

# **NEGATIVITY IN PAINTING**

**Lola Audrey Frost**  
**Goldsmiths College, University of London**  
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## ABSTRACT

This combined theory/practice research project investigates and mobilises negativity in painting. The written thesis does so by developing an interpretive method which identifies two de-subjectifying signifying processes in paintings, called poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution. The thesis proposes that these signifying processes structure an aesthetic practicing of negativity which disaggregates meaning. An investigation of philosophical texts (by Kristeva, Merleau-Ponty, Kant, Nietzsche, Adorno, Lyotard, Derrida and Irigaray) and art historical interpretations (by Koerner and Marin) of certain poetic and sublime paintings, services an understanding of these sublime and poetic practices of negativity.

The thesis explores the tensions and correspondences between negative aesthetics and philosophical deconstruction. It explores the irreducible inter-relation between experiencing aesthetic negativity in painting and understanding the discursive implications of practices of negativity. Such a dialectics enables a critique of philosophical deconstruction which degrades the autonomy of aesthetic experience, and of the feminist deconstructions of *écriture féminine* which conflate textual practices of negativity with a politics of the feminine. This research project is a contribution to a revival of negative aesthetics after the impact of philosophical deconstruction.

As an applied investigation into aesthetic negativity, this thesis explores how selected paintings by C.D. Friedrich, Nicholas Poussin, J.M.W. Turner and Mark Rothko invite poetic or sublime practices of negativity. These insights are extended into a discussion of how the contemporary painting and visual art practices of Glenn Brown, Jeremy Wafer, Rosa Lee and Therese Oulton, invite a double register of interpretation. This doubling records the experiential impact of aesthetic practices of sublime and poetic negativity, and an understanding of the deconstructive significance of these painting practices. I suggest that my own paintings likewise engage a dialectical relation between the negativity of sublime experience, and the positivity of understanding their discursive and political significance .



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## **NEGATIVITY IN PAINTING.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1. Research questions and methods.**

This thesis investigates the tensions and correspondences between aesthetic negativity in paintings and the negativities of philosophical deconstruction. It does so by developing a dialectical interpretive method which identifies how two de-subjectifying signifying processes called poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution, invite aesthetic practices of negativity. This interpretive method engages the irreducible inter-relation between practices of negativity which register as aesthetic experience, and the positivities of understanding, which engage comparison and analysis. In making these distinctions, this thesis challenges deconstructive methods which degrade the dialectical relation between aesthetic experience and understanding, and which conflate the negativities of the feminine with those of deconstructive and textual practices of negativity.

This investigation<sup>1</sup> was initially prompted by a set of questions in which I tried to understand what a deconstructive feminine sublime was, and how paintings were, in some sense, unspeakable. During the course of this study those immense, but unclear, questions have been more usefully addressed via the philosophical term called negativity. Such negativity may be aesthetic, deconstructive or feminine, all of which respectively exist in a relation to the positivities of understanding, a metaphysics of presence or the masculine. From a traditional and binarist perspective, these relations between positivity and negativity are structured by a fixed hierarchy in which the positive terms are privileged. Poststructural theory, feminism, and deconstruction in particular, have rearticulated that relation so that negativity, in its various manifestations,

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<sup>1</sup>As an academic teacher and an artist working in South Africa from 1986 to 2002, feminist and deconstructive practices informed much of my working life. That historical period, in which the cultural boycott, apartheid and then post-apartheid, propelled all South Africans into new cultural alignments, demanded the deconstruction of both racial and phallogocentric hierarchies. The feminist, postmodern, and post colonial courses that I taught were part of an artistic culture needing to define that historical moment. Moving full time to Britain, and embarking on this research project, was an opportunity to interrogate such knowledges and my relation to them.

no longer occupies its traditional and denigrated place. Instead, practices of negativity, textual, philosophical, aesthetic or political, are valuable discursive possibilities where the 'positivity' of negativity is foregrounded, even as the 'negativity' of negativity is sustained.

I had no difficulties with a poststructural project which valorises and invites practices of negativity. My difficulties pertained firstly to the question of how deconstructive negativity relates to aesthetic negativity. Are these negativities in competition? Secondly, if paintings engage the feminine sublime, or a postmodern sublime, or a post colonial sublime, how do these (deconstructively appropriate) categories of understanding relate to sublime aesthetic experience? Thirdly, how did paintings deliver sublime or poetic negativity?

These questions emerged at a time when my painting practice shifted its emphasis from a pre-occupation with post colonial predicaments to an exploration of internal, and ever proliferating, landscapes. I had moved to Britain from South Africa and several commentators suggested that these new paintings registered something of the feminine sublime. In attempting to understand what such a feminine sublime might entail, I turned to selected philosophical texts, initially Christine Battersby's *The Phenomenal Woman* and subsequently Joanna Zylińska's *On Spiders, Cyborgs and Being Scared: the Feminine and the Sublime*. These texts critique a traditional sublime subject position authored by Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime*. Zylińska's text theorises a feminine sublime, understood as a de-subjectifying textual possibility which confounds binarist categories and mobilises an indeterminacy not subsumed into rational understanding.

I however remained perplexed by these philosophical engagements with the feminine and the sublime. I was worried that these deconstructive, feminist and philosophical critiques could not record the impact, or richness, of the aesthetic experience in painting. Indeed, there seemed to be another power relation at work, insofar as such philosophical texts in emphasising the disruptive properties of feminine textual practice and the criticality of feminist and philosophical analysis, ignored the disruptive and critical properties of traditional aesthetic practices of negativity in paintings. From this perspective paintings and visual art practices seemed to be theorised through supplements more

attuned to the protocols of philosophy than to the disruptive possibilities of painting. Furthermore, given the general endorsement of Irigaray's philosophical and deconstructive tactics in feminist visual art practice in the 1990's, I was puzzled by the question of how paintings could simultaneously code the negativities of a feminist politics and the aesthetic negativities of the sublime.

These questions necessitated the development of a method which identified what negativity in painting might entail, and how we might contextualise and understand its de-subjectifying effects. This resulted in identifying two signifying processes called poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution, conceived as de-subjectifying signifying processes which disable conceptual mastery and invite the viewer into an aesthetic practicing of negativity. These operations preserve the boundary between the negativities of aesthetic experience and the positivities of understanding, thereby sustaining the autonomy<sup>2</sup> of the aesthetic negativity. That being so, these signifying processes also engage categories of understanding, inasmuch as they also draw on conventional understanding, and on our embodied and phenomenal responses, our innermost drives, our discursive prejudices and our aesthetic competences.

This thesis has drawn on the art historical insights of J.L. Koerner and Louis Marin, who respond to, but do not identify, the two signifying processes called poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution in their analyses of selected paintings by C.D. Friedrich and Nicholas Poussin. The thesis identifies the operations of poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution in painting, by synthesising my insights sketched above, with these art historical interpretative insights, and with a philosophical understanding of negativity.

Diana Coole's book *negativity and politics: Dionysus and dialectics from Kant to poststructuralism*, although an account of dialectical negativity in politics, was a very useful entry point for understanding negative aesthetics in philosophy. This

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<sup>2</sup> Aesthetic autonomy has been critiqued in postmodern culture from a variety of perspectives, the most significant being a critique of the idea that the autonomy of art is a register of a-historical, non-discursive 'truth'. My use of this term is not informed by such an understanding. Instead, following Adorno, the autonomy of aesthetic experience is a logical outcome of a dialectics of negative aesthetics. For aesthetic practices of negativity are both discursive products and autonomous events. The autonomy of aesthetic negativity from this perspective is not only a critique of reason, but also preserves the boundary between the negativities of experience and the positivities of rational understanding.

thesis has engaged aesthetic negativity in philosophical texts from two perspectives: those theories which engage dialectical negativity, namely those of Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Julia Kristeva, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Theodor Adorno and Jean-Francois Lyotard; and secondly via selected texts by Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray which both invite and theorise deconstructive practices of negativity.

This thesis finds its answers in a dialectical method and generally critiques deconstructive methods. The dialectical method developed in this study marks the precarious gap, or irreducible inter-relation, between aesthetic experience and understanding. This method allows us to register the specificity of aesthetic experience, even as it enables an understanding of how sublime and poetic painting and visual art practices mobilise negativity, and how they acquire postmodern, post colonial and feminist identities. This method sustains an engagement with the de-subjectifying possibilities of paintings without conflating them with the feminine, or degrading the autonomy of aesthetic experience.

## **1.2. Aims and argument.**

This thesis makes the case that selected paintings from the 17th century to the present, address the viewer via de-subjectifying signifying processes that invite the practicing of poetic or sublime negativity. Each painting is a particular enactment of this possibility. The argument being that these signifying processes make meaning fail, insofar as meaning is rendered poetically ambiguous or sublimely irresolvable. We might however understand something of such aesthetic specific practices of negativity. We can understand that these signifying processes disable understanding, and we might even be able to understand how they do so. We are also able to understand how such aesthetic practices of negativity are different to philosophical, or feminist practices of negativity. In short, although these practices of negativity register the autonomy of aesthetic experience, how they do so, can also be understood.

The thesis explores the correspondences and tensions between dialectical and deconstructive methods through a selection of contemporary paintings and visual art practices. Both deconstructive practices of negativity and the



aesthetic negativities of poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution, de-subjectify the viewer/reader. This thesis endorses Christoph Menke's argument in his book titled *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, that philosophical deconstruction presumes an antagonism between these practices of negativity insofar as it degrades aesthetic negativity in favour of a more general non-aesthetic, or textual, practicing of negativity. It is from this perspective that this thesis critiques Derrida's and Irigaray's deconstructive methods which degrade the autonomy of aesthetic negativity, and conflate the negativities of the feminine with those of textual and aesthetic practices of negativity.

This thesis responds to such deconstructive methods by emphasising the irreducible inter-relation between aesthetic experience and understanding and by revisiting the dialectical possibilities of a discourse of aesthetic negativity. As such this thesis mobilises Kant's insight whereby an "*aesthetic idea* cannot become a cognition, because it is an *intuition* (of the imagination) for which an adequate concept can never be found" (Kant 1952, 210). It draws on Adorno's aesthetic theory, which like Kant's preserves the autonomy of aesthetic negativity. It mobilises Lyotard's diagnostic question "Is it happening?" which registers aesthetic negativity as an untheorisable and unspeakable event discursively at work in paintings. This thesis also makes recourse to Kristeva's poetics of negativity, and Merleau-Ponty's dialectical 'chiasm' which both invite the practicing of negativity.

If these philosophers provide a theoretical platform for understanding negative aesthetics, this thesis also investigates how paintings deliver an aesthetics of negativity. Such an analytical pragmatics investigates how the modalities of poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution in selected paintings by C.D. Friedrich, Nicholas Poussin, J.M.W. Turner, Glenn Brown, Jeremy Wafer, Rosa Lee and Therese Oulton, sustain the paradoxical threshold between the negativities of aesthetic experience and the positivities of understanding the discursive significance of such practices of negativity.

In summary, the aims of this written thesis are to develop a dialectical interpretive method for both understanding some of the framing conditions of practices of negativity, and experiencing negativity in painting. This thesis

develops this interpretive method by attending to the de-subjectifying effects of the signifying processes called poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution in paintings. This dialectical method marks a paradoxical threshold between the negativity of aesthetic experience and understanding, which both enables us to understand the distinctions between various practices of negativity, and to understand what negativity is, even as it is also unable to deliver any aesthetic experience of negativity. Such delivery is the unique property, or the gift, of paintings and visual art practices, and of the relation between such artworks and the viewer.

Mobilising negativity in painting is quite a different project to identifying its de-subjectifying effects and its discursive contexts. Delivering an account of negativity in painting requires a vocabulary, a context and an identification of processes which invite the practicing of negativity. The ensuing investigation of paintings, art historical and philosophical texts, enables me to conclude this research project with an account of how my paintings invite a dialectical relation between sublime practices of negativity and a politics of the feminine.

## Chapter One

### Poetic Ambiguity.

#### 2.1. Introduction.

This chapter identifies a signifying process in painting called poetic ambiguity which disables the positivities of understanding and invites the practicing of negativity. The overall thesis will develop an understanding of an aesthetics of negativity in an attempt to demonstrate how poetic ambiguity continues to invite the practicing of negativity in contemporary paintings. In this chapter poetic ambiguity is identified as an effect of selected paintings by Caspar David Friedrich (*Garden Terrace* 1811-12, *Cross in the Mountains* 1807-8) and which exists as a processual encounter between the painting and the viewer where meaning is made ambiguous. It is such failure, or disaggregation, of meaning that registers as poetic experience.

Kristeva's essay titled *Giotto's Joy* in her book *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, 1980, translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, together with selected passages from her book *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 1984, translated by Margaret Waller; and Merleau-Ponty's chapter titled *The Intertwining - The Chiasm* in the book *The Visible and the Invisible*, 1968, translated by Alphonso Lingis, all engage an aesthetics of negativity. The art historical and literary insights of J.L. Koerner in *Caspar David Friedrich: the subject of the landscape*, 1990, and Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, 1975, engage the critical possibilities of a romantic poetics. A synthesis of these philosophical, art historical and literary insights, together with a description of my own experience of Friedrich's *Garden Terrace*, services the development of a dialectical interpretive method that both enables us to identify poetic negativity in painting and to understand some of its discursive implications.

Koerner's and Culler's engagements with poetic meaning register it as a condition of the dialectical relation between the viewer and the painting or literary text, and of the complexities of signification structured by paintings or literary texts. Kristeva's and Merleau-Ponty's philosophical models theorise the

possibility that poetic practices of negativity de-subjectify the viewer into an openness to differences. Kristeva's idea of the poetic as an unstable threshold between the negativities of the semiotic and the positivities of the symbolic, makes it a condition of the subject-in-process, whose own heterogeneity is demonstrated in this process. It is an acknowledgement of this unassimilable heterogeneity that provokes the viewer of a painting or the reader of a poetic text, into an openness to differences. Merleau-Ponty's engagements with negativity are activated by a phenomenological and experiential figure called 'the flesh', a performative process in which the viewer is unable to preserve hierarchical distinctions and is opened to differences.

This chapter will demonstrate how these philosophical models contribute to an understanding of the complexities of the operations of poetic ambiguity, whose identity is not confined to any one of these models, but whose operations are clarified through the comparison. Poetic ambiguity in painting cannot be defined by what it is, but only by what it does, and how it invites the practicing of negativity. It addresses the viewer as a de-subjectifying experience. Each poetic practice addresses this possibility differently, and each viewer brings different expectations and competences to their processes of interpretation. That being so, this thesis proposes that poetic ambiguity has a constant identity insofar as it invites the practicing of negativity by disaggregating meaning, thereby de-subjectifying the viewer. Such de-subjectification is an effect of the viewer being unable to install the positivities of conceptual understanding, and thereby unable to secure the boundaries which sustain the distinctions which secure an integrated 'self'. The de-subjectifying effects of poetic ambiguity are thus similar to the de-subjectifying effects of philosophical deconstruction. This thesis will demonstrate (in the last two chapters), how such resemblances are put under pressure by deconstructive methods which degrade the autonomy of aesthetic negativity.

This chapter, like Kristeva's discussion of *the Semiotic and the Symbolic* in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language*, presumes that aesthetic and poetic experience is to some extent unspeakable. If, for Kristeva poetic negativity records the unspeakableness of the semiotic drives, this chapter proposes that poetic negativity is the effect of a particular dialectical process inaugurated and structured by the painting and registered as an aesthetic experience by the

viewer. This processual practicing of negativity resists 'being spoken' because it is the unique property of the experiential relation between the viewer and the painting. The interpretive method developed in this thesis spans the precarious divide between unspeakable practices of negativity which register as aesthetic experience, and the positivities of understanding, which enable us to identify and compare different practices of negativity. The chapter concludes by demonstrating how the negativities of poetic ambiguity are to be distinguished from the negativities of the feminine.

