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**The photographic other: Paradox in the  
cathexis of longing**

This thesis is presented for the degree of  
**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Alex Cilla Bradley**

Edith Cowan University  
School of Arts & Humanities  
2018

## ABSTRACT

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### *A photographic and written examination of paradox in relation to the photograph*

This research aims to illuminate the relationship between paradox and photography, elaborated via Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject. Paradox is considered in relation to photography in terms of repeated and unresolved debates about the status of the photograph as either an 'index of reality' (Bate, 2004, p. 1) or as a sign. The significance of this research lies in its re-motivation of abjection in terms of paradox, not in order to resolve such debates but, rather, to illuminate the importance of such unresolved contradictions in terms of photography's often powerful affect and meaning.

Situated within the paradigm of qualitative research, the research employs the theoretical perspective of post-structuralist psychoanalysis, combined with the methodology of critical analysis, as an approach appropriate to illuminating latencies within representation. Photographs by Jeff Wall, Pat Brassington, Patricia Piccinini, Roger Ballen, and Bill Henson, are critically analysed as information-rich case studies of the use of photographic paradox.

The creative component of the research is presented in the form of a web site consisting of photographs and animations of photographs, that collide aesthetic constructions of the body as an objective, external, object of an other's vision with a more sensory, and personal, experience of the body as the site of inner subjectivity. As such, the camera lens functions as a metaphor for each of these constructions, while body parts and fluids vie with objects of memory and optical imaging, repeating and transforming existing objects into new aesthetic forms. As with the case studies of photographic paradox, this photographic project makes explicit the workings of paradox, revealing repeated and unresolved contradictions that serve to create contemplative and often powerfully affective experiences of viewing.

## DECLARATION

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I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- i. incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- ii. contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis; or
- iii. contain any defamatory material;



5 February 2018

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## RESEARCH OUTPUTS

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Research outputs from this research include:

### CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- 2017 *[Blood] [Milk] [Lens]* - Video compilation presented during Meeting Place, National Forum on Arts and Disability, Perth International Arts Festival Connect, Crawley, Perth.
- 2013 *H/orific*, Alex Bradley & Tania Visosevic, Positive Feedback Loop: Conference for Expanded and Experimental Screen Works, Metro Arts, Brisbane.

### EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 Photographs & Videos, *[Blood] [Milk] [Lens]* - Solo Exhibition featured online at Meeting Place, National Forum on Arts and Disability, Perth International Arts Festival Connect, Crawley, Perth.
- 2015 Photographs, *Unbound*, Middle East/UK/International Online Exhibition.
- 2008 Series of Photographs, *Inhibition*, Spectrum Project Space, Northbridge, Perth.
- 2007 Photographs, *Videodromo*, 24 Hour Art, Centre for Contemporary Art, Northern Territory
- 2006 Photographs, *Videodromo*, Spectrum Project Space, Northbridge, Perth.
- 2006 Series of Photographs, *Tryst*, FotoFreo Fringe, Mobile Phone Distribution, Fremantle.
- 2006 Photographs, *Iris Award* Finalist, Perth Centre for Photography, Northbridge, Perth.

# INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW & METHODS

## INTRODUCTION

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A *paradox* is defined as a “seemingly absurd or contradictory statement” (Moore, 2003, p.784). The particularities of paradox are explicated succinctly in its distinction to *antinomy*. An antinomy is a contradiction made up of two seemingly provable assertions – Roy Sorenson nominates this a “collection of arguments” (Sorenson, 2003, p. 249). A paradox, however, is distinguished as a singular argument whose statements lead to unacceptable conclusions. Rather than merely a declaration of contradiction, paradox asserts an impossibility, an inconsistency, somewhere in the relationship between the premises of the argument and the contradictory conclusions<sup>1</sup>.

A solution to a paradox is found when its impossibilities and inconsistencies are detected in the premises of the argument, the implications of the argument, or in the perception of contradiction itself. Champlin (1988) argues that paradox is thus simply a limitation of context, a ‘fallacy of isolationism’, and therefore it is this limitation that produces the absurdity and contradiction of paradox. The seeming nature of paradox is that it is irrevocably tied to the impossible, with the stalemate absurdities of irresolvable contradictions often proving robust, and many paradoxes heretofore unsolved – and with resolved paradoxes occasionally reasserted upon further investigation and explication of context. Nonetheless, when paradoxes are resolved, solutions can affect important developments in mathematics, philosophy, ethics and science, perhaps providing evidence of just such an expansion of perceptual context.

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<sup>1</sup> An example is the *Liar's Paradox*: ‘this statement is false’.

The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought (Bullock, Stallybrass, & Trombley, 1988) defines three different types of paradox that have been essential to two thousand years of developments in mathematics and logic: *paradoxes of the infinite* (examples would include Zeno of Elea's 'Arrow Paradox' and 'Achilles and the Tortoise Paradox', and 'Hilbert's Paradox of the Grand Hotel'); *semantic paradoxes* ('Epimenides' Paradox', 'Berry's Paradox', 'Grelling's Paradox'); and *paradoxes of set theory* ('Russell's paradox'). Although these are identified as the three major kinds of paradox, they are not exhaustive – or uncontroversial. Indeed, a number of philosophers continue to interrogate the nature of paradox, suggesting further category refinements and paradox characteristics.

The range of near-contemporary classifications of paradox include Willard Van Orman Quine's *veridical* (a paradox containing a true conclusion) and *falsidical* (a paradox of false conclusion) and paradoxes of *self-reference*, *self-deception*, *definition*, and *analysis* (Champlin, 1988; Hughes & Brecht, 1978). These categorisations of paradox types are significant to this research in that they reveal our continuing attempts to disambiguate the confusion and uncertainty created by paradox. The nature of contemporary paradox – grounded as it is in the classical traditions of ancient Greece – illustrates the conceptual challenge of living in a world where two contradictory things can appear true: where the impossible appears possible.

Also of significance to this study is the category of *visual paradoxes*, including the 'Impossible Triangle', the 'Impossible Cube', the 'Penrose Stair', and the *Uroborus* (Hughes & Brecht, 1978; Sorenson, 2003). While the triangle, cube, and stair paradoxes have traditionally been explored in etchings and paintings (through representations of perspective and of geometry), the uroborus is an ancient symbol of a snake (or dragon) eating its own tail. Patrick Hughes and George Brecht (1978) consider the uroborus as the archetype of the vicious circle. However, I would argue that this symbol clearly exemplifies their more detailed definition of paradox itself. Hughes and Brecht outline three essential conditions of paradox clearly embodied in this image: *contradiction*, *self-reference* and *vicious circularity*. Statements involving only one or two conditions are not considered to have met the criteria for paradox, which transpires only as a result of all three. These conditions will be considered in this research as relevant to an elaboration of

the operation of abjection in terms of paradox. At the same time, this visual symbol of paradox will inform the creation of photographic images through which the abject is explored.

Zoe Sofoulis (1988) relates the figure of the uroborus to the *pre-Oedipal* lack of distinction between self and other that Kristeva (1974) terms the *semiotic*. In Kristeva's theory (1982), this dyadic relation between mother and child, and its attendant regulations of the child's body in relation to food and cleanliness, initiates a bounding of libidinal energy in perpetual patterns of separation and identification. This pattern comprises the operation of *abjection* that serves to generate form, signification, the distinction between self and other, and all object relations. This pattern is *reduplicated*<sup>2</sup> from birth, throughout the phases of a child's development, to the construction of identity and language within the post-Oedipal that Kristeva, following Jacques Lacan, terms the *Symbolic*<sup>3</sup>:

the logic of reduplication, put in motion by the first identifications with the mother's body – sets up the logic of the psyche: repetition. The logic of reduplication itself becomes a pattern reduplicated by the psyche. (Oliver, 1993b, p. 72)

Kelly Oliver (1993a) nominates this continued pattern of separation and identification a *dialectical oscillation*:

found already within the material body, [that] leads from one level to another and eventually gives rise to the speaking subject. This is not a static oscillation. Rather it is a productive oscillation that crosses ever-new thresholds because of the dynamic tension between rejection and stases, semiotic and symbolic. (Oliver, 1993a, p. 2)

In Kristeva's theory, the stable categories of the post-Oedipal Symbolic, the categories of self/other and of language, are continually disrupted by the unstable

---

<sup>2</sup> Repeated in a fashion that allows the incremental creation of new elements, i.e. a slight change can occur with each duplication.

<sup>3</sup> The *Symbolic* is Lacan's term for "the social and signifying order governing culture [it is] the order of representation" (Grosz, 1989, pp. xxii - xxiii). Kristeva's use of the term differs in relation to that which precedes it – for Lacan, the *Imaginary*; for Kristeva, the *semiotic*. The semiotic not only precedes the Symbolic, but is also a generative element continually present within it. Additionally, it is important to note that Lacan and Kristeva's use of 'Symbolic' and 'semiotic' hold specific theoretical meanings that do not concur with everyday use of the terms.

While, Lacan's orders of the *Imaginary*, *Symbolic*, and the *Real* (material reality), are not capitalised by him, in this research they will be capitalised in line with Kristeva's capitalisation of the terms (though her writings contain examples without capitalisation too), whereas semiotic and abject will not be capitalised, also in line with Kristeva's use of these terms. This convention also serves to provide an easy distinction between 'the Symbolic' and the common term 'symbolic', 'the Real' and the common term 'real'.

energies of the maternal semiotic. Abjection is a dialectical oscillation of separation and identification that both disrupts and generates those stable categories. It is a pattern that is continuous, as that which is not contained within stable categories threatens and therefore must be contained – and yet exists always in relation to an uncontainable, ineradicable, remainder.

In these terms, paradox can be understood as a reduplicated point of incomplete *cathexis*, or attachment of energy to an idea or object (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 62), within the operation of abjection – a point where the cathexis of energies onto stable categories within signification is repetitively, and cyclicly, attempted and deferred. Paradox is theorised, within this research, as a point where stable categories are threatened by the ineradicable remainder of the ‘as-yet-unsignified’ that is irrevocably associated with the semiotic maternal. The reduplication within the operation of abjection will be considered as a vicious circle of the self-referential and contradictory relations between identity and language, subject and object, and self and other.

The specular realm has a unique function within this psychoanalytic schema – the child’s first image of the other establishes the self as a distinct and separate identity, however, this identity is an unstable ideal that is therefore continually re-articulated through subsequent use of, and fascination with, images. More specifically, photography has a unique relation to this theorising, as this re-articulation of the image is considered in terms of abjection – that is, as a generative paradox between the Real and representation, expressed consistently in photographic discourse as a contradiction between index and sign. Paradox is understood as an oscillation of contradiction that does not cease – a confusion, an impossibility of stable categories, a simultaneously disruptive and productive site of creative potential.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to illuminate the relationship between paradox and photography, elaborated via Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject. Paradox is examined in relation to unconscious processes of signification and theorised as a

gateway for the as-yet-unsignified of the unconscious to realise consciousness and signification.

Attendant to this hypothesis, the purpose of the creative work is to illuminate the workings of paradox, revealing repeated and unresolved contradictions that serve to create contemplative and often powerfully affective experiences of viewing. Photographic practice, employed as critical-method, reveals and makes available for interpretation what is implicit and unconscious in representation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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### ABJECTION & PARADOX IN ART

Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, in the exhibition catalogue which introduced patrons to the 1996 *Centre Georges Pompidou* exhibition *L'Informe mode d'emploi* (Krauss & Bois, 1997), outline Georges Bataille's concept of the *informe* (or formless; unformed) as a category relevant to particular practices within modern art. This highly influential theorisation endeavoured to redefine modern art against previous formalist and iconographic conceptions (Highmore, 1999), but also served to restrict and reduce critical perceptions of the relevance of the abject within contemporary arts practice.

Krauss and Bois distinguish the category of the *informe* "in the strongest possible terms" (p. 236) from abjection, which Krauss argues has a pervasive articulation within American and English art of the 1990s. Significant representation of the influence of the abject at this time include *Dirt and domesticity: Constructions of the feminine*, Whitney Museum, 1992; *Abject Art: Repulsion and desire in American art*, Whitney Museum, 1993; *femininmasculin*, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1995; photographers such as Cindy Sherman, Andres Serrano, Hannah Wilke; and artists such as Kiki Smith, Louise Bourgeois, Gilbert and George, Robert Grober, Mike Kelley, and Helen Chadwick. While the *informe* exhibition was not specifically designed as a counterpoint to abject art (but rather to the formalist and iconographic), it nevertheless staked out critically alternative ground.

While the concept of abjection was also employed by Bataille, Krauss maintains that Kristeva's further conceptualisation of the term in *Powers of Horror* (1982) resulted in a popularisation of abjection within contemporary art – a popularisation that consists of a surfeit of bodily secretions and fluids. In this, contemporary artists are resonating with the popular adoption, a generation earlier, of Mary Douglas' classic anthropological text *Purity and Danger* (1966). Krauss adds that abjection, both in its theorisation and in abject art, is invariably associated with the feminine *as wound* (1997, p. 244). Abjection is ultimately understood by Krauss as reduced to a “thematic of essences and substances” (p. 245) writ physically – as opposed to its originally-rich psychoanalytical conception.

Similarly, Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Dennis Hollier and Helen Molesworth, in the October discussion *The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the “Informe and the Abject”* (1994), characterise abject art as a mere reification of those particular bodily substances designated as abject, i.e. spit, urine, excrement, semen, menstrual blood, etc. However, while artistic conceptions of the abject can serve to valorise or recuperate that which has been designated abject, true transgression is considered structural – and is therefore more extensively applicable through the concept of the informe. That is, the informe functions as an attack on structure and category – it is an ‘operation’ that can be applied situationally, rather than a recuperation tied to particular bodily objects. An opposition is established here between what is understood as the categorising, literal, referential, essentialism of the abject and the anti-category, situational slippage of the informe.

My argument here is that this is a paradoxical truth – dependent purely upon a stabilisation of the notion of the abject that allies it solely with bodily substances. These analyses consider bodily substances as ‘objects’ yet, in Kristeva's conception, they are barrier breaking substances that exist paradoxically as “neither subject nor object” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). The abject is applicable beyond the body, and is “the inbetween, the ambiguous, the composite” which disturbs identity – via disturbance of categories along with “borders, positions, rules” (p. 4). In this sense, the abject can be considered an operation, and can, in fact, be seen as synonymous with this aspect of the informe.

While Krauss proposes the concept of the informe against a perceived insufficiency of transgression in abject art, she also, however, argues for a further articulation of abjection in terms of an operation (1997). To Krauss, this is currently best articulated by Hal Foster in his essay *Obscene, Abject, Traumatic* (Foster, 1996a). Foster's analysis relies on a richer, yet still limited, definition of abjection. His investigation of Cindy Sherman's photographs ally the abject with representations of the breaking down of the body – and therefore of identity (Also c.f. Mulvey, 1991). Foster contrasts this with his proposed third term (to the abject and informe) – the *obscene*<sup>4</sup>, which functions as a traumatic break in the screen of representation itself. Foster's analysis establishes the difference between the abject and the obscene as an opposition between representations of transgression (or in Kristeva's terms, representations that are contained by the Symbolic Order) and the transgression of representation itself (a crisis of the Symbolic Order). Foster's analysis revolves around the age-old argument of the possibility for change within a system, versus the possibility for change outside of a system. When systems such as language are seen as all encompassing, this argument can become paradoxical and nonsensical. However, a fuller conceptualisation of the process of abjection reveals language as a system of perpetual crisis and perpetual confirmation – a system encompassing both transgression and the status quo in endless unresolved conflict.

Foster's (1996a) analysis also equates this opposition with the factional division within Surrealism between André Breton's idealism and Georges Bataille's promotion of the perverse. Foster reinscribes this division, in psychoanalytic terms, as between *sublimation* and *desublimation* of the transgressive. Sublimation is Sigmund Freud's term for a diversion of instinctual, sexual, energy into socially acceptable forms – to desubliminate then, is to break this containment, revealing that which transgresses. Jan-Ove Steihaug (1988) contends that, within Foster's analysis, his favouring of the desublimating, Bataillean side of the opposition is synonymous with the contemporary turn toward Surrealism in art and theory that is equally focused through the writings of Bataille (i.e. Krauss' use of the informe).

Foster argues that contemporary art provides a similar division to the Surrealist factions – either waging an adolescent rebellion against censure via anal-eroticism

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<sup>4</sup> Foster's use of the term *obscene* contrasts its aggressive visuality with the safe, distancing, conventions of the pornographic.

and the parading of shit-substitutes (he claims the real thing is rarely used), or endeavouring to rupture and probe the screen of representation itself. He argues that this rupturing and probing is, at heart, an attempt to desubliminate *the Real*. The Real is Lacan's term for the fullness of the material continuum – that which exists outside of language, that we cannot conceptualise or represent (Lacan, 1973). Foster's thesis, also argued in *Return of the Real (1996b)*, is that a cultural and artistic shift has occurred from "reality as an effect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma" (1996b, p. 146). That is, while previously the Symbolic and the screen worked to protect against the Real, now we delight in their possible breakdown. However, Foster argues that we are also beset by horror at this potential, with the effect of rupture ultimately residing in the *affects* of trauma – despair and melancholia.

Foster's (1996a) analysis consists of a confinement of abjection to bodily substances and contained transgression. The elision of a richer conception of abjection – one that comprehends abjection as encompassing a crisis in the Symbolic Order – is also subsequently evidenced in Foster's demarcation of the abject. Foster outlines two types of abjection within Kristeva's theorisation: the *condition of abjection* (to 'be' the desublimated abject) versus the *operation of abjection* (to sublimate the abject in order to maintain identity and the Symbolic). Foster's definition of the operation of abjection therefore confines it solely to a continual process of stabilisation of the Symbolic. He asks, "is the abject, then, disruptive of subjective and social orders or foundational of them, a crisis of these orders, or a confirmation of them?" (Foster, 1996a, p. 114). The answer to Foster's question, however, is that the abject is both – the operation of abjection is a pattern of confirmation *and* crisis, sublimation *and* transgression. And significantly, it is a pattern whose affects include loss and despair, as the continually attempted placement of the as-yet-unsignified Real within signification entails and evokes the traumatic loss of the maternal.

This contradiction between semiotic and Symbolic is also evidenced in relation to certain precepts of the art movement of Surrealism. The Surrealists aimed to critique and transform social and psychic hegemonies – by means of artistic strategies manifestly influenced by Freudian theory. Surrealist concepts, techniques and games were devised to avoid the censorship and controls of consciousness in an attempt to release and reveal the inner world of the unconscious. This resulted in

what Mary Ann Caws (2004) entitles “[Surrealist André Breton’s] *dialogue* with the other (the unconscious)...with what is encountered by way of dreams, coincidences, correspondences, the marvellous, the uncanny; a reciprocal exchange [of] conscious and unconscious thought” (p. 15). Importantly, this revealing of unconscious contents is nominated a *dialogue* with consciousness as, following David Bate (2004), while conscious control can be reduced it nevertheless remains operational.

In his second manifesto André Breton, the founder of Surrealism, recasts and expands this dialogue between conscious and unconscious into the form of a number of contradictions:

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point. (Cited in Mundy, 2001)

Surrealist engagement with the notion of contradiction manifests in the concepts of *automatism*<sup>5</sup> and the *marvellous*<sup>6</sup>. Jennifer Mundy (2001) asserts that the various activities of automatism were, for Breton, geared toward a release of the inner world of the unconscious into the outer world that was, simultaneously, an attempt to release the tensions of contradiction. For Mundy, Iverson (2004) and Foster (1993) the Surrealist objects were, correspondingly, outer world objects manifesting the repressed inner world. The experience of recognition and pleasure, derived from this type of revelation of unconscious contents within objects of the outer world, is summed up by the Surrealist concept of the marvellous<sup>7</sup>. Bate (2004), claims that the marvellous is also, fundamentally, pleasure at the disclosure of contradictions that have been “repressed in the social” (p. 37).

This desublimation of contradiction can be witnessed in two analyses of the Surrealist Hans Bellmer’s doll photographs. Mundy (2001) and Foster (2001)

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<sup>5</sup> *Automatism* is the attempt to release unconscious contents by removing conscious controls, popularly known through the technique of *automatic writing*, and is also the mainstay behind the Surrealist activities and experiments i.e. induced trances, *Surrealist objects*, and games such as *exquisite corpse* (Polizzotti, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> The *marvellous* is “that which unexpectedly arouses wonder when we chance upon it” (Caws, 2004, p. 16).

<sup>7</sup> This notion of the marvellous differs from its use within literary theory, where it has been conceived by Tzvetan Todorov as a category pertaining to the supernatural (Bate, 2004).

analyse specific Surrealist art and photography by means of the respective divisions ‘fetishism/unbound energy’<sup>8</sup> and ‘fetish object/castrating threat’. These divisions can be understood as effectively repeating the ‘sublimation/transgression’ division we have seen earlier. Mundy and Foster recognise these divisions as disturbingly co-present in Bellmer’s dolls – sculptured, reconfigured, doll bodies whose body parts are “perversely repeated, aggressively conjoined, and obsessively transformed” (Foster, 2001, p. 207). For Foster, Bellmer’s ‘compounding of contradiction’ in the dolls causes a collapse of the genital order (of the fetish object) and a reversion to the anal order (of part objects, substitutions and equivalences) – with a subsequent fear of self-dissolution. However, the notion of the abject allows for a reading of both the ‘fetishism/unbound energy’ and ‘fetish object/castrating threat’ divisions as elaborations of paradox – and it is this desublimation of paradox in Bellmer’s photographs that acts as a gateway for the pre-Oedipal maternal to threaten and renew the Symbolic.

Similarly, in *Compulsive Beauty* (1993), Foster argues that the marvellous is identical to the *uncanny* – and is therefore a return of the repressed. Freud (1955) defines the uncanny as a category of aesthetic experience not related to positive feelings regarding beauty and attractiveness, but rather to negative feelings of fright, disturbance and repulsion. He argues that what is experienced as uncanny is frightening because it is both unknown and familiar – an effect of the recurrence of that which has been repressed:

for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.  
(p. 241)

Feelings of uncanniness are evoked in response to such things as the evil-eye, being lost and returning again and again to the same place, being buried alive, animated dolls, automata, doubles, and dismembered limbs – all, according to Freud, recurrences of surmounted ‘primitive’ beliefs or infantile complexes.

Foster (1993) equates the marvellous to the uncanny via Freud’s notion of the *death drive*. Freud outlines this drive as a destructive instinctual striving towards an absence of tension, or towards return to an inorganic state. For Foster, the

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<sup>8</sup> In Freudian theory, a *fetish object* is the means by which the (male) subject’s recognition of the female’s lack of a penis, and the resulting threat of castration, can be disavowed. The fetish object stands in for the missing penis (Freud, 1973). In this case, it functions as a Symbolic object that is then juxtaposed with the unbound energies of the pre-Oedipal.

marvellous relates to two aspects of the uncanny: confusion between animate and inanimate objects, and a compulsion to repeat. For example, marvellous objects such as the Surrealist mannequins (who seem confusingly dead and alive) reveal the death drive by “evok(ing)... the immanence of death in life” (p. 21). Similarly, the marvellous is encountered in Surrealist objects as a compulsive, repetitive working through of trauma – a trauma that ultimately manifests as death. For Foster, the traumas encountered in the marvellous are the loss of the first love object (the maternal) and the fear of castration. This compulsively returned fantasy of the pre-Oedipal is, according to Foster, fuelled by the death drive. The Surrealist’s object has its “origin of desire in loss and its end in death” (p. 48) – that is, the desire for a return to primal origins is considered by Foster as, ultimately, a return to the inorganic.

Noelle McAfee (2004), however, argues that Freud’s notion of the *uncanny* is decisively maternal and abject. The recurrence of the repressed is a memory of the maternal abject – “a regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people” (Freud, 1955, p. 236). The uncanny evidences a constant longing for reunion with the mother’s body – and a resultant fear of the death of identity that would entail (McAfee, 2004, p. 49). In this way, the marvellous can be understood as abject rather than uncanny. While Foster similarly invokes loss of the maternal and death of identity within his theorisation of the uncanny – as with the distinction between sublimation and transgression, and between fetish and unbound energy – the abject is a singular notion able to synthesise these varied models within a singular concept. The abject, as a point of crisis between the semiotic and the Symbolic, is additionally able to account for the desublimation of that traumatic loss via the presence of contradiction in the marvellous.

Krauss, in *The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism and Photography in the Service of Surrealism* (1981; 1985b), links Surrealism and photography through the notion of the marvellous. As the photograph is “an imprint or transfer off the real” (1981, p. 26), the photographic manipulations – of doubling, framing and spacing – result in a marvellous transformation of reality as ‘written’. That is, the photograph engenders a surreal experience of “nature as a sign or representation” (1985b, p. 35).

## PHOTOGRAPHY & PARADOX

This placing of the Real into language is related to a persistent conflict within photographic discourse between the photograph as index-of-reality and the photograph as a sign. Despite photography's nature as a construction, the myth of photographic truth endures. Furthermore, the advent of digital technology, and its well-known manipulations and simulations, incurred panic at an apparent removal of objectivity that has therefore resulted in the 'death of photography' itself. (c.f. Jolly, 1996; Lister, 1995; Ritchin, 1991).

Sarah Kember (1998) argues that this belief in photographic truth reveals a desire for mastery and control of the objects photographed – the Real of nature and the body. She contends that claims of the death of photography and the “panic over the loss of the real” (p. 10) are actually a loss of our *investments* in the Real – with an attendant loss of the reassurance we secure via that domination and control. Kember promotes an alternative relationship to photography whereby the photograph manifests as an agent of transformation. She claims that the photograph facilitates an encounter with the unsignified that restructures and redefines that hierarchical relationship to the Real. Kember turns to the affective power of the photograph as outlined by Roland Barthes' (1980) concept of the *punctum*. Barthes' punctum is the non-verbal, accidentally encountered, and wounding experience of photographic meaning that “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (p. 26)<sup>9</sup>. The punctum pertains to Lacan's (1973) concept of the *tuché* – a traumatic encounter with the Real. Kember (1998) neatly resolves the paradox inherent in the idea of representing the unrepresentable-Real via the notion of 'affect'. She asserts that we “know the impossibility of the real in representation...but we can nevertheless *feel* its presence” (p. 31). Kember then extends Barthes' concept of the punctum via Christopher Bollas' (1987) notion of *transformational objects*. These are objects, such as photographs, that we seek out in order to re-experience memories of the infantile relation with the mother. These are strongly affective memories of intense cumulative transformation. We seek out

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<sup>9</sup> Significantly for the proposed research, for Barthes, an experience of the *punctum* accords co-presence with the *studium* (that which is already known and named within language), i.e. both exist as essential, though opposing, elements.

photographs so that this unconscious memory of early object relations can realise consciousness and thereby transform us.

David Bate (2004) proposes a similar idea in relation to Surrealist photography. He claims that in the presence of contradiction (i.e. an experience of the marvellous), unconscious primal fantasies<sup>10</sup> emerge as traumatic memories that are then censored by the revision processes of consciousness. These ‘enigmatic messages’, of both present and absent meaning, are what we recognise as ‘surreal’. He claims that the photograph that disturbs its ‘truth value’, by nominating itself as a sign, thus invokes the marvellous and becomes surreal.

This notion is also present with regard to Surrealist photography in Rosalind Kraus’ (1985a) *Corpus Delicti*. Krauss asserts that Surrealist photography engages in a thematic doubling – i.e. in mirror images, Bellmer’s dolls, etc – that results in an ‘informe’ disturbance of identity. This doubling, along with the formal doubling of reality by the photograph, disrupts the mastery typically gained in the photographic. Krauss relates this disturbance to the ‘troubling of reality’ that is the *uncanny*. Here the shock of the marvellous is this dual doubling that evokes the repressed, wounding, experience of the death drive in the uncanny.

In these analyses the marvellous, Surrealist, photograph could be considered transformational – as either an enigmatic message to be decoded, or a transgressive disturbance of social and psychic mastery. However, the abject again allows for a synthesis of approaches within one concept. This is not to argue that these varied approaches do not entail important specificities but, rather, that the synthesising framework of the abject as paradox allows for a richer understanding of photography.

For Kember (1998), an encounter with the ‘unthought known’<sup>11</sup> (through the photograph as transformational object) is in conflict with our investment in the truth status of photography – a status that locates truth in the exterior world. She argues that therefore, digital images are useful for the creation of an

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<sup>10</sup> Within Freudian theory, fantasy structures within the psyche that are universal to subjectivity, i.e. intra-uterine existence, primal scene, castration and seduction (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973).

<sup>11</sup> The *unthought known* is Christopher Bollas’ (1987) term that equates to the *Real* as able to be experienced, or thought, via encounters with transformational objects.

epistemological shift in how we understand the notion of truth – a shift that no longer sees the object as separate to the subject, exterior as separate to interior, other to self. As I have outlined in my previous research (Bradley, 2004), however, while discourses about digital technology proclaim non-binary, non-hierarchical, liberating, possibilities they also invariably signal an attendant and overwhelming anxiety of maternal engulfment. Kristeva’s concept of abjection demonstrates that while a return to maternal origins overturns the hierarchies and separations of the Symbolic, it also entails the subsequent death of identity. The abject is also invoked, in a contradictory manner, in the conceptualisation of the digital as a purely Symbolic, bodiless, realm. In other words, the digital is revealed as ultimately neither maternal nor Symbolic, but paradoxically both.

Similarly, it can be argued that photography does not function as a transformational object despite its truth status but, rather, because of it. According to Kristeva (1989), the affects of loss (here associated with the punctum, the Real, and the unthought known) are “*fluctuating* energy cathexes insufficiently stabilised to coalesce as verbal or other signs” (p. 22). Mourning is the side-*affect*, so to speak, of the perpetual attempt to place the as-yet-unsignified into signification – to name and exteriorise a seemingly internal truth. It can be argued that the felt ‘truth’ of the Real, or unthought known, paradoxically becomes ‘true’ via placement within representation – within the sign system of the Symbolic. Photography’s status as an index-of-reality, and its nature as a sign, can both be seen as crucial to this operation. The use of abjection, re-motivated as paradox, allows for an exploration of these contradictory elements as equally essential to the nature of photography. That is, our fascination with, and response to, photography can be considered in terms of the as-yet-unsignified continually threatening and renewing signification.

## CONCLUSION

As both transgression and confirmation of the Symbolic, Kristeva’s theory of abjection allows for an understanding of the Real as located not anterior to signification (McAfee, 2004) but always within it. Symbolic representations are unstable objects perpetually torn apart and transformed by that which is not yet contained within signification. Abjection “signals the frailty of the object as the support of the subject” (Grosz, 1986, p. 109), the other as support of the self, and

representation as support of the Real. Abjection is a continuous generative pattern of crisis and confirmation between the semiotic and Symbolic – investigated in the following research as an unresolved paradox. Contrary to Krauss it is not abjection, but the elision of this richer conception of abjection as an unresolved paradox, that “function(s) like a kind of bone stuck in the throat” (1997, p. 237).

