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Apocalypse: Imagining the End

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In the popular contemporary imagination, the word apocalypse has become synonymous to end of times, straying away from its original etymology. In Greek, the meaning of apocalypse is: to uncover, to reveal what had been concealed. Nevertheless, revelation and end of times are not mutually exclusive. Truthfully, most of us feel that 'apocalypse' refers to both: to the processes of unveiling and revealing, as well as waiting, approaching and longing for what would be considered 'an end'. Apocalypse leads to an unveiling and a revealing of obscure secrets, phenomena and processes; that lead through, delivering us to the other side of the end of time.

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Key Words

Apocalypse, End of Days, End Times, War, tragedy, death, other side, heaven, hell, earth, inhabit, human.

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Let Sleeping Dogs Lie: Visual Expressions Of Burial As Loss Of Teleology

Elfriede Dreyer

Abstract

Although classical utopian models professed dogmatic but clear nation-state designs with the purpose of resulting in good Endings, more often than not history has shown that political regimes and utopian leadership models function in non-transparent manner, deliberately propositioning that it is for the good of the nation. In this paper, it is argued that burial imagery suggesting layered histories of secrets and concealed realities is antidotal to the construction of utopian ideologies and expresses a dystopian sense of loss of teleology. The depiction of burial in selected works of the South African artists Carolyn Parton, Diane Victor and Colleen Alborough is explored within the context of the expression of apocalypse in early and recent works of the German artist Anselm Kiefer, motivated by the similarities in past traumatic events that need dissolution. Burial is interpreted as indicative of an ongoing search for meaningful Ending, in this case propelled by the discovery of unspeakable terrors which lie beneath the surface of identity construction. The artists' espousal of burial in the representation, construction and installation of ravished planes and surfaces both render sites of traumatic memory and the raw, virginal soil of potentiality and recovery. These are interpreted as speaking about reclamation, the (un)fulfilment of destinies and, most importantly 'spent' ideologies. Paint, paper and found materials applied as physical matter become environmental and social strata in the expression of post-apocalypse in late twentieth-century deconstruction of *Besetzung* and contemporary expressions of South African post-colonial dystopia.

Key Words: Utopia, dystopia, redemption, apocalypse, burial, South African, history, ideology, liminal, teleology. Imagery.

1. Introduction

Post-apocalyptic depictions are often concerned with damage and ruin to selfhood suggesting a kind of liminal position within teleological¹ and apocalyptic temporality, since it is informed by the experience of post-apocalypse of a personal and political nature where the disaster or apocalypse has already occurred but disclosure and exposé were not obtained. Appropriated to a utopian framework of thought, the utopian design is shown as having led to damage and dystopian ruin, with dystopia understood as reinventing and transforming the utopian genre to the extent that *u-topia* (no place) and *eu-topia* (good place) can become *u-chronia* (no time) and *eu-chronia* (good time); the question of "where is utopia" becomes the

same as "where is nowhere" and the only answer to that can be "here", a non-spatial point at the centre of space (Rabkin et al 1983, 246).

The investigation into burial imagery as post-apocalypse in the artworks of the German artist, Anselm Kiefer, and the South African artists, Carolyn Parton, Diane Victor and Colleen Alborough, is concerned with the realities of human life and time as manifesting in the form of physically layered materials and images of obscurity, covering and cryptic secrecy. These artists' works express realities that are antidotal to the construction of utopian ideologies and render a sense of loss of teleology, dystopian non-spatiality and a suspension of time in the here and now.

2. Apocalyptic burial imagery

Considered against the turbulent cultural histories that have informed the selected artists' content and processes, there are many similarities between the South African histories of colonialism, apartheid and other forms of socio-political control and abuse, and that of German histories of anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism. In both the South African and the German environments, history has shown that political regimes and utopian leadership models mostly function in non-transparent manner that effectively obscure the actual goal or purpose of the utopian design. Dystopian works consider the notion of *Besetzung* (occupation) of various ideological kinds that describe oppressive regimes transcoded as referring to the (totalitarian) espousal of utopian modes and nation-state designs with the purpose of resulting in good Endings. Although very different concepts, at the same time there are many conceptual similarities between the utopian (human) idea of teleology as good ending and apocalypse as Ending. The notion of Ending is the meeting point between the mentioned ideas: utopian designs wittingly envisage teleological models of good Ending and apocalyptic fictions and visions - as in the Biblical sense - imagine and describe the existential good Ending as a moment of illumination and a lifting of the veils of ignorance and obscurity.

