iconic sign by its resemblance to its referent, the indexical sign by its contiguous relationship to its referent, and the symbolic sign by its arbitrary connection to its referent. For Peirce the richest signs are those that in some way combine all three categories. Peirce also attributes to the sign the quality of endless 'commutability'. Any sign, he argues, carries the potential of becoming a signifier, which in turn, can produce another signified and so on. Peirce's notion of the sign as iconic and/or indexical rather than arbitrary permits the possibility that an individual sign might be inherently powerful and moving.

Many semioticians that examine art, such as Norman Bryson, claim that painting is a visual language like any other and constructs meaning through 'a system of signs'<sup>7</sup> which have symbolic or culturally learnt connotations. In his analysis Bryson does not distinguish between the media. For him painting functions in the same way as any other visual system. Although as a painter I do consider that painting functions in specific ways, and the specific attributes and qualities of painting are important to my practice, in the terms of the writing, the differences between the media are not my focus. In this writing I am looking at images in a particular way, and from a particular angle. From this particular angle the different media are not dissimilar. In the text I am arguing that both paintings and films contain similar systems of visual effects; effects that work together to construct the suggestion of something unseen, an atmosphere, an emotional tenor. This means that, like Bryson, I will not differentiate between the media. Neither will I differentiate within the field of painting itself, although, as a painter in another context, I would I acknowledge differences in value were I focusing on other aspects of the paintings discussed.

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<sup>7</sup> From *Semiology and Visual Interpretation*

In terms of methodology art historian Anne Hollander's book *Moving Pictures* is a key text for this writing. In this book Hollander argues that the power of contemporary Hollywood movie visuals comes largely from their borrowings from painted images from the past. The book is a very general investigation into cinematic precursors. In the first chapter she begins to break down the kind of Hollywood-type sequences that she is speaking of, and identifies within them specific visual effects 'which appeal to unconscious feeling', such as the cropped or partial view. Having identified an effect or set of effects, she then proceeds in later chapters to search through each century to find examples of painters from the past that used such 'proto-cinematic' techniques. The artists that she finds she links only by their particular usage of 'proto-cinematic' effects. In her search for painted ancestors to the visual spectacles of Hollywood movies Hollander does not explain how the visual effects that they contain work. She keeps her quest within the visual field merely noting parallels and echoes and concluding that it is the act of repetition itself that builds up power<sup>8</sup>.

In my search for the painted images that prefigure three cinematic archetypes I use the knowledge of others to reveal to me new aspects of the subject. I have brought a variety of positions into play as, in my opinion, no single model seems appropriate or sufficient in explaining how the complex images that I discuss here work in terms of their power over our emotions. By interspersing my text with a diverse selection of citations from theorists, historians, artists and critics, my intention is to suggest the richness of the imagery presented. The diversity of responses to this imagery, and to its power over our emotions, indicates the complexity and multilayered nature of this long established visual vocabulary. In particular I have quoted historians who provide relevant historical and contextual information.

I propose this writing as a collection of enduring, moving and seductive visual effects relating to religious iconography, which continue to evoke, in a fractured way, a sense

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<sup>8</sup> Hollander writes in the introduction to *Moving Pictures*, 'The following discussion is a search through art history for the kinds of picture that attempted and prefigured what cinema later actually did, and that form a background and foundation for movies...In the first chapters I try to locate the specific sources for the emotive power of moving-picture imagery. I see it first in the distinctive rendering of light by the painters of the North European Renaissance, together with their ways of composing the space in pictures to suggest and invite psychological motion... (6).'

of transcendence, even when transferred to a secular setting. The effects that I discover here provide a resource for me as a painter, a painter who occupies a particular position in relation to 'pastiche' and borrowing, as described earlier (but no position on how the units that I appropriate signify). I have made this collection without putting forward an explanation of how the images, and the effects that they contain, work their power on us. I feel it is better to allow the reader to come to his or her own conclusions, and I attempt to facilitate this by presenting a variety of viewpoints.

Nevertheless, I recognise that there are many studies into how visual signals signify. For example, Bryson in his essay *Semiology and Visual Interpretation*, in *Visual Theory: Paintings and Interpretation* claims that paintings are 'a system of signs', signs which carry symbolic or culturally learnt associations. Bryson asserts that in order for the viewer to read a painting in a manner consonant with the expectations of the artist, both the artist and the viewer must understand the formula. Painting, Bryson writes, like reading and mathematics, is an activity of the sign and works within socially constructed codes of recognition. Therefore, painting like mathematics, is about recognition, 'socially generated codes of recognition,' rather than perception. He writes:

'It takes one person to experience a sensation; it takes (at least two) to recognise a sign. And when people look at representational painting and recognise what they see, their recognition does not unfold in the solitary recesses of the sensorium but through the activation of codes of recognition that are learnt by interaction with others, in the acquisition of human culture (65).

Painting is exciting Bryson claims, because it 'is bathed in the same circulation of signs which permeates or ventilates the rest of the social structure (65).'

Bryson's views sit in opposition to other theorists and artists who study how visual signals within images function, who claim that signs work cross-culturally, that they provoke a 'direct contagion' (Gombrich) between the artist's intention and the viewer's emotions. Gombrich calls this belief Expressionist Theory. For example, in the twenties and thirties artists such as Rothko, Klee and Kandinsky claimed that individual line, shape and colour effects triggered specific and fixed registers of

emotional affect. They set out in their abstract paintings and drawings to exploit this kind of natural equivalence of visual phenomena and emotional states<sup>9</sup>.

Another position, and one that is directly useful to this project, alludes to non language-based affects that visual signs may provoke and links them to our evolutionary history as human creatures. For example, Jay Appleton, in his book *The Symbolism of Habitat*, links evolutionary processes and environmental perception to aesthetic effects. One of several 'techniques' within pictures that he sees as triggering feeling in the observer in this way is darkness or shadow. He explains that, as the colour of night and of shadows, darkness in imagery has the potential to induce in us certain hardwired emotional states that relate to our not being able to see, such as fear and trepidation. Art historian E. H. Gombrich, advocates this idea in a tempered way in *Meditations*. He notes the way that certain colours often lend themselves to a particular symbolic use because of the way we link them with real everyday phenomena. He explains this idea in relation to the colour red:

Red, being the colour of flames and of blood, offers itself as a metaphor for anything that is strident or violent. It is no accident, therefore, that it was selected as the code sign for 'stop' in our traffic code and as a label of revolutionary parties in politics. But though both these applications are grounded on simple biological facts, the colour red itself has no fixed meaning. A future historian or anthropologist, for instance, who wanted to interpret the significance of the label red in politics would get no guidance from his knowledge of our traffic code (13).

The text that follows then is organised into three chapters, each concerned with a different set piece that appears on my studio wall. In each chapter I will examine the way that these set pieces are constructed from familiar motifs that have been overlaid with individual effects. Each chapter begins with an examination of these set pieces as they appear within explicitly religious painting. In these early paintings *The Psychological Interior*, *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* and *The Infinite Black Void*

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<sup>9</sup> In terms of colour, Kandinsky perceived an inherent link between the purely visual sensation that a colour provokes in the eye and an emotional feeling. In *On The Spiritual in Art*, he claimed that the physical properties of colour and their emotional or 'psychic' properties are linked. He explained how colour has both a superficial physical effect, which is short lived and 'leaves the soul unaffected', and a deeper 'psychic effect' that 'takes hold, causing an emotional vibration. Thus, the first physical elementary force develops the channel through which the deep, inner emotion reaches the soul'.

convey an atmosphere of spiritual significance. I will then briefly indicate the migration of these effects from religious painting to painting with a clearly secular theme before moving onto the reappearance of these set pieces within recent filmic culture. This I will do by discussing a single artist's work or single genre. It is not the aim or the scope of this thesis to trace each stage in the movement of these effects from religious painting of the seventeenth century to the movies of the late twentieth century. It is generally understood that there has been an increasing move towards the secular in Western visual culture. What I have done is to discuss a single work or group of works that are indicative of the way that these religious motifs and effects migrated into non-religious painting. There are however, many examples of paintings where the status of the painting as religious or secular is ambiguous. Some paintings with an ostensibly non-religious theme, such as some interiors by Velasquez for example, used evocative 'spiritual' effects to suggest that an everyday event remains within the context of biblical history. For my purposes here, these are still religious paintings.

The instances of non-religious painting that I discuss in order to demonstrate a movement of traditional religious atmospheric effects from images with a religious theme into secular imagery, exploit the religiosity of these visual effects in various ways. For example, artists such as Wright of Derby relied on the traditional meanings of these effects whilst appeasing his audience's doubts about the presence of divinity in life and nature. He and others would insulate these effects from their religious past by the use of a defiantly secular title. The majority of artists that employed this powerful vocabulary in their secular paintings however, were more ambivalent, and simply allowed the spectator to bring his own associations to the scenes presented.

*The Psychological Interior, The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* and *The Infinite Black Void* are still commonly evoked within recent filmic culture. My claim is that these powerful and emotionally moving cinematic set pieces rely upon their links to religious paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth century where they were then dominant elements of a new popular persuasive visual language intended to 'sell' the gospels to a new, often illiterate audience. In my view cinema and other forms of popular culture have kept these stimulating set pieces alive. In the current period a new generation of 'fine artists' including myself are looking to cinematic imagery of

this type to draw on the great reserve of powerful imagery that it contains. They are using this type of imagery in their work now that it has been through the 'wash cycle' of popular commercial culture.

*The Psychological Interior*, *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* and *The Infinite Black Void* are realised through combinations of individual visual effects and ideas which somehow build up a set of expectations in the viewer which culminate in a specific emotional response, be it empathy, disorientation, fear, contemplation, or awe. Although the specific emotional response cannot be clearly defined, the style that carries it can. It uses precise means for predetermined ends. My contention is that the recipes used today to produce atmospheric images from a combination of visual effects and ideas are merely updated versions of those used for centuries by painters of the past to make the scenes depicted seem intense and actual, thereby engaging the viewer's sentiments.

There are some overlaps between my chapters. For example, each atmospheric archetype is dark or darkly edged, and each uses a form of 'tenebrism' to establish this mood. However, in my breakdown of imagery into the individual effects that convey atmosphere, I have identified that the main constituents in each set piece are different. In Chapter One I have found that it is particular lighting effects that constitute the main signifier of a psychological aspect. In Chapter Two I have claimed that a particular organisation of pictorial depth is a key contributor to the creation of a nightmarish landscape. And in Chapter Three, I have emphasised the key role that the flat black expanse plays in the creation of a sense of philosophical depth and in the evocation of grand and sombre themes.

In Chapter One I discuss *The Psychological Interior*. Here a sense of psychological depth is conferred on an interior by means of the depiction of a variety of precisely observed lighting conditions and following shadow. Here the room itself becomes a metaphor for the mind, and varying qualities of light code it in order to suggest different mental states. I will argue that this commonly used set piece, appearing in recent films such as *Pi* and *Pitch Black* is, in fact, the most recent manifestation of a complex pictorial convention, one which stretches back to the emotionally intense religious interiors of artists such as George de la Tour and Rembrandt.

My investigation into this enduring set piece has resulted in the recognition of three distinct sub-groupings within the over-arching concept. These are *The Psychological Religious Interior*, *The Insane Interior*, and *The Ordinary Interior with Strange Undercurrents*. Each sub-grouping will have, I argue, a number of visual precedents from the canon of great European art.

In examining this illustrious past, I will point to pictorial similarities between recent imagery and the visual production of earlier periods, beginning with Old Master religious paintings and progressing onto secular paintings. These images will not be considered in relation to their normal art historical context or stylistic allegiances, but rather in relation to the effects that they seek to deploy. I will then proceed to show how, in the twentieth century, this atmospheric set piece, and the psychological language of visual devices that creates it, migrated into popular culture as it was increasingly forced out of mainstream painting. It re-emerged in vivid form in early expressionist cinema, from whence it journeyed into contemporary filmic culture where it flourished. Cinema kept the psychological vocabulary alive by adding visual ideas and devices appropriate to new society and to new technologies. Filmic culture has updated it, and detached it from some of its old entanglements, whilst exploiting its deep-seated appeal so that artists such as myself can use it once again in its new scrambled-yet-powerful incarnation.

The second chapter will consider the set piece of *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle*. This set piece exists within innumerable Hollywood movies such as *Matrix Reloaded*, *Sin City*, *Dark City*, and *Constantine*, where reality and fantasy are inextricably intertwined to create an image of a dreadful social space. *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* contains a variety of effects and motifs that cumulatively prompt recognition of a kind of post-lapsarian state. Signs of sin, evil, corruption, destruction and demonic powers are everywhere. In this chapter I will argue that this atmospheric set piece is confected from a multiplicity of effects and ideas, many of which have been taken from art history. It is from its links to earlier imagery, specifically to late medieval and Renaissance religious paintings of Hell – and not merely from the

Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) wizardry that goes into its design - that this mise-en-scene gets its tremendous power to shock, frighten and entertain us.

*The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* is often dark, permeated by glowing lights or flashes of flame that render the environment un-mappable and hide the enemy from sight. Often vision is impaired further by fog or rain. It is a chaotic and dense space in which the normal linear perspectival structure of built environment has given way to disorientating spatial effects. For example, instead of single point perspective, the viewer of these darker worlds is often presented with multiple entry points lit in such a way as to draw the viewer into their depths and into the dark world of the imagination. Or a sense of falling is achieved by means of concentric circles that decrease in size, or by vortex-like rhythms. As well as the use of confusing spatial designs, other effects come into play such as disjunctures in scale, strange juxtapositions, dark silhouettes and writhing forms.

*The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* of today is both extremely common and extraordinarily elaborate. Despite the fact that the latest CGI technology is used alongside teams of designers, the motifs themselves, and the styling of these motifs, remains strangely unchanged.

In Chapter Three, *The Infinite Black Void*, I will examine the way that simple and spare arrangements of forms against a black expanse - an expanse which oscillates between appearing deep and flat - has been used to encourage deep contemplation of profound issues, to activate higher mental states and to symbolise the 'great mystery beyond'.

I will argue that this effect began to function in this way in the austere and chastening still lives of the seventeenth century. In the still lives of Cotan and Zurbaran for example, objects were arranged against flat black with almost mathematical precision and with a strong emphasis on the flatness of the picture plane. Broadly speaking these still lives were intended to separate the viewer's mind from worldly distractions in order to encourage contemplation of eternal truths. In the twentieth century *The Infinite Black Void* was re-evoked. As the century progressed, the objects began to disappear and the black expanse became the main focus. Artists such as Malevich,

Newman and Reinhardt strove to harness the unique 'mystical' or 'spiritual' effects of the black expanse by eliminating all reference to the material world in their works. Floating above the specific political and social events that characterised their eras, these artists eschewed narrative in their attempt to provoke what they saw as a universal and timeless experience.

As painting became increasingly purified and refined during the 'minimalist' era the last vestiges of effect were squeezed out. In cinema, on the other hand, the motif of simple forms set against a black expanse remained more potent. Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* is a celebration of blackness and its powerful effect. Unlike the other two set pieces discussed here, even when used in a cinematic context, *The Infinite Black Void* remains essentially 'high brow.' Where the other two set pieces have been broken up, emptied out and reassembled, *The Infinite Black Void* remains strangely linked to its 'spiritual' past.

The conclusion will be a drawing together of my research and a discussion of my own investment in these set pieces in my paintings and in contemporary painting in general.

## Chapter One: The Psychological Interior



figure 3. Gregory Crewdson *Twilight* (2001)

### Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss a number of examples of both still and moving images, where a psychological dimension is conferred on an interior by means of a layering of visual devices and effects. These images will not be considered not in their normal art historical context or stylistic allegiances, but rather in the context of the psychological mood that they seek to create. I will concentrate on particular light effects within interiors as the main visual conveyor of a sense of psychological depth.

In the book *Moving Pictures* art historian Anne Hollander claims that the depiction of accurately rendered light, whether in still or moving images, is highly suggestive of a submerged psychological situation. In her introduction she writes ‘I try to locate the specific sources for the emotive power of moving-picture imagery. I see it first in the distinctive rendering of light by the painters of the Northern European Renaissance, together with their ways of composing the space in pictures, to suggest and invite psychological motion’ (6). Accurately rendered light in imagery, Hollander writes, imitates the action of real light, and real light is a moving entity. She describes, ‘the surge of feeling that attaches to the perception of light’s motion’ (16). Precisely recorded light, she continues: ‘can give this sense that the world of the picture is momentarily actual and in uncertain motion... it does not fool or please the eye, it is like part of the eye’s usual experience. Whether applied in paint or by the movie camera, this “photographic” method gives a peculiar atmosphere to the phenomena it

records, a presence, the look of having a distilled meaning' (16). This peculiar atmosphere, which she also describes as 'unsettling' (17), relates to 'our unconscious lives' and is evoked through the use of 'inspired lighting' (17) in paintings. In attempting to explain our emotional response to precisely recorded light in imagery - that is its effects on our imagination and empathetic sentiments - Hollander turns to a behavioural theory. She writes: 'for human creatures, dependent on the sun, the action of light has an obvious primal drama that compels the human imagination.... Movement and light create drama' (18).

*The Psychological Interior* exists commonly in contemporary popular culture, and especially in movies. The aim of this opening chapter is to claim an exalted past for this cinematic set piece by highlighting a number of visual equivalencies and correspondences between the contemporary *Psychological Interior*, as it appears in recent filmic culture, and religious paintings of the past. It is from these links to older pictures that this kind of contemporary imagery derives its power to arouse our emotions and activate our imaginations.

My investigation into this fundamental atmospheric set piece of *The Psychological Interior* has resulted in the recognition of three distinct sub-groupings within the overarching concept. These are *The Psychological Religious Interior*, *The Insane Interior*, and *The Ordinary Interior with Strange Undercurrents*. For reasons of analysis I find this division useful in tracing a lineage or genealogy for each one.

In the quintessential *Psychological Religious Interior* light codes the room in such a way as to explicate religious psychological states such as goodness and evil, moments of enlightenment, religious self-examination, moral confusion, crises of faith, struggles with temptation, evil masquerading as good, guilt, repentance, or saintly tendencies such as martyrdom. A complex menu of light effects such as dramatic backlighting, glowing auras or haloes, barbs of light emanating from the body, shafts of celestial light from above, and twisting flames is used to signal various psychological religious themes.

In *The Insane Interior* a number of short-lived light effects project mental suffering, disarray or insanity onto a room. Here light can be flickering, reverberating, bleeding,

sparkling, flashing, exploding, splintered, bleaching or shuddering around the edges of things. The depiction or suggestion of such lighting effects compels the beholder him/herself to participate in the pain and confusion of the main character simply by seeing.

In *The Ordinary Interior with Strange Undercurrents* a mysterious, strange or bizarre atmosphere is conferred on an everyday interior by means of a compound of odd or unnatural light effects. Often separate and distinct light and shadow effects sit together within a single room, and serve to divide it up into different emotional zones. Sometimes incongruous light sources are juxtaposed: warm and cold light, daylight and artificial light, morning light and twilight, 'normal' and highly theatrical light, strong and weak light may be placed together within a single interior. The atmosphere within *The Ordinary Interior with Strange Undercurrents* may be gently mysterious - suggestive of undercurrents of repression, alienation or melancholy in the ordinary household or, at the other extreme, the sense of mystery can be amplified to evoke a sense of something supernatural, to achieve a conflation of the paranormal and the psychological.

The earliest painted precedents for the psychological lighting styles under discussion here existed in order to make biblical stories more emotionally real. These paintings compelled the individual viewer to empathise with the characters depicted so that they would develop a more personal relationship with religious figures. Some early Psychological Interiors that use light effects to make manifest psychological states such as contemplation, reflection or reverie are set in the bordered interior where an element of quiet, order and control is implied. Others, however, which are suggestive of terrible mental suffering and disarray, are set within an outside landscape so that extreme natural lighting situations, such as stormy skies and flashes of lightning, can be harnessed as expressive effects<sup>10</sup>. Despite the fact that such images are not in any way interiors, the expressive lighting effects used in these paintings are extremely relevant to this discussion as they were later applied to interiors in the form of

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<sup>10</sup> For example, episodes such as the Temptation of Saint Anthony were frequently painted as taking place against a wild natural environment under attack from severe weather conditions. The depiction of thunderous skies and flashes of lightning were used to articulate visually the chaos and unbridled energy of Satanic forces and to suggest the resulting confusion suffered by the saint.

electrical splutterings and explosions. The modern vision of *The Insane Interior* is deeply indebted to these early ideas, as we shall see.

The chapter will be divided into two parts. In Part One I will show how Old Master religious paintings manufactured a sense of psychological drama by using various lighting effects. I will then briefly demonstrate the way in which many of these effects migrated into secular imagery where they continued to transmit a sense of psychological significance, even within a secular context.

Part Two will demonstrate how, during the twentieth century, many of the psychological effects, motifs and ideas from these earlier images migrated into popular culture - just as they were being expunged from mainstream painting. Although they appeared first in German Expressionist films (such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* directed in 1919 by Robert Weine), I consider that, in fact, these early films played a quite marginal role in the development of these set pieces for the secular culture of today, as they merely signify a move of iconography from art to popular culture rather than a point of origin. For this reason I will only mention this evolutionary stage very briefly. In the late twentieth century a new generation of filmmakers, recognising the power of this psychologically loaded set piece within those earlier films, reintroduced it into their movies once again, often in full Technicolor CGI.

## **Part One: The Psychological Interior in Painting**

### **1.1 The Psychological Religious Interior**

Rembrandt (1606- 1669) developed a number of the psychological lighting effects that are now used within cinema in order to communicate invisible religious themes such as goodness and evil, spiritual enlightenment, moral contemplation and confusion, struggles with temptation, and the inner crisis provoked by an impossible decision. Some of these were taken from paintings of the past and updated so that they became more consistent with a naturalistic style.

The single figure painting *The Prophet Jeremiah Mourning over the Destruction of Jerusalem* (1630, figure 4) depicts the prophet as totally absorbed in his thoughts. He is positioned diagonally across the painting and his body creates a border between

light and dark with a field of light running the length of his body towards the bottom left hand corner of the painting. The head of the Saint is given great significance by means of a strong spotlight that strikes the dome of his head. In the background a scene of destruction also glows out of the darkness as a temple goes up in flames. In this way we read the spotlight events as momentous despite the fact that, in the case of the prophet's head, there is no obvious action to monumentalise. The result is that the internal musings and melancholy regret of the prophet become dramatic, epic.

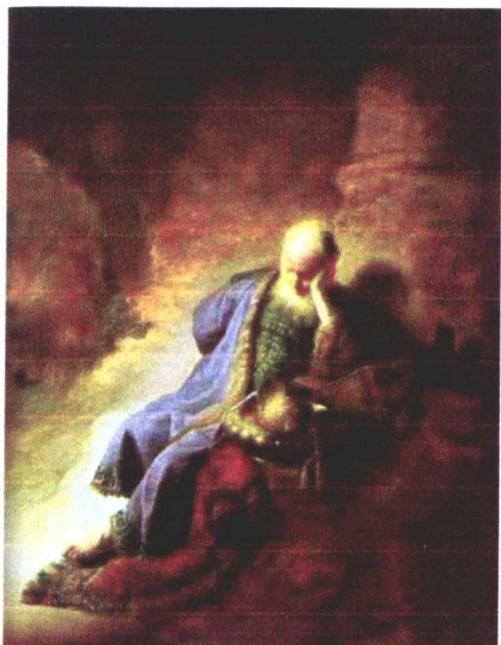


figure 4. Rembrandt, *The Prophet Jeremiah Mourning over the Destruction of Jerusalem* (1630)

This visual idea could be seen as an updated version of the halo-around-the-head effect used by Durer (1471-1528) and many others to signify intense spirituality. In Durer's etching *The Large Passion, Christ in Limbo (Harrowing of Hell)* (c1510, figure 5) Christ's moral force is externalised by means of spear-like rays emanating from the head. The Harrowing of Hell traditionally represents the moment when light – representing wisdom and divine power - is brought into the darkness of limbo, unbinding those who have been imprisoned as the prey of devils. In the etching Christ is depicted reaching down towards two figures. Above him a hellish dog-ghoul brandishes a spear, and behind him a group of followers watch. Through the archway, beyond the group of spectators, we can see a fire raging. The spear-like rays of the fire are echoed in the white rays of light that emanate from Christ's head, thus suggesting heat and the momentous spiritual power within.



figure 5. Albrecht Durer, *The Large Passion, Christ in Limbo (Harrowing of Hell)* (c1510)

Even as a baby, Jesus emanated light; he glowed. In Rembrandt's *The Shepherds Worship the Child* (1646, figure 6) a lighting effect that could not possibly occur naturally in the given circumstances is used to suggest Christ's innocence and moral force.

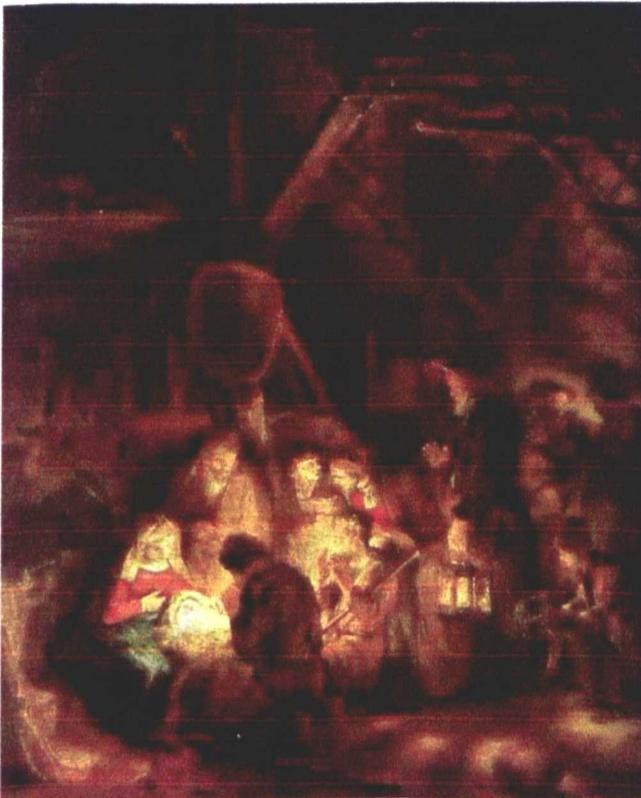


figure 6. Rembrandt, *The Shepherds Worship the Child* (1646)

The earliest known painting that uses this glowing effect to express the divine spirit is by Geertgen tot Sint Jans. In *The Nativity at Night* (c. 1490, figure 7). In this painting the Infant is virtually radioactive. The powerful light that he radiates illuminates the hands and faces of the figures around him. It is thought that Geertgen tot Sint Jans, like other artists from the period, was influenced by the visions of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Saint Birgitta of Sweden, who saw the Infant as the Light of the World, a Heavenly star glowing in the darkness of a fallen creation. She wrote of these visions that the light emitted by the Infant was so bright ‘that the sun was not comparable to it’. In the Geertgen tot Sint Jans, painted a hundred years later, the impossible lighting conditions described by the Saint are suggested by an effect of light that, although impossible in this context (a glowing baby), is in itself realistic and therefore consistent with the requirements of naturalistic depiction.

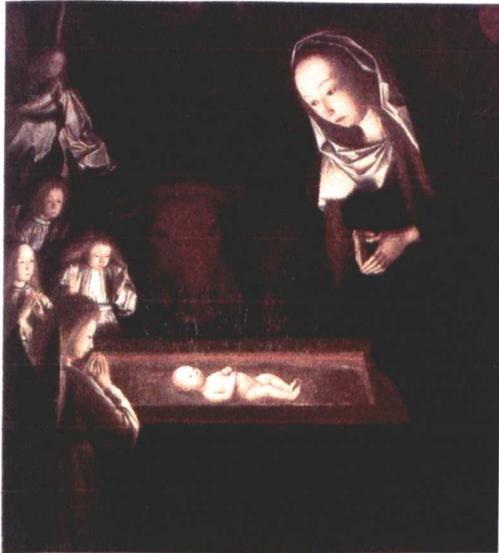


figure 7. Geertgen tot Sint Jans, *The Nativity at Night* (c. 1490, detail)

In Rembrandt's *Simeon's Prophecy to Mary* (c1628, figure 8) the biblical scene takes place in a temple. In the painting we see the devout Simeon, a man who had been visited by The Holy Spirit and told that he would see Christ before his death, telling Mary and Joseph that their child is the Messiah. The angled ray of golden white light here signifies the God-given insight. Once again, Rembrandt has updated a traditional religious light effect and harmonized it with the requirements of more naturalistic depiction. Traditionally the angled ray of light represents the descent to earth of The Holy Spirit. Rembrandt's ray of sunlight that enters a darkened room through a window is a more plausible version of the divine ray that appeared in paintings such

as Carlo Crivelli's *The Annunciation, with Saint Emidius* (c. 1468, figure 9). Here the diagonal golden ray represents the flight path of the Holy Spirit from Heaven into the chamber where Mary is praying. In Mary's room a small aperture in the wall has admitted the spirit into her presence. In Fra Angelico's version (c1430, figure 10), the divine light strikes the virgin as it enters through an archway.



figure 8. Rembrandt, *Simeon's Prophecy to Mary* (c1628)



figure 9. Carlo Crivelli, *The Annunciation, with Saint Emidius* (c. 1468, with detail).



figure 10. Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation* (c1430)

In Rembrandt's *Susanna Surprised by her Elders* (1647, figure 11) the dramatic light that strikes Susanna suggests feelings of despair and isolation. Rembrandt depicts the moment where, caught by an elder whilst bathing, Susanna is being forced to choose between rape or 'to sin against the Lord'. Light underscores the sexual and moral tension of the scene. The greater part of the painting is dark, with only the naked body of Susanna brightly spotlighted. The faces of her tormentors are more somberly illuminated. By means of this gloom the painting establishes a pictorial claustrophobia that evokes the sense of entrapment that Susanna experiences. The harsh, dramatic light that illuminates Susanna and appears to freeze her to the spot as she looks directly at us, seems to act as a constantly increasing pressure upon her, an exposure of her nakedness, a threat.

In *Tobit and Anna with the Kid* (c.1645, figure 12) fiery, wavering light denotes moral equivocation and religious hypocrisy. In the biblical story the blind man Tobit has heard the bleating of the goat and has concluded that Anna has stolen it, despite her denial. Deeply ashamed of his wife, Tobit demands that she return the creature, provoking her to retaliate angrily. Behind his upright and pious demeanour, she claims, he is a secret sinner, and it his evil - masquerading as piety - that has led to their misfortune.



figure 11. Rembrandt, *Susanna Surprised by her Elders* (1647)

In the painting *Tobit* and his wife are depicted conversing in a dark interior. The old man is seated by a fire staring blindly into its fiery depths and gesturing to his wife who both leans forward towards him, raising her left hand as if to speak, and also surreptitiously pushes away a young goat with her other hand. The wavering flames from the fire cast a red light on their faces and hands, transforming them momentarily into devil-like creatures. In this way their moral ambiguity is suggested, not by means of gestures or facial expressions, but by means of fiery lighting effects.



figure 12. Rembrandt, *Tobit and Anna with the Kid* (c.1645)

In the book *Moving Pictures* Hollander notes how Rembrandt's use of light draws the viewer into the story and minimises the need for narrative illustration. She writes,

'Inspired lighting puts the atmosphere in motion, so that it overflows the space and reaches toward the viewer.... The result is moving drama without strong colour, vigorous action, or surface detail. Its motion moves us, whatever Rembrandt's subject; and we answer with that emotional response which automatically follows the response of the eye to light. The narrative action inside the picture is psychologically freighted in advance and needs no theatrical emphasis or conventional rhetoric (25).'

Lighting ideas from George de la Tour's (1593-1652) candlelit nocturnes of the repentant Magdalene have also found their way into today's imagery. These paintings are simple, static in their composition, subdued in their colouration, yet also extremely dramatic. As was the case with Rembrandt's paintings, the drama here is psychological, and is achieved through 'inspired lighting'. The repentant Magdalene was an established pictorial convention, in which the Magdalene is depicted in penance and melancholy contemplation. De la Tour's paintings present a single woman, engrossed in spiritual deliberation, her face dramatically illuminated by differing qualities of candlelight. With her face impassive, the inner turmoil and moral self-examination that is the theme of the painting, is subtly played out by the light that caresses her face<sup>11</sup>. De La Tour's five versions of the theme form a comprehensive study of different types of candle flame within dark interiors, and each describes a slightly different internal monologue. In these candlelit scenes the flame, with its varying qualities of glow is a key to a subtle and elusive emotional subtext. In the book *Georges de la Tour and His World* Philip Conisbee writes:

La Tour's tenebrism is highly motivated, meaningful, and specific to the subject at hand.... At its most basic level the darkened interior enabled the artist to play on the theme of light and reflected light in contrast with the surrounding obscurity. It could set up a mood conducive to contemplation and meditation, both for the actors in his pictures and for the participating spectator. Light and darkness had symbolic values on several levels: most obviously in the

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Conisbee explains the inner events that are taking place here, 'She was a direct follower and witness of Christ, yet she had been the most worldly of sinners. After her conversion and repentance, Mary Magdalene matched her formal sinfulness with the intensity of her pure and enduring love for Christ... any mortal sinner might identify with her wrongs and thus be encouraged to follow her example of self-denial and self-examination on the path to enlightenment. (104).'

contrast between the spiritual darkness of our mortal world, illuminated by the light of the divine (102).