## 2.2. Garden Terrace

The following account of my engagement with Caspar David Friedrich's *Garden Terrace* 1811-12 (*Figure 1*) records how this painting produced an experience of poetic ambiguity. This painting, I suggest, engages the viewer by setting up a mobile, poetic and ambiguous relation between a variety of signs. For example, the *Ruckenfigur*<sup>1</sup>, a seated young woman reading a book, is turned away from the viewer and faces into the landscape. The meanings of this *Ruckenfigur*, are part of a signifying process that organises the viewer's interpretation, which is both unified and destabilized by a process of interpretation/mis-interpretation. This process starts as the viewer's gaze enters under the red cloth which covers the basket, associated with the female *Ruckenfigur*, and passes past the statue, through to the gate guarded by lions. From this threshold, which is both an opening and part of a strict grid of horizontals and verticals of trees, lawn and wall, the viewer's gaze extends into the landscape over the pointed roofs of the houses and past the peaks, and continues into the mysterious and 'sublime' light of the far distance. This gaze then shifts to the left of the picture frame, to return to the foreground and into the enigmatic basket and its red hood. Here a divide is set up, between the foreground and the background, even as both are unified by the mobility of this visual circuit. Koerner claims that this painting establishes the "alterity of the landscape .... (which affirms) .... a split between the self and the world" (Koerner 1990, 114).

This unified yet mobile circuit, available to interpretation and understanding is undone by poetic ambiguities, as inexplicable accommodations and resistances

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<sup>1</sup>Koerner identifies the *Ruckenfigur* in Friedrich's paintings as a device which endorses the subjectivity of the viewer by figuring an introspective and substitutional 'self'.



*Figure 1: C.D. Friedrich. Garden Terrace. 1811-12*

of meaning. For example, the circuit is disrupted when the meanings of the enigmatic basket are both clarified and contradicted by the metonymic slippage from the red cloth to the red flowers circling the base of the statue of a woman facing us with her arms open, and the relation between this statue of *Flora*, and the *Ruckenfigur*. These disruptions invite a complex array of meanings ranging from the inscription of a traditional sexualised femininity and its associations with fecundity, domesticity and nature and something else, not entirely specified, but hinted at as sexual and potent. These traditional feminine meanings are both interrupted, and reiterated by the inclusion of the young woman reading her book, her position in relation to the viewer, and her relation to the fecund figure of the statue facing the viewer. The complex poetic structure of the painting does "not express an either/or relationship but instead offer(s) several levels of interpretation" (Hofmann 2000, 251). Here unexplained complexities set up resistances and recuperations of meaning which challenge the unities described above.

This ambiguous disaggregation of meaning registers as an aesthetic experience. My argument is that via such a structured<sup>2</sup> process the viewer is opened to multiple and mobile disaggregations of meaning, and that such a poetic and aesthetic experience has both dialectical and de-subjectifying consequences because the viewer is unable to impose conceptual categories which secure unambiguous meaning and an integrated sense of self.

The negativity of poetic and aesthetic experience is thus constituted by a dialectical relation between the negativities of aesthetic experience and the positivities of understanding. Here a double dialectics is at work: firstly insofar as poetic experience registers as an unspeakable practicing of negativity, and where such an invitation registers a dialectical relation between the negativities of aesthetic experience and understanding, whose positivities are displaced by such an event. Secondly a dialectical and processual relation exists between the viewer and the painting. For although the painting inaugurates poetic

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<sup>2</sup>Culler's essay registers the impact of structuralism on literary interpretation, and usefully, from the perspective of this thesis, identifies poetic texts as the product of certain conventions. However, against the idea that poetic meaning is only structured by conventions, this study registers poetic ambiguity as a practice of negativity. Aesthetic negativity from this perspective is mobilised by a dialectical inter-relation between the structures of the painting and the multiple, contingent and contextual expectations and capacities of the viewer.

ambiguities, the experience of aesthetic negativity can only be registered by the viewer, and through his or her aesthetic and conceptual resources and discursive presumptions. The poetic disaggregation of meaning is thus the dialectical product of the relation between the viewer and the painting, *and* an effect of the displacement of conceptual mastery that registers as aesthetic experience.

### **2.3. Kristeva and dialectical negativity.**

In analysing the structure of Lyric poetry, Jonathan Culler claims that "there is plausibility to Julia Kristeva's claim that poetic language involves a constant passage from subject to non-subject, and that 'in this *other* space where the logic of speech is unsettled, the subject is dissolved and in the place of the sign is instituted the collision of signifiers canceling one another' "(Culler 1975, 170). Kristeva's essay titled *Giotto's Joy in Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, details a dialectical poetics as an encounter with unassimilable difference. For Kristeva, this dialectical relation is mobilized in signs between the discursive positivity of the symbolic, and that which is heterogeneous to symbolic discourse, the negativity of the semiotic. Kristeva's essay investigates the dialectical relation between the negativities of the semiotic and the negations of the symbolic.

In this regard, according to Kristeva, colour in Giotto's paintings in the Arena Chapel in Padua, has a psychological effect that exceeds an economy of communication and where "artistic function introduces a pivotal order into the symbolic order (the order of 'thought' according to Freud's terminology). This pivotal order - both an "energetic pressure" (instinctual drive) and an imprint (signifier) modifies both the symbolic .... and thing presentations"(Kristeva 1980, 218). This dialectical, mobile pivot that colour in painting is, thus "suggests an elementary *formal apparatus*" (ibid) that is capable of addressing both the *jouissance* (Giotto's Joy) of the body, and the repression of that "instinctual pressure under the impact of censorship as a sign in a system of representation" (ibid, 219). For Kristeva, colour in painting thus conceived, occupies the same position as that of poetic language in literature. It is a register of a dialectical process which both overcomes, and preserves, the oppositions between 'instinctual pressures' and signification.



Both dialectics and negativity are terms which Hegel brought into philosophy as part of a form of reasoning that attempts to grasp the relationships between oppositions as components of a dynamic whole. According to Diana Coole, Hegel's development of this form of mobile and synthesizing reasoning is located in the understanding that finite things cannot exist on their own, but are part of a larger whole. The motor of dialectics is contradiction, available to humans through reason rather than intuition, and consists of a process of affirmation and denial, which overcomes dualities like being and nothingness, subject and object, identity and difference. This Hegelian dialectic refuses the fixed binaries implicit in Kantian thought. It presupposes that contradictions can be overcome because there is movement between oppositions, so that the differences between oppositions are both annulled and preserved. Diana Coole argues that the motor of this movement between oppositions is a process of dialectical negativity which for Hegel is "both a process of becoming and an explanation. It delineates both a choreography and a generative force. It describes both the rhythms of becoming and their ontology" (Coole 2000, 45). In Hegel's master/slave dialectic it is knowledge or self-consciousness that effects the reconciliation of contradictions which structure historical identities and inequalities. And equally important, it is the negativity of the contradiction between the master's being for himself (in his own desire) and the slave's being for himself (in fear) that is the necessary condition of that reconciliation. Negativity in the Hegelian sense depends on "the way in which oppositions are mobile, because of their internal relationships of positive and negative, and resolvable in so far as dialectical logic permits a both/and yet eschews its instability. This process 'can only be stated as an *unrest of incompatibles*, as a *movement*' (Logic:91)". (Coole 2000, 46)

Kristeva's idea of dialectical negativity as a mobile process derives from Hegel. But for Kristeva, dialectical negativity is a mobile condition of rupture and rejection, rather than of reconciliation. It is against Hegel's 'subordinating' conception of Becoming<sup>3</sup> that Kristeva articulates a conception of negativity situated in the gap between 'the semiotic' and 'the symbolic', as the condition of

<sup>3</sup>In *Revolution and Poetic Language*, Kristeva criticises Hegel for reorganising contradictions in terms of a productive dissolution or an affirmative negativity in which *becoming* subordinates and "erases, the moment of rupture" (Kristeva 1984, 113).

both poetic meaning and poetic rupture in texts. Colour in painting is a device which both unifies and shatters "meaning and its subject into a scale of differences" (Kristeva 1980, 221). Here, colour operates in terms of a disruptive process not available to conceptual and rational logic. The negativity of colour's 'anti-logic' is a differentiating and multiplying one that exists "outside semantics ... as dynamic law, rhythm, interval, gesture" (ibid). Colour in painting is thus a device for transgressing or rupturing that which is symbolically and discursively regulated, even as it is also ultimately subject to that regulation. Colour is a dialectical hinge that exists between the painting and the viewer's instinctual responses, and registers the ideological value that an era would place upon those instinctual pressures. In this schema, colour 'pulverizes' the unity of the viewing subject, and is a 'proto-deconstructive'<sup>4</sup> device that displaces meaning and invites the practicing of negativity.

For Kristeva this is a process in which the positivities of the symbolic are put under pressure from the disruptions of the semiotic, even as these negativities in turn, are subject to symbolic law. Such a poetics of colour is a momentary event. This is both poetic experience and an ethical hiatus which opens the viewer to irreconcilable differences<sup>5</sup>. A poetic event renders the subject in-process, oscillating between self and otherness, between the discursive symbolic and the unsymbolisable heterogeneity of the semiotic. This is a practice of negativity which registers the incommensurability of the drives and of discursive regulation.

It is the dialectical disruption by the semiotic genotext of the symbolic phenotext, that Kristeva associates with negativity proper, for it is as a process,

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<sup>4</sup>In *Revolution and Poetic Language*, Kristeva marks the affinities between her conception of the semiotic and Derrida's terms "trace and gramme" (Kristeva 1984, 40), also conceived of as signifying disruptions. Kristeva however emphasises that the semiotic is tied to the body and the drives, rather than only to the play of difference in language.

<sup>5</sup>Kelly Oliver's discussion of Kristeva's *Outlaw Ethics* in the book titled *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the Double-bind* makes a similar point. Oliver points out that Kristeva links identity and negativity, not in a synthetic dialectic, but as an unstable threshold that oscillates between law and transgression. The three discourses which negotiate this threshold are those of poetic language, maternity and psychoanalysis. Poetic language occupies a disruptive and negative position vis a vis the positivities and tyrannies of traditional philosophy and culture. "From Plato's imaginary republic to Stalin's brutal dictatorship, censorship has been the sign of repression, tyranny and death. Poetry signals tolerance in a society. The openness to poetry is the openness to difference" (Oliver 1993, 182). Poetic language from this perspective is the enactment of an ethics of negativity. This according to Oliver is an outlaw ethics which involves destabilising or pulverising established identities. Poetic language from this perspective is an enactment of the 'subject-in-process' ontial. This is the articulation of a provisional heterogeneity that can never be fully captured by symbolic discourse and can only be "practiced to the point of loss" (ibid).

as an untheorisable relation between the drives and conceptualisation, that conceptual mastery is disrupted. All other signifying disruptions are part of the operations of the phenotext<sup>6</sup> and are defined as negations, not negativities<sup>7</sup>. Negations from this perspective, do not constitute poetic meaning because they do not transgress or disrupt the symbolic order.

Against Kristeva's distinction between non-discursive negativity and discursive negation, this thesis proposes that negativity exists in a dialectical relation between the viewer and the text, *and* within signification in the text itself. From this perspective, "colour, rhythm, interval, gesture" (Kristeva 1980, 221) are not necessarily understood as negativities in themselves (although they can be used as such) but as signifiers whose effects are activated within a relation to other signs. The effects of 'aesthetic ideas', like colour and tone, are part of a range of signs and signifying practices of negativity, whose import is always discursive, yet whose poetic effects in ensemble with other signs, are in some sense unspeakable. Unlike Kristeva, this thesis does not only associate such an unspeakable poetics with the disruptive qualities of colour per se, but with how colour, and other signifying features, *are used* within the text<sup>8</sup>.

My claim being that poetic processes address the viewer's imagination, instinct, embodied drives, conceptual knowledge and deeply situated ideological assumptions. The de-subjectifying effects of such poetic processes are not, in this view, an effect of the binarist and antagonistic relation between instinctual pressure and symbolic discourse. Instead the viewer experiences poetic ambiguity when he or she is unable to make meaning cohere, in spite of deploying a whole range of meaning making systems. Chromatic or tonal experience may be constituents of poetic and signifying processes which disable conceptual mastery. From this perspective, the antagonistic relation between the negativity of colour, and the positivity of understanding, is determined by a set of ideological interests and histories that preserve such a hierarchy, rather than in terms of any essential feature of colour itself.

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<sup>6</sup>For Kristeva the relation between the genotext (the semiotic disposition of the text) and the phenotext (the actual text) is a dialectical and oscillational one, which ruptures, rather than reconciles contradictions.

<sup>7</sup>See Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* Chapter 2 *Negativity: Rejection* page 124.

<sup>8</sup>In *Giotto's Joy* Kristeva details how colour *is used* as a device which volumizes form. Here colour operates within an ensemble of semic devices which sets up disruptive and ambiguous reading of pictorial space and figuration, so that "color tears these figures away from the walls' plane, giving them a depth related to, but also distinct from, a search for perspective" (Kristeva 1980, 225-226).

Although there are differences between the understanding of the operation of poetic ambiguity promoted in this study, and Kristeva's dialectical poetics, Kristeva's model enables us to think productively about how poetic texts mobilize negativity, and indeed also how affective 'signs' like colour contribute to poetic experience. Unlike Kristeva, this chapter claims that poetic ambiguity, a de-subjectifying signifying process at work in paintings, is not predicated on the binary distinction between non-discursive drives and symbolic discourse. This thesis proposes that the negativities of poetic experience are dialectically constituted by the positivities of understanding, even as they are inaugurated by multiple interchanges between the viewer and the painting as an address of our instinctual drives, embedded knowledges and discursive prejudices.

#### **2.4. Romantic poetics**

According to Jonathan Culler, in his essay *Poetics of the Lyric* in his book *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, lyric poetry is identifiable in terms of its structure and its rules of signification. To write a poem is to mobilize a set of expectations of how it will be read and which possible interpretations may be made from it. Poetic artifacts are situated in aesthetic practices which involve the knowledge and participation of informed readers. Culler discusses romantic lyric poetry in terms of four structural categories: *distance and deixis* (the impersonality of the text and its internal oscillations); *organic wholes* (which include binary oppositions and their dialectical resolution by a third term); *theme and epiphany* (the significance of the poem and its poetic structure); and lastly *resistance and recuperation* (in which a variety of rhetorical operations like metaphor and metonymy are used to mobilize poetic meaning). This account of the structural properties of lyric poetry conceives of it as a discursive practice. For Culler, we read lyric poetry as poetic because we know what the poetic is.

I suggest that the signifying process called poetic ambiguity is also an effect of particular structures. However, against Culler's structuralist account of the 'deep structure' of poetic texts, the account of poetic ambiguity developed in this chapter presents it as an effect of a processual relation in which meaning is made ambiguous. Each painting mobilises this relation in its own particular way.

Each artist develops this possibility from a repertoire of signifying systems, and each viewer brings different expectations and competences to an encounter with poetic negativity.

J.L. Koerner's discussion of the paintings of Friedrich, in his book titled *Caspar David Friedrich and the subject of the landscape*, explores how Friedrich's paintings mobilise a process which renders meaning ambiguous. This process is structured by two opposing terms: *Erlebniskunst* and *Eigentümlichkeit*, in which the autonomy of the subject is perpetually put under pressure by the truth of experience. These two terms are part of a romantic repertoire that informs Friedrich's paintings, which according to Koerner, hover between a sense of belonging and a sense of estrangement, or between the incompatible functions of allegory and symbol. Paradox, estrangement and irony are all devices which unsettle the viewer, even as he/she is confirmed as the subject of the landscape. Such processual poetic ambiguity, semic excess and uncertainty alert the viewer to his/her relational incompleteness. Friedrich's trope of the *Rückenfigur*, as the sublime wanderer, never-at-home, always in process, a sign of our own belatedness, is the paradigmatic emblem of this processual failure of meaning. This process renders the viewer as the subject of the landscape, even as it destabilizes that viewership. Such a poetics mobilizes binaries, only to confound them (compare Culler's schema in which organic wholes involve the negotiation of binaries and their resolution by a third term).

