

Elfriede Dreyer, *Dystopia and Artifice in Late Twentieth-Century Visual Culture*. Extract from thesis for D Litt et Phil Art History, Unisa 2001.

Chapter 2: A dystopian world

OVERVIEW

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In the previous chapter an overview of utopian thinking, mainly prior to the twentieth century, was presented. Several characteristics inherent in utopian thinking, such as the dichotomy between the real and the imagined, and the real and the ideal, were identified.

In this chapter it is argued that since the late Sixties, **a dystopian condition** has become evident in visual renderings. Three core traits of the utopian genre, ideology, pleasure and nightmare, are focused on and it is demonstrated how these three are communicated differently in the dystopian context. Technology is not a strong focus in this chapter, since this aspect will be comprehensively covered in the next chapter, [Chapter 3: *Technology and art in the late twentieth century*](#).

In this chapter a hermeneutic approach to articulating the dystopian condition is followed and demonstrated. This approach entails a relativistic stance in which meaning can only be contextually derived.

2.1 Dystopia and ideology

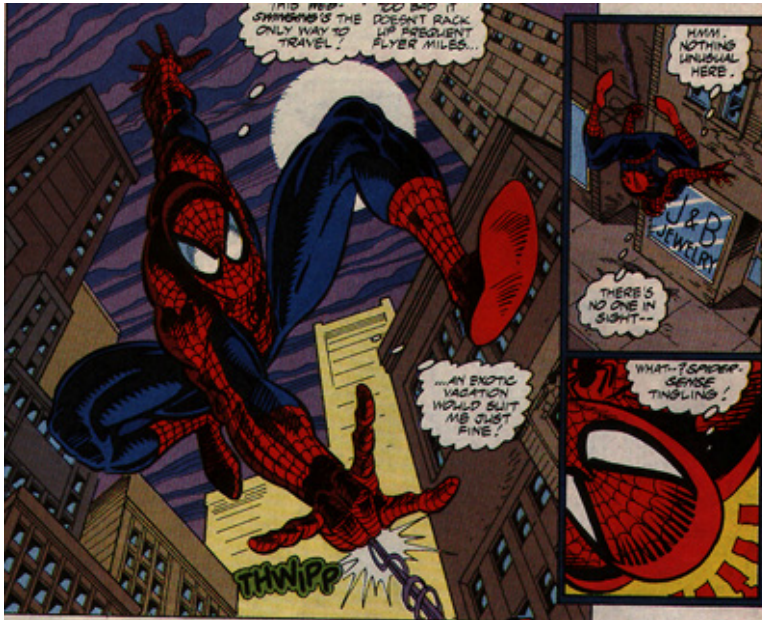
It was previously demonstrated that the stereotypical utopian genre is premised in ideological projection. It was argued that in utopian thinking the social construct is a proposed homogeneous one in which its people support and subscribe to the suggested value system.

Although the Spider-Man narratives fall into Manuel's ([Manuel](#) 1973: vii) second category of utopian thought (cf. [Chapter 1](#)), that is, a kind of thinking in which the principles of an ideal, 'optimum society' are postulated, they speak simultaneously of a dystopian world and can be interpreted as in sequence to the kind of utopian thinking that appeared in the time of the Greeks and is still found in the present.

In Figures 1 and 2, such utopia is projected in the character of Spider-Man: the setting is New York, the time is the late twentieth century and there are many visible leftovers of the American Dream, evolving since World War II and entailing dreams of global harmony, goodwill and exemplary citizens. Spider-Man represents utopia and the 'good citizen'; he is larger than life, an artificial projection and a surreal super-hero character endowed with special powers ('spider-sense'). He is also Peter Parker in 'real life', an ordinary man playing out the role of the super-hero and as such becomes utopia embodied.

At the same time, Spider-Man's world is evil and brimming with the threat of criminals and disasters of *both* a technological *and* a natural kind. In Video clip 1, this dystopian world is depicted. It would seem as if the late twentieth-century decentering process still concerns the ideologies surrounding the notions of progress and advancement of humankind, but that simultaneously, end-of-utopia debates have come into being. According to Andreas Huyssen:

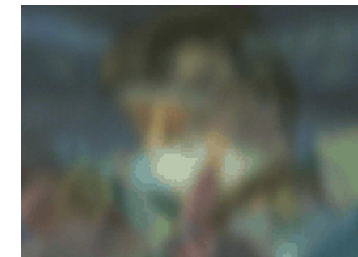
In our century, the discourse of the end of utopia is *as endemic* to the utopian imagination as its visions of the world, other times, or other states of mind. ([Huyssen](#) 1995: 85) (my emphasis)



[Figure 1](#)
scorpion.jpg
([Yomtov 1996](#))



[Figure 2](#)
double.jpg
([Lee 2000](#))



[Video clip 1](#)
bendie.mov
([Marvel Comics 1998](#))

Another pertinent visual example in this regard is the visual still from the television series, *South Park* (Figure 3), derived from the early twentieth-century narrative, *The Wizard of Oz* (cf. [Chapter 1](#)). In the satirical rendering of the haloed city of Oz in the background of the image, the ancient idea of the idealised city, such as the Holy City or Jerusalem, is mocked and ridiculed.

According to [Huysen](#) (1995: 87), the discourses on the end-of-utopia seem to operate on three levels:

Firstly, on a **political level**, with regard to a new emerging **political conservatism** from 1968 onwards, mainly as a response to Reaganism and the crisis of liberalism and the welfare state, with the long agony and final collapse of socialist alternatives expected from the Soviet Union, China and others.



[Figure 3](#)
The Wizard of
Oz.bmp
([South Park](#))

In 1984, Habermas ([Huyssen](#) 1995: 87) suggested that it is not the end of utopia which is at stake, but the end of a kind of utopian discourse which, since the eighteenth century, has been centred around the liberating potential of labour and production. Habermas insisted on the coupling of historical and utopian thought and rejected the idea of radical rupture with the past. Huyssen argues that at present utopianism is being transformed: this can be described as a “critical displacement of an earlier set of utopian energies at work in Western societies rather than their exhaustion or atrophy” ([Huyssen](#) 1995: 89). Huyssen (1995: 86) contradicts the eminent post-1960s cynicism as evident in the many end-of ideology theses by arguing for the “indestructibility” and the “irrepressibility” of the utopian imagination.