In *The Magdalene with the Smoking Flame*<sup>12</sup> (c1636, figure 13) a thorough study of an oil lamp consisting of a glass jar of oil in which is suspended a wick, supported by a thin rod, is juxtaposed with the enigma of the woman's thoughts. The Magdalene figure is depicted as engrossed and lost in contemplation of the black smoke released by the strong, steady flame. This smoke bifurcates at its tip in a compelling manner.

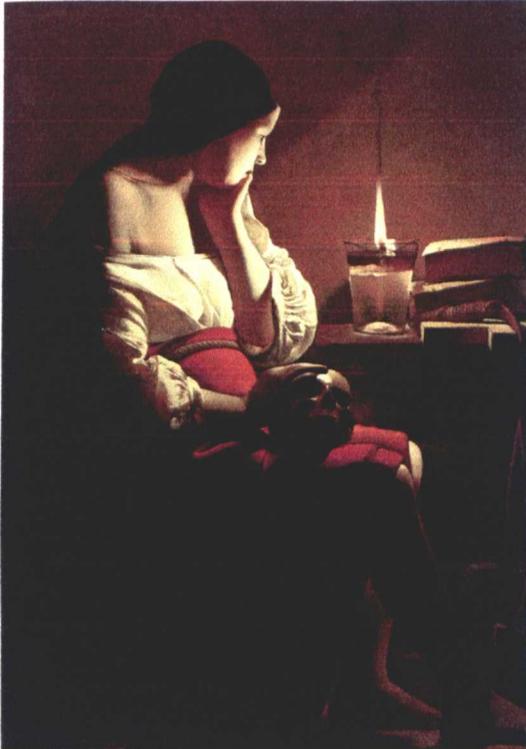


figure 13. Georges de la Tour, *The Magdalene with the Smoking Flame* (c1640)

According to Conisbee the theme of this painting is the Magdalene's contemplation of the mortality of the flesh. This particular motif, he writes, was a commonly used emblem 'wherein the smoke at the top of the flame is interpreted as signifying renunciation of the mortal life and aspiration for the beyond' (105). Using a contemporary piece of devotional literature, Conisbee shows how scrupulous La Tour has been in sticking to the spiritual illumination described within it:

Such a nuance of meaning is suggested in a collection of emblemata published in 1596 by Denis Lebey de Batilly of Metz, to whom the flame of an oil lamp caught in a current of air signifies

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<sup>12</sup> The Los Angeles version.

that the life of man after his nourishment of oil will be extinguished by the breeze of death. Yet we have to be cautious in using this emblem to interpret this painting, since other emblems tell us that the flickering flame is an image of conversion (105).

Conisbee quotes from a sermon of Father Andre de l’Auge, a contemporary of La Tour, on the symbolism of light or darkness as reflected in the mirror:

My lord, what a beautiful comparison! There are two sides to a mirror, one which is opaque and dark; the other clear and brilliant; in Jesus Christ, two natures: humanity which is like the reverse side, darkened by the burden of our infirmities, which he assumed; the other, divinity, is like a very clear and transparent crystal . . . and thus the gospel is a very clear mirror of the glory of god, by which, when we are reflected in it, we are accidentally transformed and illuminated as if by an emanating reflection of the light of Jesus Christ (102).



figure 14. Georges de La Tour, *The Magdalene at the Mirror* (c1635)

In *The Magdalene at the Mirror* (c1635, figure 14) La Tour includes a mirror, in which a skull is reflected in a subtly distorted manner. It is into this sinister reflection that the Magdalene gazes, lost in a trance-like state. The skull obscures the flame and, as a result, takes on a broad, soft orange halo. The brightness of the candlelight, however, penetrates the bone of the skull at the edges, rendering it translucent and

glowing, and creating a demonic effect. The Magdalene's face is warmly illuminated by the flame, while the hand on which she leans her chin casts a dark shadow across her jaw. The other hand, gently touching the skull, is rendered as a flat, black silhouette, apart from a reddish glow that radiates from between her fingers. These fiery effects suggest the profundity of her moral contemplation.

Other early painters who have contributed to the psychological religious vocabulary include Caravaggio (1571-1610), who developed a dramatic tenebrism to unite figures in such a way as to convey complex moral situations (figure 15), and to suggest a particularly eroticised saintliness (figure 16), and Gerrit van Honthorst (1592-1656), who painted the physical effects of illumination from a single source in order to add dramatic tension to a biblical story.



figure 15. Caravaggio, *The Taking of Christ* (c.1602)

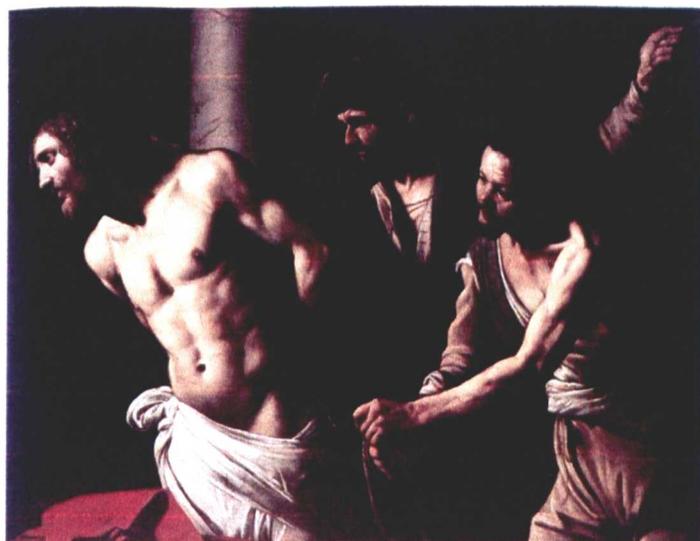


figure 16. Caravaggio, *Christ at the Column* (c.1606)

During the following centuries many of the expressive visual effects contained within *The Psychological Religious Interior* were transferred to secular subject matters. For example, in *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768, figure 17), Wright of Derby applies psychological religious lighting effects to a depiction of scientific discovery. In this painting traditional religious effects and devices, such as glowing forms and spot-lit faces, have been used to add a momentous atmosphere (an atmosphere that seems still seems to resonate with spiritual significance,) to a scene that itself seems to deny the presence of divinity in the everyday. Wright would appear to have simply ignored the traditions of this type of device to bring his own associations to the scene presented.



figure 17. Wright of Derby, *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768)

## 1.2 The Insane Interior

Distant precursors of the jagged and violent light effects used to code the contemporary interior, in order to transform it into a site of intense mental suffering or irrationality, include certain paintings with religious themes such as Matthias Grunewald's *The Temptation of St Anthony* (c1515, figure 18), in which where the protagonist is undergoing a violent mental assault. In these early examples the psychological dimension was projected onto a landscape rather than onto an interior,

as dramatic weather conditions, such as storms and lightning, played an important expressive role.

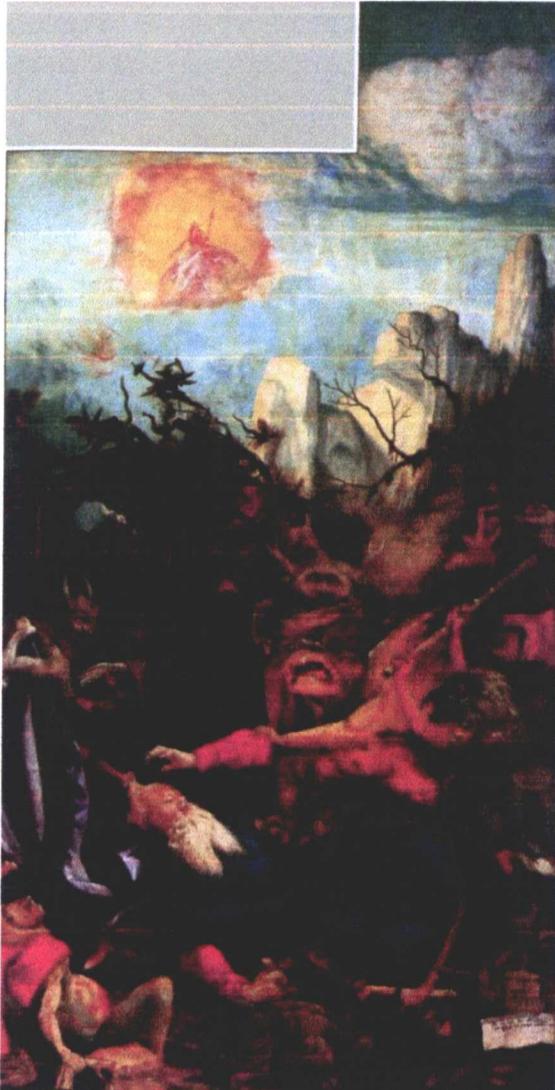


figure 18. Matthias Grunewald, *The Temptation of St Anthony* (c1515)

Grunewald's *Temptation* depicts demonic creatures frenziedly attacking the saint. The terrible confusion suffered by the saint is suggested by a kind of medieval expressionism. In the distance a violent flash of light explodes in the sky, converting the twisted and gnarled branches that surround the scene into sinister and threatening silhouettes. Out of the darkness of this mass of shadowy foliage demonic eyes flash and sparkle as points of light. The attack itself is rendered in dramatic chiaroscuro with a reddish light predominating.

In the two versions of the same theme attributed to Jan Breughel the Elder and his school (figures 19 and 20) coloured light erupts and splutters from buildings in the distance.



figure 19. Jan Breughel the Elder, *The Temptation of St Anthony* (1603-4)



figure 20. School of Jan Breughel the Elder, *The Temptation of St Anthony* (date unknown)

In Hieronymus Bosch's (c.1450-1518) *The Temptation of St Anthony* (figure 21) there is an all-pervasive sense of frenzy and derangement about the entire spectacle. A number of instances of folly, lunacy, irrationality and destruction are depicted under bursting, shuddering and splintering light effects. There are distant flashes of light, explosions, eruptions, and fireworks. The light fizzes, flashes, blasts, splutters and bleaches to create chaos of violent, short-lived light effects. In *The Garden of Earthly*

*Delights Hell* is shown as scene of mayhem, where all rationality and order has been lost. In the distance buildings explode, fires rage, demons glow and searchlights penetrate the night sky. The lake beneath is illuminated blood red. In the foreground horrifying monsters and demons enact crazy rituals and inflict terrible torments as punishment on hordes of sinners.



figure 21. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of St Anthony* (c.1500, detail)

In the book *Passion Iconography in European Art of the Middle Ages: a Study into the Transformation of Sacred Metaphor into Descriptive Narrative*, art historian James Marrow asserts that Northern art of this period strove to extend the appeal of religious art to a broad audience, including the totally uneducated masses. In order to achieve this aim of inclusivity, artists devised ways of making pictures that were more immediate in their appeal. These new pictures of biblical events did not require any literary supplement. They were accessible, populist, explicit, and full of visceral thrills. Paintings such as these attempted to solicit a set of visceral responses from the viewer as he scanned the surface of the painting, his eye moving from one graphically depicted mini-scene to the next. By this means the viewer was intended actually to experience at first hand the frenzies and torments suffered by the characters depicted. Marrow contrasts this northern expressionism with the more controlled and cerebral images of the Italian Renaissance.

Marrow describes how, in their aim to make biblical events more fearfully present and vividly alive in the lives of ordinary people, artists selected the most extreme ordeals and torments to depict. As the viewer, inured to existing levels of suffering, demanded greater levels of sensationalism, the images became increasingly graphic. According to Marrow the 'taste for the consumption of sadistic anecdote seems to have grown without restraint between the 14th and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.' (193). In fact this new type of painting was so successful in its evocation of mental pain and torment that viewers would occasionally find themselves entirely overcome. Marrow refers to contemporary descriptions of fits, visions, and spiritual fervour that resulted from contemplation of these new vivid images<sup>13</sup>.

The lighting conditions that had been used in religious art to express extreme mental anguish and pain were later applied to secular art. The incredible popularity of the secular painting entitled *The Nightmare* (1781, figure 22) by Swiss born British painter Henry Fuseli suggests that this kind of revelling in mental suffering was not merely a short-lived phenomenon. Sensationalist Gothic art such as this was quite dominant in British art particularly from around 1770 to 1830. In *The Nightmare* Fuseli has employed lighting devices from religious paintings, but he has replaced their traditional associations with new ones relating to themes such as insanity, drug-induced psychosis, nightmares and, it is often claimed, perverse sexuality.

This almost monochrome painting depicts a sleeping woman in her bedroom, her prostrate form rendered in dramatic chiaroscuro. The terrifying nature of her dream

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<sup>13</sup> Marrow describes the period leading up to the sixteenth century in the Netherlands as being one characterised by a momentous evolution in Christian spirituality. Within art and literature of the period there is a move from an austere style to a more humanistic and pathetic treatment of the Bible, with emotionally moving details coming to replace the summary formulas of earlier centuries. Connected to this was the change in patterns of spirituality; religious sensibility during this time favoured a more personal, intimate relationship with religion. Popular religious tracts were setting out to highlight the personal meaning within divine subject matter, and religious art too was specifically tailored to engender individual emotional religious engagement.

Artists and writers of this period highlighted the human aspects of biblical figures: their identity as men and women in history as well as the spiritual figures of the Bible. The stressing of their humanity, their confusion and suffering enriched and deepened the experience of the biblical stories for the pious and broadened the appeal of Christianity. The accomplishment of artists was their elaboration on biblical allusions to ordeals and temptations. Marrow calls this genre 'Passion Iconography.' To gain insight into the nature of creativity in the period, Marrow argues that we need to understand the manner in which artists of the period were urged to actually try to imagine what biblical characters had suffered and endured.

forms the subject of the painting, and is illustrated by the depiction of demons and suggested by the atmosphere created by the light effects. Behind the sleeping woman, several glass vials point to the possibility that her nocturnal visions may be drug-induced. A leering demon crouches on her chest while, out of the darkness behind her, a phosphorescent horse's head thrusts through a slit. Its mad eyes seem to flash like two naked light bulbs in the dark.



figure 22. Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare* (1781)

Fuseli's *Mad Kate* (1806-7, figure 23) illustrates the kind of heightened mental state much admired by the Romantics and continues the tradition of the projection of mental disarray onto the landscape as exemplified by Bosch. In *Mad Kate* the lunatic woman is depicted against a raging sea at night. Lightning strikes the waves, illuminating for an instant her face and wild, staring eyes. Behind her, flashes of light burst through the night sky. These paintings draw on devices and effects from psychological religious art in order to create a new kind of highly charged 'horror image', where the horror is all inside the head.



figure 23. Henry Fuseli, *Mad Kate* (1806-7)

### 1.3 The Ordinary Interior with Strange Undercurrents

In *The Ordinary Interior with Strange Undercurrents* a mysterious, unsettling or even bizarre atmosphere is imposed on a domestic scene by means of multiple lighting effects or by a strange juxtaposition of natural and unnatural effects. In *Die Geburt Christi* (c.1512) Albrecht Altdorfer (b.1491, figure 24) applies multiple light events – both naturalistic and magical - to draw attention to the supernatural occurrences that are happening within a stable at night. In the cradle the baby Jesus glows intensely. His luminous body casts a yellowish light upwards onto the faces of the cherubs that surround him<sup>14</sup>. Above this group Joseph and Mary stand transfixed in rapt attention, their faces up-lit, Joseph's by the candle that he holds, and Mary's by the light from the Infant. Outside, a white light bursts through the night on the left while three radiant angels float through the sky on the right. Above all this the sun shines brightly, despite the fact that it is night. This strange combination of light effects signals the unearthly events that are occurring in this scene.

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<sup>14</sup> As we have seen the glowing Infant is part of the iconography of the *Psychological Religious Interior* with the glow suggesting the Infant's power and moral force. Here, however, used in conjunction with other effects, it does not focus our attention on the psychology of the Infant. Rather, it contributes to an atmosphere that casts an unsettling mood over the whole scene.



figure 24. Albrecht Altdorfer (b.1491), *Die Geburt Christi* (c.1512)

In Rembrandt's version of the baby Jesus in the domestic setting of his human family *The Holy Family in the Evening* (c1644, figure 25), the supernatural presence is indicated by the use of eerie light and shadow effects. In the painting two women and a baby occupy the centre of a large dark interior. Only this group is illuminated; Joseph is barely visible, half-concealed in the darkness under the staircase. The source of the warm, glowing light which suffuses the scene is unclear but is very low down. An enormous shadow is cast behind St Anne, echoing the profile of the reading Mary, and seems to add another supernatural presence to the protective group.



Figure 25. Rembrandt, *The Holy Family in the Evening* (c1644)

In Adam Elsheimer's (1528-1610, figure 26) *Jupiter and Mercury in the House of Baucis and Philemon* (creation date unknown) an unsettling atmosphere prevails inside a plain, modest cottage. It is night, and bizarre and incongruous events are taking place, as an old couple prepare for bed, seemingly unaware of the existence of two godly visitors relaxing in the same room. Here, the couple are being overtaken by supernatural events beyond their comprehension. The psychological drama, the strangeness inherent in the scene wherein two groups - divine and human - inhabit the same space unbeknown to the humans, is conveyed mainly through separate and separating lighting effects. The interior is lit from three distinct sources. The face of the old man who is entering the house through the backdoor on the right of the picture is lit from below by the cold light from a spindly candle that he clutches in his hand. Another very low light (a candle or a lantern we cannot see) throws a weak light onto a bowl of food on the floor in front of him and provides just enough illumination for the viewer to make out the form of the old woman as she makes her way across the room. The woman is portrayed in a trance-like state, as if under a spell. On the right an intricate table lamp casts a warmer, brighter light on the faces of the godly guests seated cheerily with their feet up in the corner. This lighting arrangement, consisting of warm and cold light and bright and feeble light, all within the same space, serves to

separate the three groups from each other. Despite the fact that they are depicted in the same interior, the characters exist within distinct areas, each with its own emotional feel established by its own lighting.



figure 26. Adam Elsheimer, *Jupiter and Mercury in the House of Baucis and Philemon* (unknown date)

In *Moving Pictures* Anne Hollander calls this ‘cinematographic’ image-making. She considers that the psychological dimension of this kind of image-making, comes as a result of what she terms the ‘handless eye’ technique. That is the seemingly impartial and relentless focusing by the artist on the appearance of things as they are under specific lighting conditions. She writes: ‘the naked representations of separate objects using light effects apparently unedited by an ideal vision or ideological harmony, have an unsettling effect’ (17).

In Rembrandt’s *The Meal at Emmaus* (c.1628, figure 27) a similar juxtapositioning of the extremely ordinary and the magical is evident. The painting depicts the dramatic climax of the Emmaus story, when the two disciples suddenly recognise their mysterious visitor as the resurrected Christ himself. Rembrandt has used the most theatrical chiaroscuro to articulate the weirdness of the moment. The scene is set at

night, in a humble wooden interior. The seated disciple is depicted as if struck by lighting, his face illuminated by a harsh light from an invisible source. The figure of the resurrected Christ, opposite him, is darkly outlined against the brilliantly lit wooden wall. The contours of Christ's silhouette are echoed on a smaller scale in the glimpse of a woman stoking a blazing bonfire in the kitchen at the back, unaware of what is happening.



figure 27. Rembrandt, *The Meal at Emmaus* (c. 1628)

In Dutch interiors of the mid to late seventeenth century lighting effects conveying a sense of strangeness have migrated into secular imagery. The sense of strangeness that prevails in these rooms is no longer obviously related to a godly incarnation. Many of these Dutch interiors depict ordinary middle class rooms in which clear lines and uncluttered spaces imply a domestic world of quiet refinement and rationality. In these rooms figures with calm, unreadable faces go about their domestic duties. Everything is hushed and controlled in these painted worlds: the children and the dogs do not display any of the physical abandon or ungoverned emotion that might be expected of them. This sense of order and calm gives great emphasis to the light and the way that it that enters the dark rooms.



figure 28. Pieter De Hooch, *Mother Lacing her Bodice* (c1660)

*Mother Lacing her Bodice* (c1660, figure 28) by Pieter de Hooch (1629 - after 1684) for example, depicts a modest interior occupied by a woman, her dog and her child. The middle-aged woman is seated in the foreground of the picture doing up her bodice, her dog by her side. Caught in the act of tying the laces, the figure of the woman is mildly suggestive of sensuality, yet she also appears detached, as if caught up in a daydream<sup>15</sup>. The room where she sits is lit only by a high window, in the top right hand corner of the painting, from which light enters softly, picking out a hanging bedpan and caressing the drapes and fabrics of the bed area. The sombre lighting in this chamber is oppressive and entrapping. The woman's child can be seen behind her in the kitchen; in this second room the door to the yard is ajar and the small, silhouetted child stands stiffly, staring as if transfixed, into a blaze of bright white light outside.

Hollander in *Moving Pictures* describes this lighting device of a figure staring out from a gloomy interior through an aperture into bright light, as cinematic. It is, she claims, 'outward looking but inward looking'. She continues: 'What makes the

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<sup>15</sup> Hollander comments on the vague sense of repressed sexuality within de Hooch's interiors. She notes how 'sexuality has no pleasurable exuberance of its own to assert in these works (136-7).'

picture cinematic is the psychological movement set up by the light ..... drawing us towards what it may reveal' (311).

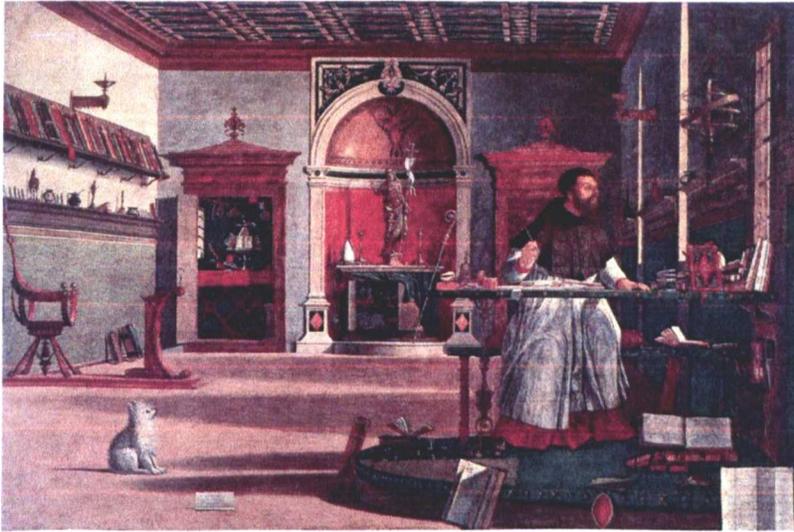


figure 29. Vittore Carpaccio, *Life of St. Jerome: Vision of St. Augustine* (c. 1502-7)

This visual device appears much earlier in two interiors with religious themes by Vittore Carpaccio. In Carpaccio's *Life of St. Jerome: Vision of St. Augustine* (c. 1502-7, figure 29) we cannot see what has distracted the Saint from his work. We can only see slivers of the strange light outside. Interestingly, in an earlier painting entitled *The Dream of St Ursula* (1495, figure 30) the bright light from outside brings with it an extraterrestrial visitor: an angel.

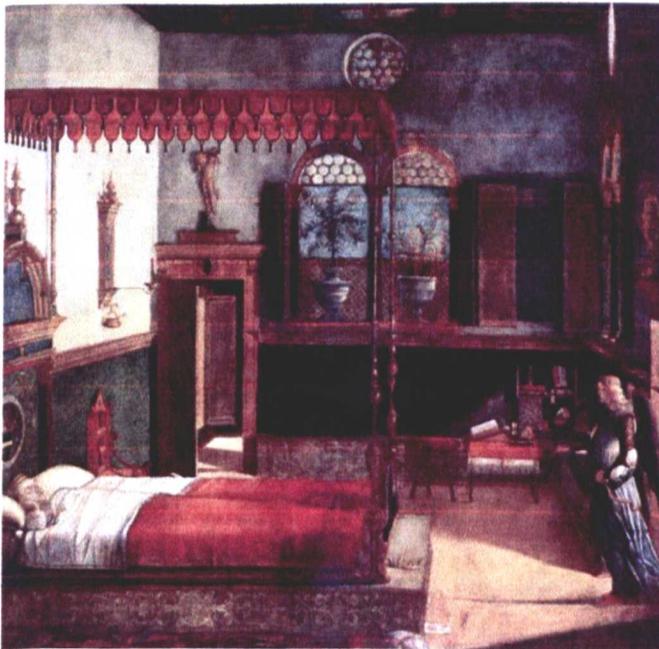


figure 30. Vittore Carpaccio, *The Dream of St Ursula* (1495)

In *A Lady with Two Gentlemen* (c1669, figure 31), by Jan Vermeer, we see the ‘outward looking but inward looking’ device once again, but here the light is much less forceful. In the painting, one section of the room is quite gloomy, whilst the other is lit by a soft, cold light coming through the open window. The woman in the painting has paused in her dealings with a gentleman by her side, and is pictured staring out at the viewer, as if suddenly distracted by something. The back of the room is dark, and we have to crane forward to try to work out the details of the room in which a second man sits. In this way, the mechanics of the picture itself engender a sense of searching for something, a mystery just out of sight.

In his book *American Silences* art historian J.A Ward claims that in Vermeer’s paintings such as *The Music Lesson* (figure 32) an ‘aesthetic of silence’ creates a sense of something artificial, or wrong, beneath the pellucid, ultra-realistic surfaces. Ward claims that a sense of time standing still is a key feature of Vermeer’s oeuvre. This feeling, he believes, is evoked by the depiction a world that is ‘unreal’ in that it is emphatically motionless - ‘movement implies time as a necessary element’ - and silent: ‘the interpretation of a painting as being silent seems to imply a lack of a sense of the passage of time (405)’.



figure 31. Jan Vermeer, *A Lady with Two Gentlemen* (c1669)

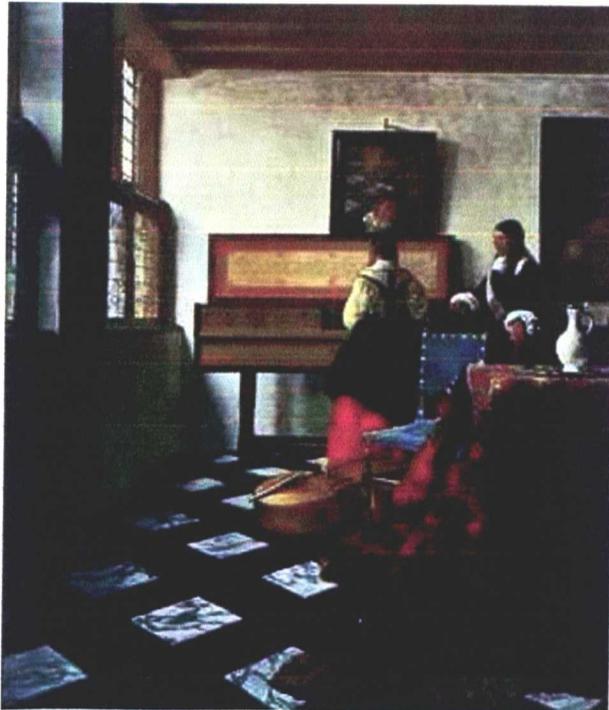


figure 32. *The Music Lesson* (c. 1662-65)

Of course, stillness and silence are conditions inherent to painting, but Ward claims, they are highlighted or even thematised in Vermeer's paintings. This is achieved by several means: firstly, by the subject: figures lost thought; secondly, by the absence of noise usually associated with the musical instruments depicted, ('a silence so emphasized that it is essentially the subject and theme of the work, 169'); thirdly, by the depiction of an absolutely precise condition of light that captures, isolates, monumentalises and preserves an individual moment under precise and transitory lighting conditions<sup>16</sup>; fourthly, by the simplicity of the composition, that is the geometric arrangements of simple shapes in a shallow pictorial space<sup>17</sup>; and finally,

<sup>16</sup> In the article *The Timeless Spaces of Edward Hopper*, Art historian Jean Gillies notes how 'the representation of an object under a precise fixed illumination means its arrest in time.' By means of a precision of light, she notes, an image of everyday life such '*Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*' is removed from a possible sequence of moments or any sort of pedestrian narrative, and thus the ordinary is given an almost iconic status.

<sup>17</sup> In *The Timeless Spaces of Edward Hopper*, Gillies applies the notion: that the passage of time must co-exist with space, to images. She describes the way that in many of Vermeer's works a very shallow picture space is implied - the parallel flatness of the plane of the back wall appears to be very close to the picture plane itself. This shallow space is further flattened by the manner in which the shapes of objects set against or on the back wall, such as maps or the backs of chairs, echo or actually touch shapes in the foreground. Gillies concludes that Vermeer's decision to allow only very shallow pictorial depth was made in order to enhance the sense of stillness and the sense of a frozen moment in time. Moreover, she claims that a careful horizontal and vertical organisation of elements, and a general lack of clutter within Vermeer's interiors, further create a sense of stillness. She explains that

by the pictorial suggestion of incompleteness, the sense of a single frame isolated from a sequence, a frame impregnated with expectancy. As his painted scenes can never be resolved, Vermeer's images hang in the air forever waiting. Ward observes how, in Vermeer's paintings, the unnatural stillness and silence are made more poignant by the subjective reaction of the viewer, caused by the apprehension that this most intimate moment might be interrupted at any time. Moreover, the viewer "automatically feels that he *himself* should be very quiet and still, so as not to disturb or be found out. (170)'

Michael Fried is of the opinion that the way that light is depicted in certain paintings can provoke the viewer to listen as well as to look. He calls this type of pictorial appeal 'a multisensory experience.' (62) This is achieved, according to Fried, by the use of a particular visual trick of illumination, suggestive of something heard, induced by means of the depiction of wavering or moving light and its echoes. Fried claims that low illumination forces us to gaze intently into the picture and also provokes us to listen closely. He writes 'looking and listening are placed under equal strain, making us aware of both as acts of willed attention.' (64)

Hollander observes how in Vermeer's paintings and other Dutch Interiors such as Emanuel de Witte's *Interior with a Woman at a Clavichord* (c1665, figure 33), the depiction of characters playing musical instruments establishes an unsettling emotional experience. She writes, 'in these paintings music-making and musical instruments also stand for emotional movement itself, like the light. .. The Vermeer music scenes, just like the de Witte, seem to be using the suggestion of sound to augment the tension. (143)

In his book *The Photosynthesis of Being*, Yves Bonnefry, claims that it is Vermeer's own melancholy that saturates his interiors and gives them their particular poetic and unsettling mood. He notes the fact that the subject of 'Time as evanescent' was popular in Vermeer's era. Holland, he observes, was on the cusp of change. Capitalism was evolving at a pace, and banking and trade were transforming both the

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as the eye scans the image in a series of jumps, from one interesting point to another, it can be seen that the fewer the points, the less movement is perceptible in a picture. Darkness is a factor in limiting the number of interesting points in these images.

landscape and people's lives. Vermeer, unlike several of his contemporaries, chose to depict the kind of ordinary, everyday events that were threatened by this imminent change. Bonnefry suggests that Vermeer wished to stop the transformation of his environment, and to preserve forever, in paint, a captured moment of ordinary daily life, about to disappear forever. It is this sense of capturing and preserving something, by means of a precision in light - something that had remained unchanged for so long, but that was now about to be lost forever - this sweetly sad response to his subject, that, according to Bonnefry, permeates Vermeer's paintings and makes them strange and suggestive of unsettling experiences.



figure 33. Emanuel de Witte, *Interior with a Woman at a Clavichord* (c1665)

## **Part Two: The Re-emergence of the Psychological Interior within Filmic Culture**

### **2.1 The Psychological Religious Interior**

As we have seen, *The Psychological Religious Interior* is infused with invisible religious themes relating to moral goodness and evil, religious enlightenment, moral confusion, crises of faith, struggles with temptation, the defeat to sin, guilt, repentance, or Christ-like tendencies such as an impulse towards self-sacrifice. These are suggested by means of a number of lighting effects. Murnau's film *Faust* (1926) constitutes an early example of the adaptation of *The Psychological Religious Interior* to the moving image. The film is shot using harsh chiaroscuro and the light tends to

spotlight and isolate details and make them glow in the manner of Rembrandt<sup>18</sup>. However, although many directors cite Expressionist films such as this as inspiration, these early films, to my mind, played a more marginal role in the development of these set pieces for cinema as they merely signify a move of iconography from art to popular culture, rather than a point of origin.