For example, Koerner details how in encountering Friedrich's *Cross in the Mountains* 1807-8 (*Figure 2*) the viewer is positioned as if he/she had come across this crucifix in the mountains at a moment in time. This 'realism' flouts the conventions of traditional landscape painting by undercutting the traditional subject/object distinctions that inform it. Here the viewer is both outside this scene as a viewer of the whole scene, and participant in it, insofar as he/she identifies with the *Rückenfigur*, crucified Christ. Insofar as traditional landscape painting established visual continuities with devices like overlapping and linear perspective, *The Cross in the Mountains* positions the viewer both across from, and below, the rocky outcrop on which the crucifix stands, which induces a sense of disequilibrium and anxiety. Oscillations between proximity and distance, smallness and immensity, familiarity and strangeness, establishes a dialectic which operates by playing system against non-system.



Figure 2: C.D. Friedrich. *The Cross in the Mountains*. 1807-08

The averted figure of Christ, across the sublime abyss that separates the viewer from his substitute self, is a symbol of both becoming and loss. But this symbolism is itself thrown into question by the frame of this painting, which codes an eye, grapes and bread, which become the allegorical counterparts for the I/ Christ. This, Koerner suggests, opens up a gap in our relation to the painting, which then becomes an allegory for deconciliation, lack, loss and metaphysical dissolution. The polysemic interplay of all these elements become analogies for a moral sentiment, not external to us, but folded into "a maddening sense of enfolding without closure, of centres becoming frames and of tenors becoming vehicles (which) function to ward off any final statement of the painting's meaning. It places at the heart of our experience of the artwork not a single message, nor even quite the sheer proliferation of messages, but rather an encounter with a process and agency of mediation per se: the infinitely meaningful, never exhaustible 'symbol' of which nature, religion, art, and community are but so many local inflections" (Koerner 1990, 129). It is this inexhaustible process, and the proliferation and ambiguity of meaning, I suggest that constitutes that signifying process called poetic ambiguity.

Koerner only attends to the negativities of what Kristeva would call the phenotext, a mobile and discursively active sliding and 'collision of signifiers canceling one another', which mobilize a set of expectations, "a set of conventions determining how the sequence is to be read and what kinds of interpretations may be derived from it" (Culler 1975, 161). This poetic process is one not defined by the binarist distinction between the anti-discursive negativities of the semiotic and the discursive negations of the symbolic, but by the particularities of a poetic process in which meaning is made ambiguous.

## **2.5. Merleau-Ponty, practicing negativity and being open to differences.**

Merleau-Ponty's idea of 'the flesh' developed in *The Intertwining- The Chiasm* in his book *The Visible and the Invisible*, 1968, provides a different model for understanding how paintings invite the practicing of negativity. Merleau-Ponty's idea of 'the flesh' is an anti-binarist, but dialectical possibility, that opens all subjects (and objects), including viewers of paintings, to differences. Such an encounter is registered within the phenomenological experience of the subject,

and thus, unlike a romantic poetics, is not orchestrated by the internal workings of a poetic text or painting. Nor is 'the flesh' authored by the relation between our instinctual drives and discursive regulation. Instead 'the flesh' emphasises a performative and dialectical relation between all oppositions: subjects and objects, language and perceptual experience, understanding and aesthetic experience, painting and viewer, landscape and painting<sup>9</sup>.

Like both Kristeva's and Koerner's dialectical poetic models, which make the relation between texts and viewers a dynamic one, for Merleau-Ponty, the idea of the reversibility and intertwinedness ('the flesh') of all phenomena, is intended to inspire the practicing of negativity in all circumstances. To do so would be to realise that subjects are objects, and that language and perception are enfolded in one another. Such reversals displace the hierarchal relation between binaries. For 'the flesh' is both a mental abstraction *and* a field of carnal possibilities which displaces the Cartesian mind/body; subject/object split, and scrambles the categories of seeing and being seen, touch and the tangible. This concept of 'the flesh', whose "reversibility is always imminent and never realised in fact" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 147), allows us to conceive of the potential of the ambiguity between relationships, for "if these experiences never exactly overlap, if they slip away at the very moment they are about to rejoin, if there is always a "shift", a "spread", between them"(Merleau-Ponty 1968, 148), we are caught up in a new type of being which is full of possibilities. Such a practicing of negativity in which our sensibility is not extracted from our being in the world, thus operates as a hinge in which oppositions become reversible variants of each other. In this schema we are invited to consider the figure of 'the flesh' as a dialectical 'hinge' which de-subjectifies us. This de-subjectifying process resembles the one identified in this study, where poetic reversals, slippages, disaggregations and ambiguities of meaning, invite the practicing of negativity.

The differences between the signifying process called poetic ambiguity, and Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic exchange, are also significant. For although the figure of 'the flesh' points to the possibilities and processes of practicing negativity via

<sup>9</sup>Merleau-Ponty's 'the flesh' has some affinities to Adorno's negative dialectics, insofar as both these philosophers theorise a de-subjectifying and dialectical process, that deconstructs a hierarchical relation between binary oppositions.



texts and aesthetic events, this phenomenal practicing of negativity is not only authored by poetic texts or paintings whose structures de-subjectify the viewer, but by the impossibility of ever fixing meaning. 'The flesh' reconfigures the fixities of all binarist structures so that meaning is conceived of as shift between reader and text. For example, as an intertwining between aesthetic experience and understanding, so that both are reconfigured in this process. It is this potential reconfiguration between oppositions that opens any 'enfleshed' viewers to differences.

Although written some time before *The Intertwining -The Chiasm*, Merleau-Ponty's essay titled *Cezanne's Doubt*, anticipates some of the themes found in this later seminal work. Written partly from the perspective of the artist, *Cezanne's Doubt* struggles to identify what the practicing of negativity involves from the artist's point of view. Cezanne's isolation, rejection, doubt and contradictory ambitions which aimed at depicting reality while "denying himself the means to attain it ... by abandoning himself to the chaos of sensation, which would upset the objects and constantly suggest illusions" (Johnson 1993, 63) are only one part of the equation. This negativity was transferred to the paintings as part of a far more ambitious project in which Cezanne's ambition is to make art as a "personal apperception, which I embody in sensations and which I ask the understanding to organize into a painting" (ibid). Such claims are, according to Merleau-Ponty, best met in the paintings themselves and in the act of painting, in which the dichotomies usually sustained in philosophy, between sensations and understanding, are reorganised so that the painter experiences himself as part of nature, even as nature is in him, and by extension, the painting enfolds both the artist and nature.

In effecting this transfer, Merleau-Ponty claims that in Cezanne's paintings, "each stroke must contain the air, the light, the object, the composition, the character, the outline, and the style" (ibid, 66). Effectively then each stroke and each reception of those strokes, embodies (enfleshes) this mobile field of representation, discourse and perception in which, as Cezanne claimed "The landscape thinks itself in me ... and I am its consciousness" (ibid, 67). The painting, the landscape and the viewer, are 'enfleshed' or reversible variants of each other. Any 'enfleshed' viewer is unable to sustain divisions and hierarchies, and this mixing of understanding and experience opens up the differences

between these oppositions. It is this openness to otherness, or to differences usually suppressed in, or denigrated by, traditional binarist discourse, that is the practicing of negativity. This is a practice which sustains the dialectical relation between positivity and negativity, even as it refuses to impose a traditional positive/negative hierarchy on those oppositions.

Merleau-Ponty's dialectical model conceives of the practicing of negativity in terms of an encounter between the painting and the viewer. This relational intertwining perpetually defeats a binarist template, for here understanding is never free from perceptual experience, or vice versa. In *Cezanne's Doubt*, Merleau-Ponty does consider the relation of colour to line, and how in Cezanne's paintings this results in the viewer getting lost in the relationships between the depiction of objects. This aesthetic negativity, however, seems to be of less interest to him than the very phenomenology of painting, which undercuts binaries and invites the practicing of negativity.

Despite these differences between that signifying process called poetic ambiguity and Merleau-Ponty's figure called 'the flesh', I suggest that both invite the practicing of negativity and opens us to difference. In this regard poetic ambiguity might be understood as a modality of a discourse of aesthetic negativity, whose character is to display multiple differences without the imposition of a binarist order or of fixed hierarchies. In this schema the practicing of negativity is inaugurated by the structures of the painting, but dialectically completed by the viewer, even as this inter-relation is opened up by the inability to fix meaning. As in Merleau-Ponty's figure called 'the flesh', such a poetically ambiguous practicing of negativity opens the viewer to differences. In concluding this discussion of these different dialectical poetic models, Koerner's and Culler's insights usefully inform this investigation into how poetic ambiguities in paintings invite the practicing of negativity. These writers present the poetic as a structural feature of texts which makes meaning poetically ambiguous. Kristeva's and Merleau-Ponty's engagement with dialectical poetics and the practicing of negativity, provide useful insights into what negativity is, and how it de-subjectifies the viewer and how the negativities of the poetic, and of 'the flesh', open the viewer to differences.

It is a synthesis of these philosophical, art historical and literary insights that services my interpretive model which identifies the signifying process called poetic ambiguity. In this schema, poetic ambiguity is conceived of as a de-subjectifying practicing of negativity, which exists between the painting and the viewer. Here the painting has the structural capacity to render meaning poetically ambiguous, even as the viewer is called upon to practice negativity. Like Merleau-Ponty's figure of 'the flesh', this dialectical process opens the viewer to differences and the practicing of negativity.

## **2.6. Poetic ambiguity and the feminine.**

My earlier interpretation of *Garden Terrace* presumes that the *Ruckenfigur* and her mysterious basket inaugurate a visual circuit which unifies meanings in this painting. This circuit has already been identified as a movement in which the viewer's gaze slides from this introspective figure of the young woman and her covered basket, to the statue of *Flora*, abundantly encircled by a garden of red flowers, through the guarded gate and the domesticated middle distance, and out into the 'sublime' and luminous light to the left, and then back again into the red hooded basket.

This painting which announces itself as a fiction, possibly like the book the *Ruckenfigur* is reading, engages feminine and female predicaments, but is not confined to them. *Garden Terrace* codes a split between these two female 'protagonists', the *Ruckenfigur* as a sign of introspective acculturation, and the statue of *Flora* as the sign of extroverted natural experience. These inter-relations are expanded by the image of the seated young woman, associated with the red covered basket, whose mysterious potency is transgressive, erotic and literary; and by the figure of *Flora*, who is no less sexualised and associated with the metonymic slippage of the red colour which migrates between the red flowers and the red cloth covering the basket. But *Flora's* sexual identity preserves, rather than transgresses, a traditional femininity. These feminine identities, which hover between agency, desire, submission and transgression are differences which are corralled behind the closed gate, guarded by two stone lions.

*Garden Terrace* mobilizes two registers: an identification with the problematics of feminine identity coded in the foreground via inexplicable contradictions, ambiguities of meaning; and a unifying visual circuit in which these anxious differences are blended together. It is the interface of these two registers that I claim constitutes the most significant operation of poetic ambiguity in this painting. This signifying process organises any number of signs, affects and signifying systems in such a way as to defeat conceptual mastery and invite the practicing of negativity.

We may track this proposition in the following way. The uncomfortable foreground, with its multiple and anxious feminine predicaments does not position the viewer in a binarist subject/object, self/other register. These differences explode oppositions, and in so doing disaggregate meaning. However, the unifying visual circuit of the whole, synthesises oppositions: the background with the foreground, the feminine predicaments and a luminous sublime light. In this unified circuit, these feminine problematics are synthesised into a composite register which links the feminine, the sublime and excess. Such a category, as Battersby argues in her book *The Phenomenal Woman*, endorses fixed hierarchies in which subject/ object, self/other, masculine/ feminine oppositions are maintained. In short, this painting mobilizes a non-binarist negative aesthetics against a traditionally phallogentric, dialectical and binarist register.

These mutually implicated contradictions produce a poetic experience full of complex connections and multiplicities, ambiguous flows and explosions of meaning, which disable the establishment of another binary whereby these two registers might be antagonistically positioned against one another. Instead these two registers are experienced as 'enfleshed' or intertwined as the viewer struggles to sustain an engagement with both. For me, this painting invited a particular kind of imaginative encounter, in which I abandoned myself to the disaggregation of meaning. In Merleau-Pontian terminology, I engaged the enfoldedness of two oppositional registers even as I realised that these two registers were moments of cognition operating in a field which defeated that understanding. I experienced this intertwining as an address of my discursive knowledge, of poetic affect, and as an aesthetic specific experience which defeats conceptual mastery. For in its own quiet way *Garden Terrace*,

addressed me as an encounter pulsing between comprehension and mystification, between understanding these contradictions contained in these intertwined registers, and an inability to understand those differences. It required me to occupy both positions simultaneously, and therefore to occupy neither.

By way of concluding this discussion, my contention is that the negativity of such aesthetic experience cannot be conflated with the negativities of the feminine. This proposition is made against Kristeva's conflation of these two negativities, and preempts a later discussion of Derrida's and Irigaray's conflation of disruptive textual practices of negativity and the feminine.

Kristeva's book *Revolution and Poetic Language* 1984, foregrounds the negativity of the semiotic, because it is a pre-verbal, pre-oedipal drive-driven field associated with the unconscious. The non-conceptualisable, heterogeneous, multiple and pulverising semiotic exists in dialectical relation to symbolic speech, writing and signification. Access to the semiotic is gained in the practicing of negativity<sup>10</sup> as the mobilization of the genotext, rather than in the presentation of it in language and signs, in the phenotext. The poetic text (the phenotext) registers the semiotic (genotext) in language, through non-conceptual, and non representational features like rhythm, interval, repetition, and as Kristeva claims in painting, (in her essays *Giotto's Joy* and *Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini*, both in *Desire in Language*), also through colour and luminous spatialization. These semiotic features which enter into the symbolic as a productive rupture, are by extension associated with the mother/child dyad, for it is the maternal chora that is the site in which the speaking subject emerges, forever in-process, oscillating between the semiotic drives and the symbolic order. It is via this maternal chora that the negativities of the poetic are linked to those of the feminine.

Confusingly, Kristeva's book titled *Revolution and Poetic Language* identifies the semiotic as both a gender-free process of signification, and as a feminine

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<sup>10</sup>See Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* Chapter IV *Practice*, in which she argues that poetic texts install the practicing of negativity because they make apparent the contradictions entailed in signification where "the subject is a contradiction that brings about practice because practice is always both signifying and semiotic" (Kristeva 1984, 215).

condition associated with the maternal chora<sup>11</sup>. According to Diana Coole, Kristeva makes a political move in which the “semiotic, negativity and feminine are synonymous terms” (Coole 2000, 220) that transgress the regulations and laws of the symbolic, so that identity is made multiple and heterogeneous. This synthesis of a signifying process, and the gendered politics of identity, conflates two different practices of negativity.

My claim is that in this Kristevan schema, the negativity of the poetic services the negativity of a politics of the feminine. This dialectical synthesis of two types of negativity, in the interests of promoting or discursively shifting the interests of one, may well be part of a feminist politics of identity. But such a feminist politics is not identical to the practicing of negativity in painting. In this regard, this thesis mobilises Rita Felski’s insights, which sustain the interaction and “inevitable tension between the spheres of ‘feminism’ and ‘aesthetics’ (Felski 1997, 427). Against Kristeva’s conflation of these two spheres, Felski engages Toril Moi’s criticism of the idea that the semiotic is feminine. For Moi, the semiotic should be understood as “a disruptive and deconstructive force ... (which) undermines all fixed identities, including those of the masculine and the feminine” (Felski 1989, 35). In so disaggregating the feminine and the semiotic, Moi and Felski preserve the distinctions between semiotic practices and feminist politics.

Likewise, my contention is that the aesthetic negativities of poetic ambiguity experienced, and analysed, in *Garden Terrace* are distinct from the negativities of a feminist politics and of feminine attributes. Although this painting makes connections between feminine identities, desires, submissions and emancipations, it slides a variety of meditations on female/feminine identity, which in turn enfold agency with submission, mind over matter, body into discourse. These poetic ambiguities scramble any neat boundaries and binaries which would sustain splits between the negativities of the feminine semiotic and the negations of the symbolic. This aesthetic specific and poetic process is not gendered, nor is it feminine.

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<sup>11</sup> The first chapter, *The Semiotic and the Symbolic* explores the contiguity between the semiotic and the maternal, although the subsequent chapters on *Negativity*, *Heterogeneity* and *Practice* focus on the gender neutrality poetic texts.