The photographic-practice component of this research is uniquely placed to reverse this elision – to make explicit the nature of that marvellous paradox between self and other, subject and object, Real and language – proposing the photographic other as “an impossible mourning for the maternal” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 9). While similar desublimations are historically evident in the practice of the marvellous in Surrealism, the informe, and the uncanny, contemporary photographic practice that troubles and transgresses the ‘reality effect’ (via sustained post-modern and post-structuralist critique in terms of abjection), utilises the same paradox between conscious and unconscious – though articulated here as a paradox between index and sign – to similarly powerful, joyous, and traumatic, effect.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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*What is the nature of paradox in relation to photography, when elaborated in terms of Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject?*

This primary research question will be investigated in relation to these secondary research questions:

- *How does paradox operation in relation to unconscious processes of signification? Does paradox, within the operation of abjection, act as a gateway for the as-yet-unsignified – including the traumatic loss of the maternal?*
- *How does paradox function in relation to photography? What is specific to the nature of photography in terms of paradox?*

- *In the same way that Surrealism entailed a staging of contradiction between the conscious and unconscious for revolutionary purposes, what occurs within a contemporary photographic practice of staging a paradox between index and sign?*
- *What aesthetic is produced by attendance to these questions in photographic practice?*

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The theoretical perspective for this research is post-structuralist-psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection advanced in *Powers of Horror* (1982). Kristeva was born in Bulgaria in 1941 and moved to France during the period of her doctoral candidacy in 1965. During this time, she was taught by Lucien Goldman and Roland Barthes and encountered prominent intellectuals such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault. Kristeva first came to prominence for introducing the ideas of Eastern-European Mikhail Bakhtin to the West, and was a member of the editorial collective of the influential radical journal *Tel Quel*. She has published extensively from the 1960s to the present day and continues as a practising psychoanalyst and Professor Emeritus at the Universite de Paris VII (McAfee, 2004; "Julia Kristeva" n.d.).

Kristeva is considered one of the first post-structuralists, yet her theories are part of an intellectual tradition that begins with the German philosophers Hegel and Nietzsche, who put forward arguments against the notion of a rational, unified, self-conscious, subject (McAfee, 2004). Within contemporary theory, Kristeva is situated alongside the 'French feminists' Luce Irigaray, Michele Le Doeuff and Helene Cixous. These theorists draw on linguistics, existentialism, deconstruction and the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan, to advance a similarly non-unified, non-rational, notion of the self as "fundamentally split between its conscious and unconscious dimensions" (Tong, 1998, p. 196). For Kristeva, this split subjectivity is essential to her notion of the *subject-in-process* (Oliver, 1993b) – identity subject to the continual patterns of crisis and affirmation that is abjection.

In my previous research, via an elaboration of these patterns of crisis and affirmation, I revealed how the mimetic technologies of artificial intelligence and artificial life were instances of abjection. As a succession of models attempting to replicate identity and life, these technologies were revealed as repudiations of the maternal, phobic attempts to place the entirety of the body into language, and as failing to stabilise identity through the creation of an other (Bradley, 2004). While the proposed research specifically addresses signification and representation rather than technology, a summary of the elaboration of the abject from that previous research is useful in order to demonstrate the further extension of these ideas.

Lacan's (2001) theorisation of the *Mirror Stage* provides a basis for an understanding of abjection. For Lacan, an infant begins life with a sense of 'oneness' or 'sameness' with the mother, a period that corresponds to his conception of the *Order of the Real*. Between the ages of 6 and 18 months (p. 4), the child passes through the Mirror Stage. During this stage, the child catches sight of itself in a mirror, or as a reflection in its mother's eyes, and for the first time perceives of itself as a separate and bounded whole, a reflected 'I' (Tong, 1988). Lacan calls this period the *Order of the Imaginary*, and argues that it is called upon throughout the subject's life, in fantasy identifications with images and others. In the following *Oedipal Phase* (Freud, 1954), the male child interprets the mother's visible lack of a penis as castration and, to ward off its fear of a similar fate, finally relinquishes its closeness with the mother in favour of identification with the father. The female child sees herself as already castrated. She identifies with the mother in return for the future gift of a baby (from her father) and later possession of the penis (Freud, 1924, pp. 178 - 179)<sup>12</sup>. Lacan proposes that, after the Mirror and Oedipal phases, the child enters the *Order of the Symbolic* where, for both the male and female child, its chosen identification with the same-sex parent also confers a place for it within culture (Tong, 1988) – including its laws, such as the prohibition against incest, now represented by the *phallus*<sup>13</sup> (Grosz, 1989). During this period the child also acquires language (Tong, 1988) or, rather, the child enters into the cultural sign system of language. Thus, as a result of that reflection of the child to itself as a bounded whole, during the Mirror Stage, the child gains identity and a place in the Symbolic as a speaking being (Grosz, 1989).

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<sup>12</sup> Which, for Freud, sets the scene for her proper adult sexuality.

<sup>13</sup> As distinct from the biological penis, the *phallus* is an amalgam of the Imaginary image of the penis and the Symbolic symbol of unity and signification.

For Kristeva, it is the maternal *semiotic* that precedes the Symbolic, not the Real and Imaginary. The semiotic symbiosis of mother and child consists of fluctuating energy flows, not yet organised into the objects and forms of the Symbolic (Grosz, 1989; Lechte, 1990). The semiotic is both separate from the Symbolic, and part of it – disrupting it continually with what has not yet been placed into its bounded objects. Similarly, identity belongs to the Symbolic, as it is an organisation of subject-hood that was not yet in existence in the mother-child fluidity of the semiotic. However, identity is also continually threatened by the semiotic – an incoherent formlessness from which it came, and to which it could thus return. In other words, identity and its objects are not stable, but are constituted in a process of conflict between these dimensions. That is, Kristeva’s subject-in-process, split between unconscious and conscious dimensions, is formed in the repeated interplay between these dimensions (Oliver, 1993b).

According to Kristeva, this process of conflict between semiotic and Symbolic takes the form of a continually reiterated pattern of separation and identification that is the *abject*. That is, as the subject forms identity – by recognising both its separation from the mother and itself as a bounded whole – so does the subject enter into a sign system (language and culture) whereby self, other, objects, and language, are also separated from that apparent formlessness and perceived as bounded wholes. However, Kristeva posits that the semiotic is not actually wholly formless, as the abject process also exists as a pattern prior to the Mirror Stage. That is, a pattern of separation and identification begins prior to birth, continues at birth and concomitantly, in the following regulation of the child’s body by the caretaker mother<sup>14</sup>. In each case, a confusion of categories exists (an abject non-object) as there is no distinct separation between mother and child: “before the umbilical cord is cut, who can decide whether there is one or two?” (Oliver, 1993b, p. 57). Similarly, the mother’s rituals, in relation to cleanliness and food, regulate the child’s body in a pattern that provides shape to the drives – with, respectively, desire and satisfaction being the drive’s expression of those earlier separations and identifications. The pattern continues as the infant ingests food from the breast that is ‘not-yet-body’ and expels faeces that are ‘no-longer-body’ (p. 57). The oral and

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<sup>14</sup> These regulations occur in what Kristeva calls the *chora* – the maternal space, where the oral and anal drives are regulated by the mother’s body in a pattern of identification and separation that precedes the Mirror Stage and identity (Oliver, 1993b, pp. 44 - 47). For the sake of clarity, I have designated only the larger, overarching, maternal semiotic here instead.

anal drives are considered anaclitic (spin offs), that is, psychological desires translated from the child's physical needs (Moi, 1985).

The body is not a unified whole, argues Kristeva (1974), and would be torn apart by those same drives if it were not constituted as a process, whereby the pieces that make up the whole are unified into sign systems. *Negativity* is "both the cause and the organising principle of the process" (p. 109). As both rejection and abjection (Weir, 1996, p. 100), it is the continuous "movement found in the separation of matter...that produces the theses [of signification]" (Kristeva, 1974, pp 107 - 110).

Oliver (1993b) outlines the same pattern of separation from the maternal in the anal drive's expulsion of faeces and, in the same manner, the child's identification with the mother's breast becomes the template for all further object identifications. For Kristeva, the pattern is a 'reduplication' of the earlier pattern, which then emerges again in language, where the oscillation of the semiotic and Symbolic creates the objects of language that are subsequently put into crisis by the semiotic, only for new objects of signification to emerge. In other words, the abject process of identification and separation is a continually reduplicated pattern that is also a generative element within language and the Symbolic (Oliver, 1993b).

After the Mirror Stage, when the subject has both identity and access to language, the separations of the semiotic are transformed into *desire*, and the subject's identity only ever exists in relation to an *other* (Grosz, 1986). That is, the mirror reflection of a bounded whole, gives rise to an *ego* who is dependent on Imaginary Order images of objects and others, projections of wholeness and self-sufficiency that hold up its own identity. Thus, identity is not stable but an impossible category – as the objects of the Symbolic are always in danger of falling to the maternal semiotic that precedes them (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9).

Identity in the Symbolic is secured by the subject's sacrifice of the maternal for the 'objects' of the Symbolic and language (Reineke, 1997). Abjection is thus revealed in all that is not contained within a sign system – Kristeva argues that identity also comprises a phobic fear of the unnamed: "fear is the mark of the failure of language to provide a symbolisation to contain drive activity" (Lechte, 1990, p. 161). Because the unnamed has failed to be separated into objects, to be defined in language, it is thus the abject 'non-object'. The unnamed signals both an

inadequate separation from the mother and, in the desire to name, a longing for the regulated unity of the Symbolic (Moi, 1985).

The lack of separation between mother and child is thus both the support for the child's subsequently formed identity, and its negation. A repeated pattern, of separation and identification, produces an abject remainder, a non-object, that initiates the next iteration of separation and identification. While my previous research (Bradley, 2004) identified the doubles of A.I. and a-life as cultural manifestations of this continual process of separation into subject and object, in this research a further elaboration of abjection occurs in relation to photography and paradox.

Photography will be investigated in terms of the abject in relation to: the production and reception of images of the other as unstable ideals continually re-articulated for the creation and maintenance of identity; and the 'photographic affect' as a continuous phobic placement of the unnamed Real within the objects of language. Photography will be explored in terms of a generative paradox between the Real and representation, articulated consistently in photographic discourse as a contradiction between index and sign. Unlike a dialectical movement towards synthesis, abjection is a reduplication of an original conflict – a self-referential, contradictory, vicious circle – the paradox between the body and signification that lies at the heart of language (Kristeva, 1982). Paradox will be investigated as a gateway for the disruptive and generative as-yet-unsignified, including the traumatic loss of the maternal.

## CRITICISMS & RELEVANCE

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Kristeva's theory of abjection has been criticised as too academic and therefore elitist in regard to feminism and, as a psychoanalytic theory, as essentialist in regard to its positioning of women. However, as Oliver (1993b) recounts, theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz (1986; 1989) and Kaja Silverman (1988) have also argued that Kristeva's theories challenge essentialism. Oliver identifies a number of contradictory reviews of Kristeva as both transgressive and reactionary, historical and ahistorical, and dense and transparent, and suggests that these contradictions arise from theorisations transposed onto the ambiguities in Kristeva's writing (Oliver, 1993b). Arguably, a number of these ambiguities relate to a dualism of

nature and culture, or sex and gender, that Kristeva's theorisations attempt to deconstruct (McAfee, 2004). The abject is a theorisation of the body in language, a body both mediated by and constitutive of culture. Moreover, post-structuralism itself is a political innovation against structuralism's essentialism "where (they) looked at systems synchronically (in a snapshot of time), post-structuralism looked at systems diachronically, through time, as events or processes" thus revealing the "dynamic, changing aspects of systems" (McAfee, 2004, p. 6). As Kristeva argues, she has inserted both history and the speaking subject into her theorisations (cited in, McAfee, 2004, p. 7).

## MATERIALS & METHODS

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### DESIGN

This research is situated within the paradigm of qualitative research and employs *critical analysis* as its methodology. Moira Peelso (cited in Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2002) argues that judging critically involves analysing the rationale and coherence of an argument, identifying its flaws, and assessing the validity of its supporting data – that is, posing questions beyond the argument itself. Critical analysis is used in the investigation of theoretical constructions, both in literature and creative works, and in the generation of a photographic project. This methodology, alongside the theoretical approach of post-structuralist-psychoanalysis, is considered appropriate to research attempting to illuminate latencies within representation.

The research design follows a model proposed by Barbara Milech and Ann Schilo (2004), in that Milech and Schilo had evaluated various models of exegesis employed in Australian Universities and developed the 'Research-Question Model' in order to address the ambiguous nature of the relationship of the creative and written components of research. This model attempts to bridge a theory/practice divide, where the exegetical or creative elements of research are often hierarchised in importance and centrality, and where it is unclear if creative production exists as valid research without additional written commentary.

The Research-Question model treats both the creative work and written exegesis as neither illustration of, nor commentary on, the other element but as an individual response to the central question of the research (Milech & Schilo, 2004). Significantly for this study, the creative component of the research exists as an independent element, without written explanation or analysis – that is, without exegesis. Within the methodology of critical analysis, this allows for a treatment of the creative practice itself *as analysis* – as theoretically informed photographic practice employed as critical method. Accordingly, I have named the two separate elements of this research as a creative project and a thesis, rather than creative project and exegesis, signalling that both elements exist as complete and separate responses to the central research question.

Additionally, a methodological focus on both *theory* and *intensity* based data (Miles & Huberman, 1994), entails *purposeful* (Patton, cited in Merriam, 1998) identification and examination of theoretical constructs in reference to photography and psychoanalysis, and ‘information rich’ case studies of relevant creative work.

While analysis of data in the thesis and creative project occurs via the methodology of critical analysis, the creative component of this research attends to these theorisations via the approach of praxis. The term praxis exemplifies the relationship between theory and practice – a relationship Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis (1986) define as *mutually constitutive* – “as in a process of interaction which is a continual reconstruction of thought and action”. In this case, theory and practice are understood to interact in iterative cycles of reflection, evaluation and production. This approach is related to the principles of Action Research, whose action and reflection cycles chart a progress from relatively imprecise notions to successively concrete outcomes (Dick, 1993). Surrealism is understood as a movement that is historically relevant to the proposed creative practice in terms of its explicit unity of psychoanalytic theory and creative practice – notably, a praxis that has consistently employed, amongst other creative mediums, critical experimentation with photography. While the creative outcomes of this research are not envisaged as specifically Surrealist, praxis is employed within the methodology of this project as a consciously similar unity of psychoanalytic theory and photographic practice, with that practice consisting of purposeful experimentation in terms of conscious and unconscious processes.

While this approach to the creative project allows for the open-ended and experimental nature of creativity, the final outcome of both the thesis and creative project is envisaged in terms of the methodology of critical analysis. That is, both thesis and creative project function as “complementary articulations (outcomes) of a single research question” (Milech & Schilo, 2004, p. 1) and, in tandem, confirm or deny the stated proposition of the research.

## PROCEDURE

The methodological focus entails identification, via a *contextual review* (Gray & Malins, 2004), of relevant theoretical constructs in both literature and information rich case studies of creative work. This approach includes:

- *A review of literature on photography, in terms of its status as an ‘index of reality’ and its nature as a sign.*
- *The theoretical elaboration of Kristeva’s notion of abjection – particularly the relation of reduplication to paradox.*
- *Information rich case studies of photographic art works elaborating post-structuralist-psychoanalytic theoretical constructs in regard to paradox.*

## CREATIVE PRACTICE METHODS

The investigative approach of praxis involves immersion in the discourses of psychoanalysis and practical experimentation with conscious and unconscious techniques, in order to identify processes and techniques that effect an elaboration of paradox. Experimentation with the medium of photography includes digital manipulations of the photograph consistent with post-structuralist practice. Techniques such as the Surrealist use of automatism, the cutting of photographs, digital reflection, and automated montage, are utilised in order to effect the “eruption of contradiction” (Aragon, cited in Bate, 2004) within the photographic.

The doll, sexual difference, the mirror, the digital, and the photographic medium itself, are investigated as apposite tropes for the staging of paradox between self and other, subject and object, the Real and language. The resulting photographic project collides aesthetic constructions of the body as an objective, external, object of an other's vision with a more sensory, and personal, experience of the body as the site of inner subjectivity. The camera lens functions as a paradoxical metaphor for both of these constructions, while body parts and fluids vie with objects of memory and optical imaging, repeating and transforming existing objects into new aesthetic forms.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

An examination of theoretical constructs – in reference to photography and psychoanalysis – occurs in both the thesis and the creative project, where a post-structuralist-psychoanalytic approach defines the objects of analysis, draws out the psychoanalytic codes, makes generalisations, and allows the drawing of conclusions (adapted from Stokes, 2003). These constructs are reconsidered in terms of the relationship between paradox and photography, particularly as a manifestation of a paradox between the as-yet-unsignified loss of the maternal and language itself. The exploration of paradox is further developed in the creative practice whereby iterative cycles of analysis and practice, employed in the approach of praxis, effect the construction of a post-structuralist-psychoanalytic photographic project that endeavours to illuminate these tensions in meaning, signification and loss.

Warrants of the validity of this research occur within the assumptions of post-structuralist-psychoanalytic research paradigms. That is, partial knowledge can occur through analysis of structures implicit to the construction of language and subjectivity. Maria Piantanida and Noreen Garman (1999) claim this partial knowledge is warranted through a coherence revealed in “logical interconnectedness [and] unity in a written text that stems from the links among its underlying ideas and the development of thematic content” (p. 241). This warrant can be applied to the coherence of analysis revealed in the thesis, and in the photographic outcome, of this research, which are both linked together as complementary responses to the research questions.

## LIMITATIONS

This research may be limited by a concern that the photographic practice might not be an adequate means for verification of the research proposition. A conscious staging of paradox, however, is consistent with post-structuralist-psychoanalytic strategies of critique and disturbance of the apparent unities of representation, and of the meanings generated by these apparent unities. An elaboration of paradox in relation to photography, in terms of Kristeva's notion of abjection, critiques and disturbs by making explicit what is implicit to signification. This practice may not be successful, however, in affirming the thesis that paradox: has a specific relation to photography in terms of its nature as an index of reality, or as a sign; or that it acts a gateway for the as-yet-unsignified to realise signification, with often powerful affect. With respect to the methodology of critical analysis there is no empirical test of this hypothesis but, rather, as stated above, the warrants of the research lie in the coherence of its argument. That is, this research attempts to provide a coherent, consistent, and comprehensive analysis via the thesis and in the creative project – an analysis that occurs via an elaboration of paradox and its relation to the abjection. Validation or denial of the research hypothesis occurs via verification of the coherence of that visual analysis and theoretical deliberation.

## SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of this research lies in its theorisation of paradox in terms of Kristeva's notion of abjection. As discussed in the literature review, this theorisation provides a synthesis of, and explanatory framework for, contradictions in contemporary debates in relation to art and photography. Paradox is understood within this research via the conditions of *contradiction*, *self-reference* and *vicious circularity* – as embodied by the image of the uroborus (Hughes & Brecht, 1978), and is theorised as a point of incomplete cathexis within the operation of abjection, illuminating the contradiction between the status of the photograph as an index of reality and its nature as a sign. This conflict operates as a generative point of meaning making, with a range of potentialities held in creative tension. This theorisation of the relation of paradox to photography is extended to the particularities of photographic practice in terms of the purposeful staging of

contradiction between the conscious and unconscious for creative, generative, purposes.

The photographic-practice of this research enacts the abject pattern of stases and rejection on the materiality of the camera, the body, and the copy, as signifiers of representation and the Real. These objects are duplicated and separated in a self-referential vicious cycle of destruction and creation, resulting in a final conferral of new knowledge of the photographic in relation to paradox and abjection.

This research will therefore add to understandings of the nature of photography and photographic practice, providing insight into the contemporary photographic aesthetic. Ultimately the creative result of this research is a unique photographic aesthetic addressing both the role of paradox, and its relationship to the as-yet-unsigned (including the loss of the maternal) with regards to the photographic.

## CHAPTER 1: THE VISUAL & THE UNCONSCIOUS

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While paradox is commonly conceived as an artefact of language, visual paradoxes attest to its contiguous existence as an artefact of the visual realm. I will argue, however, that even when visual, paradox can be construed as inevitably linked to language and the Symbolic. Paradox can be understood thus, as it represents a crisis in the perpetual, conceptual mapping of the Real. Contrary to Rosalind Krauss, who describes the abject as reduced to merely a project about naming (cited in Foster et al., 1994, pp. 4 - 8), abjection refers to this crisis, describing our desires and anxieties towards placement of the unsettling Real within our known conceptual grids of knowledge and understanding. Placement in language can be understood as synonymous with placement in a world of stable, known, objects. However, if paradox, as a point of crisis, acts as a gateway to what has not yet been placed in language, what then is the relationship of the visual to language? The photograph, as a visual artefact, is mute, so what then is its relationship to paradox?

### THE DREAM

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Sigmund Freud's (1954) *The Interpretation of Dreams* provides an explanation of the visual in relation to the workings of language and the unconscious. By extension, in this argument, it provides a useful preliminary model for the relation of paradox to the photograph. Freud outlines the dream's ability to express thoughts (normally expressed via language, as *concepts*, during waking life) in

concrete, *visual*<sup>15</sup> form during sleep. However, his analysis also reveals a much larger schematic – in which this visual utility becomes the means via which the workings of the unconscious itself are understood. In fact, Freud famously refers to this interpretation of dreams as “the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind” (p. 608). Freud’s analysis locates the seemingly unrelated, everyday, visual associations within dreams, along with their often-insistent significance, within a comprehensive model<sup>16</sup> of the workings of the psyche. In this model, the dream’s visual content unlocks the workings of the unconscious mind in relation to thought and language (1954).

Freud theorises that a dream’s *manifest content* is made up of associations from recent experience (i.e. sensory experiences occurring during sleep, and memories from within a day or two before the dream), while its *latent content* refers to more ancient, or infantile, memory. Both types of association have gone unnoticed by the conscious mind, yet these essentially irrelevant residues of consciousness may become the vessels by which the unconscious mind manages to speak (pp. 134 - 162).

In Freud’s conception, the unconscious consists of thoughts, censored from consciousness that, due to the intermediary stage of the *preconscious* (p. 541), manage to reach consciousness during sleep. The preconscious system serves both to restrict the acting out of movement during sleep, and to sufficiently relax that censorship, so that repressed thoughts are able to reach the conscious mind. According to Freud, what manages to enter consciousness is a repressed infantile *wish* (p. 160). This wish is able to evade censorship due to its disguise within that seemingly irrelevant assemblage, of recent and past associations, within a dream (p. 267). Once disguised within these “chain(s) of associations” (p. 339) within the preconscious, the dream content is then further revised by the conscious mind. Narrative coherence and logical connections are provided by consciousness, so that the dream’s content is more in keeping with the workings of everyday adult thought (p. 312). Freud argues that, in these different elements of a dream’s form,

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<sup>15</sup> While Freud acknowledges that auditory and other sensory experiences can be present within a dream, his focus, and thus my own, is directed towards the visual – as the concrete element able to express not only sensory memory, but also thoughts. However, within the dream, we do not *think* these thoughts expressed visually, but *experience* them as if by the senses (1954, p. 50).

<sup>16</sup> This model is referred to as the first *topographical* model, distinguishing it from Freud’s later *structural* model of the unconscious, which describes the *superego*, *ego* and *id*.

we are able to witness an infantile means of expression that has been superseded, and is now veiled, within adult thought (p. 548). That is, within a dream, an infantile assemblage of sensation and experience is revised by consciousness to make it coherent and amenable to adult thought and, accordingly, the dream's surface meaning serves to belie its deeper significance.

In Freud's schemata, this repressed wish has its basis in the child's first pleasurable experiences of satisfaction (i.e. of receiving nourishment from the mother) and the unpleasurable experiences that occur when these needs are denied. This dual experience, of pleasure and unpleasure, serves as the means by which cathexis occurs – i.e. the child's unbound drive energy becomes attached to a *perception of the object* that is seen to satisfy it (pp. 564 - 582). That is, a biological need, along with a memory of the object that has satisfied it, both constitute the formation of an energy-charged *wish*. However, the wish, while wanting satisfaction, also incurs the unpleasurable memory of a lack of satisfaction (p. 582). Therefore, the wish lies repressed and dormant in the unconscious, barred from consciousness, until the preconscious allows it expression during sleep (p. 579).

The preconscious then, acts to provide a link to the unconscious, which cannot access consciousness itself. The preconscious disguises the unconscious wish, enabling it to evade censorship and enter consciousness in a distorted form. In sleep, the wish makes use of the paths that are created by everyday trains of thought within the preconscious. These everyday thoughts, like the wish, contain cathetic energy. During waking thought, that energy is generally diffused as thoughts travel along associative chains in the preconscious, with the result that the thoughts, and their cathetic energy, are settled. However, in the case of dreams, unconscious wishes, requiring a means of discharge of their intense energy and therefore a means of expression, are able to attach to these preconscious thoughts (pp. 594 - 595). Freud descriptively likens this process, whereby the wish attaches to passing trains of thought, to the underworld ghosts of the *Odyssey* who “awoke to new life as soon as they tasted blood” (p. 553). Everyday, associative, residue forms a chain of associations that acts to link the preconscious and unconscious, and the intense energy of the wish is then able to transfer to these chains of thought (pp. 601 - 606). The wish, hidden and distorted, thus has its energy bound up by the preconscious – bound via attachment to ideas and associations. Elizabeth Grosz (1990) argues:

the drive is thus bound up with representation or signification as soon as it is capable of *physical* registration. Indeed this is its condition of physical existence. The drive can be lived or experienced only in so far as it acquires a significance. (p. 83)

In summary, during sleep, associations from the recent past enter the preconscious, link to associations from the further past and, through them to infantile experience and, receiving the cathexis of the unconscious wish, achieve charged visual representation within the dream. In this way, the dream provides the means whereby deeper associations are linked to more superficial ones, and repressed thoughts are attached to more recent memories. The preconscious allows for the dream to provide partial satisfaction for an infantile wish normally barred from expression. The wish “acquires...representability” (Freud, 1954, p. 574) and, disguised in this way, is able to avoid censorship and enter consciousness. Moreover, Freud extrapolates from this model of the workings of a dream to a model of thought itself:

All thinking is no more than a circuitous path from the memory of a satisfaction (a memory which has been adopted as a purposive idea) to an identical cathexis of the same memory which it is hoped to attain once more through an intermediate stage of motor experiences. (p. 602)

The workings of the dream enable only partial satisfaction of the wish, as its full satisfaction is denied by the inability to physically make the movements necessary to fulfil the wish during sleep. However, Freud considers partial satisfaction as satisfaction enough for a wish normally barred altogether from expression (pp. 578 - 579). Representation frees the wish from censorship and suffices in some measure to satisfy, where physical action cannot<sup>17</sup>.

According to Freud, the dream’s content is constructed in four ways: *condensation*, *displacement*, *consideration for representability*, and *secondary revision* (pp. 445, 488). Condensation refers to the concentration of multiple dream thoughts within a singular dream feature – e.g. a tree could conceivably simultaneously carry associations of money, an old uncle and Christmas, within the one dream. The tree acts as a nodal point for numerous seemingly unrelated dream thoughts. In displacement a similar over-determination occurs, whereby a singular dream thought occurs within multiple dream contents – the dream thought occurs again

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<sup>17</sup> According to Freud, dreams are not the only way that wishes enter consciousness. What has been repressed is both inhibited and expressed by its distortion in the form of symptoms, fantasies, slips of the tongue and other more general parapraxes (Freud, 1975).

and again in different parts of the dream. For example, a thought association, such as ‘an old uncle’, could be present in a dream conversation, the colours of a room, or an object on a table. Freud contends that a dream is unable to represent logical relations, however, this use of visual, or other concrete elements, to replace the abstract thoughts of language allows for this rich interplay of association. Indeed, the visual expression of these multiple abstractions constitutes the dream’s ‘consideration of representability’. According to Freud, within a dream, concrete elements function much like a ‘rebus’ puzzle (pp. 277 - 278), where multiple ideas are assembled together within concrete form. However, the dream’s apparent logical connectedness and narrative flow are not the result of this assemblage of concrete forms, but of *secondary revision* – the intervention of the conscious mind, to re-establish coherence and sense within that assemblage. Freud calls this reworking activity of the conscious mind “building a facade for the dream” (p. 491) – as apparent non-sense and lack of connection is reformed into meaningfulness. However, this apparent meaningfulness is deceptive, as the dream’s true meanings remain hidden from consciousness, within the associations attached to the dream’s concrete elements.

According to Freud, it is only via *interpretation* that the true significance of the dream can be found. Psychoanalytic interpretation allows the emergence of associations that the conscious mind would dismiss as irrelevant or illogical, thus allowing the chain of associations, the logic of the dream, to be revealed. In this manner, the allowance of association before logical coherence brings about an unravelling of the dream where meanings previously hidden from consciousness are revealed. Additionally, Freud allows for (yet does not elaborate) a point of mystery within a dream – the dream’s *navel* (pp. 111, 525), whose significance remains forever barred from the conscious mind (1954).

The dream then has two levels, the *primary* and *secondary levels*, containing latent content (such as the wish and navel) and manifest content (the dream’s apparent meaning) (p. 135). Freud’s analysis has thus outlined how visual representation acts to link these two levels. Visual content serves to provide a bridge between the unconscious and preconscious – allowing the infantile wish to attach to everyday memory residue and thus to achieve representation. Visual representations, containing condensed and displaced thoughts, then serve to provide the link between the preconscious and conscious – that is then unlocked via interpretation.

It is interpretation that then returns the censored conceptual thoughts from visual representation, to the linguistic form amenable to conscious understanding.

## THE MIRROR

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Jacques Lacan (1973), however, builds on Freud's analysis to provide a deeper, more complex, model of the relation of the unconscious to the visual. Returning to Freud's (1954) *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Lacan points to the dream as evidence, not of a wish seeking fulfilment, but of the trauma of the loss of that fulfilment that is ever co-present with the dream's desire.

Lacan elaborates this theorisation via Freud's conception of the *Primary and Secondary Processes*, which relate to the unconscious and pre-conscious-conscious systems respectively<sup>18</sup> (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 339). For Lacan, we are able to gain a direct experience of the hidden, inaccessible, Primary Processes in the act of waking from a dream. As we awaken from dreaming, we witness a subsequent, immediate, attempt to recapture the representation of who, where, and what we are, that is commensurate with consciousness. Our perception, or direct experience of the dream, is lost in that very recapturing of the self-that-perceives. For Lacan, we can witness the Primary Processes in that experience of rupture between our perception and adult, waking, consciousness (Lacan, 1973, p. 60). In other words, the unconscious is not synonymous with the dream<sup>19</sup>, but exists in the gap, the rupture, the unknown – that which we lose as we recapture our identity. An experience of the unconscious relates to an encounter with the Real, which Lacan accordingly nominates “the missed encounter” (p. 55). The missed unconscious, however, makes itself known through slips, accidents, and in the dream “the small element of reality, which is evidence that we are not dreaming” (p. 60). Lacan gives the example of hearing a knock on the door that both wakens him from, and initiates, the dream. Lacan's conception insists on an

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<sup>18</sup> These systems refer to the processes whereby unbound energy is attached to concrete images (via condensation and displacement) and later, in this bound form, revised into the logical coherence of adult thought.