Abel Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant* (1991) abounds with psychological religious themes, motifs and styling. The title, the urban realism and the violent content however, mean that this film is ambiguous in its status as a secular or a religious work. The film stars Harvey Keitel as the eponymous Lieutenant, a sinner suffering psychologically from an overwhelming sense of guilt. Lieutenant is a drug dealer, a drug user, a gambler, thief, sexual predator - and also a Catholic. The tortured and paradoxical emotional situation that results from these irreconcilable tendencies forms the central theme of the film and is displayed by means of religious light effects.

Lieutenant is engaged on a case involving the vicious rape of a nun by two young men from her neighbourhood. Although at first Lieutenant has no particular interest in the case, he is drawn in, despite himself, when the nun refuses to name her attackers, claiming to have forgiven them. At this point Lieutenant's own Catholic faith is re-awoken and, consumed with anguish and confusion, he begins to wrestle with his conscience and ultimately to lose his mind. In the second half of the film, unable to overcome his addictions, Lieutenant descends deeper and deeper into moral degradation and an ensuing mental agony. During the denouement the extremity of Lieutenant's moral crimes is matched by his penitence and compensation, as, finally catching up with the rapists, he exonerates them, knowing that this gesture of forgiveness will cost him his life.

Visually, as well as in terms of the narrative, there is an identification of Lieutenant with Jesus Christ. This parallel is trumpeted by means of both a liberal use of

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<sup>18</sup> Describing Murnau's film Eisner writes in *The Haunted Screen*, 'The forms come through the misty light gently opalescent. If Murnau is recalling the light-quality in Rembrandt's etchings, he interprets its function in his own fashion.... The light can waver over faces or stream in from all sides. The two effects are combined at the misty crossroads where Faust invokes the demon: a rising chain of circles of light casts a wavering glow over his face. Fiery letters flame across the screen, promising Faust power and greatness. From inside church waves of gentle light rise towards the vaulted roof ... these subtleties of lighting participate in the action. (Eisner, 290)'

religious iconography and the use of stock-in-trade psychological religious lighting effects. In fact, Lieutenant's worst behaviour takes place in conjunction with traditional religious visual ideas. For example, in the bedroom scene early on in the film, we see Lieutenant drunk, in the company of two prostitutes, standing naked and drunk in a 'crucifixion' pose while howling like an animal (figure 34). Later, in the same scene, light streams through the window from behind him towards us, the audience. As the light is obstructed by his body it breaks up into strong directional shafts of pure white that seem to emanate from his form (figure 35).



figure 34. Still from *Bad Lieutenant* (Abel Ferrara, 1991)



figure 35. Still from *Bad Lieutenant* (Abel Ferrara, 1991)

When he returns to the church to try to persuade the nun to reveal the identities of the rapists, Lieutenant finds her in an ecstatic state of forgiveness, her face caressed with light. Behind her kneeling figure, streams of morning light pour into the gloomy

interior through two windows forming inverted 'v' shapes (figure 36). As Lt kneels at her side his profile is presented to us, darkened and silhouetted against this powerful light. Attempting to persuade her to give him the names, he invokes the possibility that other such rapes might occur and would rest on her conscience; he asks her: 'can you bear the burden, Sister?' As the nun reminds him of his own faith, the flames of the candles behind him gently flicker. In the scene that follows, Lieutenant muses over the situation in a gloomy bar, a phosphorescent halo of light clings to the outline of his head (figure 37).



figure 36. Still from *Bad Lieutenant* (Abel Ferrara, 1991)

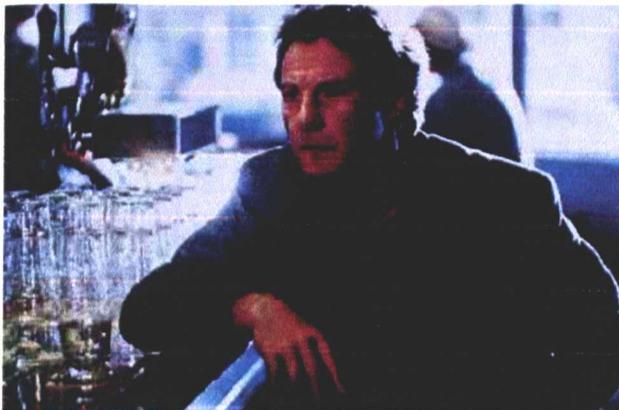


figure 37. Still from *Bad Lieutenant* (Abel Ferrara, 1991)

Examples of *The Psychological Religious Interior* also appear in the Walt Disney animated film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), but these are altogether more 'lite'. Here humour undercuts the traditional religiosity of the set piece. Animator Randy Fullmer explains in *The Art of the Hunchback of Notre Dame* how this was a deliberate strategy: 'we split the edge between humour and seriousness' (149). The film uses religious light and dark effects to suggest the goodness or the evil within the

soul (figures 38,39,40). The twisted soul inside Frolo's upright, apparently pious body is revealed visually by means of fiery light effects. In Frolo's study his struggle with temptation – in the form of the gypsy girl Esmeralda - is visually articulated by the effects of the flames of the open fire behind him. As he sings 'Hellfire'- a confession his wicked desire - with his back to the fire, the edges of Frolo's body become translucent and glow a fiery, demonic red. In Quasimodo, on the other hand, is shown with a soft, hazy and warmly toned light falling on him from above (often shafts of light,) to suggest the fact that his outer ugliness conceals hidden goodness and depths of spirit.



figure 38 (left). Still from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Disney, 1996), Frolo in his study.

figure 39 (right). Still from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Disney, 1996), Quasimodo in his room in the Cathedral

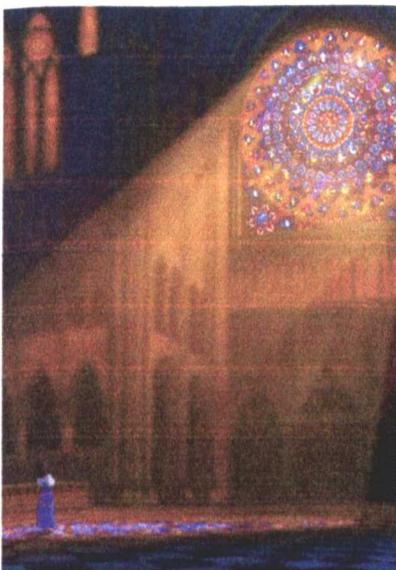


figure 40. Still from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Disney, 1996). Esmeralda in the Cathedral

The film *Pitch Black* (David Twohy, 1999) is a secular science fiction film set in the futuristic interior of a spacecraft and a planetary base station. There are a number of dramatic examples in the film of *The Psychological Religious Interior*, in which a variety of light effects, immediately recognisable as belonging to the religious iconography of sainthood, are used to visualise the secularised yet classically religious themes of betrayal, spiritual transformation and self-sacrifice. Light is used here also to illuminate the hidden nature of characters. Despite the fact that the film is actually peppered throughout with religious motifs, the religious theme is kept at arm's length, disguised and made palatable for a modern audience by means of the sci-fi genre and by an over-the-top style.

The film is a jumble of moral issues. At its heart is the conflict between self-interest and self-sacrifice. During the movie Fry, the pilot responsible for the safety of the space-craft and its passengers, undergoes a moral and spiritual transformation. Beginning with her assertion that 'I will not die for them' Fry reaches the point, towards the end of the film, where she makes the parallel but opposite assertion to Riddick, the seemingly brutal and callous escaped criminal and fellow-survivor on an alien planet, that: 'I *will* die for them. I *will die* for them.' The film abounds with religious psychological lighting ideas taken from Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Bernini, and Wright of Derby. Shafts of directional light like rain, thick rays of light from above, glowing forms, glowing flames, haloes of light and coloured auras illuminate and penetrate the pervading darkness (figure 40). In a religious sense, light in *Pitch Black* might also be seen as a metaphor for God: on the dark planet on which they land light is their only saviour, it guides them through chaos and through hell, back to safety, and it burns and destroys their alien enemies.



figure 40. Promotional material for *Pitch Black* (David Twohy, 1999)

Inside the ship, after its crash landing, the survivors crowd around the mortally wounded saint-like navigator, Owens. With a spike through his chest he shudders in agony and torment. A cathedral-like light pours into the darkened chamber from behind as Fry, knowing that Owens is going to die and needing to relieve his suffering, demands that the others leave. When we return to the room moments later Owens is lying in Fry's lap in a classic pieta pose. The spike has been removed and a thin halo of light caresses Fry's head and back as she leans over the dead body.

We first encounter Riddick – an escaped convict and murderer who possesses prison-polished eyes that can penetrate the dark – lashed to an upright pole inside the gloomy engine room of the spacecraft. A Caravaggio-esque light from above falls on his head and shoulders leaving his face in the dark. Later we revisit him there, this time bound in a crucifix position (figure 41), from where, in a parody of Christ, he mocks his captors, his devilish black eyes glinting in the darkness. When Fry approaches him he jerks forward, and a shaft of light from the right briefly illuminates his face.

Following a later conversation with Fry in the same room during which his moral position is rendered more ambiguous, Riddick opens the door to leave and walks into the raging light outside, his figure becoming a wavering, elongated spectral form. Like Fry, Riddick also undergoes a spiritual change during which he reclaims his humanity. Recognising this in the final sequence he says to the young girl who has asked him how he should be presented if they were to be rescued: 'tell them Riddick's dead. He died somewhere on that planet'.



figure 41. Still from *Pitch Black* (David Twohy, 1999). Riddick lashed to a pole.

The scene in which the severely diminished group of survivors discuss their options in the dark interior of the ruined ship is like a cinematic version of a Caravaggio painting

(figure 42). As the group, which includes Fry, Johns, Riddick, a Muslim cleric and two children, huddle together in the gloom, the lights from torches, candles and flares play on their faces and hands, casting dark shadows, and making the hands that hold them glow.



figure 42. Still from *Pitch Black* (David Twohy, 1999).



figure 15. Caravaggio, *The Taking of Christ* (c.1602)

Johns, the mercenary in charge of transporting Riddick back to jail, acts as a foil to Riddick. Presented at first as a truly upright, moral character, his actions reveal him to be malign, dangerous and self-serving. A variety of coloured light effects signal his true nature. As Johns denounces Riddick and Fry in the ruined interior, claiming: ‘he’ll leave us all out there to die’, ‘she was so willing to sacrifice us all,’ his figure obstructs a green light from the powerful flare gun behind him, causing it to break up into thick green shafts of light which seem to issue out from his form in a parody of Christ. In the sequence in which Johns is killed, he and Riddick have separated from

the group to discuss how to proceed. What is essentially a struggle between good and evil takes place between them as the green light from a flare torch flickers and twists (figure 43).

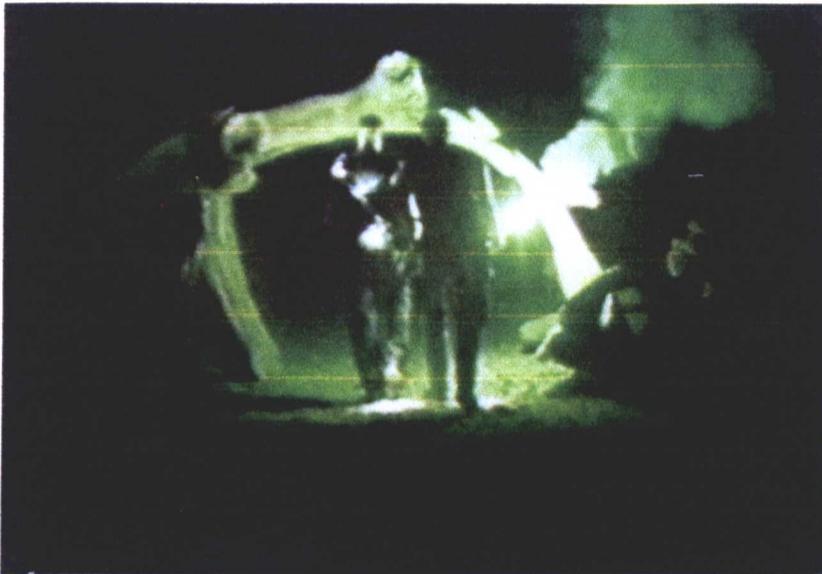


figure 43. Still from *Pitch Black* (David Thomby, 1999)

In the final scene it is raining heavily as Riddick reaches the safety of the new ship alone, having left the others in a cave, supposedly to await his return with additional lights. As he prepares to escape without them, a flash of light explodes, a flash of conscience. At that moment he sees Fry through the windscreen, brightly illuminated by the ship's headlights. As he tempts her to go with him and forget about the others we see her face, caught in the full light of the ship's beam. The white light seems to freeze her to the spot as she makes her momentous decision. As rain and light pour down on her she cries out defiantly 'I will *die* for them. I *will die* for them.' Her vow becomes a premonition when, a few minutes later, she is actually speared by one of the alien creatures whilst rescuing Riddick. The moment that she realises that she has received a fatal wound a look of ecstasy passes across her face (figure 44): an expression similar to that of Bernini's St Theresa in *The Ecstasy of St Theresa* (1547-52, figure 45), but with added light and colour effects



figure 44 (left). Still from *Pitch Black* (David Thomby, 1999)

figure 45 (right). Bernini, *The Ecstasy of St Theresa* (1547-52)

## 2.2 The Insane Interior

In *The Insane Interior* fragmented and violent light effects project mental pain, confusion and anguish onto an interior. David Lynch's debut film *Eraserhead* (1977) is the quintessential cinematic Insane Interior. In the film innumerable effects and ideas from earlier *Insane Interiors* reappear within the American middle-class interior to create distorted and grotesque sequences of grisly comedy. The film is often discussed in relation to an earlier film, Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919), described by film writer Kracauer in his book *From Caligari to Hitler* as a 'translation of a madman's fantasy into pictorial terms' (70).

In this early Expressionist film distorted and fragmented light effects, painted shadows in disharmony with the lighting, and zigzag delineation, designed to efface

all rules of perspective, create an overtly insane world. The film is shot in such a way as to create a violent contrast between light and dark. This serves to emphasise the serrated edges, sharp corners and acute angles characteristic of the sets. Heavy directional shadows criss-cross the floors and further confuse the viewer, already confounded by deliberately distorted perspectives. Unstable rooms, with slanting walls intersecting at unexpected angles, and windows and doors at oblique angles to the floor, provoke a sense of disorientation, a correlative to that experienced by the lunatic characters themselves. Dr Caligari himself is the director of a lunatic asylum who has become obsessive to the point of madness. In the final scene we see him in a small cell that is a visual manifestation of the lunatic inner world in which he is trapped. Raving, and restrained by a straightjacket he sits in a room whose walls narrow as they rise. Pointy shadows extended along the floor towards the spot where he squats. High above him there is a distorted, rhomboid window that lets in a broken light.

*Eraserhead* is also shot in high contrast black and white, and also represents the world as it might be perceived by someone who is losing their mind. The film is shot subjectively from the perspective of Henry Spencer (Jack Nance), a tragicomic figure, who is in a state of constant agitation, confusion and anxiety. When he arrives home at the beginning of the film to encounter an enigmatic, beautiful neighbour, the ride in the lift with its buzzing, flickering neon strip signals his state of paranoia. The neighbour informs him that he has been invited to dinner at his girlfriend Mary's home to meet her parents, a meeting in which it is revealed that he is to be a father. When the baby is born it turns out to be hideously deformed. At this point the story, such as it is, slows down, becoming completely stationary at times. During these stationary moments the narrative movement burrows downwards deep into Henry's subjectivity. A symbiotic use of sound and light serve to draw the viewer deep into Henry's strange and perverse mind as he retreats more and more into an irrational daydream world. A low atonal hum is almost always audible in the background, broken occasionally by an uneasy mixture of discordant noises and off pitch screeches. It is this auditory distortion and the concomitant light effects which signal the mental breakdown that Henry undergoes, and which culminates in his killing of his child.

The oppressive and bleak nature of Henry's life is emphasized by the fact that is entirely shot in black and white. The unconventional narrative and by the onslaught of images of despair and torment make it an uncomfortable experience watching the film, and the use of black and white film stock serves to alienate the viewer further. In an interview with Kenny Beida Lynch explains how he embraces this distancing: 'I just love black and white so much. Right away, you're one step removed from reality...'

Mary X's middle-class home is a diseased aberration of the suburban aspirant lifestyle. Here, instead of the cheery bright lights and clean sparkling surfaces normally associated with the American domestic dream, we get gloomy interiors, lit by malfunctioning table lamps, which flicker and fizz casting patches of dirty light upwards and creating twisted shadows. In the dinner scene where Henry meets Mary's dysfunctional family, wall-lamps and table lamps glow sombrely contributing to a stifling atmosphere. Despite the stygian gloom, the surface of the dinner table shines brightly as if radioactive. Dark shadows are cast onto the table-top by the serving bowls and by the arms of the diners assembled around it, and bizarrely shaped patches of light fall on the walls behind them. As the meal descends further and further into irrationality, the lamps by the sofa on the other side of the room buzz and flicker.

In the scene in which the baby is killed, the madness of the moment is articulated through light. In the darkness only the edges of things can be seen. As the baby's swaddling is cut open to expose its organs, the lamps blink on and off intermittently, and the babies entrails tremble in the flickering light. Suddenly, a fuse blows and the electric socket begins to emit sparks of light. The camera moves in towards the faulty flickering lamp and then the bulb blows and we are left in darkness. The most iconic image of the film follows this blackout. This is the close up headshot of Henry, upright and isolated against black, with his wild upright, standing-on-end hair alarmingly backlit, so that it seems to glow. Phosphorescent dust particles fly around his head (figure 46) This electrified look is the complete opposite of the soft, soothing halo often used to connote contemplation in portraits described earlier such as those by Rembrandt. Rather than suggesting deep deliberation, this treatment creates a sense of crisis and existential torment.

It is interesting to note how similar this iconic image is to one of the monochromatic self-portraits painted between 1907 and 1915 by Belgian Expressionist Leon Spilliaert (1881-1946) that is also suggestive of mental pain and confusion. The portrait dated around 1907 (figure 47) shows him from the shoulders up, within a domestic setting, looking into a mirror. A sickly aura of light trembles around the objects on the mantelpiece. The artist stands against blackness, his face lit from below, and stares intensely at his image (and at the viewer,) as if mentally boring a hole into his own reflection. With his eye sockets completely in shadow, his eyes can only be made out by a close scrutiny of the painting - a case of the viewer duplicating the scrutiny depicted. In sharp contrast, the artist's hair is quite white, and is painted in such a way as to suggest strong backlighting. Again the light trembles and shudders. The way the eyes are locked whilst the light shakes around the hair and the objects on the mantelpiece creates the suggestion of a level of intensity bordering on madness.



figure 46. Still from *Eraserhead*. (David Lynch, 1977)



figure 47. Leon Spilliaert (1881-1946), *Self Portrait* (1907)

Many of the effects and ideas that Lynch uses in *Eraserhead* to create its singular tone, at once both comic and expressive of a kind of decomposing reality, recur in Lynch's oeuvre, but never in such a pure form. In this particular film he has constructed for himself a highly individual and complex pictorial language, one perfectly fitted to his peculiar and self-conscious vision. Although many of the general ideas that he uses have been borrowed from the past, the details of his cinematography are highly idiosyncratic. Despite its self-consciousness, *Eraserhead* can be *experienced* rather than explained, experienced as the bizarre journeys of a wandering mind.

Certainly the independent production *Pi* (1998) directed by Darren Aronofsky lacks this precision despite the fact that it quotes ruthlessly from *Eraserhead*. Shot in high contrast black and white, it follows the descent into madness of Max Cohen, a reclusive mathematician who is obsessed with the quest for a pattern within the numerical data of the stock market. During the film he is pursued by an investment company who wish to benefit financially from such a discovery, and by a group of Jewish clerics who believe that an elusive 112 digit number has the potential to unlock all the secrets of the universe, a situation which adds to his already chronic paranoia. At regular intervals during his research Max suffers from violent fits in which intense migraines and increasingly disturbing hallucinations feature. Towards the end of the film these altered states begin to conflate with Max's normal heightened mental condition. As we watch Max drilling a hole into his temple during the denouement we are left uncertain as to whether we are witnessing another hallucination or a real event.

The film uses both sound effects and lighting ideas – including a range of lighting effects specific to the computer age - to enable the spectator to experience at first hand Max's confusion, paranoia and increasing derangement. During the early stages of his first fit we experience, along with Max, the subtle transformation of the room where he works at home, by means of the most extreme contrasts of light and dark. As the seizure takes hold of him the camera vibrates and the lights in the lab reverberate with it. Through this wavering light Max attempts to focus his attention on his front door, which is shuddering as if under pressure from outside. Suddenly the many locks burst apart and the door opens to a blast of harsh bleaching light. Then

there is white-out and a voice over. Throughout the film we hear the same refrain: Max explains how as a child he was warned never to look directly at the sun. At thirteen however, he chose to ignore the advice: ‘when I was 13,’ he tells us again and again, ‘I stared directly into the sun. Suddenly, everything came into focus at once...’

During a web interview with Aronofsky Ruby Rich comments: ‘I was really struck with how the character’s inner thoughts and feelings really changed their physical surroundings in a very material way’ (paragraph 5). The tiny, dingy room seems to act as a parallel to the inside of Max’s mind. Lighting ideas used here to suggest Max’s disturbed inner state include the slatted light from a window blind, the flickering light of a computer screen, the tiny dots of light from various electricity sources which shine like glow-worms in the darkness, the insistent and regular blinking of numbers on a dark screen, and the sudden flash of a blowing bulb (figure 48). During the migraines that prefigure the subway hallucinations these lighting effects become more violent: they pulsate, flash, streak, and explode.

The film is shot in such a way as to enable us to perceive events through from Max’s perspective. In another web interview Aronofsky explains to Steven Applebaum: ‘what I’m fascinated in doing on film right now is making a subjective exploration of a person’s reality. The reason we watch movies, I think, is so that we can go on a trip with someone else... but if, as a director, you can take that a step further and actually try to have the audience enter the mind of a character on a more visceral level, then, I think, it becomes a more intense experience. (paragraph 10)’



figure 48. Still from *Pi* (Aronofsky, 1998)

Aronofsky employs what he calls 'subjective filmmaking techniques' to describe the deepest recesses of Max's mind. In an interview conducted by Anthony Kaufman he says 'Its extremely stylised and different.' He continues,

'With camera angles, we tried to do as much as possible to bring the audience into Max's head. We wanted them to experience how it was to be a renegade genius mathematician standing on the verge of insanity.... The idea behind *Pi* was to make a fully subjective movie - meaning never to cut away (from Max's point of view) ... That was the intent, at least, we tried to stick to that from the music to the lighting. (paragraph 1)'

The Hollywood remake *The House on Haunted Hill* (William Malone, 1999) abounds with Computer Generated *Insane Interiors* and employs an arsenal of short-lived lighting effects. The coloured lights in the basement of the eponymous house flash, flicker, spark and blaze in a chaos of effects to create a sense of complete irrationality and mayhem.

The plot is simple, Steven Price, a multi-millionaire, offers a small group of people a million dollars each if they will spend the night in an allegedly haunted house, which his wife has chosen as a venue for her birthday party. This is The Vannacutt Institute, a former asylum for the criminally insane. Some sixty years earlier, a gruesome series of events had occurred as the inmates took revenge on their tormentor, the insane and sadistic Dr Vannacutt. This bloodbath had culminated in an inferno, as the whole building went up in flames. As a result of its terrible past, the house itself has become insane. We are told at the beginning of the film 'the spirit of his victims still lie within the walls'.

In the opening sequence we are shown a scene from sixty years ago, as the lunatics attack their oppressors in a violent frenzy of revenge. This massacre is shown in high contrast black and white, as a series of blinking images, as if caught on a malfunctioning old movie camera held by one of the lunatics. Then there is white-out, followed by a TV report on the event. The journalist covering the story invokes a religious connection, describing how 'a conflagration of Biblical proportions incinerated everyone inside.'

Soon after their arrival at the house, the modern-day visiting party investigates the subterranean, labyrinthine tunnels, lit by flickering and fizzing wall lights. The wandering beams from their torches add to the jerky and fragmented lighting effects. As the characters become increasingly nervous, the circles of torchlight tremble across the architectural features that they illuminate (figure 49).



figure 49. Still from *The House on Haunted Hill* (William Malone, 1999)

These corridors lead to a number of former operating rooms. In the first of these an overhead pulsating blue light flickers over preserved cadavers in a cabinet (figure 50). From the back wall a huge ventilator lets in streams of light, which are chopped up by its revolving blades so that the light seems to pulsate. As the character Melissa Marr enters this chamber, the blue lights flash pink for an instant. As she looks into the monitor of her video camera, we see the environment through its lens. This view reveals, in trembling black and white, a scene from the past: a scene of torture. Then the image flickers violently, and a succession of ghastly images flash before us: an array of Clive Barker-esque lunatics with ziplock sewn-shut faces and swivelling heads. Then there is a bleaching light, Melissa screams, and the scene ends.

Later, a succession of violent electrical surges throughout the house signal that something unpleasant is occurring. The party discovers Steven Price's wife, Evelyn, strapped to an operating table in another of these subterranean rooms. They see sparks fly from her body as she is subjected to a series of increasingly violent electric shocks. Bolts of lightning bleach their faces as they watch her die. After the final explosion of blazing light is over, a low dangling lamp swings slowly from side to side.

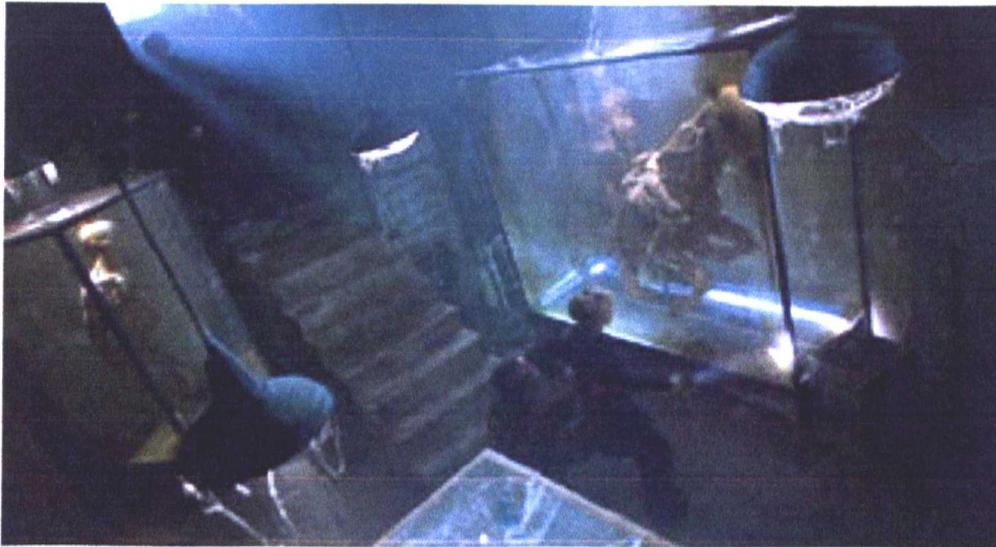


figure 50. Still from *The House on Haunted Hill* (William Malone, 1999).

Accused of this murder, Steven Price is locked in a zoetrope: a rotating cylindrical cell that had formerly been used to provoke severe psychotic disturbances in patients. Trapped in this claustrophobic environment, he watches a light as it circles around him through the slits in the machine, alternating with intervals of darkness. As the zoetrope speeds up, the light enters in an increasingly stobe-like way and begins to induce nightmarish visions of ghouls and scenes of torture. These images flash before him in quick succession in black and white. There is an *Eraserhead* moment where he seems to be underwater and a face appears before him out of the darkness with darkened eye sockets, vertical back-lit hair and with bubbles all around. He watches transfixed as it morphs horribly into a Bacon head screaming in anguish: all mouth.

### 2.3 The Ordinary Interior with Strange Undercurrents

In *The Ordinary Interior with Strange Undercurrents* incongruous or bizarre lighting arrangements or lighting arrangements that serve to separate characters in the same room suggest strange or unsettling undercurrents within an ordinary domestic interior. Sometimes this relates to the existence of something supernatural in the room, at other times it is a more secular mystery.

Steven Spielberg's films tend to conflate the genres of psychological melodrama and science fiction and produce a number of compelling examples of *The Ordinary*

*Interior with Strange Undercurrents*. In *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) for example, a mother struggles to prevent a powerful, supernatural, orange light from entering her house. We watch her obstruct doors and windows in a vain attempt to protect her son from this alien force. Despite her efforts however, the strange orange light continues to force its way into the room through holes and cracks. As it streams into the room through the floorboards, she turns around and sees her son opening the door (figure 51).



figure 51. Still from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977)

In the shot that follows we see her son as he stands, as if immobilised, silhouetted against the light from the wide-open front door, staring into the strange light (figure 52). This is the characteristic abiding image of a Spielberg movie: a single figure or small group of people staring open-mouthed and reverent in the presence of some extra-terrestrial visitation in the form of light. Artist Gregory Crewdson in an essay entitled *Aesthetics of Alienation* in the magazine *Tate etc* comments on this device of a figure looking through a window or doorway into the light of another space, and relates it back to Edward Hopper<sup>19</sup> (figure 53). He writes:

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<sup>19</sup> In the twentieth century the American painter Edward Hopper continued to paint *Ordinary Interiors with Strange Undercurrents*, despite the fact that his peers were increasingly moving away from narrative imagery. Hopper adds some new lighting ideas to the existing vocabulary, in the form of a range of evocative artificial lighting effects, such as neon lights and, also, the headlights of a passing car as it drives past a room. In *Hotel Lobby* (1943) for example, Hopper manages to suggest that the relationship between the elderly couple depicted is distinctly uneasy, by means of the use of drawn curtains and artificial neon light. As we cannot tell what time of day it is we are left suspended in a kind of non-time, a limbo. Gregory Crewdson observes in the *Aesthetics of Alienation* how this kind of light is psychological in intent: 'Hopper's narratives occur in moments that are forever suspended between a 'before' and an 'after' - elliptical, impregnated moments that never really resolve themselves. There is an enormous reservoir of psychological anxieties in his work, a sense of stories repressed beneath the calm surface (43).

I think this serves to emphasise further the viewer looking with a kind of voyeuristic gaze into the world. It is an idea that Hitchcock used in *Rear Window* (1954) where you have people looking out from one private world into another. Hopper's figures are often seen peering through windows or into the landscape. Ultimately, I believe the window creates the possibility of another existence, outside their own. He's not only showing us alienation, but also a degree of hopefulness.... Steven Spielberg picked up on this very well in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). In the film there is a collision of the themes of the paranormal and ..domesticity.'

(44)

As we have seen, however, this device has a longer history (figure 54)



figure 52. Still from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977)

figure 53. Edward Hopper, *Rear Window* (1954)

figure 54. Pieter De Hooch, *Mother Lacing her Bodice* (c1660, detail)

Todd Haynes' film *Safe* (1995) also involves an incorporeal threat to the suburban home. Here it is the hazard of invisible chemicals. Again, light is used to reveal and make visible this hidden danger. It is also used to suggest the psychological dimensions of the story, and the enormous gulf that opens up between the wife, Carol, and her husband, Greg, due to her overwhelming and irrational fear. In one scene, in

their bedroom, the estranged couple occupy the same bed, yet there is a psychological gulf between them, and this is highlighted by the lighting, with Greg illuminated by a cold bluish light, and Carol by the golden light from her bedside lamp. A still from this scene (figure 55) bears a distinct resemblance to another Hopper painting, entitled *Summer in the City* (1949, figure 56), but the separating lighting effects also appear in older works such as Degas' *Interior* (1868-9, figure 57), and the Adam Elsheimer painting discussed earlier.



figure 55. Still from *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995)

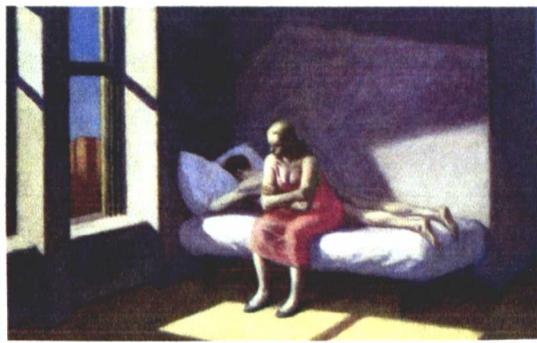


figure 56. Edward Hopper, *Summer in the City* (1949)



figure 57. Edgar Degas, *Interior* (1868-9)

In the same scene there is a shot where the glowing lamp behind Carol is reflected several times in the huge mirror behind her (figure 58). This bizarre lighting effect – a novel version of the use of multiple lighting effects discussed earlier - also occurs in Hopper's, *Automat* (1927, figure 59). Here a young woman sits in a café at night drinking coffee in front of a vast window that reflects the café's lights in such a way that they appear to lead backwards through space. In both images the reflecting glass reveals nothing but blackness punctuated by the reflected lights, lights that lead the eye deep into a black void. In her article entitled *The Timeless Spaces of Edward Hopper*, art historian Jean Gillies reads the empty black spaces of Hopper's paintings

as engendering feelings of anxiety and alienation in the viewer, feelings which (s)he then projects onto the characters within the picture. Gillies describes how these feelings result from the spectator's projection into a world at once both highly 'realistic' (410) and yet impossible to map. Hopper presents the viewer with un-navigable space, according to Gillies, by using 'incorrect' perspective, huge areas of black nothingness, and by denying the horizon line. The spectator, she states, when confronted with such space, is denied a fixed relationship with the 'realistically' (410) rendered, volumetrically correct objects being viewed. The disorientation, which such space construction provokes, produces a sense of anxiety and alienation in the viewer. In the paintings of Edward Hopper, she concludes, we see alienation itself as content.



figure 58. Still from *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995)



figure 59. Edward Hopper, *Automat* (1927)

Although not a movie, Gregory Crewdson's photographs are definitely filmic. In fact, they are often described as movies-in-one with their super-intensity of atmosphere, achieved by a compound of individual 'Hollywood style' ideas and effects.

