

# **IMAGING THE METAPHYSICAL IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE**

**A comparative study of intertextuality, poststructuralism  
and metaphysical symbolism**

by

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# INTRODUCTION

In retrospect, the journey I embarked on three years ago culminating in this research and the exhibition that it explicates, directed me to an understanding I had not set out to find. This journey drove me, perhaps by inner necessity, to seek something at or beyond the limits of our specific ideas about truth, our reality and our gods. This journey led me to the borders between the oppositions of here and there, virtue and vice, self and other, a place where darkness shines in the light and light within the dark. In time I realized that perhaps, *'what was said of God not yet suffices me'*, that perhaps *'it is the beyond divinity that is my light and my life'* (*Angelous Selesius in Derrida 1993:65*).

Initially, my journey started as a need to develop a personal style of painting. During my theoretical and practical explorations, I became particularly interested in the field of metaphysics, specifically in relation to the current developments of metaphysical expression in contemporary art practice. It was then that I decided to investigate how contemporary forms of metaphysical imaging have evolved formally and stylistically. I began to question how such approaches might be informed by current philosophical thought, given that many contemporary theorists have adopted a sceptical view towards metaphysical discourse. This point of contention presented me with the initial challenge of finding an artist whose exploration of metaphysical content is supported by topical philosophical thought. I intended this inquiry to serve as a basis from which to develop my own approach to imaging metaphysical content and to situate it within the context of contemporary thought.

In investigating such contemporary views, it became clear that many artists do in fact continue to image metaphysical content even though the notion of a metaphysical reality is not widely accepted in the context of current poststructural and linguistic thought. One particular artist, Anselm Kiefer (1945 -) caught my attention, an artist who uses imagery that may be said to hint at or allude to a deeper underlying reality.

This is reflected in his choice of subject matter which displays a variety of sources including visual references to Northern European myths, Western esoteric traditions and overt Christian subject matter. These images are inherently symbolic in nature, alluding to *'historical and mythical events [that] are signposts, presenting information about the nature of the world'* (Rosenthal 1987: 10).

What I found of particular interest was that Kiefer's imagery reflects the use of contemporary stylistic devices such as intertextuality. This concept, coined by the feminist author Julia Kristeva, pertains to a combination of imagery from various contexts such as realism and abstraction, and is informed by the poststructural philosophy of Jacques Derrida. In familiarizing myself with this concept, I was intrigued to discover that an intertextual approach to imaging may undermine the expression of definitive ideas, rendering the content of such images indeterminate.

These images are indeterminate because they are combined in such a way as to suggest contradictory interpretations of a concept. Rosenthal's analyses of Kiefer's work also suggests that the content of his images is indeterminate, because it *'always mingles viewpoints and represents conflicting interpretations'* (1998: 155).

I found it contradictory, even nonsensical that imagery which aims to suggest metaphysical content may also be informed by a philosophical theory that denies and debases the signification of any specific idea. The idea of metaphysical images informed by poststructural theory which claims that all our notions of reality and truth are dependent on, and limited to language, and that, *'there is no deeper subjective reality underlying the ordinary, socially created self, and no deeper reality underlying the ordinary socially created intelligibility of the world'* (Harland 1987: 68) seemed even more perplexing.

It was this contradiction that presented me with the main problem for this research. I was intent on solving these contradictions and hoped that in the process I would

discover exactly if and how Kiefer's intertextual images might express metaphysical content. I also hoped that such an investigation might provide me with the necessary impetus and information to develop in my studio work, an approach to imaging the metaphysical within the framework of poststructural thought and intertextual practices.

I realized that it might be possible to resolve these contradictions, by proving either that Kiefer's images still express metaphysical content symbolically, or that they allude to metaphysical content that is informed by intertextuality. This contention presented me with the sub problems of my research. I wanted to determine firstly, whether the metaphysical content of Kiefer's work was specific to its symbolic properties and secondly, whether the metaphysical content was specific to its intertextual properties. The method I have adopted to found my argument is, firstly, to compare Kiefer's intertextual imagery and its content with the principles of metaphysical symbolism, and secondly, to compare these images to the principles of intertextuality and the poststructural thought that informs it. Furthermore, I hoped that the analyses of these images might elucidate how the symbolic and intertextual elements of these images interrelate and how this informs their metaphysical content.

Since my work is informed by a similar contradiction between symbolic and intertextual stylistic practices, I will apply the same analytical principles to selected images from my own work. This will serve as a useful theoretical basis that may both inform my studio work and validate the contentions and premises of this research.

In Chapter I, the definition and aims of metaphysical discourse will be outlined in general terms. This will serve as a background to the research. The notion of metaphysical imaging, that is, the visual expression of metaphysical content, will be investigated in relation to the theory of metaphysical symbolism as defined by William Urban. Urban, a former professor of philosophy at the University of Harvard during the first half of the 20th century, developed a general theory of symbolism, in

which he outlined the major characteristics and functions of metaphysical symbols. Urban was aware at the time that modernist philosophy (such as logical positivism and structuralism) aimed '*to eliminate metaphysics, and to reduce it to the level of the unmeaning*' (1939: 15). He developed his theories as a means to prove that symbolic discourse may still serve as a valid means of expressing the metaphysical.

Even though Urban's views are regarded in general as obscure and of little contemporary relevance, his theories do provide clear criteria for the recognition and general characterization of metaphysical symbols. As a general theory of symbolism, these notions will serve as a useful theoretical guide from which to ascertain if and how Kiefer's images may be said to express metaphysical concept in symbolic form. Since my own images are also informed by varied symbolic and esoteric systems, Urban's theories will also be applied to my own work to formally characterize their symbolic content.

The second section of the chapter focuses on an investigation of the intertextual qualities inherent in Kiefer's images. Firstly, this inquiry will aim to elucidate the attributes of intertextuality as defined by Kristeva, specifically the indeterminate qualities of such imagery, and to demonstrate how this is informed by aspects of poststructural thought. Secondly, this investigation will aim to indicate how these indeterminate qualities of intertextual images may be consistent or inconsistent with the general principles of metaphysical symbols as defined by Urban. The investigation will also serve as a useful theoretical basis that will inform a stylistic analysis in Chapter II.

In Chapter II, I demonstrate and investigate, with reference to selected images of the work of Kiefer as well as my own, the nature of the relationship between the intertextual and the symbolic. The aim here is to define in visual terms any consistencies or inconsistencies between the intertextual use of imagery and metaphysical symbolism. As a basis for this inquiry, the images will be stylistically



analysed with reference to Urban's theories in order to determine whether these images reflect attributes of traditional metaphysical symbols, such as negation, anthropomorphism and generalization.

I also demonstrate whether these attributes, if indeed present in these intertextual images, are consistent with the principles of metaphysical symbolism. The intertextual elements in these works will also be stylistically analysed with reference to poststructural principles. The intention here is to determine in greater detail how intertextuality contributes to the conceptual indeterminacy of these images, and how this may impede or facilitate an expression of symbolic content.

In Chapter III, after having defined the nature of the relation between the intertextual and the symbolic properties of these images, I aim to establish the specific nature of the indeterminate content of these images. This will be done with reference to certain principles of post structuralism. This investigation will determine whether the content of these images is consistent with Urban's view of the metaphoric and the symbolic. The aim here is to assess whether these intertextual images may still be regarded as being metaphoric and symbolic.

In the second part of the chapter, the possibility that the indeterminate content of intertextual images may allude to the metaphysical will be explored. The specific nature of any such metaphysical content will also be investigated in this section. In addition, the investigation will also determine whether there is any relationship between poststructural principles and traditional philosophical and religious views of the metaphysical.

In the conclusion, I present the basic results of this research and comment on the contemporary relevance of intertextual images as a vehicle for metaphysical content.

The relevance of this field of research is affirmed by the renewed emphasis, many contemporary critics such as Suzi Gablik place on the notion of the metaphysical. She contends for example, that the excessively fragmented, deconstructive and highly rationalistic viewpoint adopted by contemporary culture is leading to a destructive condition that fosters isolation as well as a lack of values and meaning. As she says, *'in the last analysis, the psychological roots of the crisis humanity is facing on a global scale seem to lie in the loss of the spiritual perspective. Since a harmonious experience of life requires, amongst other things the fulfilment of transcendental needs, a culture that has denied spirituality...is doomed to failure in all other avenues of its activities'* (Gablik. 58)

In a broader perspective, it seems that metaphysical discourse is still a relevant and needed form of discourse in contemporary culture and that its continued exploration in the field of art, may serve as a means to restore a sense of interconnectedness and purpose on a personal and social level.

The reader must keep in mind, that the theoretical models used as a basis for this research are not specifically related to visual art. Therefore I have had to interpret and translate certain philosophical and literary concepts in visual terms. Furthermore, since this research will focus on delimited notions of metaphysical symbolism, any correlation that may or may not be suggested between metaphysical symbolism and the notion of intertextuality will be limited to the context of Urban's theories and his immediate philosophical influences.

Finally, since a limited number of artists are used as historical models for this research, any conclusion (s) that may be reached, may only be valid in relation to these artists work.

# CHAPTER I

## IMAGING THE METAPHYSICAL

### *1.1. METAPHYSICS AND METAPHYSICAL SYMBOLISM*

What lies behind everything that is? What is the meaning of life? These are some of the questions usually associated with the notion of metaphysics. Although answers to these questions have been subject to continual reassessment within the framework of varying ideological perspectives, they all have one thing in common - they have been and remain speculative, *'because it is relatively impossible [sic] to either confirm or refute them empirically'* (Jordaan 1990: 813).

Although many theorists, artists and philosophers have expressed varied viewpoints on this subject, many seem to agree that metaphysics includes a universal striving in mankind to explain our existence. In his capacity as a psychologist, Fromm, even went so far as to claim that *'All passions and strivings of man are an attempt to find an answer to his existence....the finest as well as the most barbaric cultures have the same function - the difference is only whether the answer given is better or worse...'* (Jordaan 1990: 813).

In philosophical terms, metaphysics is usually associated with a study of the nature of an ultimate reality, as well as descriptions and classifications that may reveal the most general aspects of our objective reality. Such a view holds that these universal traits may help situate our existence in the whole scheme of things, revealing meaningful aspects of our being.

In popular usage this term is usually related to matters that concern the otherworldly or spirituality, but traditionally metaphysics applies to all reality (the phenomenal and the noumenal) and is distinguished from other forms of inquiry only by its notions of generality (universality).

The theories of Urban support the view that metaphysics is a valuable form of discourse that may help to shed light on aspects of our reality and imbue our experiences and existence with meaning and purpose. For Urban, metaphysical discourse gives form to these ideas, through an intuitive exploration of abstract constructs which underlie our immediate world of objective reality. As Urban maintains, *'The first characteristic of metaphysics, is that it makes assertions or propositions about metempirical entities, which themselves are not directly experienced, but are in some fashion, the coimplicates of experience'* (1939: 632). By 'metempirical coimplicates' he means propositions of things that are beyond our experience, the essence of things, or notions of the absolute. Urban maintains that these assertions about metempirical entities help situate our experience within the framework of a larger, meaningful whole, and that we cannot understand or communicate important concepts related to our experience of our reality without them. In a way, then, the insights gained through such ideas are coimplicates of experience; they inform our understanding of ourselves and our world.

However, because these abstract metaphysical concepts allude to something that does not form part of our objective reality, we cannot empirically verify the existence of such entities. As a result, *'all statements [or images] about these implicates are symbolic in character'* rather than literal descriptions (Urban 1939: 635). Urban also maintains that, although these symbolic images are intended to reflect abstract content, they should nevertheless be based on aspects of our objective reality. This follows from two principles:

The first is that metaphysical constructs transcend our reality, and as such are wholly abstract incommunicable intuitive ideas. The only way we can express or communicate such abstract ideas meaningfully is via the phenomenal, by means of a relation to what we already know and understand (our objective reality).

Secondly, traditional metaphysical belief has always held that *'the phenomenal world is an expression of a noumenal or intelligible world and that because of this relation, the phenomenal may be taken to represent or stand as symbol for the noumenal'* (Urban 1939: 450). Urban claims that *'It has always been the contention of traditional metaphysics that the finite presupposes the infinite, the relative the absolute'* (1939:636).

Accordingly, the basis of Urban's conception of metaphysical symbolism pertains to the establishment of a relationship between an image and an abstract metaphysical concept, so that such images may not only refer to their own objective reality but also to a metaphysical reality. As Urban contends, the nature of symbols *'implies that it shall not be the literal thing in itself, but rather have reference beyond itself'* (422: 1939).

As such, symbolic content may also be categorized as metaphoric, an operation whereby meaning is transferred from one object or concept to another, through an analogous relationship. For Urban such analogies constitute a necessary vehicle for the expression of metaphysical ideas, that *'could not be determined and expressed except by such a transfer'* (1939: 179).

Symbolism thus reflects an inherent synthesis between the real and the ideal, the phenomenal and the metaphysical concept. As Urban indicates, a symbol cannot serve its function if one of these dialectical opposites is absent, *'if either reference is taken exclusively it becomes unreal or else a mere substituted sign'* (1939: 425). Indeed, this inherent duality of symbols may be said to reflect a certain level of ambiguity in that it articulates both abstract and literal aspects. However, even though this dual identity of symbols presents a logical contradiction, Urban maintains that it is a valid vehicle for the expression of metaphysical content because a conceptual interpretation of symbols ultimately favours the signified (metaphysical content) as the true locus of meaning. Urban says that *'This is the affirmative element in all symbol formation and*

*expresses itself as the first principle of symbolism...namely that every symbol stands for some object and the interpretation of the symbol is the determination of that object' (1939: 426).*

We cannot, therefore, read the symbol backwards and interpret the signified (the metaphysical) as a phenomenal thing. This would emphasize the literal aspect of the symbol, which, contrary to its intended aim, would result in mere fiction or nonsense, negating the symbol's metaphysical content. As Urban states, '*When the similarity between symbol and symbolized is interpreted as though it was a picture [a phenomenal thing], it is taken literally and always involves an element of fiction, it is only when the similarity is taken by way of reflection [from signifier to signified] that we have symbolic truth' (1939: 440).* Urban further maintains that symbolic truth '*is not the common [Literal] form of representation ...but a similarity in the way of reflecting on the two things' (1939: 409).*

Symbolic truth for Urban however, is not limited to partial coincidences, characters and relations, but rather constitutes a vehicle or medium of insight, '*a gateway into something beyond' (1939: 416).* This is supported by the author's belief that symbols do not merely represent or illustrate preconceived concepts, such as the absolute, but also facilitate an intuitive insight into the nature of the metaphysical.