In its second form, the discourses on the end-of-utopia are related to **modernity and the masternarratives of the Enlightenment**. [Huyssen](#) (1995: 89) argues that:

Baudrillard's potlatch and symbolic exchange, Lyotard's language games, Derrida's différance, Barthes' notion of the writerly text and its pleasure, Kristeva's privileging of the semiotic over the symbolic, Deleuze and Guattari's desiring machines and their notion of a minor literature all may be considered as being themselves utopian, opposed to what these writers would consider the monologic, logocentric, teleological, oedipal and therefore politically totalitarian discourse of enlightened utopianism.

Most post-structuralists, opposed to and critical of utopianism since they blame the problems of modernity on it, display binarism in thinking in their rejection of the idea of history as continuity. The profound disgust with historicism, which occurred during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, became acute as a result of a disillusionment with the cult of historical consciousness accompanied by a scientific worldview. During the twentieth century, many scholars concerned themselves with notions of utopian thought against the background of the nihilistic onslaught of the time. It was especially during the Sixties that many publications saw the light in the wake of the deconstruction of master-narratives, notions of power, origin, truth, genius, and above all, ideology. Such deconstruction concerned a decentering of mainstreams and centralisms and the conviction that 'truth' does not exist as a single unitary entity, but is to be found in many forms simultaneously. Post-structuralist Jonathan Culler (1983: 131), for instance, maintains that:

... deconstruction is not a theory that defines meaning in order to tell you how to find it". As a critical undoing of the hierarchical oppositions on which theories depend, it demonstrates the difficulties of any theory that would define meaning in a univocal way: as what an author intends, what conventions determine, what a reader experiences.

The third set of discourses on the end-of-utopia concerns **questions on the notion of reality** or realities, for instance, as reflected in the Baudrillardian position of the disappearance of the real, argued especially in *The Perfect Crime* of 1996. For Baudrillard, utopia is not to be realised in the sense of the transformation of dream into reality, since developments in technology have brought on hyperreality and simulacra as other reals. The pollution and saturation with images of the contemporary world is not about utopia but about reals per se. According to Baudrillard, the end of utopia is the end of the real, a kind of vanishing act, and we are left with the dystopia of the nothing, the 'no space' in which the distinctions between the real and the non-real have collapsed and vanished. In this sense Baudrillard becomes the fulfilment of Mannheim's predictions ([Mannheim](#) 1947, Chapter 7).

For the purposes of this investigation, the first set of discourses concerning the notion of ideology and the third discourses concerning the notion of the real, are more relevant. (Only the notion of ideology is attended to here, since in Chapter 4 the notion of the real is dealt with in depth.) My view is that the discontinuation of the project of ideology is untenable, although I am of the opinion that, in the late twentieth century, it perhaps makes more sense to replace the term 'ideology' with 'desire'. In this regard I follow French theorist Jacques Derrida who develops a theory on *parergon* as the discourse of interpretation around the work that attempts to uncover the 'presence' of the *ergon*/artwork in its concealed form. Derrida's theory of *parergon* is expounded in *The Truth in Painting* (1987) (the translated version of *La Vérité en Peinture* of 1978) and a supplementary reworking of Heidegger's *ergon*. In *The End of Philosophy*, Heidegger interprets *ergon*, as encountered in Aristotle's ideas, as follows:

Thought in the Greek manner, the work is not work in the sense of the accomplishment of a strenuous making. It is also not result and effect. It is a work in the sense of that which is placed in the unconcealment of its outward appearance and endures thus standing or lying. To endure means here: to be present at rest as work. (Heidegger 1973: 5)

Ergon as 'work' in this context refers to the act of unravelling or figuring out in the broadest sense. *Parergon* as interpretation reflects the artificial framing of vision in the use of the photographic camera. Derrida criticises the different endeavours that ensued in history to unveil ultimate Truth as a single determined entity and views *parergon* as designating:

... a formal and general predicative structure, which one can transport intact or deformed or reformed according to certain rules, into other fields, to submit new contents to it It is the concept of the remark, of this 'General Remark', ... without being part of it and yet without being absolutely extrinsic to it. (Derrida 1987: 55)

The *parergon* is nothing more than an approximation of what an artwork could mean and is not measurable as an 'ideal' interpretation or an ultimate Truth. Derrida maintains that the answer to any question arrests an abyss which already presupposes that there is no decidable answer, that is, the answer is dragged down into the abyss in advance. The abyss in the Derridean sense is an infinite space filled with indefinite multiplication (*Of Grammatology* 1976: 163). The idealism surrounding *parergon* is thus not concerned with a total abrogation of traditional standards and methods, but is an attempt, a project or a strategy to come close to

the meaning(s) of the *ergon*/artwork by allowing different interpretations and viewpoints and disallowing authoritativeness. Although this process is never terminated, the will or wish to interpret or, in a sceptical sense, the act of doing so, remains. In my article, '[Parergon](#)', of 1995, I argued that:

The idealism surrounding parergon is thus not concerned with a total abrogation of traditional standards and methods, but it is an attempt, a project or a strategy to come close to the meaning(s) of the *ergon*/artwork by allowing different interpretations and viewpoints and disallowing authoritativeness. Although this process is never terminated, the will or wish to interpret or, in a sceptical sense, the act of doing so, remains. *Parerga* seem to be driven by a motivating 'desire' (a Romantic concept), a mutation of the metaphor of ideal. ([Pretorius](#) (Dreyer) 1995: 8)

I support Huyssen's view of the end-of-utopia or dystopia debates as still, ironically, fundamentally ideological. I also support his questioning of Karl Mannheim, who in 1926 predicted that in the future in a world in which there was never anything new, it would be possible that there would exist a condition in which thought would be devoid of all ideological and utopian elements ([Huyssen](#) 1995: 85, also see [Mannheim](#) 1936). Similarly, Marcuse does not view the loss of freedom in advanced industrial culture as end-of-ideology but, on the contrary, as more ideological since "ideology is in the process of production itself" ([Marcuse](#) 1964: 11).

In Western late twentieth-century visual culture, end-of-utopia as well as utopian viewpoints are articulated, depicting dystopian states of fragmentation, alienation and displacement due to the conditions induced by urbanism and technology. Jenny [Mecziems](#) (1987:92) of the University of Warwick suggests that the late twentieth century is very much concerned with whether there is going to be a future at all due to the environmental, ecological and other global concerns which are under siege to technology. It may thus make more sense to talk about a 'post-dystopian' society rather than a dystopian or post-utopian society.

2.2 Twentieth-century relativism

In Figure 4, which depicts the cover of one of the very first Spider-Man comics of the Sixties (Issue and date unknown), Spider-Man's actions are derivative of another fictional construct, the Tarzan comics, created by Edgar Rice Burroughs during more or less

the same time. In the Figure, Spider-Man hooks his sling on the tree branches in order to save a damsel in distress from the claws of savages. (Over the next thirty-odd years, however, Spider-Man's sling becomes a web and has been put to many uses, such as a [parachute](#).)