Crewdson's *Twilight* series (1990), highly staged photographs of middle-class American life super-charged with atmosphere, epitomise *The Ordinary Interior with Strange Undercurrents*. They depict suburbanites at twilight, enacting moments of surreal behaviour whilst seemingly lost in a reverie or a trance. In some images there is a sense that they are just on the cusp of waking up again. These images, by means of odd or unnatural light effects - unsettling juxtapositions of warm and cold light, daylight and artificial light, morning light and twilight, or 'normal' and highly theatrical light - balance an atmosphere of repression, alienation or Hopperesque melancholy with Spielbergian passivity in the face of supernatural events. In *The Aesthetics of Alienation* Crewdson expresses his interest in what he calls 'an

aesthetics of alienation' - an aesthetic that he links primarily to the work of Edward Hopper, but which he also observes in certain other artists and filmmakers such as Spielberg and Cindy Sherman. He also states his admiration of the way that Hopper deals with American 'vernacular spaces', 'where there is a sense of the familiar and the ordinary. His work feels as if it can be everywhere and nowhere' (46).

In the photograph of a family at dinner (2001, figure 60) a man and his two small children sit wordlessly around the dinner table, each staring in a different direction, whilst a woman serves dinner. The lack of any kind of interaction between them is emphasized by the lighting that locates each of them in separate 'microclimates'. The central light, a chandelier made up of artificial candles that glow a gentle orange, hangs over the dinner table without delivering much illumination. Its feeble light fails to unite the group. Instead, a small, square ceiling light, to the left of the chandelier, emits a shaft of almost celestial light that isolates the man from the rest of the family. The contours of his face are rendered in a dramatic chiaroscuro. The same light also spotlights the plate of food directly below it. The woman is in a dark area of the room; behind her, light streams across the wall from another, more powerful light that emanates from an unseen source in a room on the right. She stands, unnaturally erect in front of the table, serving food in a mechanical manner. Like the rest of the family members, she stares into space, seemingly in some kind of stupor. The drawn curtains suggest night, yet we can see light outside through them. As with Spielberg's motifs, there is a sense that this light is trying to get in.

In *Untitled (Dylan on the Floor)* (2001, figure 61) the same man is seen kneeling on the living room floor. The bare wooden floorboards have had holes drilled into them and shafts of blue light are pouring upwards through them. Here the image looks entirely artificial due to the theatrical lighting. The man crouches in an area between the light shafts, in an agitated manner. Behind him an artificial fire glows an angry red. All around him doorways to other spaces are ajar, and tantalising light effects draw the viewer towards the little separate worlds inside. We can see beyond this room into another, brighter, altogether calmer room where an empty chair and a carafe of coffee are waiting. In the main room an open cupboard door reveals a well-lit closet with hanging clothes inside.



figure 60. Gregory Crewdson *Twilight* (2001)



figure 61. Gregory Crewdson *Twilight* (2001)

Light reflections dominate *Untitled (Ophelia)* (2001, figure 62), in which a woman in a trance-like state floats on the surface of the dark waters of a flooded living room.

The light from the windows behind is raging in such a way that it seems to be trying to get in. There are a number of reflections in the water from these windows and from a table lamp and, in a mirror, three further dangling lampshades are reflected from another part of the room that we cannot see. Crewdson says of this image: 'I really like that moment where the ambient light comes together and works with the artificial light and creates this very powerful and evocative palette.'



figure 62. Gregory Crewdson *Twilight* (2001)

## Conclusion

Although the lighting devices I have described were initially deployed in order to make the invisible psychological dimension of religious stories more emotionally immediate, I have shown that, as society became increasingly secular, these artistic devices became detached from their religious moorings and were instead used to signal the otherwise invisible psychological dimensions within secular scenarios. When these lighting devices migrated into film during the nineteen twenties and thirties they continued to exert their old emotional pull. In fact, allied to this powerful new medium, their atmospheric effect was greatly intensified. At some point during the second half of the twentieth century a new generation of filmmakers seems to

have rediscovered these potent visual formulas. Recognising their power to engage an audience's emotions, these directors reintroduced them into their films, but in a more self-conscious manner than their predecessors. Auteurs such as Lynch and Ferrara continued to believe that these devices could be used to express layers of their own personal psychology. Others however, used them simply for their visceral power, without considering any particular previous meanings. Such directors frequently signposted their borrowings by means of humour or an 'over-blown' quality. By this means they reflected a growing cynicism towards this kind of emotionally manipulative set piece, and acknowledged the existence of a new generation of viewers, well versed in reading and deconstructing seductive imagery. The result was an emotional distance within their movies.

The particular ways that filmic culture uses these set pieces today reveals the continued power that they exert. To some extent the period of declamation seems to have ended. In the latest generation of fantasy films, the emphasis on ironic quotation has diminished and we are encouraged once again to become fully engaged by these moving set pieces.

## Chapter Two: The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle



figure 63. Still from *Casshern* (Kazuaki Kiriya, 2004)

### Introduction

*The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* contains a variety of effects and motifs which collectively prompt recognition of a kind of post-lapsarian state; signs of Sin, evil, corruption, destruction and demonic powers are everywhere.

In this chapter I will begin by arguing that the original *Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* was Hell, as it appeared in the imagery of the late medieval period, (generally accepted as stretching from around 1300 to 1500). My intention is to identify significant iconographic, formal and semantic similarities between the Hell-worlds of medieval paintings and those created within movies today. Robert Hughes, in his book *Heaven and Hell in Western Art* notes how images of Hell within medieval art, and also within the descriptive prose of the New Testament, ‘contain all the fundamental aspects of the immense structure of fear which Christianity was to erect. (35).’ Indeed, a large number of those pictorial effects and devices originally deployed in religious art to evoke fear of the possibility of some terrible future reprisals for acts of Sin have survived to the present day quite unchanged. I will also demonstrate the way in which specific Northern European artists of the renaissance period, such as Bosch, Breughel and Mandyn,

condensed together the various visual effects and devices that had been invented during the medieval period, and invented their own, newer effects within their spectacular and grandiose Hellish tableaux. I will end Part One of this chapter with a brief discussion of the etchings of Jacques Callot, which signify an early stage of the migration of Hellish devices from religious art into secular imagery.

In Part Two of this chapter I will demonstrate how, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* makes a significant comeback within secular filmic culture, namely Hollywood cinema. In *The Matrix Trilogy* for example, *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* is intended both to evoke a pleasurable fear and dread in the audience, and also perhaps, in a more metaphoric way, to draw attention to real social situations and their possible future repercussions.

The invention of sophisticated digital technology in the form of Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) seems to have rekindled and facilitated a desire to manufacture whole new worlds, rather than merely record the realities of our own. We are bombarded, as never before, with dramatic cinematic versions of various types of Hell and of its resident fallen angels. Hell is now situated in our world; it can be a deserted subway system or a subterranean nightclub, but certain key iconographic ideas are quite consistent with those within earlier images in this tradition. Interestingly, these new, crowd-pleasing, fantastical spectacles frequently demonstrate a sensational mix of the futuristic and the medieval. Of course, any search to track down precise allusions and sources for today's elaborate cinematic set pieces is something of a guessing game as to what their creators knew. Nonetheless, striking parallels exist with older imagery, and these will be the subject of this chapter.

### **Part One: The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle in Painting**

The original nightmarish city was Hell<sup>1</sup>. The artistic imagination of the late Middle Ages, the period during which the kind of exciting and atmospheric effects and ideas that I will

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<sup>1</sup> The Christian Hell, probably derived from the Greek Hades or Netherworld and the Judaic Sheol was an underworld where souls who had chosen to sin were sent to burn. The depiction of Hell as a place of eternal

be examining at first came into being, conceived of Hell as a subterranean place of darkness and fire, ruled by Satan, where his demons inflicted all sorts of tortures on those sinners whose actions had condemned them to eternal damnation. In his book *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, Richard Cavendish catalogues some common pictorial elements of medieval Hell,

'Fire, heat, burning, purging, searing, roasting, scalding stewing. Torments of fire, a lake of flames, rivers of toads and snakes, black water. Showers of fiery rain like arrows. Furnaces, ovens, fumes and smoke... storms, rain, hail, people flayed, roasted, cramped together, fighting, a black stream, ooze, marshes, slime, a river of boiling blood, suicides in trees, Harpies in the branches. Disease, drowning, torments, mutilations. Devils and demons with hooves, snouts, scalloped ears, snaky tails, tusks, fur, scales, wings, shells, fangs, beaks faces in bellies or buttocks. Hell is the realm of chaos, Sin, the disorderly, the unnatural, the deformed and perverted... (120).'

Both Virgil and Dante mention the gloom of Hell, and indeed, darkness was an elementary component of Hellish imagery from the late medieval period. In these early visions Hell tended to be depicted as the opposite of Heaven, an anti-Heaven. Darkness was an inverted correspondence to Heaven's brightness and clarity. Late medieval artists developed methods of creating a kind of visible darkness. In *Heaven and Hell in Western Art* Hughes notes,

'In the Hells of Giotto, Taddeo di Bartolo, Nardo di Cione and – as far as one can judge from the surviving fragments – Orcagna, Hell's obscurity is schematically indicated by dark background spaces, iron-grey and earth brown rocks, rings of dead unreflecting water and sudden bursts of fiery red; but the whole scene is bathed in an even light which gives equal weight to each of the crevices and cauldrons wherein souls are tormented. (212)'

In Giotto's *Last Judgement* (uncertain date, claimed variously to be between 1304 and 1314, figure 64) Hell is blood red and black, in contrast to the warm ochres, golds and cerulean blues of Heaven above it. In the centre of the painting sits Christ, enclosed in a mandorla of fire. A stream of fiery smoke flows down from Christ's mandorla to Hell,

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damnation ruled by Satan first appeared in the tenth century in representations of the Last Judgement and was elaborated on over the following centuries.

signifying that the inferno is kept in existence by God's will. At the base of Hell the Devil, another inverted correspondence, squats, eating sinners. On either side of him there are openings into the ground which suggest yet deeper subterranean levels. A variety of painful punishments are being inflicted on the sinners by grey hairy demons with pointed ears, clawed feet and long tails.



figure 64. Giotto, *Last Judgement* (dated between 1304 and 1314, and detail)

In this fresco the orderly, static nature of Heaven, with its rows of angels geometrically arranged in tiers, contrasts with the energy, disorder and chaos of Hell. Within the infernal abode order has broken down, as the damned are plunged into the chasm of Hell in a swirling, writhing mass of tiny naked bodies, swirling within a blue-black vortex. As they fall their bodies spiral, corkscrew, twist and interlace. Hughes notes how the expression of chaos was at the root of medieval Hell imagery. The presentation of Hell as a realm of anarchy, through the medium of this seemingly disordered and chaotic organisation of elements, is another key visual device. Hughes writes:

‘Artists strove to find a form for Hell, the other half of a dualistic universe. Where Heaven was peace and order, Hell was disorder and chaos. Where Heaven was described with aesthetic clarity to create an analogy between form and subject, the pictorial organisation of Hell needed to convey aggressive and malevolent energy. Artists attempted to create the opposite of formal harmony in their images of Hell.’ Their efforts produced ‘a terrifying world, complete in itself, with its own ruler laws, ecology, population, substances and weather. (157)’



figure 65. Coppo di Marcovaldo, *The Last Supper* (c.1225, detail of mosaic)

In the mosaic of *The Last Supper* by Coppo di Marcovaldo in Florence (second half of thirteenth century, born c.1225, figure 65) a sense of enormous energy is created by the multidirectional movement of writhing snakes and bodies. In Jan van Eyck’s *The Last Judgement*, (c.1425, figure 66) a sense of congestion and chaos is achieved by devils, monsters and sinners pressed tightly together so that their bodies intertwine.

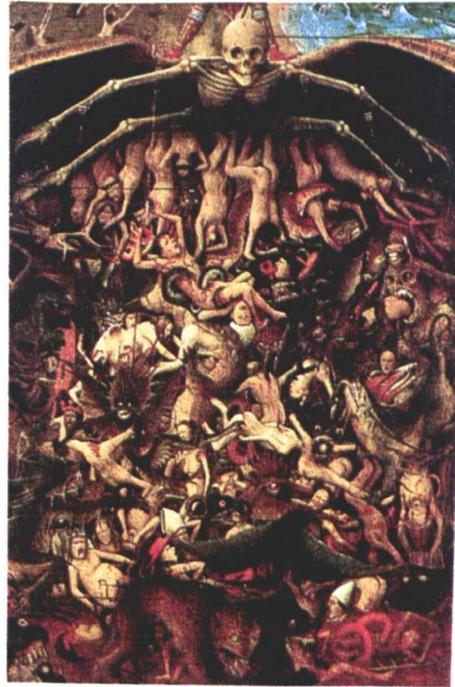


figure 66. Jan van Eyck, *The Last Judgement*, (c.1425, and detail)

In the section of *The Universal Judgement* in the Camposanto, Pisa, sometimes attributed to Francesco Traini, which depicts Hell (c.1350, born 1321, figure 67), the sinners at the top of the picture are arranged vertically but their orientation becomes increasingly disorderly and unruly as the tiers descend. The sinners are woven into the space of the picture by snakes and by the arms of demons<sup>2</sup>. At the bottom of the image, the writhing flames reinforce this twisting rhythm.

The medievalist Thomas H. Seiler, joint editor of *The Iconography of Hell*, in his essay *Filth and Stench as Aspects of the Iconography of Hell*, points out that this contrast between the order of Heaven and the chaos of Hell appears in the earliest versions of the bible. He considers that the description of horrible sights, smells and sounds adds to this sense of chaos. He notes how in the Bible ‘The calm and order of Genesis 1.1 is counterbalanced by the disorder and babble of Genesis 11 and the fire and odiferous brimstone that devastate the Cities of the Plane in Genesis 19.24... in several texts ... the

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<sup>2</sup> The idea of groups of sinners encircled in a great chain - sometimes of snakes or even worms - herded like animals by devils appears in art as early as the twelfth century.

punishment of evil, Hell and damnation are always represented by sights, sounds and scents designed to be aberrant to all our senses. (132).’



figure 67. *The Universal Judgement* in the Camposanto, Pisa, (c. 1355, variously attributed to Francesco Traini and Buonamico Buffalmacco)

In Hell imagery heat, smoke and fumes are often represented in order to emphasise the sense of chaos and confusion and to provoke a sense of discomfort. Allusions to revolting smells were also common, with Hell frequently portrayed as a dark and stagnant underground bog, pit or well. Seiler describes the following effects, which were frequently employed: sulphur and pitch raining down, slime, black foul waters, misty vapours, mire and mud. Particularly disgusting were depictions of rotting and festering limbs. Seiler describes how in some Hell imagery despairing sinners facing judgement were depicted as having corrupted and decomposing bodies, sometimes eaten by toads and snakes.



figure 68. *The Damnation of Lovers*, Mathias Grunewald (fifteenth century)

Historian Paul Binski, in his book *Medieval Death*, links this kind of hideous imagery of festering bodies back to what he calls ‘the culture of the macabre’ - an ‘obsessive compulsive voyeurism’ which created images in which suffering and voyeurism are central features. The Black Death that had ravaged Europe in the first half of the fourteenth century had contributed to this culture. Contemporary writers saw the plague as God’s punishment for sinful behaviour<sup>3</sup>. Post-plague art reflected the prevalence of both disease and guilt. According to Binski, ‘the second important approach to the issue of the macabre sees it as a manifestation of a highly developed guilt culture. (131).’

In this illustration by the Limbourg brothers (c1410, figure 69) vapours are depicted as rising from the flames of a huge grille. A jet of fiery devil’s breath, like a geyser of a volcano, is filled with bodies corkscrewing upwards within it. In *The Infernal Torments of the Damned*, a miniature from an illuminated French manuscript of Augustine’s *City of*

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<sup>3</sup> The Italian Boccaccio, for example, who lost his whole family to the Black Death in 1348, described it as ‘a punishment of an entire culture’, and the fourteenth century writer, William Langland, in his *Vision of Piers Plowman* said ‘these pestilences were for pure sin.’ (Binski, 127).

*God* (c. 1416, Paris, figure 70) there is the suggestion of repulsive cooking smells, with sinners being boiled and roasted.



figure 69. Illustration by the Limbourg brothers for *Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Bury* (c1410)

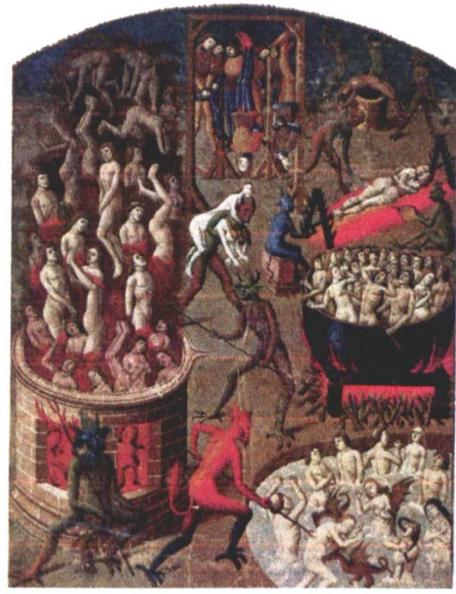


figure 70. *The Infernal Torments of the Damned*, a miniature from an illuminated French manuscript of Augustine's *City of God* (c. fifteenth century Paris)

In *Hell* (c late fifteenth/sixteenth century, figure 71) by an unknown Portuguese artist there is an impression of intense heat and overwhelming odours.

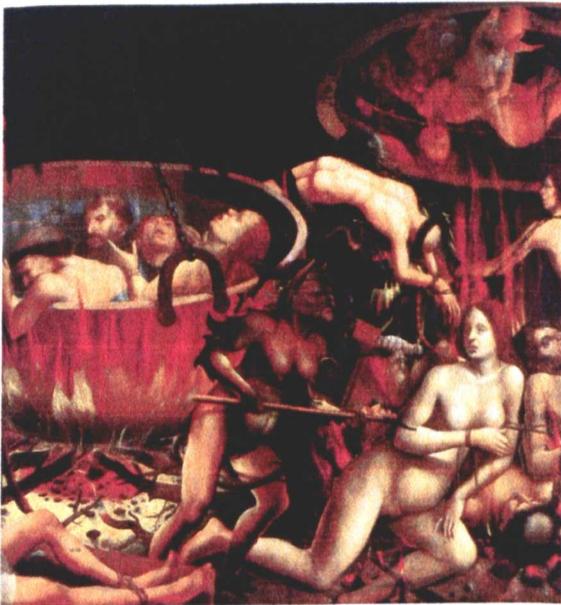


figure 71. Unknown artist *Hell* (c late fifteenth/sixteenth century)

Heat and noise were also evoked as part of an overall assault on the senses. Fire was a fundamental feature in depictions of the Infernal City<sup>4</sup>. Over the course of the Middle Ages, as images become richer in detail, a huge array of unpleasant incendiary effects develops. In *Visions* Cavendish writes, 'Fire and heat are the principle torments of Hell and Hell-fire is the infernal counterpoint of the radiance of Heaven. It emits a blinding and smothering smoke. The imagery of furnaces, ovens, fumes and smoke inspired painters like Hieronymus Bosch in the fifteenth century and John Martin in the nineteenth to portray Hell in terms of industrial scenery (112).'

References to industry, with its associations of discordant noise and sweatshop conditions also often appeared in Medieval Hell imagery. For example, Taddeo di Bartolo's spectacular fresco *Hell* (born 1362, figure 72) contains a concentration of Hellish 'special effects' including an impressive array of contemporaneous industrial equipment being used as instruments of torture. In *Visions* Cavendish explains how as technology evolved so did the types of punishment depicted. For example, when the blast furnace was invented it was immediately applied to Hell. Other real life industrial instruments that found their way into Hell included pitchforks, hooks, bellows, pincers and axes.

At the top, in the centre of the Taddeo fresco, the Devil – with a man's torso and arms, a lion-like head and bird's legs and claws - is both devouring and excreting some sinners whilst simultaneously banging other's heads together and crushing them underfoot. In other sections reddish brown demons, equipped with a vast array of instruments of torture, are inflicting various different punishments and torments on a number of pale writhing worm-like figures. The Seven Deadly Sins are each singled out for suitably apt punishment. In one compartment an adulteress is lashed by a demon, while a sodomite is impaled on a stick; in another, demons force the gluttonous, including one notably corpulent sinner, to consume rotten food; and in another a miser is strangled with a rope and a usurer lies in flames whilst a demon excretes gold coins into his mouth.

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<sup>4</sup> References to fire as a punishment appear in the Old Testament; it is inflicted on Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24).

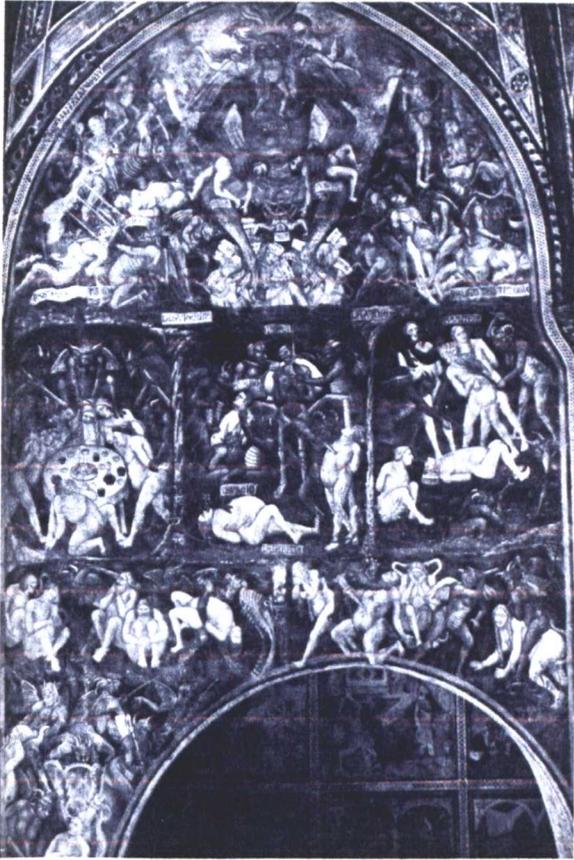


figure 72. Taddeo di Bartolo, *Hell* (c.1396)

A similar compositional scheme has been used in Fra Angelico's *Last Judgement* (c. 1432, figure 73). Here, Hell appears to be situated inside a hill, which has been rendered in cross-section to reveal a honeycomb format. Clothed sinners are being herded into the hill through a cave opening by black devils brandishing spears. Once inside they are left naked. Here it is dark but raining flames. Once again, different torments are taking place in each cell-like subdivision. For example, in the top right corner a dragon's gaping mouth is being fed live sinners, whilst others wait nearby. One waiting sinner is holding his own severed head, another hangs upside down. In other cubicles there are hangings, boilings and burnings. Right at the bottom of the maze the Devil stands in a huge cauldron chewing up and dismembering the wrongdoers. Flames lick the cave walls<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> An earlier and more basic example of this compositional idea for Hell can be seen in a twelfth century Byzantine mosaic depicting *The Last Judgement* in the cathedral at Torcello, near Venice. Here the image is arranged in tiers, with the figures decreasing in size from top to bottom. Christ as Saviour is in the top tier, Christ Seen in Glory in the second, the third depicts the Angels, and in the fourth the Damned are separated from the saved and herded into a huge fire wherein they become engulfed by flames. Beneath the

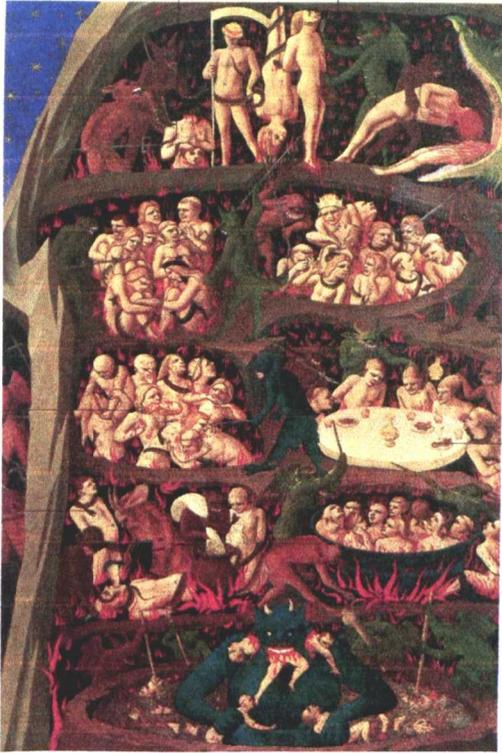


figure 73. Fra Angelico, *Last Judgement* (c. 1432).

Giovanni da Modena's *Inferno* (c1404, figure 74) is a spectacular image in which a variety of graphically depicted torments are being meted out simultaneously within different caves using a variation on the compartment idea. Here a series of diagonals criss-cross across the surface to produce the separate compartments. As we read across the picture plane we see the wrathful being devoured by giant rats, the misers force-fed melted gold, the heretics hacked to pieces with an axe, the lustful having their backs torn with huge pincers and a sodomite pierced with a skewer.

Another interesting variant on this compositional idea can be found in *Satan Enthroned in Hell* by the Brussels Initials Master (active 1385-1410, figure 75). Here Hell exists as a subterranean architectural structure divided into compartments by means of arches and pillars.

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fourth tier Hell is further subdivided into separate cubicles in which a variety of punishments take place, such as drowning in flames and being eaten by worms<sup>5</sup>. The cubicles become smaller the lower they are.



figure 74. Giovanni da Modena, *Inferno* (c1404)



figure 75. Brussels Initials Master (1390-1410)

In *The Inferno* by Nardo di Cione (active 1343-66 in Florence, figure 76) this kind of compositional scheme for Hell is rendered in a complex map-like form. At the top of the image snake-bound sinners are being herded into chasms in the ground around a lake. Hell begins just beneath this surface and descends deep into the earth in tiers. Once again we see it in cross-section. Many of the tiers are subdivided into smaller units by walls of rock. In the sixth circle there is the city of Dis with its high walls going up in flames<sup>6</sup>. Here the walls are red and frightful symbolising the eternal nature of the fire. Below a number of subdivisions further complicate the space.

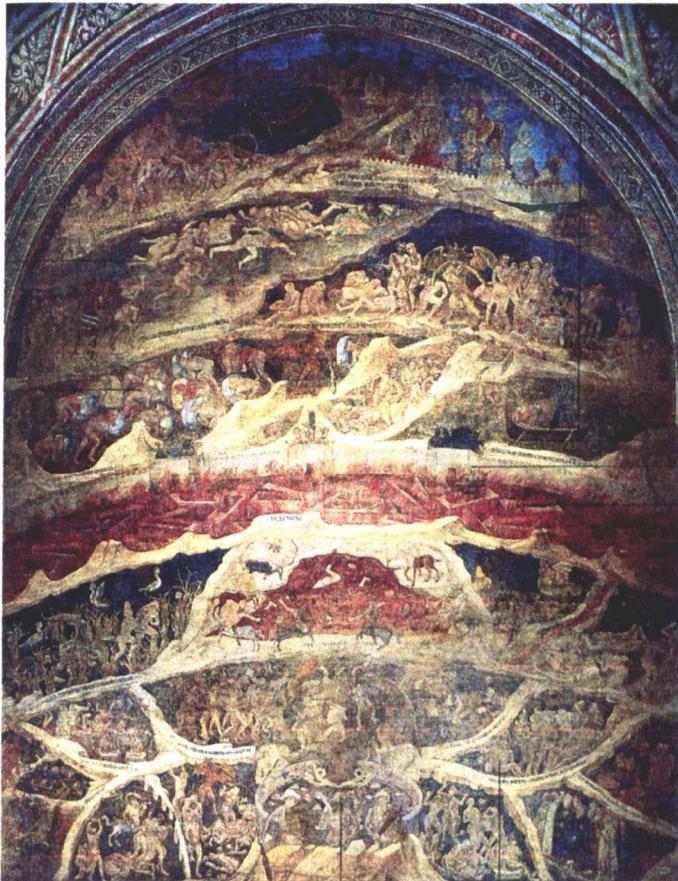


figure 76. Nardo di Cione, *The Inferno* (1343-66)

In this image the artist has followed closely Dante's elaborate schema for the structure of Hell<sup>7</sup>. In Dante's *Inferno* sinners are cast into nine separate concentric circles that fall

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<sup>6</sup> Dante describes Dis as a fortified city whose walls, seemingly made of iron, are punctuated by great red towers that seem to be on fire.

<sup>7</sup> Much of the geography of Hell as described by Dante has an even older history as it was taken from Islamic and eastern sources and from Virgil.

into a conical hollow or deep crater to the centre of the earth. The most abominable sins are punished at the bottom of this crater. Upper Hell, where the lesser sins find their punishments, is formed of five circles. The first is limbo, with the souls of unbaptised people and pagans. The second is for the lustful, the third for gluttons. The fourth is for misers and the fifth for souls damned for anger. Within this are the walls of the city of Dis, which contains the whole of lower Hell. Circle six holds heretics and from here a cliff drops to another river, the Phlegethon, in which the 'violent against nature and self' are punished. From the edge of this circle an even deeper cliff plunges down to circle eight which is divided into trenches containing the fraudulent. Finally Dante arrives in circle nine the frozen lake, the bottom of Hell, in which the souls of traitors are punished by Satan. Hughes observes how 'one feature of Dante's Hell was to be of great importance for the depiction of Hell in general. This was the separation of the pit into circles or cells, each of which contained a group of sinners undergoing torment for a different Sin. (214).'

In her book *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages*, Penelope Reed Doob investigates the medieval obsession with the labyrinth as a visual sign 'with its narrow paths, turnings, circles, bewilderment, re-tracings, and deceitful arts (Doob, 1)'. As the labyrinth is inherently 'deceitful, nearly inextricable', she explains, it is a perfect expression 'of the world and Sin'. A labyrinth was the obvious structure for Dante's *Inferno* as the medieval mind tended 'to equate the structural windings or *errores* of the maze with moral error (Doob,7)'. The idea of the labyrinth incorporates both formal principles – circuitousness, complexity, and transmitted significance such as imprisonment. Given this she writes,

'It is not surprising that the landscape of the Comedy should include a series of labyrinthine places: the organising principle of Dante's other worldly topography is the pattern of concentric circles that characterises most medieval labyrinths... The whole point of Hell, the feature that makes it an arch-labyrinth, is its inextricability, as so many mythographers had warned. The damned soul's only, inevitable, and eternal goal is a strictly delimited circle.... There is no end – no cessation, no goal - ... the damned have nowhere to go in the inescapable dwelling determined by the false paths they chose on earth... it is an inescapable prison. (282).'

Medieval labyrinths in literature and art were intended to confuse, bewilder and frustrate by means of a brilliantly complex structure, invariably a labyrinth containing many points of choice between two or more paths. Doob writes how they,

‘Simultaneously incorporate order and disorder, clarity and confusion, unity and multiplicity, artistry and chaos... they are dynamic from a maze-walker’s perspective and static from a privileged onlooker’s point of view. Their paths are linear, but – since many ancient and medieval labyrinths are round – their pattern may be circular, cyclical; they describe both the linearity and architecture of space and time. They may be inextricable (if no one can find the exit) or impenetrable (if no one can find the centre) (1)’.