<sup>19</sup> In Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1954), the unconscious manages to ‘speak’ (achieve representation of, and discharge the energy of, the wish) the latent meaning of the dream. The manner of expression of the dream is determined within the pre-conscious and then by its apparent meaning within consciousness. In other words, the entire system – unconscious, preconscious and consciousness – constructs the dream.

unconscious that is not a hidden version of consciousness, subject to logic and rationality but, rather, another place altogether, governed by its own logic, that we cannot recapture within consciousness (Grosz, 1990, p. 12).

While loyal to Freud's theories, Lacan presented a challenge to the psychoanalytic orthodoxy of the time by his insistence on this gap, or rupture, between conscious and unconscious that, he posits, is then reiterated in the subject. Rather than concurring with the prevailing focus on the ego (whereby orthodox psychoanalysis concerned itself with strengthening the ego against the demands of the id and superego), Lacan insists on the unconscious as the primary focus of psychoanalysis. This focus is the basis of a theory that re-inscribes the Freudian ego, in relation to the unconscious, as fundamentally lacking – with the consequent aim of psychoanalysis being to resign the individual to the abysmal fate of forever being lacking (Grosz, 1990).

For Freud, the infant's repression of desire for the mother is synonymous with the founding of the unconscious. Lacan's re-motivation of that repression, in his conception of the Mirror Stage, theorises a repression of the dyadic relation with the mother that, in its completion in the Oedipal phase, results in both identity and access to language (Moi, 1985). This ensures that an experience of the Real is a traumatic encounter with loss (Lacan, 1973). That is, an encounter with the Real, the "plenitude of fullness" (Grosz, 1990, p. 34) before the divisions of language, is synonymously an encounter with loss of identity – a missed encounter, one that cannot be grasped, like the dream in waking.

For Lacan, the subject is governed by lack – this traumatic Real that returns and 'unveils' (Lacan, 1973, p. 55) itself endlessly. The subject then attempts to stabilise its ruptured identity through the use of images. Lacan's *Mirror Stage* refers to that period of time when the infant's unity or oneness with the world (what Lacan refers to as a 'lack of a lack'<sup>20</sup>), a world not already split into the objects of language, is ruptured. This rupture is generated in those first experiences of lack produced by the infant's unfulfilled needs<sup>21</sup> and its recognition of the mother as a separate object able to fill or deny those needs. The infant catches sight of itself in the mirror, and

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<sup>20</sup> (Cited in Grosz, 1990, p. 34)

<sup>21</sup> The child's biology ensures it is not self-sufficient and it relies on the mother/care-giver to provide its food, warmth, shelter, etc.

by recognition of its own image, gains a stable and coherent image of self at odds with its own inadequacy. This recognition of self, via an image of wholeness, propels the infant into the Imaginary Order – the realm of doubles, others, and mirror images, that promise mastery over lack. While the Imaginary Order is consistently re-experienced as an adult, the Mirror Stage is completed in childhood via the Oedipal Phase. In this phase, the oneness with the mother is repressed, founding the unconscious, with the child next gaining access to language and the Symbolic. The separations begun in the Mirror Stage provide a blueprint for the separations and categories of language (Grosz, 1990). Additionally, access to language provides access to social power and a place within culture. In this way, the completion of the Mirror Stage serves to offer mastery over lack (via the lure of a stable identity) the promise of power through a speaking position within language, and a place in the social realm (Grosz, 1990).

In attempting to fill its natural, biological, incompleteness, through images and the stable objects of language, the self becomes eternally linked to others. The child, lacking in itself, forms an identity whose boundaries are reliant on images of others. In this sense, the self does not find the completeness it seeks in self-autonomy, but rather in inter-subjectivity (Grosz, 1990). That is, identity, at its core, is split between self and other, with self-mastery and control regulated by social existence. Correspondingly, the Lacanian subject relates to Freud's conception of the *narcissistic ego*, which takes itself as its own libidinal object. Freud's *hydraulic model* of the psyche refers to a movement of libido, whereby the subject stores energy in its own internal processes while simultaneously investing energy in external, social, objects such as its own body image, other people, images, and objects (Grosz, 1990). The storing and investing of libido (*ego-libido* and *object-libido* respectively) relate to a filling and depleting of cathexes within Freud's model. Grosz argues that in Lacan's conception of the Mirror Stage and the Symbolic, the ego's desire for objects external to the self is evidence not only of a desire to satisfy needs, but of desire that is thoroughly implicated in representation and meaning – it is the drive energy manifest in the cultural realm. In Lacan's conception of the fundamentally lacking subject – divided always between self and other, or self and object, or self and self – we encounter the role of the cultural, and of the image, in the creation of identity (Grosz, 1990).

Grosz contends that while the senses other than vision involve an incorporation of the other (for example, to taste something we ingest part of it) the mastery gained by vision is incurred by its very separateness. The subject's vision organises its pre-Oedipal, messy, body into a sense of wholeness via the image, yet also separates the subject from itself. That unity of self occurs via an image external to the self. In this sense, vision provides hierarchy, perspective, control, mastery, and a self that is separate in order to be a self. In this sense, the self is outside the ego's influence and incurs the ego's subsequent wrath (Grosz, 1990). While a source of pleasure (in mastery and domination), the image incurs the ego's aggression for the fulfilment it fails to provide. The inter-subjective, culturally-implicated image, part of the social and cultural domain, is perpetually invested with both erotic and aggressive libidinal drives. (Grosz, 1990)

There is thus an inherent paradox suggested within Grosz's explication of Lacan. The child's sense of self as a separate and unified subject is based on denial of the origins of that image in the other – that “otherness (is) its condition of possibility” (Grosz, 1990, p. 43). That the self remains unconscious of this hinge between self and other, to live as an independent and autonomous subject, points to the “radically split” (p. 43) nature of its being. In Freud's latent and manifest levels of the dream we encounter the visual as a means of both hiding and expressing the repressed desire for the mother. Similarly, in Lacan's conception, images are used as an attempt to master that loss. It is, however, an attempt that fundamentally fails. The image of the other, the object, and the subject's body in the mirror, are founded on this core separation – a separation that immediately corrodes what these images construct.

Grosz argues that Lacan's conception of the subject as reliant on otherness, internalising images to construct a perception of a unified self, necessarily destabilises the coherent ego – as a self-knowing identity able to accurately comprehend the world:

The certainty the subject brings with it in its claims to knowledge is not, as Descartes argued, a guaranteed or secure foundation for knowledge. It is a function of the *investment* the ego has in maintaining certain images which please it. (1990, p. 48)

Grosz asserts that in Lacan's framework the ego is unable to apprehend reality but remains stuck in the realm of images – the Imaginary relations between self and other, where reality is pre-constructed through these images (Grosz, 1990).

Lacan's notion of the Symbolic designates the cultural and social domains as additionally essential to the construction of the subject. Identity does not exist only as the result of the Imaginary realm, but as a result of the subsequent entry into language and social relations. The Imaginary and the Symbolic both come to represent reality, as the subject forms identity at the expense of the Real – and therefore loses access to the fullness of the Real (Grosz, 1990).

The Lacanian orders of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, are explicated at the level of the drives in Lacan's concepts of *Need*, *Demand* and *Desire* (Grosz, 1990, p. 59). While for Freud the drives are essentially biological in origin, for Lacan the drives exist as a function of the subject's relation to the Symbolic. As elucidated earlier in relation to Freud's notion of the wish, while instincts are given effects of biological and survival needs, the Freudian drives occur as the unbound energy of the unconscious manifests in bound form – via attachment to the objects seen to satisfy those biological needs. Thus, via attachment to external objects, the drives can be seen to enter the cultural realm<sup>22</sup> (Grosz, 1990). The drives subsequently become concentrated on what Freud nominates the *erotogenic* zones (p. 57) – sexualised places on the body relating to the intersection of the internalised self and the external, and thus cultural, realm – the eyes, mouth, anus, penis and clitoris<sup>23</sup> (Grosz, 1990).

Lacan's concept of Need relates to the infant's biological necessities, such as those of food, warmth, and shelter. The infant's needs for such things are continued and repetitive, and as the infant has a given biological lack of those necessities, an external object is required to attain satisfaction. In this way, the infant's needs become attached to external objects, with each object thus designated the object of desire (Grosz, 1990). Lacan draws on Freud's description of a child playing *Fort! Da!*, where a child's game of drawing a cotton reel towards and away from itself, saying a proto-verbal approximation of *Gone! Here!* as an attempt to master the presence and absence of the mother. This attempt at mastery is required, as the presence or absence of the mother fills, or fails to satisfy, the child's incessant

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<sup>22</sup> Grosz argues, however, that in some passages Freud contradicts his assumption of biological determinism, ascribing a similar social and cultural convergence with the instinctual pathways as outlined by Lacan (Grosz, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> Freud later ascribed the body's internal organs and thought itself (significantly, including the drive to knowledge) as erotogenic (Grosz, 1990).

needs. Lacan supplements Freud's analysis, arguing that the child's need for the mother is converted into a linguistic demand. The Demand designates the desired object (mother), but also takes the other as its object (cotton reel) – as the other is able to satisfy the demand – “I want...Give me” (Grosz, 1990, p. 61). Lacan contends that, in the same way as libidinal cathexes are attached to objects, in this case they are attached to language. Moreover, he asserts that the infant's needs are constant and repetitive, given that they are only able to be filled by the often-absent other, and are thus fundamentally insatiable (Grosz, 1990).

Lacan proposes that while the element of the need that is articulated is able to be satisfied, in that constancy of need and awareness of absence, there is necessarily a part of the need remaining. This residue of what can be expressed in language is, according to Lacan, repressed within the primal repression that founds the unconscious. Lacan nominates the result of this repressed remainder as the subject's Desire (Grosz, 1990). Again, the notion of a gap is invoked, in that Desire represents the subtraction of Demand (what is able to be placed in language) from the infant's Needs. Once in the unconscious, this residue of need is attached to a representation which, as we have seen in the case of the dream, then serves to express the unconscious desire. Desire is synonymous with the repressed wish of the Freudian unconscious and, as in Freudian dream analysis, its significance lies not in the discovery of desire, but in the multi-variant expression of unconscious desire within consciousness. Gross (1990) describes the scope of this expression as an “infinite semiosis” of desire (p. 66). While Demand works to position the child within Imaginary relations with objects, the remainder of Desire serves to undermine the stability of that very position. Identity then, according to Lacan, is situated within a gap – the gap between conscious and unconscious, language and desire (Grosz, 1990).

The subject's desire is thus absent from language, remaining unexpressed in the ‘timelessness’ (Freud, 1954) of the unconscious, yet it is able to be articulated via demand. The articulated Demand speaks also for Desire, yet what is desired is never filled by the demanded object. The subject seeks certainty and stability via the self-object and self-other relations, yet needs unmet or unsatisfied in that articulation are the remainder that ensures that the demanded object never fills or satisfies. Desire wants finally “to be filled by the other” (Grosz, 1990, p. 62). The

object once gained is discarded in the endless search for another (Grosz, pp. 59 - 62).

Demand is thus an expression of libido-cathexis bound to language – the drives within signification. While biological needs are repetitive, the drive has *vicissitudes* (Freud, cited in Grosz, 1990, p. 74), that is, the drive inevitably deflects its aims, as the found object does not satisfy. The drive finds partial satisfaction in the object, however, as it does in the process of sublimation, or the expression of symptoms, each a distortion, inhibition, and expression of that infinite unconscious remainder (Grosz, 1990).

Lacan nominates the object of satisfaction, the *objet a*. This does not refer to the object gained by Demand, which is the aim of the drive, but refers instead to the object that is the cause of the drive (Grosz, 1990). The *objet a* is thus behind this constant displacement of objects. Lacan returns here to the erotogenic zones, looking to the orifices as boundaries between internal and external, and self and other. For Lacan, the drive's source (the *quelle*) is located at the cut, or the rim, of the body which functions also as the drive's place of return (Grosz, 1990, p. 77). The drive, seeking the object as its aim, returns to the rim as its goal – i.e. the drive pulls the object, that cannot satisfy, towards the subject in order to fill its hole.

The aim then is always a return, a reintegration into the circuit of a perfectly self-enclosed auto-eroticism which has succeeded in replacing the lost object with its own processes and parts. The drive describes the residue or remainder left over of the primal object that ensures no substitute (even the Real itself) will ever plug the rim, fill it to completion. (p. 77)

Lacan (cited in Grosz, 1990) relates this circuit and its remainder to Freud's metaphor of a mouth kissing itself, closing and opening "upon its own satisfaction" (p. 77).

Lacan (1977) contends that we trade the loss of the mother and access to the Real for a place in language and culture as a speaking being. While the child abandons the Imaginary phase in order to enter the Symbolic, the Imaginary is nevertheless re-experienced throughout its lifetime within the identity-structuring object-relations of love and (what Lacan proposes as) a perpetual fascination with images. For Lacan, this return of the Imaginary signals that we are "caught up in the lure of spatial identification" (p. 4) as we attempt, and fail, to gain the mastery promised by identity.

Lacan's model, of complete movement from one phase to another (albeit with the subject effectively haunted by what has been left behind), is extended within Kristeva's (1982) theorisation of the abject, which proposes a more troubled and productive differentiation between phases. For Kristeva, the child's movement, from its loss of the Maternal relation to its subsequent entry into the Symbolic, does not transpire as a succinct, definitive, or even a haunted, separation. Loss of the Maternal is not simply characterised by one movement, as the child moves from one phase to another, from symbiosis to separation or "from insufficiency to anticipation" (Lacan, 1977, p. 4) but, rather, this phase-movement is only one of many manifestations of an irresolvable, troubling, productive, conflict at the core of existence. That is, in Kristeva's conception, the separations regarded as belonging to the Symbolic are, in fact, also present well before entry into the Symbolic<sup>24</sup> and, correspondingly, the child's lack of differentiation with the Maternal manifests also as the abject crises within culture and the semiotic crises within language. In Kristeva's terms, the semiotic is always present in the Symbolic, and the Symbolic is always present in the semiotic. That which Lacan has theorised in terms of Need, Demand and Desire (Lacan, 1973), for Kristeva are the boundings and mastery of body, language, and self<sup>25</sup>, along with an attendant annihilation of those same boundings. Begun in the mother-child relation, these boundings and unboundings both serve to propel us from the Real into culture. Therefore, in terms of Lacan's theorisation, in Kristeva's conception, it is not desire alone that propels, but the attendant reiteration of its underside – lack.

Desire and lack relate to Kristeva's (1982) notion of the abject – as the unbound, remainder of the Real – existing as an irresolvable, and fundamental, crisis. A crisis which recurs, not merely in a multi-variant 'infinite-semiosis' of expression within language, or a dialectical pattern of conflict and resolution but, as Oliver (1993b) argues, as a continuously repeated pattern of the conflict itself, manifesting in

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<sup>24</sup> As stated in the introduction to this thesis, Kristeva points to the pregnant woman as evidence of the separations of the Symbolic occurring even from the earliest moments of existence. She poses the question 'is a pregnant woman one person or two?'. The separations continue via the actual act of birth, the presence and absence of the mother, and the subsequent regulation of the child's body in relation to food and cleanliness (Oliver, 1993b, p. 57).

<sup>25</sup> While Need, Demand, and Desire, relate generally to body, language, and self, a direct correlation is not implied here, but points instead to a link between Lacan's mapping of the drives as a kind of progression (from need to language to desire) and Kristeva's more over-arching concept of the boundings of the semiotic (that traverse the body, language, self, and even culture) as an endlessly repeated reiteration of fundamental conflict.

many various forms (p. 72). That is, the abject does not simply refer to a pattern of separation and identification, but to a pattern of the recurrence of the irresolvable conflict between these two elements. Kristeva nominates this pattern a *reduplication* (Oliver, 1993b, p. 72) of this conflict, as it is both absence and presence, or lack and desire, which tear down and manifest new forms of language and cultural expression in a continuous repetition. In other words, there is no presence without absence, lack without desire, no generation of the new without a crisis of the old, no Symbolic without semiotic, no one without the other. While these elements appear separated within the terms of language, what occurs and recurs is the unresolved crisis between them – the paradox between language and the Real, between the body and culture, which exists as the fundamental core of being.

## THE EYE

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Lacan's (1973) *scopic drive* enacts a similarly unresolved conflict, where the subject's gaze is determined as beyond the physicality of vision itself and, rather, to do with the self-other relations of the subject (pp. 83 - 88). Significantly, the "lure of spatial identification" (Lacan, 1977, p. 4) – whereby the subject seeks the image or love object that will fill him/her – includes an internalised fantasy of the returning gaze of the *Other* (1973, pp. 84 - 106). Lacan uses the concept *Other* here in distinction to the uncapitalised *other*. Whereas the *other* refers to a specific, desired, interpsychic, object, *Other* refers to the larger domain of *otherness* as an interpsychic domain of subjecthood, relating to the superego, Symbolic, and unconscious. In Freud's theorisation, the repression of the desire for the mother is the very prohibition and injunction that operates to found the unconscious, form the superego, and tie the child to the constraints of culture – all during the completion of the Oedipal phase. The repression of desire for the prohibited mother is thus the *primal repression* that opens the unconscious, paving the way for all subsequent repressions. Similarly, the cultural injunction against that desire (in the form of the *incest taboo*<sup>26</sup>) is the internalised prohibition that forms the Superego – the aspect of consciousness that prohibits desire in favour of the social and cultural

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<sup>26</sup> In Freudian theory, this taboo is represented by the possibility of the father's intervention – to castrate the child for desiring the mother. This thus involves both threat (of castration) and guilt (for desiring the mother). (Freud, 1954, 1962).

expectations that constitute the subject within the Symbolic. For Lacan, these three essential aspects of identity, Superego, Symbolic and Unconscious, serve as the realm of the Other. The Other is conceptualised as an internalised phenomena, whereby the subject's gaze intersects *intrapsychically* with these three realms.

This intersection is elaborated by Lacan (1973) within the terms of the *gaze*, whereby that which the subject sees differs from vision (pp. 67 - 119). For Lacan, vision is merely a mapping of space according to the principles of perspective<sup>27</sup>. The concept of the gaze, however, conceives of more than this perspectival mapping, in the sense that the subject's looking is driven by the *scopic drive* – the search for wholeness in the “field of vision” (p. 92). Significantly, within the terms of this psychically driven search, as the subject sees, s/he also incurs the possibility of being seen by others. Whereas the actual gaze of an other would be temporally based and situational, and therefore limited, the *possibility* of a return gaze can operate as an unidentified, and therefore unlocated, constant. Similarly, whereas the actual gaze of an other would be an external event affecting the subject psychically, the constant possibility of a return gaze operates intrapsychically, without recourse to events in the external world. That is, subjectivity incurs the ceaseless experience of the possibility of being seen from outside the body. This intrapsychic experience thus transpires as a concept of otherness removed from a particular object as, for the subject, “the spectacle of the world appears to us as all-seeing” (p. 75). Additionally, as a returned gaze looks from outside the body, the subject is perceived externally – as a singular, whole, identity. The Other is, therefore, a concept of otherness that defines the self as an object discontinuous from the world (Grosz, 1990). Furthermore, in the same way that, via looking, we assume a privileged point of perspective over the field of vision, the intersection of the Superego, Symbolic, and Unconscious within the Other, entails the same privileged, masterful, gaze returned upon, and positioning, ourselves. That is, we experience the social and cultural taboos, internalised injunctions, and subsequent unconscious repressions (an intersection of Superego, Symbolic and Unconscious) within that possibility of the returned gaze, *as we gaze*. Lacan thus proposes that as we desire the other in the field of vision we are, concomitantly, part of the desire of the Other (pp. 86-104).

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<sup>27</sup> Yet, Lacan argues, the blind are perfectly able to have that same map without seeing (1973, p. 76)

Lacan locates the scopic drive as existing between “the eye and the gaze” (p. 73). The drive searches for the *objet a* – the symbol that has been separated from the self, in order to constitute the self, that then also bears the meaning of lack. In that, when we look, we also become the object seen, we incur a reminder of that lack. Lacan asserts that “in the scopic field, that gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture” (p. 106) and continues “I am photo-graphed” (p. 106) – remarking that he has pointedly fragmented the word ‘photograph’. In other words, the Other’s gaze positions us where we are mapped not in perspectival space but, rather, in the mask of wholeness and identity that we are given through the possibility of another’s gaze (p. 107). A wholeness and identity that, it would seem to follow, is nevertheless in conflict with the taboos, injunctions, and repressions we experience as a consequence. Lacan graphically illustrates this gap, between the visual mask of identity, and the perceptual self, via the experience of what we look for and find lacking in the eye of a beloved. He says that what we look at is not what we wish for: “you never look at me from the place from which I see you” (p. 103). It is in that difference that the subject is constituted:

Generally speaking, the relation between the gaze and what one wishes to see involves a lure. The subject is presented as other than he is, and what one shows him is not what he wishes to see. It is in this way that the eye may function as *objet a*, that is to say, at the level of the lack. (p. 104)

Lacan proposes that the gaze is made up of two terms that co-exist – I look at, I am looked at (pp. 72 - 75). If formulated diagrammatically, each term seems to entail a contradictory explication of the subject’s wholeness and lack:

I look:  body)	I search for wholeness (I do not feel whole	via looking from inside my
(I am looked at) I feel: body	I do not feel whole  (I look whole to you	from inside my  via looking)

This is a contradictory explication that, because irresolvable within these terms, is also continually repeated. In this schema, looking emerges as an essential activity in the reiteration of a continuous contradiction, between wholeness and lack that, in

Kristeva's terms, serves to both structure and threaten identity. Accordingly, through the notion of the abject, it is possible to argue that in looking, the gaze determines the eye as an orifice. The orifice-eye is thus located as the cause of the drive (the *quelle*), and its return, as it pulls the other towards its rim for completion. Given this, the eye, rather than being synonymous with *objet a* (as declared by Lacan) can be seen as functioning to produce *objet a* – in the gap of self that the subject's vision incurs. The eye, and what is looked at (the object, the other, the image) transmute, via the abject, as points of paradox in which the self annihilates and generates itself<sup>28</sup>.

## THE WORD

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Lacan (1977, p.149) uses Saussurian linguistics as the base from which to explicate this paradoxical movement, from lack to demand and desire, as it also appears within language. Ferdinand de Saussure delineates a *sign*, as made up of two components, the material *signifier* (i.e. a sound or visual element) and the conceptual meaning, or *signified*. For Saussure, the relation between these two elements of a sign is not fixed, that is, a material signifier does not have a fixed relation to meaning. A sign's meaning occurs via its difference from other signs. Lacan adds to this theorisation via his designation of the signified, in the endless chain of difference within language, as yet another signifier (Grosz, 1990). That is, a signified becomes the next signifier, leading to another signified, and so on. For Lacan, all signification is contextually based and relative to the entire field of signification. Lacan represents this by:

S/s  
(Lacan, 1977, p. 149)

where a bar separates the signifier from the signified, and by:

S---> S---> S---> S---> S--->  
s---> s---> s---> s---> s--->  
(Grosz, 1990, p. 95)

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<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Grosz (1994) argues that in Lacan's framework body image becomes a threshold term – i.e. it is neither and both, private/public, self/other, nature/culture, and psychical/social, instinctive/learned, determined by genetics/environment (p. 23).

This diagram represents the endless slide of meaning of signifier and signified, where each term represented by S/s is related only momentarily, by difference to other signifiers and signifieds, within a chain of possibilities. For Lacan, this lack of fixity is an evident lack, present again within language itself – and the resulting polyvalent, or polysemic, potential of language similarly refers to the endless chain of substitution compelled by demand and its remainder, desire (Grosz, 1990, pp. 93 - 103; Lacan, 1977, pp. 146 - 178, p. 287).

Lacan argues, however, that while language fleetingly arrests to produce meaning, it is solidly fixed in the case of repression. In his schemata, signs relate to consciousness, signifiers belong to the domain of the unconscious, and the bar between them relates to the bar of censorship that separates the two (Grosz, 1990). In the case of repression, the expression of dreams, unconscious manifestations, and symptoms, enacts the prior fixing of meaning to particular signifiers within the unconscious. Whereas language as a whole shifts in an endless web of association and meaning, tied not to a core, but with a cataclysmic nothing as its base, the language repressed within the unconscious is trapped as a point of solidity, frozen in time and significance (Grosz, 1990).

Lacan's (1973) famous dictum that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (p. 149) is elucidated in his use of linguistics to describe the expression of the unconscious via the primary processes. Lacan does not mean that the unconscious is unfixed like language, but rather, he relates Freud's processes of condensation and displacement to the linguistic terms *metaphor* and *metonymy*, as a way to describe the workings of what is fixed in the unconscious, as it is expressed in consciousness. In Lacan's conceptualisation, language is a self-referential system that represents neither the subject nor the Real, but refers only to its own pre-existing categories and relations (Grosz, 1990, p. 99). That is, language does not provide representation for the subject's ideas and thoughts, but is a system that serves to constitute the subject, placing him/her in pre-existing webs of social and cultural meaning (p. 97). Grosz argues that Lacan's use of metaphor and metonymy does not depict a relation to the Real, but rather signifies a similar relation of language to language (pp. 95 - 98). For example, the term 'raining cats and dogs' would not translate across cultures, being culturally and historically specific in its substitution of terms.

In metaphor, where two dissimilar objects are compared or substituted for each other (e.g. raining cats and dogs) (Beckson & Ganz, 1990, p. 156), Lacan sees the primary process of condensation. In this case, the replaced term is the repressed signifier, frozen beneath the bar of censorship, fixed in meaning, while the signifier that replaces it is the symptom via which the unconscious speaks. The repressed signifier then becomes a signified, unable to move in the normal flux of meaning within language (Grosz, 1990, p. 100). In metonym (a substitution of objects or ideas by related objects or ideas, e.g. the pen is mightier than the sword) (Beckson & Ganz, 1990, p. 160), which Lacan relates to the primary process of displacement, the flux of language is utilised in the endless substitution of terms that occurs via demand and desire. While metaphor freezes the movement of language, ensuring that the symptomatic signifier relates to the repressed signified, metonym enables the repressed term, and its conscious metaphoric representative, to connect again to the associative chains of language, allowing its expression within consciousness (Grosz, 1990). In other words, Metaphor links the repressed term to a symptom, while Metonym provides the link between those two terms and the associative chains of the preconscious and conscious – each serving to allow the unconscious expression within consciousness and the possibility of interpretation to take place (Grosz, 1990, p. 100).

## TWO LEVELS OF PARADOX

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Within the workings of condensation and displacement, and metaphor and metonym, a link is evidenced between visual representations of paradox and what Kristeva (1982) recognises as an underlying paradox between the Real and language. The subject's loss of the mother, and the plenitude of the Real, occurs by the subject's movement through the Mirror and Oedipal Phases, and his/her subsequent entry into language and the Symbolic, as 'a subject'. In Kristeva's terms, rather than movement from one phase to another, the maternal, or the Real, returns as the remainder – that which has not yet been placed in language. The unbound-Real returns as the unresolved, continually recurring, pattern of separation and identification that describes the crisis of the abject – i.e., the paradox between the Real and language, the maternal and the Symbolic, that is both the crisis, and regeneration, of language and the Symbolic. This remainder returns, not only as an ever-present, unconscious wish/desire made manifest within

the multiple expression of unconscious contents within dreams, but also as loss able to be made manifest in the presence of representations of paradox.

A surface, or manifest, paradox (such as within a photograph) could function as a metaphor for the repressed loss of the maternal, with metonyms of paradox providing an associative link between condensed and displaced preconscious expressions of that founding loss. That manifest paradox would also serve to act as a metaphor for the inconceivable loss of language, the Symbolic, and identity, which would occur with that return of the repressed maternal. That is, in the presence of representations of paradox, we are able to experience the paradox between language and the Real that underlies existence, with the resulting release of the cathected affects of loss, fear, and disturbance that would conceivably accompany that paradox.

In the subject's early separation from the maternal, language and identity are seemingly set in place, with an attendant myth of fixity assigned to these separated objects. That is, language and identity operate on a pretence of stability, as they teeter on the brink of the abyss of their origin.

The loss of the primal object creates a lack which the child will attempt to fill using language to signify its demands. The language at its disposal replaces an ontological lack (lack of nature, lack of identity, lack of fixed objects) with a lack at the level constitutive of language (the lack of anchorage between the signifier and the signified: the lack constitutive of each sign). This lack is the most basic feature of desire and is both assumed and covered over by signification (Grosz, 1990, p. 102).

While language is thus an expression of the primal loss of the maternal and the Real, through Freud's analysis of dreams it is possible to witness expression of that loss, via condensation and displacement, within predominantly visual content. Lacan's analysis supplements this understanding of the visual, through his concepts of Need, Demand and Desire, where that loss can be seen in the endless circuit of drives striving to complete the subject, via the images, objects, and language, of the Symbolic. However, even satisfied demands and desires incur a remainder, with the subject's lack finally unable to be filled. In the scopic drive this is witnessed in the *objet a* and the Other, the sought object, and its return as lack via the ever-present possibility of the returned gaze. As Kristeva outlines (1982), the subject is situated precariously on the boundaries of the body and language, reminded constantly of the frailty of what we hold secure "in order to live" (p. 3).

While Freud and Lacan's analyses highlight the means by which the expression of the unconscious is made possible via the visual, Freud's (1954) *The Interpretation of Dreams* provides a model describing how unconscious contents are nevertheless also tied strongly to linguistic expression. Unconscious contents expressed visually work not as signs, but as assemblages of meaning, brought to coherence and understanding via chains of association, linking the unconscious and conscious. In Freud's analysis, it is interpretation of these associations that allow the release of unconscious, as-yet-unsignified, contents into the flow of language. What has been repressed is the unspeakable, the loss that precedes, and in fact founds, signification and identity, and then propels the desire to interpret or revise the unconscious contents it gave rise to, back into consciousness and language. The word and the image connect in an uroboric, vicious, circle, of the unconscious and conscious, the Real and language, the plenitude of the maternal semiotic and the fixed categories of identity.

## CHAPTER 2: THE PHOTOGRAPH

### THE PHOTOGRAPH

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The ontology of photography – the nature of its existence and where it sits in relation to other practices and art forms – has been contested since its inception. It has been variously declared as essentially scientific, mechanical, technical, artistic, Humanist, Realist, or Modernist, extending to contemporary theorisations that it is apposite to postmodernism (Krauss, 1984)<sup>29</sup> or ‘dead’ (Jolly, 1996). Its history, invention, uses, and ways of meaning, have all been debated at various intersections of cultural knowledges, activities, and, conceivably, agendas. Whilst our understandings of ‘what photography is’ are undeniably affected by the surrounding contexts, the practices and outputs of what is called photography have also provoked and reflected comparable changes in meaning regarding its defining terms and contexts. For example, Susan Sontag (1971/1977), in her seminal meditation *On Photography*, declares photography’s effect on the visual as “alter[ing] and enlarg[ing] our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe” (p. 3): a statement which can be experientially recognised as valid, given her example that via photography “everyday life (is) apotheosised” (p. 90). With changing cultural, historical, artistic and scientific contexts, photographic practices have similarly advanced various definitions, including relegating photography to ‘art’ (i.e. the Pictorialist emulation of painting), ‘documentary’ (Strand’s ‘straight print’ and styles of Realism), or ‘technology’ (the Bauhaus moving beyond the physicality of the eye to the lens’s ‘new vision’, and Benjamin’s ‘optical unconscious’).