The context is the jungle and might be appear familiar to Africans or tourists to Africa. To such reader/viewers, the threats posed by the wild might not be as real as to those who are unfamiliar with the African jungle, such as the American readers, since to them Africa is still an exotic, dangerous, untamed wilderness. Spider-Man's actions would thus appear even more heroic to these reader/viewers. Such relativity of knowledge goes hand-in-hand with the deconstruction of the notions of genius, absolutes and ideology. This in turn subverts radical dichotomies and sharp black-white distinctions and activates instead consciousness for fragmentation, overlap, similarity, dualism, mutation, differentiation and marginality.

During the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries the idea has been firmly entrenched that knowledge, ideology and utopian construction are relative constructs. The notion of locality or specificity is of special importance in relative constructs. French phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur broadens this concept by identifying one of the pivotal problems in hermeneutics as that centering on epistemological specificity ([Ricoeur](#) 1981: 165), since the concept of interpretation seems, at the epistemological level, to be opposed to the concept of [explanation](#).

The specifics of the real of the jungle in Figure 4 have been exaggerated and dramatised in order to create a stage or theatre for heroism.



Figure 4
spider-jungle.jpg
(Wright 2000: 6)

The utopian mode of thinking is encountered in *both* the concept of exotic wild nature (aimed at the urban reader/viewer) *and* Spider-Man's heroic deeds. The dystopian element exists in that the utopian aspects are recognised but are deconstructed since the drama and seriousness of the threat have been lost in the context of the comic book.

In deconstruction, value dichotomies and hierarchies such as true and false are questioned as they have been historically produced. In Figure 4 the heroic meta-narrative has been produced tongue-in-cheek and is received as such. The heroism is not explained but simply illustrated by way of the context of jungle and threat. Since Spider-Man is a fictional hero, but heroism presents itself in the real observed world, the visual text becomes dystopian by hovering between the real and the imagined, as well as in the sacrilege of the concept of the chosen one, the prophet, the hero.

For post-modernist Dominic [Baker-Smith](#) (1987: 1, 8), the dystopian mode may indeed be described as a kind of hovering between ideal forms and the inadequate provisions of experience, as a strange relationship between an imagined world and the familiar theatre of human experience, or as a transaction between imaginative vision and practical intelligence (argued in *Between Dream and Nature: Essays on Utopia and Dystopia*, a publication of selected papers presented at a conference of the University

of Amsterdam in 1984 to consider some of the range of imaginary projections by George Orwell in his novel *1984* of 1946). This interface between imagination and experience determines the viewer's reading of a text and the disclosing of the meaning or the context of the visual text.

2.3 Fragmentation

The Spider-Man adventures are presented *both* as an ongoing narrative *and* as a broken narrative in the sense that every publication in the series deals with only a part or fragment of a single narrative within the larger core narrative. Therefore its conception follows late twentieth-century deconstructionist notions of non-closure, fragmentation and relativism. Similarly, Video clip 2 is a fragment of some unknown whole video with a beginning and an end, one of a series of video cartoons with Spider-Man as central character.

Each of the Spider-Man comics (as demonstrated in Figure 5) is a fragment that presents some sequence of events, that is, containing a section of the complete narrative but not the complete narrative. To this end the whole series must be collected. There is continuity in the sense that the comics are produced in series, one comic following on the next, but it is only collectors, who may be are in possession of a whole series, who can follow the complete narrative. In my search for Spider-Man comics in South Africa, only a few copies could be located and additional comics had to be ordered from the USA. I was unable to collect these in sequence and the ones I did manage to acquire provided me only with fragments of the various series. Therefore I have only partial knowledge of the various Spider-Man narratives.

The Spider-Man comics can be interpreted as representing the idea that knowledge is not only relative, but also that it is partial and fragmented. The idea of twentieth-century broken narrative or fragmentation in logic (as demonstrated above), can be enforced by arguing that the dystopian condition has come about practically, partly as a result of multiple scientific and technological discoveries and inventions, and theoretically, through the influence of theorists, such as Hume, of science and empirical knowledge. Since Hume, the rationality of science has been denied and his well known contention that invention is a priori entirely arbitrary, and therefore every effect distinct from its cause, has been followed by many other theories, including those of the astro-physicists of our time.



[Video clip 2](#)
harrypet.mov
([Marvel Comics 1998](#))



[Figure 5](#)
Amazing Spider-Man 15-02.jpg
([Spider-Man Movie News](#))

Hence, the awareness has been established that it is through the ongoing accumulation of details of recurring patterns that a close, but never a closed, reading of universality can be approximated. It is neither the general principles per se nor the logic and factual evidence inherent in the process of cause and effect that render meaningful outcome. As such, discourse relative to artworks continues and a fundamental sense of indecision is raised in the deconstructivistic aesthetic by opening up boundaries and creating a flow or a flux in interpretation.

2.4 Framing and fragility

German artist Anselm Kiefer's New Romantic work, *Every Human Being Stands beneath His Own Dome of Heaven* (Figure 6), renders the idea that the boundary of the dichotomy between the real and the imagined is as fragile as a 'soap bubble', that:

... quickly bursts at the slightest breeze, the slightest contact with reality, for in its description of an imminent future, it jettisons all links with an uncomfortable present. ([Mattetelart et al 1984:7](#)).

The work speaks about utopia and the creation of an ideological microcosm within a macrocosm. There are several layers of reference to ideology in this work. In a political sense the saluting figure refers to the 'real' of recent Hitlerism in Germany, although political ideology is always mere construct and fiction. The figure is placed in a ploughed, excavated landscape that refers to a long tradition of nature as site of ideological projection, found in both classic and romantic texts. The work also speaks of the eternal relationship of Being to world, a notion that fundamentally envisages coding (cf. [Chapter 5: Figure 62](#)).



[Figure 6](#)
Anselm Kiefer,
*Every Human Being Stands beneath His Own
Dome of Heaven* (1970)
([Rosenthal 1987:16](#))



Figure 7

Amazing Spider-Man 04-19.jpg
(Spider-Man Movie News)

Referring to coding, description and point of view, [Givón](#) (1989: 1) argues that: "The description of an entity is incomplete, indeed uninterpretable, unless it specifies the point of view from whence the description was undertaken". Accordingly, "A picture is not fully specified unless its frame is also specified" ([Givón](#) 1989: 2), indicating an important relation between meaning and context. [Givón](#) (1989: 2) maintains that: "The meaning of an expression cannot be fully understood without understanding the context in which the expression is used".