Indeed, since knowledge of the metaphysical cannot be obtained through direct experience and objective verification, Urban regards intuition as an invaluable component of symbolic thought in that it allows us to understand the metaphysical indirectly.

Urban maintains that this intuitive form of truth which can itself be neither presented nor represented, is indirect because it is '*made known ..in the very process of discourse..'* (1939: 669). As he points out, '*intuitive meaning .... comes out most clearly when, through the mobility of words, [it is] transferred metaphorically from*

*one object or referred to another*' (1939: 156). Because such intuitive knowledge *'is immediately known in the process of experience'* (Urban 1939: 637), its disclosure has the quality of a distinct and palpable impression.

Since this form of knowledge is dependent on a relationship between opposing elements such as the objective and abstract, image and idea, it may be regarded as a dialectical process which through a synthesis, eventuates in a third concept. Urban concludes that, *'A recognition...of this third way of knowing opens up the possibility of both understanding metaphysical language and of validating the type of propositions expressed in this language'* (1939: 365).

Urban goes on to make a clear distinction between general symbolism and metaphysical symbolism, claiming that metaphysical symbols are specifically employed to *'throw light on existence in its totality or in its innermost essence'* (1939: 657). In addition, the author contends that images employed as metaphysical symbols should not be mere illusionistic replicas of the phenomenal world, but should be distorted or 'moulded' in specific ways. From this it follows, that *'the metaphysical symbol, differs... in important respects from every other type of symbol'* (1939: 659).

Urban defines these particular attributes of metaphysical symbols in terms of three main characteristics: The first necessary characteristic of such images is the fact that they are generalized, so as to reflect universal rather than specific content. This is an important characteristic because, as Urban claims, *'The ultimate object of metaphysical discourse is to say something significant about the whole of reality'* (1939: 651). It is also this universal quality inherent in metaphysical symbols that makes it possible to express the notion of an all encompassing absolute (such as the notion of God for example). Finally, generalized images which reflect basic and universal aspects of our reality may help contextualize the human condition as an integrated whole.

The second characteristic of metaphysical symbols is that they are negative expressions, that is, they allude to an alternate reality that is outside of space and time as we experience it. Accordingly, in order for realistic images to serve as appropriate vehicles for metaphysical content, they must first be *'moulded, and this moulding takes place through a process of negation, negation of their spatio-temporal character'* (Urban 1939: 706).

For Urban despatialization and detemporization are significant in that they articulate two important notions traditionally associated with the metaphysical, namely omnipresence and the timeless present. The first of these, Urban maintains, *'embodies and expresses our experience or realisation of the compenetration [sic] which negates the externality of space, the second the interpretation which negates the mutual externality of successive moments of time'* (1939: 707).

The third characteristic of metaphysical symbols is that they include an anthropomorphic aspect. *'The language of metaphysics'*, Urban claims, *'must inevitably be anthropomorphic and its symbols taken from the human and the personal, rather than from the abstract and impersonal, side of experience'* (1939: 665). This is a necessary component of all metaphysical symbols, without which we would not be able to grasp their analogical relations and the abstract content they allude to. This is so because *'no relation is really intelligible unless it can be understood as something analogous to relations within our own experience and its activity'* (Urban 1939: 675).

A further characteristic of such anthropomorphism is that it also relates to the notion of the valuable. This is an important aspect of metaphysical symbols, because in order for such images to articulate content that may give meaning and purpose to our existence, they have to allude to something that is inherently good and valuable in itself.



By utilizing symbols that suggest goodness or value we are able to allude to a metaphysical reality characterized by positive attributes such as perfect harmony and peace. It allows us to conceive of a divine being of love and benevolence; an almighty protector who is inherently good. This situates our reality and existence within the universal context of such ideal truths. By emulating and believing in such ideal values of the metaphysical, our lives are filled with a sense of meaning and purpose. As Urban points out, *'We cannot think of life except as a centre of values and except as a movement towards the good'* (1939: 701).

Urban aptly refers to anthropomorphism as the axiological aspect of metaphysical symbols, alluding to the fact that, although such symbols aim to express that which exceeds our frame of reference, they nonetheless have to remain rooted in the human context.

## ***1.2 CONTEMPORARY IMAGING AND THE PROBLEM OF INDETERMINACY***

Urban's theories of the general nature of symbolism provide clear theoretical guidelines that may inform the visual expression of metaphysical content. There are aspects of his theory, however, that seem at odds with the approaches contemporary artists have adopted to imaging the metaphysical. For example, whereas the general aim of symbolic discourse centres around the expression of specific determinate truths, the imagery of some significant contemporary artists like Kiefer, seem to reflect metaphysical content that does not offer any clear conception of truth. Rather than articulating specific *'assertions or propositions about met-empirical entities'* (Urban 1939: 632), the images of Kiefer evoke *'an atmosphere of uncertainty and undecidability'* (Rosenthal 1987: 291). The indeterminacy inherent in these works also seems to be intentional. As the artist himself claims, *'Painting now has to have a meaning [but] not a specific meaning'* (Rosenthal 1987: 93). The indeterminacy in Kiefer's work, is evident in *Kyffhäuser* (Plate 1), an example from a series of images by the same title. The name *Kyffhäuser* refers to a mythic forest. In this image, the

artist reworks photographs by applying paint and other materials like sand or straw, or glueing additional photographs on top of existing ones, even writing on them. The lower part of the image consists of abstract shapes of varying tones with darker gestural brushstrokes at the bottom. Although abstract, the treatment of light in the image evokes the sense of a landscape that is filled with a metaphysical presence and seems in keeping with the title of the work. The top part of the image however (a photograph of a basement), presents a visual contrast to the imaginative reality of the painted landscape beneath.

The fact that Kiefer wrote *'Kyffhäuser'* across the floor of this basement suggest that he also equates this dark, damp interior with such a mythic place. Rather than forming an integrated whole, a reading of the abstract and veristic elements of this image suggest different realities that are both perceptually and intellectually incongruent. As Rosenthal remarks, the intertextual images of Kiefer suggest *'multiple and sometimes conflicting realities, with the result that a powerful air of fantasy and even delusion became ever-present'* (1987:76).

Such a combination of different contexts or realities such as realism, abstraction, found objects and text, which suggest irreconcilable contexts, may be related to Kristeva's notion of intertextuality. She explains the concept of intertextuality as follows, *'that in the space of a given text, several utterances taken from other texts intersect and neutralise one another. Reading for significance we undo this neutralisation and run the threads of meaning back across all the other texts from which our given text was formed. Hence a perpetual multiplication of meanings, as for the polyvalent poetic word, which adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse'* (Moi 1986: 168).



**Plate 1:** Anselm Kiefer, *Kyffhäuser*, (1980 – 81).  
Acrylic, emulsion and watercolour on photograph. Francesco Clemente Collection.

In Kiefer's images the use and combination of different styles such as realism, abstraction and written text, may be said to encourage indeterminacy because, rather than expressing an integrated point of view, it generates a multitude of contexts that often elicit a number of irreconcilable interpretations. In support of this view, the psychologist Jordaan maintains that '*context is something without which meaning and*

*understanding are impossible*’ and further that *‘to make sense of anything, we must see it in [a specific] context’* (1989: 47). Even though this seems to suggest that indeterminate meaning is related to a combination of different contexts, this does not necessarily seem to be the case. In some Pre-Renaissance imagery, different visual contexts such as realism, abstraction and the written word are combined in such a way as to express clear determinable concepts.

One example of this is Simone Martini’s *The Annunciation* (Plate 2). In this painting, realistic figures are superimposed on an abstract and flat gold ground. The artist has also included the text *‘ave gratia plena’* in the image, which represents a spoken greeting from the archangel Gabriel.



**Plate 2:** Simone Martini, *The Annunciation*, (1333).  
Tempera on wood. Galleria Degli Uffizi

Although such a combination of disparate stylistic elements may seem similar to Kiefer's intertextual approach to imaging, the content of this image is not indeterminate. In fact, the symbolism of the image was widely understood and decipherable in the context of its time and thus articulates a clear and definitive idea of a heavenly reality. The combination of realistic figures with a flat abstract background, suggest that these figures are spiritual beings, that occupy an alternate reality that is spaceless. Such a negation of the spatial properties of objective reality is also consistent with Urban's theory of metaphysical symbolism.

It would seem, then, that there is more to intertextuality than a mere combination of different stylistic elements. Certain combinations appear to support determinate meaning such as demonstrated in Martini's painting, whereas a similar approach in Kiefer's work reflects a more open - ended reading. How, then, does the combination of different stylistic elements articulate indeterminate content?

For Kristeva, the answer lies with intertextual images that suggest contradictory content. As she says, intertextual images may serve as a vehicle of contradiction: *'it may break the law of identity, and'* articulate an idea that is *'not identical with itself'* (Lechte 1990: 95). Rather than articulating distinct meanings of concepts such as light or dark, phenomenal or noumenal, such images suggest paradoxical and contradictory meanings *'expressing both one and other simultaneously'* (Lechte 1990: 96).

The indeterminacy of intertextuality is then related to a destabilization of the specified meanings of mutually exclusive opposites, and articulates meaning that crosses the boundaries between self and Other. For Kristeva, the indeterminacy of intertextual images ultimately resides in the fact that the content of this type of imagery *'is never entirely analysable...the signifiers do not constitute'* [a specific meaning] *'a closed or unified whole'* (Lechte 1990: 103). Opposites, alterity and negation can often appear in the same image. Intertextuality, in addition to being an interpenetration and combination of different texts may thus also be said to represent an intersection of

meanings rather than the fixed point of a specific meaning, and as such is clearly in contradiction to Urban's conceptions of the metaphysical symbols.

This notion of intertextuality also bears resemblance to the poststructural theory of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida holds that all discourse and the concepts that it may express are ultimately indeterminate because concepts are never isolated existents. Instead of regarding ideas and concepts as isolated pockets of meaning, Derrida conceives of meaning as a system of differences and oppositions between elements. In this sense, meaning is always dependent on its opposition to other concepts, so that the truth of any concept is always contaminated with an Other, always implicates another. Derrida explains such contamination by what he calls dissemination, that is a slippage of meaning from one opposite to another, of one specific idea to another.

This implies that meaning is always elsewhere, that it is continually deferred from one sign to another, one idea to another. As a result, signs can never refer to any ultimate or definitive truths. Indeed, such a deferral of meaning leads to a condition of understanding where meaning is dispersed infinitely because it '*spreads out amongst undecidable ambiguities*' (Harland 1987: 133). For Derrida, meaning is something that remains '*perpetually unfulfilled*' [and] '*exists in the absence of all signifieds*' (Harland 1987: 135). Because intertextual imagery is informed by these theories, it may also serve as a vehicle to bring to light the inherent instability and indeterminacy of the concepts and notions of discourse.

Other authors, such as Gilmour for example, seem to voice support for the idea that an intertextual use of imagery may prevent the viewer from arriving at a clear conceptualization of any determinate signified. Gilmour claims that the depth of meaning usually associated with symbolic imagery is noticeably lacking in Kiefer's art, and that '*this depth is replaced by surface or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth)*' (1990: 94).

Gilmour further argues that intertextual imagery, *'is for the most part a conception of practices, discourses and textual play'*, which rather than focusing on deeper symbolic meanings, suggests *'an interplay between various kinds of signifiers'* (1990:94).

In contrast to this view, Urban maintains that images used as metaphysical symbols should have specific and determinate properties, that is to say, they must reflect content that is negated and generalized and reflect specific values such as goodness. For Urban, the primacy of symbolic truth relies on such a metaphoric relation.

The principles of intertextuality thus seem irreconcilable with those inherent in metaphysical symbolism, and as such may interfere with the symbolic expression of metaphysical content. In relating images with contradictory values to abstract metaphysical ideas, it may be impossible to form a clear intelligible understanding of the 'truths' that such an analogy may reveal. Furthermore, in combining different texts (such as realism and abstraction) which represent conflicting ideas, intertextual imagery may hinder symbolic thought processes because it emphasizes the disparate properties inherent in the visual text itself, rather than directing our thoughts towards the metaphysical. Finally, because of these contradictory qualities, intertextual imagery may not reflect fixed characteristics such as negation, generalization and value statements that are necessary for images to serve as a vehicle for metaphysical content.

The conflicting approaches and theoretical models that are evident in Kiefer's work suggest an impasse. It is unclear why and how the artist used these disparate approaches to express metaphysical content, or whether such images can do so at all. In the following chapters, I will attempt to resolve these inconsistencies.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **CONTEMPORARY METAPHYSICAL IMAGING**

Having established a theoretical basis from which to analyse the varied thought processes that inform Kiefer's work, my aim is to determine exactly how these opposing theoretical influences are expressed through the artist's images. It is my hope that such an investigation may shed light on the contradictions and inconsistencies in Kiefer's work and ultimately may help to determine how the artist's imagery expresses metaphysical content.