Engaging both apocalypse and utopia, burial imagery in particular produces metaphors of spent ideologies, created in the three selected artists' works through layers of concealment such as thick encrusted paint, layered book pages and piles of cotton wool. A post-apocalyptic work such as Parton's dense yet ordered Carolyn Parton, *25.150kg landscape*, 2011, from the *Threshold* exhibition at the University of Cape Town, Figure 1, presents a revisionist and self-reflexive discourse on the aftermath of the apocalypse-like event, which can be interpreted as a response to both environment pollution and, in my view, post-apartheid burial and catharsis. Parton's artistic process entails a project of collective gathering of artists' discarded paint residues partly induced by a viewpoint of "art pollution" expressed by the painter Jan Andriess, Marlene Dumas's companion, that there is overproduction of paintings in the world which depletes the natural metal and mineral resources of the earth (paint contains metals such as titanium and cadmium).



Figure 1

Carolyn Parton, *25.150kg landscape*, 2011
 Reconstituted reclaimed paint in frame, 72 x 115 x 3cm

At the same time *25.150kg landscape* depicts a landscape that is not viewed from above or down, nor presents the conventional viewpoint of gazing *at* the landscape, but offers a confrontation *with* utopianism on eye level. Surfaces simulating incisions, inroads and trajectories can be viewed as representing post-apocalyptic remnants and consequences of utopian ideologies in Africa and South Africa in particular. Signifying secrecy, Parton's layered strata of paint embody a burial of history and through the compositional ordering of the paint strata - almost as a kind of analytic archiving - express a quest for meaningful Ending or teleology through the ongoing search for Truth. Almost as a fragment taken from a much larger constellation of arranged and re-arranged planes, the directionless 'packing' of the strata calls for an interpretation of loss of teleology where *both* the beginning and the end have been misplaced. As such the sheets of used paint - applied as physical matter - become a burial of ecological and social strata concealing the (un)fulfilment of destinies and blundered cosmological and utopian teleologies. Works dealing with selfhood such as Parton's in which recognisable, documentary or personal imagery are abandoned in favour of the non-representative use of metaphoric materials, according to Russell West-Pavlov (2007, 147) does not make the work objective, "for it remains engaged": as such, the work "bear[s] witness for a short time yet to a world now gone". The work gazes away from the artist, even when it has emerged from the artist, and towards the many dead and the few survivors (West-Pavlov 2007, 147).

Inherently burial imagery ensnares a mystical element through its character of obscurity and expresses a desire for the sacred as an ultimate spiritual place. The shrouding of the sacred speaks about loss of good Ending and frustrated resolution through the very secrecy of the veiling. Yet, the shrouding is post-eventual and does not denote a neophyte search for a joyful union with the sacred, since it is constituted by productive burial. Bataille views the sacred as a fundamentally ambivalent force, a centre of alternating attraction and repulsion that consists of a collection of forbidden, impure, excluded things that nevertheless possess an attractive force (Heinämäki, 2009, 66). Just like Bataille's notion of apocalypse, Parton's sensual *24,925kg Landscape (Desmond-Marlene) (Reclaimed spent paint and canvas)* (2011), Figure 2, suggests an initial starting point or groundwork plan forcefully evolving into counter-directional outgrowths and mutations as if responding to multifarious magnetic, attracting forces.



Figure 2

Carolyn Parton, *24.925kg landscape*, 2011
14.300kg of spent paint in frame, 84 x 52cm.

In Parton's work the rhetoric of place has vanished in that the teleological linearity, vocabulary and modes of thought that form the cosmology (Augé 2008, 63) has been lost, and therefore both utopia and apocalypse are untenable. The work becomes a depiction of a dystopian non-place, since as Marc Augé (2008, 63) argues, "a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place." Parton's works function as post-apocalyptic thresholds in the sense of being on the verge of disintegrating, or alternatively viewed as metaphorically collecting and reassembling the pieces.

Such fragmented sense of selfhood is echoed in the idea of place as post-apocalypse and post-ideological construct as illustrated in, for instance, Mircea Éliade's presentation of the church as place of teleology where the church door becomes a metaphorical threshold. The sacred interior of the church as a place of worship of a concealed God in *The Sacred and the Profane* is teleologically presented by Éliade as a fixed point giving human life an order and an orientation (Heinämäki 2009, 67): "The door that opens on the interior of the church actually signifies a solution of continuity. The threshold that separates the two spaces also indicates the distance between two modes of being, the profane and the religious. The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds - and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible" (Éliade 1959, 25). Such mythological idealisation is brutally made banal and blasphemous in Bataille's *Story of the eye*, where this liminal threshold of the church contains the tomb of Don Juan, the founder of the church, so that by entering the church the "faithful would trudge over his corpse" (Bataille 1982 [1928], 55, 56), and where the "whole altar ... seemed very mysterious and just right for sex." Such transgressive encounter with the sacred is characterised, according to Bataille, by consent to inner violence; that is, by transgressing *inner* limits (Heinämäki, 2009, 72) and thresholds, which Bataille transcodes into erotic terms. Yet, as in Parton's work, the transgression of the boundary never reaches a final, ultimate destination but remains on the verge as a continual disruption, a desire and a point of reassembling.