In comics, the typical, idiosyncratic representation of images and text is in frames, as demonstrated in Figure 7. Each frame represents a few seconds in real time, and simulates the frame structure found in digital video and film. The frames are in logical sequence, but simultaneously every frame remains a fragment. The content of every frame is quite cryptic in order to facilitate an economical style of narration. The frames function as microcosms in a macrocosm or as fragments of the whole, and simulate the idea of third cultures as argued in the section on [globalism](#) in Chapter 3.

Within this perspective, utopian construction can be interpreted as relative and very fragile, subject to dismantling at any point in time. As such dystopia becomes evident.

2.5 Dystopia, novelty and memory

Many twentieth-century literary and visual texts, such as the Spider-Man narratives, depict a world dominated and driven by technological and digitised systems that are continually updated. Technological inventions are partly grounded in imagination and 'play'. In turn, invention is related to the notion of novelty.

The twentieth-century philosopher, A N [Whitehead](#), maintains in *Science and the Modern World* (1948) that the "... union of passionate interest in the detailed facts with equal devotion to abstract generalisation ... forms the novelty in our present society" (Whitehead 1962: 408). Such ambivalence is at the core of understanding the dystopian condition: it is at the same time concerned with the future *and* the past, that is, with the drive to create a better and more efficient future, based on the technological inventions as well as the disasters of the past; it is concerned with *both* local contexts and detail, *and* global theories; and it is simultaneously projected on global utopian ideas *and* the decentering of single authoritarian systems.

In *Twilight Memories*, [Huyssen](#) (1995: 6) argues that the current obsession with novelty and its experiences, as expressed and rendered in visual form, is not merely one of the many forms of post-modern *pastiche* or another *fin de siècle* syndrome, but rather a sign of the crisis of the temporality inherent to the preoccupation with novelty that has propelled and driven modernity since the turn of the last century. As a result, in late twentieth century a nostalgia for the past, a longing for a time when there was more stability, has emerged simultaneously with an obsession with memory. Huyssen's hypothesis may be interpreted as a kind of 'holding on' in the face of radical technologisation and novelties that are born and die concurrently.

Robert [Kuttner](#), in *Market, State, and Dystopia* (1993), argues that a dystopia is a utopia in reverse and he describes the post-1980 era as a free market dystopia that was built on the ruins of depression and the World Wars in favour of a marketised society premised in novelty. The modernist obsession with the new was prepared by the ideas of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and other early works dating from 1873 to 1876, as well as in later works, such as *The Will to Power* (1964), he develops the theme that the past must be seen as a burden and argues that the individual must become original and

'raw'. As such, the individual becomes a kind a superman/woman or *überhistorisches* individual that must be empowered by finding the 'true self' that transcends the present horizon of time and others, as well as by mastering the passions and channelling them creatively into deeds and works of universal or perennial form. In *One-dimensional Man*, Herbert [Marcuse](#) (1964: 10) argues that the evolution of mass culture and production has invaded the private space of the individual and has claimed the entire person, reducing everything to mere operationalism.

The notions of the 'new' and novelty go hand-in-hand with the notion of free will. The twentieth century has seen the postulation of individual freedom and the right to freedom of speech or 'voice' as a central tenet. Baudrillard takes a deterministic stance by arguing that will (and desire) cannot be contained or controlled. He continues by referring to Nietzsche's postulation that the drive to will seems in fact so strong that out of fear for desiring nothing, man [woman] "will prefer the desire for the nothing, thus making him [her] self, by the deployment of a will without object, the surest agent of that continuity of the nothing which is the continuation of the original crime" ([Baudrillard](#) 1996: 13).

It would seem that for Baudrillard the drive to will, alternatively phrased as the drive for the new, is a dystopian drive, aimed at nothing since the self has become so acutely aware of temporality. In the chapter 'The Spectre of the Will' in *The Perfect Crime*, [Baudrillard](#) (1996: 12 & 13) concedes that:

The will is entrapped by the limitless freedom it is accorded, and it consents to this out of an illusion of self-determination. ... But most often, the will merges with the event as its retrospective *mise en scène*, in the same way as a dream sequence gives expression to the sensation of the sleeping body.

The constant flux of new objects, viewpoints, events, reals, has come to simulate a grey or "twilight" (Huysen) state of being in which present and past converges into memories of space and time. Novelty is impossible to conceive without its immediate or sometimes distant past. Therefore a paradox exists in the very concept of the new as grounded in the past and memory. Whilst teleological notions of history are fading in the twentieth century, memory seems to be bridging the gaps between, the shifts and

transitions from novelty to novelty, and especially accelerating technical processes. In this context, memory has come to mean something beyond utopian space and time. According to Huyssen, it

... does not require much theoretical sophistication to see that all representation -- whether in language, narrative, image, or recorded sound -- is based on memory. Re-presentation always comes after, even though the media will try to provide us with the delusion of pure presence. But rather than leading us to some authentic origin or giving us verifiable access to the real, memory, even and especially in its belatedness, is itself based on representation. ([Huyssen](#) 1995: 2)

The conflation of the concept of novelty with memory evokes the end-of-utopia debate, as discussed earlier, and contains an incipient reference to history. It is especially in the work of artists such as Anselm Kiefer and Sigmar Polke that a new confrontation with and return to history is observed, which [Huyssen](#) (1995: 88) describes as a new form of utopian thinking embodied as *post-histoire* or post-utopia. In the drive towards uncovering past experiences and events, memories and nostalgia are evoked in a teleological wish for completion. This twilight of paradox may be alternatively phrased as a dichotomy, a post-industrial split between leftovers of old constructs and their memories. [Huyssen](#) (1995: 3) describes this as a "tenuous fissure between past and present ... making it alive and distinct from the archive or any other mere system of storage and retrieval".

In Figure 8, a scene from one of the Spider-Man comics is depicted in which there is reference to a primordial beginning, to [Atlantis](#), the cradle of souls at the beginning of time. According to [Blakeney](#) (1937: s.v. "Atlantis"), Atlantis was a great island whose inhabitants became wicked and impious, and the island was in consequence swallowed up in the ocean in a day and a night. Yet in Figure 18 the reference to Atlantis becomes an ironic revisitation of a place and concept in the sense that Atlantis now becomes imbued with futuristic technological mutants. Spider-Man's post-industrial world is set in a looming apocalypse. In the tales of Spider-Man, he swings about in a world of fires, floods, nuclear disasters and other dramas that threaten the very existence of humankind and the planet earth. A cosmic undercurrent is created that has affinity with Greek mythology, involving the four elements of fire, water, earth and sky as introduced by Thales. The rendering of the post-industrial world includes with these elements technological disaster so that the



[Figure 8](#)
[water2-s.jpg](#)
[\(David 1996\)](#)

century.