## 2.8. Conclusion

This chapter has identified a signifying process in painting, called poetic ambiguity, which disaggregates meaning and disables the positivities of understanding in such a way as to invite the practicing of negativity and to open the viewer to differences. This aesthetic practice of negativity has been identified via the insights of Kristeva, Merleau-Ponty, Koerner and Culler and my account of an experience of C.D. Friedrich's painting titled *Garden Terrace*. These philosophical, art historical, literary and experiential insights inform an interpretive method which registers the negativity of aesthetic experience, even as this method delivers an understanding of how such poetic ambiguities are not identical to the negativities of the feminine.

In identifying and analysing that signifying process called poetic ambiguity, we engage the positivities of understanding. Such understanding cannot register the aesthetic practicing of negativity, which is the unique property of the relation between signifying processes in art works and the aesthetic experience of the viewer. This chapter marks a dialectical relation between poetic experience and understanding, in the interests of demonstrating how a painting like *Garden Terrace* disables the positivities of understanding and invites an aesthetic practicing of negativity, even as it registers the discursive implications of a politics of the feminine.

Deconstruction, as will be discussed later, also invites practices of negativity. Deconstructive methods by contrast, erode the dialectical relation between experience and understanding and conflate different practices of negativity in the interests of deconstructing fixed and hierarchical assumptions. These discursive distinctions and competitions will be more fully addressed in chapters three and four. More immediately, the next chapter investigates how another signifying process in painting, called sublime irresolution, also de-subjectifies the viewer and invites the practicing of negativity. Sublime irresolution foregrounds an antagonistic opposition between differences, unlike the deferrals and slippages of meaning structured by that poetic ambiguity, which opens the viewer to differences.

## Chapter Two

### Sublime Irresolution

#### 3.1. Introduction.

This chapter identifies a signifying process in painting called sublime irresolution. Like poetic ambiguity, investigated in the first chapter, sublime irresolution disaggregates meaning, and the viewer's inability to resolve meaning registers as an unspeakable sublime experience which invites the practicing of negativity. Sublime irresolution and poetic ambiguity are thus conceived of as two differing modalities of an aesthetics of negativity. These first two chapters register the differences between poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution. Poetic ambiguity opens the viewer to differences, whereas sublime irresolution provokes the viewer, by rubbing differences up against one another.

As a second order activity, we might understand and contextualise such practices of negativity. The dialectical interpretive method mobilised in this thesis enables us to negotiate that boundary between understanding and aesthetic experience. This chapter demonstrates how the positivities of understanding are disaggregated by a dialectical and signifying relation between the viewer and the painting, even as it details how we might understand how such a practices of negativity are produced by paintings. The first two chapters develop an understanding of aesthetic negativity in painting in preparation for an investigation into the tensions and correspondences between negative aesthetics and philosophical deconstruction in the last two chapters.

In identifying the signifying process called sublime irresolution in paintings, this chapter explores how Louis Marin, in his book *Sublime Poussin*, responds to sublime unrepresentability in Poussin's painting *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* 1658. It also investigates how philosophical engagements with the sublime, in Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime*, Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and Lyotard's essay *The Sublime and the Avante-Garde*, inform an understanding of this signifying process and of an aesthetics of negativity in philosophy. These insights service an analysis of the differences between the sublime paintings by Nicholas Poussin (*Landscape with Pyramus*



*and Thisbe*), J.M.W. Turner ( *Seascape with Storm Coming on* and *The Fall of an Avalanche at Grisons*) and Mark Rothko (*Red on Maroon*), so that we can understand how an experience of sublime irresolution is produced by paintings.

My engagement with these paintings, and with these art historical and philosophical texts, is informed by an interpretive method which both records the negativities of aesthetic experience and enables us to understand the differences between these experiences. This dialectical method registers something of the Kantian insight that the differences between non-conceptualisable 'aesthetic ideas' and conceptual understanding can be negotiated via categories of understanding. It is an interpretive method which has an affinity with Adorno's theory of negative dialectics and with Lyotard's notion of a sublime event, diagnosed by the question 'Is it happening?'. These philosophical engagements with the sublime inform a general discursive category called an aesthetics of negativity that informs philosophy and painting from the 17th century to the present.

### **3.2. Compressions and oscillations**

In identifying the signifying process called sublime irresolution in painting, and detailing how it provokes the practicing of negativity, we begin with an investigation of Louis Marin's analysis of Poussin's painting *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* 1658 (*Figure 3*) in his book *Sublime Poussin* 1999, translated by Catherine Porter. Here Marin identifies the sublime as "generative structure for a theory of the passions" (Marin 1999, 121) which summons affects through signs, and which exists as

"the unrepresentable of representation, an unrepresentable aspect that defines neither the outside nor the inside of representation nor even a blind spot that would hollow out its centre; rather, it results from the very operation of representation, from its panic or its exuberance. Understood in this way, the sublime is representation at its apogee: that is, in one of the precise senses of the term, "that which stands above the edges of an already-full measure."... "This sublime is the "almost too much" (the



Figure 3: Nicholas Poussin. *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*. 1658

expression is Kantian) of representation, its internal excess.”(Marin 1999, 120).

According to Marin, the sublime in painting cannot be approached by description, but can only be summoned in signs through a process which produces sublime effects in the viewer’s imagination. A description of Poussin’s *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, records the representation of a tempest via the effects of weather: the dark sky, lightning, agitated surfaces and windswept figures. Here the double lightning strike, and the conflict, tension and disequilibrium of the landscape, become allegories for the double anguish and tragic fate of the two lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe, whose tale was narrated by Ovid.

For Marin, such a description of the painting is not sublime, but sets the scene for an experience of the sublime which is mobilized by a semic matrix, which gathers meanings together. I suggest that Marin’s account of this matrix is comparable to my account of that signifying process called sublime irresolution, which structures meaning in such a way that the viewer is unable to synthesise contradictions and is imaginatively installed into an experience of sublime irresolution.

For example, Marin describes *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* as a representation of people fleeing the forces of the tempest, whilst others observe the gory event of a lioness attacking a man. This lioness is in turn set upon by a man with spear. This narrative backdrop in which violences are performed and observed, preempts the same relation between violence and observation in the foreground in which Thisbe finds her dead Pyramus, which in turn extends to the viewer and the whole painting. In this process the viewer is metonymically installed into an affective state which renders the viewer both observer and violated. Such contradictory enfoldings and proliferations of meaning show “schematically the conflicting forces involved, their tensions and their positions of equilibrium” (Marin 1999, 81).

On the one hand the painting *Pyramus and Thisbe* displays the multiplicity of passions involved in coding this terrible tragedy, even as it invokes an affective sense of drama, tension, fear, agitation, thrill, and incomprehension that exceed

this demonstration. This painting establishes a structuring 'grammar' which pits contradictory communicative features against one another, where the detachment of observation is irresolvably folded into violent experience. It is this contradictory signifying process that installs the viewer into that matrix, identified as sublime irresolution. Following Marin, my proposal is that in so doing, this painting de-subjectifies the viewer into the practicing of negativity. Here sublime meaning is not coded through the representation of a tempest, but within the conditions of the construction of meaning, and its disaggregation. In this process the viewer employs his or her cognition and imagination, only to have these faculties exceeded by the multiplicities, compressions and contradictions of meaning coded in the painting.

The sublime terminus of this process Marin suggests is reached when the contradictions between observation and violent experience are superseded by another destabilising contradiction which presents itself to the viewer in terms of an encounter with the still and unruffled lake which, like a glassy eye, exists at the centre of this mobile and tempestuous mayhem. This contradictory stillness reflects not only the raging tempest, but also invites a form of speculation in which the viewer and the lake become interchangeable gazes, where the glassy eye, that is the lake, returns the all-seeing (sagelike) gaze of the viewer. In this exchange, subject and object, become interchangeable. This 'sage/lake' Marin suggests, becomes the "great eye of the viewer, of the sage who has been brought back to himself by the representation of unrepresentability" (Marin 1999, 102).

This account registers a speculative encounter between the viewer and the painting. The painting structures a particular kind of aesthetic experience, which is registered and completed in the viewer's imagination. The de-subjectifying effects of the dialectical relation between the painting and the viewer, disable conceptual mastery and install the viewer into an unspeakable practicing of negativity, or as Marin somewhat cryptically states, into the 'unrepresentability of representation'. This process, in which a dialectical and de-subjectifying relation is inaugurated by a painting but completed by the viewer, is experienced as an aesthetic event.

According to Adorno such an aesthetic process is "an occasion for subjective dissolution and reconstitution" (Huhn 2004, 8). For Lyotard the sublime is encountered as an unrepresentable event, only available to diagnosis via the question "Is it Happening?". This thesis proposes that an experience of sublime irresolution (as with poetic ambiguity) involves a dialectical and de-subjectifying process that invites an aesthetic specific practicing of negativity. This analysis has much in common with Adorno's aesthetic theory, Marin's account of sublime unrepresentability and Lyotard's diagnostic question. Although neither Adorno's, nor Lyotard's accounts of the sublime identify any particular signifying processes which register how sublime negativity is produced in paintings.

If we return to Marin's engagement with *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, this account of an experience of sublime irresolution is staged as the interplay of contradictions in which oppositions (between conceptual detachment and violent and affective immersion; between representation and the processes which exceed it; or between subject and object) are mobilized, heightened, and folded into, and on top of, one another. This account of a sublime process registers how these contradictions are superimposed upon one another, and 'rubbed up' against one another, to effect maximum semic compression, incomprehension and a sense of the sublime.

Marin's *account of Pyramus and Thisbe* thus enables an understanding of the sublime effects of this painting, if not of experiencing sublime negativity, which is uniquely associated with the relation between the painting and each viewer's response to it. However, Marin's analysis does indicate *how* that signifying process called sublime irresolution structures the failure of meaning in this painting. In his analysis, this is a painting where contradictions are superseded by even more contradictions, so that the viewer's and the painting's 'gazes' become interchangeable, where subject/object distinctions are scrambled, and where the viewer is both violated and violator. My observation is that Marin's account of the sublime practicing of negativity in *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* registers this disaggregation of meaning as a process of semic compression. I suggest that Marin's interpretation enables us to identify a modality of the signifying process called sublime irresolution; a modality which compresses contradictory meanings.

If Poussin's *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* thrills the viewer by installing him/her on a precarious sublime threshold, via imaginatively compressed and contradictory oppositions, J.M.W. Turner's *Seascape with Storm coming on* of 1840 (Figure 4) in the Clore Gallery of Tate Britain, mobilizes the operations of sublime irresolution *in a different way*. Turner's painting also de-subjectifies the viewer by presenting him or her with irresolvable contradictions. Turner's painting sets up an oscillational operation, or modality of sublime irresolution, which activates the mobility that exists between oppositions. This mobile interchange, however, has a less dramatic, less thrilling effect than the compressions of contradictory meanings in Poussin's *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*.

I suggest that Turner's *Seascape with Storm coming on*, mobilizes contradictions between 'a focussing event' and 'a dissipating flux', as differences of painterly application, or of tone and colour, within abstraction. For although this painting is a representation, it is barely so, even if it does hint at a sky, an horizon, and a menacing, black and stormy sea. Meaning, and its disaggregation, registers here in terms of the abstract qualities of paint. In particular, where the eye is caught by an accumulation of paint, light, colour and texture, and where such accumulations are undone by fluctuations and dissipations of colour, viscosity and mark. These mobile interchanges do not rupture or compress meaning, but are inflected as variations of the same, as a labile address of both a painterly and abstract affect. In encountering these oppositions the viewer is drawn into an ever-repeating oscillation, between dissolution and focus, and between two shifting registers where the image codes space and the sea, as plays of paint. Such oscillations suggest excessive, undefinable and Dionysian pleasures, in which the sublime threshold between comprehension, and that which overwhelms comprehension, is a positive, or becoming experience, rather than a terrifying or thrilling one.

My argument is that these two paintings, *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* and *Seascape with Storm coming on*, deliver a sublime experience by means of two differing modalities of that signifying process called sublime irresolution. Understanding such sublime disaggregations of meaning, and how such irresolution might be delivered in different paintings, is to be distinguished from an aesthetic experience of sublime irresolution which disables understanding. It



*Figure 4: J.M.W. Turner. Seascape with Storm coming on. 1840*

is this peculiar dialectical relation between the negativities of aesthetic experience and the positivity of understanding, that this study foregrounds. It does so in the interests of demonstrating that aesthetic practices of negativity are the unique property of the relation between the painting and the viewer, even as we can also understand something of that relation insofar as we can identify the de-subjectifying effects of aesthetic practices of negativity, how such negativity is mobilised in paintings, and how practices of negativity differ.

### **3.3. Dialectical negativity and the sublime.**

Kant's, Nietzsche's, Adorno's and Lyotard's philosophical engagements with the sublime engage various versions of a dialectical aesthetics of negativity.

a) Kant's book *The Analytic of the Sublime*, part of *The Critique of Judgement*, translated by James Creed Meredith and reprinted in 1952, continuously struggles with the irresolutions of the sublime, even as it overcomes that irresolution through a dialectical solution in which sublime excess is mastered by the reasoning subject. Unlike the Hegelian dialectic, sketched in the first chapter as a mobile operation that mobilizes differences between oppositions, the Kantian dialectic or 'logic of illusion', according to Allen W. Wood, is characterised as a form of human reason "which taunts itself with a prospect of knowing what it can never know" (Wood 2005, 84). This paradoxical logic is part of reason's criticality, for it enables making distinctions between illusions and truth. For Kant, reason is our highest faculty, which

"prevents us from being deceived by optical illusions, by our feelings and desires, by contingent logical errors of understanding, by the corrupting deceptions practiced on us not only by others but even more often by ourselves, even by the necessary illusions to which reason itself is subject" (Wood 2005, 85).

For example, in his book *The Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgement*, also found in *The Critique of Judgement*, Kant presents a logical conundrum regarding two statements: "every one has his own taste"... and ... "there is no disputing about taste" (Kant 1952, 205). Here the contradictions between the thesis, in which judgments of taste are not based on concepts, versus the antithesis, in which



judgments of taste are based on concepts, are dialectically resolved when through a process of reasoning we conclude that a *judgement* of taste requires conceptualisation, which is independent of any aesthetic object. For it is through conceptualisation that we can negotiate oppositions or 'antimonies' between the thesis and antithesis. These are dialectically resolved through a process of reasoning, which concludes that judgments of taste rest on indeterminate concepts, as special aesthetic types of concepts that are not available to understanding.

The *Analytic of the Sublime* is likewise infused with a dialectical logic whose terminus is always the reasoning human mind. This idea of the supremacy of the reasoning mind is continuously repeated in this text. It is the power of reason that struggles with and defeats, the shapeless indeterminacies of the sublime, where thought and meaning fail. In this text, Kant identifies the sublime as independent of any object or form, as a "presentation of an indeterminate concept of reason" (Kant 1952, 91) and as the outrage of the imagination and uncontainable in any 'sensuous semblance'. The sublime incites "the mind to abandon sensibility, and to employ itself upon ideas involving a higher finality" (Kant 1952, 92).

This privileging of reason over sublime sense might be seen against the strenuous challenges that the sublime provokes. For Kant the sublime is a 'negative pleasure' produced by an oscillational movement between a 'check to the feelings' followed by a 'discharge' of feeling, or by a 'mental movement' which agitates the mind. The sublime thus provokes both the pain (of meaningless irresolution) and the pleasure (of rational understanding of that pain). For the sublime is a "self-contradictory concept" (ibid) that defeats the imagination, even as this defeat alerts us to a metaphysical "supersensible substrate (underlying both nature and our faculty of thought) which is great beyond every standard of sense" (ibid). These irresolutions, challenges and contradictions are continuously absorbed into a dialectical process as the stimulus for sublime feeling. Indeed, it is the very difficulty of the sublime that is the basis of a moral sense, which emerges against and out of, the strenuous difficulties of being confronted by that which the mind cannot accommodate, an absolutely large object for example. A non-artistic sense of the sublime, unlike beauty or poetry, and not to be found in the mere sensuous resemblances of

painting, confronts us with irresolution and contradiction, which from a Kantian perspective, we dialectically overcome through the powers of reason.