By stylistically analysing some of the artist's images I hope to determine if, and to what extent, his images may be said to adhere to the general principles of metaphysical symbolism, such as negation, anthropomorphism and generalization. The chapter will be divided into three separate parts, in which the relation between the stylistic elements of Kiefer's images and each of these principles will be addressed separately. I hope to determine how the intertextual elements in these images affect the symbolic attributes in these works, and the impact of this on the expression of metaphysical content.

Not only has Kiefer's intertextual approach to imaging served as a basic influence on my own practical explorations, but my images, like his, reflect the symbolic influences of varied esoteric traditions. The fact that my own work is informed by such disparate approaches, also suggests a contradiction in terms. To address these similar inconsistencies in my own work, I shall analyse a selection of my own images. My intention is to come to a better understanding of my own approach to the use of intertextuality and to demonstrate how the content of my images is informed by the relationship between their symbolic and intertextual elements.



## 2.1 NEGATION AND CONTEMPORARY METAPHYSICAL IMAGING

### 2.1.1 Negation and Kiefer's imagery

The concept of negation as an absence of objective space, or the denial of an object's existence in physical space does seem to be consistent with some of Kiefer's use of intertextual imagery. In the image *March Sand* for example (Plate 3), a photographic landscape is partially obscured through a gestural overpainting of actual sand. The application of the sand over the surface of the photograph introduces abstract shapes, and presents a visual contrast that contradicts the veristic qualities of the landscape. In this way, the abstract shapes of sand, in the context of the photograph, alludes to the essence of nature behind the appearance of objective reality. Such a negation of the illusionistic or objective space of the landscape is consistent with Urban's theories of symbolism.



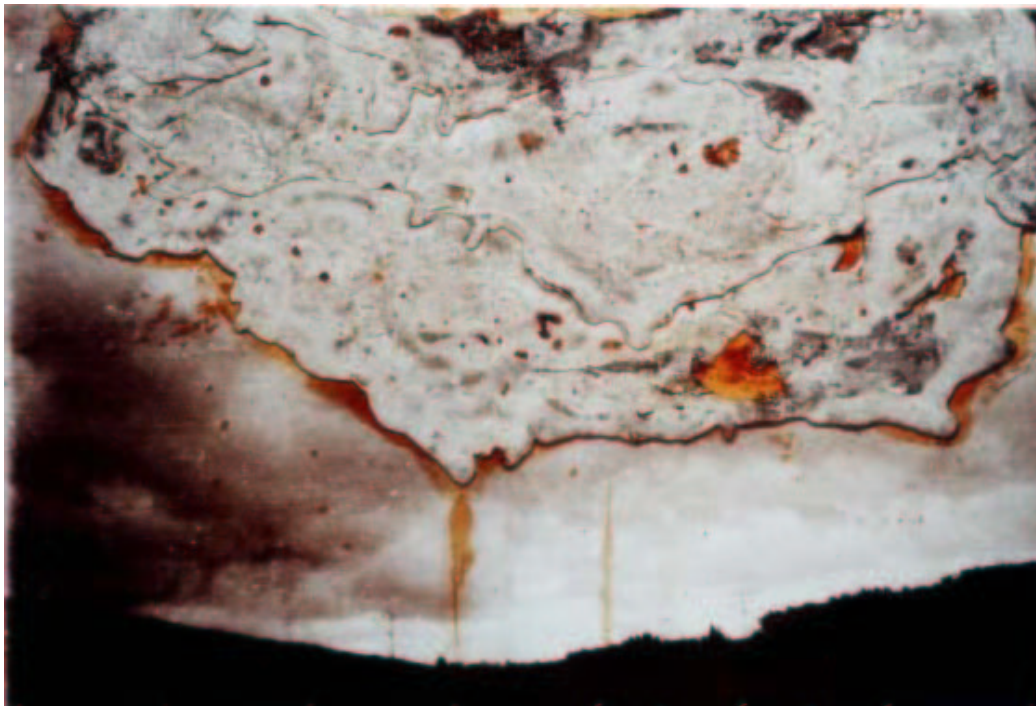
**Plate 3:** Anselm Kiefer, *March Sand*, (1980).  
Acrylic and sand on photograph. Saatchi Collection, London.

However closer consideration of the image reveals a contradiction. Kiefer's overpainting although negating the underlying photographic illusion of the landscape also affirms its presence. This is because the artist used actual sand, which, being an actual physical constituent of any given landscape, re-asserts the presence of land and the space it may create and occupy. The overpainting is not an illusionistic representation, but a textured addition to the flat surface of the underlying photograph. This further emphasizes the physical presence of the sand, evoking a more vivid conception of our experience of actual landscapes and the space alluded to.

It seems thus that Kiefer not only negates presence and space but also paradoxically affirms it. Kiefer's use of intertextuality, his combination of different materials such as photographs and sand, and signifying systems (realism and abstract gestural shapes) may be said to simultaneously affirm and negate the spatial properties of the image in question.

Other examples of Kiefer's paradoxical affirmation and negation of spatial properties may be found throughout the body of his work. In *Heavy Cloud* (Plate 4) for example, the introduction of an abstract lead form superimposed on the underlying photographic landscape gives the appearance of a metaphysical presence. This is because the abstract and two - dimensional quality of this form, contradict the highly illusionistic space of the landscape and therefore allude to something that does not share the same spatial properties of objective reality. The lead shape is also an essentially flat addition to the surface of the image, and does not conform to the perspectival illusion of the clouds behind it. The space and physical presence of the object are thus brought into question, or negated. This negation of objective space is consistent with Urban's theory and its expression of the metaphysical.

However, as with the previous landscape, the negated qualities of the image are contradicted by the physicality of the lead, which, in protruding from the surface of the illusionistic



**Plate 4:** Anselm Kiefer, *Heavy Cloud*, (1985).  
Lead and shellac on photograph. Lila Acheson Wallace Collection.

photograph, asserts its presence as a phenomenological, very real and earthly material. Rather than alluding to a specific idea of negated space, the image simultaneously negates and affirms the idea of physical space, therefore rendering the spatial characteristics of the image indeterminate.

This paradoxical characteristic of Kiefer's expression of space may be related to Derrida's notion of *différance*. *Différance* as a deferral or a slippage of meaning between two opposing concepts may also be related to such a simultaneous affirmation and negation of the concept of spatiality. This deferral of one meaning between mutually exclusive opposing concepts attests to a certain similarity between such concepts, a sameness that implies an inherent relationship between two opposing terms. For Derrida such a relationship between one term and its Other illustrates an important aspect of poststructural theory, namely that a concept's ultimate meaning and value are intelligible only in the context of its relation to an opposing concept. For Derrida, concepts are not merely self - referential, but also necessarily implicate and

refer to other concepts. This gives paradoxical meanings to concepts, implying that they bear their opposites within themselves.

This notion of *différance* whereby an image may express content that paradoxically reflects opposing meanings is evident in Kiefer's work. In *March Sand*, for example, the overpainted sand, which obscures and negates the spatial properties of the underlying landscape is also the element which paradoxically affirms it. We may say that the notion of negated space also, in part, represents the opposing notion of its affirmation. In this sense, Kiefer's use of intertextual imagery not only expresses paradoxical content, but also articulates a suspension of the differences between opposing concepts.

It is clear then, that Kiefer's use of negation is not consistent with Urban's theories because it does not allude to a definitive idea of negated space. Kiefer's simultaneous expression of space and its negation does not allude to distinctive concepts, but to an intersection and contamination of opposing meanings, concepts that '*point away from*' themselves to their respective opposites '*even before they are themselves*' (Harland 1987: 147).

In addition to the negation of space, Urban's theories also hold that symbolic images should allude to the negation of time as it is experienced by consciousness as consecutive moments. Urban claims that this detemporization of imagery is necessary in order for images to be suggestive of the metaphysical, more specifically, so they may suggest an omni-present, a time outside of ordinary time.

Many of Kiefer's intertextual images do in fact seem to suggest detemporization, which is achieved by means of *supplementarity*, that is, a doubling of similar content. This may be demonstrated with reference to an image from the book *Brandenburg Sand* (Plate 5). As with *March Sand*, the overpainted sand in this particular example negates as well as affirms the presence of the landscape.

However, this image also suggests a present moment on top of another moment. The intertextual approach draws attention to the photograph and overpainted sand as successive layers that were created at different moments in time. If this image were just a traditional photograph, we would read the entire image as the representation of one integrated presence and as one moment in time, but the intertextual nature of the image utilising diverse elements such as photographs and actual sand suggests a double presence, firstly the presence of the land at the particular moment the photograph was taken and secondly, the presence of the sand (taken from the actual landscape) which was overpainted at another particular moment in time



**Plate 5:** Anselm Kiefer, *Brandenburg Sand*, pp. 34 -35. (1980).

At first one might assume that the suggestion of these different moments in time may suggest a distinctive temporization, because it suggests successive (different) moments in time, that is a sequential linear conception of time. However, because the overpainted sand may be regarded as not just another metaphorical presence of the

landscape conceived at another different moment in time, but as a supplement or a re-representation of the photographic landscape underneath, it also detemporizes the image according to the logic of supplementarity. The artist's intention to re-represent the photographic landscape is demonstrated by the fact that he used sand, as well as the fact that the overpainting mimics the perspectival lines of the photographic landscape beneath it.

In order for the overpainted sand to come into being as a supplement, the spaces in between the sand, constituted by the photographic landscape, must be regarded as 'empty space', for it is this becoming (negative) space of the photographic image that allows the sand to present itself to the viewer's consciousness at a particular moment in time. However, the sand as a supplement takes the place of the photographic landscape. It serves as a substitute for the 'absent presence' of the photographic image which has now become 'empty space'. But this substitute (sand) is belated in regard to the presence of the photographic image, it takes over a present moment which has already passed - a past present, and thus is an after-effect so to speak.

The original presence of the photographic landscape is also not a full presence, a specific independent moment in time, because it is supplemented. This means that the present moment of the photographic landscape is delayed and deferred until the viewer can read the supplemented presence (the sand) which is supposed to make up for the lack of the original presence. The present moment to which the photograph refers, also refers to a future present moment (that is the moment at which the viewer reads the overpainted sand as a replacement or re-representation of the landscape).

In the final analysis, then, Kiefer expresses a landscape that is present in different moments in time, and also that these different moments in time are the same because they both allude to the presence of the same landscape. As a result, this image does not refer to any specific moment in time, but rather negates the idea of temporality. It

suggests an indeterminate moment in time that is divided and split from its inception - that is at once itself and Other.

This seems to be consistent with Urban's idea that metaphysical symbols should be de-temporized, that is to say, that they should represent a non - specific moment in linear time. As Urban says, an image that is detemporized suggests a present which is not present, that is ' *a present which is [not] localised in time*' (1939: 707). This is also consistent with Derrida's conception of supplementarity which suggests a present which is already a past, that is to say, a present that is already deferred or elsewhere, and therefore not localisable in present time.

However, Derrida's conception of deferred presence, that is, of an indeterminate present, is also explained as having the effect of temporization. In fact, Derrida claims that it is this very indeterminacy or incompleteness of a represented moment in time, that constitutes the possibility of the existence of space, that allows for a presence to represent itself to consciousness at a particular temporized moment in time.

It seems that Kiefer's use of intertextual imagery is not merely indicative of detemporization, but also of temporization. More precisely, one could argue that Kiefer's use of imagery suggests a simultaneous temporization as well as a detemporization.



### **2.1.2 Negation and my imagery**

The images in Plate 6 and 7 consist of a combination of realistic figures with an abstract background. These intertextual images suggests a negated 'space', that is, a metaphysical space rather than an objective one. This results from the fact that the figures are represented floating on an abstract background, rather than in any phenomenally recognizable background and space that bears the attributes of objective reality. They seem to have been taken out of ordinary space and time.

The empty background suggested by the dark even tonalities that surround the immediate space around the figures has a border (the lighter diffuse edge around the borders of the painting). The lighter tone of these borders suggests that the background itself has a background, which prompts a shift in perception. When we regard the lighter edges of the painting as a background of the darker, more even, tonal field in the centre, it causes the darker field to appear not as an emptiness but as a positive flat foreground. This emphasizes the flatness of the picture plane, accentuating not the illusionistic space suggested by the realistic figures, but rather the actual physical surface of the canvas. Therefore the intertextuality in these paintings may be said not only to negate spatiality, but also to affirm it. This renders the spatial attributes of these images indeterminate.





**Plate 6:** J A Opperman, *Untitled*, (2001). Oil on canvas. Private Collection.



**Plate 7:** J A Opperman, *Untitled*, (2001). Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

In another image entitled, *Of Metaphysics and Algebra* (Plate 8) traditional metaphysical concepts are suggested by means of reference to numbers. The number two, for example, represented by the two figures facing one another, articulates the universal underlying principle of opposition, the dyad. Dyads have traditionally been associated with metaphysical principles. These are forces of opposition that may be said to define the basic underlying principles of our world, such as the sun and the moon, heaven and earth, *'knowledge and ignorance, good and evil, Gnostic light and darkness'*(Elkins 1999: 54). The dyad does not merely represent two separate opposing forces, but is also the basis for synthesis that may yield a third principle. The notion of three (represented in the painting by the negative/empty spaces between the four dots above the figures) also has many connotations. In alchemy, three

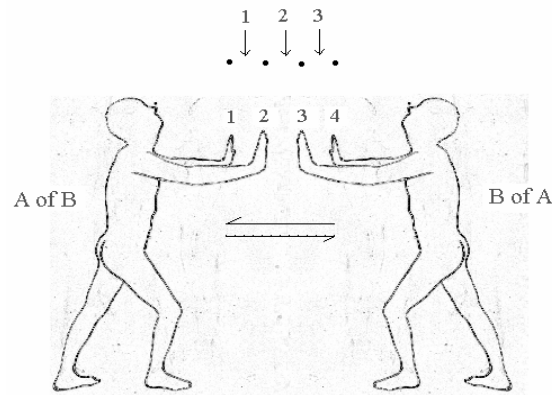


**Plate 8:** J A Opperman, *Of Metaphysics and Algebra*, (2001).  
Oil on canvas, Private Collection.

represents the hypostatical principles of body, mind and soul. In Christian belief the number three also has great importance in that it represents the three fundamental aspects of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The number four (represented in the painting by the four hands which align with the four dots above them), is

usually associated with the basic constituents of the phenomenal world, such as the four classical Greek elements: earth, water, fire and air. To alchemists, Elkins says, *'the four elements are everywhere'* (1999: 57). The number four also has other symbolic connotations, such as the four sacred animals (lion, eagle, man and cow) the four movements of nature, (ascendant, descendant, horizontal and circular), and the four terms of metaphysics (being, essence, potential and action).