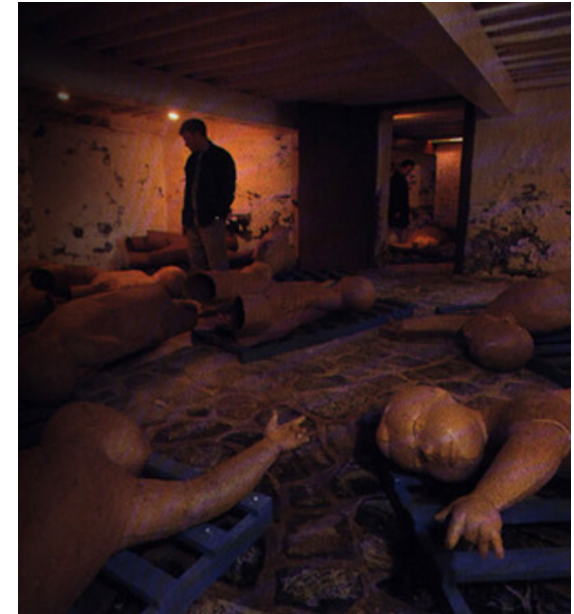
cosmological picture of the mythical beginning and end of the world is complete. Furthermore, the water world evokes associations with another ancient myth, that of the Flood, as found in many works of Kiefer.

Subverted utopia is found in the remembering of the (sometimes traumatic) past, as in the work of many South African artists, and especially of German artist Anselm Kiefer. In Figure 9, South African Kevin Brand depicts seventeen Aryan boys reaching out as if to their guardian, playing on sentiments of trust and hope ([Williamson & Jamal 1996: 16](#)). Yet the doll-like figures are broken and discarded, alluding to the destruction of monuments in the changed political environment of post-apartheid South Africa after 1994. The title of the work, *Here XVII*, refers to the colonial past when South Africa was a Dutch colony in the seventeenth

Jo Ractliffe's *A Sunny Day IV* (1995), Figure 10, similarly evokes the days of apartheid struggle and recalls a Fifties Johannesburg environment. Ractliffe's urban landscapes enshrine the everyday and the 'petty', but they speak essentially of experience and history and the desire to reclaim and recover the 'own' experience within that history ([Williamson & Jamal 1996: 74, 76](#)).

In Anselm Kiefer's *Jerusalem* (Figure 11), a dialogue is set up between the 'present' of the overpainting and the 'past' of the underpainting. This interacts with the third dimension of the collage and evokes pictorial and formal ambiguity. The grey of the overpainted lead recalls Huyssen's 'twilight' of memory, the play between the past and present of time and place. The canvas is split in two, negated by the continuation of the imagery right across. Such dividedness is further strengthened by the two-dimensional collaging of two simulated metal swords on a ravaged earth presented in three-dimensional deep space. The painting of the landscape in emulsion, shellac and acrylic is overpainted in grey lead, and then partially torn away to reveal the underpainting.

Besides its schizophrenic allusion to binary time and history, *Jerusalem* comments on technology and technical process in its utilisation of both traditional and contemporary attitudes to painting. This mixing of modes of representation is taken further in the reference to production, the manufactured objects (the metal swords) mixed with traditional painting technique. The work comments on evolution in technique and technologies in general and especially on the late twentieth-century situation of rapidly developing technology as well as on the notion of free choice (will) and the artist as consumer. Although in *Jerusalem* the landscape is rendered as excavated and plundered, insinuating the destructive tendencies of the technological onslaught via the collaged metal



[Figure 9](#)
Kevin Brand,
Here XVII (1995)
([Williamson & Jamal 1996: 17](#))

objects, on the horizon a golden zone is discerned – reminiscent of a New Jerusalem. In this work a dystopian sentiment is evoked, grounded in the postulation of a new world following on the past and present unpleasant one.

Sam [Mendes](#)'s film, *American Beauty* of 1999, similarly covers many aspects of dystopia, utilising a revisionist methodology. In this film (as illustrated in Video clip 3), the drab life of the main character Lester is posthumously depicted, a kind of *post facto* simulacrum. Lester has been shot dead and from this position recounts his miserable life in a late twentieth-century urban setting. His life, representing the typical dystopian citizen, reeks of the collapse of family structure and value systems; boredom; violence; misplaced sexuality; losses; alienation and hatred – basically, of being 'sedated', in Lester's own words.

Towards the end of the film all these disgusting and unpleasant aspects of Lester's real life (his past 'real' life) are transformed into the vital elements that made his life worthwhile. In the rendering of dystopia an ambivalent utopian position is found: Lester wishes to transcend his miserable life of middle age, the given unpleasant real, and enter a projected utopian real of, for instance, sex with an attractive teenage girl and a better relationship with his wife and daughter (Video clip 4). Yet there is subversion of this utopian thinking when his real life in 'retrospect' becomes idealised as superb.

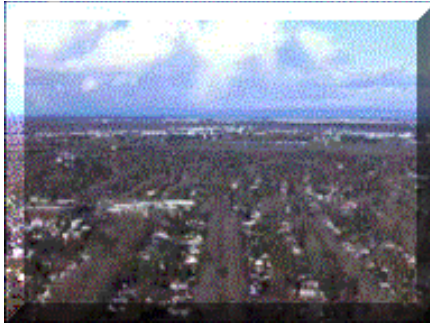
According to [Huyssen](#) (1995: 101), such dealings with history and the current obsession of artists with memory have probably emerged as a result of the real that



[Figure 10](#)
Jo Ractliffe,
Detail of *A Sunny Day IV* (1995)
([Williamson & Jamal 1996: 75](#))



[Figure 11](#)
Anselm Kiefer,
Jerusalem (1986)
([Rosenthal 1987: 144](#))



[Video clip 3](#)
Video clip 1 from the film
American Beauty (1999)
([Mendes 1999](#))



[Video clip 4](#)
Video clip 2 from the film
American Beauty (1999)
([Mendes 1999](#))

has become more elusive than ever. "The old opposition reality/utopia has lost its binary structure because we acknowledge that reality is not simply out there, but is also always the site of some construction, just as utopia is and yet different from it" ([Huysen 1995: 101](#)).