Colleen Alborough's stop frame animation, *Balance* (2011), Figure 3,² was according to the artist (Looking for balance, 2010) an attempt at making "sense of personal fears felt when I travelled through parts of the city that I'm not familiar with", thus when the limits of safety and certainty are transgressed. *Balance* features a headless man trying to find his place (and his balance) in a shifting cotton landscape representing the city (Johannesburg) embroiled in an endless process of transformation whilst through the use of raw cotton suggests constant regeneration and potentiality. The main protagonist tries on a "number of discarded heads but none seem to fit, and then sinks into a subterranean chasm, chased by gauze phantoms" (Burggraaf 2011). The angst-ridden performance seems to suggest displacement and a search for resolution against the backdrop of crime in the city and violent histories. Commenting on the pace and character of globalised and cosmopolitan South African city life, Alborough (Looking for balance, 2010) states:

I think it can lead to an overwhelming feeling of chaos, and a sense of being out of control. Added to this, in Johannesburg, are the all-too-numerous stories of crime and violence. As we go about our daily lives, we carry with us these horror stories in our minds and sometimes, again too often, many of us carry the memories of an actual experience(s) of

crime. The exhibition considers how these cumulative factors of city living, and in particular Johannesburg urban life, can lead to a state of being off-balance.



Figure 3

Balance (2010)

Video still from stopframe animation

The work suggests that the utopian ideologies of post-apartheid South Africa are not realising and that the imagined end to racial hate and poverty has not arrived yet. Stop frame animation as medium is significant in itself. It presents continuous temporality in the potentiality of the medium of going back and forth in time, even interrupting time and as such playing God through the ability to postpone Ending indefinitely. In *Balance* the artist produced the sound entirely from material sourced from her own home such as computer cpu's, her car's gear box and her coffee machine. By introducing the artist as self-appointed mistress of destiny apocalypse is deconstructed as resolution and the heterotopia of the self-constructed place is posited. Apocalypse becomes a non-place in time suspended and time reordered. In such heterotopic spatiality, difference and Otherness articulate in post-utopian space where, as Kevin Hetherington (1997, 43) states, "Heterotopia signify ... through similitude ... where meaning is dislocated through a series of deferrals that are established between a signifier and a signified rather than directly to a referent."

In two other works of Alborough containing burial imagery, *Night journey* (2007), Figure 4, and *Haunted territory* (2007), Figure 5, the self is presented as coiled into a heterotopic state of Foucauldian incarceration where the body has been 'disciplined' and 'punished' into docility. Foucault (1977, 141) argues that discipline sometimes requires "enclosure, the specification of a place that is heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself." Foucault refers to Julian Offray de La Mettrie's³ theory on the body that concerns the notion of dressage,

where the analysable body is joined to the manipulable body and the body becomes docile so that it can be "subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault 1977, 136). De La Mettrie's alteration of Descartes' postulation that human beings are *like* machines to the explicit claim that they *are* machines (Woesler de Panafieu 1984, 130), can be viewed as further espoused in Bataille's pornographic depiction of unremitting machine-like sexual activity in works like *Story of the eye*. The presentation of the 'punished' body in post-eventual context allows the idea of primordial sin to enter here: a religious kind of ideology and teleology leading to apocalypse and the revelation of truth, righteousness and redemption to those who have managed to discipline their earthly bodies. Yet, in Alborough's *Night journey*, sin is deferred and buried so that apocalypse becomes nullified and irrelevant. The artist presents heterotopic intimate space as a place of freedom through withdrawal; it is a place of comfort and quiet restoration, represented by the image of the mummy. Identity and self are 'buried' under layers of wound cotton bands and world and time become deferred in the void of sleep and the flight into other realms of consciousness.

Figure 4



Colleen Alborough, *Night Journey* (2005-2008)
Interactive video installation
Installation views, Substation Gallery, Wits University, 2005

Figure 5



Colleen Alborough, *Night Journey* (2005-2008)
Interactive video installation
Installation views, KZNSA Gallery, 2005