Reading the painting from the bottom upwards, (Fig. 2) it may be noted that the two realistic figures express physical objective space, demarcated by the two distinct and separate spaces that their volumes occupy. The combination of their hands, which in the painting are horizontally aligned, suggests a synthesis, the number four (the four elements)  $2+2=4$ . However on the side of each figure is written 'A of B' and 'B of A', which suggests that the figures 'A' and 'B' respectively are not mutually exclusive but rather in some way related. They are not only distinct opposing figures, but there is also a similarity between them.



**Figure 2**

By stating 'A of B' the left hand figure refers not only to itself but also to the Other, its opposite (figure B) and suggests that the figure 'A' is only an aspect of figure 'B' (an A of B). The same can be said of figure 'B' which is also not a fully present figure, a thing in itself, but also only just an aspect of 'A' (a B of A).

In this sense figure 'A' cannot be regarded as a full presence, as a complete and specifically affirmed spatial presence in itself, that stands on its own in complete opposition to an alternate figure 'B'. We are here invited to think of difference as *différance*, that the figures are not only different but also identical. The presence of the text (the letters A and B) causes a certain deferral of meaning. Firstly there is a deferral of the idea that these figures are completely different and occupy separate spaces, and secondly, a deferral of the idea that the hands of the two figures add up to four hands. Here two hands of two figures allude to the number four but because these figures are also identical, the two hands of these two figures allude to the number two.

Although these realistic figures may appear to represent objective space they also suggest the negation of space, that is, a space that is not a distinct, self-identical volume. The notion of space implied by these figures is one of two distinct volumes and also of a volume occupying two distinct places in space. This alludes to an idea of spatiality that is inconsistent with our objective experience.

Spatiality in this image, then, is rendered indeterminate. The realistic rendering of the figures suggests space and volume, but the text (A of B) (B of A) associated with these figures defers the conceptualisation of a definitive presence of the spaces that the figures occupy.

The four dots above the hands of the figures represent the four elements and as such suggest aspects of the phenomenal world. They represent objective space and time. Their spatiality is affirmed, not by an illusionistic approximation of our world, but by the specific spaces that they occupy on the surface area of the canvas. The three areas in between these dots, the negative 'empty' spaces, represent the trinity. The concept of the phenomenal (the four) is represented as having positive spatial properties, and the concept of the metaphysical (three), represented as negative space, may be regarded as two opposing ideas. In the image under question, however, the three empty spaces are in between the four dots, and as such are the necessary spaces that

enable a separation of these dots, that make it possible for us to read them as four separate dots that occupy different points on the picture plane. Accordingly, the four positive dots must simultaneously refer to their opposites, the three negative spaces. Ultimately, then, the four dots allude to the notion 'four' as a contaminated concept rather than as an independent fixed one. The dots signify themselves as well as the three negative spaces.

Conversely, the three negative spaces can also only exist as three separate spaces if they are demarcated by the dots. As a result the identity of the three negatives is in part constituted by these positive demarcations. Accordingly, the three empty spaces are also contaminated because they not only signify themselves but also refer to the positive demarcations.

Ultimately, then, the negative spaces (the metaphysical trinity) and the four dots (representing phenomenal space) are represented as if contaminated by each other. The representation thus alludes to a contamination of the opposing notions or concepts of the heavenly and the earthly realm. The representation may be argued to render indeterminate the suggested symbolic properties associated with the numbers three and four. Here  $3 = 3$  but also 4 and conversely  $4 = 4$  but also 3.

This reciprocal 'contamination' of the positive space (dots) with the empty space (between these dots) also negates the spatial properties of the image because it suggests a positive space that is somehow also a negative space and vice versa. This in itself certainly concurs with Urban's notion of the representation of the metaphysical through negation, because the image represents a space that is not a space as we would normally conceive of it, as clearly specified dots and negative spaces on the picture plane.

However, the image not only implies a negation of spatiality but it also paradoxically affirms it. It may be argued that it is this very relation to Other that negates the idea

of specific negative and positive spaces, that makes it possible to see the dots and the negative spaces in the first place. It is by virtue of a minimal relation to the empty space, that the four dots can be what they are, can present themselves to consciousness as the illusion of positive space occupying the picture plane.

The symbolic 'algebra' implied by the whole image suggests that  $2 + 2$  (hands) = 4 but also 2, moreover that the 4 (the four dots) = 4 but also 3. The image as a whole confounds and renders indeterminate the notion of spatiality. It suggests space as both affirmed (positive) and negated (negative), and renders indeterminate the specific metaphysical concepts related to the numerical symbolism.

## **2.2 ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND CONTEMPORARY METAPHYSICAL IMAGING**

### **2.2.1 Anthropomorphism and Kiefer's imagery**

Kiefer's images also seem to suggest anthropomorphism, in that his choice and manipulation of imagery imply that he is concerned with personal and emotive content. Many of his images are suggestive of human elements, but no sooner are these elements expressed than they are negated. For example, Kiefer often uses images of either wooden (in his earlier works), or brick interiors; places that bear specific value or importance. These interiors are, however, always large empty structures, sometimes with only a few flames burning against a far wall, such as can be seen in *Sulamite* (Plate 9) and *To the Supreme Being*.





**Plate 9:** Anselm Kiefer, *Sulamite*, (1983).  
Oil emulsion, shellac on canvas, Saatchi Collection.

When Kiefer makes reference to specific and significant individuals or beings in his works, such as in *March Sand* (cf. Plate 3, pp 20), he often indicates their presence by scribbling their names over the surface of a vast landscape, rather than utilizing images. These floating diminutive texts in relation to such expansive landscape seem rather impersonal and inexpressive and diminish the anthropomorphic qualities of the images.

In Kiefer's imagery of technology, compiled in the book *Birth of the Sun* (cf. Plates 13, 14, 15 and 16, pp. 48 - 50) anthropomorphic structures are placed in a strange empty interiors. Often these buildings seem old and abandoned as if they do not serve any purpose any more. As a result these images seem more indicative of a reminder of a past human presence than an actual one. As Rosenthal notes, '*Although each of Kiefer's buildings preserves some passing thought- an artist, idea or deity- the structures as a whole are lifeless*' (1987: 119).



Even though Kiefer's photographic images depict empty interiors, or landscapes that seems to negate human presence, they are often overpainted in a highly gestural manner which imbues them with an expressive (personal) quality. This seems to suggest that Kiefer paradoxically negates and affirms the anthropomorphic elements in his work

The fact that Kiefer's imagery reflects borrowing from various preceding styles, and some of his content seem to be appropriated, negates or subtracts from its anthropomorphic characteristics (its personal expressive value). In appropriation, which is *'the conscious quotation of a pre-existing image, style or historical antecedents'* (Biro 1999: 155) the impersonality of communication is emphasized, a world in which nothing is ever added, invented, changed or improved upon. *'What is appropriated is stripped of any power or mystery, and reduced to a rationalized, sterilized series of facts and image'* (Biro 1999: 150). Yet *'in Kiefers work there is always some sort of active transformation - some conscious and critical recasting of the original model as opposed to a passive transmission'* (Biro 1999: 156). Because of this, Kiefer's work does not merely negate the anthropomorphic but also paradoxically retain an element of personal expression through the particular choice and combination of his images.

Kiefer's work thus articulates neither human and personal qualities nor an absence of such qualities. It may rather be said that there are anthropomorphic traces in his images that are neither simply present nor absent, but seem to be in a constant state of withdrawal. As Taylor puts it, *'This site of desertion is the no place of a certain withdrawal. Something is always slipping away, always missing in Kiefer's art'* (1992: 292).

Instead of expressing definitive anthropomorphic elements, which according to Urban, enables the viewer to relate to metaphysical symbols and interpret its content, Kiefer expresses anthropomorphism paradoxically. This may be said to hinder the

viewer's identification with the metaphysical symbols in the artist's work and a subsequent understanding of its content, adding to its indeterminacy.

There are also other aspects of anthropomorphism, such as the notion of value, that the content of Kiefer's images may be said to articulate in a paradoxical manner. For Urban, it is necessary to situate metaphysical concepts within the context of humanistic qualities that reflect both value and goodness. In reflecting such qualities, symbolic images might articulate an idealized conception of the metaphysical, as something that may have a positive influence on our lives, and that reflects truths that are of value to us. It is this kind of content, Urban holds, that may imbue our whole existence with a sense of significance and purpose.

Kiefer's images that allude to various religious concepts and ideologies seem to articulate the notion of value and the good. In some of his more recent works such as the 'Emanation' series, his imagery seems to allude to the coming of a new enlightened world order, as the heavenly (God) revealing himself to the world. In *Heavy Cloud* (cf. Plate 4, pp. 22) for example, the artist poured lead over the photographic image of a landscape, the abstract shape of which suggests a revelation or outpouring of a divine metaphysical presence. This outpouring from heaven or 'emanation', forms part of the doctrines of Jewish mysticism that give credence to the notion of the divine light(s) in which the *'heavenly is made manifest and meets the earthly in a rapprochement of seemingly great significance, [which is intended] to restore us again to a higher spiritual condition'* (Rosenthal 1987: 138).

The abstract, uneven, lead shape also invites an analogy between itself and the underlying photograph of an overcast cloudy sky on which it is superimposed, and may also be suggestive of God's appearance as a cloud to the Israelites during their exile in the desert. Even though this work seems to suggest and affirm metaphysical ideality and its values, there are elements to the work that may contradict such a reading.

In the title, for example, the artist refers to the emanation, (the lead pouring) as a 'heavy' cloud, which as Rosenthal notes, may be regarded as a pun on *'heavy water... a synonym for radiation'* (1998: 108). In physics, heavy water refers to the process of nuclear fission which is facilitated by water in which heavy hydrogen is replaced by ordinary hydrogen. This punning, which invites an analogy between the suggested emanation and the process of nuclear fission, a dangerous and destructive force, seems to contradict and devalue the pure and virtuous qualities of the emanation. In addition, Kiefer's use of lead for the emanation further questions its heavenly qualities, since lead is also used in nuclear reactors as a means to contain dangerous radiation. Underneath and along the edges of the lead shape, the brownish colour of shellac can also clearly be seen which also seems to suggest a toxic radiation leakage. The emanation in this image thus seems to express not only the virtuous qualities of a heavenly substance, but paradoxically also points to a negative, destructive quality that may be inherent in it. Again this paradoxical affirmation and negation of the concept of value invites a poststructuralist reading: that the emanation engendering the metaphysical notion of the valuable, the good, may also be said to bear the trace of its opposite: evil and destruction.

In another landscape, *Nigredo* (Plate 10), Kiefer painted deep receding lines (over a photograph of a landscape) that lead off into the horizon. The image is painted in dark sombre tones in a textured manner which suggests a devastated, burnt and empty landscape. The title of the work suggests that this blackening of the land, represents an alchemical process in which alchemists attempted to transform the ordinary, the physical, to a purified or transcended state, one of eternal perfection. In such a process, the alchemist also embarks on a process of self transformation.

*'The moment of nigredo is a critical, first plateau of achievement. An egg is placed in the athanor furnace, where a symbolic sexual union occurs: the hot, solar male and cold lunar female interact. This event is filled with pain, rage, killing and putrefication, matter is destroyed and opposites dissolve into the liquid nigredo. [It is]*

*a darkness darker than darkness and is associated with a return to a pre-cosmological chaos. The phase ends with the appearance on the surface of a starry aspect in which a glow begins to be seen in the sky'*(Rosenthal 1987: 127).

The appearance of an illuminated aspect can be seen in the particular lightness of the upper - sky of the image. The content of this image thus seems to allude to the idea of a spiritual transformation which may lead to the revelation of a new enlightened world. The fact that the image symbolizes the revelation of a metaphysical truth that may imbue our lives with goodness and value is also in keeping with Urban's theories.



**Plate 10:** Anselm Kiefer, *Nigredo*, (1984).  
Oil, acrylic, shellac on photograph. Philadelphia Museum of Art

However, in contrast to Urban who equates metaphysical truth exclusively with goodness and perfection, the alchemical elements in the painting suggest that such a truth is obtained through pain and destruction. Kiefer seems to bring this to the viewer's attention by emphasising the devastation of the landscape. The blackening of the landscape suggests that the process of transcendence also bears the '*potential for terrible and sinister experiences of blackness, of spiritual death, of a descent into hell*'

(Rosenthal 1998: 127). It seems that Kiefer is trying to convey an idea that the metaphysical not only reflects the qualities of goodness and virtue but also a dangerous aspect: that the quest of purity and value requires a detour through death and destruction.

Such a reading of this image also represents Derrida's concept of the *trace*; the notion that all reference to self (value and goodness) takes place by way of a detour through an Other and that '*a concept or entity includes in one way or another, what it is opposed to*' (Gasche 1986: 187).