2.6 Dystopia and pleasure

In Chapter 1, the role of [pleasure](#) in pre-twentieth-century utopian constructions was illuminated. Within constructions of dystopian urbanism in the twentieth century, the notion of visual pleasure has moved into a central position of importance. It is cinema especially, as prime form of visual pleasure and entertainment, as well as forms of entertainment utilising computer technology, that are dominating urban way of life. Sabine [Hake](#) (1993: 89), Associate Professor of German at the University of Pittsburgh, argues that there has been a logical migration from the notion of spectacle to experiences of visual pleasure.

In Kentridge and Bloom's film, *Memory and Geography* (1994), Figure 12, pleasurable urban spectatorship is depicted in an installation artwork in a drive-in cinema. The work demonstrates the interrelatedness ([Hake 1993: 94](#)) of cultural practices in the articulation of pleasure, with the cinema at the centre.

Within the context of late twentieth-century mass culture, the notion of pleasure is found especially in the masses' mesmerisation in front of television sets which present many novel worlds to the viewer. In Figure 13, Jane Alexander's *Integration programme: man with TV* (1995), the black man is looking at a double, a white man, on the screen. The

white man stands on a street corner and addresses himself repeatedly before a mirror, his gestures "an endless relay of hair



[Figure 12](#)

William Kentridge & Doris Bloom,
Memory and Geography (1994)
([Williamson & Jamal 1996: 46](#))



[Figure 13](#)

Jane Alexander,
Integration programme: Man with TV
(1995)
([Williamson & Jamal 1996: 25](#))

strokings and tie adjustments" ([Williamson & Jamal 1996: 22](#)). There is unending interface between the moving figure and the mesmerised figure with no resolution. The work demonstrates the deconstructionist idea of decentering and continual recontextualisation.

The virtuality of television and cinema provides entertainment and suggests a form of escapism. Visual pleasure is articulated in, for instance, action films (providing the masses with identification with physical strength and agility) and in romantic as well as erotic films and artworks (providing escape from the humdrum reality of relationships). In this way, such visual experiences provide pleasure and escape, embody impotent dreams and provide release from repressed desires (Hake 1993: 97).

In the nineteenth century, escapism was noticeable in utopian visions of green worlds and fantastic gardens created in response to the fear and horrors of urban crowding and industrialisation. [Hunt](#) (1987: 137) refers to Gertude Jekyll and William Robinson who promoted the horticultural paradise. Other utopians such as Carlyle and Ruskin invoked the world of flowers and cultivation as an antidote to the city. According to [Hunt](#) (1987: 115), the pleasure principle is also prevalent in the place of gardens in the utopian cityscape. He argues that:

... we are seduced by coloured ads which promise us immaculate lawns if we use their special fertilizer. These - and others - are the continuing expression of our wish for an impossible, nonsensical, healing, perfect, nowhere world. ([Hunt 1987: 138](#))



Figure 14
Gabriel Orozco,
Oval Billiard Table (1996)
([Enwezor 1997:168](#))

In Orozco's *Oval Billiard Table* (1996), (Figure 14) the pool table refers to contexts of entertainment, leisure and pleasure, as well as demarcating an area of pleasurable escape from everyday work environments. The work may be interpreted as a contemporary reworking of the idea of another world as green arcadia. Such translation of the ancient myth is frequently encountered in New Romantic literature and imagery, often utilising the image of the enclosed sports field, in this case, the pool table.

The table embodies the idea of manufacture and the synthetic 'garden', thus of a culture industry of an advanced kind. It further speaks of alienation in its presentation of the synthetic 'garden' as well as in the starkness of the work. The ancient relationship between human beings and nature has been terminated and there is ensuing dystopia in the artificially created sublime.

In *Late Marxism: Or the Persistence of the Dialectic*, [Jameson](#) (1990: 145) argues that the analysis of pleasure should be placed within "a framework of the theory of the alienated labor process ... [that] has been prolonged by any number of contemporary discussions of the commodification and colonization of leisure." For Jameson, pleasure means not thinking about anything, and forgetting or ignoring suffering, even where it is evident. In this sense, pleasure is escapism, a flight from a reality, a utopia or a sublime. According to Jameson, the utopian account



[Figure 15](#)
Anselm Kiefer,
Der Rhein (1980 - 1982)
([Stiftung Froehlich](#) 1996: 81)

... of the relationship of aesthetic experience to the psychic subject decisively reabsorbs two of Kant's two great motifs: that of the suspense of interest, and also the doctrine of the sublime, which is here and throughout reread or rewritten by Adorno as precisely this encounter with the not-I or the Other, that is ontologically central to his aesthetics. His account moves dialectically through the traditional descriptions, drawing its power from the critique (and in particular the notion that aesthetic experience is in any sense to be assimilated to pleasure or the satisfaction of needs), but also sometimes modifying them in a positive way. ([Jameson](#) 1990: 216)

Sabine Hake (1993: 104) contends that "[through] the myth of visual pleasure, a projection screen was set up as well as a place for forgetting". Such forgetting is found in virtual reality. In the context of mass media, especially in virtual reality spaces in computer games and films, notions of addiction, false pleasure and fixation come into play. ([Virtual reality](#) is investigated in more depth in Chapter 4). Such contexts may be more aptly described as involving deceptive pleasure, but still offering a kind of sublime. It thus becomes a dystopia of false pleasure. Marcuse subscribes to this notion and suggests that true happiness or pleasure can be inscribed within false experiences ([Jameson](#) 1990: 146). It thus becomes a strange kind of artificial, simulated pleasure.

In Figure 15, the 'prison bars' created by the tree branches of the forest close in on the spectator and become a kind of cage, demonstrating this caged-in, fake pleasure. The spectator can look through the bars and catch a glimpse of the beautiful scenery of the river Rhine and surrounding area, representing greenery and a pleasant utopian dream world. In the distance the unpleasant polluted city is visible. The spectator's gaze moves unendingly back and forth from the pleasant to the unpleasant places.

Looking at the aforementioned examples, it would seem that dystopian pleasure can be interpreted as a kind of release and escape, but also as an impotent, unresolved condition. Dystopian pleasure is unsustainable in its continual desire for escape and forgetting. Therefore the pleasure remains fragile and temporal (cf. [Chapter 5](#) for the interface of the notions of pleasure and cyborg).

2.7 Dystopia, nightmare and catastrophe

Besides the explanations of dystopia as end-of-utopia and utopia-gone-wrong, it can point towards a nightmarish future society ([Bergonzi](#) 1987: 211). Dystopia is, furthermore, also concerned with losses in the sense of, for instance, loss of innocence, order, identity or stability. In this case the nightmare of dystopia is located in the past.