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<sup>29</sup> See pages 67 - 71.

Sontag identifies a persistently contradictory nature in delineations of the photographic. Her essays list various binary accounts of photography as being either: lucid acts of conscious knowing or pre-intellectual intuitive encounters; democratic or authentic; mass reproduction or high art elitism; Realism and objectivity, or subjectivity; Realism that shows reality as it appears, or Realism that reveals an unseen, or hidden, reality. Sontag relates these binaries to earlier historical disputes which questioned whether photography's mechanical nature served to limit its status to that of a trade, a craft, or a tool of the scientific, and therefore precluded it from being considered fine art. For Sontag, the "history of photography is punctuated by a series of dualistic controversies" (p. 129) that originate in this contested relationship with art. Sontag sees photographers' justifications, and also, their rejections, of photography as art, as circling around the deeper-seated binaries of 'beautification' or 'truth telling' (p. 86) and photography as 'expression' or photography as 'faithful record' (p. 118). However, Sontag reveals a collapse of these dualistic binaries, with each element of the binaries utilised for various purposes over time: lauding straight prints or doctored prints, documentary or pictorial, encounter or fabrication, found objects or constructed, decision or effort. (Sontag, 1971/1977)

Sontag, however, defines photography not as an art, but a medium. She states that art can be made from the medium of photography, but it can also have other non-artistic uses such as weather photography, x-rays, and pornography: each of which, since the publication of *On Photography*, has subsequently become part of the practice of art (Elkins, 2007). For Sontag (1971/1977), photography promotes both the notion of 'high art', objects of value, created by talented photographers; and, contradictorily, the notion that art is obsolete. "The power of photography – and its centrality in present aesthetic concerns – is the idea that it confirms both ideas of art" (p. 148). Sontag argues that the second idea has dominance, arising from the widespread use of media, such as photography, which democratise producer, production, subject and image and thus undermine the foundations of high art as exclusive, prestigious and unique. She contends that the sphere of art is then transformed in return by the ubiquitousness of photography – into meta-arts and media. Photography's confusion of distinctions: between fine-arts and the elite/and a democratic medium practised by anyone; the authentic/and the fake; original/and copy; good taste/and bad; is finally adopted with "all art aspir[ing] to the condition of photography" (p. 149).

Allan Sekula (1982), in his analysis of photographs such as Alfred Stieglitz's *The Steerage* (1907) and Lewis Hine's *Immigrants going down gangplank, New York* (1905), points to the same instability of categories within the popular binary of 'art photography' vs 'documentary photography' (Sekula, p. 108). Sekula uses these two photographs of similar content (middle-European immigrants and ships' gangplanks), to serve as distinct examples – of art and documentary photography respectively. For Sekula, Stieglitz's photograph hides its politics but declares its aesthetics, while Hine's hides its aesthetics while declaring its politics (p. 103).

Alfred Stieglitz, one of the principal figures in the history of photography, championed the idea of 'photography as art' through the *Photo-Secession movement*, his renowned gallery 291<sup>30</sup>, various writings and journals, and through his publication *Camera Work* (1903 - 1917). The Photo-Secession movement was formed specifically to promote the idea of 'photography as art' as opposed to 'photography as a technical enterprise', as practiced by the camera clubs of the time. Photography's status as an art has, however, been continually questioned and championed since its inception – including Charles Baudelaire's (1859) dismissal of photography as merely a 'servant' of art (a relationship Baudelaire defines as analogous to that of printing and shorthand's relation to literature) (cited in Hirsch, 2000, p. 116) and an 1862 French court ruling in regard to copyright, announcing that photography was legally considered as art. Furthermore, the championing of photography as art includes the *Pictorialist* photographic tradition, where photography deliberately imitated Impressionist painting (using soft-focus, texture, light effects and print manipulation to position the photographer as an artist of unique objects), and also, the 'straight prints' (later lauded as the appropriate artistic technique because of their lack of manipulation and fidelity to Realism) (Hirsch, 2000, p. 216) – each an approach which Stieglitz championed over time in *Camera Work* (1903 - 1917) and gallery 291.

*Camera Work* (1903 - 1917) also contained art and writing, but its significance lay in its treatment of photography as art – expressed emphatically by the high-quality production of a set of photographs in each issue of the magazine. Photographs, including *The Steerage* (Stieglitz, 1907), were carefully printed, framed, and

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<sup>30</sup> Where Stieglitz exhibited and promoted French and American modernist photographers and artists, notably including Picasso and Man Ray.

contextualised, in a manner that defined them as unique and precious objects of art. Sekula analyses *The Steerage* (1907) (along with Stieglitz's commentary on this and other photographs, within his memoirs), as both championing photography as art and similarly championing Stieglitz himself. The photograph, and the surrounding discourse, locates Stieglitz as the mystical, genius artist, whose individual expression is captured within the image. According to Sekula, the contents of the *The Steerage* (1907) serve only as a symbolic representation of Stieglitz's internal revelation of alienation, and then identification. Sekula argues that the subsumption of the entire photograph within Stieglitz's 'self-expression' and experience denies both the context of the photograph and its "status as a report" (Sekula, p. 101).

Against this example, Sekula juxtaposes sociologist Lewis Hine's concerned, documentary, photography such as *Immigrants going down gangplank, New York* (1905). Hine's photographs were explicitly political, produced for social welfare organisations, and publications that promoted the liberal reform agendas of the time. *Immigrants going down gangplank, New York* (1905) serves as one part of a larger, political, discourse about immigration in relation to labour, housing and other considerations. Sekula argues that Hine photographs his subjects as victims, as evidence of the conditions of the time, yet also endows them with dignity. Hine, according to Sekula, thus reveals two levels at work within his photographs: "a level of *report*, of empirically grounded rhetoric, and a level of 'spiritual' rhetoric" (Sekula, p. 106). That is, Hine operates as a photographic 'witness', but his granting of dignity to the oppressed also serves to position himself as a photographic 'seer', able to envisage the humanity of the poor as if they held none without him. Hine therefore returns the documentary photographer to the status of genius artist as "the representation drops away and only the valorised figure of the artist remains" (p. 108).

For Sekula, this binary confusion between photographer as seer or witness, is the result of a myth that places photography within either Symbolism or Realism: a juxtaposition more commonly, but falsely, expressed as 'art' and 'documentary'. He claims that every photograph encapsulates both terms in the binary, only *tending* towards one or other pole during specific contextual readings. Sekula outlines expressions of this Symbolist/Realist binary as: seer/witness; expression/

reportage; imagination or inner truth/empirical truth; affective value/informative value; and metaphoric signification/metonymic signification (p. 108).

For Douglas Crimp (1980) in *The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism*, a binary similar to Sekula's – but, in this case, defined by Crimp as being between “the straight and the manipulated print” (p. 97) – has transpired as the “central debate in photography's aesthetic history” (p. 97). Crimp further delineates this binary as between: the imagination or the world, as basis for the photograph; fictional manipulations or records of the real; directorial or documentary styles; and mirrors or windows (p. 97). Crimp's analysis however, like Sontag's and Sekula's, in the end results in a disruption of those photographic binaries identified within the analysis. In this case, the disruption occurs, not by relativistic placing along poles of the binary, as within Sekula's analysis, but via Crimp's identification of a resurrection of the modernist notion of a *photographic aura* within contemporary conceptualisations of photography.

The concept of an aura originated with Walter Benjamin (1936/2010), who notably designated the photograph, due to its nature as a reproduction, a ‘copy’. A photograph was thus marked as differing from an ‘original’, or unique, artwork (such as a painting), and devoid of the aura purportedly felt in the presence of an original. However, Crimp (1980) asserts, the treatment of photography ‘as art’ serves to attach a similar aura to the photographer. In this case, the aura no longer belongs to the photograph, but to the genius-artist-photographer and his/her style. Crimp's analysis thus revives Sekula's (1982) construction of the ‘photographer as seer’ to posit the case for a photographic aura. Crimp's argument, however, also concurs with Sontag's (1971/1977) notion that photography's contested relationship with art finally serves to disrupt the very photographic binaries that arise out of that contestation. However, while bringing together elements of Sekula's and Sontag's analyses, Crimp theorises that it is not ‘photography as media’, but the ‘photographer as seer’, that results in binary disruption. In this case, however, the binary gives way to the ‘manipulated prints’ pole – with the photographer's style, imagination, and manipulations, working to extend the notion of art to the other end of the continuum, the ‘straight prints’ pole – the photographic real, documentary and record. Thus, for Crimp, inevitably, the ‘photographer as seer’ results in all styles of photography, from the personal to the commercial, being accorded the status of art (Crimp, 1980).

In each of the three arguments above, for Sontag, Sekula, and Crimp, the nominated photographic binaries are unstable, with photography's relation to art seen as the destabilising factor. Both photography and art are transformed via this destabilisation, with the photographic binaries now transported to the ontology of art, and the notion of art, in return, transported to both sides of the photographic binary. All of which occurs without a subsequent resolution or removal of either binary.

Sue Best (1993) identifies a similar binary instability occurring in relation to both photography and painting. She argues that Jean-Francois Lyotard (1982), Douglas Crimp (1981), and Yve-Alain Bois (1986), situate photography as mechanical and industrial, with (following Benjamin) mass production and 'readymades'<sup>31</sup> inexorably implicated in their subsequent predictions of the 'crisis', 'end', or 'mourning' (p. 55) of painting. Best (1993) contends that painting is conceptualised by these theorists as either superseded by photography (with painting of necessity then attempting to stake out different ground to maintain relevance), or becoming mechanical<sup>32</sup> like photography (a mimicry intended to contain and limit the threat of photography's difference). She claims that these arguments are a dialectical theorisation constructing a challenge for supremacy between painting and photography – a challenge which results in a victor, with the loser consigned to the past and irrelevance (p. 58). Even so, Best then disputes this apparent dialectic, arguing that the challenge between photography and painting results only in each remaining persistently relevant to the other. Best recognises the dialectical notion echoed within *Camera Lucida* (Barthes, 1980), where she portrays Roland Barthes' conception of photography's effect on painting as an Oedipal child's ascendance over the murdered father (Best, pp. 55 - 56). However, Best also recognises her own model, of photography and art's persistent and mutual relevance, also echoed

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<sup>31</sup> From Marcel Duchamp's ground-breaking and avant-garde nomination of mechanically produced objects as art – these reformed and re-contextualised everyday objects were nominated 'readymades'.

<sup>32</sup> Best (1993) refers here to Yve-Alain Bois' lauding of Robert Ryman as a painter who "mechanically decomposes the uniqueness of the pictorial mode" (p. 55) so that painting is then acting in the same way as photography and therefore maintaining its relevance.

here by Barthes' description of photography as haunted: "Photography has been, and is still, tormented by the ghost of painting" (p. 30)<sup>33</sup>.

Furthermore, Best (1993) reasons, if the introduction and prevalence of photography has purportedly led to painting's 'end' and subsequent efforts to define itself (by staking out its own different ground or conceptualising itself as mechanical) then the contemporary questioning of the ontological nature of photography has been triggered by a development of equivalent momentousness. That is, a questioning of the meaning of photography has become similarly prevalent as a response to the touted effects of the computer in purportedly heralding the 'end of photography', where (in the end) "the computer provides the necessary other for photography to realise its identity" (p. 57). That is, the computer is seen to herald the end of photography because of the speed and ease of manipulation of photographs in the digital realm.

Of course, rather than 'end photography', the computer has instead heralded another debate as to photography's essence – this time, not in relation to art, but in relation to the notion of photographic objectivity, i.e. whether photography is an index or a sign, a trace of the Real (Sontag, 1971/1977, p. 154)<sup>34</sup> or a construction. For example, Fred Richtin (1990), in *Photojournalism in The Age of Computers*, argues that while photographs have always been manipulated, analogue photography includes a presumption of truth, in that it is commonly and frequently understood as a transparent window on reality. According to Richtin, however, photographic truth-telling has been put in doubt by the rise of digital photography. While it is possible to simulate reality entirely through the use of a computer via a digital photograph, an animation, a virtual world, etc, it is the ease and speed of alteration within digital photography that, for Richtin, puts the presumed veracity of photography in doubt, possibly causing an "undermining of photography's status as an inherently truthful pictorial form" (p. 28).

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<sup>33</sup> The full quote is "Photography has been, and still is, tormented by the ghost of painting (Mapplethorpe represents an iris stalk the way an Oriental painter might have done it); it has made Painting, through its copies and contestations, into the absolute, paternal Reference as if it were born from the Canvas" (Barthes, 1980, pp. 30 - 31).

<sup>34</sup> Sontag argues that a photograph is "not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled (sic) off the real, like a footprint or a death mask" (1971/1977, p. 154).

In this sense, Best is seeing photography as the ‘other’ of painting, and digital photography as the ‘other’ of photography. The implication here is that rather than conceptualising painting, photography, and digital photography, each in relation to each other, these discourses serve instead to pose a purely binary relationship, as part of a considered pair, in order to define each element in terms of lack or absence.

Best goes on to argue that if the contemporary emergence of the digital has correspondingly resulted in photography now searching for its essence, this activity paradoxically also aligns it with the investigations of the early avant-garde (who were similarly exploring what was essential in notions of art) (Best, p. 57). Consequently, this places photography squarely within the terms of modernism and enacts a return to early essentialist photography theorisations such as John Szarkowski’s (1966) MOMA catalogue essay listing of *thing itself*, *detail*, *frame*, *time*, and *vantage point*, as to what constitutes the intrinsic components of photography (Best, 1993, p. 57). In other words, as Best notes, heralding the end of photography serves only to return it to its beginnings. Furthermore, it raises the question of whether painting, after attempts at self-definition, would concomitantly then enter “the end of the end” (Best, p. 57). At this point, it can be argued, essentialism would lead inexorably (as modernism led into postmodernism), to arts practice that then deconstructs these very definitions. That is, an ‘end of the end’ of painting, manifests in paintings that serve to deconstruct painting (Best, 1993).

Best sees Bette Mifsud’s postmodern photography as similarly posing a deconstructive counter model of photography’s supposed end in opposition to that essentialism that Best contends arises from the question ‘what is photography?’ (Best, pp. 57 - 58, 76). Mifsud’s work uses photography’s past history (such as the stereoscope<sup>35</sup>), its technological present (such as landsat<sup>36</sup> images), painting, installation, sculpture, transparency, x-rays, and mirrors, to provide a material, visual and conceptual, deconstruction of photography. Mifsud’s photography systematically questions and disturbs not only each of Szarkowski’s essentials of photography but, also, the concepts of observer, observed; vision, object; and the familiar metaphors of photograph as document, mirror, transparent

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<sup>35</sup> A stereoscope is a device where two images (taken at different angles) are viewed as one, providing the illusion of depth.

<sup>36</sup> Landsat images are satellite images of the earth’s geographic resources.

window, mechanical copy, and so on (Best, p. 73). Best contends, for example, that ‘photography’ and ‘fact’ are placed in a temporal sandwich between the conventions of Realist painting, long acknowledged as illusionistic in its creation of perspective, depth, light, shade, etc; and the virtual illusions of the digital (p. 61). Best argues that in her exhibition *Hallucinations and Other Facts* (1988), Mifsud counteracts this categorisation via multiple stereoscopes of Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s painting, *Rinaldo in the Garden of Armida* (1763). Each stereoscope is produced by a photocopy of the painting, with an acetate photocopy of the same image offset against it. While the painting is reproduced multiple times, each acetate is positioned differently and reportedly creates illusions of depth, movement, and texture unique to each image.

A highly complex set of exchanges and returns occurs in this image. A photographic technique, that works against the flattening effect of photography, but which was designed to surpass the illusory effects of painting, is returned to painting via photocopy. Yet the depth and movement is indeed a perception without objective reality – two thicknesses of paper, slightly offset produce it. (Best, 1993, p. 63)

Best argues that in this and other works, the past and the present, painting and photography, photography and the digital, fiction and real, are all presented together in an assemblage that complicates any dialectical models of these binaries, with their victors and vanquished, and serves to expose instead a complicated network of exchange, debt, and meaning between the opposing terms. A binary disturbance lurks here within Best’s “exchanges and returns” (p. 63), as she notes the infinite reflection, as in a hall of mirrors, with regards to these ontological conceptions of photography (p. 66). These, it can be argued, seem to have no stable conception. For example, Best also argues that Mifsud’s work implies that the past is neither dead nor preserved, but exists now in the present, in a more complex fashion:

Transformed no doubt, this is not the past as it once was, but its continued value in the present, even if only to signify the past for the present (and hence also the present for the present), indicates its ongoing role: a type of continuity not able to be assimilated by the dialectical model. (p.58)

Best’s view is that the collapsing of the notions of the origin and end of photography within Mifsud’s photography – by her placement of past and present photographic technologies and conceptions in an assemblage of mutual play and

relevance – simultaneously serves to displace Mifsud’s own postmodernist conception as the teleological ‘answer’. That is, Mifsud’s photography is not positioning itself as a postmodern critique that is therefore the ‘answer to the question’, but rather, the postmodernism in her work consists of a troubling disturbance of the categories and conceptions – not so that they disappear in irrelevance but, more precisely, so that they are visible, in a way that simultaneously constructs and deconstructs them. Best concludes that neither postmodernism nor modernism has completely defined or conceptualised photography: which is highlighted by Mifsud’s photographs as “not simply a metaphor for the postmodern condition of the arts” (p. 77), nor “simply a transparent conduit or an instance of mechanical reproduction” (p. 77), but is instead revealed as complexly both, and more. Best argues that instead of annulling the question ‘what is photography?’, Mifsud’s photography insists on the need to ask it, while calling the query itself into question – as I would suggest, Best also succeeds in doing through her analysis.

Returning to *The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism*, Crimp (1980) also applies his arguments about photographic seers and auras to postmodern photographic practices. Crimp claims that these practices serve to further disrupt the photographic binaries but, in this case, in relation to the aura. The aura, he argues, contradicting Benjamin’s original nomination, is shown to be an element of the copy rather than the original. Postmodern photographers, such as Sherry Levine (who re-photographed Edward Weston’s nudes of his son) and Richard Prince (who used images from advertising, such as the ‘Marlborough Man’, blown up and re-contextualised, in his own photographic constructions), subvert the notion of a photographic ‘original’ – claiming the photograph as always “representation, always-already seen” (Crimp, p. 98). Representation and copy are elided here, with photography solely a representation with an absent original.

The desire of representation exists only insofar as it never be fulfilled, insofar as the original [will] always be deferred. It is only in the absence of the original that representation may take place. And representation takes place because it is always already there in the world *as* representation. (pp. 98 - 99)

In Crimp’s conception, nature, the opposite of representation, is also a representation – in accord with Lacan’s theory that we cannot directly access the Real, as we live merely through Symbolic and Imaginary conceptualisations. This

disruption of the notion of photographic originality reaches its apotheosis in Cindy Sherman's photographic practice. Crimp argues that Sherman uses the *directorial* mode of photographers such as Duane Michaels, who "use the apparent veracity of photography against itself, creating one's fictions through the appearance of a seamless reality into which has been woven a narrative dimension" (p. 99). However, Sherman, in turn, uses this notion of the directorial mode against itself. Crimp argues that Sherman's self-portraits such as her *Untitled Film Stills* (Sherman, 1977 - 1980) series, where she photographs herself as stereotypical woman characters in various B-grade movie or film noir scenarios, create fictions that ultimately expose "the fiction of the self" (p. 99) within these narratives. This approach correspondingly reveals identity as itself a representation or a copy (p. 99).

Rosalind Krauss (1984) applies a similar analysis to photography, with her theorisation also expressed succinctly through the work of Cindy Sherman. For Krauss, the stereotypical, yet arbitrary, techniques associated with photography; for example, the stereotypical rules of technique and composition within genre photography – such as portrait, landscape, snapshot and travel photography – along with photography's reproducibility; confer what she calls the *multiplicity* (pp. 58 - 59) of photography. Thus, many photographs are taken of particular people or places, which have slight differences. In general, however, these images contain such stereotypical renditions that they are to all intents and purposes the same image of the same person, monument, building, or vista. For Krauss, photography's multiplicity serves to reveal the stereotypicality and unoriginality of all aesthetics. Photography thus works to displace the distinction between original and copy upon which aesthetic discourse relies:

Within the aesthetic universe of differentiation – which is to say: "this is good, this is bad, this, in its absolute originality, is different from that" – within this universe photography raises the spectre of nondifferentiation at the level of qualitative difference and introduces instead the condition of a merely quantitative array of differences, as in a series. The possibility of aesthetic difference is collapsed from within, and the originality that is dependent on this idea of difference collapses with it. (p. 59)

For Krauss, Sherman's photographs reproduce cultural stereotypes, both within their content, and also within their formal construction and individual styles. Krauss terms the cultural content of such images the "culturally already-given" (p.

59) while Crimp (1980) identifies the “d  ja vu” (p. 99) or “always-already-seen” (p. 98) of representation. Krauss argues that, with Sherman’s reproduction of her own image:

one is constantly confronted by formal conditions that are the results of institutional recipes: the movie still with its anecdotal suggestiveness, or the advertising image with its hopped-up lighting and its format dictated by the requirements of page layout. (Krauss, p. 59)

Following Crimp, within Sherman’s use of this trope of the stereotype, it is not merely identity that is revealed as a construction but rather, Krauss contends, that Sherman’s photographing of herself locates the actual artist her/himself as another non-original copy (p. 68). Moreover, Krauss argues that this collapse of the notion of artistic originality incurs a consequent collapse of the notion of artist as critic, separate from, and able to comment on, the world. This lack of critical distance equates with the realm of the *simulacrum*, where we cannot distinguish between reality and representation, real and copy – the realm of the *false copy* (Krauss, 1984).

Krauss refers here to Gilles Deleuze’s (cited in Krauss, 1984, p. 62) analysis of Plato’s theorisations in terms of the simulacra. Deleuze argues that Plato’s notion of *ideal forms* is an attempt to categorise each element of the world in terms of ‘difference’, an enterprise which simultaneously collapses that notion of difference. That is, Plato theorised the existence of inaccessible ideal forms for, or ideal essences of, each object of the material world. The objects we can perceive are, according to this theory, only shadows or imitations of those ideal essences. Therefore, Deleuze contends, a false copy is defined in contradistinction to the perfect resemblance of a *true copy* of an ideal form, and therefore:

puts into question the whole project of differentiation, of the separation of model from imitation. For the false copy is a paradox that opens a terrible rift within the very possibility of being able to tell true from not-true. (Deleuze paraphrased in Krauss, p. 62)

For Krauss, the idea of a simulacrum is destabilising in its implication of the possibility of the false copy<sup>37</sup>. She argues that the only resemblance the simulacrum has is to the “idea of non-resemblance” (p. 62), where an entity is a simulacrum only by virtue of its not being a non-resemblance and thus, similarly to

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<sup>37</sup> This relates to Jean Baudrillard’s second order of simulacra, rather than the third (where the real disappears and we enter the hyperreal).

Bates's notion of photography, creates a hall of mirrors, where the notion of an objective viewpoint from which to distinguish real from copy is repeatedly called into question (Krauss, 1984).

Krauss identifies Sherman's understanding of photography (in a conception that seems similar to Best's) as being the "Other of art" (p. 68). Note the use of capital 'O' here, designating not the 'other', which is the object of the self, but Lacan's 'Other' that belongs to the Unconscious, Superego and Symbolic. This is otherness not attached to a particular person or object, but rather, the lack invoked when a subject attempts to fill their incompleteness through an 'other', the annihilation summoned in that attempt for identification and fullness; in other words, the abject mother. Sherman's work, for Krauss, thus exists not as an art object, but as the practice of criticism. Sherman's use of photography positions it as a metalanguage which is used to deconstruct the myths of art: "creativity and artistic vision, and the innocence, primacy, and autonomy of the 'support' for the aesthetic image" (p. 68). Krauss then proceeds to invoke the Other of art photography, however, in the form of a 1 min television series on photography canvassing what she calls 'sociological' readings. These constitute a place where popular opinion, instant reading, and individual projection substitute for the analysis of formal or contextual meaning undertaken by the art critic (p. 68). Krauss invokes this kind of reading of photography as the ever present Other which, in the end, deconstructs photographic criticism.

Sherman's critique of photography, through photography, thus serves as evidence of Krauss' assertion that, with the photograph, we are not presented with reality, but rather with the "reality effect" (p. 63). A photograph's resemblance to the original is based on mechanical reproduction rather than some kind of internal essence relating to the ideal. Photography, for Krauss, acts as essentially a deconstruction of the binaries of original and copy, real copy and false copy, and hence (in its subsequent interrogation of those traditional notions of art related to uniqueness, originality, individuality and self-expression), photography is the means by which "art is distanced and separated from itself" (p. 63). By this, Kraus seeks to imply that the photograph necessarily, perpetually, destabilises the ontological concepts of documentary, artistic expression, real, copy, expression, reproduction, etc, that give it meaning. Furthermore, Krauss' theorisation of these ontological conceptions is binary in nature, as she contends that photography either

invokes what she calls the “photographic simulacrum” (p. 63) of the reality effect, or represses this to gain the effect of art. Krauss proposes an ironic example of photographic destabilisation, where she argues that the ‘art effect’ is more and more the domain of commercial photography and advertising, which subsequently invoke the return of the repressed ‘reality-effect’ of photography. Krauss designates this the return of the “primal scene...of art debauched by commerce” (p. 68).

Geoffrey Batchen (1997) reasserts John Tagg’s assertion that photography “has no identity” (cited in Batchen, p. 11) by claiming, and collapsing, a photographic binary in relation to photography theory. Batchen (pp. 5 - 12, 19 - 20) understands canonical photographic theorists, such as Sekula, Tagg, and Victor Burgin, as claiming a contingency for photography in opposition to essentialist investigations of photography’s ‘nature’ within photographic histories, aesthetics, and investigations of the medium. Batchen sees Sekula’s and Tagg’s arguments as based on postmodern conceptions of meaning – that is, as arising from the complexities of context and surrounding discourse. In Burgin’s case, meaning is dependent on the viewer’s unconscious psychic forces, which are similarly contingent on the context of subjectivity. Batchen asserts the existence of a theoretical binary between conceptions of photography as:

Having no identity and dependent on context	Defined by its essential attributes
A cultural phenomenon	Having an inherent nature as a medium
No history of its own	Having an historical outline
Mutable, contingent	Eternal values
Social practice and politics	Art and aesthetics

(Adapted from Batchen, 1997, p. 20)

Batchen contends, however, that postmodern theorists arguing for the contingency of photography are merely asserting an “oppositional logic” (p. 20) that contradictorily re-inscribes an essence of photography – “the photograph still has an essence, but now it is found in the mutability of culture rather than its presumed other – an immutable nature” (p. 20). That is, contingency itself is the new essence of photography.

The abundance of binaries outlined in this chapter – such as Realist vs Symbolist, documentary vs art, straight print vs manipulated print, aura vs copy, copy vs false copy, real vs reality effect, essential attributes vs contingency, expression vs reproduction, etc – provide cogent evidence for Sontag’s (1971/1977) assertion that the “history of photography is punctuated by a series of dualistic controversies” (p. 129). Whilst the ontology of photography can be understood as decidedly binary in its critical conceptions, no stability of terms, nor common agreement about the nature of photography, is yielded, other than that a binary instability is incurred. For Sontag (1971/1977), Sekula (1982), Best (1993), Crimp (1981), Krauss (1984) and Batchen (1997), and for the postmodern photographic practices of Sherman (1977 - 1980) and Mifsud (1988), this disturbance does not result in a victor amongst each set of binary terms, but rather induces a deconstructive hall of mirrors whereby each iteration of the binary seems to deconstruct the next proposed term of opposition, and each term of opposition comprises “the other within the system of the simulacrum” (Krauss, p. 68).

Photography transpires as uniquely positioned in terms of its specific, historical (and otherwise contextual) placement, in relation to preceding and contemporaneous conceptions of art (such as in relation to painting, in relation to modernism and postmodernism, as a technology of reproduction, etc) to both embody, and elucidate, the self-referential contradiction latent in all representation – enacted here between various notions of ‘photography as an index of the Real’ and ‘photography as a sign’ – as the surface manifestation of a deeper, more fundamental, contradiction: between the Real and language. The binary instability revealed in conceptions of photography’s ontology can be discerned as a vicious circle, whereby each iteration of the contradiction shifts the terms of the contradiction, without resolution – enacting a continued reduplication of the crisis between the Real and language, the semiotic and Symbolic. Via Kristeva’s notion of the abject, it is possible to see these mirror reflections of the camera as both disturbing, and meaningful, as they collapse infinitely, one conception into the next, each image into its other.

## CHAPTER 3: TEARS OF THINGS<sup>38</sup>

### CASE STUDY 1: JEFF WALL

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Jeff Wall's *The Storyteller* (1986) can be considered as an information rich case of photographic paradox. Depicting a group of figures sitting in a somewhat desolate area beside a freeway, it is a photograph that foregrounds the spatial relationships portrayed within it. The photograph's composition encompasses three large triangular-shaped zones: a group of large trees (perhaps the edge of a forest) alongside a small parcel of sky; the ground with six figures sitting upon it; and the concrete supports of the freeway above. The ground itself is then divided into three areas: a dirt strip on the edge of the trees; a swathe of green and gold grass; and a stone-paved area beneath the freeway. From left to right across the photograph, these concurrent divisions all evidence a transition from the 'natural' to the 'cultural' across each of the three areas. The resulting composition is thus made up of a natural mass (the large trees), balanced by an opposing similarly sized technological, or cultural, mass (the concrete of the freeway), with the ground comprising the middle third mass - an in between nature and culture zone, that is then also thrice divided according to the same pattern.

This delineation of the two divisions brings a further division into visibility within the photograph. The three divisions of the ground, transitioning from nature to culture, each also join with a counterpart above: the dirt strip joins with the larger trees to the left; the green and gold grass joins the small trees and sky; and the stone-paved ground joins the freeway above it: again, dividing the photograph into thirds, and with the same transition.

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<sup>38</sup> A translation of Virgil's *lacrimae rerum* (Whaton, 2008).