Anselm Kiefer's recent work, *Il Mistero delle Cattedrali* (2011-2012) is entrenched in burial and apocalyptic imagery. As in most of Kiefer's works since the onset of his artistic career in the 1980s, a distinct alchemical reading of his 'closed' and hidden metaphors is evident in the staging of closed, inaccessible books and images of, for instance, the philosopher's stone and metallic, especially lead, surfaces. The title of *Il Mistero delle Cattedrali* has been taken from the esoteric publication by Fulcanelli (published in 1926), who claimed that the Gothic cathedrals of Europe had openly displayed the hidden code of alchemy for over 700 years. According to Mark Stavish (2006, 171), the name 'Fulcanelli' seems to be a play on words: Vulcan the ancient Roman god of fire plus El, a Canaanite name for God and so the Sacred Fire. It is believed (Rivière 2009:31) that Fulcanelli's true identity was Jules Violle, a French physicist. A meeting between the French chemical engineer and member of the Résistance, Jacques Bergier, and Fulcanelli occurred during June 1937 in a laboratory of the Gas Board in Paris. According to Neil Powell (1976, 53), the following is a translation of the original verbatim transcript of the rendezvous:

The liberation of nuclear power is easier than you think and the radioactivity artificially produced can poison the atmosphere of our planet

in a very short time, a few years. Moreover, atomic explosives can be produced from a few grains of metal powerful enough to destroy whole cities. I'm telling you this for a fact: the alchemists have known it for a very long time The secret of alchemy is this: there is a way of manipulating matter and energy so as to produce what modern scientists call 'a field of force'. The field acts on the observer and puts him in a privileged position vis-à-vis the Universe. From this position he has access to the realities which are ordinarily hidden from us by time and space, matter and energy. This is what we call the Great Work.

In many of Kiefer's works the land is rendered in paint, metal and found materials as an amalgam that suggests a kind of apocalyptic sublime grounded in the forces of the universe through deliberately inviting oxidation and other natural processes of degeneration. Once again the artist plays God; Kiefer (White cube, 2011) states that: "You have to find a golden path between controlling and not controlling, between order and chaos If there is too much order, it is dead; if there is too much chaos, it doesn't cohere. I'm continually negotiating a path between these two extremes." Kiefer's work seems to function in a post-apocalyptic liminal between De la Mettrie's idea of the clockwork universe -order - and the chaos of the very alchemical-artistic process. It is same kind of relationship that characterises the distinction between the geometrical organisation of road versus the mythological determining of movement.

Kiefer's *Dat rosa miel apibas* (2009) suggests an apocalyptic opening of the Book of life and the revelation of truth, reminding of early works such as *Die Himmel* (1969). In works such as *Ausbrennen des Landkreises Buchen* (1974) the road to the non-place is posited in lieu of apocalypse. Seemingly leading in a linear, logical way to a final Ending which is nowhere, it reminds of Foucault's "ship of fools", a concept derived from the Enlightenment and the Renaissance, during which a common practice was to keep the outcasts of society, especially the perceived insane, on a ship going nowhere (Foucault et al, 2006). The idea of a ship or a road without destination is fundamentally dystopian and defers time and purpose.⁴

3. Closing

In the latter two works of Kiefer, burial may be interpreted as deliberately propelled by the likely discovery of unspeakable terrors which lie beneath the surface, and therefore beneath the plane of identity construction. Yet, frequently burial imagery manifests as an intuitive act or a wish for renewal and catharsis. The rendering of sites of traumatic memory and post-apocalypse in Kiefer's work resonates with Alborough's contemporary expressions of South African dystopia as well as with Parton's generic interment and scar imagery. At the same time, the three artists' espousal of burial in the representation, construction and installation

of ravished planes and surfaces render the raw, virginal soil of potentiality and reclamation.

In the making and unfolding of history, the proverb of 'let sleeping dogs lie' has been and still is often applicable in the sense of actions, conditions or so-called 'truth' being covered up and buried; however, burial as process and strategy can simultaneously articulate psychologically with the notions of healing. This seems to be the non-resolution, the non-Ending or post-apocalypse suggested by the three artists.

Notes

¹ The word 'teleology' has been derived from the Greek τέλος, *telos*, the root of which, τέλε, means 'end' or 'purpose' and thus relates to cosmological teleology of which nature itself causes certain 'endings' and reflects design and purpose. Whereas teleology is distinctly rooted in causality, the word 'apocalypse' signifies the ideas of revelation or disclosure following its Greek origin of ἀποκάλυψις *apokálypsis*. In popular culture apocalypse is also catastrophe and disaster induced by natural or technological causes.

² In 2011 *Balance* was selected for showing at the Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, or Oberhausen International Short Film Festival, Germany. The sound was post-produced by process-oriented composer and musician João Orecchia.

³ De la Mettrie's *L'homme machine* (1748) established French materialism and formulated his vision when the vogue of automata appeared (Woesler de Panafieu 1984, 130).

⁴ Many ironies are embedded in the term 'utopia' understood as a fictional place as originally articulated by Sir Thomas More (1516) in the sense of 'no place' or 'land of nowhere'.

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