Kant's understanding of the sublime resists irresolution, suppresses negativity and privileges rational understanding. As such, Kant invokes a binarist dialectics against the negativities of sublime excess, and calls that victory, *the sublime*, as a response to paradoxes he finds when "human reason taunts itself with a prospect of knowing what it can never know" (Wood 2005, 84). This Kantian sublime records a *subjectifying* moment where otherness, heterogeneity, and sublime negativity are contained within, and regulated by, the knowing and reasoning subject. Diana Coole's book *negativity and politics: Dionysus and dialectics from Kant to poststructuralism*, demonstrates how the positivity of Kant's binarist and dialectical method is irrupted by "gaps, hiatus, lacunae, discontinuities, undecidables, confusions, ambiguities, inconsistencies, contradictions, antimonies, unknowables" (Coole 2000, 41). Negativity is thus a constitutive component of the Kantian sublime, but one foreclosed by the positivities of understanding.

This investigation cannot fault Kant's insight developed in his book *The Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgement* which argues that the irreducible differences between the negativity of 'aesthetic ideas' and the positivities of understanding can be negotiated through processes of reasoning. Such reasoning not only preserves the distinctions between the negativities of aesthetic experience and the positivities of understanding, but also registers an understanding of that difference. However, Kant's theory of the sublime developed in his *Analytic of the Sublime* sustains a hierarchy in which reason subjugates the negativities of sublime excess. It is this dialectical hierarchy, which sustains traditional binaries, that is the object of post-Kantian philosophical critiques.

Christine Battersby's book *The Phenomenal Woman* 1998 is exemplary of such a philosophical critique. Battersby is critical of Kant's binarist and dialectical solution because it is a philosophical system which sustains the binary in which a rational self is constituted by sublime otherness. For Battersby, the Kantian sublime

"requires 'excess'; it requires its 'other'; it requires a 'matter' that must hover always out of reach. But that 'other' - and matter - are ultimately constrained and pinioned in a position of fake infinity. The term that Kant employs for this receding (but fixed) infinity is the 'sublime' - terms which keep 'nature', and 'the object' and 'matter' at a distance and in stasis. ... The transcendental 'I' constructs itself as persisting and stable as it confronts this 'sublime' otherness that threatens to overwhelm it" (Battersby 1998, 79).

Here Battersby is critical of Kant's dialectical method which preserves traditional and patriarchal binaries in which the negativity of feminised sublime excess is the constitutive 'other' to the positivities of a rational (and masculine) subject. A Kantian negative dialectics of the sublime, from such a feminist and deconstructive perspective, is problematic insofar as it preserves hierarchical binaries, suppresses negativity and privileges the reasoning (masculine) subject.

Battersby's critique of the Kantian sublime registers the impact of a deconstructive sensibility, critical of binary oppositions and fixed hierarchies which sustain the positivities of reason, phallogentrism, a metaphysics of presence, and the integrated subject against the negativities of sublime excess, otherness, textual indeterminacy, and the feminine. Similarly, as will be demonstrated, Nietzsche's and Adorno's engagements with the sublime, register a critique of Kant's binarist dialectics of the sublime. Whereas Lyotard's theory re-engages something of Kant's non-conceptualisable 'aesthetic ideas', as the delivery of sublime experience.

b) Nietzsche's book *The Birth of Tragedy* translated by Walter Kauffman in 1967, engages an anti-binarist dialectics informed by a different conception of the sublime and theory of the subject. For the Nietzschean sublime is not organised by reason, but is discursively at work in aesthetic objects and practices. Nietzsche's dialectical anti-binarism is a critique of Kant's dialectical method which sustains the boundaries between oppositions, including that threshold between rational understanding and aesthetic experience. Nietzsche's philosophical text is written in a style of writing that is aphoristic, metaphorical and allusive. This style of argument synthesises aesthetic protocols with

philosophical understanding, so that unambiguous and rational understanding is disrupted. Here the de-subjectifying techniques of art are imported into philosophy, and pre-empt Derrida's development of deconstructive practices of negativity discussed in the next chapter.

Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* is organised by a dialectical relation between two principles, the Apollonian and the Dionysian. This relation between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, as complementary forces in Greek culture, is presented as a mobile, oscillational and becoming one. The Apollonian principle is associated with the visible, knowledge, individuation, light, dream and moderation, whereas the Dionysian is associated with excess, music, flux, rapture, destruction and mystery. Furthermore, the Dionysian is the 'primordial ground' from which the Apollonian emerges, and is also paradoxically, the generative field from which both these oppositions emerge. The Dionysian principle is both the ground, and an oppositional 'protagonist', in an ongoing and irresolvable contest that is both the condition of art and of life. Although this contest is staged in terms of Greek culture, and as a critique of classical Greek theatre and philosophy, which tragically suppressed the forces of Dionysus in its preoccupation with individuation and reason, *The Birth of Tragedy* is also implicitly a critique of Kantian metaphysics and binarist hierarchies. For although the Dionysian and Apollonian principles are perpetually in contest with one another, this contest emerges as a single generative and destructive stratum of life, which unlike the Kantian or Hegelian dialectical march of reason, is informed by forces that Nietzsche later defines as the will to power<sup>1</sup>.

Diana Coole links Nietzsche's will to power with irresolvable Dionysian and Apollonian rhythms, fusions, antagonisms, and with human life and aspirations in which "we are also formed and destroyed in the great effulgence of becoming" (Coole 2000, 91). She also links this will to power/ becoming with negativity, but qualifies it by claiming that this form of negativity is to be understood as generative, anti-rational, performative, life-affirming and beyond

<sup>1</sup>In *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche identifies the will to power, as a form of anonymous becoming, as a succession of independent processes in which things, including people, subjugate other things, which in turn resist such power and install new subjugations and resistances. Diana Coole identifies this cycle of the will to power as "ebbs and flows, cycles and becomings, where the connectedness but differentiation of all things is endlessly productive" (Coole 2000, 98).

negation. Negation is here understood as “nihilism, metaphysical no-saying, dialectical negation, reactive forces, will to nothingness, guilt and resentment” (Coole 2000, 85). However, the *negativity* of becoming, as the will to power and the celebration of life (as both generative and destructive), is a critique of Kantian metaphysics, in which the positivity of reason trumps the negativity of sublime excess.

Where Kant’s *The Analytic of the Sublime* is a systematic attempt to define the sublime, Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* sketchily addresses the topic of the sublime as both Apollonian and Dionysian. The Apollonian sublime is characterised as both beautiful and terrible and “where we intuitively comprehend their necessary interdependence” (Nietzsche 1967, 45). This Apollonian sublime, like its Dionysian counterpart, is an experiential category through which the sufferings of life may be sublimated.

Apollo “with his sublime gestures ... shows us how necessary is the entire world of suffering, that by means of it the individual may be impelled to realize the redeeming vision, and then, sunk in contemplation of it, sit quietly in his tossing bark, amid the waves” (ibid 45-46).

This uplifting sublime is both the counterpart and another version of the Dionysian sublime in which

“art approaches us as a healing sorceress ... She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the *sublime* as the artistic taming of the horrible” (Nietzsche 1967, 60).

On the other hand, the sublime, and the divine, are also associated with the satyr, ecstatic reveler and companion to the god Dionysus in which oblivion, excess, contradiction, are expressed through the dithyrambic satyric chorus. Tragedy “is seated amid this excess of life, suffering, and pleasure, in sublime ecstasy” (Nietzsche 1967, 124).

Although schematic, Nietzsche’s various engagements with the sublime differ from those of Kant insofar as this is not the evocation of a threshold in which

reason resists excess, irresolution and negativity. These Nietzschean sublimities are not only polyvalent and unsystematic, but promiscuously slip between principles of individuation and of primordial oneness, and exist in art and life, as sublimatory thresholds which heal the horrors of life and which invite us into the sublime negativities of excess, rapture and dissolution. These multiplicities suggest a mobile matrix, informed by the irresolvable play between oppositions, pleasure/pain thresholds and the sublimatory effects of art. This is a sublimity that is both aesthetic and philosophical. For the Nietzschean sublime registers the production of sublimity in aesthetic objects and practices, and most significantly, against Kantian attempts to control the negativities of sublime excess within the positivities of reason, the Nietzschean sublime is a celebration of that negativity in both philosophy and art. The irresolvable relation between the organising metaphors of this text, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, constitutes a model for a dynamic process that de-subjectifies a reader or a viewer into the negativities of sublime excess. For Coole, this "differentiation without opposition" installs "a new economy of life beyond negation where Nietzsche sets becoming free from the logical synthetic march of the dialectic" (Coole 2000, 87).

This discussion of Kant's and Nietzsche's philosophies of the sublime sketches an engagement with an aesthetics of negativity and of the sublime taken up by Derrida, Adorno and Lyotard in the 20th century. The significance of Kant's aesthetic theory for this investigation into the operation of sublime irresolution in painting, is his account of how the negativity of 'aesthetic ideas' may be approached by, but not duplicated by, the positivity of understanding. Here the autonomy of aesthetic experience is not reducible to a supplementary understanding. On the other hand Kant's engagement with the sublime, does set up a traditional and binarist hierarchy in which sublime negativity is suppressed by the positivities of understanding. Against this Kantian viewpoint, I suggest that sublime irresolution in art is a de-subjectifying technique that resists a Kantian discourse of the reasoning and integrated subject by confronting the viewer with that which he or she cannot conceptually master.

Both Nietzsche's and Kant's engagements with the sublime frame a discourse of subjectification that emerged in modernity. Nietzsche privileges the practicing of sublime negativity as part of the generative and destructive processes of

becoming found in both art and philosophy. For Nietzsche, a sublime experience is a de-subjectifying opportunity to encounter such excess, in art and in philosophy. Whereas in the Kantian schema, we might understand that a sublime experience subjectifies the reader or viewer in such a binarist way that the rational self is defensively positioned against the negativities of sublime excess. These arguments about the status of aesthetic experience, and its subjectifying or de-subjectifying capacities, are central to the negative aesthetics that Adorno takes up in the 20th century.

c) In Adorno's discussion of the sublime in his book *Aesthetic Theory*, published in 1970, translated by C. Lenhardt, and edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, art is central to Adorno's dialectical theory. Adorno's engagement with the sublime in art bears some resemblance to both Kant's and Nietzsche's theories of it. Art for Adorno, as for Kant, has an aesthetic autonomy. Unlike Kant, for Adorno the sublime in art is not an opportunity to endorse reason, but to critique it. Adorno writes "Art is rationality criticizing itself without being able to overcome itself" (Adorno 1970, 81). For Adorno aesthetic practices of negativity, inaugurated by art works, are an immanent critique of instrumental reason. Artworks, in this schema, disable reason by installing the viewer into a process in which the positivities of understanding cannot cohere, and where meaning fails. This a moment or an event, in which heterogeneity, dissonance, the non-identical, otherness or negativity, appear out of and against the positivities of reason. It is this production of negativity that is the immanent critique of reason.

From Adorno's perspective, art involves a processual practicing of negativity, *and* an understanding of the implications of that negativity. Here art is both aesthetically autonomous, a register of aesthetic experience, and a critique of reason. This negative dialectics marks the inter-related but irreducible differences between aesthetic experience and conceptual and critical understanding. This negative dialectics enables what Adorno calls the 'truth content' of the work of art. He writes "To grasp truth content is to be engaged in criticism" (Adorno 1970, 186). Artworks however, "do and do not possess truth content" (ibid 187) for although they invite interpretation and understanding, they also "fail to achieve what is objectively willed in and through them" (ibid ). Truth content, or negativity, in this schema is not to be

encountered through the positivities of understanding, but only through a process which an art work inaugurates, and which is completed in the experience of the viewer. This process causes the negativities of heterogeneity and otherness appear. These valued practices of negativity from this perspective, are not transformed by, or into, the positivities of understanding. Aesthetic negativity thus has an autonomy, even as it is the property of the dialectical relation between the viewer and the artwork.

This dialectical process bears some resemblance to Nietzsche's sublime dialectics which operates between the dynamics of Apollonian individuation and Dionysian immersion. For Adorno's dialectical model also presumes a mobile relation between oppositions, between the universal and the particular, between parts and the whole, between identity and non-identity<sup>2</sup>. This process does not synthesise and resolve oppositions, but preserves a dynamic reciprocity, or a gap, between oppositions. Adorno's theory is a negative dialectics, in which art occupies a privileged position. "Art works crackle .... because there is a friction between antagonistic moments" (ibid, 254).

Adorno's discussion of the sublime in art, registered under the topics of *Enlightenment and shudder* and *The sublime in nature* and *The sublime and play* in his book *Aesthetic Theory*, both promotes the sublime as an aesthetic category which articulates this immanent critique, and scrutinises the sublime in terms of its history and its discursive uses. Under the first topic, *Enlightenment and shudder*, Adorno associates art with tropes of the sublime, whereby art is both momentary and sudden, which brings "back the terror of the primal world" (ibid, 118). (Sublime) art is the paradoxical point between vanishing and preserving meaning. "The instant, which is the work of art, assumes a definite shape where it constitutes itself as a totality out of its particular moments" (ibid, 119). Art, in this schema, inaugurates a dialectical and processual relation between oppositions that is independent of "human meddling and purposive action"(ibid). This immanent process, like Kant's aesthetic theory, preserves the aesthetic autonomy of the art object, even as it sets up a mobile and dialectical

<sup>2</sup>Hegel's dialectical positivity registers a negotiation between negativity and positivity, so that negativity is transformed in such a way that the negative becomes positive. This becoming dialectics is different to Adorno's negative dialectics where negativity must be preserved, but not rendered servile to the positivities of reason. Adorno's negative aesthetics preserves the negativity of aesthetic negativity against the traditional dialectical impulse to render negativity positive.



relation between this aesthetic object and the viewing subject. For Adorno this relation is a negative dialectics, in which mobile object/subject relations, disable conceptual mastery and present the viewer with heterogeneity and the non-identical. According to J.M. Bernstein in his book *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*, Adorno's negative dialectics enacts a logic "which because not general, not universal, subsists only in and through enactment" (Bernstein 1992, 157). This practicing of negativity, via aesthetic objects and textual readings, is the road to "self-relinquishment" (ibid, 188). The goal of negative dialectics is to "use concepts to unseal the non-conceptual with concepts, without making it their equal" (ibid).

Adorno's discussion of the sublime in art in the chapter titled *Thoughts on a theory of the art work* in his book *Aesthetic theory* compares the de-subjectifying properties of art, and of the sublime, with Kant's version of the sublime which promotes "domination, power and greatness" (ibid, 281). Here the Kantian sublime is conceived of as a social fact that is not an immanent critique of reason, but a "kind of transcendence" (ibid, 282) or a positivity that in turn informs traditional aesthetics. It is against this traditional aesthetic 'art religion' that Adorno asks for a sublimity in which negativity is not 'played down', but where instead fundamental contradictions are brought out. Adorno writes

"Whereas the traditional concept of the sublime as an infinite presence was animated by the belief that negation could bring out positivity, the same does not hold for art that aims at truth content in the context of irreconcilable contradictions" (ibid).

Adorno's theory of negative dialectics significantly informs my contribution to negative aesthetics, which is to identify those signifying processes called poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution. These signifying processes in paintings and visual art practices engage a de-subjectifying, processual and aesthetic enactment of negativity. This sublime enactment of negativity is experienced as an unspeakable event, which may, via second order of analysis, become available to understanding. Poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution also register a dynamic gap, or an irreducible inter-relation, between aesthetic experience and understanding. Where for Adorno aesthetic specific practices of

negativity in art in general register as a critique of reason, from my perspective, although such a critique is indubitably valuable, I am also interested in *how* paintings deliver the negativities of sublime experience.

d) Lyotard's *The Sublime and the Avante-Garde* first published in *Art Forum* April 1984, translated by Lisa Liebmann, and later modified by Lyotard with these modifications translated by Geoff Bennington and Marian Hobson, is presented in *The Lyotard Reader* edited by Andrew Benjamin in 1989. In this essay Lyotard draws a boundary between aesthetic experience and understanding. For his question "Is it Happening?", as a diagnostic of sublime experience in art, is not an attempt to negotiate the dialectical relation between the negativities of the sublime and the positivities of understanding. For Lyotard sublime experience is an event that can only be approached "through a state of privation (where) thought must be disarmed" (Benjamin 1989, 197). Lyotard's response to Barnett Newman's painting is an account of a sublime experience or event, where thought or consciousness are disabled.