Telephone or electricity wires also serve to partition the depicted scene, though this time in half, not thirds. The wires cut across the photograph horizontally, intersecting with the smaller trees at the centre of the composition. These trees comprise a dense group of what appear to be bright yellow saplings, and two relatively taller trees, spaced out and outlined against a barely visible building and the broader area of sky behind. The saplings are similarly toned, both to one of the smaller trees, and to the large area of gold spread throughout the grass area. Accordingly, these three elements align vertically to cut a bright, golden, swathe, through the composition. Furthermore, these horizontal and vertical divisions intersect in the centre of the photograph, providing a visual focal point, which also serves to highlight ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ as oppositions within the photograph<sup>39</sup>. While the composition can be understood to be split into a spatial nature/culture binary, the further divisions, that transition from one to another over three areas, declare the binary as being able to be divided further. Significantly, the three areas in each of these transitional divisions also meet at the horizon points of each, roughly intersecting at this same central point, where the wires meet the smaller trees. Correspondingly, it can be argued that each type of division – and thus both the conceptual binary and its further division – intersect and are given equally momentous weight by the composition. Within this photograph, nature and culture seem to be elucidated as paradoxically, both binary and more complex than binary.

Spatial relationships are also foregrounded in the depiction of the figures within the photograph. A group of people sit on the dirt strip, apparently listening to another person (presumably the ‘storyteller’ of the title) crouching before them at the lowest point of the scene. Two people are positioned close to the storyteller, sitting around a small fire. The figures are placed in a semi-circular arrangement, with the outstretched hands of the storyteller posed as if being warmed over the fire and gesturing as s/he is talking. An additional two figures sit higher and further away from the storyteller, on something like a blanket, while on the bottom right of the photograph, a man sits by himself on the stones underneath the freeway. There seems to be an intimacy between the storyteller and the group with him/her, and yet, because of the triangular placement of figures within the photograph – on the correspondingly triangular mass of ground – another level of intimacy appears to occur between all of the people depicted in the scene, including between those

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<sup>39</sup> A further mirroring is also present, as two, relatively taller, small trees are spaced apart in a manner similar to the four electricity wires; that is, aligned in spaced-apart sets of two.

sitting further away and apart. This intimacy between the figures seems to contradict the desolation of what is usually a discarded space, beside a freeway.

Furthermore, the intimacy between the figures seems to occur in a myriad of directions, with connections between: (i) the group of people close together, directly a part of the conversation; (ii) the people close together and the couple farther apart, all seemingly listening to the storyteller; (iii) between the couple farther apart, who while together on the blanket have dissimilar body placement, including one's back turned to another, distinguishing them as individuals with different relationships of intimacy to the other figures in the scene; (iv) between the storyteller and the people facing him/her; (v) between the one person not facing the storyteller, sitting alone, and all the people facing the storyteller; (vi) between the person sitting alone and the storyteller; (vii) between the three individuals all sitting away from the group, both the couple and the man apart; (viii) between the storyteller and all the other figures; and accordingly, (ix) between all the other figures and each other. Furthermore, because numerous, these spatially located intimacies reveal that, consequently and simultaneously, separations are also occurring – as some are included, and some excluded, within each identified intimacy. Moreover, the complexity of these intimacies and separations can then extend further for the viewer – to the wider field of the photograph, to relationships: between the figures and the freeway; the figures and the ground; the figures and the trees; and then further, to the social world not visible within this enclave, this more often discarded space, beside a freeway.

The figures' occupation of this leftover space, their seemingly similar skin tone and hair colour, the title *The Storyteller*, the storytelling occurring on the more 'natural' strip of land, along with the connection between storytelling and pre-print oral cultures (where narrative is used to pass on cultural knowledge and to entertain); suggest that these figures are people from an indigenous, marginalised, culture. Despite the obvious political meanings associating such indigenous cultures with nature and primitivism; with colonial, or dominating, cultures respectively associated with technology, culture, and progress; the placement of figures, and composition of space, within the photograph nevertheless occurs without providing determinate meaning. While both indigenous cultures and nature can be understood as 'discarded spaces' within colonial cultures, the complex network of intimacy and alienation within the photograph serves to question the value of that

marginalisation while, simultaneously, complicating the question of its existence. 'Intimacy and nature' compositionally dominate 'alienation and culture' within the photograph, as the in-between spaces are also comprised of the 'natural', and the figures' very presence within this space signifies connection, even between the most separated person and the rest, turning the traditional value hierarchy between culture and nature on its head. The values attached to the polarity are not only reversed but, the nature of each polarity is further complicated, by the simultaneous presence of its opposite, or other, by the intimacies and separations of the figures depicted on the 'transitioning from culture to nature', third space, of the ground.

Tracing the intimacies and alienations of the scene can also extend these categories to include the viewer, who is perhaps able to find meaning in the photograph, and yet unable to determine exactly what that meaning is. The photograph has the look of a seemingly casual snapshot of the scene, yet a knowledge of Wall's oeuvre denies such, as the scene is likely to be purposefully constructed, with acute attention to detail by the photographer. The nature/culture binary is determinedly signified within the photograph, yet the complexities of spatial composition, in both figure and ground, declare a network of social meaning that, while traceable, remains finally undetermined. The unusualness of people's presence within that space, the banality of the scene, and the intimacy drawn by the figuration, serve to question the actual point of the scene. It could be argued that the determined signification of the nature/culture binary, which does not point to a further signification of determined value, gives rise to readings which constantly circle away from the traditional binary and then back to it, attempting to resolve its meaning, failing, and circling again. In this way, the constant circling leads to a mapping of the nature/culture relationships within the image, that signifies only that it is more complicated than the presence of the binary suggests. Is this not the lived experience of those positioned by the binary – subject to, railing against, fitting, not fitting, finding different places within: none of which provide the stability suggested by simple binary terms? As theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) have argued, those subject to the margins, to the polarity of 'less value' within a binary, live with a constant disruption of self-placement. This is because, by necessity, there is an uneasy, unfixed, unsolvable, unresolvable, relationship between their lived experience and the expectations implied in that imposed cultural placement on the margins. That is, marginalised people are central within

their marginalised lives, and that lived experience of centrality can be considered as one manifestation of the excess of that binary language of value.

A similar vicious circle can be seen in Wall's photograph *Mimic* (1982). In *Mimic*, Wall recreates a street scene he had witnessed previously, where a Caucasian man makes a racist gesture towards an Asian man walking alongside him – pushing his own face so that his eye narrows, supposedly to resemble the physical characteristics of the Asian man's (Wagstaff, 2005, p. 12). The Caucasian man uses his middle finger, so that the back of his hand and his raised finger simultaneously make a common, obscene, gesture. Wall designates this photograph as his first attempt at the genre of 'street photography', with its 'shoot from the hip', spontaneous, capture of the moments of everyday life (Burnett, 2005, pp. 20 - 21), yet he incorporates the usual techniques of the 'studio work' genre in its production – i.e. a deliberate construction and composition of elements within the frame and, in this case, the use of the large format camera which is more often chosen to photograph stationary objects. For Wall, this contradiction is part of a larger attempt to synthesise the conventions, aesthetics, and drama, of classical painting, with the contemporary world's aesthetic (at that time) of 1970s documentary cinema. Wall sees photography as the medium that synthesises these two approaches, bringing what he sees as the compatibilities of artifice and realism to his work and, more broadly, the fictional into the idea of the indexicality of the photograph (Wall, cited in Wagstaff, 2005, p. 11). While Wall is known for these constructed, 'cinematographic', scenes<sup>40</sup> (Burnett, 2005, pp. 20 - 21), *Mimic* (1982) is a *reconstruction* of the witnessed scene – a laboured, and purposeful, reconstruction of a momentary occurrence.

Craig Burnett (2005) succinctly describes the effect, of this reconstruction of the momentary, as a photograph that treats an "everyday event...monumentally, with all the pathos and pictorial force of an Old Master Painting" (p. 20). Wall argues that "mimesis is one of the original gestures of art" (cited in Burnett, 2005, p. 21) and that the photograph itself is mimetic in its recording of the man's gesture of mimicry. However, as the photograph is a re-staging of the original street occurrence, it is also then a *reconstruction of a reconstruction* – a re-staging of the staging of a particular physical characteristic. Additionally, as Burnett (2005) remarks, the gesture itself was probably carried out by someone else and then

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<sup>40</sup> Presented in the large light-boxes common to advertising culture.

witnessed by the man, who then mimicked it in this moment. As Wall reflects, “the mimesis just spreads” (cited in Burnett, p. 21). Furthermore, it could be argued that the lack of any empirical, physical, basis to notions of race<sup>41</sup>, adds a further refraction to this hall of mirrors, with the gesture itself being a reconstruction of racist reconstructions of ‘Asianness’.

Knowledge of the institutional art discourses around Wall’s work entails awareness of his specific construction of, and attention to, the details of his photographed scenes. In the case of this particular photograph, however, the binary between ‘caught moment of the street’ and ‘careful construction of elements within a studio composition’, along with Wall’s titular reference to mimicry, serve to point also to a deeper binary – between the man’s impulsive, momentary, gesture and what Wall considers the long-construction of bigoted subjectivity leading towards that momentary gesture (cited in Burnett, 2005, pp. 20 - 21). That is, Wall recognises a contradiction between the complex, deeply contextual, social and psychological, power relations between these subjects within the photograph, and the man’s simple, impulsive, action. Additionally, the reverse could also be considered here, with the man’s impulsivity juxtaposed with what could be the long after-effect of the racist gesture.

This gesture, as witnessed by Wall, can be understood as the first link in a metonymical and metaphorical chain-of-associations about ‘looking’: the man points to and moves his eye; a gesture that is witnessed by Wall; Wall interprets what he witnesses as revealing the contextual power relations hidden (or repressed) within, and yet founding, this gesture; Wall replicates the gesture, via the production of a photograph; viewers see the photograph and perhaps witness Wall’s interpretation. The man’s finger makes a physical gesture to point towards the physicality of (his idea of) ‘Asianness’ – pointing towards ‘physical difference’ as both signifier of difference, and signifying ‘less than’. While in the animal world, the physical expression of mimicry can ensure safety from predators, in this case, the gesture of mimicry is that which is finally threatening or predatory. Additionally, pointing towards the perceived threat of a different ‘race’, via the physicality of the eye, paradoxically signals an inability to know (or metaphorically, ‘to see’) the contextual similarities and differences that other

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<sup>41</sup> The gesture implies clear borders between identifiable ‘races’ – as if clear physical characteristics can be accorded to particular ethnicities, in order to inscribe social difference. However, the idea of race is not confirmed on the biological and genetic level (AAPA, 1996; Keita, S. O. Y., et al, 2004).

people embody. This transpires as a paradox of ‘looking whilst not seeing’ – it is the embodied, context-ridden, lives of those people subject to prejudice, that are elided in his momentary gesture of embodied bigotry. The Caucasian man makes his eye look like his idea of an Asian man’s when, figuratively speaking, he sees nothing about him.

The gesture is directed at both the Asian man’s physical difference and the Asian man himself – via pointing towards, and moving, his own eye. The eye can be understood as the metaphorical crux of this ‘looking whilst not seeing’ paradox. In this case, the eye embodies an ontological boundary between the physical, observable, exteriority of the body and the experiential, hidden, interior of the mental, emotional, psychological, social, and cultural, that comprise a person’s identity. The man gestures towards physical difference in order to demean it, purporting to ‘know’ the truth of the man behind that physical difference. Yet perhaps, for the viewer, it is the Caucasian man’s personhood revealed, or constructed, by the photograph. While each person in the photograph can be understood as socially positioned, the Caucasian man’s gesture specifically serves to reveal his immersion in, and reproduction of, discourses of hierarchical value – where particular differences are accorded the value of ‘less-than’. In this way, the man’s distinctly social gesture, towards the physicality of the eye, serves to reveal that which it denies – that the physical is social, and the social, physical.

I would argue nonetheless, that the literal and figurative centrality of that gesture serves to support the viewer’s identification with the subjectivity of the Caucasian man – as the central subject of the photograph. In this way, the photograph also draws the viewer towards this man’s relationships with the other figures. The Asian man seems to do nothing to prompt or deserve the bigoted gesture, merely embodying the physical characteristics of the Caucasian man’s prejudice. A woman is physically joined to the Caucasian man (as they hold hands, him pulling her as she walks alongside, but slightly behind him), but appears psychologically distant, or oblivious, to the enactment of power beside her (and thus perhaps also oblivious to her own privilege, and her own subjection, within racial and gendered power relations – those pictured and imagined). All three figures walk down the street in somewhat similar attire, however a small class or income difference is signified as the Caucasian couple’s clothes appear slightly dishevelled and casual, whilst the Asian man, seemingly in a worker’s uniform, looks neater and more formally

attired. These differences however, are slight and ill defined, an ambiguity that therefore draws attention to the similarities of the clothes (and therefore of the people) as much as to their differences. Similarly, the capture of the figures on the street, whilst signifying difference (via the bigoted gesture), is also the encapsulation of a moment that does not allow the viewer to see the people's origins, destinations or purposes, and as such, is the capture of what appears to be a chance encounter of equivalence within that figurative space. The characters all walk for a moment, almost alongside each other, signalling an 'all in it together(ness)' that seems to transcend their differences in subjectivity, to signal a greater 'human condition', outside of the enactment of bigotry and hierarchical difference.

This stepping back to see a larger context can occur again for a viewer who, whilst drawn into identification with the Caucasian man, also witnesses what he denies. Identification with the context of a wider humanity may also serve to provide a self-reflexive linking of the imaginative 'placing of self in an other's subjectivity' with its flip-side, the 'placing of other in self', that can occur within identification. That is, stepping back into viewing a larger context can propel the viewer into reflection that produces awareness of their own split subjectivity. The viewer can understand that, like the Caucasian man, one represses, and yet, like the Caucasian man, one can be oblivious to what it is that is actually repressed. Via the Caucasian man, the viewer can understand that this is a grave and critical part of human sociality, that we enact: individual, oblivious, relentless, positions of power and victimhood; random projections of hatred and prejudice, impersonal in foundation, yet personalised in imposition; implicit, uncalled for, unfair (mis)judgements of personhood: and that these misjudgements are part of what makes up 'the social', and are also (necessarily) then internalised as part of 'self'.

The meanings outlined above can be considered as both present within, and absent from, the photograph *Mimic* (1982). The experience of viewing the photograph is, one could argue, that of flip-flopping – between these identifications with other and self, and also, simultaneously, between apprehension of what appears to be a consistent and constructed meaning, and the awareness of the lack of any implicit-meaning within this, and indeed all, signification. It could be argued that these paradoxes are resolved by considering the meaning of the photograph as constructed via an embodied, situated, process of interpretation. For example, these

interpretations offered for Jeff Wall's *The Storyteller* (1986) and *Mimic* (1982), interpret and articulate contradictions within the photograph in an attempt to resolve the evident paradoxes. Resolution arises not solely by bringing the paradoxes into language, but also, in doing so, by linking to the deeper foundational paradox between language and the Real. This deeper paradox makes concrete the fact that the power relations of difference belong to language and culture; that recognition of the similarities of personhood, or more precisely, the potential ability to empathise with, know, or experience, an other's subjectivity, is a capacity that is limited to embodiment and therefore also to circumstance, that is also repressed within language. Further, that while this awareness is repressed by language, language is also the means by which it can be articulated and therefore brought to consciousness. That is to say, via language we can understand ourselves as potentially able to occupy any, or even all, subjectivities (and thus also their power positions) in all situations. This equivalence of potential however, does not nullify nor equalise power. Instead, it reveals that knowledge and subjectivity are limited, contextual, and not fixed, though existing within a Symbolic system of binary and hierarchy that pretends fixity.

## CASE STUDY 2: PAT BRASSINGTON

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In Pat Brassington's photograph *Space for Dreams I* (2009), a woman stands in a room wearing a wedding dress, her hands flaring the skirt outwards, as if asking for admiration, or at least confirmation, of the image produced. The woman, however, is facing the corner of the room, and the size and shape of her figure appear too small to be concealing either an onlooker, or a mirror, to admire, or confirm, in return. Her white dress dominates the frame, with the remainder of the visual field taken up by the wooden floor and skirting, along with a large expanse of pink wallpaper, patterned with leaves and what appear to be large flowers. The lack of objects, other than the woman with her white dress, the wooden floor, and the patterned wallpaper, suggests the room's emptiness; and more specifically, the emptiness of the corner she is turned towards. Concomitantly, the woman's head is not in frame, allowing the viewer to identify with this 'looking in' or inner-subjectivity, rather than her outer-appearance or character.

The feminine colour of the wallpaper, along with its obvious visual significance, are redolent of Charlotte Perkins Gillman's canonical short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892/1997) – whose female protagonist is confined to an old nursery, by her husband, as a rest cure for her supposed madness after childbirth. The eponymous wallpaper that surrounds the protagonist, and dominates the room, becomes the focus of her introspection, or madness, and seems to simultaneously chain her to, and free her from, her prescribed feminine role within the medical and social context portrayed (a context that pathologises emotion and other perceived feminine traits). In the case of Brassington's photograph, the woman's positioning, pose, and the surrounding wallpaper, similarly work to indicate introspection, or inwards direction, with the trope of femininity signalled, in this case, by the attire of the white wedding dress. Furthermore, the anonymity signified by the visual absence of the woman's face and head, along with the familiar gesture of flaring the skirt of the dress, allows the viewer to identify with her as a generic, rather than particular, 'woman', looking inwards. An obvious association here is with the cultural trope of a female's childhood imaginings of weddings and wedding dresses, arising from the idea of a wedding as a place where the woman is the focus of display, in a ritual that culturally promises the 'fulfilment of femininity'. This signified generality empties the woman's gesture of holding out the dress, and the room's emptiness becomes her emptiness too – as while being the centre of display, she has no individuality or embodied subjectivity, and moreover, in this case, no audience or larger culture to confirm. The clichéd girl's dream of a wedding dress, as the singular reply to women's desire, and the concurrent promise of the fulfilment of femininity, seem to have failed here. There is no apotheosis of femininity, no audience, and no centre of attention – just introspection and memory, turned towards, and facing, this nothingness in the corner of a room.

The woman's watch functions as a focal point, anchoring the movement of the eye from automatically looking upwards after seeing the woman's stance. The focus is thus brought from the woman's dress and stance and, consequently, from the association of childhood imaginings, to the watch and the present time. Following the conventions of perspective, the composition of the photograph then directs the viewer's eye from the watch to the floorboards and then follows the floorboards into the corner. The corner is obscured but, nonetheless, it is also immediately evoked, by those same traditions of perspective. The skirting of the right wall also serves to point the eye to the corner as well as to the skirting of the dress. At the

exact line where the conventions of perspective inform the viewer that the walls meet, there is instead, a seam which appears to run the full length of the back of the woman's dress and thus, the full length of the photographic frame also.

This seam, running down both the middle of the dress and the photograph, gapes open for a small stretch at the top, revealing the same pink and patterning of the wallpaper, but in this case, lying underneath the dress. The shape and colour of this open section of seam are decidedly suggestive of a vulva, in which case, accordingly, the woman should be positioned facing forward in the photograph. This anomaly creates the possibility of a dual positioning for the woman, as she is facing away but, then, due to the seam, symbolically and logically facing forward. This creates a visual, self-referential, contradiction that is not straightforwardly solved by any other elements of the photograph. This creation of contradiction, within the conventions of perspective, prompts a vicious circle for the viewer, who repeatedly searches for the resolution of a singular perspective.

Visual elements are thus probed for associations, for the purpose of disambiguation, yet may serve instead to reinforce this perspectival paradox. In this way, the paradox of perspective, in regard to the woman's dual forward-and-away placement, serves to prompt metonymical links, such as one between her display of the wedding dress and a possible, similar, opening of the dress to display her vulva. This associative logic, however, is cut in two by the horizontal waistband of the dress, with the placement of the open seam at the top half of the dress, rather than the logical bottom, and thus conclusively physically separated from the placement of the suggested vulva. However, the linking of the wallpaper on the walls, with the wallpaper beneath the open seam, serves to associatively transform the entire photographic scene into a symbolic vulva. Yet the impossibility of the actual display of a vulva, via an opening in the top of the dress, remains. This invoked, yet impossible, display can then be associatively linked to other 'not present' displays of the vulva, in a further attempt to disambiguate the resulting paradox. In this instance, as the chain of associations attached to wedding dresses (in regard to the feminine role) stretches from childhood to adulthood, the associations attached to a displayed vulva could follow a similar path and link to the common occurrence, in childhood, of girls lifting skirts or dresses to display their nude bodies. The girl admonished as inappropriate for displaying her nakedness, is thus associatively juxtaposed with the previous association of the childhood dream

wedding. This opposition, between taboo sexuality and culturally sanctioned wedding, is then linked yet again, to both the adult woman's wedding and to the adult sexuality to which wedding rituals, in essence, refer. The disparity within this opposition thus serves to link to the opposition between the actual lived experience of adult femininity and these child, and adulthood, dreams and cultural rituals, condensing within the signifier of the wedding dress. In this way, the photograph's paradox propels the viewer to see what is beneath the dress – that is, not only an imagined vulva, but also the cultural inscription of gender attached to that genitalia, from childhood onwards. The photograph constructs a paradox, in reference to femininity, that circles around the imagined image of the woman facing us at the same time as she is facing away. Here are two realities that cannot exist at once, as with the cultural coding of femininity and the actual lived experience of it. These two realities cannot meet, as the walls cannot, with the woman's real body 'in the way'.

### CASE STUDY 3: PATRICIA PICCININI

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*The Breathing Room* (1999), consists of dark room with three large video screen installations and accompanying audio, including a sound active floor<sup>42</sup>. Each screen displays a close-up image of what appears to be the same, unknown, creature which, in the confines of the dark space, brings the viewer into an almost claustrophobic proximity with the unidentifiable geography of its body. Whilst the creature is unknown, and its skin, orifices, and protrusions, unrecognisable, the actual presence of these elements suggests that the creature has the body of a mammal. In addition to these visual elements an audible beat is heard, seemingly coming from the surrounding walls but, also, vibrating through the soft, sponge-like, floor, creating an encompassing experience of what appears to be the heartbeat of a living creature. The sound of breath can also be heard, inhaling and exhaling in time with the opening and closing of the creature's orifices. Even so, it seems impossible to identify these orifices, to name a mouth, an anus, or any other orifice, as they do not resemble any known, named, bodily, opening. As openings in the skin, they would seem to allow objects and substances to enter and exit the

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<sup>42</sup> The catalogue, *Call of the Wild: Patricia Piccinini* (Piccinini, P, and Kent, R, 2002, p. 42), lists video installation and sound active floor, 3 video back projectors, 12 television monitors, audio system, sprung floor and transducer, dimensions variable.

body yet, correspondingly, the specific purpose of each is also unclear. This indeterminacy of the nature, position, and purpose, of each orifice has an effect of uncanniness, making visible the strict few variations of known orifices mapped on known bodies, whilst at the same time, denying such. The childhood horror of monsters, different in ways unimaginable, so that the horror is both at something possibly so strangely different and also then at ones own body, as something now without the comforting, and orienting, solidity of the known and fixed.

This uncanny indeterminacy also extends to the audio of breath inhaling and exhaling, which has a variation where the slow rhythm increases in tempo until it mimics either the sounds associated with sexual climax, or the sounds of intense distress and panic. Within the close-up confines of viewing images of the creature's skin, protrusions, and orifices, an inability to determine which experience the breath signifies, can transfer both erotic charge and panic to the viewer. The viewer's specific position *as viewer* is then also in question – as possibly too intimate, or perhaps harmful, in regards to the creature. In other words, via the real-time, ambiguous, experience of the audio and visual representations of the creature, the viewer is brought into the heart of the matter. Within the confines of the dark, enclosed, space, intimately viewing body parts, surrounded by representations of the physical elements of the creature's experience, the viewer is unable to pin down the 'what is what', 'which is where', and 'who is who', of this creature. Whilst science would conceivably monitor these elements of a living being (heartbeat, breath, a continuous visual of the body), none of these elements cohere to form an identifiable whole, an identifiable living creature. Rather, this transpires as an experience of pre-Oedipal partial-objects, where not only the viewed object is in doubt but, also, any position from which the object can be viewed. This results in a perspective as dissembled as the creature itself, with a viewer unable to find the customary controlling, distanced, position from which to look, unable to separate subject and object, own self from the creature other.

The suggestion of a heartbeat, the inhaling and exhaling of orifices, along with the unrecognisability of the orifices, protrusions, and creature, indicate that this is an artificial life form, a creature biologically constructed by humans. Here, science is positioned as creator (or in religious paradigms, as god) with the power to create something entirely new in nature. The creature's ambiguous sounds, seemingly from either intense distress or mating, raise questions regarding the ethics of such a

creation. If the creature is in distress, what damage has been done to it by giving it a life that scares or harms it? If the creature is mating, the possibility of procreation exists, which suggests an attendant lessening of the creator's control. What would this mean for the existence of it and every other life form? Additionally, the representation of the existence of such a creature – in a manner that creates an illusion of its aliveness and, therefore, actual existence – raises the paradox, referred to earlier in reference to Deleuze's false copy (cited in Krauss, 1984, p. 62), of an inability to determine the difference between copy and Real. That is, the viewer is presented with a representation (a copy) of either the possibility of an actual creature (an imagined creature), or an actual scientifically-created creature, which would be, in itself, a copy of that imagined possibility. For example, in Patricia Piccinini's photographs *Protein Lattice* (1997), a mouse has an ear growing out of its back. The mouse could be either a digitally, or otherwise created, fictional mouse, or an actual scientifically-created mouse that has been photographed, but the fiction and fact binary then opens to include the third possibility for this photograph, of a photographic reconstruction of that scientifically created mouse. The viewer's identification can thus move irresolvably between, for example, pride, compassion, and fear, all whilst confused as to the actual object of identification. As with Jeff Wall's photographs *Mimic* (1982) and *The Storyteller* (1986), the untethering of polarities into irresolvable complexities is essential to the abundant signification of the piece.

As with Ron Mueck's hyper-realist human sculptures, there is also an uncanniness in regards to the skin of the creature. That is, its lifelike appearance is signified not only by the extremely detailed nature of its resemblance to human skin but, also, significantly, by a purposive resemblance to the flaws and imperfections of human skin. Much like the way noise is programmed into virtual environments, to make the spaces appear more lifelike than the smooth 'perfection' of the virtual, in this case, it is the magnified details of blemishes, pores, folds, and moisture, that signifies 'aliveness' to the viewer – much more than the other perfectly copied physical traits. Similarly, the unidentifiable nature of the orifices presented, indicates that they could be orifices related to body waste and/or to sex, both of which, in humans, would be hidden and taboo. In this case, it is not the 'clean and proper body' of the Symbolic that reassures the viewer of the authenticity of this cultural creation, but rather, the abject body – the lived, intimate, experience an imperfect, uncontrollable, body.

While the creature in *The Breathing Room* (1999) is resolutely unidentifiable, Piccinini identifies it as the same creature, the *siren mole*, featured in a number of subsequent series of photographs. In *SO2 (Synthetic Organism 2) (Series 1)* (2000), Piccinini ascribes a similar authenticity to the creature by embedding it within environments that signify particular recognisable, cultural, aspects of humanity. For example, in the photographs *36 Degrees on the 14<sup>th</sup>* (2000), *Restless* (2000), and *Waiting for Jennifer* (2000), this artificial creature is inserted into the familiar western icon of a young man's car. The creature is a passenger in two of the photos, accompanying a young man as he presumably waits for his girlfriend 'Jennifer'. The creature's position within the car (in the front passenger seat, with the back seat perhaps left to Jennifer) and therefore the social hierarchy outlined within the car, and the creature's open body language (as it sits on its back with legs in the air and belly exposed) signify a friendship relation or, more specifically, within the Australian vernacular, 'mate-ship'. However, the creature could easily be understood alternatively, as something akin to a pet dog. In this case, it would occupy a very different position hierarchically – being made to relinquish the seat to Jennifer. The creature is indeterminably situated in this instance, as either socially like-human or socially like-animal. The ambiguous positioning disturbs these polarities, as it presents them and, thus, via association, disturbs the conceptions of consciousness, self-awareness, emotionality, intelligence, etc, that are attributed to humans and animals. These elements are attributed quite differently to humans than to animals, despite the similar biology, particularly of humans to other mammals, such as dogs. Moreover, the creature is not only positioned inside human social spaces, but via this ambiguous placement within the hierarchies of these spaces, it is also situated effectively as a normal, or 'natural', part of them – all whilst the spaces themselves are concurrently *made strange*<sup>43</sup>, by means of the non-identifiability of the creature and by the revelation of their resulting unsteady boundaries.

This uncanniness is fore-fronted in the second image of the series, *36 Degrees on the 14<sup>th</sup>* (2000), where a partial image of the creature - its tail truncated and somewhat phallic – is reflected in the car's hub cap. The creature moves out of frame, partially shadowed by the car, conveying an indistinctness echoed by the

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<sup>43</sup> *Making strange* or *ostranenie*, is a term introduced by Victor Shklovsky, used by the Russian Formalists, that describes breaking a viewer/reader out of habitual modes of perception in order to introduce a new way of seeing/understanding (Shklovsky, 1917).

ambiguity of both its body part and the purpose of its movement. The context is thus transformed from the previous, comforting, domestic sphere, to one of distinct unease, as this reminder of the possibility of danger, that is connate to the unknown, slips for a moment into view.

Within the second part of this series, SO2 (Series 2) 2001, in *Kick Flip Ollie* (2000), *Last Day of the Holidays* (2000), and *Social Studies* (2000), the viewer returns to the comfort of suburbia, as the same creature is placed with young boys skateboarding in a carpark. The boys are interacting with the creature and in one photo are all gathered around, looking and smiling at it. The boys seem comfortable and at ease with the creature, who appears to be either a curiosity or a pet. However, an attempt to place the creature wholly into either category fails and it remains, again, indeterminably either. However, whether existing as curiosity or pet, this interaction between the creature and the boys clearly suggests that it is an unthreatening and culturally-integrated life form. The signifiers of the cultural sphere are thus attached to the creature, as if it is a part of this sphere.

Indeed, there is an 'ethics of care' suggested here, by the inclusion of creatures constructed according to imagination and science (and also as possible futuristic predictions of current technology) into the human arena. That is, the actual creation of life suggests wide, even infinite, possibilities outside of the 'already known' of life. While the existence of such creatures remains theoretical, the evoked possibilities remain enormous. Once a creature's existence is actual, however, all possibilities narrow to the singular. That is, an actual singular creature has a specific place in the world – including a progenitor, the meeting of particular biological needs, a specific relation to a particular environment and, of course, relationship to other animals, including humans. Piccinini logically extends this to a specific place in the world that includes intimate relationships with others – not the mating behaviour regularly included in representations of 'the nature of animals', but the familial, the suburban, the domestic. This specific placement accords with that of pets, as companion animals domesticated by humans for their own purposes, or with the human creation of offspring (with attendant associations of 'family'). That is, the placement of the creature in this specific environment, while not determinable, nevertheless references the familiarities of already existing placements, defined in accord with or distinction from them. Beyond its juxtaposition of the 'strangeness' of a fantastical creature with the 'ordinariness' of

the domestic sphere, this work suggests that if science plays god, then humanity is changed too. This change does not so much reflect humanity's new found, god-like ability to create another entity from synthetic tissue but, rather, the existence of new relationships with the products it creates. That is, humanity must expand its existing social relations, including discourses around the idea of life, in order to interact with, and to include, these new life forms.