In Figure 16, such nightmare-of-the-past is rendered in Kiefer's reference to traumatised German identity in post-war twentieth century. Kiefer refers to many great figures in German history, such as the poets Grabbe and Klopstock, National Socialists Hölderlin and George, and others. From 1976 to 1980, Kiefer produced at least three works with exactly the same title, the same theme of [Varus](#) and the same content. A network of spidery lines of a blood trail in a forest connects the starting point of the names of Varus, Hermann and Hermann's wife, with other names taken from later German history ([Rosenthal](#) 1987: 49). In response to the trauma brought about by Hitlerism, the artist seems to attempt a reconstruction of German greatness through the excavation of its national heritage into one comprehensible whole, a kind of linear construct charting heredity.

In addition, in this work Kiefer expresses a radical scepticism for so-called 'greatness' and even 'genius' by ironically titling the work, *Wege der Weltweisheit*, translated as *Ways of Worldly Wisdom*. Through the imagery and narrative mode, he articulates the viewpoint that ideals of genial vision, also utopian vision, aimed at human advancement and progress, are questionable. Images of intertwining vines, branches, blood stains, fire, spider webs and erased faces create an anxious dystopia, but in a backward-looking sense. Flames and smoke infuse the scene with a feeling of utopian hell.



[Figure 16](#)
Anselm Kiefer,
*Wege der Weltweisheit-
Die Hermanns-Schlacht*
(1978-1980)
([Rosenthal 1987: 53](#))

Dystopia as nightmare, although being markedly prevalent in the late twentieth century, has not been confined to this period only. It is also encountered in pre-twentieth-century literary examples such as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and in early twentieth century literature such as Orwell's *1984* (1947) and Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932).

For [Mecziems](#) (1987: 97), the nightmarish element can be found in texts in the extent to which the utopian fiction deviates from the natural, sensory world we know. Nightmare can thus be found in supernatural, surrealist or techno elements, in that these might become alienating, shocking or obscene. Often the dystopia is found in the fragmented, hybrid, midway position between the real and the imagined, for instance at the end of Orwell's *Animal Farm* of 1946, where the distinction between men and pigs becomes diffuse.

Most twentieth-century dystopian texts from the turn of the century link nightmare, disaster and cataclysm with technology. One of the earliest examples of twentieth-century dystopia in visual culture is Fritz Lang's film [Metropolis](#) of 1926 (Figures 17 - 19) in which utopian and paradisiacal visions are projected on the invention of the machine. Figure 17 contains the classic version of the virtual city; Figure 18 contains the drawing by Erich Kelttelhut of the virtual city Metropolis; and Figure 19 depicts the city by night.

A duality is created in terms of the 'upper world' where the 'Father-God-Creator' (boss of the city, Metropolis), his son and management reside. In the 'under world' (literally accessible via a walkway) the workers and the machines are found. Although being the 'heart' and future of the city, the underground industry of machines simulates a smoking hell full of humble, suffering



Figure 17
metrop3m.jpg
([Metropolis](#))



Drawing by Erich Kettelhut. ©Filmuseum Berlin-Deutsche Kinemathek.

Figure 18
metrop4l.jpg
([Metropolis](#))

souls. Many parallels with Christianity and Christian mythology are found here, such as heaven/hell, paradise, post-deluvian flooding, God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and Satan (Rotwang the genius-creator). In this film a subversion of the Christian creation myth is found in Rotwang's statement that "machines have been created in the image of man".

A crucial message of the film is the menace of machines and the fatalism embedded in the portrayal of human beings as fallible: it is inevitable that the workers, who must maintain the machines and turn the arms of the giant clock of time, will become exhausted and unable to continue. The city will therefore be flooded. In such dystopian renderings the sanctioning of the inhabitants is irrelevant since there is mostly some force or authoritarian agency in control, in this case the decision-makers, that renders the inhabitants helpless to some degree.

The dystopian world-view furthermore entails 'cosmic pessimism', cosmic anxiety and fears of catastrophe. It harbours fears of cataclysmic disaster ending in extermination and annihilation. Cataclysmic texts speak of an impending apocalypse, that is, of disruption, annihilation, destruction, violence and chaos. According to [Munkner](#) (s.a.), the catastrophe is brought about by the social elements that have suffered and endured hardship and exploitation. In *Iceberg: Utopia, Dystopia, and Myopia in the Late-19th Century*, [Munkner](#)

(s.a.) argues that *both* dystopian *and* anti-utopian visions are in a sense utopian, and that in both there is an awareness of pending disaster:



[Figure 19](#)
metrop5.jpg
([Metropolis](#))

debacle happen. As a consequence, this disaster will not allow making anything new out of the doomed course of the world. ([Munkner](#): s.a.)

Dystopians are like utopians reformers of the mind, or perhaps more accurately, would-be reformers who are openly anxious, indeed pessimistic about the future. Like utopians they discern looming, threatening changes in their society, and stress their immediacy or presence respectively.

Unlike utopians, they despair of any truly hopeful solution to them. The ability of the utopian mind to accept or prefigure the future as the radically new (new in the sense of progressive) doesn't exist for the dystopian. However, dystopian partially understands its predicted, inevitable catastrophic 'end' as a modest 'new'. In how far this 'new' will be able to thrive amidst an encompassing disaster is unclear.

Anti-utopian, on the other hand, in fact describes the absolute opposite of utopia. That means there will be no 'new' whatsoever. Nevertheless, it could be regarded as linked to utopia in the sense that, although different in ideology, it also tries to predict the future: its message, however, is a paranoid helplessness that will make a great

Dystopia in the sense of 'after the catastrophe' is depicted in [Ridley Scott's](#) 1982 (1992) film, *Blade Runner* (a term borrowed from William S. Burroughs), an adaptation of the Philip K. Dick novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) (cf. 'androids' in [Chapter 5](#)). It is perhaps one of the most popular cult films ever, covering territory from *film noir* to cyberpunk.



[Video clip 5](#)
Video clip 1 from the film
Blade Runner (1982)
([Scott 1982](#))

In the new version of *Blade Runner* (1992), Video clip 5, the film concerns the issue of memory to a much greater extent than the original version. In a scene of Deckard in his room, the piano and photographs are nostalgically depicted as remnants of the 'real' past. The shift in the dystopian present is a 180° move from utopian future orientation to past orientation.

The film is set in 2019, a time when the Earth has become so polluted and congested that the populace are encouraged to migrate to 'off world colonies'. The reasons for this pollution are not really explained in the film, but in the novel it is suggested that 'World War Terminus', also referred to as 'W.W.T.', caused the radioactive dust and pollution.