As we have seen, in most Hell images there is a correlation between the punishments being inflicted and the deadly Sin committed by the recipient. In *Visions* Cavendish explains that some of these were methods were actually in use on prisoners of the time. He writes: ‘besides variations on the theme fire and heat, many other tortures were imagined as suitable forms of retribution and as deterrents to crime and sin in earthly life. Some of the torments were punishments inflicted on criminals in real life, others were the products of the artists’ own ingenuity. (112).’ Regarding these elaborate horrors, Hughes is of the opinion that that there is a sense in the Hell imagery of the Thirteenth century and later ‘that Hell was a convenient repository into which artists and writers could pour all their sado-masochistic fantasies; a safety-valve for the Id of European culture.’ (211). In fact, Hughes states in *Heaven and Hell*, these elaborate Hell images are perversely pleasurable in their appeal to our darkest fantasies. He writes,

‘There are various reactions which a modern tourist is likely to have to a treatment of the inferno, ... they are apt to end up as a compound of awe, pleasure and admiration, tied together by a sense of the sheer ingenuity of the myth; but only a minority is likely to see the fresco as what it was originally intended to be, a morality play with a strong documentary flavour aimed at one’s conscience and designed to give a dreadful fright. The tendency is to enjoy eschatological nightmares of this sort.’ (34)

Binski, in *Medieval Death* explains that Hell images from the thirteenth century onward, always had a dual nature. On the one hand they presented us a cacophonous dark, dirty and smelly place, the antithesis of Heaven (where all is civilised, desirable and good). But on the other hand these Hellish places were also very appealing in the sense that they were visually exciting and fascinating in their diversity and detail. Binski writes how 'Hell represents a fantasia of effects to the senses of sight, hearing and smell. (175)'. He continues, 'Hell was 'the realm of variety and fantasy.. the roots of this realm of spectacular visual fantasy (were) in the early middle ages' (175). Hell with its bizarre demons and ingenious and graphically displayed tortures was a 'mutant and powerful world with a carnivalesque character' (175).

During the late medieval period a huge diversity of visual ideas were invented for devils and demons. In her essay *The Inhabitants of Hell: Devils*, published in *The Iconography of Hell*. Medievalist Barbara D Palmer observes how 'numerous medieval art and drama scholars have noted that, while images of virtue - angels for example – remain relatively static over time, images of evil tend to reflect their cultural environment, its values, abuses and terrors. (20)' Palmer notes the range of recipes for devils. She writes,

'In the vast cauldron of diabolic imagery with either verbal or artistic authority, one can see the shape of a giant, a black boy, monk, scholar, woman, wild beast, angel, adder, dragon, Leviathan, bird, smoke, fire ibex, bee or locust. Additional appendages are attached from the ass, leopard, bear, horse, wolf, scorpion, bull, goat and bat, with wings, horns, fangs and body hair in varying proportions. Clad in fur, scales, cowl, hood, mitre or horned headdress, these creatures are armed with chain, serpent as chain, fire-hook, flesh-hook, trident, axe, mace, club and plate-armor forged from souls. Multi-headed or multi-faced to suggest their duplicity, some devils are also represented by further anatomic distortion as Behemoths of sexual prowess or corruption. Although usually pictured as black to signify their deprivation from light, red, blue, yellow or green devils occur as cultural norms dictate.' (24)

Depictions of Satan himself show less variation in terms of iconography. He is most frequently horned with a pointed head, animal ears, and bat-like wings. His body tends to be hairy and his feet clawed or cloven.'

In *Visions* Cavendish describes how ‘bureaucrats’ in the underworld are bits of human cobbled together with bits of animals. In *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* by Dirck Bouts (1450, figure 77), for example, the demons are monsters in whom human and animal characteristics are mingled. Palmer believes that such confections symbolise our deep and persistent fear of the animal world. She writes, ‘both the concept and form derived from the animalistic world of pernicious wildlife and physical environment, acquire additional attributes from social ills and dangers, and further embody man’s psychological, spiritual and moral terrors.’<sup>8</sup>

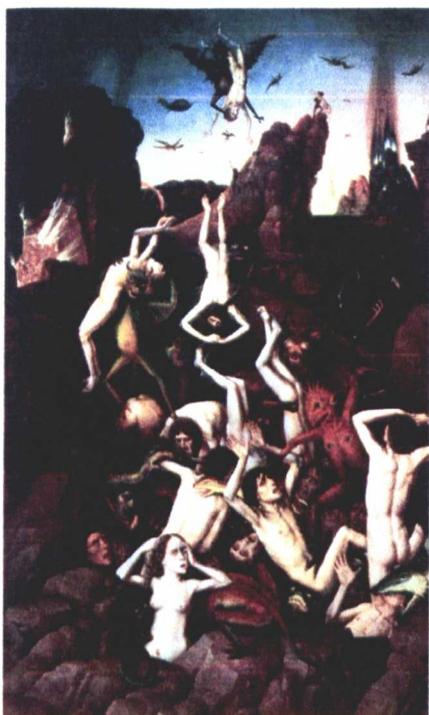


figure 77. Dirck Bouts, *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1450)

Another important and enduring iconographic element that appears in many medieval Hell images is the Hell-mouth, the doorway to the depths of Hell. This motif was subject to variation over time. Sometimes it appears as a yawning cave (figure 78)<sup>9</sup> or the entrance to a deep extinct volcanic crater, sometimes as the gaping jaws of a terrifying

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<sup>8</sup> From the above essay

<sup>9</sup> According to Cavendish, this may be a reference to Virgil’s the Aeneid (Virgil died 19BC). Virgil describes how Aeneas’s decent into Hell starts at Lake Avernus, a grim tree-shrouded lake with black waters. Aeneas enters a yawning cave and walks on in eerie darkness past a whirlwind of mud, a great tree, monsters and marshes until he arrives at the doorway to the land of the dead. (101).

monster (figure 79), and sometimes as a mixture of the two, a cave mouth with ‘teeth’ as in Andrea da Firenze’s fresco of *The Descent into Limbo* (figure 80).



figure 78. *The Mouth of Hell*, St John’s College, Cambridge. English fifteenth century.

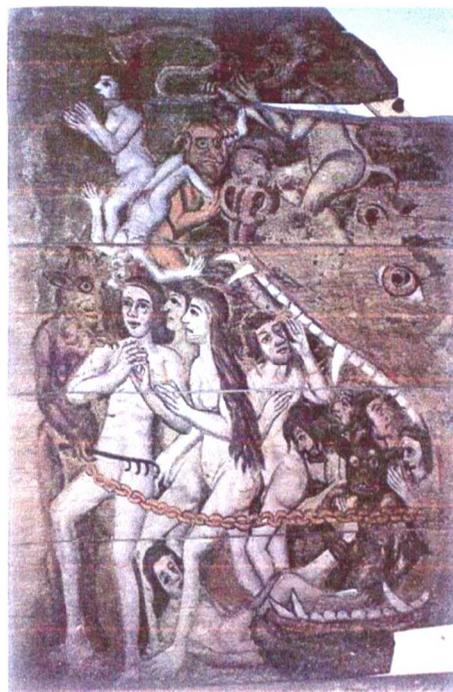


figure 79. *Souls Being Led into the Hell's mouth*. From the ‘doom’ painting at Wenhaston church, Suffolk, painted in the early 1500s

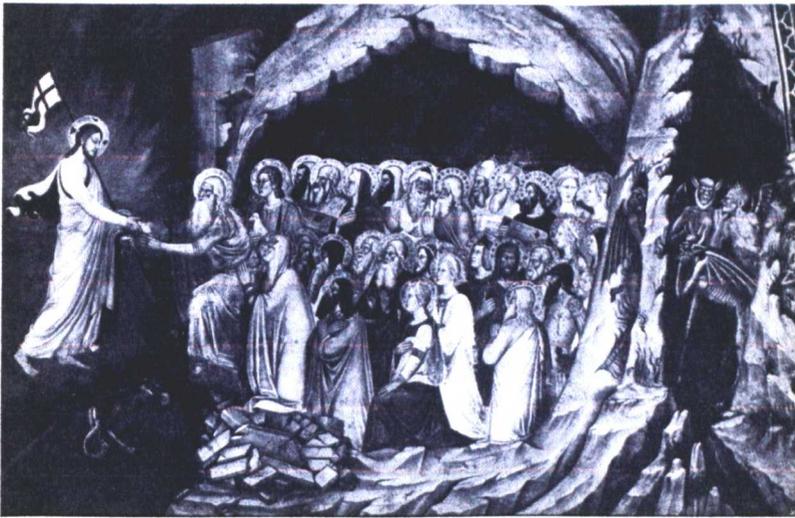


figure 80. From Andrea da Firenze's fresco of *The Descent into Limbo* in the Spanish chapel at Sta Maria Novella, Florence (1367).

Hughes explains that the apocalyptic beast Leviathan - a gigantic fish which supported the sea on its back - was also often identified with the Hell-mouth (figure 81), as was the cauldron, a primary image of suffering. The cauldron/Leviathan (figure 82) eventually mutates into the lion head with circular band (door knocker) in its jaws often seen on entrances. Another variant exists in the images already discussed by Traini / Buffalmacco and Fra Angelico, where the doorway to Hell is portrayed as a naturalistic landscape feature, the mouth of a cave, and Leviathan's gaping jaws have moved backwards into the Hellish domain where they receive live human prey.

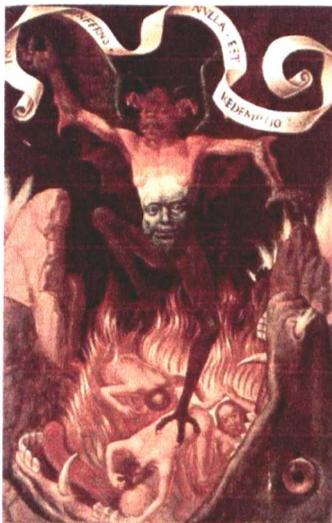


figure 81. Hans Memling workshop. *The Mouth of Leviathan*. Panel of the *Polyptych of Vanity* c. 1485



figure 82. Giusto di Menabuoi, *The Last Judgement* (detail)

Medieval Hell was a fantasia of special effects and fantastical imagery; it was a delirious topsy-turvy world of inversion and invention. However, it also heavily referenced reality. Palmer in *The Inhabitants of Hell: Devils* stresses the point that Hell imagery of this period had, as its starting point, real material life. She considers that it is the imaginative juxtaposing and assembling of incongruities that creates the horror. She writes ‘the elements of diabolic representation are common, drawn from normal activities, implements and anatomies. Their assembly, however, is perverse, and it is this grotesque organisational scheme that is peculiar to diabolical iconography’. She continues, ‘What distinguishes the inhabitants of Hell is the disintegration, fragmentation, incongruity, antithesis, exaggeration, adaptation, juxtaposition, and recombination of elements into a potential compound of all the contortions and distortions known to exist among living things on this earth. (17)’

During the Renaissance period there was a vast expansion in the range and complexity of topographical features and other elements that an artist could fit into one image of Hell. Artists such as Bosch (c1450-1516), Patinir (c.1480-1524), Mandyn (1502 – c.1560) and Breughel the Younger (c.1564-1638) created elaborate spectacles, in which high levels of realism were fused with recurrent Hellish effects and motifs and also with new ideas from their own imaginations. There is a sense in which artists of the Renaissance straddle two camps in their depictions of Hell, in that they attempt to both symbolise the world, a world that has fallen to sin, and to describe it as it appears to the eye. Renaissance Hell is our world –the world above ground - but transformed. And it is precisely this mixing up of the close recording of actual phenomena with fantastical invention that makes the Hellish vistas of artists such as Bosch so compelling and enduring. The physical situations and the landscapes presented are so convincingly real that they make Hell real. Art critic Jonathon Jones stresses this point in his essay *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, writing, ‘the same naturalism that will later make the art of Vermeer and his contemporaries so lucidly mimetic is employed by Bosch to destroy the world... the real does not simply make the unreal believable, it creates it

Historian Robert A. Koch, in his book *Joachim Patinir* claims that Renaissance paintings of Hellish environments were no longer didactically intended. He suggests that, by the sixteenth century, belief in Hell was less concrete. Rather than painting images designed to warn the audience away from sin, painters such as Bosch and Patinir were concocting their elaborate and highly detailed vistas mainly in order to satisfy their public's desire for stimulating, thrilling and salacious pictorial entertainment. Koch notes how there was 'a continuing demand for a pictorial adventure with the cachet of a sanctified theme .. Even in the late compositions of Patinir, the viewer is routed through the picture from detail to detail and from scene to scene... He wished to involve the viewer as much as possible with the details that were descriptive, that told the story if possible, that made an intellectual game of disguised symbolism.'

In *Landscape With Charon's Boat*, by Joachim Patinir (c. 1485, figure 83), naturalistically portrayed countryside is subtly demonised in the spirit of the late medieval images of Hell already discussed. In terms of composition we see the flat compositional ideas of the medieval period (the structure consisting of separate cells and the multidirectional 'chaotic' surface arrangement of forms,) replaced with continuous receding space, a variation of the new system of perspective. However, Patinir discounts many of the rules of Classical perspective, making his paintings an odd mixture of illusionistic and subjective depth. Two perspectival principles operate, the horizontal elements are seen from above and the vertical elements are seen from more or less eye level. This allows for multitudinous detail, which extends from the borders of the image to the furthest distant point. The scene is presented as a 'world landscape view' - that is, as if viewed from a high eye level so that a vast stage of operations can be shown all at once. A series of detailed vignettes are arranged, one on top of the other, across this continuity of space. As they get further away, they shrink. Koch notes how the artist 'permits us to scan the landscape as though through a telescope', (17), reading across and up the picture focusing in on each pocket of activity in turn.

Small diabolic details and signs of sin, destruction and demonic powers pervade the scene, there is, for example, what Koch describes as 'an enigmatic Boschian

protoplasmic creation (37)' situated in the left corner. Variations of this transparent jelly-like construction appear in other images of the period. For example a transparent orb, containing a miniature landscape embedded in crystal, exists in the paintings of Bosch and Joos van Cleve as well as within Patinir's *Salvator Mundi*. Koch also notes how 'Patinir deliberately disrupts scale in order to make his landscapes more immediate and more exciting (19)'

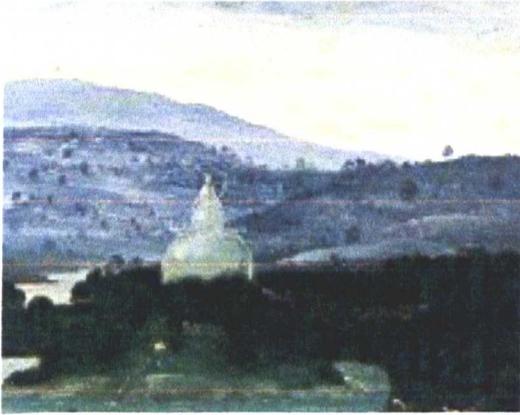


figure 83. Joachim Patinir, *Landscape With Charon's Boat*, Detail

On the right of the picture there is the nightmarish city itself. The boat travelling across the Styx is being directed towards the portal of Hades, which signifies its boundary. Here an ornamented architectural structure with a string of toads has replaced the traditional medieval monster mouth as the entrance to the infernal city. Behind it a ruined city goes up in smoke and flames. Flying demons circulate in the black sulphurous sky.



figure 83. Joachim Patinir, *Landscape With Charon's Boat*. (c.1485, and detail)

It is often remarked how Patinir's paintings owe much to Bosch (c.1450-1516), and in particular to his dramatic apocalyptic backgrounds. Koch notes in his book on Patinir how 'the background in Bosch is a self-contained entity. (69)'. The backgrounds in Bosch's minutely detailed Hellish vistas contain concentrations of infernal elements with the entire concatenation epitomising the sinful world (figure 84). Typically there are devil's galleons, sunken ships, torture wheels, microscopic crowds, armed horsemen, gallows, tall ladders, dancing peasants, inns, and ruined bridges, all set against a range of dramatic pyrotechnics.



figure 84. Hieronymus Bosch, *Hell*, right wing of the *Last Judgement* triptych (detail)

In the background of the central panel of *The Temptation of St Anthony* (c1505, figure 85) explosions erupt within black buildings on the skyline spitting fiery jets and sparks into a smoke clogged sky. Behind the buildings a forest fire has broken out, leaving skeletal trees and sending raging flames high into the night sky. In his book *Landscape into Art* Kenneth Clark notes how the aesthetic effectiveness of flames with their unexpected red and orange bursting out of a pool of darkness was much exploited by Bosch and his followers. He writes, 'the emotive effect of flaming light, or actual flames, seems to have been discovered in the 1490s, and was part of the repertoire of Hieronymus Bosch. In this, as in so much else of his work, he may have been inspired by medieval miniatures, or, more probably, by the frequent representation of Hell in miracle plays. (41).'



figure 85 . Bosch, *The Temptation of St Anthony* (plus details)

In *Hell*, the right panel of the *Haywain* triptych (c. 1500, figure 86), a jagged black building aflame is silhouetted against an orange sky<sup>10</sup>. The flames that lick the building serve to sharpen its outline in a dramatic way. We can see also the tiny silhouette of a hanged man against the flames and a demon riding a bat-winged fish hunting a bird in the sky. These flying bat-winged hybrid creatures are typical of Bosch (also see figure 85), although similar airborne jumbles exist in *The Temptation of St Anthony* by Martin

<sup>10</sup> This is in fact the city of Dis, a fortified city whose iron walls are punctuated by great towers that seem to be on fire. These walls are red and frightful because the city's fires burn eternally.

Schongauer (1445-1491, figure 87) and *The Temptation of St Anthony* by Lucas Cranach (1472-1553, figure 88).<sup>11</sup>

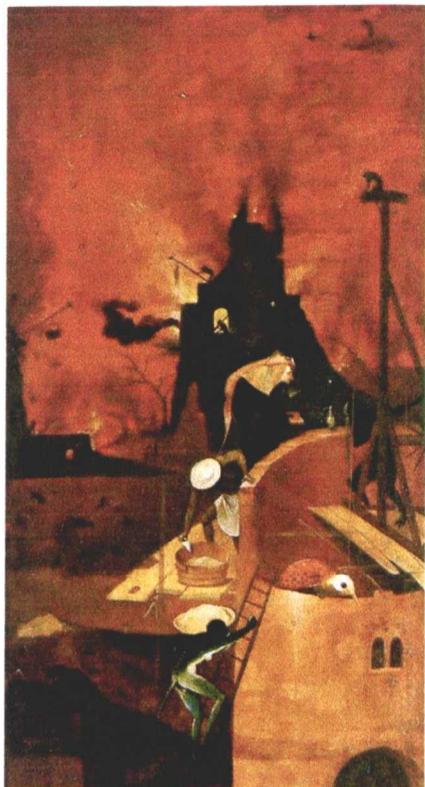


figure 86. Bosch, *Hell* (c. 1500). Detail



figure 87. Martin Schongauer (1445-1491), *The Temptation of St Anthony*



figure 88. Lucas Cranach (1472-1553), *The Temptation of St Anthony*

<sup>11</sup> During this period flight was seen as a supernatural activity

In the middle ground of *Hell*, a demon bricklayer, half animal half human, trowels mortar as he builds the walls of the infernal city, which is indefinitely under construction.

Another such creature, with a heavy load on his back, climbs a spindly ladder to the rim of a tall tower, reminiscent of the tower of Babel. There are high gallows on the top of the tower. Ladders, frail bridges or wobbly planks between buildings appear frequently in Bosch's paintings. In *Musical Inferno* (c. 1500, figure 89), the right panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych, the flaming effects make visible the tiniest of characters crossing between the ruins on precarious planks.



figure 89. Bosch, Detail from *Musical Inferno* (c. 1500). Right panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych

Medievalist Binski explains that in the medieval images that preceded those by Bosch, these linking devices were used to suggest Purgatory, the place where souls in a state of forgivable sin, requiring cleansing, might wait whilst 'suffrages' were enacted on their behalf by the living (196-7). Robert Hughes in *Heaven and Hell* explains that the ladder or bridge as used in Hell imagery, could be either an object of salvation or an obstacle course. Bridges in medieval Hell imagery tended to refer to the Bridge of Judgement below which lay the stinking marshes and fire-pits of Hell<sup>12</sup>. For the wrong-doers it became very narrow and sometimes the sinful soul met its doppelganger coming in the opposite direction. On this frail arch the evil spirit was uncovered and the sinful were

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<sup>12</sup> In early C8th, St. Boniface described how in his vision of Hell, the traveller saw a river of pitch spanned by a wobbly plank

shocked and fell into the gulf below (164-165). In the miniature from *Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* entitled *Angels Lifting Souls from Purgatory* (early fifteenth century, figure 90) by the bridge that the souls must cross spans a fire flowing beneath it.



figure 90. Limbourg brothers, *Angels Lifting Souls from Purgatory* from *Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (fifteenth century, before 1416)

Another typical Boschian Hellish effect was the visual allusion to music. In her book *Angels and Demons in Art* Rosa Giorgi explains how, in passages of the stories of Ezekiel and Isaiah in the Old Testament, music is a symbol of vanity, an instrument of subtle enticement by the devil. Even in classical antiquity, she comments, music provided a way to encourage the soul's wickedness to the surface. In the vista of Hell in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (figure 91) several instruments are depicted. Balanced atop a tree that appears to be transforming into a human figure, there is a pink bagpipe, around which can be seen three pairs of mismatched dancers, a demon and a naked sinner, parading in a circle. Below this there is a yellow harp, on which sinners are stretched as though on a rack. Rosa Giorgi explains that the harp, presented here as an instrument of torture, has been variously interpreted as a sexual symbol, as punishment for sins of the flesh, as a biblical instrument of praise that was refused by sinners when they were living, and as an ancient echo of the harmony of Paradise (107). To the right of the harp, a figure with the snout of an animal leads a choir by reading music printed on the buttocks of a sinner. Next to him a beggar plays a ghironda, a lute-like instrument, while the

bombardon, a brass wind instrument, completes the harmony or disharmony created<sup>13</sup>. A large pair of disembodied ears holding a knife blade between them suggests a sense of disharmony is more likely.

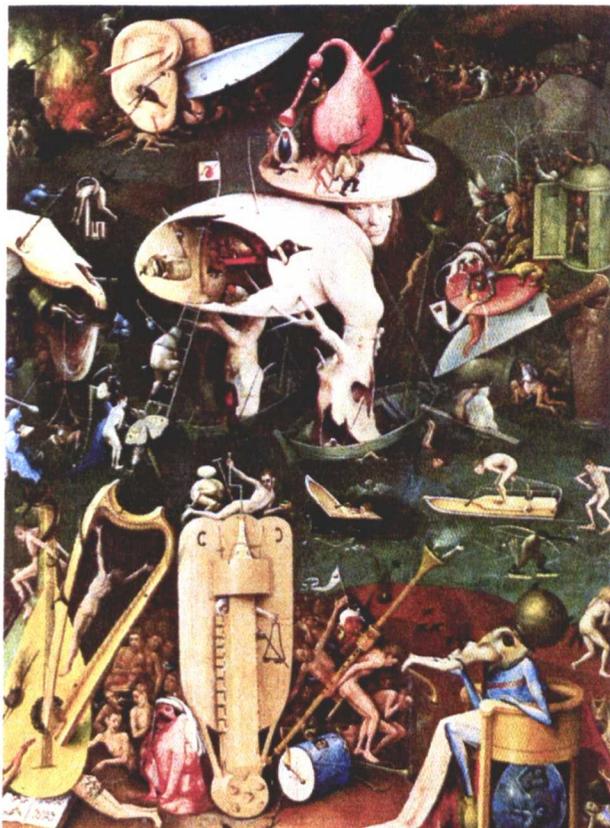


figure 91. Bosch, The right wing of *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1504)

Binski, in his *Medieval Death*, notes how depictions of dance in images like this one tend to signify death, illicit knowledge and sexuality<sup>14</sup>. He explains how, in this kind of context, the motif may be an example of ‘the Dance of Death’, a common motif in both Northern Europe and also on occasion in Italy after about 1425. In it ‘the living, regardless of their spiritual situation in life, are compelled by dancing cadavers to cavort with them as a *memento mori*. (153)’ Dance was generally disapproved of, he tells us, because of its sensual and erotic undertones and its association with seduction. In

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<sup>13</sup> Giogi explains that according to the musical theories of John Scotus Eriugena of the ninth century, sin is the dissonance within the harmony (107).

<sup>14</sup> In the York mystery plays, the tormentors of Christ dance around the foot of the cross in mockery.

responding to this erotic display, Binski explains, the viewer recognises his own sinfulness.

Although Bosch's Hell imagery seems at first immensely innovative and imaginative, in fact the majority of Bosch's idiosyncratic characters and symbols are really just ordinary creatures and objects recontextualised, transformed in size, oddly juxtaposed with other ordinary forms, or fragmented and reassembled. In an article entitled *Out of this World* Guardian critic Jonathon Jones remarks how Bosch 'interleaves different realities and unrealities, painting things perfectly natural in themselves, but hilarious and terrifying in their wildly inappropriate conjunction.' Barbara D Palmer in her essay *The Inhabitants of Hell: Devils* also stresses the fact that it is the assembling of incongruities that makes Bosch's confections grotesque. She writes,

'The more diabolic images one analyses, the less peculiar their individual iconographic elements become. At first glance demons appear to be horrific, nightmarish creatures escaped from another world; consequent examination reveals that the elements which compound diabolic representation are in fact samples from the world of man, of nature, and of sacred art. Bosch's startling left panel, showing St. Anthony borne aloft by demons, from the *Temptations of St. Anthony* is a case in point. The viewer immediately reacts to a world that never was and that he very much hopes will never be: suspended in a sulphurous blue sky, St. Anthony clings to a crab-like demon while assaulted on all sides by voracious flying fish, a captured sailing ship with boat in tow, and demons which range from the homicidal to the comical. Closer study however, identifies recognisably natural details. The homicidal demon carries a leafy locust branch as his weapon, another demon a long-handled mallet, and the third an ordinary hay scythe; the flying fish look like fish, the blackbirds like blackbirds. (26)'

Jan Mandyn also samples from 'the world of man, of nature, and of sacred art'. The artist had a particular liking for expressionistic trees. In his *Temptation of St Anthony* (figure 92) there is a Bosch-like scene in the right hand corner; however the main expressive force comes from the gnarled and twisted trees in the foreground, one of which appears to have a face with a version of a Hell mouth and a single eye suggested by a mirror held by a skeleton. A decapitated head swings from the branches above, while strange creatures lurk within the dark spaces between the branches. In another version of this theme, also

attributed to Mandyn (figure 93), hanged bodies dangle from the branches of a dead tree on the left while, on the right, demons emerge from a mouth within the trunk of a tree, which appears to be full of fire. In Mandyn's *Landscape with the Legend of Saint Christopher* (figure 94) another decapitated head hangs from a mossy branch in the foreground, while a corpse hangs from a dead branch behind.



figure 92. Jan Mandyn (1500-1560), *Temptation of St Anthony* (date unknown)

The trees in these images may refer to the motif of the Dark Wood, where, in the first canto of *the Inferno*, Volume One of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1314), the traveller finds himself trapped, midway along life's road, unable to emerge from the darkness without divine guidance. The Dark Wood traditionally symbolised the entry point into the fantastical realm of Hell. Many visions of Hell began in the Dark Wood with an initiation by fear. The Hell-traveller lost his way within it and, by implication, his conscious will. Sometimes the traveller actually lost consciousness before awaking to find himself in a dreadful forest. In *Heaven and Hell* Hughes describes the Vision of St. Paul (c. 4th century) where the forest has become a torture chamber: 'Paul is shown a forest at the gate of Hell. The trees are on fire but they are not consumed; from them, sinners hang by different organs - adulterers by their genitals, the proud by their hair, and so on. It was thus that Giotto depicted the fate of adulterers in his fresco of *The Last Judgement*. (173)



figure 93. *The Temptation of St Anthony* probably by Jan Mandyn (date unknown)



figure 94. Jan Mandyn, *Landscape with the Legend of Saint Christopher*,

In *Heaven and Hell* Hughes explains that the motif of the Dark Wood represented ‘one of the worst phantoms of the medieval imagination – the fear of nature untamed. At the time that the image of the dark wood was developed, forests had none of the pleasant overtones with which the Romantic Movement endowed them for us.’ (170) The Dark Wood, as it appeared in literature and art of the late middle ages and early renaissance, was a vivid symbol for an alien and terrifying anti-world. Within it rampant plants and roots pressed, crept and strangled civilised areas, threatening the order and stability of the rational ordered world. An extraordinary range of malevolent forces dwelt within the

Dark Wood, from bandits, snakes and enraged dogs to ghosts and monsters. In Durer's *The Knight, Death and the Devil*, for example, the forest is tangled, incoherent, strewn with skulls<sup>15</sup> and thorns and has an animalistic presence. It is chaos itself, the opposite of the upright hero on horseback. In the Wood of the Suicides in Dante's *Inferno* the punishment of suicides is that their souls are turned into withered trees. In Nardo di Cione's fresco the *Wood of the Suicides* is made up of thorny trees from which pathetic faces materialise. Harpies stand guard in the uppermost branches. In William Blake's version from *The Inferno*, (1824-7, figure 95) harpies also nest amongst the branches and sad characters are shown as half-materialised in the trunks.



figure 95. William Blake, *The Inferno*, (1824-7)

The flat multidirectional arrangement of pictorial elements that we saw in late medieval Hell has been developed into a receding vortex composition in *Aeneas' arrival at the shore of Lake Avernus* by Mandyn (figure 96). Here a spiral arrangement of forms transforms Aeneas' arrival into a dizzying spectacle. Looking at the image and getting caught up in its rhythm is like looking down from the top of a spiral staircase into its depths. Fish skeletons, a lobster and bony monsters populate the night sky and lead the eye in a semi-circle down to a boat in the left corner which is struggling for survival in a stormy sea. Within the arches and ruins on the right, tiny figures cavort with monsters,

<sup>15</sup> The skulls may refer to an ancient belief that the demons of a wood could be appeased by human sacrifice offerings.

while weeds dangle from the collapsing masonry. This painting is particularly interesting as it uses man-made architectural structures within a scene suggestive of a world gone mad, a place beyond human control.



figure 96. Jan Mandyn, *Aenaes' arrival at the shore of lake Avernus* (date unknown)

The Breughels continued the tradition of the spectacular Hellish vista. Pieter Breughel the Elder's (c. 1525-1569) *Dulle Griet* (Mad Meg, c.1563, figure 97), contains a huge amount of Hellish detail including a bizarre Hell mouth in which one still living eye glares out of a brick wall from beneath a wooden awning. In *Heaven and Hell* Hughes explains how, by this time the jaws of Leviathan had been changed again into a fresh and horrible synthesis, Leviathan as architecture, often a grotto or outbuilding (196-8). Sometimes this architecture appears as fleshy, that is part organic matter, part ruined masonry and brickwork. There are also various unfortunates and biological curiosities as well as the usual array of fantastical hybrid creatures. Robert Hughes explains that during this period the disabled and the sick were seen as bad omens or as justly punished

sinners. He writes ‘the freak was feared because it was a manifestation of evil, a drop thrown into the cauldron of irrationality that bubbled underneath civilisation. (226).’ He continues, ‘the insane grotesqueness of the monsters suggests, with ineluctable power, the deformities which sin itself works on the human soul. (229)’



figure 97. Pieter Breughel the Elder, *Dulle Griet* (c.1563)

Both Bosch and Pieter Breughel the Elder’s influence are evident in the dark and fiery painting *Orpheus in the Underworld* (c. 1594, figure 97) by Pieter Breughel<sup>16</sup> the Younger (c.1564-1638) who was also known as ‘Hell Breughel’ because of his fascination with hobgoblins, fires and grotesque figures. The background is deeply indebted to Bosch, with a city visible on the horizon, complete with burning torture wheel, gallows, and an industrial machine feeding on the bodies of live sinners. The sky above is seething with flying monsters and cavorting demons. In the middle distance there is a mill with great bellows that splutter out flames, as the humans fueling it are incinerated. Between the two industrial sites winds a river which leads the eye to the

<sup>16</sup> The sons to Breughel the elder retained the ‘h’ in the spelling of their name.

distant horizon. The whole image spirals outwards from this point on the horizon to the perimeter, like a vortex.



figure 97. Pieter Breughel the Younger, *Orpheus in the Underworld* (c. 1594)

The second version of *the Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1634) by the graphic artist Jacques Callot (1592-1635, figure 98) marks an interesting point in the migration of Hellish devices from religious art into secular imagery. Callot produced perhaps the earliest images of Hell on Earth. In his late etchings the grotesquery of the real political world is melded with a traditional biblical scene to produce a part-secular, part-traditional religious Hell.