In the representation of a male scientist cradling a creature released from its incubator in *Science Story: Part 1, Laboratory Procedures* (2002), Piccinini reinserts the maternal elided from this scientific 'creation'. The scientist's gesture of care also serves to reinsert an animality back into notions of humanness – that is, it is through the body, reproduction, and child rearing, that humanity is forced to witness its nature as animal. Science, as a manifestation of the Symbolic, negates the body and nature as it attempts to transcend them (Bradley, 2004). Piccinini's photo, however, works to insert the biological back into that transcendent technology. In other words, Piccinini re-replaces that which has been replaced. The paradox signified is thus between the culturally-imagined, infinite, possibilities that science intimates and labours towards and the specific, lived, situated lives of individual creatures born in this manner – asserting also, that the possibilities of our cultural-scientific imagination are also psychologically, and animally, driven.

This self-reflection in terms of cultural creations is intensified with *The Breathing Room* (1999), as the entire experience takes place in a dark, womb-like, room where the presence of an audible heart-beat signifies that the viewed life-form (the possible made actual) is alive but, also, contradictorily, suggests the possibility of the viewer as the life-form within the room/womb. That is, the viewer can identify with the creature, as an embryo or infant, looking out through a window (screen), on to the skin and orifices of its mother – much like an embryonic kangaroo would look onto the mother's external womb. In this way, the creature with the strange orifice then becomes not just something humanity can culturally birth, but something that could conceivably also birth the viewer (and by extension, humanity). This signified paradox – whereby a viewer is able to position them-self as part of what has birthed the creature and/or as the creature birthed – is similarly

rich in implication<sup>44</sup>. The contradictory presence of both positions in this maternal relation further implies the possibility of all conceivable combinations of technological and human – human birthing artificial, human birthing human, artificial birthing human, and artificial birthing artificial. In this way, Piccinini’s construction of a creature, and suggestion of a womb, brings the artificial not just into the realm of the natural, but also into the realm of the human while, conversely, and simultaneously, bringing the human into the realm of the artificial and the technological. Piccinini propels the viewer to contemplate the falsity of the binaries of human/animal, nature/culture, nature/technology, artificially created/naturally birthed, in a way that positions the ‘other’ of artificial-life as not just a paradoxical creature that disturbs these binaries but also, further, as no longer only ‘other,’ but also ‘self’. Conceptions of intimacy, separation and otherness open and close like the creature’s orifices, whose function we are unable to determine.

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<sup>44</sup> Arguably an example of Erica Seccombe’s (2014) *fifth dimension* of an artwork, comprised of “an individual’s subjective experience of virtual nature” (p. 1). Seccombe adds to artist Olafur Eliasson’s sensory-based fifth dimension (as cited in Seccombe, 2014, pp. 1 - 2), whereby the individual’s subjective/sensory engagement with installation art exceeds any conception of art as an object of rational truth. Seccombe privileges the viewer’s sensory engagement with virtual depictions of nature as similarly able to undo and challenge customary conceptions of nature, along with customary conceptions of the viewer as separate from nature, and as separate from the artwork itself. That is, it is the complexity of the embodied experience of an artwork that in itself embodies the possibilities for change.

## CHAPTER 4: THE VISUAL & THE ABJECT

### THE THETIC IMAGE

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Freud's (1954, 1924) analysis of the story *Oedipus Rex*<sup>45</sup> (for the purposes of his Oedipal theory), introduces a schematic, later further developed by Lacan and Kristeva, of the relationship between the visual and the unstable nature of identity. Freud (1954, 1924) interprets Oedipus' stabbing of his own eyes as a symbol for castration, with 'fear of castration' correspondingly represented as a fear of losing one's eyes or one's vision (as elaborated in his later essay *The Uncanny*<sup>46</sup>). This interpretation is predicated on Freud's location of an image – that of the sight of visible sexual difference – as the central and propelling force of the child's subsequent movement towards subject-hood, via the process he termed the *Oedipal Phase/Complex* (1954, 1924). This phase occurs when the male infant<sup>47</sup>, catching sight of the mother's genitals, interprets her visible difference (from his own and his father's genitals) as a result of castration. That is, rather than seeing the different genitals as another variant of genitalia, the infant assumes the mother had a penis, just like his own, which was then lost. According to Freud, this prompts the male child to relinquish identification with the mother, for the father – subsequently taking into his identity the future promise of the father's social power

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<sup>45</sup> Sophocles, n.d./2011.

<sup>46</sup> Freud, 1955.

<sup>47</sup> The female child sees herself as already castrated, identifying with the mother in exchange for a future gift of a baby (from her father) and later, possession of the penis (1924, pp. 178 - 179). However, a similar fear of switching back can be assumed from the loss of power associated with the female child's identification with the mother's position in culture. By necessity, this power would always be circumscribed by her incomplete separation from the pre-Oedipal maternal. While a detailed analysis of these concepts in regard to differences in gender (and also to non-binary gender, which is not addressed in these theories) is beyond the scope of this research, further investigation and elaboration of these differences appears to be a fruitful direction for future research.

(1924, p. 176). This process however, also evokes the threat of its reversal – that is, the fantasy of the mother’s ‘castrated’ genitals not only propels the male child to switch identification from one parent to another, but also incurs a fear of switching back – this time with the consequent loss of that promised power.

This association of the loss of vision with the pre-Oedipal maternal relation, and of vision with the phallic power of the post-Oedipal, is extended within Lacan’s theorisation of the three registers of the psyche (the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real), and then further elaborated within Kristeva’s conception of the abject. For Lacan, it is the essentially visual experience of the Imaginary that accords both the male, and female, infant’s passage through the Mirror Phase – with the sight of a reflected, coherent, image of itself initiating its ensuing self-conception as a subject. As the promise of the father’s phallic power assures the male subject’s passage through the Oedipal phase, this visually stable form secures both the male, and female, child’s identity and position within the Symbolic.

The reflected image of self is primarily *thetic* – as the initiatory image whereby the drive patterns of rejection and stasis separate and cohere into the forms necessary for symbolisation. Within linguistics, the *thetic*, from *thesis*, refers to a proposition or placement<sup>48</sup>. Kristeva borrows Edmund Husserl’s (1913) term ‘thetic phase’ – for the positing of the object, by the subject. For Kristeva, however, Husserl’s is an idealist formation and, instead, her thetic phase refers to both the positing of the object and the subject. Or more precisely, the thetic points to the identification that is a separation, that produces the subject as it is producing the object, or vice versa. It is the positing of the subject, object, language, and meaning (Keltner, 2011, pp. 26 - 27). It is the point where the dynamic between the semiotic and symbolic elements of language produces signification – and it is thus not only a proposition, but also a rupture. In the Mirror Phase, the thetic refers to the break where the subject separates from the maternal and identifies with the signifier (Lechte & Margaroni, 2004, p. 14), moving from the semiotic to the Symbolic. The thetic is where drive motility meets unity, and meaning connects with sign (Kristeva, 1974). It is the Mirror Phase specular image that “establishes a separation and identification between subject and object [that is] the precondition of signification” (Keltner, 2011, p. 27). Kristeva argues that “all enunciation, whether of a word or of a sentence, is thetic. It requires an identification; in other words, the subject

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<sup>48</sup> From the Greek *thetikos*: *thetos* laid down; *tithenai* to place (Brookes, 2014).

must separate from and through his image, from and through his objects.” (Kristeva, 1974, p. 43). That is, this image marks where the abject semiotic (or in Freud’s and Lacan’s case, the pre-Oedipal and the Real) has given birth to a new, apparent, fixity: the seemingly coherent forms of language, and of self, delivered via rupture and discontinuity.

As the stability inherited via the male subject’s passage through the Oedipal Phase is threatened by the possibility of its reversal, in regard to the Mirror Phase, the new found Symbolic identity is similarly threatened by the possibility of a falling back into the undifferentiated relation with the maternal. Thus, the child embarks on an endless quest in search of similar coherent images, to secure, and re-secure, its Symbolic identity. The infant seeks to transform its felt experience of un-coordination and dependency into a unified, autonomous, and separate, image of self. This self, suddenly gained, is nevertheless, still a specular image, and thus, not really gained at all. That is, the reflection contains both a visual and experiential distance – it is an image of self always predicated on a different, future, fullness, just out of reach. The reflected self is an illusion of promise, a glimpsed possibility of wholeness, identified with as if it has already been achieved and, yet, therefore, also contrasted with the concurrent failure of that promise: the present, felt, experience of ‘not whole yet’, a co-present reminder of the incompleteness and disunity of self.

Lacan nominates the infant’s identification with this reflected ‘I’ (that is also, as a reflection, ‘not I’) a *misrecognition* (1949/1977) – a slip inherent to that illusory stability. As the infant endlessly searches for images, as lack propels desire, these thetic objects that prop up and define the self (Leupin, pp. 1 - 7) fall again to the remainder of the body, and the Real, from which they sprung. This gap/lack/distance, inherent to an identity based on reflection, propels the subject’s endless search for stability, yet also provides that stability’s subsequent downfall. Furthermore, it can be understood as identical to the distance between the Real and language, between the experiential and the abstract, and between the body and consciousness – a distance traversed to gain power, a chasm fallen into, a shadow-play always in relation to an other or an object – glimpsed, grasped, held, but never integrated, never completing the held open circle between self and whole self, between self and other, between object and satisfaction. Moreover, Oliver’s (1993b) elaboration of Kristeva’s abject, as a repeated pattern of separation and

identification, allows for an understanding of this quest for images as inscribed in this compulsive and unconscious, yet, also destructive and generative, pattern – whereby the subject’s quest for reflections of that thetic-self is more than an endless, or futile, gathering and failing, propping and falling, as it also entails the endless creation of the new.

The term ‘thetic’ is in strong contradistinction to Lacan’s term for the Mirror Phase reflection: the *ideal ego*. The ideal ego is an internalised fantasy of perfection, a ‘whole’ self. While this fantasy is always differentiated with its underside, *reality*, in contrast, the thetic is a unity that simultaneously functions as a break. Operating from birth through to the Symbolic, the thetic is the separation that exists within identification; the negative, the abject – the push away in order to be, that occurs at that moment of identification – it is paradoxically, both position and negation, object and cut.

The ensuing self-other, and self-object, relations fuelled by that central image (and according to the logic of abjection, via similar but more partial instances of the visual thetic, earlier than the Mirror Phase image)<sup>49</sup> are relegated to the sphere of the Imaginary (i.e. the repeated viewing of photographs, film, advertising, etc, identification with protagonists, the search for romantic love objects, etc). These visual relations are also, necessarily, inseparable from not only the social relations, but also, specifically, the power relations of the Symbolic order. That is, it can be argued that, correspondent with the ways in which language operates, it is via this founding and thetic image, that the visual forever after serves to separate, categorise, and create the distance and unity that support this promise of a coherent self. In other words, the categories and hierarchies of the Symbolic (that are better known through the workings of language), are inseparable from this compulsive quest for stability, and its necessary failure – as encapsulated in that reflected image.

Moreover, in the same manner in which the newborn infant’s manifest dependency on its mother leads eventually to a taking up of the symbolic stand-ins of language – a process delineated by Lacan in his conceptions of Need, Demand, and Desire –

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<sup>49</sup> For instance, as the semiotic elements of language, such as prosody, are the blueprint for the thetic separations of language, according to that logic of abjection the mother’s breast (which Kristeva terms the first object) (Oliver, 1993b) and the mother’s face would also be the first blueprints of thetic unity that later cohere as objects within the Symbolic.

the promised self-sufficiency of the thetic image adheres a sense of self only already caught, and transcribed, within the existing signs and meanings of the Symbolic. Where the dance of lack and desire is propelled by: that initial dependency; the ensuing subjectivity constructed through the Mirror and Oedipal Phases, and the self-annihilation of identity that would result from identification for the male child, and full identification for the female child, with the care-giver mother; and the self-coherence and social power promised by identification with the father and/or the signifier: this dance is also mirrored already in the power relations of the culture the infant is born into. In this sense, the Symbolic power offered by the Imaginary image is a culturally-specific, fragile, unity maintained by the constant, repeated, visual expression of that which is considered socially powerful – put into crisis by the constant, repeated, intrusion of that which is not.

#### SUBSTITUTING ART FOR THE MATERNAL

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In Kristeva's terms, disturbance of this visual stanchion, the failure of its base function, is synonymous with the subject's inability to completely separate from the maternal<sup>50</sup>. Rather than relegating vision's failures purely to the pre-Oedipal – a past phase of infancy, threatening reoccurrence (and the loss of the phallic power gained within the Symbolic) – Kristeva's notion of the semiotic allows for an understanding of visual fixity as constantly, and necessarily, interrupted by that which forms it. Both vision and its failures are part of the continued pattern of abjection – a pattern of stasis and rejection, reduplicating the crisis between the semiotic maternal and the Symbolic. Furthermore, within her monograph *The Severed Head* (2012) Kristeva provides the ultimate metaphor for this contradictory, self-referential, movement.

In *The Severed Head* (2012), Kristeva analyses the repeated use of the severed head throughout the history of art. She argues that this particular image, and our

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<sup>50</sup> Much like the position women are relegated to within this framework – with an incomplete separation from the maternal.

Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to delineate the differences between the male and female subject within Lacan and Kristeva's models, the difference in genders in this respect suggest further investigation, into whether this incomplete separation of the female infant is perhaps a better model for the standard psyche than the male infant's more complete separation, as an avenue for future research.

broader investments in the visible, provide a defence against two important and opposing fears: a primary fear, where the dependent infant fears that its loss of the caretaker mother (via the loss of the Maternal) will result in annihilation and death (of the body, as opposed to the loss of identity feared by a return to the Maternal); and the lesser fear of the loss of phallic, or Symbolic, power associated with castration (via a return to the maternal, the reversal of what is gained by its loss)<sup>51</sup>.

According to Kristeva, the subject can mitigate the terror of the loss of phallic power with the Symbolic tools of eroticism and language. However, these tools were not available when the child experienced such utter incompleteness, in the dependency of infancy, as to warrant a fear of complete annihilation<sup>52</sup>. For this archaic fear, it is representation itself that salves, as the child's movement from the Maternal to language is more than a movement, it is also a substitution – a substitution of the lost Maternal relation for the sign. As Kristeva asks: “isn't the sign precisely that which symbolises the object in the absence of the object? That which represents arbitrarily or through convention, its lost referent?” (2012, pp. 5 - 6).

These fears both arise from the loss of the Maternal. One fears that loss, however, and the other, in contradiction, fears its reversal – with both incurring different consequences that nevertheless correspond, in that they both also incur a loss of self-hood. It can be argued that these two fears are the expression of a paradox, or more precisely, a surface expression, in the form of a contradiction, of the deeper paradox between the semiotic and Symbolic, the Real and language, body and mind, the unconscious and conscious. As with the distance between the ‘self that looks at self, in order to be’, as outlined previously – the surface contradiction, experienced by a subject within the Symbolic as either lack, or power, functions only via the Imaginary and Symbolic interrelations of subject-hood, and object-hood, as split off or separated manifestations of the whole. In relation to the visual metaphor of the uroborus, this can be illustrated in the way in which the two ends

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<sup>51</sup> These fears are differentiated from the process of abjection – which is a putting into crisis of Symbolic identity, an experience of the annihilation of that division – as opposed to these two fears that the child carries as part of Symbolic identity and which s/he can therefore ameliorate to some extent. Abjection is the rising of the primary repression that created the unconscious, whereas this is the return of repressed *contents* of the unconscious. The abject is a very different model than fetishism: the return of the abject is a true crisis, not a prompt for sublimation.

<sup>52</sup> A fear that can be recognised, once the child has taken its place within the Symbolic, as physical death.

of the uroborus, the head and tail of the snake/dragon, appear to be separate entities if the rest of the body is hidden from view. Within the terms of this metaphor, the head and tail represent the binaries and contradictions of consciousness, whose self-referentiality is hidden within the unconscious or, more precisely, by the splitting off of the unconscious from view. In this sense, the object is that which momentarily collapses this splitting off, this repression of the whole field, necessary for Symbolic identity, language, and cultural function. For Lacan, the self-referential contradiction inherent in these interrelations is evidenced in his two instances of other-hood, the 'other' that is sought in order to fill, that he states is synonymous with the mis-recognised ego, and therefore contains its gap, and the 'Other' that is the larger Symbolic, lined with the ego's resultant (social) shame regarding that lack.

This entirety is beautifully wrought by Kristeva in her analysis of the repeated occurrence of the image of the decapitated head within art, and as the founding image of art, throughout history. She argues that these repeated representations, and accordingly, representation itself, function to protect against these two fears. Via art, the subject curtails both the 'loss of self' and the contradictory 'loss of power', as s/he represents them. That is, a representation of the severed head both hides the separation from the Maternal (via substituting it for a sign) and reveals it (via representing it). The head cut from the body is reminiscent of Descartes mind/body split, which is repeated within Symbolic subjectivity via the various manifestations of the privileging of one term's associations over the other (e.g. mind/body, consciousness/unconscious, thought/feeling). The severed head, a literal separation of the brain from the body, operates as a metaphor for the separation of the Symbolic and the semiotic, and correspondingly, identity and the Maternal. This separation is thus revealed, in the image of a severed head, as a false division – in that the separation of the two results not in a subject, but a corpse. The image of the severed head is thus akin to the revealed uroborus, whereby a binary reality is revealed as a continuum, and the contradictory terms are revealed as a necessary, paradoxical, structure built upon the repression of that continuum. In the act of creating a representation of the cutting, or division, of the head from the body, the Maternal is both lost and found, and the self both creates and annihilates itself.

## A THETIC DOUBLE-BIND

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For Kristeva, instances of representation (such as the photograph) are signs that are substituted for the loss of the Maternal, that also serve to protect the subject against the two distinct fears metonymically associated with that primal loss. That is, for the subject now within the Symbolic Order of being, representation acts as a substitution for the maternal relation lost via its passage through the Mirror and Oedipal Phases, while simultaneously protecting against both: an archaic (and therefore attained prior to these phases) fear associated with the loss of the maternal caretaker; and a fear of the loss of power associated with a reversal of the Mirror and Oedipal Phases' loss of the maternal.

Whilst the two fears are contradictory, it is important to note that the subject who holds these fears has already taken its place within the Symbolic Order, gaining identity and a position as a speaking being<sup>53</sup>. In other words, the maternal has already been lost, the child's identity secured – and it is only then that the subject holds this contradiction of fears in relation to that loss. Furthermore, it is only via the child's movement from the pre-Oedipal to the Symbolic that the fears come into contradiction with each other, as each is gained via a different stage within that process. Each fear can thus be seen to be irrevocably psychically associated with a different side of that founding thetic break – between having the maternal in the pre-Oedipal and incurring her loss within the Symbolic – though experienced by a subject now manifestly on one side of that break.

Another contradiction is thus revealed by each fear's association with a different side of that thetic break. That is, both stages – that of prior to, and after, the the loss of the maternal – are associated with a fear that is contradictory to the actual loss occurring within that phase. Thus, when within the maternal-relation, the child fears her loss; having lost her, the subject fears not losing her. This conflict then, to lose, or not to lose, arising as the opposite of what is actually present or not present, as a consequence, also incurs its opposite. In other words, each is already paired with its opposite as the occurrence of one fear therefore necessitates the occurrence of the other. These fears result in an oppositional hall of mirrors that reveal a paradoxical double-bind for the subject.

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<sup>53</sup> For a detailed account of what serves to anchor the child in the Symbolic, preventing that return to the maternal, see Kristeva's theorisation of the positive experience of attachment to the Imaginary Father in *Tales of Love* (Kristeva, 1987).

The subject however, does not consciously hold these fears, nor consciously choose between them. No choice can actually be made but, rather, each fear's hold and effects are entirely unconscious in origin. In becoming a subject, a contradiction is incurred whose only possible resolution is psychic, and where any psychic resolution incurs more of that which is to be resolved in the first place. Like all double-binds, this contradiction is irrevocably unsolvable, because each iteration serves to set off another. Becoming a subject, which entails passage through the two stages and incorporation of the associated fears, thus engenders a vicious and self-reflexive circle for the psyche.

#### REPRESENTING THE CUT

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This paradox of the psyche manifests as a result of the thetic break; wherein the Real and maternal are repressed, and the subject enters the Symbolic realm of power, language and abstraction. Whilst the Symbolic and language serve to hide the Real from view, in being repressed the Real is brought into contradiction with the Symbolic and language – as it generates them. That is, language and representation are in a paradoxical relation to the Real. Similarly, it can be argued that an object is in a paradoxical relation to every other object, the minute it exists as an object. The creation or abstraction of an object, such as a word or a photograph, incurs a thetic break, splitting parts of the continuity of the Real from view – with a resulting Symbolic pretence that the object is not part of the same continuity as the other object, as if each object existed somehow independently of every other. This is the paradox inherent in this conception of the formation of subjectivity – the subject in the Symbolic retains these contradictory, self-referential, fears gained by its experience of, and movement between, the pre-Oedipal maternal and the Symbolic, as an unconscious residue of the loss of continuity that is denied by the singularity of identity. The anxieties in relation to the presence or absence of the maternal are the unconscious, charged, stirrings of the associative chains between what is repressed, in order to be, and the abstractions of selfhood.

The act of representation then (as evidenced in the previous case studies), whilst creating seemingly fixed objects and abstractions, serves to actuate an endless hall

of mirrors whereby each thesis is marked in contradistinction to its anti-thesis, each binary term in opposition to its polarity, in a dialectical procession leading not to synthesis, but to a reduplication of the crisis formed by that first cut (along with its metaphorical equivalents, castration and beheading). Moreover, whilst representation acts as a balm for the two fears of the subject, it also contains the possibility of revealing that latent cut – the paradox between Real and language that consciousness represses. In representations of the cut itself, the Imaginary relation, the fantasy separations between self/other, subject/object, language/Real, are ruptured. Here again, this is not a reassuring synthesis, or bringing together of separated things, but a falling apart of categories that include ‘reality’ and ‘self’, resulting in a subject who hangs precariously over a dangerous chasm of overwhelming, conflicting, and irresolvable, loss. Kristeva describes this as “the power of drawing, on the border dividing the visible from the invisible” (2012, p. 3). Whilst this is a translation from the French it is, nevertheless, a poetic use of language allowing multiple concurrent meanings: that the *act of drawing/representation occurs on* the border between conscious and unconscious, the Symbolic and the Real; and that the *power of drawing/representation is that it is this border*. That is, that representation cuts – it is the process of dividing the invisible from the visible. Additionally, that ambiguity of multiple meanings suggests that drawing itself is powerful, and that one can gain/draw power from attending to that border (for example, by the creation of a representation of the cut). To draw is to cut an object from the Real – a pencil line of lead, moving across a page, draws on/uses the invisible, to create/make visible, and visibly marks this boundary as it does so. The boundary is the cut, and to represent the cut, renders the border as it destroys it – imploding the divisions as it creates them. It is language created from the body, as the body swallows the resultant words. To cut is to copy the object, or copy the copy of the object, or copy the copy of the copy, and so on. It is ravelling, it is spinning yarn from meat, it is thethetic break. Representation of the cut breaks the myth of the Real vs language, the body vs language, self vs other – which falls down to reveal its unbearable truth. It is loss of the maternal that is cathected and, when unbound, that fragile ego, object, phallic, power that lies amongst its ruin.

## CHAPTER 5: WIRE MOTHER, CLOTH MOTHER

### CASE STUDY 4: ROGER BALLEEN

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Roger Ballen's photography, depicting the white, Afrikaans, poor of South Africa, whilst originally photojournalistic or documentary in style, later developed into a more constructed and collaborative photographic practice. In this later period, Ballen still photographs his subjects much as he finds them, but complicates that previous documentary approach with a new process, whereby both the human subjects and other elements within the depicted environments are rearranged and assembled according to his, and his human subjects', construction. Rather than occurring as a distinct break from his previous work, this stylistic turn seems to have arisen from Ballen's recognition of the environments he documented as having "symbolised something deeper" (Ballen, cited in Cook, 2007, p. 14 ) and from his observation that the various elements within struck him as having "psychological relationships" (p. 14). Although significant style elements remain the same (i.e. his use of black and white prints, wide-angle lens, even lighting, straight front-on framing, choice of subject matter, etc), this later manipulation of elements produces a distinctly different photographic oeuvre to the earlier work. Ballen's later photographs can be seen as taking a turn from documentary to a distinctly more psychological style.

Whilst this turn is quite obvious in the overall appearance of Ballen's photographs, within each individual image, the difference between documented and constructed elements, between real and imagined, is ambiguous and finally indeterminable by the viewer. For instance, the viewer of Ballen's monograph *Boarding House* (2009) does not encounter a wholly fictional text, able to be read via the usual codes and

customs of fiction; but rather, encounters an actual existing dwelling, with its real occupants and furnishings inside, that are, nonetheless, assembled with an obviously fictional, or constructed, interplay between the subjects and elements within. Which particular elements are found as is, or manipulated for the photograph, is not in any way signalled by the placement or look of the elements in the photographs, the style of the photographs, or the construction of point of view. Instead, the documentary style confers an equitability of ‘truth’ to all elements, while the inscription of psychological significance seems both heavy and obvious, yet similarly balanced across the entirety of elements. In this way, the contradictory conception of photography, as either index or sign, is invoked as an un-locatable distinction between all elements of the photographic construction, which provides each photograph with an impelling potency. While arguably not foregrounded as an element of each photograph’s meaning, this tendering of real and imagined, along with the impossibility of conclusively distinguishing between each, can also be understood as providing a significant clue to the structure by which a possible interpretation of the photograph’s resultant, and seemingly indecipherable, meaning can be undertaken.

These later photographs, of the predominantly white, but socially and economically marginalised, in Johannesburg (where whites are more commonly depicted with all the privileges accorded them by what was their dominant position within the racialised social hierarchies and separations of Apartheid), expose the abject border of that privilege, where not only the racially subjugated of Apartheid are laid waste by subsistence level shelter, clothing, food, and infrastructure. Rather, the photographs reveal the extremes of societal neglect and privation within that same, dominant, white culture. In *Boarding House* (2009), the subjects are photographed inside an abandoned warehouse – a dwelling with little to none of the furniture, decoration, and comforts, that a Western, socially and economically privileged, viewer would traditionally associate with the notion of ‘home’. Rather, the abundant neglect that surrounds and engulfs the random objects, minimal furniture, and the odd animal or insect, presents each as seemingly lost, disconnected, out of place, and culturally abandoned, as the residents represented within.

Generally, subjects’ faces are not shown, or if they are, they are turned away, or covered by hands, masks, or in some other fashion disconnected from recognition as identifiable, or singular, individuals. Whilst a head with its face turned away can

nevertheless still be the recognisable subject of a photograph, there is a distinct lack of positioning of subjects in terms of the common identification processes of viewing. That is, the viewer is not encouraged, or positioned, by the elements of the gaze, where the customary exchange of looks, between characters inside the screen, and with viewers of the screen, leads the viewer to identify with the perspective, and therefore also the actions, of a singular personhood depicted within<sup>54</sup>. Rather, within these photographs, the subjects' faces are positioned entirely against the customary mechanisms whereby the viewer identifies with the point-of-view of the protagonist as they look at other characters and elements within the scene. In this case, when the eye/s of any of the subjects are able to be seen by the viewer, they look only at other elements in the room, such as furniture or animals, usually with no apparent interest in, or engagement with, these same elements. The subjects look as if caught in, and by, a nothingness, a void, whose passive contemplation somehow places the subjects as somewhat equivalent to all the other also-non-active objects within the space, "there is a strong feeling that things are only just being held in place, and that every object has equal agency" (Cook, 2007, p.17). There is also, in that passive contemplation, a complete absence of the customary action and reaction that defines a protagonist. Furthermore, the subjects' heads and faces, the body parts traditionally associated with personality and identity, are positioned similarly to other body parts and pieces, such as hands and feet, within the photographs.

This representation echoes the psychoanalytic conception of the pre-Oedipal body as a *body-in-pieces*. The pre-Oedipal body exists prior to the body-mapping and world-mapping conceptualisations of the Symbolic, including the gestalt cohesion of selfhood gained via passage through the Mirror Phase. In this case, there is no identifiable body, or self, or object, or other, within the photographs. Furthermore, it is not only people that are depicted in this way: the animals present often have hidden faces or bodies, the heads of animals and dolls appear separated from their bodies, a doll is rearranged so that a limb points the wrong way, or human, animal, and toy, combine body parts to make one body; while the objects present, such as wires or telephone cords, lack handsets and connection, and any other perceived purpose or use. In other words, within the photographs, a disconnection of objects and elements abounds. It is the concept of the Mirror Phase, with its attendant movement from amorphousness to subjectivity, that is the frame by which these

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<sup>54</sup> See Berger (2008), Heath (1985), and Mulvey (1999).

seemingly indecipherable photographs, of the neglected and abandoned, urban poor, can be interpreted.

Within the mirror phase, it is the reflection of the whole bounded-self, the eye seeing the 'I', that initiates the movement from that amorphous non-self, the body in bits and pieces, through the beginnings of the body-boundings and markings of maternal care, to that pivotal moment of recognition of a marked cohesion of self – with its attendant subjectivity and, once language has been acquired, place in the social realm as a speaking being. Although the identification processes that customarily mirror and re-inscribe that 'self'-recognition in the viewing of specular images are not permitted by the arrangement of the subjects within Ballen's photographs, there are, however, an abundance of 'others' present that do incur these identification processes for the viewer – although with troubling, and uneasy, effect.

In *Boarding House* (2009), an effusion of (often bodiless) faces are drawn, painted or hung, on the walls. Whilst these ubiquitous traces of children's play are testament to the pervasive presence of children within the dwelling; the children depicted are few in number, and never actually shown as playing but, rather, are rendered in the same disconnected manner as the adults and animals within. The few children's toys in the dwelling – plastic and stuffed animals, trucks, and dolls – are, similarly, not located so much as traces of play, but rather, are positioned in the same equitable, detached, manner as their animal and human counterparts<sup>55</sup>. That is, there is no difference here between an actual rabbit and a toy dinosaur, each existing in the same place in the same way, with no hierarchy of focus between them. Furthermore, this depiction of remnants of play, rather than the simple nurturance of clothes, bedding, or food, occurs as a brutal contrast to the dirt, devastation, and neglect, of the surroundings. It is these faces, scribbled on the walls, that occupy the dwelling, more so than the odd animal, insect, child, or adult, depicted within, and they draw and occupy the viewer's attention accordingly.

Whilst some toys or animals have their faces hidden like the human occupants, in contrast, others (including the skin of a dead animal) face the viewer. This does not

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<sup>55</sup> While the animals depicted often face the viewer, they nevertheless appear to embody that same detachment.

appear to disturb the aforementioned equitable positioning of each, as the animals and toys that face the camera lack the actions and intent of protagonists, and do nothing in that instance but look. In other words, this particular look is as disembodied and dissociated as those that are hidden. That this locus for viewer identification occurs only in the inanimate and animal, however, confers an eerie and somehow sorrowful effect.