"Newman's *now* which is no more than *now* is a stranger to consciousness and cannot be constituted by it. Rather, it is what dismantles consciousness, what deposes consciousness, it is what consciousness cannot formulate, and even what consciousness forgets in order constitute itself" (ibid).

Lyotard traces this negative aesthetics, called the sublime, in which "aesthetics asserted its critical rights over art, and that of romanticism, in other words, modernity, triumphed" (ibid, 199). From this perspective Newman's 'now' is an engagement with a contradictory feeling that vacillates between the pain of privation before or after 'its happening', and the pleasure of 'it happening'. As such Newman's paintings are indebted to a European history of sublime interventions, both artistic and philosophical, from the 17th century to the present. For Lyotard, this negative aesthetics includes Boileau's, Longinus', Kant's and Burke's<sup>3</sup> accounts of the sublime. Lyotard's contribution to this

<sup>3</sup> According to Lyotard for Boileau, "The sublime cannot be taught...(and)... is not linked to rules that can be determined through poetics; the sublime only requires the reader or listener have conceptual range, taste, and the ability 'to sense what everyone sense first'" (ibid, 201). Longinus' engagement with the sublime, according to Lyotard, not only responds to its irresistible provocation, but Longinus also "tried to locate sources for the sublime in the ethos of rhetoric, in its pathos, in its techniques: figures of speech, diction, enunciation, composition." (ibid, 200). The sublime from Kant's perspective, according to Lyotard, is an indeterminate mixture of pain and pleasure, resulting from an encounter with an absolutely

discourse of aesthetic negativity is to mark sublime experience as an event via the diagnostic question "Is it Happening?". In registering this event

"the art lover does not experience a simple pleasure, or derive an ethical benefit from his contact with art, but expects an intensification of his conceptual and emotional capacity, an ambivalent enjoyment" (ibid, 206).

In the 19th and 20th centuries, according to Lyotard, art "was to be a witness to the fact that there is indeterminacy" (ibid). From this perspective Cezanne's paintings record a practicing of negativity in which little 'colouristic sensations' invite the viewer to "bear witness to the indeterminate" (ibid, 207). For Lyotard, such indeterminacy prevailed in American abstract expressionism, even if aesthetic objects, and paintings in particular, as the privileged vehicles for aesthetic negativity, were put under pressure by minimalism and art povera. Against this degradation, for Lyotard the contemporary avante-garde still registers the indeterminate for it

"inscribes the occurrence of a sensory now as what cannot be presented and what remains to be presented in the decline of great representational painting. ... the avante-garde is not concerned with what happens to the subject, but with: 'Does it happen?', with privation. This is the sense in which it still belongs to the aesthetics of the sublime" (ibid, 208).

For Lyotard, this discourse of the sublime, which includes the contemporary avante-garde, is affected by other discourses, and in particular, by the discursive collusion between capitalism and the avante-garde<sup>4</sup>. This collusion between art and capitalism not only registers a reality "increasingly ungraspable, subject to doubt, unsteady" (ibid, 209), but the "experience of the human subject ...(is)... dissolved into the calculation of profitability" (ibid). In

large object where "the imagination, fails to provide a representation corresponding to this Idea" (ibid, 203). It is in Burke's account of the sublime that Lyotard finds a model for his own idea of the sublime as a condition of privation. In Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, "the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening" (ibid, 204). For Burke a very big object astonishes and threatens us, and art in distancing this menace provides relief. Sublime art from this perspective, is no longer confined to classical rules, but is the vehicle for intense experience.

<sup>4</sup>Peter de Bolla's book *The Discourse of the Sublime: History, Aesthetics and the Subject* presents the sublime as a discursive effect of the discourses on debt and the capitalist economies of exchange that emerged in Europe in the mid 16th century.

this postmodern era sublimity becomes a register of an instantaneous transfer of information, "where all is said, we 'know'" (ibid, 210) and where sublimity "is not longer in art, but in speculation about art" (ibid). This dismal result, however, is not inevitable, for Lyotard "the enigma of 'Is it happening?' is not dissolved for all of this, nor is the task of painting" (ibid).

Lyotard's engagement with the sublime emphasises the Kantian distinction that the negativity of aesthetic ideas, as that which remains unrepresentable, or unspeakable, is not available to understanding. But unlike Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime*, which dialectically attempts to synthesise that irreducible relation, Lyotard simply marks that boundary. In so doing he preserves the autonomy and negativity of sublime experience, only knowable through a diagnostic question, 'Is it happening?'. Art is the privileged locus of the imagination's inability to present the unrepresentable. Sublime art, from this perspective, causes the imagination to fail. Lyotard's diagnostic of the sublime thus resembles Kant's idea of non-conceptual aesthetic ideas. Unlike Kant, Lyotard's register of a sublime event does not engage a dialectical relation between this experience and understanding it, nor to the possibilities of its production, or to its critical effects. Lyotard does however conceive of the sublime as part of a discourse of aesthetic negativity in European art and philosophy from the 17th century to the present, and how this discourse is impacted upon by a capitalist economy.

In conclusion, both Nietzsche's and Adorno's theories of the sublime take issue with Kant's version of it. Where the Kantian sublime subjectifies a rational self, Nietzsche's and Adorno's accounts of the sublime disrupt the dialectical binary which sustains a hierarchy between the positivities of reason and its suppressed 'other', sublime negativity. For Nietzsche, the sublime is a de-subjectifying opportunity to encounter sublime excess. For Adorno, it is a de-subjectifying opportunity to practice negativity. Such aesthetic practices of negativity are critiques of instrumental reason. Both Nietzsche's and Adorno's accounts of the sublime impact on Derrida's deconstructive sublime, discussed in the following chapter. For Derrida's deconstructive sublime is a de-subjectifying textual opportunity to practice (non-aesthetic) negativity.

Lyotard's theory of the sublime registers something of Kant's idea of the autonomy of 'aesthetic ideas'. For Lyotard a sublime event, diagnosed via the question 'Is it happening?' is an aesthetic experience which suspends time and disrupts understanding by being a witness to the indeterminate. Like Adorno's account of negative dialectics, sublime art from a Lyotardian perspective, resists the reductive power of understanding and theory, for it only registers as aesthetic experience.

These philosophical insights provide a vocabulary for understanding that signifying process called sublime irresolution in paintings and visual art practices, which delivers sublime experience as the practicing of negativity. Adorno's and Lyotard's insights are particularly useful for understanding such aesthetic specific practices of negativity. For like poetic ambiguity, sublime irresolution is to be conceived of as a processual enactment of negativity, structured by a painting or artwork, which engages the intellectual, conceptual, emotional, discursive or phenomenal capacities of the viewer, only to disaggregate meaning by presenting the viewer with an excess of information, or with oppositions that cannot be resolved.

With regard to poetic ambiguity, this disaggregation of meaning registers as an aesthetic event, one whose de-subjectifying effects invites practices of negativity and the acknowledgement of heterogeneity, multiplicity and differences. Sublime irresolution, however, forecloses such openness to differences insofar as it rubs contradictions up against one another, for example the differences between subject and object, understanding and experience, self and otherness. Sublime irresolution is a simultaneous disruption/instantiation of binary oppositions where the antagonisms between oppositions render this a threatening or thrilling event available to that diagnostic question 'Is it happening?'.

Marin's analysis of such unrepresentable sublime experience in Poussin's painting *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* registers such a provocative practicing of negativity. Marin's analysis eschews a philosophical vocabulary of negative aesthetics and any attempt to represent the unrepresentable. By contrast this syncretic study of negative aesthetics in philosophy and painting, not only attends to the fact that paintings and artworks invite the practicing of

negativity, but also how they do so. The ensuing discussion investigates how the signifying process called sublime irresolution disaggregates meaning in Turner's and Rothko's paintings. It does so by attending to the differing modalities of sublime irresolution registered by these paintings.

### 3.4. Sublime negativity in painting.

As already demonstrated, both Poussin's *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* and Turner's *Seascape with Storm coming on* structure an experience of sublime irresolution. Yet, when we compare these two aesthetic practices of negativity, we are able to understand that there are differences in the manner in which they do so. Poussin's painting de-subjectifies the viewer through a compression of meaning which overwhelms comprehension, whereas Turner's does so by presenting the viewer with a mobile and oscillational operation which shifts between two irresolvable registers as an aesthetic experience in which oppositions are mutually enfolded. These differing modalities are available to analysis and comparison. Modalities of sublime irresolution are to be distinguished from typologies of the sublime. Both are categories for understanding the sublime. Yet they differ insofar as modalities of sublime irresolution are associated with a processual practicing of negativity, whereas typologies of the sublime are static and representational categories for understanding the sublime.

In distinguishing between the modalities of sublime irresolution and typologies of the sublime, we might consider both the generation and disaggregation of meaning in Turner's *The Fall of the Avalanche at the Grisons*, 1810 (*Figure 5*). This painting codes sublimity via the representation of an immense and catastrophic natural disaster in which a house is crushed by an enormous and icy rock, and the atmosphere is saturated with flying debris. Here sublime meaning is coded via a typology of the terrific sublime<sup>5</sup>, whereby the viewer is confronted by, but positioned away from, the excesses and violence of nature. This terrific sublime, installs the viewer into a position of sublime mastery, similar to that of Kant's reasoning subject, whereby the dangerous excesses

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<sup>5</sup>Andrew Wilton's book *Turner and the Sublime* is a catalogue of some typologies of the sublime; for example, the Classic Sublime, the Landscape Sublime, and the Architectural Sublime. Like the 'terrific sublime' these meaning generating categories are not an effect of unresolvable meaning, but of the viewer imposing identifiable categories into the processes of reading.



*Figure 5: J.M.W. Turner. The Fall of an Avalanche at Grisons. 1810*

and terrors of nature are safely kept at a distance. A terrific sublime from this perspective endorses an all seeing eye in which the viewer is positioned above and outside this natural disaster. Here an 'I' persists against of the sublime power of an overwhelming catastrophe. In terms of this analysis, this 'terrific sublime' is both a representational category and a subjectifying opportunity which keeps various discursive positions in place. For example, the perpetuation of those subject/object, mind/matter, culture/nature binaries that Battersby critically associates with the Kantian sublime.

However such typologies of the sublime, where meaning does not fail, and where the viewer is comfortably able to recognise the rhetorics of a sublime category, are different to the modalities of sublime irresolution. This signifying process installs the viewer into the indeterminacies and negativities of sublime experience by disaggregating meaning. In this regard, Turner's *The Fall of an Avalanche at Grisons* mobilises an abstract register whereby shimmering white paint evokes snow, or the thick clotted streaks of grey paint resemble a cloud. These contradictions between reading the painting as both an abstraction and a representation, puts pressure on both these registers. Such disaggregation of meaning registers as an unspeakable and sublime event. Yet such an unspeakable experience might also be analysed, so that we might understand the differences between various modalities of sublime irresolution, and the differences between such modalities and typologies of the sublime.

My analysis of *The Fall of an Avalanche at Grisons* presumes that the viewer is positioned between a typology of the 'terrific sublime' and an abstract, aesthetic specific experience which transgresses<sup>6</sup> binarist assumptions. From this

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<sup>6</sup>John Parker addresses Turner's paintings in terms of a typology he calls 'the transgressive picturesque'. but the account he gives could apply equally well to Turner's engagement with the sublime. Parker claims that Turner's use of light was indebted to Claude, but Turner's paintings transgressed binarist pictorial conventions which established clear differences between the viewing subject and the depicted landscape though a "highly feminised pictorial space ... which draws the viewer in, increases their sense of proximity and fails to give the Claudian distance between the viewer and the viewed" (Parker 1998, 375). This incorporation challenged traditional conceptions of how landscape painting functioned in British society and brought into the genres of landscape painting what

"Reynolds and Shaftsbury felt should be excluded: the feminine, unheroic and unidealized, the evidence of labour, the vanity of viewpoints, the sense of uncertainty, social change and last but not least, the evidence of pictorial composition as a historical, social and material practice. Turner's transgression consists in his inclusion of the 'impolite'. By doing so he disassociated the ideal that pictures should offer universal truths from the idea that such truths should be timeless, static, certainties. Instead he offered picturesque traps for the elite, encouraged them to test their education by working through his associations, only to have them realize that uncertainty and change were inevitable" (Parker 1998, 376).



perspective irresolvable sublime meaning in *The Fall of an Avalanche at Grisons* is generated by the hiatus between abstraction, in which colour, tone and mark affectively register meaning as paint, and representation, as the coding of a terrifically sublime event. It is this oscillation between oppositions, between representation and abstraction, knowing and seeing, or between focus and flux, that registers as an experience of sublime irresolution. We might, as a second order practice, compare and analyse how that experience is delivered by these paintings. In this regard, Turner's engagement with the operations of sublime irresolution, consistently registers a generative oscillation between oppositions, a modality of that signifying process called sublime irresolution, which differs from Poussin's dramatic compressions and disaggregations of meaning.

Sublime meaning and its disaggregating failure in Mark Rothko's paintings, is mobilized by the interplays of irresolvable contradictions within abstraction. Anna Chave writes of Rothko's painting that he

"had come to understand the affective power of a state of irresolution or undecidability, but he could manipulate it now in more abstract, and so more direct, way. He created suspense by suspension, in other words - by suspending plain rectangles in a non-specific space. ... In creating shapes that were almost but not quite focused, almost but not quite solid, he found a way to describe the brink between being and not-being, presence and absence. This, in essence was his subject" (Chave 1989, 184).

To rephrase this quote in the language of this study, Rothko's paintings invite the practicing negativity, by presenting the viewer with irresolvable and sublime contradictions which demand both focus and non-specificity, suspension and solidity. Understanding and analysing this modality of the signifying process called sublime irresolution, is extrinsic to the instantaneous experience of a sublime event, as Lyotard's analysis of Newman's painting records. This modality does however inform an understanding of how we engage sublime negativity paintings, and how meaning fails in Rothko's abstract paintings, and how Rothko's paintings deploy sublime irresolution in ways that are different to Turner's or Poussin's engagements with sublime irresolution.

For example, if we consider Rothko's *Red on Maroon* 1959 (Figure 6), which is part of the Seagram Building series at the Tate Modern, the rectangularity and verticality of the whole painting is reiterated by the same orientation of the deep red 'figure' with bleeding edges on the 'ground' of the pale red maroon. Difference is marked here in terms of tonality, colour and degrees of sharpness, or degrees of focus. Yet these differences are also stalked by levels of sameness of shape and of direction. These differences and samenesses are part of an oscillation in which the interplays of horizontality/verticality, figure/ground, colour/tone, containment/dissolution, immersion/expulsion are part of a contradictory visual syntax that is generally identified as Rothko's oeuvre. However, each painting articulates its own particularity from this general vocabulary. In *Red on Maroon* this particularity is coded via the terrifying juxtaposition of two tonal registers which simultaneously erode the coding of figure/ground. For although the 'figure', the bleeding form, ostensibly sits on top of the 'ground', the tonality of the 'figure' as a deeper red, in fact makes it recede.

This confusion is orchestrated by the conflation of categories understanding, so that the figureness of the 'figure' becomes contaminated by the groundness of the 'ground'. This sublime disorientation and irresolution produces a sense of affective panic, even as the viewer's gaze is drawn into pleasures and disorientations which are generated by the inability to separate the ground/figure couplet. The blurred border between figure/ground reduces difference because it indeterminately and irresolvably figures both. We might mark this experience with the diagnostic question 'Is it happening?', but I have attempted to demonstrate that such a sublime event is also the result of an intentional mobilisation of oppositions in which meaning is disaggregated and where the positivities of understanding fail.