In an earlier version of *The Temptation of St Anthony* (1617, figure 98) Callot employed a range of traditional effects to produce a theatrical and spectacular Hell tableau. In this, a map-like etching from about 1615, two organisational principles seem to be in play. Firstly there is the circular momentum, established by the arrangement of the foreground figures and forms in a dark arc, and reinforced by the circular arrangement of elements within it. Then there is the series of 'S' shaped rhythms within the circle, established by

the swarms of tiny figures on the ground and by the river. The swirling, seemingly chaotic composition that results carries the eye across and ‘through’ the surface of the picture from detail to detail and gives a sense of prodigious activity. In the sky, tiny demonic figures spiral and tumble down to earth as they are released into the air by a huge winged and horned creature. On the ground beneath, tiny grotesque beings teem in and out of a giant mouth-like aperture within a geological rock formation. In the distant background there is a bridge being crossed by ant-like soldiers, and some strange ships beyond. In the middle ground are other weird forms of transportation driven by skeletons and by a range of spidery freaks with horns, wings and misshapen bodies. Cavorting in the foreground are a variety of elaborate courtly ghouls and lowly deformed figures. They dance, play music, drink, eat and defecate. Above these frolicking monstrosities, other creatures shoot pistols at the armies below whilst the carcasses of their victims sprawl down suspended from the rocks above.



figure 98. Jacques Callot, *The Temptation of St Anthony* (1617)

In his series of works on the effects of war (1622, figure 99), Callot moved away from this kind of fantastical scene, to depict the appalling sufferings of ordinary people who have become the victims of war and its aftermath. These etchings show in graphic detail a variety of human miseries that come as a result of the destruction and horror of war. A variety of real life horrors are on display, such as burnings at the stake; buildings going up in flames, hordes of tiny people rampaging out of control, fallen riders, dead horses, beggars and cripples, and tortured bodies hanging from their necks suspended from trees

(figure 100), all set against a dusty and smoky landscape. In a grand etching known as *The Punishments*, from about 1634, Callot has catalogued all ten popular forms of punishment within a single grand vista, rendering each cruel event with great detail and precision. In this picture of a huge town square teeming with tiny figures, the inclusion of several features employed by Bosch in his fantastical scenes, such as the gallows with tall ladders, circling airborne creatures, and an architectural Hell-mouth in the form of a castle gateway, make the image even more nightmarish. In her book *Eyes on the World: The Story and World of Jacques Callot*, author Esther Averill claims that works such as these make Callot the first reporter-artist. Pointing to other images of his, which depict gypsies, outcasts, rogues, and hunchbacks, she argues that the artist was intending to bring contemporary injustices to the eyes of the world.



figure 99 Jacques Callot . "Cinquième Acte", *Il Solimano*, c. 1620



figure 100. Jacques Callot, etching from *Miseries of War* (published 1633)

In the second version of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1634, figure 101) fantasy is infused with social reality. In this incredible scene, as well as the stock-in-trade hellish special effects already mentioned, the influence of the Thirty Years War (1618-48) is there. The weaponry and transportation of the period, the disease and famine that he had lived through, and the punishments that he had watched have all found their way into this dystopian image. So too has the wanton destruction of poor dwellings and great buildings alike, and the marauding behaviour of the mercenary soldiers that he had seen. On the right of the picture demons have invaded and occupied a great Gothic ruin at the base of which the hapless Saint is being nudged toward a cavernous hell-mouth.



figure 101. Jacques Callot, *the Temptation of Saint Anthony* (second version, 1634)

## Part Two: The Re-emergence of *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* within Filmic Culture

In recent years there has been an increasing pre-eminence of the set piece of *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle*, with dystopic societies appearing in innumerable Hollywood movies. These societies vary from being only a few degrees separated from the reality of our world, to being examples of full-blown fantasy. With the blossoming of CGI (computer generated imagery), these Hollywood *Nightmarish Urban Spectacles* have become ever more visceral and absorbing, and demonstrate an increased power to elicit responses of shock and revulsion.

Several Hollywood directors and cinematographers who evoke this set piece claim an earlier film, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), as a template. Certainly the film's stylistics demonstrate an early stage in the shift of iconography from art to popular culture. In *Metropolis* the workers, 'in their proper place - the depths,' are enslaved beneath the ground in a vast hot and steamy industrial Hell where they are forced to run the great machines that supply the city. The Hellish nature of *Metropolis*'s subterranean sweatshop is suggested by a variety of familiar effects and motifs. There are ant-like people sweating from the intense heat whilst trapped in endless cycle of torment; there are cog-wheeled machines, reminiscent of Bosch, belching out steam, there are misty vapours, rings of fire, and the allusion to clamorous noise (figure 102).

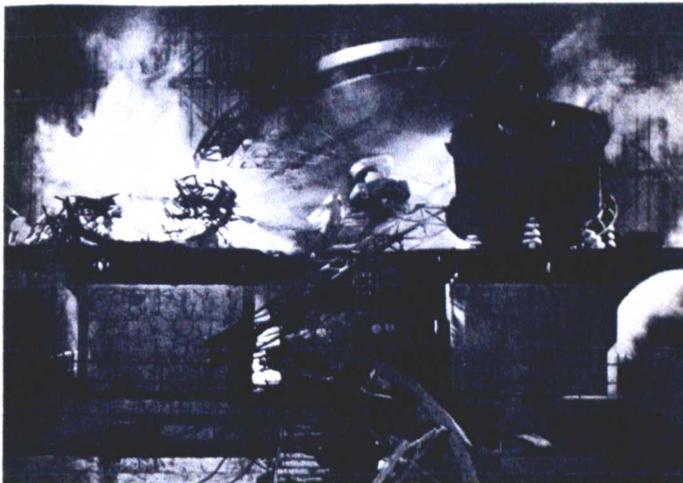


figure 102. Still from *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927)

The elite who control the city live above ground in luxury. The city has developed in vertical strata around a monumental new Tower of Babel. Futuristic aircraft zip through the atmosphere, while stylised skyscrapers are connected by spindly aerial walkways (figure 103).



figure 103. Still from *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927)

Amongst the many recent movies that evoke *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle*, Alex Proyas' film *Dark City* (1998) also contains two versions of set piece, one above and one below ground. Aboveground is a gloomy Forties style *noirish* dystopia of perpetual night, fashioned, we are told, from elements of different eras, different pasts, all rolled into one (figure 104). Glowing neon lights and hazy lamps generate a dirty green haze that hangs heavily around buildings, emphasising the jagged nature of their outlines. On the empty streets smoke issues from the grilles in the pavements, rain pours down, and a sense of sickness, dampness, and putrefaction fills the air.

A spiral motif recurs throughout the film (figure 105,106), symbolising the enclosed nature of this city. One scene reveals a city map organised in a spiral, in another, the entire city is exposed in bird's eye as a maze enclosed in a circle of water, whilst in a third, a deranged policeman draws endless spirals on the wall, lamenting 'there's no way out'. The spiral motif is further emphasized by the city's many spiral staircases and by

the subway system that travels in a circle. Like a medieval labyrinth, here the city is a strictly delimited zone with no end, no cessation, no goal. The associations with the labyrinth and Hell are amplified during the scene when Murdoch attempts to escape the city; having reached the lake at the city's edge, he discovers that the bridges, canals, and black waters that lead from it become dead ends, are blocked off, circle back.



figure 104. Still from *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998)

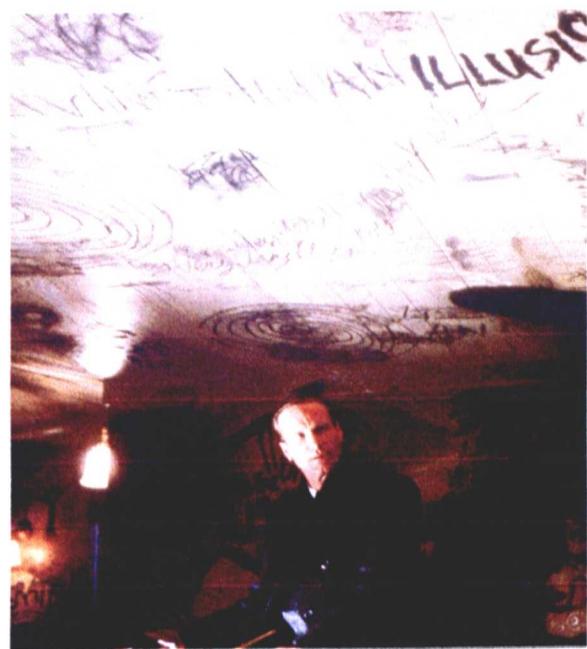


figure 105 (left), and figure 106 (right). Stills from *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998)

Below the earth live the aliens, the unseen malevolent forces that control the city (figure 107 and 108). Every twenty-four hours they gather in rows of concentric circles, like dark angels, around a huge amphitheatre carved from rock, and watch as giant clockwork cogs turn. As they rotate, these cogs focus the telepathic power that will restructure the city above ground. The collective alien power makes the buildings on the surface go soft, morph and sprout. Streets and avenues reconfigure and buildings become fleshy as they shift and warp into place, and portals to the underworld open within the city walls as fleshy apertures, then seal up again when the job of rearranging the city, keeping its inhabitants disorientated, is done.



figure 107 (left), and figure 108 (right). Stills from *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998)

In the final sequence the two worlds conflate as the giant cogs break through the pavement causing buildings to jut out at crazy angles. Aliens zip through the night sky as hero and arch alien fight in an airborne jumble. When their leader falls, the remaining aliens spiral upwards and away like a swarm of tiny insects, accompanied by lightning and fireworks.

*Dark City*, with its eclectic aesthetic, which references the industrial and the futuristic, owes many of its ideas to the earlier film *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982, figure 109).

It also borrows from art history and, in particular, from the graphic artist Piranesi (1720-1778),<sup>17</sup> who was himself indebted to Mandyn and Callot. In Matt Hanson's book *Moviescapes*, the production designer of *Blade Runner* Lawrence G. Paul comments, 'I brought in just about my entire architectural research library, and we went from Egyptian to Deco to Classical. We turned the photographs sideways, upside down, inside out, and backwards to stretch where we were going.'

In *Blade Runner*, the Hellish future city is gloomy and smoky, and it is always raining (figure 110). In his book *Terminator*, Richard Dyer describes the nocturnal rain of 'tech-noir' films such as *Blade Runner* and *Terminator 1* (James Cameron, 1984) as a self-inflicted pollutant: 'Like sin, rain soaks, it gets in everywhere, there's nowhere to go. This is the nightly rain of film noir and dystopian science fiction, of the future sequences of *The Terminator* films (1984, 1991). This is rain as pollution, the rain that mankind has produced. (64)'

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<sup>17</sup> In these etchings seemingly realistic social environments appear as if haunted by malevolent supernatural forces. A number of visual ideas contribute to the sinister atmosphere, including the mixing of architectural styles, especially the grandiose and the avant garde, to evoke the sinister. In the essay *From Myth to Modernity* in the magazine *Art and Design* Sarah Greenberg notes how Gothic and Baroque styles mingle with eighteenth century rationalism in these ornamental cityscapes. She writes, 'the present intermingles with the past and ruins become *vanitas* images conjuring notions of decadence and decay (67-8).'

The *Carceri* are dank and smoky environments in which things – chains and ropes - dangle down from great arches like hanged corpses. Parts of the architecture are ruined, there are bridges and walkways, often perilous and high, which jut out sharply, and apertures that appear as orifices. Highly artificial lighting effects such as up-lighting code these ruins, and make them seem monumental and imposing, a sense amplified by the artist's use of scale wherein tiny ant-like figures are juxtaposed with grand architectural features. Arcs, spirals and multidirectional criss-crossings create a seemingly chaotic environment, and divide the space into distinct 'compartments'. However, here there are no actual punishments illustrated for us. In Piranesi's version of Hell we are encouraged to imagine them for ourselves. By these means, the artist transforms architectural scenery into what Greenberg calls 'a mental image of the city' with 'an aesthetic of decline and fall.'

Greenberg notes how Piranesi uses *scena per angolo*, a theatrical design idea in which single point perspective was replaced by a series of diagonal axes which cut across the stage, opening up a succession of vistas. Greenburg describes how, 'Recognisable form is enveloped in scenes of spatial ambiguity that defy the laws of proportion and perspective... Although littered with the scenes of torture, these scenes do not depict sadistic punishment but rather they conceive of architectural space itself as a prison. (70).'

Greenberg comments on how enduring the influence of Piranesi's sinister confections are. She writes, 'Piranesi's architectural hyperboles become semi-abstract studies in which order and anarchy co-exist. In their evocation of man-made structures spiralling out of control, the *carceri* seem to prefigure modern images of the mechanised city, immortalised in Expressionist films such as *Metropolis*. (70-71)'

The city in *Blade Runner* is frenetic and chaotic (figure 111). Traffic is multidirectional, moving vertically as well as horizontally, and being airborne as well as earthbound. Film writer Paul M Sammon in *Future Noir: the Making Of Blade Runner* says: ‘this Hellish environment is dotted by dozens of fireball-belching cracking towers cocooned in a thick petrochemical haze. Strange futuristic vehicles zip by in a polluted sky overhead.’



figure 109, figure 110. Stills from *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982)



figure 111. Still from *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982)

Amongst several later emulations, the film *The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997) references the design of *Blade Runner*'s city spaces, but here the future-scape is less dark and industrial. Garish colours have replaced the gritty, rain-soaked urbanism that had become a standard view of the future city. As in *Blade Runner*, flying cabs zip between endless skyscraper canyons in an imaginative excess (figure 112).



figure 112. Still from *The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997)

In *The Fifth Element* the sea has retreated so that the bridges of Manhattan Island are hundreds of metres in the air. Eric Hanson, one of the digital artists who worked on the

film, explains in *Moviescapes* that ‘this changed the notion of a single street and ground plane for circulation.’ He continues, ‘hovering craft were envisioned to roam into stratified layers throughout the verticality.’ (64). To create these rich vistas Mark Stetson, the visual effects supervisor, describes how he ‘used a combination of miniatures in the fore and mid-ground, with digital 2d matte-painted backgrounds, and a CG layering of buzzing sky traffic (*Moviescapes*, 64).’ In this cluttered urban environment, as well as towering megastructures, there are vertical subways and multi-level horizontal aerial walkways between buildings. These spindly structures are reminiscent of the bridges and ladders of earlier imagery where horrific fates awaited those who fell (figure 113).



figure 113 *The Ladder of Judgement* stretching between Heaven and Hell. As the virtuous ascend the wicked are dragged down to fall into Hell below. 7<sup>th</sup> century, St Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai

Bridges between realms of order and chaos appear in a number of recent films. For example, in *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005) the bridge is a linking device between the Gotham City and the rest of the country. Both the film and the video game have some good examples of *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle*. (figures 114 and 115)



figure 114. *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005)



figure 115. *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005)

The bridge motif also appears in the earlier film *Escape From New York* (John Carpenter, 1981). Here Manhattan Island has become a Hell-on-earth, a self-governing prison. We are told at the beginning of the film ‘There are no guards inside the prison, only the prisoners and the rules they have made.’ The denouement of the movie takes place on the blocked off 69<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, the only remaining link between the chaos of the prison and the order of city beyond. As the hero Snake traverses the bridge in order to return the kidnapped President to the rational world, he is assaulted by a range of dramatic pyrotechnics and flying projectiles. Closely pursued by the villain’s chandelier car (an

example of the film's unsettling bricolage), Snake drives through smoke, explosions of fire, showers of bullets, a deluge of stones, bursts of coloured flares, bonfires and hoards of bloodthirsty lunatics. The bridge is chaos itself, it is covered in graffiti and strewn with burning fragments and the upside down carcasses of burnt-out cars.

When Snake first arrives on the Island on his mission to save the President he finds the streets deserted, except for the odd wretched character enacting some meaningless ritual, a lunatic bashing metal for example. Rising smoke and a reddish fog fill the air, and fires burn in the streets. Wrecked and abandoned cars clutter the roads, windows are broken, and a mayhem of broken glass and wrecked television sets and fridges are strewn across the pavements. The residents – drug addicts, lunatics, murderers and the like, have retreated from the city's surface to live in subterranean tunnels from where they send out night raids onto the surface. During one sequence, a manhole cover is pushed aside from below and hordes of marauders (covered in animal skins so that they appear half beast, half human,) swarm out brandishing sticks. As they scatter down dark alleyways, petrol bombs explode around them. When Snake enters the subterranean interior where the President is being held, he passes a series of gang-rapes, lashings and tortures, before reaching the President who, tied to a throne, is being savagely beaten.

In *Sin City* (Robert Rodriguez, 2005), a bridge connects Sin City, a Forties styled metropolis steeped in venality, violence and depravity, to Old Town, another self-governing district, this time inhabited by female prostitutes with murderous appetites (figure 116). Other set pieces with a Biblical flavour include a windy forest at night occupied by wolves and cannibals; and the Santa Yolanda Tar pits filled with viscous tar and surrounded by huge dinosaur sculptures.

The film is full of the most extreme imagery. Sin City is a terrible and perverse place of darkness and rain where pleasure is taken in elaborate violence. Here even the heroes are corrupt, deceitful, cruel and twisted. The villains - lunatics, goblins and cannibals - delight in the sadomasochistic violence they inflict on their enemies. The film is a maelstrom of murder, decapitation, castration, dismemberment and cannibalism; at least

nine different kinds of torture are portrayed in grisly detail, including heads stuck into toilets, severed limbs and heads, a ripped-out penis, and two electric chair shocks.



figure 116, 117 and 118. Stills from *Sin City* (Robert Rodriguez, 2005),

As is the case with Old Town, the ghetto district of Venusville, in the film *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990, figure 119), is also conceived as a separate realm, with its own population and rules. Venusville is a seedy red-light district of brothels, bars and casinos where miners go to relax after hours. Populated by mutants and freaks (imaginative and perverse assemblages of fragments of anatomies - animal and human), Venusville draws on the traditional iconography of Hell that saw the deformed as the consequences of sinful behaviour. Like traditional Hell, this anti-world is reached only by means of an underground tunnel.

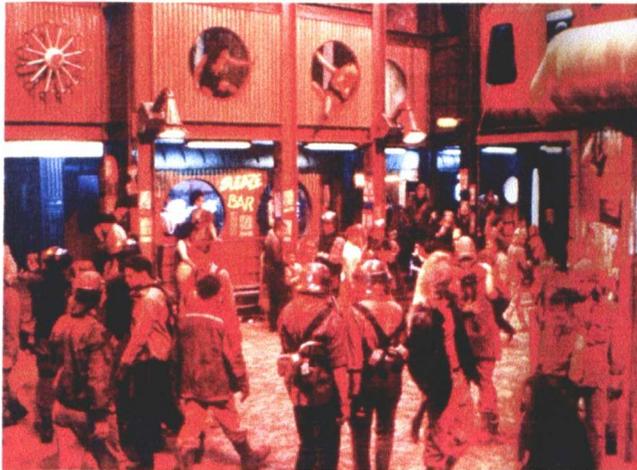


figure 119. Still from *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990)

In *Seven* (David, Fincher, 1995) the depiction of horrible sights such as decapitated heads, and the suggestion of revolting smells, such as rotting and festering bodies, contributes to the sense of a city drenched in vice and sin. Here Hell is a New York-like city of the present day. The story is divided into seven sections and takes place over seven days, one for each deadly sin. On each day sickening apt punishments are inflicted on individuals guilty of contemporary versions of the Deadly Sins. Each elaborate punishment is enacted in a separate dungeon-like space, usually a festering cellar with nasty wet things suspended from the ceilings (figure 120). The darkness is tinted different colours for each Deadly Sin. Richard Dyer in his book *Seven*, cites the film's cinematographer Khondji who explains that: 'Gluttony is the darkest, with brownish lampshades casting small pools of light on sallowing wallpaper and torches stabbing light into the darkness... Khondji suggests the effect is that of light on grease in a pitch-black

space. (64)'. Sloth is tinted with green, 'a very necrotic, green scene according to Khondji, like being under the bottom of a river, a moist, fungal look.' (64). Dyer believes that a quotation from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, found at the Gluttony murder scene, suggests that the darkness in *Seven* connotes Hell: 'Long is the way and hard / That out of Hell leads up to light.' Dyer claims that it also signifies sin, 'the dark in Western culture is oppressive, dangerous and a sign of wickedness. The rigour and remorselessness of *Seven*'s darkness serve not only to make it frightening and sinister but are also redolent of the film's vision of the encroachment and profundity of sin' (65).



figure 120 and 121. Stills from *Seven* (David, Fincher, 1995)

Like the traditional Hell of the Middle Ages, the world of *Seven* has its own climate: a climate of perpetual rain and fog (figure 121). On the empty streets steam belches from the grilles in the pavements, fires explode in dustbins, rubbish is strewn everywhere, and paint peels from the city's walls adding to the sense of chaos. References to Dante's inferno run through the film, with visual accompaniments such as spiralling staircases, endless corridors and dark and confusing alleys.

Katherine Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995) is set in the Los Angeles of the very near future. Rife with corruption, vice and civil unrest, the city has become a modern day Hell. The film contains sequences and single shots that constitute good examples of the Hollywood *Nightmarish Urban Spectacle*. For example, during Lenny's nocturnal drives - it is always night-time in *Strange Days* - a sense of a city on the edge of mayhem is evoked. In his car Lenny passes a number of mini-tableaux that contain a variety of acts

of cruelty, violence and vice. We see armies of riot police in full gear brandishing guns, we see marauding swarms of civilians pushing and shoving each other in a crush of bodies, we watch surreal events (young children attacking an old man in a Father Christmas outfit), we drive past semi-naked prostitutes of both sexes and of indeterminate gender (here 'sex can kill you' Lenny says, evoking connections with the plague as retribution for sinful behaviour), and past vigilante shopkeepers brandishing guns. These tableaux are set against a variety of atmospheric situations that heighten the sense of malignancy and chaos: cars and buildings explode, sending flames bursting through the dark; a ubiquitous blue-tinged smoke fills the air; black smoke belches from vents in the pavement; and veils of yellow and pink smoke emanate from flares thrown by street protestors. Through this haze vertical and horizontal neon signs from nightclubs and late night stores flash and glow. Blue and yellow police lights and helicopter search beams also interrupt the gloom.

Another nightmarish set piece in *Strange Days* is the vast subterranean nightclub, a smoky, hazy and sweaty environment with flashing lights and throbbing music. This chamber is presented like a medieval Hell with a number of vertical and diagonal metal beams and girders that separate the atrium into separate compartments containing, in Lenny's words, 'every kind of perversion'. In one section there is a suspended cell with a fake-garrotted dancer hanging from it; in another a group of Nazis are burning books with a blowtorch; in another an S&M scene is taking place; in another drug taking; then 'freaks'; and finally there is a group of teenage girls brandishing guns. Some sections are displayed under blue illumination; others are lit by a pink or yellow light. In the centre of the club a writhing crowd dances in a trance-like mass. Search beams cut through the smoke to pick out specific characters. The club is presided over by a devil-like character, dressed all in black with a widow's brow, and his cohort of demonic heavies.

The final sequence has a carnivalesque character. The violence on the streets has escalated and the sense of aggressive and malevolent energy has mounted. Road-blocks, tanks and police cordons are being erected everywhere as the police restructure the city in

a series of dead-ends, and no-go zones. As the New Year approaches, the streets become filled with people. A sense of Hellish chaos and congestion is achieved by shots of them packed together, writhing and fighting. Fliers drape down from tall buildings and tickertape fills the air. The fervid dancing of the crowd is disrupted from time to time by violent skirmishes between protestors and police set against exploding fireworks. At 11.46 the character Macy pushes her way through the dancing swarm, past drugged-out revellers dancing on car bonnets, past a grim reaper, and towards the centre of the crowd. As gunshots and fireworks explode simultaneously, the camera pans up and presents the situation from above. From this vantage point the police and revellers look like swarms of antagonistic ants as they merge and fight within the giant circle of bodies. And then the army pours in from the periphery. Tickertape and bullets hail down on them like rain and there is an air of apocalypse, frenzy and bloodlust.

In the movie *Constantine* (2005, Francis Lawrence), taken from the comic of the same title, Hell exists as a parallel place. Visual effects supervisor Michael Fink explains in the essay *Highway to Hell* by Joe Fordham (in *Cinefex*<sup>18</sup>), how Hell is presented as an anti-world. He says ‘if you were sitting in a living room in Hell it would be a normal living room, except it would be nasty and hellish. We didn’t want flames and guys with little forked tails, but we did want Hell to be a violent place so I suggested ... that we look at atomic bomb footage. (36)’ In Hell the vehicles and the buildings come from reality, but look as if as they have been subjected to intense heat with paint peeling off and emitting smoke. On the skyline the jagged edges of ruined skyscrapers are dramatically silhouetted against a flaming red sky in the manner of Bosch. The design team conceived of Hell as, in Fink’s words, ‘the moment before the shockwave hit.. where everything was eroding and burning, with an awful sulphuric wind (36)’ (figure 122).

In *Constantine* fluid, wind, bird and insect simulations are layered on top of each other to create incredible cinematic versions of the Hellish vortex. The nightmarish parallel domain is bursting with energy, it swirls and twists. Greg Strause, effects co-supervisor, comments in *Cinefex* on the swirling 90 second sequence of *Constantine*’s psychedelic

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<sup>18</sup> *cinefex* number 102 July 2005, p36

mind trip into Hell. He explains, ‘we used a fluid simulation to create a swirling foggy nebula, filled with a maelstrom of particle effects and 3D flying chunks, like debris inside a tornado.... we had to composite all the blowing winds of Hell... building up layer on layer....we really beat it with brute force in the composite, layering the elements. (51)’ In another sequence there is a frenzy of flapping wings as a flurry of black shadows fills the sky against a frenzy of light, and later a flock of ferocious seplavites, half-headed, sightless demons, circle in the sky, animated with bats and vultures as reference (figure 123).



figure 122. Still from *Constantine* (2005, Francis Lawrence)



figure 123. Still from *Constantine* (2005, Francis Lawrence)

As was the case with Bosch’s idiosyncratic assembling of fragments, these creatures that populate *Constantine*’s Hell are hybrids. The filmic Hell-dwellers are made up of both

animal and human anatomies, they are disgusting creatures, half decayed and with their craniums slit open to reveal their brains. There are also shambling figures seething with bugs (figure 124, 125), and a vermin man made of crabs, rats and beetles, serpents and frogs.



figure 124, 125. Stills from *Constantine* (2005)

The Japanese film *Casshern* (Kazuaki Kiriya, 2004), set in a future era of totalitarian states and perpetual war,<sup>19</sup> contains several quintessential *Nightmarish Urban Spectacles* (figure 126-128). With great visual energy the film brings together a vast array of effects and motifs. The over-the-top sprawling visions that result are a blend of the medieval and the renaissance, the mechanical and the futuristic. The skyline in *Casshern*, a confusion of mechanical war machines, cogs and rotating blades set against a sulphurous sky, is

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<sup>19</sup> The film begins with the words, 'after fifty years of bitter warfare, the Eastern Federation has beaten Europa's armies and taken control of the Eurasian continent. Pockets of resistance fighting the oppressive new regime remain'

again deeply indebted to Bosch. The architecture is chaos itself, with structures suggesting a world gone mad, a place beyond control. Out of the tangled girders and pipes a face emerges, as the man-made world morphs with nature and with traditional sacred art.



figure 126. Still from *Casshern* (Kazuaki Kiriya, 2004)



figure 127. Still from *Casshern* (Kazuaki Kiriya, 2004)



figure 128. Still from *Casshern* (Kazuaki Kiriya, 2004)

The *Matrix Trilogy* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999-2003), also contains several stunning examples of the *Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* in which urban environments are mixed with fantasy to varying degrees. Packed full of painterly references, the nightmarish social environments of *The Matrix* are, according to writer Bruce Sterling in his essay *Every Other Movie is a Blue Pill*,<sup>20</sup> an 'archetype-infused mulligan of references and images. (23)' He continues, 'they back-flip from cliché to archetype. They generate tremendous narrative power. The clichés no longer tire us in these movies; they exhilarate (23).'

Synthetic City, the computer generated city that the Matrix has conjured up, is an empty, hermetically sealed labyrinth with towering buildings and wet streets. This is more or less our world but emptier, darker, and generally sicker<sup>21</sup>. Within this confectioned environment everything has a green hue, the green of an old-fashioned computer monitor: from the shafts of pale viridian rain that fall on the city, to the green-tinted labyrinthine office that Neo works in. Vertigo and disorientation are the central sensations of this noir metropolis. The topography of the synthetic city is an elaborate deception. Designed to mask the truth from its inhabitants, it is labyrinthine and unmappable, with architecture that actually mutates: doors appear within solid walls and mirrored facades ripple liquidly (figure 129). From street level, the mirrored surfaces of the glass-fronted corporate architecture create a sense of concertina-ing space which both seems to expand and become more congested. A sensation of falling comes from the vertical orientation of the city. During several sequences we are positioned on the roof of impossibly high skyscrapers peering down, or at the top of staircases looking into the spiral depths of the stairwell.

At the other extreme is the film's Machine City: a fantastical futuristic Hell, a kind of ultimate sweatshop where machines farm humans for their energy. Machine city exists beneath the ruined Earth, now a post-apocalyptic 'desert', a devastated Bosch-like terrain

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<sup>20</sup> In his essay *Every Other Movie is a Blue Pill* in the book *Exploring the Matrix*, ed: Karen Harber

<sup>21</sup> Green filtering creates a 'sickly' ambience according to Bill Pope, the film's director of photography.

with jagged ruins set against a 'scorched' sky filled with heavy chemical clouds (figure 130).

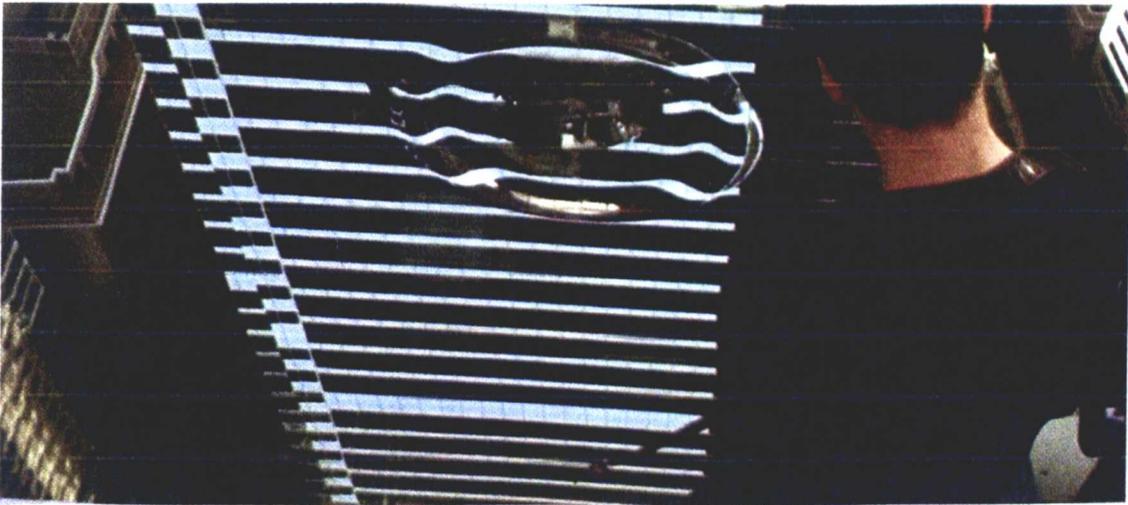


figure 129. Still from *Matrix Trilogy* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2000-2003)



figure 130. Still from *Matrix Trilogy* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2000-2003)

Machine City is the grand set piece of the trilogy, it is a total extravaganza, a grand, energetic whirling spectacle with spiralling swarms of machine insects, vast techno-organic structures organised like tropical creepers, blasts of fire and a general sense of heat and chaos. The Geigeresque skyscraper structures of Machine City, with their elaborate lobster-claw tops, spew jets of fire out into the night sky (figure 131).

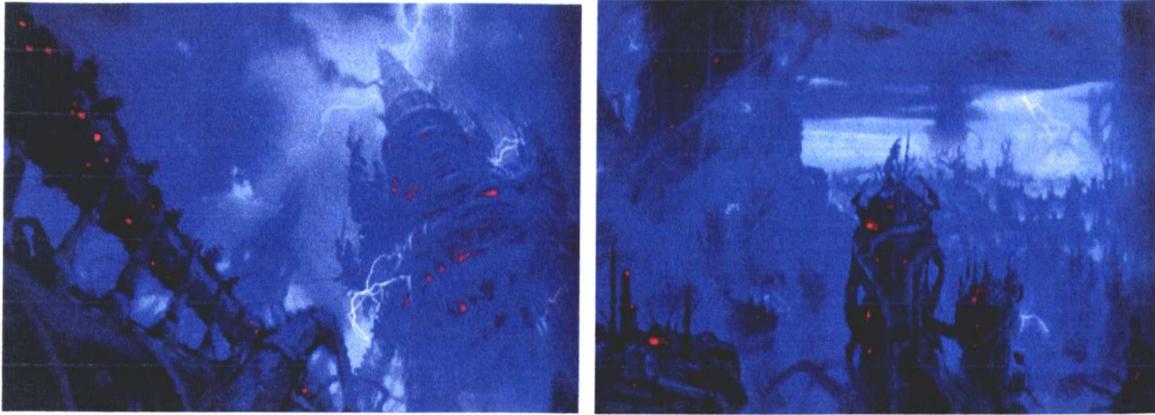


figure 131. Graphics for *Matrix Trilogy* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2000-2003)

Beneath these towers, endless harvesting fields, cultivated by huge spider-like machines, are filled with rows of glowing red cubicles inside which humanity sleeps isolated in individual chemical baths. In *Building Sci-Fi Moviescapes* visual effects supervisor Craig Hayes explains how the ‘primary brief was to create something unique not simple a recreation of a real city. They spent a lot of time thinking about how the architectural forms could be different, as the machines had no human constraints to narrow the form of these structures (108).’ In fact, many of the effects and ideas that constitute Machine city are neither unique nor different, as we have seen.