Similarly, the boarding house has photographic portraits hanging on, or adhered to, its walls, with the people in these portraits also looking towards the viewer. On the one hand, in the context of an otherwise absent, identifiable subject, the effect of this counterpoint is striking. On the other hand, as these photographs are attached to the boarding house walls, which Ballen invariably treats as backdrops – with the same separation between figure and field that is common within portrait photography – the subjects of these portraits are held as separate from any identifiable subjectivity, or protagonist's action, as the other subjects photographed within the dwelling. Unlike the real and toy animals, people, and body parts, which occupy an equal, yet disconnected, focus, the faces within these images appear to occupy another contemporaneous space entirely. Yet, as Robert Cook (2007) relates, “these photographic ghosts of different generations come together in concert with the other elements of the image. They speak to each other in the present tense” (p. 17)<sup>56</sup>. The ‘subjects’ of these portraits, though photographed in another time, occur in the present time of the viewed boarding house as ‘objects’ – possessions, portraits, of what is not able to be possessed by the occupants within. The photo of a recognisable boy in *Remembrance* (2008, p. 121); the wedding photo, and vacation portrait of a smiling child, in *Upseeddaisy* (2008, p.27); the portrait of an adult, and portrait of a child, in *Encroachment* (2001, p. 13); and the Madonna and child in *Peeling Door* (2007, p.43): appear as relics of elsewhere – so completely other, in that they evidently possess both subjectivity and the hallmarks of the usual cultural norms of nurture and care, that they seem to stare out of the frame, into, and from within, this new place, where they simply do not belong. This complication of the usual identification processes of viewing results in something akin to identification in regard to the photograph; viewers are brought, via this complication, to empathise with the Boarding House inhabitants, whose neglect and privation propels a hope that they too would not belong where they so obviously do. Here then, in the combination of that equalising distance, that turning

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<sup>56</sup> Cook (2007) refers to *Bedroom, Bethulie* (1984), where similar photographs appear.

away from engagement with the viewer, and that looking-out occurring only from the inanimate, the animal, and the photographic objects possessed by the inhabitants, is an impetus for identification – a tenderness of feeling for the uncared for<sup>57</sup>. The viewer – after their own movement from utter dependence on the maternal through to individual self-hood – can be brought into empathic identification with the children and adults living within the boarding house, through the associative activation of what was their own lack of care, their own privation: the inevitable remainder of the desiring, adult, self. If, as Kristeva (2012) posits, mourning is the absence of a symbol for that lack at the centre of being (pp. 5 - 6), then empathy is an affect perhaps able to release a portion of that cathected lack, that also, in its expression, serves to bridge the separation that caused it.

Accordingly, the faces scribbled, placed, and marked on the walls can also be seen as serving to evoke that lack, whilst also providing some type of means of identification for the viewer. In this case however, the faces do not seem to propel an empathic identification, but rather, serve to emphasise that overall lack for the viewer with which to identify. Significantly, the faces often appear with holes cut out in place of eyes or other orifices. That is, within the boarding house, Symbolic identity seems so absent that the viewer, looking for a mirror phase *ideal-ego* to identify with in the photographs, has only the inanimate, the animal, or another representation, to see. This representation within a representation is one of lack, not the fullness of the mirror reflection. The doubling of representation, along with the childlike nature of the drawings, and the returned look of the inanimate and the animal, can be considered as an example of a representation of the cut – the paradoxical separation of the Real and representation. In looking at these photographs, the viewer is brought into a concurrent experience of *self* and the memory, or awareness, of their *infant lack of self*. Rather than an easy identification, with the mirror of representation serving to reinforce a conception of self, the viewer is instead brought into a troubling awareness of, and experience of, both identity and non-identity, presence and absence, fullness and lack.

In their evocation of lack, the photographs seem to echo the themes of the famous Stanford University experiments in maternal deprivation, on rhesus macaques, by

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<sup>57</sup> Powerfully wrought in the associative relationships incurred by the ambiguities of the phrase “brutal, tender, human, animal” (Cook, 2007), a catalogue title for an exhibition of Ballen’s photographs.

researcher Harry Harlow (1958). In these experiments, cruelly deprived, newborn, monkeys were separated from their mothers and given only a wire, or cloth, representation of a mother instead. In one experiment, the *wire mother*, a metal contraption rigged up in a cage, gave nothing but food (milk dispensed through an opening) to the monkey, who had to climb, or cling to, the contraption in order to feed. The *cloth mother*, consisted of the same contraption covered in cloth, providing some comfort (though next to nothing) when the baby monkey clung to it. Given a choice, the monkeys consistently chose the cloth mother over the wire mother, comfort over the sustenance of food. Or they tried in vain to cling to the cloth mother, whilst reaching for food from the wire mother. Other experiments involved the use of long-term partial, or total, isolation, including keeping infants isolated in dark enclosures from birth, through to 6 months of age. In the long term, deprived of their mother's touch, and given only these bare substitutes, or isolation, the experiment's monkeys grew to be considered unfit adults, in terms of the resulting deficits in their social behaviour, and were subsequently euthanised. Others exhibited self-harming behaviours or died from stress. For a western culture accustomed to thinking that affection and caring-touch weakened a child – that it was an unnecessary coddling, preventing growth towards adulthood and independence – the experiments were ground-breaking, in that they proved that the opposite was true – a parent's touch is as basic and necessary a need as food and air, and its absence as devastating.

The adult occupants of the boarding house seem to be immersed in a similarly devastating absence of care and nurturance. They display a lack of engagement with each other and with their surroundings, consistent with that of the isolated monkeys (or indeed human children neglected in similar ways<sup>58</sup>). The boarding house occupants do not look back at the viewer, or at an *other*, they seemingly do not want, do not desire, and do not demand. The only language present, the only words spoken, in all that childish wall graffiti, are what appears to be a name, and the words 'happy happy' – as separate as language and desire seem to be, from those who live within<sup>59</sup>. Rather, the scribbled faces seem to represent the 'no-one

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<sup>58</sup> C.f. *Maternal Care and Mental Health* (Bowlby, 1951) and *Romania's Abandoned Children* (Nelson et al, 2014).

<sup>59</sup> Fittingly, Ballen took the photograph *Happy Happy* (2000, p. 15) that has these words on the wall, after a brutal fight between the warehouse inhabitants – which resulted in the death of one of the inhabitants. The fallen Christmas tree is a result of the violence that took place, and in effect, Ballen photographed the aftermath of the conflict (Ballen, 2010).

and nothing' self that familial and cultural neglect raises. Within *The Boarding House*, there is no care, there is no belonging, nor promise of these things to be found.

Poverty is as much cultural neglect, alienation, and exile from the 20th century consumerism and its infinite consumption and desires, as it is an absence of sufficient means. In the extremes of such neglect and abandonment, where even the shelter of the boarding house is temporary, the residents display an absence of desire towards all elements of the environment – existing in an equitable relationship to each other, rather than circumscribed by the intentions of the gaze and the Imaginary object-relations of subject-hood. As when a child plays with toys, or turns the world upside down by imagining life secured to the underside of a table or the ceiling, the 'upright' ways of seeing, and the social meanings attached to objects, are untethered. Each and every element is equal in this tableau of absence, this "motherless geography"<sup>60</sup>. While there is a stasis within the frame, in terms of significance, without the ordering and hierarchical categories of language to move the objects into place there is, nevertheless, a dynamism present, a tension given by the ceaseless interplay of the held apart elements, with the associative condensations and displacements of lack and loss, as the repressed maternal "acquires...representability" (Freud, 1954, p. 574) in the visual.

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<sup>60</sup> The title of a poem by Elaine Orr (Orr, 1991).

## CHAPTER 6: TEARS AT THE HEART OF THINGS<sup>61</sup>

### CASE STUDY 5: BILL HENSON [1]

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If understood via Lacan's Mirror Phase, an infant's moment of self-recognition in the mirror is necessarily a moment of 'crossing the Rubicon'<sup>62</sup>. That is, the subject, once having gained identity and language within the Symbolic, is able to incur experiences of the Real (via its transgressions), but does so always from within that experience of gained subject-hood, never able to return to a time before that moment of recognition, before identity was formed. Moreover, as Alexandre Leupin (2004, pp. 18 - 19) indicates, in Lacan's schema, the Real itself is necessarily dependent on the Symbolic – as the subject's unconscious does not exist before the primal repression that occurs via the infant's passage through the Mirror and Oedipal Phases. The very phase that allows the subject's entry into language, that acts as a gateway between one state and another, also serves to separate the self from itself, and from all else. That is, the Mirror Phase instantiates not only a speaking subject, but also its unconscious, and therefore the Real. As can be seen via an analysis of Bill Henson's photographs, however, use of Kristeva's concept of the semiotic, rather than that of Lacan's Real, allows for an interpretation of the photographs whereby the viewer is able to surveil their own passage across this apparent Rubicon, by being brought into awareness of the two modalities. This is able to occur via a distinct, double, experience of engagement with Henson's photographs, whereby paradox provides the means through which the viewing subject can, and indeed does, return across the Rubicon. The viewer

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<sup>61</sup> Poet Seamus Heaney's translation of Virgil's *lacrimae rerum* is "there are tears at the heart of things" (Heaney, 2008).

<sup>62</sup> Named after the Rubicon river which Julius Caesar crossed with his army in 49 AC, breaking the law and therefore committing his army to civil war. Passing the Rubicon is passing a point of no return (Britannica Concise Encyclopedia, 2006).

does not incur a moment of the impossible Real, but rather a more sustained engagement with the semiotic – revealing both the impossibility and possibility enabled by photographic paradox.

## BORDERLANDS

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Often compared with paintings from both the Renaissance and Baroque periods<sup>63</sup>, Henson's photographs evidence a distinctly naturalist relationship of figure and field<sup>64</sup>, with the placement of human subjects in a seemingly equal relationship with nature, neither subjugated by, nor dominating over, the depicted landscape but portrayed as merely one 'natural' element amongst the other similarly natural elements. Accordingly, in Henson's *Untitled Works 1994/95* (1995), Australia's selection for the 46th Venice Biennale, the individual is not emphasised as the subject of the photographs but, rather, different male and female figures are depicted naked in various positions and poses, coupled together and alone, amongst the ruins of modern automobiles, in the surrounds of the Australian bush at night. As with Renaissance and Baroque art (such as the paintings of Rembrandt and Caravaggio), chiaroscuro lighting<sup>65</sup> is used to provide drama and emphasis within that naturalist depiction. The figures within the photographs, along with the dramatically lit clouds and sky, visible ground cover, and rusted automobiles, are contrasted with both the shaded silhouettes of trees and a larger, and absolute, darkness. While the chiaroscuro lighting of these elements (and particularly of the figures), serves to emphasise them within the photographs, the dominating masses of darkness within the composition resolutely defy this emphasis.

Each image consists of a dramatic and decentralising use of photographic montage, constructed from different fragments of photographs, taped and pinned together. These fragmented arrangements work in tandem with the large masses of darkness to destabilise any focus on the lit areas of the photographs. Additionally, photographic fragments of body parts are placed adjacent to other fragments

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<sup>63</sup> Particularly Vermeer, Titian, Rembrandt, Watteau (Bendigo Art Gallery 2012).

<sup>64</sup> Naturalism was influenced by the publication of Darwin's revolutionary paradigm of evolution (Britannica Concise Encyclopedia, 2006).

<sup>65</sup> From the Italian for light-dark, a contrast in light and shadow to create a 3D effect (Britannica Concise Encyclopedia, 2006).

containing whole bodies, providing further visual dislocation – as the usual body gestalt of the pictured elements is simultaneously presented and denied within the one view. Both large and small pieces of black and/or white photographic paper<sup>66</sup> are taped to the montaged fragments, similarly dominating and disrupting the visual coherence of each photograph. Thus, within Henson's *Untitled Works 1994/95* (1995), the photograph's apparent indexicality accords with the naturalistic representation of figures and field and is somewhat countered by the use of dramatic lighting that serves to focus on the depicted figures – with both further undone by the evident construction of the photographic montages. It can be argued that this construction and destabilisation of the supposed reality of the image accords the viewer with both an easy identification with the figures, and a concurrent troubled distance from that identification.

At the same time as this thoroughly contemporary deconstruction of the photograph's proposed indexicality is occurring, particular elements also seem to point contrarily to both another time and another medium of representation. Henson's painterly technique (in his use of lighting that mimics the techniques of chiaroscuro and sfumato<sup>67</sup>) is reinforced by the posing of figures according to the conventions of Renaissance and Baroque painting. For example, Christopher Allen (2005) relates the poses in Henson's photographs to the paintings of Correggio and, in this particular series, the photograph of a girl being carried by another figure to paintings of the Deposition of Christ (such as Correggio's *Deposition from the Cross*<sup>68</sup>). Perhaps, also, Caravaggio's *The Entombment of Christ* (1602-1604) is echoed here, by the repetition within a number of other images, where a girl is held, positioned with legs bent at the knee and close together in a manner similar to the way Christ is depicted in that painting. Yet, whilst this referencing of various religious paintings of the Renaissance and Baroque periods seems to point towards a European past, the photographs contradictorily depict the surrounds of the distinctly Australian bush. Additionally, the dark and moody lighting of the

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<sup>66</sup> Isobel Cromby (1995) notes that the photographic paper is placed backwards, so that the paper company's logo is visible – clearly signalling the photographs' construction (p. 12). Also worthy of note, is that both white and black photography paper (developed and undeveloped) reveal no figures or forms – that is, no image is visible other than the absence or presence of light (in its positive or negative, depending on whether the paper is developed or not), or the 'other side' of the paper altogether, where only the medium of the image is left visible.

<sup>67</sup> Subtle gradations of light and shadow, a smoky effect – as opposed to the clearer lines of contrast between light and dark in chiaroscuro (Ward, 2008, pp. p104 - 106).

<sup>68</sup> (Correggio, 1525).

Australian landscape again mixes both realism and drama, in a further evocation of the themes of Renaissance and Baroque painting.

Echoing this equipotent binarism, various borders between binaries are evoked in the photographs: the figures depicted are youths, on the cusp between childhood and adulthood; muted skies evidence either dusk or dawn; the figures repose on a car wreck, with these wrecks traditionally abandoned to rust on the borders between cities and bush (and for anyone venturing far into nature, as much a discoverable and common artefact of the bush as the various flora growing around them) – all signposting a spatial liminality between accepted notions of nature and culture within the photographs. Correspondingly, a viewer is unable to determine surely if the youths are posed as embracing or copulating, tender or violent, in pain or in sexual ecstasy. For example, in two photographs, there are smears of blood on the belly, breasts and exposed upper-inside thighs of a supine, solitary, girl – perhaps abandoned, perhaps satiated, perhaps injured and alone. These photographs provide an utter lack of clarity as to the nature of the scene and to the nature of the blood – whether its origin is: the girl’s menses; a torn hymen (thematically fitting, as constructed by many cultures as an initiatory moment for girls, marking the transition between childhood and adulthood); or the visual remains of an act of sexual violence. Like a stain, the blood seems to mark the passing of some occurrence, but the nature of said occurrence, and therefore which meaning is to be attached, is left in disturbing and ambiguous abeyance.

In Henson’s monograph, *Lux et Nox (2002)*<sup>69</sup>, similar teenage figures are also depicted within the liminal space of the urban fringe – although in this case evidence of both industrial, and residential, architecture and infrastructure is also present; and both the figures and landscape are represented in a more identifiable and visually gestalt manner. However, unlike within the *Untitled Works 1994/95 (1995)* series, these figures and other specific elements are often placed in a central position within the photographic composition. As with *Untitled Works 1994/95 (1995)*, chiaroscuro lighting is used to emphasise different elements, bathing them in a somewhat numinous glow, where other surrounding elements are engulfed by shadow. For example, rivers, train lines, fences and roads have their surfaces or edges lit, while all else is in shadow, outlining them as if they are divinely signposted pathways to elsewhere. The light source within these fictional

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<sup>69</sup> Latin for Day/Night, Light/Darkness (Knighton, 2016, p. 63).

photographic scenes is not identified or obvious, but the use of sfumato within the lit areas bestows the impression of natural light, while the chiaroscuro lighting on the centralised figures and other elements accords a more dramatic and painterly feel to the otherwise realistically depicted scenes.

Thus, as with the juxtaposition between the natural and dramatic within *Untitled Works 1994/95* (1995), whilst the human figures in Henson's photographs also exist in a seeming equanimity with the landscape surrounding them, contradictorily, the composition and lighting serve to highlight and dramatise particular elements, imbuing them with an added numinosity. Described by Henson as 'dreamscapes' (2002, p. 175), and oft compared to dreams or memories by critics (see: Heyward, 1995, p. 26; Cromby, 1995, p. 14; Mirlesse, 2015, Cooper, D, n.d.), the scenes in both *Untitled Works 1994/95* (1995) and *Lux et Nox* (2002) evidence a potent mix of simple naturalism and an 'otherworldly' feel<sup>70</sup>.

As with the *Untitled Works 1994/95* (1995) series, a liminal borderland is evoked in *Lux et Nox* (2002), as we see teenagers occupying their own, seemingly separate, world amongst the ghostly shapes of the industrial and residential day's remains. In one photograph (2002, p. 10), a casual embrace between a girl and boy is pictured, whereby the girl's arm serves to frame her lit face with a curved shadow, evoking the sense that what is being viewed is a mirror, or a painting, rather than a photograph. Correspondingly, there are incidences of figures surrounded by darkness with only a face visible, or perhaps a face and torso, so that they appear suspended, or held aloft, in the light. Some figures are posed to appear as if they are looking at something in the distance, or lost in thought, or in some cases, looking directly at the camera (and therefore the viewer) but apparently without seeing and focused elsewhere – all with an apparent 'otherworldly' look. In one photograph, a girl's face has a stream of tears falling down her cheek; in another, an androgynous boy or girl lies naked with their body curved. In these romantic tableaux, there is the same painterly feel and echoes of the lighting, posing, and pictured subjectivity, of Renaissance and Baroque art – but at the same time, the figures are immersed in the present and the quotidian: shown holding beer bottles,

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<sup>70</sup> Perhaps, as with the workings of metaphor, transferring one set of associations to the other, with the numinous made natural and the natural, numinous.

wearing white singlets<sup>71</sup> and typical teen jewellery, and sitting amongst contemporary bicycles and automobiles. Lines and shadows are everywhere: lights, clouds, fences, wires, advertising text, possibly a crate, a service station lit in an almost ghostly manner. In one photo, with whatever is supporting her hidden from view, a girl appears to float in the air above the lights of a distant freeway. The suggestion of fantasy in this photograph leads away from notions of an objective reality towards meanings that are more to do with the visual expressions of interior, and perhaps even ecstatic, experiences. The photographs entrance with a liminal borderland, between the boundaries of painting/photography, past/present, adult/child, culture/nature, light/dark, real/imagination, and natural/supernatural: lux/nox.

These contrasts, within both sets of photographs, are perhaps deepened and reinforced for those viewers whose own teen years were spent socialising with groups of peers at night, in exactly these type of urban ruins, amongst the almost silent emptiness bordering many developed environments. The religiosity of the poses in *Untitled Works 1994/95* (1995), and the otherworld evoked by the warm toned highlights of the chiaroscuro lighting in *Lux et Nox* (2002), is perhaps also echoed by more secular memories of an intoxicating, unfamiliar, burgeoning, adult life – of peers, alcohol, drugs, and sexual play – surrounded by the industrial and urban artefacts of the city's edge or, for some Australian viewers, the immense, eerie, and fecund, darkness of the Australian bush.

Significantly, while the description of Henson's photographs as 'dreamscapes' easily relates to these liminalities, or lack of fixity, within the conjured binaries and borderlands, the term is also a fitting metaphor for the striking arousal of the realm of the senses by these photographs. As when waking consciousness scrambles to provide a rational narrative for a stimulating dream, a viewer desiring an equivalent explanatory story could find instead that the preconscious holds sway – that any meaning is seemingly indeterminable, whilst at the same time, a compelling mix of feeling and sensation dominates the experience of viewing. This is exemplified in *Untitled Photograph* (2002, p. 164), where a girl and boy lie alongside each other

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<sup>71</sup> Seemingly the *Chesty Bonds* singlet of Australian brand *Bonds*. A common clothing item in 1970s - 1980s Australia, seen as so symbolic of the brutal, macho, drinking culture – such as that portrayed in the film *Wake in Fright* (Kotcheff, et al., 2012) – that it has been nicknamed the 'wife-beater': though often worn by infants, and in this case adorning the bodies of teens, in a spectacularly vulnerable antithesis of that association.

in the dark, with a few red lights from a distant freeway seeming to hover in the air above them. As within the majority of photographs in the monograph, nothing is happening, no action occurring, but nevertheless, there seems to be an intensity present, belied by the quotidian nature of the scene. This perhaps conjures memories for the viewer of similar intense moments during adolescence: that common experience of lying close to another, aware of the exquisite possibility of the space between; the rich sensation of air felt on every inch of skin; each hair follicle brought alive by awareness of that tiny distance between where one body ends and the other begins; in that moment, a seemingly inviolable breach, that later, will be crossed and then forgotten – another Rubicon, of the bridge between self and other, though afterwards reinforced by the expulsions of abjection, defined and outlined in this moment only by the acute exhortations of longing. Perhaps the photograph conjures memories of similar heady, unspoken, feelings – where all that teems in the charged air between is unable to be articulated, or perhaps impermissible, and not a single word passes those limits of skin. One can only wait, for the smallest of movements, the tiniest sign of intention – when all is already sensed, yet not trusted. In the photograph, the boy’s head is turned towards the girl, his eyes closed, as if with tenderness, whilst the girl looks away. Though in another photo, almost a copy of this one, she too turns towards him – a single, intimate, moment before, or perhaps after, that Rubicon. A photograph, or perhaps a memory, of a girl and a boy in the dark, with the distant freeway’s lights overhead, closeness and longing, lying together “down at the heart of things, where all words fail” (Henson, 2009).

#### WHERE ALL WORDS FAIL

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Henson’s photographs can exist for the viewer, as either: indexes of something real; photographic fictions; or an evocation of memories. Yet it is perhaps in the absence of any ready, rational, explanation for the intensity conjured by the photographs, that this range of responses can also occur simultaneously during the experience of viewing. For Kristeva, it is representation of the non-linguistic that provides the power of an artwork. That is, it is not in the rational understanding of a painting, or photograph, that its power lies, but in the non-linguistic and affective potency of its colour, forms, patterns, and composition, its “colour, visual marks and formal elements that operate independently of figuration or iconicity” (Barrett,

2011, p.11). If, as has been argued, the work of art is erected in defence against both the loss of the maternal, and the reversal of that lack, art then acts like any other fetish object, in that it simultaneously defends against what is repressed and is also haunted by that which has been repressed:

If loss, mourning, and absence set the imaginary act in motion and permanently fuel it as much as they menace and undermine it, it is also undeniable that the fetish of the work of art is erected in disavowal of this mobilising affliction. (Kristeva, 1987, p. 6)

That is, what is absent is also called into presence in an attempt to secure that untenable border of the object. In his comparison of photography and film, in relation to the notion of fetish, Christian Metz (1985) argues that in the case of the photograph, while presented only with that image inside the frame, the viewer nevertheless projects meaning into the off-frame. Accordingly, meaning is determined not only by the content of a photograph, but is also haunted, and even undermined, by what is not represented within its fragile borders. For Metz, the click of the camera shutter is a cut that divides the photographic presence (the inside the frame) from the photographic absence (the off-frame), that is, the cut that divides the presence of the fetish object (the photograph) and the absence, its denied lack (the 'seen' lack of penis that creates the fear of castration). Similarly, according to Kristeva's theory, the power of a photograph lies not in its readily interpretable elements but, rather, in the links between its visual elements and what has been individually and/or culturally repressed – which is to say, a photograph's power lies in the off-frame, the remainder, the unconscious, of the photograph's apparent meaning.

As with language, it is the semiotic elements (in the case of visual art: the colour, rhythm, masses, patterns, and composition) that provide the piercing cut of the punctum, while what is already known, the studium, lies dormant and fallow on the paper. These distinctly visual, non-verbal, elements function like the images in a dream, linked via associations and displacement to what is charged and repressed within. Via interpretation, such elements can achieve verbalisation, and hence cathexis of the repressed, but it is through affect that the remainder – the unbound and unstable energy that has not transformed into signs – is displaced (Kristeva, 1987, p. 8). The intense feelings, and even memories of such, provoked by the photographs, the power of the photographs according to Kristeva – that, in the case of Henson's work, can be a dark and rapturous experience of viewing – are evidence of the links between the unsaid, the unknown, of the photographs, and the

viewer's unconscious. It is the visual, semiotic, elements of a photograph that allow that long chain of pre-conscious and unconscious charged associations from what has been represented, to what has not.

It is through the original loss of the maternal that this all begins: "loss, mourning and absence, set the imaginary act in motion" (Kristeva, 1987, p. 6), creating the photograph as it exists for the viewer – "erected in disavowal of this mobilising affliction" (Kristeva, 1987, p. 6) – yet undermining and menacing it too. When we look, we "aim...at replacing an absence with a presence" (Metz, 1985), but that absence again cuts through. Henson himself, in the text that concludes *Lux et Nox* (2002), describes this failed attempt to plug the hole in self, this endless longing for other or object, enacted by looking and imagination, that leads only to one's own unconscious:

In a photograph, we have simultaneously an absolute presence in the evidential authority of the medium and an entirely impossible dreamscape.

What draws you in is what slips away.

And yet, this longing persists – this lack of connection to someone or something.

The sweet expression of a face, eyes cast down, thoughts turned inward...

Such things send us back into a different space, but remarkably it's always our own.

(Henson, 2002, p. 175)

Notably, Henson frames this process as one that occurs because of both the indexical nature of a photograph and its existence as a 'dreamscape'. This same division – between the pre-conscious and unconscious, irrational, imaginative, sensory, dreamscape; and the conscious, rational, and verbal, objects of language and the photograph – occurs also at the level of the formation of these objects in consciousness. According to Kristeva (1980 pp. 217 - 218), once the primal repression of the maternal has occurred, any subject encountering an object engages in further repression. In this process, an object's *thing-presentation* is repressed, in favour of its *word-presentation*. The moment a subject senses an

object, a split occurs between those sense impressions and the words for the object. While it is these same sense impressions that lead directly to the thought processes that provide the object with words and names, these word-presentations also “hold at bay, the ‘thing-presentations’ and their corresponding instinctual pressures” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 217). The mourning for the loss of the first object, the maternal, along with the exultation and joy the subject feels in splitting off an object from the Real, are part of this warding off, or repression, in favour of the word-presentation of the object. In this way, the object is split between its repressed thing-presentation and its conscious word-presentation, as the affects of mourning and joy are “transposed into rhythms, signs, forms” (Kristeva, 1987, p. 8), as what is unconscious and conscious weave together as the semiotic and symbolic communication of representation and language. Thus, language is not only a process of categorising, or formalising, sense impressions but is also a repression, a pushing away of the excess semiotic – a cultural and psychic ‘no’: “where this instinctual drive will later be replaced, due to repression, by the sign representing (erasing) it” (p. 217).

### THE IMAGE BETWEEN

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While the Real and the unconscious are held outside language they, nevertheless, destroy the myth of its fixity by re-entering that from which they have been excluded. The real, the unconscious, the Symbolic, and the subject, are all part of a dynamic process of stasis and crisis that is fundamentally social, created through the awareness of an other. An infant’s sense impressions are hierarchised at that moment of recognition during the mirror phase, with the visual image (first of the reflected self or the mother, and then all others) being the hinge between: a multi-sensual and chaotic experience<sup>72</sup>; and one where subjectivity is ordered by the already existing systems of the social and language. That is, the other, the ‘I’, the object, and the word, are all haunted objects, resulting from, and at the same time carrying, that split between ‘I’ and ‘not I’ in the mirror. This unfixed, unstable, subject is thus impelled into endless psychic and social relationships, via the boundless puissance of the image.

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<sup>72</sup> Albeit with the beginnings of pattern formation occurring before this point it is, nevertheless, the pivotal point between these two modalities.

## CHAPTER 7: THE ORIFICE EYE

### CASE STUDY 5: BILL HENSON [II]

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The potency of the visual, where the split between Symbolic and semiotic is constantly reduplicated in the relationships of the subject and its objects, is also elaborated in Lacan's concept of the gaze (as previously explicated) where in the act of looking, the subject simultaneously incurs the possibility of being looked at in return. This incursion into the psyche destabilises the ego's centrality. The subject is able to conceptualise itself as, thus, not the centre of the perspectival universe, but as an object of the other's vision<sup>73</sup>. Additionally, in this realisation of a self 'offered up to be seen' there is also a recognition that while the self's perspective is always limited, conversely, s/he is able to be seen by a possible other from multiple possible perspectives. Furthermore, the sense of self in this schematic is intrinsically social and, as has been outlined, the judgemental, censorious, superego – the social mediator of the Freudian topology – plays an intrinsic role. That is, the bounded whole from the mirror stage, a visual ideal of the subject that s/he does not live up to, is a bounded self able to be seen and judged by others. For the subject, the possible presence of a viewing other carries with it the inscription of that inner insufficiency as something entirely readable by the other, on the subject's visible, outer, self. For Lacan, this is the realm of the 'Other', where the subject imagines itself as standing out in the "field of the other" (Lacan, 1973, p. 84) <sup>74</sup> drawing their attention and judgement, as a *stain*.

Lacan extends this conceptualisation of the split between conscious and unconscious, that is always present in the visual, with his concept of the *screen*.

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<sup>73</sup> Because any possible 'other' is hypothetically looking at the subject, this is an instance of the 'Other', with its attendant unconscious fears.

<sup>74</sup> That is, the subject imagines itself as standing out in any other's visual map.

For Lacan, the gaze looks at objects in reality, but instead sees something born of the relationship between the eye and its object. Lacan relates how the light reflects off an object he is looking at, which creates an impression in his eye:

In the depths of my eye the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture. That which is light looks at me, and by means of that light in the depths of my eye, something is painted. (Lacan, 1973. p. 96)

According to Lacan, it is that relation between the viewer and the object, the retina and the light, that the eye sees – not the object itself.