In articulating a notion of value and goodness that also contains traces of an Other, Kiefer's images render our specific ideas about the metaphysical indeterminate. Because of this indeterminacy, these images allude to metaphysical content that does not articulate any definitive truth. It does not allude to something we can understand though specific meanings such as goodness or evil. As Biro suggests, '*There is nothing to guarantee any ultimate truth behind Kiefer's works and thus no hermeneutic teleology, no sense that with time and care one's interpretation will arrive at some completely accurate and encompassing result*' (1999: 59). Because of this, the metaphysical content of Kiefer's images is not consistent with Urban's views.

### 2.2.2 Anthropomorphism in my imagery

In all of my own works, veristic images of figures are present, and insofar as these figures form a central area of interest or focus in the paintings they contribute an anthropomorphic quality. The representation of the nude human body, for instance, represents a cognitive and perceptual immediacy of human presence, not merely in terms of the physical, but also emotively and spiritually. The spiritual presence that these representations may evoke is further facilitated by the fact that the figures are rendered on an abstract background, as if dislocated from ordinary phenomenal space and time.

Beneath these figures, in Plate 11 for instance the letter 'A' is printed. Although the 'A' signifies or refers to the figure above it, which emphasizes the image as a represented presence of humanity, the figure may also conversely be said to signify or refer to 'A'. In this sense the figure not only signifies itself, but also refers to an Other, that is, an 'A'. Here the 'A' as a label may be said to defer the complete human presence of the figure as such, for it implies that the meaning of the figure is implicated or dependent on the label 'A', an Other extraneous value. As a result, the image is never self-identical, never coincides fully with itself, it does not signify itself but also an Other. This defers and displaces the anthropomorphic presence of the figure.

The presence of a value 'B' further defers any determinate anthropomorphic qualities of the image, because it implies that the value of 'A' is also somehow determined by, and dependent on, the value of 'B'. The labelling which defers the immediate complete conception of the anthropomorphic presence of the figure (of the figure as figure, self - identical with itself) may also make the viewer aware that the painted figure is itself merely a signifier (like a picture in an encyclopaedia, for example). It implies that the figure also refers to the actual person who is the subject of the image, in other words, it points (signifies) away from itself; it does not



**Plate 11:** J A Opperman, *Untitled*, (2000). Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

signify only an anthropomorphic presence, but also the absence of an original human presence. Because the A and B in each painting refers to or is coupled with different figures occupying different poses, it implies that the value of each 'A' that is hinted at but never disclosed is not the same in each case. The labels of 'A' and 'B' then function as place holders, not only for an indeterminate value 'X', but also for continuously alternating values. This further contributes to the hermetic quality of indeterminateness to which the figures and the paintings as a whole allude.



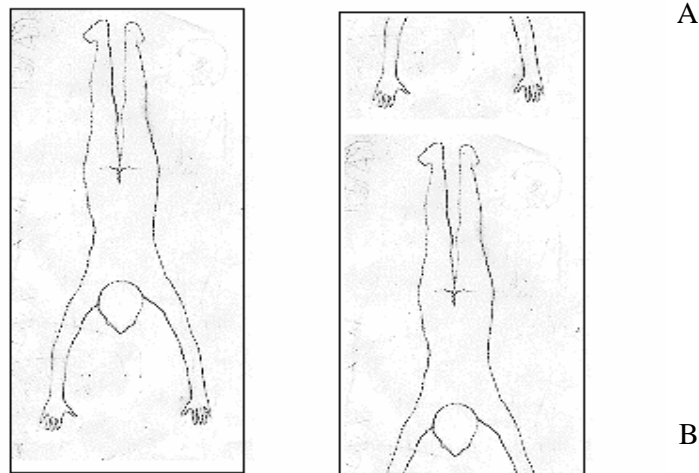
**Detail: Plate 11**



The labels 'A' or 'B' may then be said to simultaneously signify or represent the anthropomorphic images present in the painting, and paradoxically to negate or defer a full or complete conception of such anthropomorphic qualities. They render indeterminate the anthropomorphic qualities in the corpus of the paintings as a whole.

In another work entitled *a (d) scention* (Plate 12), a figure can be seen upside down with arms outstretched, as if falling from the sky. The notion of descending may be interpreted in religious terms as a process of being cast from the heavens, of fallen grace or a descent into hell. Below the realistically rendered figure is written the title of the work, *a (d) scention*, which, contrary to the realistic image, suggests an 'ascension', generally connected with the notion of spiritual growth and enlightenment (of value). As a result the intertextuality of the image may be said to be disjunctive, that is, the realistic image seems to imply the opposite of the written elements in the work.

Attached to the bottom of the painting is a piece of string. By pulling the string downwards the 'falling' figure can be seen moving downwards, its arms disappearing behind the lower panel of the canvas (Figure 3. b) However, as the arms disappear below, they can be seen simultaneously re - appearing from above (Figure 3 a). This suggests that the line from which the arms seem to be appearing and disappearing is the same space, that the bottom, 'b', is also the top 'a'. In effect, what is represented is the paradoxical notion that the figure is not only falling down , but also, so to speak, falling upward, that is, it is descending and ascending at the same time. Stated in other terms, the figure is moving in opposite directions simultaneously.



**Figure 3.**

The intertextual image may also be said to render the notion of the valuable, or the good (ascension) indeterminate. It suggests that the notion of the valuable or good is contaminated by its opposite (descension), in that it may be said that the one (ascension) contains the trace of the other (descension).

The image may also be related to *Nigredo* in the sense that it also suggests that the notion of the valuable, the good, (ascension) can only take place via its other (descension). It suggests that in order to ascend to a higher spiritual state of goodness, one first has to descend, to fall from grace. In this way the content of the image questions the exclusivity of the notions of ascension and descension. It renders these traditionally held opposing concepts indeterminate and implies a double movement, a (d) scension as well as a simultaneous ascension.



**Plate 12:** J A Opperman, *a (d) scention*, (2001). Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

Rather than attaching specific values and ideas such as ascension or descension to the metaphysical content of the image, I intended this image to allude to a metaphysical idiom that is independent of such limited human values, something that exceeds the scope of such linguistic categories. I also hoped to convey the idea that the experience of spiritual growth may not be a one-sided process, but may concern the relation and interaction between opposing experiences and ideas.

## 2.3 GENERALIZATION AND CONTEMPORARY METAPHYSICAL IMAGING

### 2.3.1 Generalization in Kiefer's imagery

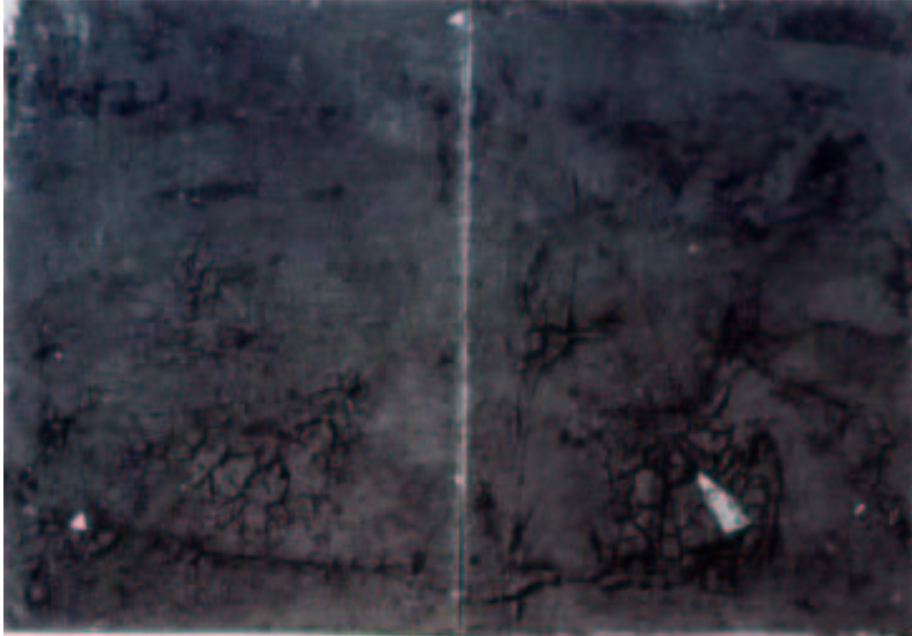
In symbolically articulating such notions as emanations and the divine Kiefer's imagery expresses the absolute and the universal. In *Heavy Cloud* for example (cf. Plate 4, pp 22), the abstract lead shape in the landscape suggests a divine emanation or revelation, an absolute universal force or being beyond the ordinary. The abstract shape of this emanation and its relative size in relation to the contrasting veristic photographic landscape is what lends the form its generalized qualities, that which allows the image to be read as a symbolic image of the absolute.

Abstraction has long been regarded as a means of representing that which is universal. Worringer, for instance, claims that all metaphysical art, '*remote from all reverent affirmation of the phenomenal world, seeks to create for itself a picture of things that shifts them far beyond the finiteness and conditionality of the living into a zone of the ... abstract*' (1967: 133).

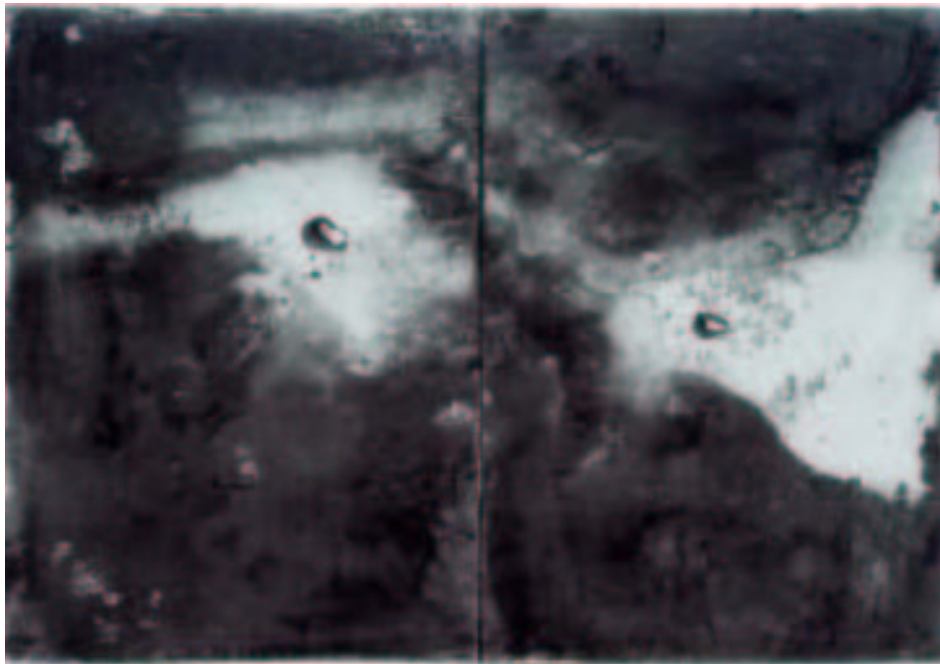
Inasmuch as Kiefer's intertextual imagery reflects the use of abstraction and its consequent generalization, which facilitates the expression of the notion of the absolute, it seems to be consistent with Urban's notion of metaphysical symbolism.

However, the sheer physicality, texture and protrusion of the lead from the surface of the illusionistic background also asserts itself, which seems to contradict and diminish the universal qualities of the abstract shape. The lead makes the image at once more physical, and more temporal than the flat illusionistic photographic landscape beneath it. It becomes less a symbol of a universal divine and more a sign of specific physical aspects of our phenomenal realm. Yet again, Kiefer's use of intertextuality seems paradoxical and disjunctive. It simultaneously suggests a universal concept as well as a finite one, the universal as well as the specific.

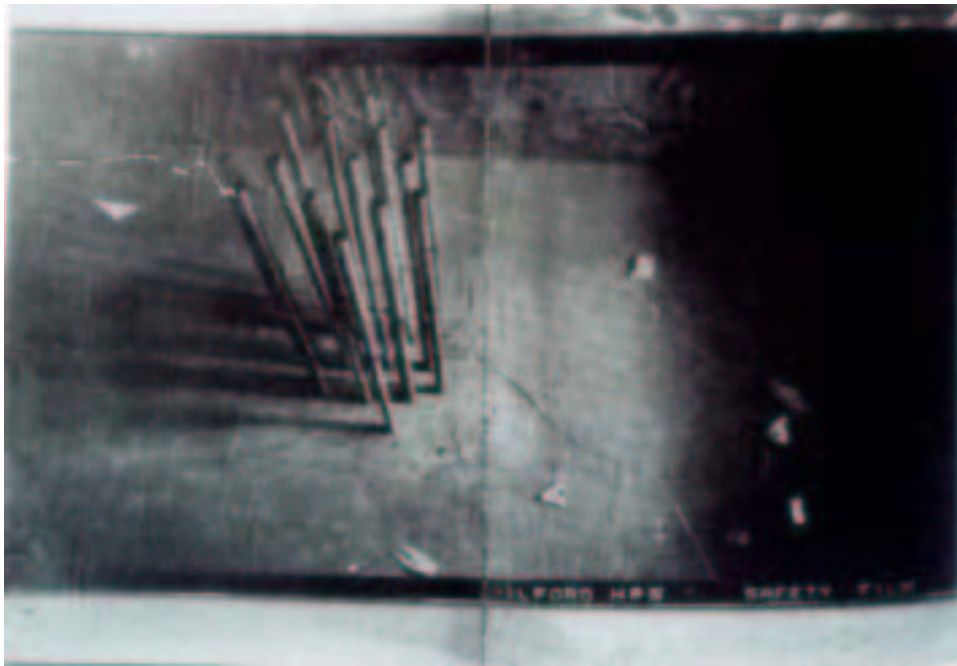
In the series of images, entitled *The Birth of the Sun* (Plate 13) the use of generalized imagery that alludes to a universal divine force is also evident.