## Conclusion

Describing *Casshern*, Matt Hanson in *Building Sci-Fi Moviescapes* writes, ‘Casshern uses CGI to create a realm of electrified senses, a hyperreal zone, that is leading the genre into increasingly fantastical scenarios following the ‘future documentary’ tone of science fiction film at the start of the decade that moved away from the mythical. In doing so, it brings a graphic intensity and broader philosophical exploration to current concerns such as genetic modification, ethnic cleansing, and global terrorism. (151)’

In the spate of recent Hollywood films the set piece of *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* is re evoked to suggest, in an entertaining way, a variety of ‘what if’ scenarios. We are presented, in these blockbuster movies, with a number of dystopian situations – the exaggerated and elaborately illustrated consequences of our current sinfulness, and in particular our collective failure to deal with sin. These include failure in the face of

technological advance<sup>22</sup>, failure in the face of encroaching corruption and greed, and failure to accept and confront gritty reality, preferring to live pretend Technicolor lives<sup>23</sup>. These films could thus be seen then as a direct descendent of earlier imagery in terms of both meaning and form. In a half-hearted way these images too are designed to shock us out of behaviour we know to be sinful. The nightmarish dystopias of modern cinema are always more about the present than they seem.

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<sup>22</sup> These films suggest that we are out of balance with technology especially as it encroaches into our bodies in the form of nanotechnology.

<sup>23</sup> A huge number of films that question reality – each suggesting a sinister puppeteer – have been released over the last decade such as *Minority Report*, *the Truman Show* and *Dark City*. These films imply that we have lost control of our own consciousness.

## Chapter Three: The Infinite Black Void



figure 132. Still from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick,

### Introduction

The set piece of *The Infinite Black Void* is typically simple, sober and perfect. It consists of a black expanse that oscillates between appearing deep and flat. Sometimes this expanse contains precisely arranged objects, which are rendered in such a way as to put great emphasis on their abstract qualities: their shape, texture and the intervals between them. This powerful and enduring set piece, found in a variety of images, both still and moving, is used to evoke concepts that lie beyond our capacity to comprehend and master.

In the preceding chapters I discussed the way that two recurrent set pieces of cinema and painting, employ particular effects in order to add sentiment to a human situation and draw the viewer's imagination into a dramatic event. In *The Psychological Interior* and *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* 'illusionistic' light, dark, colour and spatial effects are applied to a scene in such a way as to appeal to the viewer's emotions through the construction of atmosphere. In order to function in this way, the actual mechanics of the atmosphere needed to 'disappear', to allow the viewer to be 'transported into' the scene depicted. This kind of treatment would breathe life into a story, make it seem actual and present. *The Infinite Black Void*, on the other hand, actively avoids narrative, functioning

rather in the context of the iconography of the infinite. In this chapter I will show how a variety of intangible, ineffable and un-representable symbolic meanings have become attached to *The Infinite Black Void*. These are necessarily difficult to list. Terms such as 'the infinite', 'the sublime', and 'the transcendental' tend to be used in relation to this set piece.

In this chapter I explore how the main effect used within *The Infinite Black Void* - a featureless black expanse - has been used by artists to suggest both an empty space and a flat surface; both veil and void; both colour and background effect. In many of the images discussed here simple forms are arranged against this blackness. Even when these forms are naturalistically rendered, the blackness of the background emphasises their shape and de-emphasises their purpose. In this way they become close to abstract elements in an overall pattern rather than familiar objects. The lighting used in *The Infinite Black Void* also serves to distance the objects from their ordinary functions and associations. As with the other central motifs discussed in this writing, a form of tenebrism is employed here. However, where in the previous two chapters the tenebrism established an all-enveloping mood, here the effect is stark and emotionally distancing. The specific compositional structure required for *The Infinite Black Void* does not propose a perfect vantage position for the viewer. Instead (s)he is presented with a continuous field.

In *The Infinite Black Void* the black background, the stark contrast created by highly artificial lighting and the precise organisation of the forms come together to create an image in which abstract pattern comes across as strongly as illusion. The nineteenth century painter Joshua Reynolds links the tendency to emphasise the abstract qualities of an image to a desire to evoke grand eternal themes. In *Looking at the Overlooked* Norman Bryson notes how 'Reynolds believes that great art can exist only when particulars are shed and art achieves the level of great ideas. (175-176)'

In terms of symbolism, the blackness itself with its rich vein of cultural meanings, its connection with darkness and night, and with its inherent absorbent qualities, leads the

mind towards certain rather bleak abstract concepts. I will show how the symbolic and expressive associations of black which are exploited in the set piece of *The Infinite Black Void* include its associations with death; with voids, negatives, and absences; with the night and the infinite; with the spiritual, God, and that beyond language; and with the intellectual, the non-material and the anti sybaritic. The painter Ad Reinhardt alludes to this register of symbolic possibility in *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*. Of black he writes,

'Awareness of things hidden, look toward what is hidden  
Avest for that which has no dimension, no time  
Nothing to take hold of, neither place, time, measure nor anything else  
Beyond essence.....  
Beyond seeing, beyond foul and fair of what transcends all affirmation.' (106)

In the same book he also quotes the first astronauts in space: as they look into the void one of them remarks, 'it's a hostile void and very black.' This description is also apposite in respect to *The Infinite Black Void*.

Once again, my aim in this chapter is to show how the powerful and evocative images of cinema are reliant on traditions from art history, and particularly from religious art. I begin by discussing specific Spanish and Dutch religious paintings, paintings that sought to block thoughts relating to the material world, and to encourage the viewer instead to consider spiritual matters. I then proceed to show how in the 'Modernist period' this formula re-emerges in even more pared-down form within secular painting. I show how Malevich and others revisited and updated this device in order to suggest other layers of reality beyond the material realm. Although the black paintings of this period that I discuss were not religious in a conventional sense, there was an effort by the artists concerned to retrieve an element of the spiritual in what they saw as a secular culture dominated by spectacular commercial imagery.

Of course, this period also established an alternative secular trajectory for the black

expanse, one of non-expression and formalism. This trajectory began most obviously with Manet and developed through Matisse<sup>24</sup>. Here, the pure physical properties of the colour were emphasised and the expressive force and mythical and spiritual associations de-emphasised. Formalism represents an alternative trajectory to the one I wish to concentrate on, which is rather one that fills the colour with symbolic and expressive force. It is one of the intentions of this chapter to show how resistant the visual formula of *The Infinite Black Void* is to any attempts to separate it from its links to its past<sup>25</sup>.

As the century progressed, painting's drive towards purity, clarity and non-theatricality eventually led to the expulsion of the symbolic and evocative aspects of this visual motif in favour of the purely material. In cinema however, and especially in the films which constitute what Paul Schrader terms 'transcendental cinema', forms isolated against a flat black expanse continued to be used to conjure up a deep and profound philosophical

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<sup>24</sup> Although the concept of black as a colour, not simply a darkener, had been much debated in painterly circles since the Renaissance (artists as far back as Titian were noted for their command of black as an autonomous colour,) Matisse (1869-1954) most famously declared it as a colour in its own right. Inspired by Manet's paintings with their areas of pure black that lifted from the object (a jacket, a hat) to become active participants in an abstract arrangement of colour and tone, Matisse painted a number of images with black as a central theme. He also strove to claim for black a whole range of characteristics that had previously been considered as alien to its inherent nature such as luminosity. In the book *Matisse on Art* he writes,

'The use of black as a colour in the same way as the other colours - yellow, blue or red - is not a new thing. The Orientals made use of black as a colour, notably the Japanese in their prints. Closer to us, I recall a painting by Manet in which the velvet jacket of a young man with a straw hat is painted in a blunt and lucid black... In the portrait of Zacherie Astruc by Manet, a new velvet jacket is also expressed by a blunt luminous black. Doesn't my painting of Moroccans use a grand black, which is also as luminous as the other colours in the painting. (166)'

One of earliest paintings in which Matisse demonstrates a preoccupation with flat black was *French Window at Collioure* (1914). Here the viewer is drawn through the window blinds, which flank the edges of the painting, into a flat black expanse. In the book *Colour and Meaning* John Gage notes:

'In Matisse's repainting of the subject of an opening into a dark room, Matisse seems to be presenting a quality of luminous blackness as the subject... Black is offered as a subject in this canvas more radically than in any other work by Matisse. *French Window - Collioure* (1914) related closely to Manet's *The Balcony*. The window, opening not out onto a landscape, but in to a dark room, presents a quality of luminous blackness as the main theme of the painting. (204)'

<sup>25</sup> Matisse most famously attempted to challenge the heritage of black as an absorbent colour and life-negating symbol and to present it instead as a radiant and positive colour with luminescent and vibrant qualities in works such as *French Window - Collioure* (1914). I will show that, despite the attempts by the progressive Modernist movement (influenced by Matisse,) to secularise the black expanse and to distance it from its symbolic, mystical inheritance, this project was ultimately unsuccessful.

mood and to evoke a sense of invisible parallel realms. In this chapter I will emphasise the key role that the science fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) played in the popularisation, rebirth and re-enchantment of this motif for a twentieth century secular audience.

## Part One: The Infinite Black Void in Painting

### 1.1 Seventeenth Century Dutch Still Life Painting

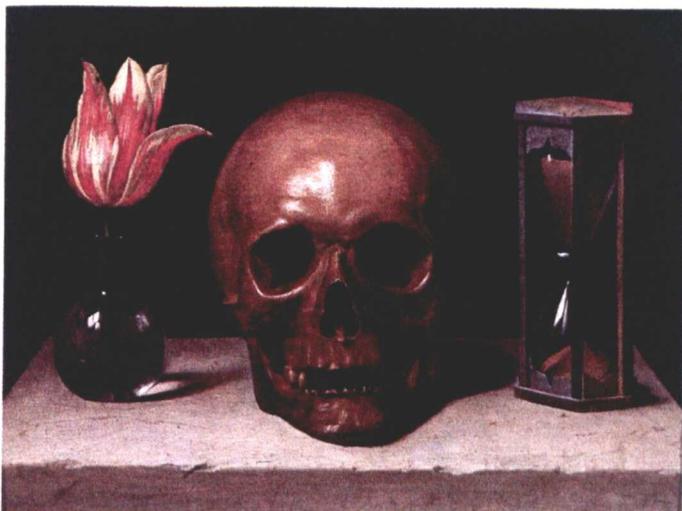


figure 133. Philippe de Champaigne (1602-1674), *Still-Life with a Skull* (date unknown)

In *Still-Life with a Skull* (date unknown) by Philippe de Champaigne<sup>26</sup> (1602-1674, figure 133) three items rendered in glowing colour are presented against a flat black background. These items: a tulip, a varnished skull and an hour-glass, are described in great detail and with great precision. In fact, their different surfaces are so convincingly rendered that the viewer is almost tempted is to reach out and touch them. In contrast, the black background is a completely non-naturalistic device. Belonging to a different register of visual communication - a formal convention - it solicits a different kind of response in the viewer, one that relates to reading or interpretation rather than sensation<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Philippe de Champaigne was a Flemish artist who was active in France.

<sup>27</sup> Gombrich, in *Expression and Communication* examines the way that we respond differently to different kinds of conventions in images by using what he calls 'expressionist theory.' He manufactures the following table to illustrate the opposition between two halves of the brain:

Expression	.....	Communication
Emotion	.....	Information
Symptom	.....	Code

The layout of the objects, the regular spacing between them, is also highly formal. It emphasizes the contrived nature of the set-up; there is nothing accidental about this scene.

Traditional seventeenth century *vanitas*, in which still life objects were set against black backgrounds, conveyed abstract themes relating to the impending threat of death, the all-pervasive presence of death, and the futility of earthly pleasures. A human skull was often used as a centrepiece. Champaigne's *Still-Life* juxtaposes the skull with a short-lived flower and an hourglass, to underscore the brevity of life and the inevitability of death and decay.

The inanimate objects in *vanitas* were used to symbolise their subject rather than describe it. The subject of death could be evoked by several devices. Firstly by the convention of the *vanitas* itself, which was commonly understood, secondly by the actual objects, which acted as obvious metaphors, and thirdly by the fact that the blank black background would block any kind of escape into a possible narrative that might be read into the image and thus distract from the stark message.

In *Looking at the Overlooked* Bryson observes how, given that the subject of death was too great to be comprehended, access to the theme had necessarily to be approached obliquely. It occurred through what he calls contemporaneous 'discourse'. The structure of *vanitas* facilitated contemplation of this discourse – a discourse that saturated daily life and concerned the inevitability of death and decay. He writes 'understanding takes place not through visuality but rather through discourse... such truth cannot be apprehended in terms of the body, experience or vision. (118).'<sup>2</sup> *Vanitas* with their stark depiction of objects set against black, do not enable the viewer to escape into a narrative, Bryson explains, 'its purview cannot get beyond the nearest objects. The cocoon of nearness, that

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Natural

.....

Conventional

Communication and information, he explains, are carried by codes that are both learnt and read. Therefore codes activate the intellectual side of the viewer's mind. For example, Gombrich claims that the single colour field paintings of the twentieth century appealed to the communication/information side of the viewer's mind. Finding himself confronted with the unconventional and unexpected, the struggling viewer sets out to decode the concept.

dark space... harbours a force of gravity and inertia nothing can escape. The transcendental can be sensed only in the inability to reach it. (120).’ The black backgrounds block the viewer off from the pleasurable aspects of the physical world. The pictures are inert, they refuse to offer any diversion, any escape. The viewer’s ensnarement in a fallen material world is mirrored in his ensnarement in a blank picture.

Dutch flower paintings of the seventeenth century also have black or brown black backgrounds. Some of these flower paintings include *vanitas* objects such as skulls, crucifixes or mottos such as ‘*Time Was. Time is. Time will be*’ (as written beneath a ‘forest floor’ flower painting by Otto Marseus Van Schrieck 1619-78), but many do not. Whether a contemporary viewer would have read flower paintings as carrying the same harsh moralism as *vanitas* is disputed.



figure 134. Otto Marseus Van Schrieck, *Flowers and Butterflies* (undated)

In his book *Dutch Flower Painting 1600-1720* Paul Taylor emphasizes how a contemporary audience would have seen these images in the context of their religious belief. He does not, however, explore the significance of the black backgrounds but rather treats it as a customary effect without particular relevance. Art historian R H Fuchs on the other hand, is in no doubt that the function of Dutch flower painting was to concentrate

the mind on the fleeting nature of life and of beauty. In his book *Dutch Art* Fuchs claims that, because flowers were not used as ornaments to adorn people's homes as they are now, it would have been unlikely that a contemporary viewer would read these images as part of a human narrative (109). Rather, these were artificial constructions carefully arranged with almost mathematical precision. Isolated against black, and glowing with life and beauty, the implication that the blooms would all too soon fade and drop off would have been inescapable for a contemporary audience, well-versed in *vanitas* type images. Fuchs on early flower painter Bosschaert (1573-1631):

‘ The bouquet, then, is an aesthetic construction, composed from illustrations in scientific flower-books rather than from actual observation - a thing of great beauty, painted with great skill; even the caterpillar and the dragonfly are rendered with great delicacy. All natural beauty however, will eventually decay: this sentiment of transience is part of the picture's meaning. (109)’

In van Schriek's *Flowers and Butterflies* (undated, figure 134) the blooms and insects are arranged in a circular formation. The black background emphasizes this kind of highly deliberate composition. The repeated circular gaze required to examine the work is conducive to the development of an almost meditative state. The particular thoughts that might occur to the viewer whilst in this state would, of course, be determined largely by the prevailing social context. Within the religious context of the seventeenth century these thoughts were likely to turn to religious themes; most of which involved death in some way, thus contemplation of flower paintings would induce meditation on death. The evidence points to a society obsessed with morbid themes. The state of contemplation set in motion by the careful arrangement of a still-life's elements against flat black, was unlikely to involve either joy or pleasure. Whilst beauty and indulgence may have been represented in imagery from the period, the obverse was always implied: all earthly pleasure ultimately preceded death and damnation; all beauty was merely a prelude to decay. Fuchs says, ‘A seventeenth century Dutchman would look at Nature in a moralistic way, within a framework of moral values.. He would look at a realistic picture in much the same way.. It is natural to think about decay when flowers are in full bloom, and this is, for instance, the primary meaning of early seventeenth century flower-pieces. (109)’

Discussing this Dutch tendency to evoke a theme by means of the depiction of its opposite, Bryson notes that this is because ‘things of the spirit’ cannot be illustrated in pictures. Such matters transcend representation, and can only be glimpsed through their opposite. The black background in such images points to the impossibility of their representation. Bryson writes:

‘Whereas the Albertian window of Italian painting opens effortlessly onto sacred spaces and transcendental truth, in the northern context this access to the transcendent is exactly blocked and prevented: transcendental truth does not belong to the realm of the visible; it cannot be simply pictured. The God of the reformation is a hidden God, and where the Catholic vision of Ignatius of Loyola is able to visualise Hell or the Crucifixion directly, Calvin cannot see anything. Accordingly, what is sacred or transcendent cannot be authenticated in vision in pictures, for vision here has no direct access to things of the spirit. .... In Dutch paintings the comment ‘all is vanity’ can only be performed by an image which, paradoxically, is itself a vanity... the sacred can only be glimpsed – through a glass, darkly – through the medium of a fallen world. (150)’

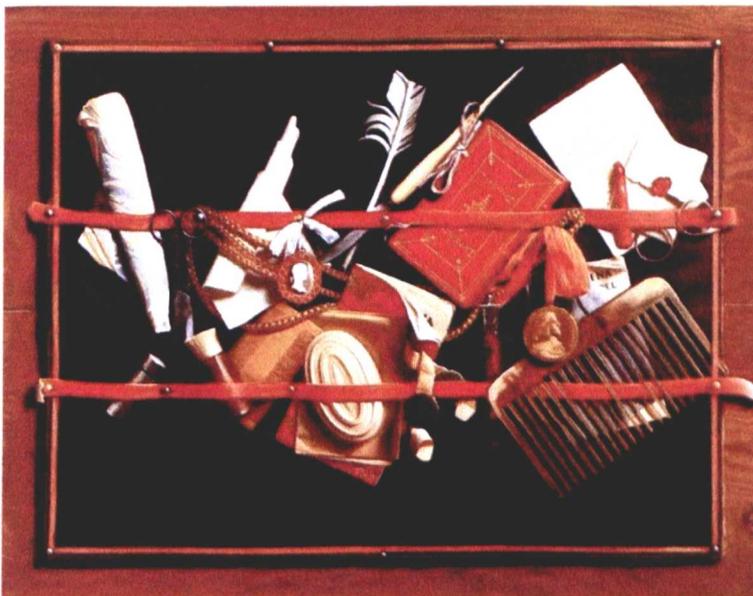


figure 135. *Steckbrett* by Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678)

In his painting *Steckbrett* Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678, figure 135) shows us a collection of personal belongings, held in place by leather straps against a black pin board with a wooden frame. These objects, however, despite their personal nature, fail to communicate anything human about their owner. The objects seem distant, cold,

impersonal, and unfriendly. This might be due to the fact that each one is rather too perfectly described, and the arrangement too deliberate. Although the organisation of the various elements seems, at first glance, to be quite haphazard, in fact there is, in fact, a definite zigzag rhythm. The black background emphasises this pattern and also defamiliarises the objects; set against black, they are removed from their usual context.

Whereas most other seventeenth century still lives show the objects placed 'behind' the picture plane (even when they appear to jut forward, there is a ledge or other device to locate them in the 'correct' place), this painting makes the objects appear to project out of the picture and into the viewer's space. They look as if they could just be picked up, a true *trompe l'oeil*. And this would seem to be the point of this painting; rather than being about the objects themselves or their owner, this picture seems to have as its theme the painter's brilliance, his power to transform paint into life. The theme of transfiguration is at play here.

Norman Bryson claims that the objects in *Steckbrett* seem to have a life independent of their human users. He feels that compositions such as this are somehow menacing in the way that they suggest a purified world beyond human existence. *Trompe l'oeil*, he asserts, prevent the viewer from commanding his surroundings from a position of visual centre. In the randomness of their arrangement against 'the black planetary surround,' they threaten the principle of an all-powerful human organiser in their defiant refusal to obey the viewer's organising gaze. He writes:

'Hyper-real *trompe l'oeil* so mimics and parodies the sense of the real that it casts doubt on the human subject's place in the world, and on whether the subject has a place in the world. For the split second when *trompe l'oeil* releases its effect, it induces a feeling of vertigo or shock; it is as if we were seeing the appearance the world might have without a subject there to perceive it, the world minus human consciousness, the look of the world before our entry into it or after our departure from it. (143)'

## 1.2 Seventeenth Century Spanish Painting: Velasquez, Cotan, Zurbaran

In *Woman Cooking Eggs* by the Spanish painter Diego Velasquez (1599-1660, figure 136) an emphasis on the composition transforms the scene so that it functions on more than one level<sup>28</sup>. The black background stresses the way that the forms and colours are arranged in an endless pattern of circular rhythms. As the eye gets caught up in the circling arrangement, the literal content makes way for a more conceptual one.



figure 136. Diego Velasquez (1599-1660) *Woman Cooking Eggs* (1618)

The seated woman and the standing boy are painted against black. A number of kitchen implements surround them. The blackness behind the scene absorbs the blackness of the boy's clothes so that his head and hands appear disembodied. The woman's lower half is also engulfed by blackness. The heads, hands and implements, which appear as if spot-lit, are arranged in a series of concentric circles against the black. These circles are themselves made up of circles or ellipses in an endless cycle of repetition. Heads, hands, plates, baskets, eggs, pumpkins, ladles and onions become orbs that glow out of the dark to form larger circular rhythms. The greater circle begins with the basket at the top of the picture, the eye then travels down the woman's head and shoulder to the white bowl at

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<sup>28</sup> The patterning suggests perhaps an underlying message, to the effect that greatness is not only to be found in the unique event, but exists perhaps even more in the great mass of mundane repetition.

the base of the picture. From there it travels up through the egg to the eggs in the red bowl towards the pumpkin, the boy's head and then back to the basket. This arrangement produces a complete circle, which almost touches each edge of the canvas. Within that a smaller circle of forms orbit the red bowl and the floating eggs inside. The form of the egg itself – the yolk within the albumen- echoes the relationship between the two outer circles. The effect of these glowing objects endlessly orbiting each other against black is mesmerising, even trance-inducing.

In *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* by Juan Sanchez Cotan (1561-1627, figure 137) the eponymous legumes are organised in a curve. Framed on three sides and set against flat black, the precision of their arrangement, both in the sense of the intervals between them on the flat plane, and in the way that each form seems to advance forwards incrementally through space, is given great emphasis.



figure 137. Juan Sanchez Cotan (1561-1627), *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* (c. 1600)

There is no sense of a domestic context or of a human story in the painting. The black plane flattens the picture space, and the strong emphasis on the abstract pictorial qualities of shape and interval also dissuades the viewer from any narrative reading. In *Looking at the Overlooked* Bryson describes the kind of un-naturalistic and highly controlled

depiction within this and other still life paintings of the period as inducing a sense of 'radical estrangement' (174) in the viewer. Bryson talks about this in terms of a:

'Rejection of the space of the table per se; to be acceptable it must present itself as another thing – art morality, prestige . . . – through which male superiority may be re-affirmed. Above all, the space must be controlled: subjected to a relentless and strenuous focus; redesigned first as a composition of objects, and redesigned once more as a composition on canvas. The exteriority of the painter to the scene is dealt with by power working on a number of levels at once, in tremendous exertion of masculine resources operating upon the scene from outside (174)'.

Bryson asserts that this is a defiantly non-narrative still life, which studiously avoids issues of human identity in order to deflect the viewer's attention from worldly distractions to the contemplation of more profound truths. He writes 'by detaining attention in this humble milieu, by imprisoning the eye in this dungeon-like space, attention itself gains the power to transfigure the commonplace. (64)' According to Bryson, the mathematical arrangement of the objects against black indicates that the painting is intended as a spiritual exercise, akin to the spiritual exercises described by St Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), the first of which was a contemplation of sin and its consequences. These exercises were intended to lead the individual to see God in all things, through the medium not only of the intellect, but also of emotions and feelings. They would redirect his sight away from the world and the tug of his own desires and towards imagining hell and its torments (65).

In their negation of the human subject as the primary focus, Cotan's still lives, Bryson claims, expel the very value system of human beings, dealing instead with continuous states beyond material existence. He explains how the artist treats painting as 'a spiritual discipline, bound up with self-negation and the reduction of ego (87),' his is 'the vision of the monastery not the court'. In Cotan's paintings Bryson continues, 'the most humble becomes the most exalted (79)'. He writes:

'The objects depicted by Cotan belong less to the cocoon of nearness than to a kind of eerie outer space (Charles Sterling said of the quince and the cabbage that they 'turn and glow like planets in a boundless night'). Similarly, Zurbaran's *Lemons, Oranges, Cup and Rose* shows a visual field so

purified and so perfectly composed that the familiar objects seem on the brink of transfiguration or transubstantiation. Standing at some imminent intersection with the divine, and with eternity, they exactly break down with the normally human (88)'

Here Bryson is describing how the precise arrangement of objects, their removal from a context, and their presentation against black, causes them to become defamiliarised, and cleansed of human presence. The seventeenth century *Infinite Black Void*, in its elimination of the fallen human world, seems to exist on the border between the material and the immaterial. It acts as a gateway to a world beyond that of human situations, beyond the material: an infinite, spiritual zone.

Cotan's student Zurbaran (1598-1664) also painted sparse and perfect still lifes. In *Metalware and Pottery* (figure 138) for example, four objects of tableware are deliberately positioned at regular intervals along a shelf. Behind them is stark black. On the far left is a metal cup on a metal plate, next along a china vase, then a terracotta water jug and finally another vase on a metal plate. Although each object is highly individualised, certain features such as the handles echo each other so that, on an abstract level, the image becomes a rhythm of repeated shapes. The intervals between the objects (the negative spaces) are exceedingly regular and resemble the shapes of the positive forms but upside down.

Bryson notes the way that although, at first glance, the precision with which the individual textures of the objects are described seems to invite the viewer's touch, the composition - the clinical arrangement - and the 'brilliant, raking light (73)' quickly 'slap' away the outstretched hand in the most reproofing way. He asserts that this set-up is defiantly resistant to touch. These perfect objects, he explains, form a spectacle that is immaculate and totally self-contained. There is no room for the viewer in this scene, no entry point. A human being will only upset the perfect alignment, harmony, peace and order of this set-up. Bryson writes,

'The equidistance of the objects from the viewing position ... pushes the viewer out and keeps the objects at arm's length. Between the eye and the forms it seeks to contact stretches a gulf which

nothing traverses. And again this opposes the normal order of tactile space... here nothing can be touched at all: touch would do violence to the scene. (74)



figure 138. Francisco de Zurbarán, *Metalware and Pottery* (c. 1635-40)

The ‘slap’ is necessary if the human eye is to rise above the material ‘fallen’ world and enter a higher, purer realm of pure order. Bryson concludes,

‘As with Cotan, there is a sense of reproof and correction offered to a mode of vision that inhabits the world benightedly, in the shadow zone of gestural repetitions and muscular routines. The painting is severe in its demands on perception: the flooding of the darkened world with light is painful as the eye is stung into action, and disused optical pathways are re-opened and switched to current. But the strain is necessary, if vision is to rise above the fallen world. (76)

None of the seventeenth century artists under consideration here actually illustrate the themes that they transmit. Rather, they allude to them obliquely by harnessing the operative role of the black expanse in their symbolism. The organised, purified and cleansed spaces of these paintings acts as a kind of intermediary zone between the material and fallen world and the divine.

### 1.3 The Migration of The Infinite Black Void into Secular Painting

Although a formula similar to that of the seventeenth century still lives discussed above reappears in some secular paintings of the following two centuries, yet in most cases there are characteristic differences. The still-lives of the eighteenth century French painter Jean Simeon Chardin (1699-1779), for example, such as *A Basket of Plums* (c.1716, figure 139) in which objects are isolated against dark backgrounds, present a much softer, more sensual and more tactile world of objects<sup>29</sup>.



figure 139. Jean Simeon Chardin (1699-1779), *A Basket of Plums* (c.1716)

A better example of the secularised *Infinite Black Void* might be William Nicholson's *The Lustre Bowl* (1911, figure 140). Famously inspired by Velasquez, Nicholson has painted a spare and severe composition of greys, blacks and a single colour, here green. In the painting a (grey) metal bowl and a pile of peas are set on a grey tablecloth against a featureless black expanse. As was the case with Zurbaran's still life against black, the English painter here has rendered the different textures with great skill. Like Zurbaran he offers a tantalising illusion, whilst at the same time taking it away by means of the flat

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<sup>29</sup> In *A Basket of Plums* a basket sits on a ledge with loose cherries, nuts and currants strewn about it. Behind it is dark. A string from the rim of the pannier dangles down, passes in front of the ledge and touches the bottom edge of the canvas. In this painting the depicted scene clearly belongs to the human world. This is a world that appeals to all our senses at once. As was the case with Zurbaran's forbidden fruits and flowers we see before us stuff that we want to feel with our hands. In the Chardin however, there is no barrier between the universe in the picture and the human spectator. In fact everything about the composition of the picture serves to invite the viewer in as a full participant, from the soft focus, which shows us a scene as might be perceived on a casual glance, to the gentle chiaroscuro, to the composition which invites the eye to travel into and around the space via an established route. Here the black background functions as a realistic deep space. Even the partial frame of the ledge is traversed by a string that seems to project into the viewer's realm thus connecting the two worlds. There is no suggestion here that the viewer will disrupt the order as the objects are arranged informally as if we have just left, about to return at any minute.

black background. Nicholson has also reduced the idea of still life to its most pared down form. His still life is minimalist, and seems to strive towards some notion of perfection. Nicholson's emphasis on the abstract properties of his subjects was to have a strong influence on the abstract movement in Britain.



figure 140. William Nicholson, *The Lustre Bowl* (1911)

The best examples of the secularised *Infinite Black Void* however, come from certain single colour field paintings of the period dominated by Modernism, where a black field is used to evoke a kind of non-denominational spiritual effect, a moment of ultimate insight. In Russian Supremacist painter Kasimir Malevich's painting *Black Square on a White Ground* (1914-5, figure 141) for example, all sense of illusion is eradicated to leave just the pure black plane. This work was to become an icon of modernism and was generally interpreted as an early form of minimalist abstraction. In the book *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism. Unpublished Writings 1913-33* Malevich responds to critics that described this work as a dead square, an embodiment of emptiness, by asserting, 'this was no empty space I had exhibited, but rather a feeling of non objectivity (144-5)<sup>30</sup>.' Malevich explains that the next task of Western art, having mastered nature through representation ('the shell'), was to master the absolute: 'the essence' which exists beyond the surface appearance of things. Malevich wanted to point to an invisible truth that is

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<sup>30</sup> He elaborates on this term 'non-objectivity in art is an art of pure sensations, it is the milk without the bottle.' (144-5)

obfuscated by the surfaces of the visible world. The essence, Malevich explains, is ‘the milk without the bottle’ (145). He continues,

‘The Shell has grown on sensations and enclosed the essence which cannot be imagined by consciousness or imagination. To me Raphael, Rubens, Rembrandt, Titian and others are only a beautiful shell or body in which society cannot discern the essential in the sensation of art. If these sensations were freed from the framework of the body, then society would not recognise them... the face of the hidden essence of sensations may completely contradict the representation, particularly when the former is wholly devoid of lies, without an image, non-objective. (144)’

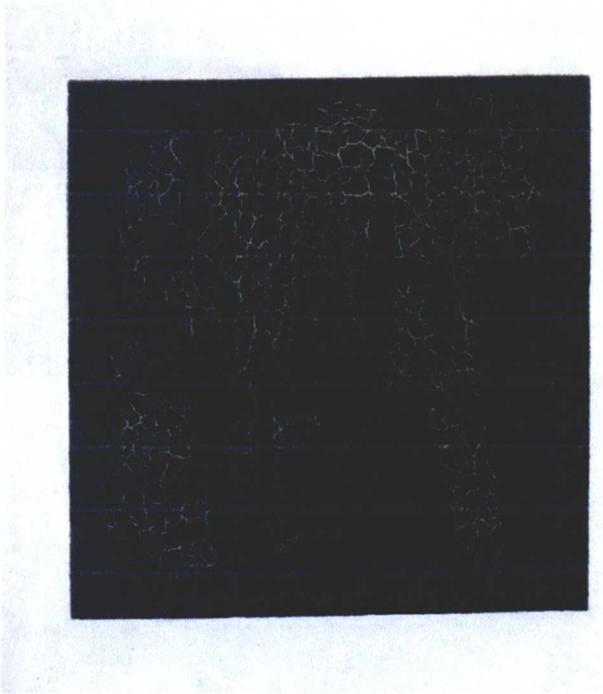


figure 141. Kasimir Malevich, *Black Square on a White Ground* (1914-5)

Malevich describes Suprematism as ‘a new non-objective system of relations between elements by means of which sensations are expressed. The Supremacist square is the first element out of which the Supremacist method is built... Suprematism is that end and beginning where sensations are uncovered, where art emerges ‘as such’, as faceless. (146).’ The first colour is black. Malevich writes: ‘colour is something with the help of which we can talk about the universe or about the state of our inner animation. (32/3).’