After a bloody mutiny by a NEXUS 6 combat team in an off-world colony, the replicants (mutant [androids](#)) are rampant on earth and are declared illegal on earth B under penalty of death. Special police squads, Blade Runner units, have orders to kill, upon detection, any trespassing replicant. This is not called execution. It is called 'retirement'.

The film contains complex, over-full scenery brimful with fragmented images, broken objects, textured walls, cage-like grids, hexagonal floor patterns, grid-like blinds and elevators. Everybody is smoking and there is total collapse of universality or consensus or collective agreement. There are no rules, just total disorder and chaos: Deckard shoots the replicant Zhora in the street, nobody reacts and "move on, move on" is repeated over a loud speaker. The "move on, move on" is symbolic of mindless carrying on, going forward in time, lost sense of direction and radical dystopia. The metropolis of *Blade Runner* speaks of the

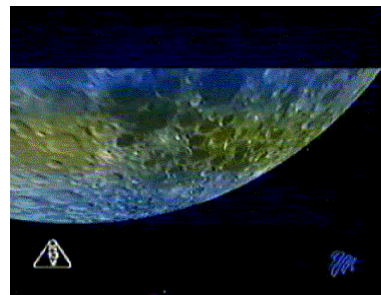
anonymity and disconnectness of urban life. There is no networking or police system - Deckard is on his own. Messages are sent to the people - they don't respond. The film depicts the tragedy of human beings being driven from paradise never to have it again. In Version 1 (1982), the main characters Deckard and Rachael go to a paradise-like area. In Version 2 (Director's cut of 1992) this part is cut and they remain in a hell of contemporary urban dystopia, therefore never regaining Paradise.

This is exactly what is rendered in Michael [Bay's](#) *Armageddon* (1998). In Video clip 6, cataclysm is depicted in the form of a meteor hitting planet earth, confirming such looming fears of annihilation and destruction. In the opening scenes of *Armageddon* (Video clip 7) such paranoia is similarly rendered. Yet what occurs in this virtual reality created by means of sophisticated computer technology is that the fictional reality becomes so believably rendered that it is impossible to distinguish between the real of the New York setting and the fictional construct.



[Video clip 6](#)

Video clip 1 from the film *Armageddon*
(1998)
([Armageddon 1998](#))



[Video clip 7](#)

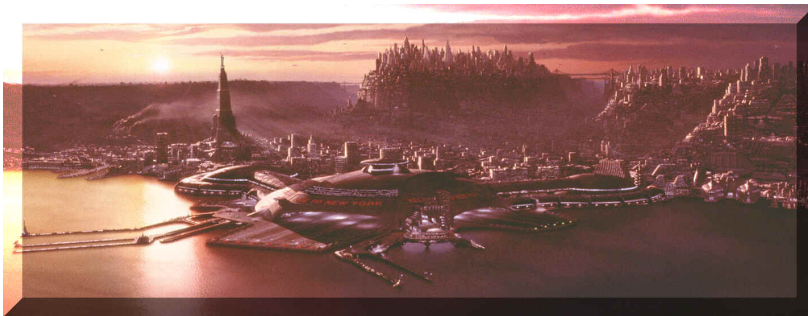
Video clip 2 from the film *Armageddon*
(1998)
([Armageddon 1998](#))



[Video clip 8](#)

Video clip 1 from the film *The Fifth Element*
(1997)
([Besson 1997](#))

In *The Fifth Element* (1997) ([Besson 1997](#)) (Figure 20), the dystopian real of the fictional rendering of the urban setting in the film is just as real. In Video clip 8 similar fears of cataclysm are articulated, interpreted as a primordial 'evil' force that is always present in the world. The story is set in the twenty-third century when Earth is preparing for the End. In this film, which deals with the threat of the extinction of the human species, the five elements that must be sought out in order to combat the diabolical danger are shooting, fighting, exploring, solving and surviving. Dichotomy between two worlds is depicted yet again as in many other films, a dichotomy between the universe and all its multitude of varied forms of life (maybe the 'real'), and that of another world or dimension consisting of anti-life and anti-energy, not made of the four Greek cosmic elements of earth, fire, water or air (URL: www.movieweb.com/movie/5thelement/8). This becomes the threatening 'fifth element'.



[Figure 20](#)
Scene from *The Fifth Element* (1997)
([Besson 1997](#))



[Figure 21](#)
Anselm Kiefer,
Osiris and Isis (1985-1987)
([Rosenthal 1987: 149](#))

In the same way, in Kiefer's *Isis and Osiris* (Figure 21) a dystopian vision is rendered. Allusion is made to a diametrically opposed conception which poses the possibility of decline and, if interpreted more extremely, catastrophe. Yet the work also suggests transcendence through the pyramidal shape surging up into the sky, enforced by the use of Renaissance perspective creating deep space. Ambivalent uneasy feelings are evoked in the mixed imagery of technological debris and primitive chaos.

The pyramid shape in *Isis and Osiris* resembles a Tower of Babel, a man-made piling up of layers of ideologies of technology and scientific progress. The grim organic disintegration rendered deconstructs the myth of technological utopia.

Kiefer's landscapes have often been described as pessimistic, apocalyptic and catastrophic, but also as 'after the catastrophe'. The excavation of the Kiefer landscapes, in combination with his political and mythological references to historical events and battles, becomes metaphoric of the potentially catastrophic effects of utopian thinking. In contrast to *Armageddon*, in which human abilities and capabilities are celebrated in the form of the main character saving the earth from destruction through meteoritic movements, Kiefer's work remains cynical, pessimistic and doubtful. As such Kiefer's work raises questions about the future and in this sense become post-dystopian.

2.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, I maintain that, as demonstrated in examples of late twentieth-century visual culture, utopian (and dystopian) thinking seems to be consistently concerned with individuals' relationships with each other and their world; either in the form of futuristic ideal constructs, or in memories of past worlds and ideas.

During the late twentieth century, there is dystopia, an ambivalent condition in which old truths are deconstructed and pleasant utopian dreams *both* nurtured *and* shattered. This condition seems to entail an uncomfortable, undesirable and unpleasant present, as well as an unpleasant and threatening but conceivable future state of society. Dystopia further seems to enfold a state of fragmentation, relativism and questions regarding the truth value of appearances.

As in previous times, art works are still the vehicles for expressing such views, experiences and dreams of worlds, future and past.

In the next chapter, [Chapter 3](#), the role of technology in late twentieth-century visual culture will be investigated in more depth.