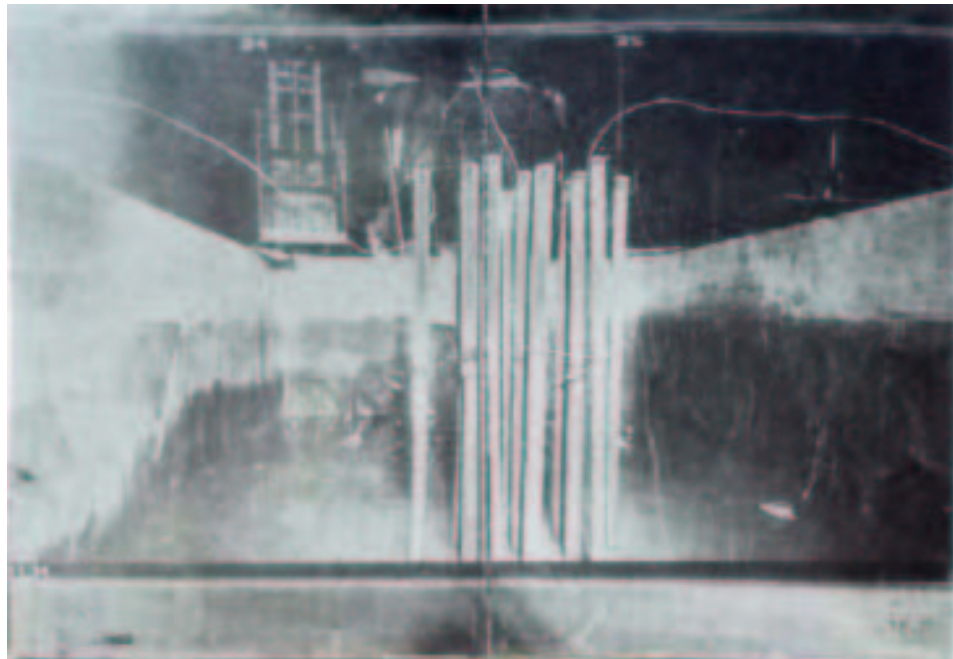
**Plate 13:** Anselm Kiefer, *Birth of the Sun*, pp. 11 – 12.



**Plate 14:** Anselm Kiefer, *Birth of the Sun*, pp. 17 - 18



**Plate 15:** Anselm Kiefer, *Birth of the Sun*, pp. 19 – 20.



**Plate 16:** Anselm Kiefer, *Birth of the Sun*, pp. 21 - 22

The series of images begins with an image of a lead aircraft, suspended from the ceiling in one of Kiefer's studios, at the bottom is written '*Isis searches for the parts of Osiris*' so linking the plane to the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris. According to this myth, Isis, the wife of Osiris, (who has been dismembered) goes in search for his

body parts in order to resurrect him. The images that follow resemble landscape photographs taken from an aerial perspective, partially obscured by washes of red clay and embedded ceramic bits. The second half of the book consists of black - and - white photographs of water streaming into a 'reactor ' tank suggested by upright fuel rods. In addition Kiefer has painted liquid silver over many of the photographs, so that they may suggest an energy discharge. In the last photograph, broken pieces of ceramic can be seen scattered across the floor, which as Biro notes is a *'possible reference to the kabbalistic notion of a divine force breaking the vessels that sought to contain it, thus connecting the modern age to yet another ancient mythic time frame'* (1999: 219). Kiefer's use of lead, silver and copper in the work also suggests an alchemical process of transformation. What is of importance here is that *'by contrasting the real genesis of a star [implied by the title] with the birth of gods and the invention of human technologies... the book hints at a parallel between the natural, spiritual and mortal worlds'* (Biro 1999: 219).

The images suggest a greater historical circulation or transformation of energy, *'a stream that issues not only in power produced by human hands but also in the birth of suns and the actions of the gods'* (Biro 1999: 221). This energy may be interpreted as a universal divine force, a totality behind the everyday world, and so the image may be regarded as a universal symbol of this divine force. Such an articulation of an underlying universal totality is consistent with Urban's notion of the metaphysical in that it alludes to one all- encompassing whole.

Even though the absolute is believed to be more than just a simple collection of all the finite elements in the universe, something that exceeds our frame of reference because we are unable to comprehend it in its entirety, Urban maintains that we have to conceive of it in finite terms, as a unified whole that is complete in itself. Such a seemingly limited view of the absolute is necessary because, Urban contends, if we do not conceive of the absolute as a specific thing, a singularity, we will not be able to believe in a universal whole that encompasses and includes everything in it.

Contrary to this view, Kiefer combines many different traditional metaphysical idioms, such as the alchemical, Jewish mysticism, and Egyptian mythology. Even though these culturally and ideologically disparate metaphysical forms of discourse all allude to and express notions of an absolute or deity; they are also fundamentally different in their doctrines and belief structures, and point towards their own individual conceptions of such a totality. In a sense, the intertextual imagery of *The Birth of The Sun* articulates different and multiple conceptions of the absolute. It refers to universal totalities rather than a universal totality, so undermining any conception of an all-encompassing universal whole. Evidently, this approach is at odds with Urban's view on the subject.

These inconsistencies in Kiefer's use of generalization, however, seem to be consistent with Derrida's view on the subject. As Derrida claims, a theme such as the alchemical content of Kiefer's work, which suggests a striving towards the absolute, is '*a constituted unity of substance...[and] exercises a totalizing function with regard to all the signifiers of a work. The theme secures a work's unitary meaning, its inner continuity*'. Derrida also claims that the universality that the theme can express, '*can succeed only if there is no other competing theme*' (Gasche 1986: 263). In suggesting various competing metaphysical themes, Kiefer's work impairs the totalizing function of the work as a whole, that is, it inhibits the viewer in conceiving of a unitary metaphysical concept that suggests a singular all-embracing totality. As Biro notes, '*Kiefer's works uncover shifting constellations of problems, not clear hierarchies of meaning of definite contexts of orientation*' (1999: 77).

Furthermore, because the underlying absolute force that these various themes allude to is in a sense a repetition of these original totalities, it also lacks the primacy of a self-referential whole, because it takes the place of an already incomplete and absent whole: '*it is already inscribed within the space of repetition and splitting or doubling of the self*' (Gasche 1986: 291). The representation of a universal totality in this image never adds up, never coincides with itself. This notion of a totality always seems to



bear the trace of a remainder, a part of the whole that is missing. It would seem then that Kiefer's use of intertextuality, although alluding to a universal concept, simultaneously negates this concept, thus rendering this notion indeterminate.

This paradoxical articulation of totalization and non - totalization in Kiefer's imagery may also be said to be applicable to the corpus of his work. Kiefer's intertextual imaging which combines various disparate symbolic systems with unique conceptions of a universal totality, may also be said to dislocate and disrupt any coherent and unitary conception of an all-embracing absolute.

### **2.3.2 Generalization and my imagery**

My work entitled *Seat of the Soul* (Plate 17 and 18), was informed by the notion of the essence of the self, the soul. The notion of a determinable essence of the self is certainly a universal metaphysical concept in that it is generally regarded as the point of origin and basic ground of existence, as the irreducible centre which connects all aspects of our being. *'As the subject of thought, memory, emotion, desire and action, the soul [is] an entity that makes self-consciousness possible...and accounts for personal identity or a persons continued identity through time'* (*Cambridge dictionary of philosophy. Ed. R. Audi.. 754*).

The work itself consists of two parts, the painting and a device (consisting of three glass plates) through which to view the painted image (Figure 4). When viewed, a reflection of the viewer's eye is seen above the horizontal figure in the painting. This was achieved by positioning a small mirror in the direct line of sight between the eye and the image. My intention was to invite people to consider the analogy between the soul and the eye, an analogy informed by a vast historical tradition. One such analogy, for example, is the age-old



**Plate 17:** J A Opperman, *Seat of the Soul*, (2001).  
Oil on canvas. Private Collection

belief that the eyes are the windows to the soul. The notion of self-reflection is an important one in traditional metaphysical philosophy. Self-reflection is believed not only to enable a simple perception of appearances of the outer world, but also to enable an intuitive understanding of the essence of things. Such thought holds that it is a means to intuitively grasp the '*Ding an Sicht*' or essence, believed to exist behind the world of appearances (their physical attributes).



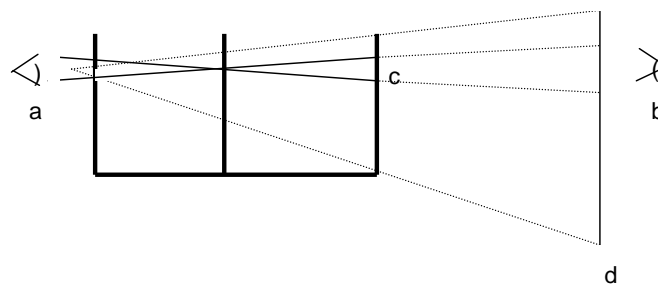
**Plate 18:** J A Opperman, *Seat of the Soul*, (2001).

As the philosopher Husserl says, *'The phenomenality of phenomena, that is, their quality of appearing as themselves to themselves, [to see oneself seeing oneself] distinguishes them insofar as they constitute the realm of meaning, from sheer mundane existence'* (Gasche 1986: 229).

The reflection of the viewer's eye as seen projected on the surface of the painting (Fig 4 b) is isolated from the rest of the physiognomy, so that just the pupil and part of the

iris can be seen. This means of isolation may be said to generalize the projected image of the eye through a removal of the personal attributes of the viewer's facial features. It allows the viewer to regard the eye not as a specific eye, but as a generalized image that refers to the universal concept of the eye, a locus of the essence of the self.

In utilizing the reflection of the viewer's eye, and isolating it from the viewer's other facial features, I hoped to evoke, through metaphorical means, the universal idea of a metaphysical presence, the essence of the self. This use of a generalized image to express a universal concept is in keeping with Urban's notions of metaphysical symbols.



**Figure 4.**

However, it was also my intention that such an isolation of the reflection of the eye, as well as the fact that it is seen in the completely dislocated context of the painting, should evoke a sense of disquiet and unease. I hoped that this would cause people to experience a dislocation of their presence : a conception of two distinct selves, the 'I' who looks and the 'eye' of an Other that looks back. It presupposes the viewer as a self that looks from one side but also looks back from the opposite side, suggesting that the self and the essence that it alludes to are split and doubled. This doubling denies or inhibits the viewer from seeing himself as himself, and by extension denies the intuitive conception (via self-reflexivity) of a universal metaphysical essence that is whole and singular.

This conception of the self as double also negates the idea of essence as a purely interior attribute. This results from the fact that the projected reflection of the self (essence) as a double situates the essence outside the self, that is, as part of the painting and not a wholly pure internal aspect of the viewer who is looking. This is inconsistent with more traditional beliefs on the subject and also with Urban's idea that metaphysical essences are unique wholes. For Urban, the soul cannot be described except as '*an ens... a substance*' (1939:696). Analogous to physical substances, metaphysical entities (such as the soul) is thus understood as things that have distinctive, individual identities. They are deemed singular, integrated wholes that exists independently of other substances (essences).

Although this work symbolically alludes to the notion of a metaphysical essence, it also paradoxically inhibits and negates such an expression, and therefore, the image in question may be said to render the universal or generalized concept of a spiritual essence indeterminate.

# CHAPTER III

## *3.1 TOWARDS A CONTEMPORARY METAPHYSICAL AESTHETIC*

It would seem that the characteristics of metaphysical symbols such as negation, generalization and anthropomorphism are indeed present in Kiefer's intertextual imagery, but that Kiefer's use of these notions cannot be said to be wholly consistent with the principles of metaphysical symbolism proposed by Urban. This results from Kiefer's paradoxical use and application of negation, generalization and anthropomorphism. The simultaneous affirmation and denial of these concepts renders their inherent meaning and function indeterminate.

It has also been demonstrated that the indeterminacy present in intertextual imagery is consistent with various poststructural principles, developed by Derrida. The fact that Kiefer's images clearly reflect both the attributes of symbolic and poststructural thought processes seems to suggest that it was the artist's intention to combine such disparate approaches. In fact, the various stylistic analyses of the artist's images hint at a relationship between these approaches: that the symbolic elements inform Kiefer's intertextual explorations and their resulting indeterminacy by providing the initial material for a consequent deconstruction of such content. What seemed at the beginning of this investigation an insurmountable contradiction in Kiefer's work now appears partially reconcilable. The indeterminacy inherent in the artist's work seems dependent on a synthesis between more traditional symbolic and poststructural thought processes.

Even so, this still does not provide a feasible explanation of how Kiefer's intertextual images may in fact express the metaphysical, or whether they are able to do so at all. If it is assumed, for argument's sake, that these images express metaphysical content, it clearly cannot be attributed entirely to the negated, general or anthropomorphic

properties of these works. Kiefer's particular manipulation of imagery suggests, rather, that any metaphysical content in these intertextual images may be informed by their characteristic indeterminacy. In short, the major concern remains whether intertextual imagery can serve as a vehicle for metaphysical concepts, given the characteristic absence of any and all determinate signifieds in such images. The resolution of this problem requires further investigation.

Because Kiefer paradoxically negates and affirms the symbolic properties of his imagery and its content, it seems that the artist is primarily concerned with expressing the poststructural view that the inherent meaning of any concept always implies a reference to an Other, opposing concept. The fact that these indeterminate images emphasise the nature of the relationship between two diametrically opposing meanings and the duality implicit in it, also brought to my attention a related poststructural notion: that we are only able to make sense of any particular concept through its relation to an opposing concept. This reference to Other is the condition of the existence and meaning of all ideas of our reality. My further investigations suggested that such indeterminate content may allude to the metaphysical.

A re-evaluation of some of Kiefer's images, focusing on the particular nature of these intertextual images and its poststructural import, seems to lend support to this conjecture.