In the essay *Black Moods* published in *Tate etc*<sup>31</sup> Gabriel Ramin Schor links Malevich's black square to a page within a volume of Robert Fludd's *Utriusque cosmic maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica* (1617, figure 142). The picture is a black square surrounded on each side by the words *Et sic in infinitum*. For Fludd, this was a representation of the first moment, the beginning of all creation. Schor writes,

'The image – a black square – is presented in the context of a metaphysical iconography of the infinite. Each of the four sides of the square (slightly distorted so that it looks more like a rhombus) is marked with the same words: *Et sic in infinitum*. For Fludd, this image is nothing less than a representation of the *prima materia*, the beginning of all creation (32)'



figure 142. The black page from Robert Fludd's *Utriusque cosmic maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica* (1617).

From about 1946 Barnett Newman began to experiment with a similar stark pictorial vocabulary from which illusionistic forms and depth were totally excluded. Pure flat black, often with a characteristic 'zip'<sup>32</sup> through it, was a key part of Newman's potent abstract vocabulary, as was the emphasis on simple geometry. Like Malevich, Newman saw black as a means to evoke the unrepresentable: that which exists beyond our sensual

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<sup>32</sup> He often divided his canvases with a narrow, vertical band of colour that he called a "zip," suggesting its ability to activate the surface of the painting.

experience and beyond language. Specifically, Newman aimed to provoke a sense of awe with his spare black compositions such as *Prometheus Bound* (1952, figure 143) – a tall rectangular area of flat black with a ‘zip’ of white along the bottom edge.

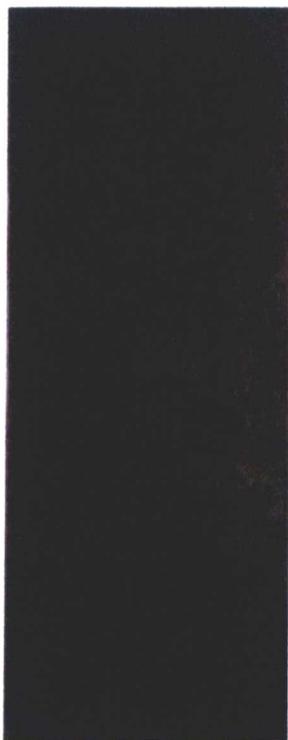


figure 143. Barnett Newman, *Prometheus Bound* (1952)

In the essay *Black Moods* Schor asserts that Newman was particularly influenced by eighteenth century notions of the sublime, and in particular by Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756), in which Burke connects black with the sublime and the terrible (32). In his book *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* Robert Rosenblum observes of Newman’s *Stations of the Cross*:

‘Here the ultimates pertain to death and resurrection, evoked by the primal duality of black and white, and of taut linear forces that, like paths of feeling, quiver and strain against a field of raw canvas, translating the sequence of Christ’s martyrdom into irreducible, abstract metaphors, and totally transforming the corporeal Passion into a spiritual one. (212).’

Rosenblum comments on Newman's position amongst a tradition primarily sustained by non-Catholic artists:

'The sense of divinity in boundless voids, where figures, objects, and finally matter itself are excluded, belongs to a tradition primarily sustained by non-Catholic artists – Protestants, Jews, or by members of such modern spiritual sects as Theosophy – for the iconoclastic attitudes of these religions were conducive to the presentation of transcendental experience through immaterial images, whether the impalpable infinities of horizon or sky or their abstract equivalents in the immeasurable voids of Mondrian or Newman. (212)'

Ad Reinhardt also belongs to this group of artists who are generally associated with progressive Modernism, yet whose desires for their paintings also involved the stimulation of a non-denominational 'spiritual' affect in the viewer. Rosalind Krauss in her essay on the grid in *The Originality of the Avant -Guard and Other Modernist Myths* picks up on the paradoxical position occupied by artists such as Reinhardt, whose black canvasses came to represent, on the one hand a complete blank, the zero point of painting, the ultimate expression of painting's factuality and autonomy, and, on the other an icon, a conduit to the sacred, an intersection between the material and the immaterial.

Krauss questions the success of the modernist project in its attempt to be un-theatrical, disinterested and 'aware of nothing but art (10)'. Krauss accuses Reinhardt in particular of being undecided about whether black in his paintings was connected to matter on the one hand, or to spirit on the other (10). Black for Reinhardt, Krauss contends, seems to function in a similar way to the grid whose 'mythic power makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief. (12)'

In a statement made in 1961, published in *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, on his first *Black Square* paintings Reinhardt acknowledges a desire to reach for the transcendental,

'a square (neutral, shapeless) canvas, 5 feet wide, 5 feet high, as high as a man, as wide as a man's outstretched arms (not large, not small, sizeless) trisected (no composition), one horizontal form

negating one vertical form (formless, no top, no bottom, directionless), three dark (lightless) no-contrasting (colourless) colours, brushwork brushed to remove brushwork, a matte, flat, free-hand painted surface (glossless, textureless, non-linear, no hard edge, no soft edge ) which does not reflect its surroundings - a pure abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, disinterested painting - an object that is self-conscious ideal, transcendent, aware of nothing but art. (82)



figure 144. Ad Reinhardt *Abstract Painting No 5* (1962)

In this statement Reinhardt claims to be using the black square to separate the viewer from previous interpretative ways of seeing and induce in him a feeling ‘nothing but art.’ This feeling was to be induced by means of the presentation of a field of perfect, untextured black released from not only its illustrative role, but also from its own materiality. Such a black would have no discernible marks, impurities, imperfections or other potential distractions. In the paintings themselves Reinhardt strove for to a perfect, chromatically pure black surface that avoided all illusionism.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> In *Art as Art* Reinhardt observed with great distaste that the glossy and reflective black of Robert Rauschenberg’s *Untitled (Glossy Black Painting)* c.1951 made the painting unavoidably theatrical and dramatic. He said:

‘As a matter of fact, the glossier, texturier, gummy black is a sort of an objectionable quality in painting. It’s one reason I moved to a sort of dark grey. At any rate it’s a matte black. And the exploitation of black as a kind of quality, as a material quality, is really objectionable.... Shiny black reflects, and it has unstable

Late in his career Reinhardt reflected further on his black paintings, concluding that they represented a desire to 'push painting beyond its thinkable, seeable, graspable, feelable limits' (81). Regarding his use of black to reach towards the transcendental,<sup>34</sup> he claimed to be a follower of the traditions of China rather than to the chiaroscuro of the West<sup>35</sup>.

Barbara Rose in *Art as Art* comments on the black paintings which dominated Reinhardt's oeuvre in the last decade of his life.

'The black paintings are icons without iconography. They function like the hypnotic patterns of Islamic decoration or the abstract diagrams of tantric Buddhism. They induce a state of contemplation which may be defined as meditative. As objects inducing such a changed state of consciousness from that of normal consciousness, their function is different from that of the art object in Western civilisations, and approaches that of the art object in Eastern civilisations. The black paintings, although not specifically religious, are an effort to retrieve the dimensions of the spiritual in a culture determined to reduce its art to the status of a commercial trading commodity. (82)'

By the time of Reinhardt's death in 1967 such recourse to other apparently timeless dimensions was beginning to be seen as reactionary. This attitude was summed up in critical theorist Theodor Adorno's statements in *Aesthetic Theory* (1984) where he claims that any romantic impulse within art is tantamount to obfuscation. He quotes Brecht: 'What an age is this anyway, where / A conversation about trees is almost a crime/ Because it entails being silent about so many misdeeds' (86).

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quality for that reason. It's quite surreal. If you have a look at a shiny black surface it looks like a mirror. It reflects all the activity that's going on in a room. As a matter of fact it's not detached then. (87)'

<sup>34</sup> During a contribution to a seminar on the subject of black as a concept and as a symbol made in 1967 and published in *Art on Art*, Reinhardt explained that the colour black had been used extensively in many cultures as a symbol, as a colour and as a carrier of cultural connotation. He ended his whirlwind tour by referring to black as representing the negative, the formlessness, the hidden, origin, redemption, faith, truth, time 'and I suppose in one way or another they all represent transcendence' (87).

<sup>35</sup> Reinhardt stressed that he did not borrow directly from Chinese art, but that its philosophical premises nourished his artistic beliefs, he wrote, 'Classic Chinese paintings range from rich complexities of brush-strokes to formless washes and dissolved spaces. They can look organised and organic, atmospheric and airless, immanent and transcendental, ideal, unreal and most real. They are complete, self contained, absolute, rational, perfect, serene, silent, monumental and universal. They are 'of the mind', pure, free, true. Some are formless, lightless, spaceless, timeless, a 'weightless nothingness' with no explanations, no meanings, nothing to point out or pin down, nothing to know or feel. The least is the most, more is less. (27)

Moreover, the drive away from characteristics associated with other media and towards a pure statement of its material elements had led to the elimination of expressive and symbolic content within the mainstream of painting. This state of affairs led the American painter Frank Stella, famous for his black paintings of the 1950s and 1960s such as *Either/or* and *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor*, to deliver a tirade in the book *Working Space* against the 'excruciatingly dull and uncompromising' close-value, shallow-surface paintings of classic Minimalism. He claimed that they had been denuded of effect and drama. By the eighties the black field in painting had effectively run out of steam.

## **Part Two: The Re-emergence of The Infinite Black Void within Filmic Culture**

Just as the *Infinite Black Void* was losing its potency in painting it reemerges in cinema in its most evocative form yet, and in particular, in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).<sup>36</sup> The film attempts to evoke a sense of the spiritual, the transcendental and the metaphysical, by means both of the actual story<sup>37</sup> but also through the form that supports it at a material level. Throughout the film Kubrick reactivates the powerful visual set piece of geometric forms set against a dark expanse of blackness. Sometimes the forms are arranged a curve (figure 145), sometimes in a line (figure 146), and sometimes a diagonal that advances through space from background to foreground (figure 147).

In order for it to resonate with a somewhat cynical society this set piece needed an appropriate new context. Science fiction, with its intrinsic connection both to popular culture and also to concepts of the mysterious, the supernatural, and the unknown was ideal. The plot, of extreme simplicity, can be summarised in one paragraph: an

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<sup>36</sup> *2001* might be placed in the context of other epic science fiction films of the period such as *Solaris* (Tarkovsky, 1972) and *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977). In these films a grandiose tone is achieved, a sense of the scale of the universe and the insignificance of the human being in the context of the vastness and infinity of space.

<sup>37</sup> According to Kubrick, *2001* is in essence an epic story of human awakening and eventual enlightenment. Kubrick is quoted in Nelson's book *Kubrick* as stating: 'man must strive to gain mastery over himself as well as over his machines. Somebody has said that man is the missing link between primitive apes and civilised human beings. You might say that that idea is inherent in *2001*. We are semi-civilised, capable of co-operation and affection, but needing some sort of transfiguration into a higher form of life.'

extraterrestrial intelligence, presented in the form of a black monolith, influences terrestrial pre-history by stimulating the discovery of tools by a group of apes, thus setting in train the apes' evolution into modern human society. Millennia later, in 1999 another monolith is discovered on the moon and found to come from the region of Jupiter. A team of astronauts is sent to investigate, guided by the humanoid computer HAL 9000 which controls their spaceship. Conflicts between Man and computer develop and are played out.

In *2001* Kubrick combines evocative sequences suggestive of great mysteries, vast powers and timelessness, with an elaborate substructure of explanatory material. By this means he recontextualises the iconography of the infinite and the transcendental within an apparently rational context.



figure 145. Aries carrying Dr. Floyd to Clavius crater in Moon.

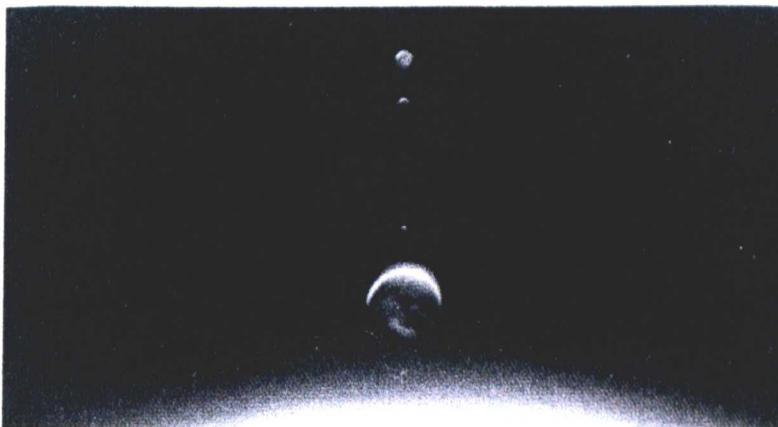


figure 146. Still from *2001*. Alignment of Jupiter and its satellites.

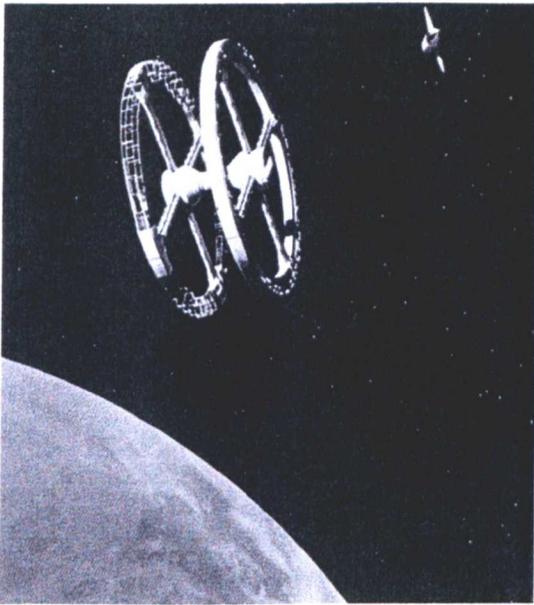


figure 147. Still from *2001* .Orion and Earth.

Black is the dominant colour in this film. It acts, just as it did in the paintings of the seventeenth century, as an emblem of mystery and as a gateway to a realm of higher consciousness. In the form of the monolith, a vast, matte black, mark-resistant rectangle (which transforms every shot in which it appears into the movie equivalent of an abstract painting,) black represents a superior intelligence, pure disembodied thought. Black, in *2001*, is the colour of true vision, of wisdom, of power, of fear, and of infinity. When the star child emerges from the white room he is subsumed into its depths. The new enhanced human race that he symbolises has finally moved beyond the rational, beyond the material, beyond language, into the eternal realm of pure blackness. All his borders have collapsed and he is finally free.

At certain junctures in the film the narrative stops completely and an absence of sound effects accompanies a black screen. Sometimes the black expanse is punctured by tiny points of light, sometimes it is framed by a window, at others not. These black vistas contain no vanishing point, the picture is a surface. It feels remote and self-contained. The extreme simplicity of such sequences is emblematic of the film as a whole, which is slow and minimal, containing little dialogue, plot or complex characterisation. Humanity

and its traces are minimised in these sequences. Rather there is a sense of time unaffected by the vicissitudes of human history.



figure 148. Still from *2001*. Alignment of Jupiter and its satellites.

During the opening sequence the blackness of space, and the slow alignment of three planets, represents a pre-creation era, the mysterious unknown time of the universe's birth. Sometime millions of years later an ape-man throws a bone into the blue sky above, the bone rotates and transforms into a orbiting satellite slowly turning against the blackness of space. The camera pulls back and we watch as two satellites and a space station circle the earth, their elemental shapes against black forming elegant, minimal compositions. The pace is slow emphasising the enormous vistas and the sense of harmony. As yet there has been no speech. For several minutes the viewer watches images of a giant circular space station revolving and orbiting in space to the accompaniment of the *Blue Danube Waltz* of Johann Strauss. Kubrick crops the vehicle in a variety of ways, such that its perfect arcs are accentuated against the pure black background. This fifteen minute sequence is a pure celebration of black: its symbolic associations and meditative qualities.

The film is divided up into four distinct sections. These are quite elliptical and the audience is required to fill in the gaps between them. Each conjunction of sections involves protracted sequences, during which we drift through the black expanse of space. Blackness is being used here to allow the spectator to think, to speculate and to drift

around in the depths of his own subconscious. The idea of mind expansion, of inner transformation, thus becomes both a theme and an actual aim of the film itself – the medium becomes the message, as it were, in these black sequences, which invite the viewer to contemplate and ultimately to reach his own enlightenment. In his book *Kubrick* Thomas Allen Nelson writes, ‘Overall, *2001* invites its audience to ‘see’ beyond the earthbound limits of time and self and to experience a cinematic imagination that gives form to its own dreams of duration in the amorphous expanses of outer space. (114)’

The first connection between sections is the match between the bone and the satellite. We move from primeval man and his ascent to 2001 and Dr Floyd’s visit to the moon in a single jump cut, followed by the sequence of outer space vistas described above. The next conjunction takes place during Dr Floyd’s trip to the moon to examine the monolith. Kubrick cuts from the piercing sound coming from the monolith and a conjunctive image of the monolith, earth and sun against black, to a black screen and the title ‘Jupiter Mission: 18 Months Later.’ This is followed by another series of beautiful images of the Discovery One set against black. This section ends with Bowman, having performed a lobotomy on HAL, watching Floyd on a small screen admitting to the ‘total mystery’ of the monolith. The film then cuts to the blackness of space and an eerie chanting sound. Three planets and a ship come into view and are pictured in various geometric configurations against the black sky. Then the monolith appears and the music becomes more urgent, closer to a screech. We watch as the monolith, which appears dark blue, floats through the black void. Sometimes its form is subsumed into the blackness and all we see is a sliver of light bisecting the black like a Newman zip. Then the four elements, Jupiter its moons and the huge monolith, begin to come into alignment. When they reach this state of perfection the camera jumps to Bowman’s pod, depicted as tiny in the centre of a field of black. Then back to black before the star gate sequence begins. The final conjunction occurs when Bowman comes out of the rooms at the end of the film as a star baby. The camera goes out to space again and we watch the embryo shimmering against black journeying towards earth to the music of Richard Strauss’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.



figure 149. Still from *2001*, Earth

*2001* is an excellent example of the cinematic form that film director Paul Schrader calls 'The Transcendental Style', a cinematic style that strives 'toward the ineffable and invisible (17)'. In his book *Transcendental Style in Film*, first published in 1972, Schrader argues the case for a new, as yet unrecognised international cinematic style. This style expresses the sacred through a specific cinematic language that eschews spectacle for austere and self-referential styling. Schrader explains how unlike the dominant cinematic style of psychological realism, which uses a wide range of expressive effects and ideas to draw the viewer into a state of emotional empathy with the characters and the story presented, the transcendental style draws attention to its formal constituents of colour and sound. In the Transcendental style of cinema the viewer is not transported 'into' a narrative via a brainwashing spectacle of visual formulas. The films that Schrader identifies as belonging to this tradition do not offer two hours of escapism. Instead they are 'poetry to be understood over time'.

Schrader identifies 'stasis' as a major contributor to the evocation of the spiritual and the transcendental. Films such as Ozu's *Late Autumn* for example, begin quite conventionally: a jaunty narrative leads the viewer into the film and into the story. Once the viewer is completely immersed though, the camera and therefore the narrative stops. In the case of *Late Autumn*, Ozu punctures the narrative to dwell on the black silhouette of a mountain. Schrader writes: "When the image stops, the viewer keeps going, moving deeper and deeper ..into the image. This is the 'miracle' of sacred art. If it occurs, the viewer has moved past the point where any 'temporal means' are of any avail. He has

moved beyond the province of art.” (19)<sup>38</sup> His mental processes, now mobilised, instead of continuing in a forward motion, rather begin to move deeper into the still image and thus, especially if the image is stark, into a meditative state. Schrader writes:

‘Transcendental style stylizes reality by eliminating (or nearly eliminating) those elements which are primarily expressive of human experience, thereby robbing the conventional interpretations of reality of their power. (11).’

Schrader discusses the possible influence of religion on the development of this style, and in particular of Jansenism and Calvinism. He considers that the ascetic tradition – against excesses of any kind in visual material- could give this cinematic style some of its leanness’. Schrader also links the Transcendental cinematic style to Byzantine iconography, with its dark, flat backgrounds and flattened forms and its ‘dialectic of concrete and abstract’. Byzantine images, he explains, turned away from the alluring world of the senses, ‘soaring ever higher into a region of theological symbolism and, through its images, carrying man’s imagination to the transcendent real where images hovered between God and man’ He writes:

‘Like Oriental art, Byzantine iconography was an art of fixed ends, and those ends were spiritual and ideal rather than human and sentimental. The work of art was a means to an ineffable end... to achieve these ends Byzantine art was anonymous and impersonal. Some icons were described as pictures made without hands, formed, rather, by miraculous contact with the original. (98).’

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<sup>38</sup> In the book *The Cinematic Body* film theorist Steven Shaviro describes an effect used in film that he has observed in two of Jean Luc Godard’s films. Here single objects are divorced from their context and set against black. Such a presentation he claims focuses the attention and encourages a state of deep contemplation in the viewer, ‘Consider Godard’s images, in extreme close-up, of a pebble held in a hand in *Weekend*, and of coffee swirling in a cup in *Two or Three things I Know about Her*. These images are invested with a surprising, alien beauty...the pebble is displayed on a hand like a pediment, against a dark background, its indentations - almost like the features of a ravaged face - harshly contoured in the sharp light... the aberrant scale and unfamiliar lighting of these images defamiliarises their objects... the pebble and the coffee are nether useful nor significant; they work neither as things nor as signs. They are nothing but images, mutely and fascinatingly soliciting our attention. The pebble rests, the coffee swirls, filling our screen. Our gaze is suspended; we are compelled merely to regard these images in their strangeness, apart from our knowledge of what they represent. (29)’

## **Conclusion**

The Infinite Black Void has found its way into other, more recent images. However, its usage today is problematic for several reasons. The most important is that this set piece relies on the existence of a societal 'discourse' (as Bryson calls it), which includes some notion of a spiritual realm. By blocking narrative it presents the viewer with a gap that he is then compelled to fill. For seventeenth century minds, saturated with religious discourse relating to higher spiritual realms, this kind of gap in the image would function as intended: the gap would be filled by religious themes appropriate to the convention. Where there is no shared discourse of the spiritual variety however (as is the case in today's secular, consumer societies), the gap will be filled differently by each viewer. This blackness, however, this negative void, prevents the viewer from bringing uplifting, positive abstract concepts into play, and creates a situation of entrapment. For the truly secular consumer-viewer, for whom the concept of a non-corporeal higher realm is alien, access to the spiritual zone must come at one remove.

## Chapter Four: Conclusion.

In the preceding three chapters I have laid out the case for my claim that the three familiar filmic set pieces analysed in this text (*The Psychological Interior*, *The Nightmarish Urban Spectacle* and *The Infinite Black Void*), derive much of their power to affect us from their links to images from the past. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that the majority of powerful Hollywood set pieces feed off older imagery. Today, of course, being constantly bombarded with eye-catching images, it is difficult to imagine how powerful painted images once were in the period before mechanical reproduction.

I have discussed how institutionally sanctioned painting neglected, indeed rejected, this kind of emotionally manipulative imagery and the effects that it contains during much of the twentieth century. During the nineteen-seventies and eighties, however, some painters (several of whom were associated with Neo-Expressionism<sup>39</sup>) became interested in this type of evocative and expressive imagery once again. Certain painters of that period, such as Eric Fischl, Paula Rego, and Jorg Immendorf, created idiosyncratic versions of the set pieces that have been discussed here. In their employment of these traditional atmospheric motifs, these artists bypassed popular culture (its dominance in their era and its power *vis a vis* these set pieces), and related their works instead back to the history of painting. For example, Jorg Immendorf's *Café Deutschland* series and Eric Fischl's suburban interiors are Psychological Interiors from the Eighties that draw on older painting traditions. Where other artists of the period were more interested in disrupting the manipulative aspects of this type of imagery, which they associated with the promulgation of reactionary ideology, these painters used it in a traditional manner to express subjective feelings towards their subjects. As a consequence, they were attacked by critics for their unexamined use of pastiche, for their egotistical individualism, and for the reactionary stance implied in their recreation and reworking of older painting styles.

Part of the reason why a return to this kind of emotionally manipulative imagery and the effects that it contains, was seen as reactionary by the art establishment of the Seventies

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<sup>39</sup> An international painting trend that existed within a heterogeneous field of art practice.

and Eighties may relate to the way it had been used within certain secular paintings of the nineteenth century. There had been a vogue during the mid-to-late nineteenth century for a certain style of sentimental pastiche. Augustus Leopold Egg's *Past and Present 1, 2 and 3* (1859, figure 150) for example, uses precisely the light techniques I have discussed in order to convey a moralistic message relating to the perils of infidelity.



figure 150. Augustus Leopold Egg, *Past and Present* (1859)

In his essay *The Rainbow: A Problematic Image in Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, George P. Landow examines the way that iconography from religious art migrated into secular art of the nineteenth century. He observes that in some nineteenth century paintings a sense of religious moralising pervades the image, especially where a concatenation of traditionally religious effects and ideas have been used. Landow describes such images – American nineteenth century luminist paintings for example - as disturbing in their religio-political agendas. In this context these traditional effects and

devices were used for nationalistic purposes, to suggest God's covenant with the United States.

Currently these set pieces and the effects that they contain are reappearing once again in the paintings of a new generation of artists. A kind of self-conscious expressionism and romanticism is now common in painting. Unlike the Neo-Expressionists before them, however, these artists, myself included, are finding their visual effects within commercial culture, often preferring to evoke Disney as an obvious reference rather than say - Edward Munch.

There are perhaps two reasons why, in the current period, these set pieces and the effects that they contain are once again accepted as legitimate visual currency. One reason might involve an acceptance on the part of today's artists that the critical work has already been done; that a previous generation of critical artists, having drawn attention to the way that the kind of powerful and emotive imagery examined here had been used for various ideological purposes, had already exposed it, and in so doing had broken its power. They did so with anger, irony and eventually with humour, and thus allowed artists of my generation to leave aside criticality as a main focus and enjoy once again the process of creating seductive pictures - albeit with an awareness of history. For me, re-evoking this type of emotionally moving imagery is like reassembling a shattered vase, whilst wanting to keep in view the signs of fracture and glue.

The way that I produce my paintings using visual motifs and effects taken from a range of atmospheric images from the recent and distant past differs from painting to painting in terms of the level of fracture or disjunction perceptible. In some of my paintings effects taken from a range of atmospheric visual material are collaged together 'across' the image. For example in the painting *Aksai with Huge Wave* (2006, figure 151) based on a black and white nineteenth century photo of a sinking ship the sky comes from a still from the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2005), the sea from an American action painting that I saw exhibited recently, the pale green glitter in the wave on the left comes from a T-shirt, the seals on the rock come from a painting by the nineteenth century

American painter Albert Bierstadt, the distant rocks on the horizon from an early Turner painting, the tiny figures on the right from an Adam Elsheimer painting and the figures in the bottom right hand corner from an etching taken from a children's novel.



Figure 151. *Aksai with Huge Wave* (2006)

In other paintings effects are layered on top of each other, 'over' the image as it were, in a more inextricable manner. For example in *Grey and Silver Mines* (2004) I melded ideas taken from various incarnations of Hell imagery (colours, rhythms, the Hell mouth, arrangements of figures the compartment idea and others) with a section of a photo of Brazilian gold mines (figure 152).

My intention here is that the viewer be seduced into the painting and the narrative before the image starts to break apart. The way that I construct my paintings from various pictorial elements appears, on first viewing, to achieve a spatial coherence due to a superficial spatial integrity. This is quite different to artists who are often associated with Postmodernism, such as David Salle, James Rosenquist or more recently Dexter Dalwood, who montage together fragments from disparate images in such a way as to draw attention to the feature of fracture first, and therein negate the seductive qualities inherent in the images from which they sample. In their paintings the viewer is completely blocked from entering into the dreamworlds offered by seductive imagery. In my images the viewer is invited to enter the scene by what appears to be, at first glance,

an adherence to the conventions of naturalistic topographical painting. (S)he is briefly 'taken in' by the vista presented despite the intensification of the image - achieved by the superimposition and editing together of 'the best bits' of other images - before being tripped up and made self-aware by the level of intensification – that is the excess of effects, as well as by the spatial and other inconsistencies.



Figure 152. *Grey and Silver Mines* (2004)

The current freedom that artists such as myself currently enjoy *vis a vis* this type of compelling imagery has also been facilitated by certain Hollywood movies of the last decade. These films, many of which have been discussed above, have completely scrambled former meanings so that there really is no coherent fixed significance to these types of visual set piece. In Disney's *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and in *Sin City* and *Casshern* for example, many former stylistic manifestations of these set pieces appear – Medieval, Renaissance, Romantic and Expressionist varieties are mixed together in one big melting-pot. Up until and including the mid-twentieth century these set pieces had tended to be swept up in an overall style of the era, with Film Noir as perhaps the last really coherent style of this type. In the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries

however, eclecticism is itself the style of the era, that is the borrowing and sampling from all the other previous eras. And with this eclecticism comes, not a building up, but an emptying out of cultural meaning, as past and present are brought together. What is left is the vaguest suggestion of some kind of heroism, or of transcendence, alongside a slightly hackneyed quality, and it is these qualities that I try to evoke in my paintings.

At base level though, despite their complicated history, if one examines just the visual information that carries atmosphere, one is left with a vocabulary of special effects, which encompass various qualities of light, dark, scale, mass, composition and viewpoint. These effects move us because, on some level, they activate or evoke basic, visceral responses, various registers of fear, puzzlement, anticipation, comfort or discomfort, control or lack of control, hotness or coldness, amazement or calm. Ideologies adapt and change, but instinctive responses remain somewhere within us, and this fact explains, to some extent at least, why these effects can be used in many different contexts and still affect us every time.

Even though these powerful effects are not fundamentally ideological, they nonetheless confer an ideology or moralism once they become allied to motifs and images. In the ultimate reductive historical sweep one might say that initially they functioned as part of a kind of early religious advertising campaign, whereas later (in the paintings of the nineteenth century for example) they were used to produce various types of propaganda (nationalistic and moral). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries they appear again, this time within spectacular and compelling Hollywood movies, movies which present us with a variety of fantasy tales. It is in this context (movies on video and DVD) that I first became acquainted with them.

In my paintings I also use this powerful and manipulative language of effects. I use the tools of Hollywood cinema that I love in order to create my own enhanced Hollywood freeze-frames. These redirect attention back to the real world, one that has been overlaid with an atmosphere constructed through a concatenation of effects and devices from imagery of the recent and distant past. My intention is to express in an approximate way,

(with a fair amount of 'critical distance'), and in a commonly understood popular language, my own romantic beliefs about the world. In my paintings I give the real and forgotten events that I depict the TV treatment. I show events as they would appear if they were made into a movie, shown on TV and then freeze-framed. It is through TV that all important information is now conveyed. We are accustomed to perceiving things as important when we see them broadcast on the screen.

Whether one sees the visual ideas and motifs that I have discussed in this writing and that I use in my paintings as empty remnants or as still infused with living and potent meaning, as enemy or friend, as part of the 'Society of the Spectacle' or as part of the legacy of human achievement, as signifying belief or as selling myths, as cultural signs or as emotional triggers, depends on one's viewpoint. And this attitude determines one's usage of them. To me these visual ideas and motifs are all of these things at the same time, but with an emphasis on their positive aspects: I hope and believe that the atmospheric motifs and effects that I have catalogued here are indeed potent friends, expressive of human achievement and belief. The mass of pinned-up images on the studio wall with which I began are the source and continuing inspiration for my approach to my paintings.

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