*Red on Maroon* does not evoke a sense of positive becoming, like Turner's *Seascape with Storm Coming On*. Instead Rothko's painting produces a sense of panic, disorientation, and suspense. For those multiple operations sketched above, like Poussin's *Pyramus and Thisbe*, overwhelm the viewer with semic excess, but do not effect any catharsis, or endpoint to the compression of contradictions. Rather these contradictions perpetually re-circulate as repetitions of colour/tone; figure/ground; blurred/border. Bersani and DuToit



*Figure 6: Mark Rothko. Red on Maroon. 1959*

claim that “stasis thus awaits Rothko as the terminal point in his erosion of differences. It is as if stultifying sameness - as immobilizing as defensive differences - were the secret goal of all these mobile features” (Bersani and DuToit 1993, 120). Chave, Bersani and DuToit attend to the modalities of sublime irresolution in Rothko’s paintings as a register of either suspension or stasis.

In mobilising this interpretive register, I accept that we bring a multitude of interpretive registers to our encounters with paintings and visual art practices. If I have explored sublime experience as a negative effect of the failure of meaning this does not exclude the possibility that these paintings also register the known and the knowable, whereby Rothko’s paintings code a form of anguish consonant with modern alienation. Here Rothko’s paintings articulate a type of Dionysian suffering. Such an interpretation is consonant with Rothko’s engagement with Nietzsche’s book *The Birth of Tragedy*. This is supplementary knowledge that we bring to the painting which is extraneous to an experience of aesthetic negativity. It is a supplement we might use to stabilise the negative and de-subjectifying effects of a sublime experience.

It is against such knowable supplementarity that this thesis promotes the idea that negativity can only be practiced through an encounter with individual paintings. The interpretive model mobilised in this study, indebted to Kant’s, Nietzsche’s, Adorno’s and Lyotard’s theories of the sublime, is an attempt to come to terms with the relation between the negativities of aesthetic experience and the positivities of interpretive understanding. This thesis takes seriously the idea that aesthetic practices of negativity are in some sense unspeakable and resist interpretation, even as it delivers an understanding of such practices of negativity, and how they make meaning fail and how we might differentiate between them.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

This chapter has identified a signifying process called sublime irresolution, which enables us to negotiate the paradoxical threshold between understanding the sublime, and experiencing it as an unrepresentable or unspeakable event. This chapter has drawn on the art historical insights of Marin and the philosophical

insights of Kant, Nietzsche, Adorno and Lyotard, all of whom offer differing accounts of how the sublime operates as a subjectifying, or de-subjectifying aesthetic category that invites the practicing of negativity. Marin proposes that we understand the sublime as an effect of the organisation of meaning, via a semic matrix that he identifies as a "generative structure for a theory of the passions" enacted through an encounter with Poussin's painting *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*. For Marin "the sublime is the impossibility of a theory of the sublime, the display or "monstration" of its impossibility" (Marin 1999, 139).

This chapter has argued for something similar. It has demonstrated how selected sublime paintings mobilise a de-subjectifying signifying process which disaggregates meaning. Such an event, as an aesthetic specific practicing of negativity, is to some extent unspeakable or unrepresentable. This chapter has however, argued that aesthetic negativity can be understood, but only insofar as we can distinguish it from other practices of negativity, analyse how it invites the practicing of negativity and understand it as a de-subjectifying event. The interpretive method mobilised in this study thus marks the irreducible inter-relation between the unspeakableness of sublime aesthetic experience, and an understanding of how paintings deliver such experience.

This method is variously indebted to the philosophical insights of Kant, Nietzsche, Adorno and Lyotard, but differs from such philosophies, insofar as it is oriented toward understanding how paintings deliver sublime and poetic experience. In this regard this chapter has investigated how Poussin's *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, Turner's *Seascape with Storm Coming On* and *The Fall of an Avalanche at Grisons* and Rothko's *Red on Maroon*, register an unspeakable and sublime event, even as we are also able to understand via differing modalities of sublime irresolution, something of how these paintings do so, and how these modalities of sublime irresolution differ.

Aesthetic negativity is not immutable, or discursively discrete. It is found in paintings and visual art practices, and theorised in philosophy, from the 17th century to the present. This thesis has identified two differing modalities of an aesthetics of negativity in painting, called poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution. The first two chapters of this thesis have presented these two modalities as having relatively distinct identities. Poetic ambiguity opens the

viewer to differences, whereas sublime irresolution mobilises an interplay of oppositions that provoke or thrill the viewer. The next two chapters investigate how the boundaries between aesthetic experience and understanding are troubled by philosophical deconstruction whose methods disrupt the boundary between experience and understanding and degrade the autonomy of aesthetic negativity.

## Chapter Three

### Deconstruction and Negative Aesthetics.

#### 4.1. Introduction.

This chapter investigates the tensions and correspondences between deconstructive practices of negativity in philosophical texts and aesthetic practices of negativity in contemporary paintings and visual art practices. It does so by deploying the dialectical interpretive method already developed in this study, which sustains the irreducible inter-relation between aesthetic practices of negativity and understanding the implications of that negativity. By contrast deconstructive methods collapse such distinctions in the interests of an inbetweenness which deconstructs fixed oppositions and blurs boundaries, including the boundary between the negativities of aesthetic experience and the positivities of understanding.

The previous two chapters investigated a discourse of negative aesthetics through a consideration of the philosophies of Kristeva, Merleau-Ponty, Kant, Nietzsche, Adorno, and Lyotard, and of Koerner's and Marin's art historical interpretations, and my own accounts aesthetic negativity in selected paintings by C.D. Friedrich, Nicholas Poussin, J.M.W. Turner and Mark Rothko. The ensuing discussion of selected texts by Derrida (*Spurs: Nietzsche's styles* and *The Colossal*), will investigate how deconstruction both resembles and challenges, such a dialectical discourse of aesthetic negativity.

This chapter will investigate how aesthetic negativity, as an effect of the signifying practices called poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution, is a feature of Glenn Brown's paintings and Jeremy Wafer's visual art practice. This chapter will argue that these contemporary paintings and visual art practices sustain their aesthetic specificity, even as they record the impact of philosophical deconstruction within their differing aesthetic modalities. The dialectical interpretive method employed here preserves the distinction between an experience of aesthetic negativity and understanding the postmodern and post colonial identities of these painting and visual art practices.

## **4.2. Dialectical and deconstructive methods.**

This chapter registers the antagonistic differences between deconstructive methods, which degrade the dialectical relation between oppositions, and the interpretive method used in this study which sustains the dialectical relation between aesthetic experience and understanding, and by extension, preserves the autonomy of aesthetic negativity. The dialectical interpretive method developed in this thesis enables us to identify how sublime and poetic aesthetic practices of negativity de-subjectify the viewer. This method can only 'point to' that unspeakable enactment structured by the dialectical relation between aesthetic objects and viewers, in an effort to illuminate the irreducible inter-relation between aesthetic experience and understanding.

From this dialectical perspective we can only experience aesthetic negativity, although we can also understand how it is mobilised by paintings and recognise that poetic and sublime practices of negativity de-subjectify us, and indeed that they do so in different ways. Poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution can be understood as two differing modalities of an aesthetics of negativity. Furthermore, I suggest that deconstruction and an aesthetics of negativity might be understood as two genres of a discourse of negativity because they both disrupt the positivities of understanding and of meaning. We can understand how both deconstructive and aesthetic specific practices of negativity de-subjectify the viewer or reader and as such register an affinity with one another, even as we might also understand that these practices of negativity are in competition with one another.

Furthermore, in distinguishing between, and preserving the boundary between the unspeakable negativities of aesthetic experience and the positivities of understanding, the dialectical method deployed in this study enables us to understand that the postmodern and post colonial critiques that paintings and visual art practices deliver are of a different order to sublime or poetic aesthetic negativity, whose failures of meaning de-subjectify the viewer. These postmodern and post colonial critiques are only available to a second order practice of understanding, which we dialectically mobilise as a positive supplement to the negativities of aesthetic experience.



Philosophical deconstruction eschews the clear-cut outcomes sketched above. Deconstruction refuses the establishment of boundaries that would fix differences and preserve the autonomy of negative aesthetics. Deconstruction is a practice of the inbetween that disrupts a constitutive inter-relation between aesthetic experience and understanding, or between negativity and positivity. Derrida's project of critiquing a metaphysics of presence and the integrated subject is conducted through a deconstructive style of philosophical argument that refuses the establishment of certainty and unambiguous understanding. Seen from this perspective deconstructive philosophy is a textual practice of negativity which preserves indeterminacy.

For example, in Derrida's book titled *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, the reader is presented with a deconstructive philosophical style of writing that disrupts the rational assumptions and methods of traditional philosophy. Derrida's text conflates the negativities of the feminine with those of a dissimulating, quasi-poetic and deconstructive style of writing. It also disrupts the traditional binary, in which the positivities of philosophical understanding exist in dialectical and hierarchical relation to the negativities of style. This inaugurates a deconstructive process which installs the reader into a textual and non-aesthetic practicing of negativity. Such a textual and philosophical event, like Adorno's negative dialectics, operates as a critique of the "integrated subject" (Holland 1997, 4). Using Christoph Menke's arguments found in his book titled *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida* 1999 translated by Neil Solomon, I suggest that Derrida's deconstructive methods found in *Nietzsche's Styles*, degrades aesthetic negativity in favour of a more general textual and non-aesthetic practice of negativity.

Similarly, Derrida's essay *The Colossal* engages the sublime as a process of infinite dissemination, open to differences to come, even it deconstructs the binarist and dialectical assumptions of the Kantian sublime. Derrida's text is both a philosophical supplement to the sublime, which challenges Kantian dialectics, and a textual practice which invites a deconstructive practice of sublime negativity. It is thus both a 'frame', or a supplement to the sublime, and 'its work'. Derrida's sublime text, where understanding is perpetually at risk from a style of writing, installs the reader into a sublime and deconstructive

practicing of negativity. This deconstructive doubling of a subversive style and a philosophical argument constitutes both an understanding of the discursive implications of the displacement of the Kantian sublime with a deconstructive sublime, and a defeat of such understanding.

This chapter will investigate how the deconstructive methods employed by Derrida's two texts degrade the traditional and dialectical relation between aesthetic experience and understanding. Such degradation is part of a deconstructive project which blurs the distinction between aesthetic practices of negativity and textual practices of negativity, but privileges the latter. This textual displacement of the autonomy of aesthetic negativity is part of the task of deconstructing the settled assumptions of a Western philosophical tradition and its all-pervasive metaphysics of presence<sup>1</sup>.

By contrast, the differentiating dialectical interpretive method developed in this study preserves the particularity of aesthetic specific practices of negativity, and enables us to make distinctions between experience and understanding. It enables us to understand, to some extent, what negativity is, and how it might be mobilised in paintings. However, this is a method which leaves the delivery of practices of negativity to that unique relation between paintings/visual art practices and viewers. Poetically ambiguous and sublimely irresolvable paintings and visual art practices, from this perspective engage 'proto-deconstructive' practices of negativity, as aesthetic experience.

### **4.3. Deconstructive quasi-poetic/feminine style.**

The first chapter of this thesis investigated how the signifying process called poetic ambiguity in C.D. Friedrich's painting titled *Garden Terrace*, de-subjectifies the viewer by disrupting binary oppositions. Deconstructive texts likewise invite de-subjectifying<sup>2</sup> practices of negativity, and do so by

<sup>1</sup>A metaphysics of presence, emanating from Greek philosophy, "is fixed in the concept of totality which dominates Western philosophy" (Derrida 1978, 102). In his essay titled *Violence and Metaphysics* in his book *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, Derrida exempts Levinas from that violence by claiming that Levinasian metaphysics "calls upon the ethical relationship - a nonviolent relationship to the infinite as infinitely other, to the Other - as the only one capable of opening the space of transcendence and of liberating metaphysics" (ibid).

<sup>2</sup>To 'de-subjectify' is the inverse of to 'subjectify'. This inversion carries with it the histories and discursive values associated with a discourse of subjectification in which the boundaries and certainties of 'the self' are maintained.

disrupting binary oppositions and by conflating different negativities. In his book *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* 1979, translated by Barbara Harlow, Derrida invites the practicing of negativity<sup>3</sup> by redeploying Nietzsche's ideas on the questions of truth and 'woman'. As Keith Ansell-Pearson puts it:

"What Derrida is doing in *Spurs* is enlisting Nietzsche's attempt to write with style(s) (conceived of as a feminine operation) in the cause of deconstruction and its critique of the metaphysics of presence"  
(Patton 1993, 35).

Derrida makes the case that Nietzsche's style, as a spur or a weapon and a device for distancing and protecting, invokes not the 'figure of woman' but '*Nietzsche's woman*'. Here

"coiled in the labyrinth of the ear ... a tapestry or curtain ... rises ... at the sound of a powerful contralto voice ... . This voice, like the best of man ... to be found in woman, appears to transcend the difference between the sexes" (Derrida 1979, 43).

Here the "question of style becomes a question of strategy in which the possibility of a 'radically deferred, indeterminate style of writing' is explored in order to avoid all essentialisms and stable categories" (Patton 1993, 35). This indeterminate style of writing, which produces a processual and disruptive form of readership, invites the practicing of negativity by conflating the negativities of the feminine with a quasi-poetics.

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<sup>3</sup>To make the claim that Derrida's deconstructive texts invite the practicing of negativity is to risk a deconstructive criticism that negativity exists in a dialectical relation to positivity; a relation, philosophical deconstruction would critique. Derrida's essay *From Restricted to General Economy in Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, compares Hegel's concept of negativity to Bataille's laughter. Such laughter "exceeds dialectics and the dialectician... and what Hegel calls abstract negativity....Bataille pulls out of dialectics. He withdraws it from the horizon of meaning and knowledge" (Derrida 1978, 323). Laughter, poetry and deconstruction are not bound by a dialectics where negativities are servile to sovereign positivities. Instead, from Derrida's perspective deconstruction, laughter and poetry are opportunities to open up the space between positivity and negativity. In mobilising the term a 'deconstructive practicing of negativity'. I am aware that there is a certain transgression being played out here, for deconstruction is never purely a practice of negativity or of positivity, but a practice which doubles these distinctions. That being so, I maintain that deconstruction does invite the practicing of negativity, and that deconstructive practices of negativity are similar to aesthetic practices of negativity, insofar as both are de-subjectifying opportunities. Furthermore aesthetic negativity may be conceived of as a proto-deconstructive practice, which deconstruction displaces in an attempt to occupy the privileged discursive position that aesthetic negativity, as the sovereign purveyor of negativity, has in modern culture. The ensuing discussion will make the case that deconstructive and aesthetic practices of negativity are two competing genres of a discourse of negativity that has several articulations.

Style/woman-as-untruth ('*Nietzsche's woman*') does not pertain to real women, but to a discursive position open to both women and men, yet it bears the imprint of women's supposed 'identity' figured as non-identity.

"Perhaps woman - a non-identity, a non-figure, a simulacrum - is distance's very chasm, the out-distancing of distance, the interval's cadence, distance itself ... at once divergence, distance and the distantiation of distance, the deferment of distance, the de-ferment, mocking, sympathetic, seductive. Yes, life is a woman!" (Derrida 1979, 53).

This dissimulating 'femininity', seductive, distanced and divergent, is a resource for women and men, insofar it makes possible the transgression of static truths and hierarchical foundations. To embrace of the negativities of the feminine is to acknowledge a variety of alterities that are usually repressed in western culture and philosophy. This figure of '*Nietzsche's woman*' is a 'spur' for the practicing of deconstructive negativity which defeats/protects the distancing techniques of reason which sustain dichotomies between, for example the aesthetics of style and philosophical reasoning.