In *Heavy Cloud*, (cf. Plate 4, pp 23) for example, Kiefer negates phenomenal form by including an abstract form on the realistic background of a landscape, but in using lead for the abstract form, the physicality of the abstract symbol is also affirmed. In so doing Kiefer may be alluding to the fact that the concept of negation cannot be expressed and cannot serve as a symbol for the metaphysical before it is in fact affirmed. The negated abstract symbol cannot exist and serve as a vehicle for the metaphysical except by virtue of a phenomenal physical substance. The notion of a physical substance that may articulate metaphysical content through negation in itself

certainly concurs with Urban's notions of symbolism. However, in traditional metaphysical symbols, the difference between the two entities (the signifier and the signified) is invariably perceived from the perspective of the latter term, the term of plenitude, from which the latter term of the opposition is held to derive. In other words, we usually do not pay too much attention to the phenomenal (physical) origin and qualities of the image but focus our attention and thoughts on its symbolic properties - that is, that which is signified.

Contrary to such traditional symbolic principles, Kiefer's imagery emphasizes the signifying properties of the image, in this case the lead and texture of the abstract shape rather than the metaphysical reality it alludes to. The artist makes us aware that the idea of a divine substance has its origin in a physical earthly substance. Moreover, not only are the metaphysical qualities of the image rooted in mundane physical properties, but the former is dependent on the latter. The concept of negation and the metaphysical ideas it embodies can be expressed only through a physical image. This suggests that the negated content is contaminated and impure, making it impossible to conceive of something that is uniquely metaphysical in its own right.

Derrida's notion of the *arche-trace* may also be related to such a simultaneous conceptual emphasis on both a signifier (the physical properties of an image) and a signified (negated properties suggestive of the metaphysical), as well as the inextricable relation between such oppositional terms.

Ultimately then, the image does not merely suggest the negated content which alludes to the metaphysical, or just the physical properties of the symbol that limits such an expression, but rather a relationship to Other that provides both the possibility and impossibility of expressing negated content. As Gasche explains, the metaphysical '*concept of plenitude or presence can be thought only within dyadic conceptual structures (1986: 187).*



Kiefer's use of negation clearly does not express only negation but also alludes to the possibility and impossibility of the expression of negation, a metaphysical referent.

Kiefer's use of anthropomorphism reflects the same logic of the *arche-trace*, and may be demonstrated with reference to *Nigredo* (cf. Plate 10, pp 40). In this image, Kiefer alludes to the idea that the value and goodness of the metaphysical is tainted with evil and destruction. By emphasising this reciprocal contamination of the valuable and the valueless, the self and the Other, the image alludes to an important poststructural concept : that these are not mutually exclusive concepts, but that the one is dependent on the other. Rather than referring to specific ideas, the image invites the viewer to consider the particular relationship between these opposing ideas : that a revelation of that which is good and valuable is attainable and possible only by way of a detour through its opposite, death and destruction. This relation to an Other does not describe things that exist in language, such as goodness and evil, but a necessary structure of relation between such concepts. It alludes to something that precedes language. It represents the condition of the possibility of the existence of differing concepts such as goodness and evil, and their inherent meanings, through the establishment of an interrelationship between them. The image thus indirectly alludes to that which makes it possible for us to conceive of such notions as goodness and evil, that we may attribute to the metaphysical.

Kiefer's use of generalization seems to follow much the same pattern. In *Birth of the Sun* (cf. Plate 13, 14, 15 and 16, pp.49 - 50), the artist makes use of intertextual images that allude to varying interpretations of the notion of the absolute. Because these images all directly point to differing conceptions of a unified metaphysical whole, they inhibit the viewer from grasping the notion of an all-encompassing metaphysical unity. Even so, these disparate intertextual elements also indirectly hint at an underlying absolute, a common force shared between the images. It is this act of referring to an Other (another underlying notion of the absolute) that restores the inherent meaning of these various themes of the absolute. It repeats their meaning as

an integrated idea. This reference to Other may be said to constitute a self-reflective doubling: it makes it possible for these various themes to appear to themselves as themselves, as a repeated reflection of themselves that signifies the idea of an undivided whole.

Yet this very reference to Other also makes it impossible for these varied themes to express the idea of a unitary absolute. In order for these images to refer to another underlying notion of the absolute, they have to sacrifice their own meanings. They must admit, so to speak, to the failure of their own meanings and values so that they can assume a function of reference, so that they may refer to an Other. Consequently, the images refer to a notion of an absolute that does not coincide with its own meaning, but to an Other meaning from which it is absent. The act of re-representing the notion of an absolute suggests that it is not a self-identical whole, but is incomplete because, *'it is inscribed in the space of repetition and splitting or doubling of the self'* (Gasche 1986: 291).

Rather than articulating specific ideas, such as the notion of an absolute unity, the image refers to a relationship between the images and what they signify: a relationship between a self and an Other that makes it possible to express the notion of a self-identical absolute and also simultaneously limits and denies such a expression.

My work may also be said to allude to similar poststructural principles. One work in which I attempted to deconstruct the notion of a universal concept is *Seat of the Soul* (cf. Plate 17 and 18, pp. 54). In this work, the viewer is presented with a reflection of his eye that re-represents the self as an Other - as an exteriorized double. I intended this to allude to a certain duality inherent in the notion of the self that would not permit the viewer to see himself as an integrated whole. I also wanted to convey the idea that an understanding of the self as a unique internal locus of one's essence is dependent on a relation to the external phenomenal world (an outside).

I hoped that in emphasizing such a relation between the self and Other the work might encourage the viewer to consider the fact that this very relation must precede both the existence of the self as self, and of the self as Other (as reflection). Without such a relation, no appearance of the presence of the self can come into being. In spite of the traditional esoteric connotations of the work, I hoped that it might evoke not the specific idea of a self, but rather a structural relationship that makes it possible to conceive of a self in the first place. I also intended to evoke the idea that it is impossible for the self to be a specific localizable singularity that exists apart from the outside world.

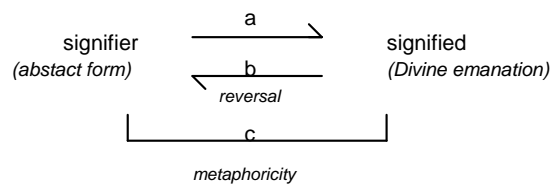
In the final analysis, Kiefer's and my own intertextual imagery does not express negated, anthropomorphic or generalized concepts as such, but rather that which makes it possible for these concepts to allude to the metaphysical, and also makes it impossible for these concepts to delineate the metaphysical definitively.

Given the fact that these images do not allude to specific ideas but rather structural relationships between concepts, the question arises whether these intertextual images may still be regarded as metaphors. After all, Urban conceives of metaphors as vehicles for the expression of definitive metaphysical concepts. In contrast, Kiefer's and my own images, even though alluding to the notions of negation, anthropomorphism and generalization, do not articulate these notions or any metaphysical ideas they may engender definitively, and therefore are inconsistent with Urban's notions of metaphor. In fact, such indeterminate employment of these concepts that both express the metaphysical and resist such an expression seems to be a closer approximation of Derrida's notion of metaphoricity. It is a concept that Derrida describes as a structural relationship that alludes to the possibility, as well as the impossibility, of the metaphoric expression of the metaphysical.

In *Heavy Cloud*, for example, this peculiar use of metaphor may be seen. In this image Kiefer uses a form that is negated and generalized in order to express a

metaphysical concept (the notion of a divine emanation). Initially the employment of a negated and generalized signifier which alludes to a metaphysical signified seems consistent with Urban's theory of metaphors. As is usual with metaphors, the viewer is led to interpret the image as a signifier that refers to a signified. In guiding the viewer's thought processes towards a specific idea, the viewer's attention is focused on the inherent meaning of the signified, the metaphysical concept that is alluded to. (Fig 5. a).

However, Kiefer's intertextual approach to imaging not only emphasizes that which is expressed, (the signified) but also emphasizes the signifier itself. This results from the fact that the signifier is made up of lead, which emphasizes the physical properties of the abstract shape, rather than its symbolic content. This invites the viewer to interpret the image less as a symbol of the divine, and more as a sign for a mere physical substance. In so doing, the viewer's usual conceptual reading of this metaphoric image is reversed, because in this instance, the non-symbolic element maintains the viewer's focus of attention. (Fig 5. b)



*Figure 5*

This reversal, culminating in an awareness of the physical nature of the metaphor may also allude to the inherent relationship between the signifier and signified. It is suggested that it is in fact the physical nature of the signifier that makes it possible to conceive of a signified, an idea of the divine. Without the phenomenal we would not be able to express metaphysical concepts at all. In a sense, the signified (Divine) is

dependent for its existence on the phenomenal signifier. This presents a point of contention, because it invalidates the belief that metaphors can uncover the metaphysical, as something that exists separately from our reality and that transcends it. It would seem that the very nature of the metaphoric process makes the concept of the metaphysical dependent on the physical. It makes it subservient to the physical, contradicting the very essence of our beliefs and intuitions about the uniqueness and transcendence of a metaphysical reality.

By alluding to the relation between signifier and signified, rather than metaphoric content itself, the image makes us aware that our metaphysical concepts can only exist insofar as they are related to an Other (phenomenal entity). Because of this, it is impossible to express that which is truly metaphysical in its own right. It suggests that we can never fully understand the metaphysical because we cannot see it for itself, but can only conceive of contaminated metaphysical ideas that *'hint at the logic of contamination and of the contamination of the logical distinction between concept and figure'* (Gasche 1986: 310). In support of this line of thought, Gasche maintains that the analogies which enable the expression of the metaphysical also cover up such content. *'Indeed since the 'as' structure [of metaphor] uncovers with regard to an Other, it veils and reveals in the same gesture'* (1986: 301). Rather than expressing metaphoric content, the image alludes to the possibility and impossibility of the expression of the metaphysical content, it alludes to the notion of metaphoricity.

It expresses *'that ... which itself is not analogical, since it forms the ground of analogy [something] outside of the system [of signifiers and signifieds]'* (Gasche 1986: 304), that which enables an image to enter into an analogical relationship with an abstract concept, so that metaphysical truth may be expressed. As Gasche states, it is that which *'allows a concept to be a idealised counterpart of a sensible image'* (1986: 308) and therefore it is *'older than the philosophical distinction between the proper and the metaphoric'* (1986: 294).

The common factor in both my own and Kiefer's intertextual images is that they do not articulate specific concepts, but rather a structural relationship between differing concepts, specifically between elements that are diametrically opposed to one another. This relation to an Other, which alludes to the possibility and impossibility of the existence of specific and definitive ideas, is reflected in all the various poststructural concepts that have been mentioned up to this point. These concepts, such as *différance*, the *arche-trace*, the *supplement* and *metaphoricity* are collectively referred to as *infrastructures*, and have this in common: they constitute '*the open matrix in which these oppositions and contradictions are engendered*' (Gasche 1986: 147).

Because these infrastructures explain how our ideas and concepts come to exist through a relationship between oppositional terms, they point to a place outside of such dialectical opposites and the meanings they engender, something that does not form part of our language. As Gasche maintains, these infrastructures cannot be a part '*of the opposites for which they account for otherwise it would belong to the order of what it comes to explain*' (1986: 148). Infrastructures are older than these concepts and language in general and also precede the logic that gave rise to them. To think infrastructures is to think pre-logically, as that which makes possible the logical and thus thought itself. It is that which governs the possibility and impossibility of every logical proposition. Therefore '*no constituted logic nor any rule of a logical order can...provide a decision or impose its norms upon these pre-logical possibilities*' (Gasche 1986: 249).

In this sense, infrastructures are metaphysical or transcendental structural principles insofar as they precede and exceed the realm of our knowledge and our ideas, including our notions of the metaphysical. Because infrastructures allude to something that precedes even our metaphysical concepts such as God, it is actually more metaphysical than any traditionally held metaphysical concept or deity. '*It comprises properties that are by right older than those traditionally attributed to the transcendental*' (Gasche 1986: 295).

At first it may seem that the concept of infrastructures alludes to more fundamental metaphysical concepts and existents. This, however, is impossible for a number of reasons. Firstly, infrastructures represent both the possibilities and impossibilities of the existence of concepts or existents, meaning that they allude to both the truth and falsity of the existence of entities such as God. Secondly, because infrastructures precede logic and illogical thought, they cannot provide definitive and intelligible ideas about metaphysical entities. In short, they make it impossible to definitively name, characterize or believe in any specific concept or entity. Thirdly, because infrastructures cannot be regarded as definite existing things in themselves as traditional metaphysical concepts presuppose, they are not *'essences, since it is not dependent on any category of [language such as] that which is present or absent. Nor is it a supra essentially beyond the finite categories of essence and existence. It does not call any higher inconceivable or ineffable mode of being its own'* (Gasche 1986: 149). To think that which the infrastructures designate is to think that which cannot directly be thought of, that which is beyond human understanding and meaning because it cannot be embodied in language, in short, that which is unnameable.

Ultimately, then, the content of Kiefer's intertextual images does allude to the metaphysical, but as that which cannot be defined in the context of human language.

Such a view of the metaphysical is inconsistent with Urban's theories of metaphysical symbolism. Rather than alluding to specific, generalized, negated and anthropomorphic ideas, intertextual images render such notions indeterminate. This view further contradicts the notion of symbolic truth in that it does not allude to intelligible ideas that may define the nature of an ultimate reality, hinting rather at something that cannot be understood as meaningful. Because intertextual images do not suggest a metaphoric relation between a sign and a signified, but rather that which precedes the linguistic paradigm of such a relation, they do not facilitate an intuitive grasp of metaphysical truth.

Intertextual images may be said to allude to something that escapes the structure of opposition between an image and abstract ideas, the symbolic and the literal. We are unable to derive any definitive knowledge of the metaphysical from these images, because they guide our thoughts to a place outside of the oppositions that inform our language and our understanding of reality.