Lacan calls this the *screen*<sup>75</sup> and argues that this viewing of the relationship between eye and object allows the viewer to insert his or her self within this screen. As the self is able to be mapped externally through the imagined or possible gaze of the Other, when a subject views an actual map of an other's vision, such as a picture, s/he also attempts to integrate themselves into that picture. In this way, the subject is able to take on a conception of itself as also the other's (visual ideal) object in order to ameliorate the stain (Lacan, 1973, pp. 84, 104, 105 - 119). Furthermore, as with the self-surveillance described in Foucault's (1977) metaphorical reading of Bentham's panopticon – whereby societal power is not only something that acts upon the subject, but is also enacted by the subject upon itself<sup>76</sup> – similarly, via the mechanism of the always present possibility of being seen within the gaze of the Other, the subject unceasingly submits to its own conception of the Other's gaze. For Lacan, the subject inserting itself into the screen is an example of *mimicry*, which is a means via which the subject can camouflage itself (act like the others it perceives). The subject does this so that s/he does not stand out to elicit attention and judgement, and conversely, so that s/he does stand out in order to elicit approval. In either case, the subject thereby ameliorates the stain via the screen. As with the way camouflage protects an animal from actually being seen, the self-protection and mediation of the 'real' self that occurs via the creation of the screen keeps the subject existing and the images flowing. Indeed, the subject has no access to the Real, only to an endless flow of

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<sup>75</sup> It is important to note that Lacan's notion of the screen does not specifically relate to the cinema or television screen but, rather, to the projections (that protect and mediate) that exist within all acts of viewing.

<sup>76</sup> Bentham's panopticon is a prison designed so that the prisoner is always able to be seen by the guard, but unable to tell at what particular moments s/he is being watched: "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). Foucault argues that in the same way as the prisoner internalises this always present possibility of being seen and punished, that people act according to society's rules when a representative of that power is absent, as much as when one is present (1977).

images/screens, created between the subject's eye and the object, the eye and the other, the eye and the picture. The protected, bounded, mediated, self, that the Other can see, carries with it the lack at the centre of being, while the screen acts to mask that lack via the realm of the image.

Lacan conceived of the art form of painting as an opportunity for a viewer to lay down this outside-aware gaze, this false and protected version of self, to perhaps see something of what the other actually sees or imagines. He argues that as the eye of the creator is absent in a picture, the fact of its creation, the hand of the author, so to speak, is the stain of the image/screen, the lack within the presented 'whole'. Furthermore, Lacan argues that a viewer acts according to this framework (arguably, the 'rules' of viewing) and also then elides the constructed nature of representation as s/he is looking at the object. The gaze accords reality to the representation, in order to ward off the stain, with the screen camouflaging (protecting and mediating) both the self and the impossible Real.

### IMMERSION & DISTANCE

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In *Untitled Works 1994/95* (1995), Henson's use of the technique of photomontage adds another, physical, level to the existing contrasts within the photographic content. Montaged pieces of photographs are interrupted by the addition of jagged chunks of photographic paper, held in place by tape. This, along with Henson's intentional blurring of elements (via agitation of the developing fluid<sup>77</sup>) and printing techniques that emphasise the swathes of darkness (Sidhu, 2005), adds a disorienting and disruptive effect for the viewer. Arguably, any purposeful search for meaning is held at bay by the ambiguity of what is actually being viewed – not only at the level of interpretation of content, such as to whether sex, or sexual violence, is depicted, but also as to which content (a body, an arm, a female, a male) is actually present and visible within these fragments interrupted by the photography paper and tape. Similarly, Isobel Cromby (1995, p.13) notes that different lighting conditions emphasise either the cuts, or the images, of these montages and that, when exhibited, Henson purposefully balances the lighting so that either can dominate during viewing. However, as George Alexander (2005)

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<sup>77</sup> (Cromby, 1995, p.10).

notes, it is not calm ambiguity or liminality produced by the photographs, but rather contradiction, as Henson “sets up tensions by colliding opposites” (p. 4). The materiality of the photograph, that commonly disappears as the viewer follows the conventions of the screen, is thus brought into jarring focus.

Whilst these conventions usually serve to immerse the viewer in the social and political reality depicted within the photograph, disruptions to such conventions, that draw attention to the photograph’s construction, are considered to provide a more critical distance to that presented reality<sup>78</sup>. In this case, whilst serving to bring the viewer into awareness of the ‘hand of the photographer’, this disruption occurs alongside other elements that are more seductive than distancing. The abeyance of meaning and in-determinability of the content of the photographs, along with the rich arousal of senses, affect, and memories, for the viewer, could allow a stronger, more bodily, immersion, as non-linguistic, unconscious, and sensate, experiences are privileged over understanding, knowledge, and language. The consequence of two such strongly wrought visual effects occurring simultaneously can be a viewing experience of duality, whereby the weight given to both draws attention to each modality. The immersive elements provide a strong experience of the affective and bodily at the same time that the viewer is also experiencing critical distance from just such unquestioned immersions. The viewer consequently becomes aware of the deeper, more unconscious, processes elided in the usual acts of viewing, at the same time these processes overwhelm them, so that immersion and distance are both simultaneously recognised and yet uncontrollably experienced.

This conscious and felt experience, of the duality of the unconscious and conscious at work within representation, undoes the usual separation of sense impressions of, and words for, objects. Yet, unlike the sharp and momentary eruption of the Real, this gateway between conscious and unconscious is held open via just this mixture of contemplation and sensation occurring for the viewer. This two-fold and contradictory response, occurring in relation to the dualities of the photographs, leads the viewer, like water circling a drain, towards the deeper, irresolvable, contradiction of which the photographs are comprised – that between representation and the Real.

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<sup>78</sup> Such as Bertolt Brecht’s *estrangement effect*, also called *alienation effect* (including breaking the fourth wall) (Brecht & Willett, 1964); *making strange* or *ostranenie* (see footnote 41); or Laura Mulvey’s *disruption of visual pleasure* which works to delegitimise false ideology (Mulvey, 1999).

## THE OBJECT & ITS UNDOING

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In Henson's photographs, there are two factors that work to support this held open gateway, this experience and contemplation of both the object and its undoing.

Henson's photographs present subjects unaware of the surveilling eye of the viewer, who is positioned with a traditional god's-eye-view of the depicted scene. Rex Butler (2008) notes that this effect is emphasised in Henson's work by both the distance and intimacy of the camera within the photographs. In line with the functionalities of the camera, the viewer is able to see both the entire scene, mid-shots and close-ups but, in this case, these different viewpoints can all be encapsulated within a single image, bringing the subjects simultaneously near and far, in relation to the viewer, stepping outside the normal capabilities of human vision. However, as David Malouf (2005)<sup>79</sup> notes, the god's-eye-view is also strikingly countered by the disassembling effect of these same montaged perspectives:

What is left out is the total and orientating view. Left out as well are the connections between the various parts of the body, and all those moments that the camera has not recorded for us and whose absence prevents us from following the act as a continuous spectacle. We are shown precisely what we expected to respond to, and the gaps, alive as they are and activated by what goes missing in them, are part of what we are shown. (Malouf, 2005, p. 35)

In this manner, Henson's montaged pieces resemble a car crash – a 'collision of opposites' whose aftermath is unable to be immediately, visually, untangled. The actual car wrecks represented in Henson's photographs are often the result of just such crashes, yet what is left of what was likely a shockingly bodily experience, are only the fallow shells of its container – a violent experience of intimacy with the self that is now represented by the distance of an anonymous, mechanical, and decaying, corpse whose silence speaks nothing of that which has occurred. Like a photograph from another time, whose accorded distance and absence is breached by the piercing and very personal element of the punctum, this fallowness is breached by the very intimate presence of another crash, the collision of the cut

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<sup>79</sup> Malouf's comment refers to another of Henson's photographic series, yet is, in every respect, apposite here too.

pieces of photographs, the disassembled bodies and narrative, providing just such an associative link to the imagined, dramatic, incident itself.

The world of the figures presented within the photographs also seems to encapsulate both distance and intimacy. Cromby (1995) notes a mythical feel to the depicted world, as if viewers are given a look into something they are normally barred from seeing, entering, and perhaps even knowing of (p. 14). In the darkness and soft, glowing, twilight hues there is a sense of looking at a dream, a place outside time, another reality. It is perhaps a hell, a purgatory, an eden, or an older bacchanalian world – a seemingly completely separate, impermeable, place whose beauty and strangeness also carries the seductive and affective familiarity of imagination or memory. The viewer, with their god's-eye-view, is not only encouraged to collapse their material separation from the photographs and to identify with the subjects within but to, also, be aware of themselves in the act of looking, into this very separate world, as they are again seduced into a deeper immersion. Yet like a car crash, this dual experience is not a slow or gradual immersion and contemplation, but, rather, a deeply felt, shocking, and immediate, experience of two elements colliding.

Via this duality, viewers can be seen to be positioned as both identifying with the subjects looked at, and as consciously being aware of themselves looking at those subjects. If viewers are barred from entering the world they are seduced by, and if they become conscious of their separated-selves looking upon that world, each viewer would thus stand in for the all-seeing eye of the Other, even while the familiar intimacies of 'other'-identification abound. The deconstruction of the photograph's surface, with the montage of photographs and imposition of pieces of photographic paper, serves to thwart the standard warding off of the stain. The creator's presence is as strongly conspicuous, as it is also absented, by those seductions of identification. A viewer is thus able to experience the shame of the stain, at the same time as it is thwarted – a hyper-awareness, for the self, of looking at that, which is looking at that, which is standing in for the self.

Contrarily, while a viewer is able to experience the shame of the judging super-ego, the subjects of Henson's images, framed as unaware of the viewer's god's-eye-gaze in this 'other place', seem to exist in a space void of the usual social judgements, taboos, and laws, that work to censure the viewer. The seemingly separate world

and its inhabitants, the in-determinability of the youths' actions, and their apparently non-hierarchical occupation of that space, support a sense for the viewer of a pronounced absence of traditional social laws. Butler (2008) observes that even the viewer's god's-eye-view serves to reinforce this seeming amorality, as "it retreats from the scene like an absent God, refusing to judge his subjects, withdrawing with it all moral surety or direction" (p. 277). The photographs can compel at least partial awareness of that aspect of the unconscious Other and its psychic relationship to the Symbolic and social laws<sup>80</sup>. The normally unconscious taboos and social laws are brought into conscious awareness via the presence of a world conspicuously without them. Whilst the inhabitants of this 'other place' can be seen to exist outside the realm of the stain and the all-seeing gaze of the Other, the viewer looking onto this world can be brought into awareness of their own inadequacy, in the same act of looking that more usually accords them control of it.

This profound mixing of the pre-Oedipal, ego-subjectivity, and the super-Ego-framed 'Other', results in photographic subjects posed as being unaware of the viewer, and an entranced viewer also uncomfortably and consciously aware of their surveilling eye. Whilst so much contemporary commentary (see Marr, 2008; Devine, 2008; Fortescue, 2008; Caldwell, 2010) points to the morality of Henson's representations of naked youth, and the production of such images in terms of procuring models and informed consent, this complicated construction and deconstruction of the images seems to provide the opportunity for the viewer to engage with just such social and ethical implications surrounding their own practice of viewing. Additionally, the effect of the equal strength given to the viewer's sense of power and shame, whilst looking at themselves looking and, concomitantly, the equal strength given to both the collapsing of traditional separations and the seductions into deeper identifications, work to extend those implications for the viewer to all acts of looking at images. As Malouf (2005) observes, in relation to Henson's photographs, "it takes us a little time to realise that the real subject may be the act of looking itself" (p. 35).

The intimacies and separations of Henson's photographs reinforce the held-open gateway between conscious and unconscious in the viewer, by extending the duality of 'experience and contemplation' within an interrogation of the powers, social taboos, and repressions, of the gaze and the screen. In this case, the dualities

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<sup>80</sup> Especially in regard to sexuality.

are self-referential contradictions around the act of looking, simultaneously reinforcing and undoing the normally unconscious identifications that make identity possible. Furthermore, another element supports this held open gateway between conscious and unconscious, semiotic and Symbolic, for the viewer. Viewed through the lens of the mirror phase, the particular binaries emphasised in the photographs can be seen as metonymic of the two modalities – of the pre-Oedipal non-identity and post-Oedipal identity, conscious and unconscious.

In the contradictory evocation of the binaries of childhood and adulthood, the photographs incur, for the viewer, a profound engagement with the difference between the two and, significantly, the movement that has occurred, for each adult subject, between the two. The viewer, in effect, returns back over that crossed Rubicon of the Mirror Stage. Whilst the various binaries within the photographs can be understood as metonyms of the two modalities, adolescence itself functions as a metaphor for the point between them, that break in the subject between the infant non-self and the post mirror phase subjectivity; between the experiential self and the contemplating, socially-mediated, subject who speaks, and who looks.

How do you explore to the best and most powerful effect the quicksands between knowing and not knowing, between understanding and sensing, between comprehension and instinct? The perfect metaphor for all that is adolescence. (Capon, cited in Fortescue, 2008, p. 33)

As Anna Gibbs (2003) argues, metaphor has a “dangerous potency” (p. 310), is an act of violence where paradigm substitution is a killing-off of one element in favour of an other (p. 310)<sup>81</sup>. In this case, adolescence replaces, in what can be a deeply shocking manner, the fantasy of post-Oedipal identity *as mastery and fixity*, of the subject and object *as bounded, whole, and knowable*.

Contemplation and experience of the movement from childhood to adulthood, also links metaphorically, in this case, to the movement between the semiotic non-self and Symbolic identity. Rather than solely presenting a paradox between the Real and representation, Henson’s photographs thus comprise an additional paradox,

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<sup>81</sup> Aptly, Gibbs (2003) links metaphor’s replacing of one term for another with the figure of the double, the “quintessential figure of modernity” (p. 311) whose presence “signals a concern with the maintenance of – nevertheless porous and permeable – boundaries between an interior and an exterior (subject and object) and with the policing of movement (projection, introjection) across or through them” (p. 311). That is, metaphor is another instance of the copy, with the same attendant hall of mirrors at play.

also in relation to the gaze, that allows for that held-open-gateway between the two modalities – a paradox that not only links the two phases (via a chain of associations relating to each modality), but one that does so via simultaneously both reinforcing, and unravelling, the construction of the viewer's own subjectivity around this central, and founding, paradox.

The constant staging of binaries within the photographs, in a non-hierarchical, or non-Symbolic, order, refuses the customary masking of what has been repressed in the creation of the subject's ideal objects, language, and desired others – the abject remainder, the off-frame of the screen's reality-effect. The photographs, instead, return the viewer to the original contradiction from which the endless and irresolvable process of lack, demand, and desire originates. Whilst troubling in effect, the added element of self-surveillance, returning the viewer's gaze upon themselves, works to direct the viewer's awareness towards the crux of the paradox between representation and Real, the point of primal repression that creates the two modalities the viewer is able to both experience and contemplate. The photograph, as a mirror image of self, thus becomes a paradoxical hall of mirrors, that endlessly reflects those ideal objects, and others, words, images, and selves, as it simultaneously exposes them as constructions, as mirage reflections on the outside, or surface, of self, that infinitely, and inexorably, lead back, underneath, or beyond, that ruptured skin – that bounding of self – to include unconscious experience, sensations, and origins.

## CONCLUSION

### CONCLUSION

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An experience of paradox within visual representation can precipitate an immediate affective charge for a viewer (if the content of the photograph links to the viewer's own subjectivity, including linking to that which has been repressed by the workings of metaphor and metonym<sup>82</sup>), thus propelling a conscious attempt on the part of the recipient to disambiguate that paradox via interpretation of the work. In each of the photographic case studies presented, a number of binaries evoked by the photographs are held in contradiction, with the viewer unable to resolve the conflicting terms within the image and thus unable to determine a coherent meaning for each photograph. The relationship between a viewer's subjectivity (including that which has been repressed) and the interpretation of photographs, is further explicated in the distance between the stability and mastery incurred by viewing images on the one hand and that which seems to pointedly wound on the other. The presence of indeterminacy within photographs does not allow the usual experiences of mastery and separation but, rather, transpires as a hook that, in effect, binds the viewer, subverting that desired, conscious interpretation and allowing the sharp prick of the Real.

The seemingly meaningless, flat, surfaces, of Jeff Wall's photographs provoke the viewer to consciously investigate the detail of the photographic content, in order to attend to that elusive meaning – and in doing so, this action reveals and subverts the viewer's habitual (including the culturally habitual) ways of viewing and making meaning. Pat Brassington's photographs are so evidently placed to communicate with the unconscious, that her work is considered part of the

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<sup>82</sup> That which is individually repressed, and/or the individual repression of the culturally taboo.

Surrealist tradition<sup>83</sup>. The figures and objects she presents, while uncanny and provocative, also serve to disturb and query cultural constructions of the feminine. Patricia Piccinini's artificial life forms are fascinatingly new, but gain their impact from their troubling relationship with the present. That is, as novel objects with uncertain referents, they upend the complex web of meanings of the existing social orders they are inserted into, demanding categorisation, yet serving to destroy those same categories.

Contrary to the manner in which the conscious mind revises a dream upon waking, in order to provide the charged assemblage of dream content with coherent meaning, these illogical and fantastic assemblages of photographic content signal the value in, at least initially, holding the desire for conscious coherence at bay and allowing the strange, visual-assemblages to move and haunt the viewer without the usual supports of language and understanding that are used to fix and master that experience. A viewer can be pierced into awareness of the intrusion of their unconscious, thus allowing for a different understanding of a photograph – one that reveals, and makes explicit, the individual and cultural norms by which meaning is normally made. Furthermore, the instant linkage of photographic content (that always occurs when viewing a photograph), with associations made at both a conscious and unconscious level, is brought more into conscious awareness in the presence of photographic paradox, as that which is irresolvably contradictory disturbs visual coherence and its attendant, unconscious, confirmation of psychological mastery. A process of investigation of these photographs – that is, an interpretation operating in an analogous manner to dream interpretation, where chains of association are revealed and followed – unveils the ways in which an exploitation of the unstable, paradoxical, ontology of the photograph (such as the paradox between index and Real), results in photographs with no apparent ready or fixed meaning, but with nevertheless powerful, complex, and rich, content and affect.

Similar to the way in which the placement of the Real into language is a placement within known conceptual grids and relationships of understanding, what cannot be understood according to those pre-existing grids unsettles and exposes that which is in language, and thus also the Symbolic, as cultural fictions – and not the reality

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<sup>83</sup> Brassington herself identifies Surrealist techniques and psychoanalysis as two particular elements, along with image appropriation, framing her practice (Marsh, 2007).

to which they pretend. The representation of objects and elements whose relationships can only be understood by interpretation, rather than conscious construction, creates an experience for the viewer of pre-conscious associative relationships that creates, and holds open, a gateway between the unconscious and conscious. It is this same gateway the viewers of Roger Ballen's *Boarding House* (2009) experience when the only identity available for identification is a child's representations of 'self', scribbled drawings of faces looking back at them.

As care of a child involves more than just the basics of food, water, and shelter, a caretaker's interaction with a child is also comprised of more than these basics. This interaction involves touch along with subtle exchanges at the level of hormones, temperature, smell, sound, taste, facial recognition, etc. In other words, the language related to maternal care does not fully describe the real, bodily, immersion as it relates to the senses, and the chemical – the biological, of that dyadic relation. The immersive experience in relation to viewing *The Boarding House* (2009) is one of dirt, privation, and lack, rather than fullness and maternal care. This is to say that *The Boarding House* serves as a representation of absence and lack, and can be considered a representation of that which is denied by representation – the loss of the maternal.

While the loss of the maternal is repressed in order to create identity, language, and representation, via: an absence of identification; the tropes of maternal neglect; an assemblage of contents rather than an ordered hierarchy; and the depiction of representations of faces looking at the viewer; *The Boarding House* photographs are able to signify and unbind that repressed loss. In the absence of identification, the presence of representations of faces looking at the viewer is significant, as 'looking' associatively signals the very border where identity is created. What is not present in these photographs is the Mirror Stage, thetic, body – a coherent reflection to identify with, to build meaning. While passage through the Mirror Stage incurs two, contradictory, fears<sup>84</sup> of the loss of the maternal in relation to either side of that boundary, these fears can be ameliorated by representation. In the case of *The Boarding House* photographs, the fears are amplified, rather than ameliorated, and there is only the inescapable presence of that feared loss of the maternal, and the resulting overwhelming affects of such loss. As affirmed by these

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<sup>84</sup> The fear of loss of the caretaker mother (that would result in annihilation and death), and the lesser fear of the loss of phallic power (associated with castration). In other words, fear of losing the maternal and fear of not losing the maternal.

photographs, it is the very existence of the lost maternal that is heterogeneous to the Symbolic, that annihilates and shatters the unities of identity, language, and representation.

To say that the semiotic, and thus rejection, is heterogeneous, is to say that the effects of rejection – in art, for example, cannot be predicted or grasped by existing social forms. As Kristeva puts it, the heterogeneous element is that which ‘the symbolising social structure...cannot grasp. (Lechte, 1990, p. 138)

Whilst representation acts as a balm for these two fears in relation to the loss of the maternal, it also holds the possibility of revealing the paradox that incurs these fears in the first instance – the false splitting of the Real into thethetic objects of self, self and other, self and object, language and representation. While “the maternal object – missed by the infant – can be said to have a ‘cathexis of longing’ concentrated upon it” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 64), the Mirror Phase bounded-self’s ideal, continually propped up by the viewing of images, is an absence of longing – a fullness of others and objects that, if achieved, would contradictorily confer a lack of social relation. For the subject that does not lack – the imagined, strived-for, self that is finally, and completely, as whole as its reflection promised – does not need others, or care, nor anything, to pacify that gaping dependency and loss, that the fake, mirror-wholeness actually confers.

In a sense, the maternal *is* longing and loss, as much as it is threatening excess. The endless repetition of faces scribbled on the wall, representations of the lost Real in the guise of representations of identity, are metaphors made uncannily real. The associative linking of identity and non-identity, of presence and absence, of adult subjects and lack of maternal care, brings the abstractions of loss to life by linking the before and after experiences of the Mirror Stage in a chain of associations that cathects the repressed, bound, energy of that primary loss. The adult viewer identifying with nothing but the child’s drawing looking back, experiencing the painful motherlessness of the boarding house, is viewing a representation of the cut, the break between non-self and self. The Boarding House photographs allow the viewer to experience both the before and after of the Mirror Stage, as the memory of lack, and the affects of loss, return, unbidden, to the Symbolic – wire mother, cloth mother, boarding house.

Bill Henson photographs adolescents within environments on the margins between nature and culture, within the soft hues of the hours between day and night. In an analogous way to that in which Kristeva considers identity to be an ‘open system’, she also considers adolescence to be a specific point of subjectivity where transmutability is at work:

I understand by the term ‘adolescent’ less an age category than an open psychic structure. Like the ‘open systems’ of which biology speaks concerning living organisms that live only by maintaining a renewable identity through interaction with another, the adolescent structure opens itself to the repressed at the same time that it initiates a psychic reorganisation of the individual – thanks to a tremendous loosening of the superego. (Kristeva, 1990, p. 8)

In other words, adolescence functions as a boundary between childhood and adulthood, where subjectivity opens to the repressed pre-Oedipal; not as a moment of release but, rather, as a sustained engagement able to take place over time. Within adolescence, the censorious super-ego’s control is loosened enough to allow aspects of the pre-Oedipal to exist simultaneously, and in relationship, with the subject’s post-Oedipal identity – resulting in the psychic reorganisation necessary for adult identity. Adolescence itself functions as a powerful metaphor, not only for the breach between the two distinct states of the pre-Oedipal and Symbolic identity, but for a time where that breach is a held-open gateway between the two states, where crisis allows multitudinous transformations to occur.

Henson’s *Lux et Nox* (2002) and *Untitled Works 1994/95* (1995) also attend to these two different states, with the composition of the photographs staged between: the real and imaginary; the seductively familiar, and the disturbingly unfamiliar, of the uncanny; and the everyday and the extraordinary. Henson’s photographs provide the viewer with an experience of their own, and their culture’s, repressed. The photographs present collisions of these oppositions that serve to implicate the viewer in both an examination of their own viewing and their own constructed, cultural, identity via the powerful, simultaneous, experience and contemplation of these two states of being.

This ‘crossing back over the Rubicon’, that can occur with Henson’s photographs, reveals paradox as a point of incomplete cathexis of the as-yet-unsignified, traumatic loss, of the maternal. Photography’s ontological contradiction between index and sign ensures that this and other uses of photographic paradox, such as those within the case studies presented in this research, are uniquely placed to

provide a bridge from surface, or conscious, oppositions to the repressed and founding paradox upon which both identity and culture are built. The numerous binaries evoked in Henson's photographs between day/night, adult/child, painting/photography, past/present, culture/nature, light/dark, and natural/supernatural, serve to metonymically link to that deeper unresolved contradiction between the Real and language and, in this instance of photographic paradox, allow a release of the cathected loss of the maternal upon which that very breach is founded. Desire for images is revealed as more than the constant propping and falling of Symbolic identity, it is a means by which that unbearable and unspeakable loss is sublimated into that which is understood as subjectivity and reality. The resultant contradictions incurred by that loss ensure that it is never quite covered over, that the break in the Real that comprises identity, objects, others and, accordingly, images and photographs, remains a present and generative force within each of these Symbolic objects, including the photograph and its viewer.

Abjection is both rejection and the ensuing dialectical oscillation caused by the remainder of that rejection. In other words, abjection is both a point of incomplete cathexis and the ensuing process or pattern that results from this. Rejection sets in motion the unending process of confirmation and separation, a reduplication of the conflict caused by that initial separation; a conflict that whilst visible in abject non-objects, such as body fluids, is also necessarily part of a larger process of the continually incomplete cathexis of the lost maternal. The abject is thus not just a surfeit of body fluids (Krauss & Bois, 1997) but, rather, an endlessly repeating conflict between semiotic and Symbolic, rejection and stases, caused by the self-referential nature of the contradiction between these two states. This false split functions as a stuck trauma, endlessly repeating the primal repression that founds identity, language, and the Symbolic order; in each iteration destroying and renewing what came before – not in a synthetic progression but, rather, in a reduplication (Oliver, 1993b) of that founding crisis.

Elaboration of paradox under Hughes and Brecht's (1978) terms of contradiction, self-reference, and vicious circularity, evidences that paradox is present both in the breakdown of what should be logical, and non-contradictory, conceptualisations, and also in self-referential vicious circles that these failures of Symbolic stability give rise to. The abject itself can thus be understood as describing the operation of a paradox. This repression of continuity, via separation, refers to the foundational,

recurring, self-referential, contradiction between semiotic and Symbolic – the paradox that affords subjective being.

This theorisation of paradox as a recurring process is pointedly relevant for understanding the ongoing theoretical debates defining photography as either index or sign, revealing the power of this ontological contradiction as an unresolved paradox; a paradox that serves to link to, and partially release, the traumatic loss of the maternal and its accompanying double-binds, or fears. This paradox reveals the moments of exaltation and loss which, when viewing a photograph, relate not only to the individually and culturally repressed but also, inevitably, to this greater repression. When a gateway between the Symbolic and semiotic is held open and chains of associations, between photographic contents and repressed contents, are linked to that primal repression, the cathexis of longing is partially released and the viewer is, for a moment, unbound: from themselves, from meaning, and from reality, as they look at a photograph and are charged with the released affects of loss, and of joy in that unbinding.

Abjection describes the founding, irresolvable, and self-referential, contradiction between representation and the Real – a paradox that transpires as always present, within language and (significantly for this research) within vision. The failures of vision can be understood as the abject body asserting, inserting, itself, within vision – as the paradox necessarily, and always, present within it. The infinitely contextual, uncategorisable, material-continuity of the Real is denied by, and crashes through into, thethetic forms of representation, and identity, as it gives life to them: it is a bloody birthing, where the as-yet-unsignified creates a tear in, and for, being.

In terms of vision and its failures, the drive energies of negation, its stases and rejections, belong to the orifice of the eye. While Lacan's theories of *the gaze* and *the screen* outline the difference between the material eye and the psychic processes involved in the act of looking, these theories describe the workings of lack, desire, and identification, via the movement of drive energies through a psychic gateway that is attached to a physical orifice. That is, in the case of viewing photographs, the drives circulate through the orifice of the eye, as the subject's desire enacts its search for objet a, and then fails to fill its lack, to plug the hole of the orifice completely. The drive energies circulate endlessly through this

orifice, a hole in self – a movement mirrored in the endless opening and closing of Piccinini's unknown orifices and in Freud's apt metaphor of the mouth kissing itself: each describing the pulse, of separation and lack of separation, that is the abject process. In Kristeva's terms, the desired objects of the Symbolic, once formed or gained, fall again into the material abyss of their remainder.

Abjection allows for an understanding of the sign as inescapably partnered with the semiotic. An experience of viewing that entails powerful affect, without a conscious awareness of the meaning of a photograph, provides an impetus for interpretation, an unpicking and unravelling of that immediate experience into a coherent story – not one put together by the conscious mind to make it amenable but, rather, a story that tracks the charged associative chains throughout the image. When there is no charge, there is only the presence of the known, the dreary studium, but the intrusive prick of the punctum signals the presence of the unconscious, linked via the assembled contents of the image and the reader's present and past associations to that deeper repressed. John Lechte (2009, pp. 85 - 86) describes how an acknowledgement of the semiotic function in language is an acknowledgment that a text's meaning only comes into existence within a reader's experience of a text. Elements of a text, social structures and contexts, language, cognition, affect, memory, sensation, and the viewer's unconscious, are all simultaneously part of the meaning. It is not that the addition of these elements constructs some kind of summation of meaning for a photograph, but that they are interrelated, and indistinguishable, from each other in its viewing. An acknowledgment of the semiotic recognises that there is no sharp division between image and viewer, other than in the self/other, or 0/1, logic of the repressed continuity of the Symbolic.

The Symbolic photograph belongs to reality, objectivity, fixity, and a kind of transcendence of time and place, as context has only the 'lip service' of the closed aperture, or orifice, the definable, and defined, context already-established-always, but not the opening and closing orifice, the mouth constantly kissing itself, the self and other entwined in endless rituals of separation and identification, the self erotically in love with (filling) itself. With acknowledgement of the semiotic, the photograph is an uroborus, a gateway to stand before and pass out of/through/into.

For Kristeva, the image too is akin to an open system: “an image is not itself a thing, but a way in which psychic space is articulated” (Lechte, 2009, p. 86). An image exceeds its Symbolic functions in that, if meaningful at all, beyond any tired repetition of the already known, it aligns with the semiotic rather than with knowledge and understanding. In doing so, the image exists as more than a separate object, occurring in relation to the lived conscious and unconscious associations of the viewer, it exists as a rupture, a cut in both the subject and the Symbolic<sup>85</sup>. The photograph, the marvellous paradoxical index of the Real and, yet, constructed sign, can exist as a cut in both the subject and the Symbolic, where the semiotic pulses allow the drives, the unknown, the unconscious, the lost and longed for, to destroy and reform the existing objects of the known world – with both exultation and sorrow in that release and destruction, that loss, longing, and creation. The Symbolic is reformed in the abject, held-open cut, closing for a moment in new forms, new signification, before that “quite literal ‘revolution’” (Walsh, 2009, p. 158) of the reduplication of abjection begins anew.

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<sup>85</sup> Kristeva also extends this understanding, of the image as rupture, to the relationship between the act of viewing and that of creating, and describes this in a beautiful evocation of each process, as a relationship with both the artist and the viewer “alternately playing the roles of the wound and the knife” (2012, p. 84).

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