In accordance with infrastructural principles, the content of intertextual images may be said to allude to a disappearance of meaning, something that appears to us as a perpetual withdrawal from our understanding and intuition. In trying to grasp or think that which is alluded to in these images, our conceptions disappear and dissolve, simply because we cannot think or understand that which precedes thinking and understanding. As Gasche points out, *'to think outside of ontological difference eventually condemns one to be no longer able to think at all or to engage in something that can no longer be called thinking...'* (1995: 170).

Therefore, the content of these images cannot be the object of even the most refined form of the intuiting of essences. They escape phenomenization to the extent that they refuse to appear in person or present themselves to the phenomenological gaze. According to Gasche, *'the infrastructures dissolve the comprehension of the thing in itself. Instead of offering themselves up they withdraw. They efface themselves, constantly disappearing as they go along'* (1986: 150).

However, this does not mean that intertextual images allude to a mere absence, but rather to a sense of something that appears to disappear, or as Derrida puts it, *'a something without thing'* (1993: 80). This vague sense of metaphysical presence results from the fact that infrastructures not only represent something outside of language, but also that which makes possible the existence of ideas and concepts (language). In expressing these notions, intertextual images therefore not only allude



to something that transcends language and reality, but also the birth of language and meaning.

Because of this, intertextual images will always allude to notions of the metaphysical that *'go both ways [that] are divided in two and lend themselves to two readings (Gasche 1986: 191):* one of an absence of meaning and one of a presence of meaning, a sense of something but also of something that continually evades us by disappearing. Ultimately such a view suggests something that *'remains at the margin of the system'* of meaning and existence (Gasche 1986: 191).

When we interpret intertextual images such as those of Kiefer's, we may still get a vague sense of a metaphysical element present in these images, which invites us to delve into the suggested meaning of the work. But instead of being rewarded with a definitive insight into a metaphysical reality, the mysterious sense inherent in the work resists our attempt at interpretation. It keeps on withdrawing from us; the more we try to get an intuitive grasp on that which is alluded to, the more it withdraws into silence. Neither simply present nor absent, this unnameable is a *'site of desertion ...the no place of a certain withdrawal. Something is always slipping away, always missing...'* (Taylor 1992: 292).

As Taylor aptly claims with regard to Kiefer's work, *'Beyond history, beyond even myth, Kiefer pursues or is pursued by something other, that is neither near nor far, neither immanent or transcendent. Its distance is proximate and its proximity distant. Never present without being absent, this beyond that is ever near is the unfigurable that Kiefer struggles to figure'* (1992: 292).

Even though it is clear that the content of intertextual images articulates a very different view of the metaphysical from symbolism, it does not necessarily mean that the partly symbolic properties of these images are obsolete. Kiefer's ardent and

continued exploration of different symbolic imagery and its concepts throughout his career attests to this.

Even though I have aimed to express a poststructural view of the metaphysical through my own exploration of intertextual imagery, I have also continued to make use of various symbolic images in my work. I have come to realise that the presence of symbolic elements adds a hermetic and mystical quality to the content of my work that seems to support and facilitate the expression of something that is unnameable. At times, it has seemed to me that there may even be a mysterious affinity between the disparate approaches.

Perhaps such a affinity is not entirely unimaginable if one considers the fact that the poststructural view of the metaphysical as an unnameable is not a new concept, but that it is reflected throughout the ideologies of various historical systems of thought: ideologies that articulate a similar notion of the metaphysical, albeit from a more symbolic perspective.

The doctrines of Jewish mysticism, such as the Kabbalah, for example, make reference to the notion of God as unnameable, indescribable. In central Buddhist philosophy, the notion of the absolute is also equated with the indefinable. The notion of the Godly as an unapproachable, unnameable force is also referred to in the Bible, which states the following, '*...but the Lord said, you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live*' (Exo 33: 20). Of course, the notion of the Judeo-Christian God cannot be equated with the nature of the infrastructures, because He is believed to be a singular definitive essence, but it serves as a apt example that many religious ideologies conceive, at least in part, of the metaphysical as an unnameable concept.

As Gasche notes with regard to the unnameable quality of the infrastructures, '*the invisibility of the infrastructure...seems to be linked to a powerful motif in classical philosophy according to which what makes visibility possible must itself be invisible.*

*If that source were seen, it would blind the beholder. According to this logic one cannot face the source of the light, one cannot speak of that which makes speech possible, because one cannot withstand so powerful a plenitude. As we have seen, for structural reasons, that which, as the absolute ground, does not belong to the totality of what it makes possible, cannot possibly offer itself to perception' (1986: 231).*

In the light of these affinities, it would seem that, at heart, these two opposing approaches may not be so dissimilar after all. If so, it may be argued that intertextual images simply re-express the already ancient belief in the inaccessibility of the metaphysical, and therefore, do not contribute in any significant way to the contemporary representation of metaphysical content.

On closer consideration, however, intertextuality does seem to offer a valid contribution to the expression of the metaphysical.

The fact remains that the notions of symbolism, as reflected in Urban's view on the subject, seem to have deviated from the basic idea, held by various old beliefs, that the metaphysical is a mysterious and indefinable construct. Perhaps during the course of history symbolic thought has developed and adapted to allow us to attribute specific ideas and concepts to a metaphysical reality. These ideas, such as Urban's notions of negation, generality and value, allow us to make more sense of a metaphysical reality because they allude to ultimate truths that are specific and intelligible ideas: things that can be described and appropriated through language. It is a view that satisfies our metaphysical desires: the need to believe in a truth that could once and for all explain and quantify our reality and our existence.

In contrast to this, however, intertextuality renders all these specific concepts that may become attached to the notion of the metaphysical indeterminate and obsolete. In alluding to something 'outside' of language, it invites us to reconsider the validity of

such a definitive view of metaphysical truth, and revives the basic belief in the notion of the unnameable

Through my own practical explorations, I have come to understand the relationship between symbolism and intertextuality as a process of contradiction, synthesis and transformation of ideas, but most importantly, as a journey of discovery that may facilitate a better understanding of the inherent mystery of truth from a contemporary perspective.

# CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this research, I set out to investigate the contradictory thought processes that inform the content of Kiefer's work. I was of the opinion that these contradictions might prevent the expression of metaphysical content. As it turned out, however, the contradictions in Kiefer's work do not inhibit the articulation of metaphysical content. In fact, it is the very combination of disparate approaches such as the symbolic and intertextual that facilitates the expression of metaphysical content.

I discovered that intertextuality transformed the symbolic content of these images, rendering its specific concepts indeterminate. This intertextual indeterminacy dismantles the belief that the metaphysical could be defined by specific ideas such as universality, negation and anthropomorphism. By removing all definitive concepts about the metaphysical, intertextuality makes it possible to allude to something that precedes the existence of language, something unnameable. For Derrida this notion of the unnameable alludes to a secret that '*cannot be unveiled [and] remains inviolable even when one thinks one has revealed it*' (1993: 26). It is something that '*remains silent because it remains foreign to speech*' and all forms of discourse (Derrida 1993: 27).

This study has helped clarify how the contemporary stylistic device of intertextuality may inform the expression of metaphysical content within the framework of current thought. It has provided me with an invaluable theoretical basis that supported my own practical explorations of the metaphysical. In attempting to figure something at the limits of reality, that which exceeds our potential for understanding, I hoped to free the notion of the metaphysical from the restraints of relative discourse, from diametrically opposing concepts such as existence and non existence, light and darkness, good and evil. As Gasche maintains, the metaphysical is not apart of such definitive ideas, but rather '*appears, is named within the difference between all and*

*nothing, life and death within difference and at bottom difference itself* (1995: 160). As I have come to understand it, to express the metaphysical through intertextual means, is *'to say God as He is, beyond his images, beyond this idol that being can still be, beyond what is said, seen of him; to respond to the true name of God* (Derrida 1993: 80). For Derrida at least, this name of God is *'a sort of universal hive of inviolable secrets, of idioms that are never translatable except as untranslatable seals'* (1993: 80).

As I see it, this view does not denigrate a belief in the metaphysical. On the contrary it enables us to conceive of and express metaphysical content that is not limited to certain definitive ideas. This is a view that does not seek to define or appropriate the metaphysical, to bring it under human control, the control of language, expecting it to fit our expectations on our terms. Instead, it guides us back to the roots of much traditional philosophical and religious thought - the belief in that which is unnameable. This may help to re-imbue our notions of the metaphysical with a sense of mystery.

Because intertextual images allude to a metaphysical truth that cannot be explained or understood it may seem to undermine the aim of metaphysical discourse. After all, metaphysics has always been driven by a need to understand ourselves and our reality, and to find meaningful answers to our questions. It may even be argued that the intertextual approach is of no consequence, because what is absolutely unknowable is of no relevance to our lives. We have always been led to believe that truth is dependent on understanding, meaning and sufficient reason, that only things that can be sufficiently explained are true.

It seems to me, however, that the search for an ultimate truth that could sufficiently explain the nature of an ultimate reality represents a contradiction in terms. If we could embody such a truth in language, if we could understand it completely, it would no longer be a part of the metaphysical, something that transcends our reality, but just

another part of our objective reality (our mortal ideas). In a sense, it seems that to try and definitively circumscribe the metaphysical is to dissolve and dismantle it.

Perhaps an awareness of something that eludes our grasp is an awareness of the metaphysical itself. It acknowledges the fact that we have reached the limits of our reality and alludes to something greater than us. It provides the basis for our beliefs in the spiritual, which give meaning and purpose to our existence and our world. Perhaps the inherent value of metaphysics lies not in the act of understanding itself, but rather, in the act of understanding that there is something beyond understanding.

In a world so full of disparate views and opinions, each and all alleging the certainty of a truth, it seems to me that we may have reached a spiritual impasse. Perhaps to contemplate the silence of an unnameable truth may be more rewarding than to lose oneself in the labyrinth of conflicting opinions of ceaselessly proliferating claims to truth.

Is it not better to contemplate a silent truth not dependent on the ever-changing specific opinions reflected by a *zeitgeist* than to conform to the truth of the day or to wait for a better truth that may never come? Perhaps the only truth we can be certain of is the truth that we can never be certain. Perhaps we should, as Derrida suggests, save the name, the name of God, a name that is unnameable.

The rest is silence...

# DEFINITION OF TERMS

## ANTHROPOMORPHIC

In the context of this research, the concept of anthropomorphism or the anthropomorphic will be used to define images that may be said to suggest human qualities. These qualities may be objective representations of the human form or man made products or they may be represented through the expressive treatment of form that implies subjective human qualities such as personal emotions or ideas.

## DISSEMINATION

A poststructural concept conceived by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida by which is implied, an unstable, slippage or deferral of meaning from one sign to another, generating a state of perpetually unfulfilled meaning that exists in the absence of all signifieds. *'In Derrida's conception, one signifier points away to another signifier, which in turn points to another signifier, and so on ad infinitum.'* (Harland 1987: 136)

## INTERTEXTUALITY

A term coined by the feminist Author Julia Kristeva by which is implied an interchanging and interrelation of meaning between various signifying systems. In the context of this research, this term will be used with reference to a particular stylistic characteristic of the imagery employed by contemporary artists, namely the combination of veristic, abstract and written elements. The application of this term to any artist's work is not intended to relate these images or their content to any of Kristeva's other theoretical concepts.



## METAPHYSICAL

The term metaphysical has very broad implications and is generally employed as a referent to the spiritual in general. Although the artists and theorists that will be investigated during the course of this research may have differing viewpoints on the nature of the metaphysical, their work and its content will be analysed from the viewpoint of Urban's interpretation of the metaphysical. He sees the metaphysical not necessarily as that which only pertains to the spiritual to the exclusion of everything else, but rather as a discourse 'that seeks to discover the general ideas or principles which are indispensably relevant to the analysis of everything that happens'. Urban thus sees metaphysics as applying to all aspects of being, as that which '*deals with the ideas applicable to reality as a whole*' (Urban 1939: 632). In the context of this research then, the notion of the metaphysical is meant to infer that which includes the phenomenal (the world of sensory perceived objects), the spiritual and the connections between these levels of reality that may reflect on the notion of reality as a whole.

## METAPHYSICAL SYMBOL

Urban interprets the metaphysical symbol as an image that pertains to the expression of life in its innermost essence or in its totality. This definition reflects Urban's general description of his notion of the metaphysical, but in addition, includes and necessitates the involvement of the artists intuitive processes as a part of its expression.

## POSTSTRUCTURALISM

In the context of this research the notion of poststructuralism is meant to refer to current philosophical theory that uses the notions of language and its categories as a means to define our concept of reality. Poststructuralists like Derrida for example further believe that meaning as it is related to the language of the sign is unstable and ultimately unpredictable so that signs can be said to '*work creatively, anarchically and irresponsibly*' (Harland.1987: 124).

## PRE-LOGICAL

Derrida equates the pre-logical with his notion of the infrastructures. For Derrida, infrastructures are pre-logical because they allude to ‘something’ that precedes logic, thinking, existence, in short, all linguistic concepts or ideas. As he says, infrastructures ‘*points ...to the pre-ontological status of what amounts to a condition of possibility of sorts...*’ (1995:194). It is ‘*something inassimilable because it exceeds the system [of language] on all accounts*’ (1995: 194). Derrida seems aware of the contradiction implied by this notion, namely that he is trying to define with language, something that is supposed to exceed it. As he indicates, the pre-logical nature of the infrastructures implies to go ‘*there where you cannot go, to the impossible...to paralyze oneself in the in-decision of the non-event.*’ (1995:75). Even though other pertinent philosophers, such as Wittgenstein, argued that no concepts apart from inchoate bedrock ‘concepts’ are possible outside of language, the notion of the pre-logical nonetheless plays an important role in Derrida’s thought about the metaphysical.

In the context of this research Derrida’s notion of the infrastructures and their pre-logical nature will be accepted as valid propositions. Any philosophical debate that may pertain to this notion will not form part of this investigation.

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