In *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, the conflation of the negativities of the feminine, a political project, with the negativities of a quasi-poetic style, a deconstructive project, is not without its gains and its losses. As several feminist commentators have noted, a deconstructive project, which marks alterity as feminine, elides the regulatory and repressive operations of the trope of 'women as otherness', and how this affects real women in patriarchy<sup>4</sup>. This conflation of the feminine with a quasi-poetic style, services a deconstructive project that hovers between the textual and the political practicing of negativity. This is a

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<sup>4</sup>Gayatri Spivak in her essay titled *Displacement and the Discourse of Woman* claims that "a deconstructive discourse, even as it criticizes phallogentrism ... must displace the figure of the woman twice over ... as a double displacement into the sign of the abyss" (Holland 1997, 48). This view conceives of '*Nietzsche's woman*' as a figure which displaces the realities of women, and this displacement ensures that female identity is associated with dissimulation, seduction and untruth. Within such a brutal economy of exchange, '*Nietzsche's woman*' is not a deconstructive figurative matrix available to both women and men, but the mark of a hierarchy which sustains masculine resentment, as the will to power. Janet Lungstrum, by contrast argues that the "Nietzschean woman is, above all, a new dialectical art of *palingenesis*: a creativity of self-renewal that demands a male-female symbiosis, a bisexual agon without resolve and without synthesis" (Burgard 1994, 137).

deconstructive practice that Irigaray invokes as part of a deconstructive discourse of *écriture féminine*, discussed more fully in Chapter Four. In Irigaray's text, the philosophical degradation of poetic style services a becoming politics of the feminine.

*Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* doubles the negativity of the "dissemblatress, an artist, a dionysiac", with a "radically deferred, indeterminate style of writing" (Patton 1993, 35). Such heterogeneity forecloses the possibility of mastery, that is the mastery or distancing of understanding. We are invited to 'conclude' that '*Nietzsche's woman*' (a style of doing philosophy) is a figure of such dissimulating heterogeneity, that it deconstructs our habits of mastery oriented toward schematic clarity and truth. Instead meaning is deferred in the interests of indeterminacy, dissimulation, non-mastery and a perpetual agonistics. '*Nietzsche's woman*' produces the reader as "a bisexual agon, without resolve and without synthesis" (Burgard 1994, 137). The 'lesson' we learn from this deconstruction of conceptual clarity, truth or mastery, through a performative and processual agonistics of a dissimulating, seducing style which is never reducible to itself nor becomes the antithesis of that which it deconstructs, is that philosophy is 'shot through' negativities that are constantly deferred. *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* is a philosophical and processual opportunity to encounter those repressed negativities.

Such a deconstructive practicing of negativity is the possibility of encountering alterity in a philosophical text. Derrida claims that such an understanding of "deconstruction is not an enclosure into nothingness but an openness to the other" (Kearney 1993, 31). Jonathan Roffe in his essay *Deconstruction as Ethics* in the book *Understanding Derrida* clarifies how such openness to the other situates alterity, otherness, "at the heart of language" (Roffe 2004, 38). Roffe claims that for Derrida, the generalising nature of philosophical ethics and morality is itself a form of violence, where

" 'law, the power of resolution, and the relationship to the other, are once more part of the *archia*, they lose their ethical specificity'... that is metaphysics - is itself a threat to ethics" (ibid). ... "Western philosophy is predicated on a fundamental necessary exclusion of alterity in order to create order, truth, subjectivity, and all of those deep philosophical values"

(Roffe 2004, 41). ... "this hierarchy itself, just like the traditional self-other dyad must be undone: there is no fundamental, transcendent asymmetry between self and other in either direction, but a radical and universal disequilibrium, where all sameness is dissolved into a web of otherness" (ibid).

This critique of a metaphysics of presence does not mean that a new binary is installed, rather "self and other emerge together through what Derrida here calls 'the work and peril of interrogation' - an unsure, difficult and risky process" (ibid, 42). It is this practicing of negativity within deconstructive philosophy, which can never secure an ethics of the self, or of alterity, but which is an address of multiple differences that is the "condition of possibility for any ethical act" (ibid, 43).

Derrida's *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* invites such an ethical moment, whereby a traditional style of philosophical argument is displaced/infected by its 'others': the negativities of a feminine dissimulating, and a quasi-poetic deconstructive style of argument. '*Nietzsche's woman*' thus does not invite the binarist negativities of the 'will to power'<sup>5</sup>, but installs an undecidable practicing of negativity, a textually deconstructive process of reading. The reader is confronted with two moments. Firstly, in which he or she is opened up to the negativities of, and differences between, the feminine and a dissimulating quasi-poetic style. Secondly, even as he or she is also presented with a displacement, or a deconstruction, of traditional philosophical assumptions and methods which preserve the differences between aesthetic experience and philosophical understanding. It is such doubling, between a process which produces distinctions, and a process which displaces differences (that interminable *differance*<sup>6</sup> between difference and deferral), that delivers the reader to

<sup>5</sup>Diana Coole explores Nietzsche's practicing of negativity in which "the will to power, as the mode of becoming, is only a more sophisticated and integral metaphor for the force and form, excess and creative individuation, pulsing opening and closing, that Nietzsche had formerly imagined in a state of contradictory tension. The abundant energies (will) of the cosmos manifest themselves in a continuous process of creating and destroying, forming and deforming (power), but these two aspects are now inseparable. They are not simply synthesized, but are the very phenomenality of phenomena" (Coole 2000, 93).

<sup>6</sup>Alan Bass in his translators' introduction to Derrida's book titled *Writing and Difference* 1987, reminds us that for Derrida, the term *differance* does not "function simply as either *difference* (difference) or as *differance* in the usual sense (deferral), and plays on both meanings at once" (Derrida 1967, xviii). It is against the reduction of terms to a totality, or a structure which seeks to present the whole, and against Structuralism in general, that the neologism for which Derrida is so famous, must itself remain undecidable.

deconstructive undecidability.

*Derrida's Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* is a text which invites the practicing of negativity, for it instantiates an undecidable process of reading which sustains/erodes differences. The reader is unable to conceptually master meaning. This deconstructive failure of meaning, like the negativity of poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution, is a de-subjectifying event. There are thus significant correspondences between aesthetic practices of negativity and deconstructive practices of negativity in terms of their de-subjectifying effects and their disaggregating methods, but not in terms of their discursive commitments. We might recall that *Garden Terrace* both unifies the viewer's experience in terms of a binarist discourse which sustains subject/object distinctions, even as it disaggregates that experience by also presenting the viewer with an anti-binarist, poetic displacement of meaning. Like deconstruction, this is a de-subjectifying process which invites the practicing of negativity<sup>7</sup>. The ensuing discussion records something of the discursive competition between aesthetic negativity in painting and philosophical deconstruction.

I suggest that *Derrida's Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* invites the practicing of negativity by conflating the negativities of the feminine with those of a quasi-poetic style of doing philosophy<sup>8</sup>. In so doing, this philosophical text deconstructs, and degrades, the positivities of a traditional style of philosophy. This is a method which ruptures the traditional dialectical hierarchies in which

<sup>7</sup>Christoph Menke compares Derrida's and Adorno's approach to the practicing of negativity, which both deploy 'processuality'. For Derrida, the text infinitely and interminably constitutes the reader differently at each encounter, via processes which displace meaning. For Adorno, the aesthetic object inaugurates a failure of meaning by setting up a dialectical relation between oppositions. This involves a 'hesitation' between mimesis and meaning. This process of repetitive and mimetic re-enactment constitutes meaning and its failure. Here the aesthetic object inaugurates a practicing of negativity, which de-subjectifies the viewer. Such correspondences between Adorno's aesthetics of negativity and Derrida's philosophical deconstruction, according to Menke, are put under pressure by Derrida's insight that "the aesthetics of negativity betrays its own insights into the logic of negativity by remaining aesthetics" (Menke 1999, 162).

<sup>8</sup>Elizabeth Grosz identifies a structure for how deconstruction produces a sense of indeterminacy. It is this indeterminacy that I suggest invites the practicing of negativity. According to Grosz deconstruction is a "threefold intervention into the metaphysical structures of binary oppositions: 1. the strategic reversal of binary terms, so that the term occupying the negative position of the binary is placed in a positive position, and the positive in the negative position; 2. the movement of displacement, in which the negative term is displaced from its dependent position and located as the very condition of the positive term; and 3. the creation or discovery of a term that is undecidable within a binary logic, insofar as it includes both binary terms, and yet exceeds their scope. It is a term which is simultaneously both and neither of these terms." (Grosz 1989, xv.)

the negativities of dissimulation, otherness, the feminine and the aesthetic, constitute the positivities of (masculine) reason. Here feminine and poetic negativities are reconstituted as textual negativities, no longer bound by a dialectical and hierarchical relation to the positivities of (masculine) reason. They exist *en bloc* as a compendium of heterogeneous negativities whose untruth, feminine dissimulation and quasi-poetic style disrupts the positivities of a traditional and rational style of philosophical argument.

If in *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* Derrida disrupts a traditional and binarist hierarchy whereby the positivities of a philosophical argument trump the negativities of a poetic style, this text *also* disrupts a traditional aesthetics of negativity which sustains the dialectical distinction between aesthetic practices of negativity and the positivities of understanding. For in associating the political negativities of the feminine, with the aesthetic negativities of the poetic, the discursive boundaries of both are disrupted, even as negativity as a general tendency is preserved. For Derrida, it is only when the poetic infects and is infected by other discourses, that aesthetic negativity is displaced from its traditionally privileged position. Indeed it is through a general, and non-aesthetic, practicing of negativity that the boundary which preserves and privileges the autonomy of an aesthetics of negativity, may be deconstructed. Derrida makes this point in his book *Writing and Difference* 1978, translated by Alan Bass:

“ The poetic or the ecstatic is that *in every discourse* which can open itself up to the absolute loss of its sense, to the (non)-base of the sacred, of nonmeaning, of unacknowledged play, to the swoon from which it is reawakened by a throw of the dice. What is poetic in sovereignty is announced in ‘the moment when poetry renounces theme and meaning’ ” (Derrida 1978, 261).

Friedrich's *Garden Terrace*, we might recall, also disables meaning and opens the viewer to differences via the aesthetic operations of poetic ambiguity, whose negativities, as demonstrated in the first chapter, are not reducible to the feminine. If the aesthetic practicing of negativity inaugurated by poetic ambiguity in Friedrich's painting so resembles deconstruction, we might consider that negativities of poetic ambiguity in particular, and the aesthetics of



negativity in general, are a privileged resource for philosophical deconstruction. I suspect that this is indeed the case. That being so, deconstructive methods degrade aesthetic negativity in the interests of promoting more dispersed non-aesthetic and textual practices of negativity.

According to Christoph Menke in his book titled *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, Derrida critiques negative aesthetics because this a discourse in which aesthetic negativity is privileged over other practices of negativity. From this perspective aesthetic negativity is a form of negation dialectically constituting the positivities of traditional philosophical aesthetics. Negative aesthetics thus sustains a dialectical relation between experience and understanding, a relation philosophical deconstruction seeks to disrupt. From this perspective, even if negative aesthetics remains one of the most radical approaches to the discipline of philosophical aesthetics, it remains for Derrida "within the limits that have been inviolably drawn for this philosophical discipline" (Menke 1999, 163).

For Menke, Derrida's condemnation of negative aesthetics because it is tied to a traditional and dialectical aesthetics, should be seen against Adorno's defence of it. We might recall that for Adorno, the negativities of (particular) aesthetic specific practices place reason in crisis, whereas for Derrida, textual negativity (generally) disrupts all established discourses and practices, including the discourse of aesthetics. According to Menke,

"Derrida has expanded this critique far beyond its primary contents into a general critique of all aesthetics as the subjugation ("making servile") of the potentialities of negativity" (Menke 1999, 163)...."The marginalization of aesthetic experience, especially of one whose negativity has already been recognized, is for Derrida nothing less than the complicity of tropes aesthetics with "metaphysics", that is, in Derrida's usage, with that approach to our discourses that reconstructs (reenacts) their useful functioning" (ibid, 164).

Bearing these insights in mind, we are better placed to understand the disruptive features of Derrida's text *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*. Firstly it disrupts a rational style of argument associated with the Western philosophical tradition,

by infecting it with a Nietzschean style of argument. Secondly, this disruptive philosophical style of arguing is characterised as a quasi-poetic style, even as this deconstructive method degrades the boundaries between philosophical understanding, aesthetic experience and the feminine. The degradation of these boundaries disrupts the aesthetic autonomy of aesthetic experience. In instantiating this disruptive logic, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* conflates the negativities of the feminine with those of the deconstructive, dissimulating quasi-poetic style.

#### **4.4. Deconstruction and the sublime**

The previous chapter investigated Kant's, Nietzsche's, Adorno's and Lyotard's philosophical accounts of the sublime. These philosophies of aesthetic negativity variously present the sublime as a subjectifying or de-subjectifying effect of the dialectical relation between unspeakable aesthetic experience and an understanding of that experience. This aesthetics of negativity also informs Derrida's discussion of the sublime in *The Colossal*, in the chapter titled *Parergon*, in *The Truth in Painting* 1987, translated by Geoff McLeod and Ian Bennington. Here Derrida critiques the binarist and dialectical assumptions of the Kantian sublime by recourse to a deconstructive method. This method mobilises a sublime practicing of negativity that might be called a deconstructive sublime. According to Bernstein "Deconstruction, the working of the sublime, is sublime" (Bernstein 1992, 171).

Derrida's deconstructive sublime is a textual operation that disrupts a traditional metaphysics of presence, which itself contains and preserves binarist hierarchies that privilege reason and the integrated subject. As discussed earlier, this metaphysics of presence is defended by Kant's version of the sublime. Derrida's text deconstructs this Kantian version of the sublime and installs the reader into a deconstructive practicing of negativity. Here the negativity of the sublime is the 'work' of deconstruction, a double event, where the deconstructive text is both 'frame' and 'work'. Here, the sublime is not an effect of aesthetic negativity, but a textual and processual enactment, or a deconstructive practicing of negativity. The sublime from this perspective is unknowable, undecidable excess, which only appears through a textual process where meaning and understanding fails/emerges. For Derrida this

deconstructive process is called the *passe-partout*, both a frame - a supplementary understanding, and the work - a deconstructive practicing of negativity. This *passe-partout* by-passes traditional dialectical distinctions between the disruption and construction of meaning, and is undecidably both. The *passe-partout* also disrupts the boundary which preserves the autonomy of aesthetic negativity, inasmuch as it figures a non-aesthetic or textual practice of negativity. From this perspective the 'truth in painting' exists between

"the outside and the inside, between the external and internal edge-line, the framer and the framed, the figure and the ground, form and content, signifier and signified, and so on for any two-faced opposition". ... "The *passe-partout* which here creates an event must not pass for a master key. You will not be able to pass it from hand to hand like a convenient instrument, a short treatise, a viaticum or even an organon or pocket canon, in short a transcendental pass, a password to open all doors, decipher all texts and keep their chains under surveillance" (Derrida 1987, 12).

In contrast to this view, for Adorno, the truth content of art is an aesthetic specific practicing of negativity, organised by the dialectical relation between the aesthetic object and the viewer, where meaning and understanding also fail/cohere. For Adorno it is the property of art to mobilise that dialectical relation, and sublime art is one of negativity's privileged moments through which the autonomy of aesthetic negativity is sustained. The correspondences between Derrida's and Adorno's texts, relate to their common commitment to the practicing of negativity, inaugurated by textual or aesthetic processes which causes meaning to fail/emerge. It is the status of that process that is the contentious point here. For Adorno, such processes are aesthetic and autonomous and operate as an 'immanent critique of reason', whereas for Derrida aesthetic negativity is caught up in a philosophical aesthetics of negativity which services a master-narrative of a metaphysics of presence. Against this possibility, Derrida's deconstructive sublime, as the articulation of the uncontainable figure of the *passe-partout*, de-subjectifies the reader by displacing a binarist format, associated with a Kantian dialectics of the sublime and a dialectics of aesthetic negativity in which aesthetic autonomy is secured,

with an infinite process of dissemination, open to the differences and multiplicities of meanings to come.

Derrida's practicing of negativity in *The Colossal* engages a type of language that is antithetical to the differentiating impulses of the interpretive method deployed in this thesis, which does not mobilize negativity but makes distinctions in the service of understanding how negativity is mobilised in art and deconstructive philosophy. As such this thesis will to some extent violate deconstructive principles and methods, and in so doing distort the practicing of negativity that Derrida's text makes possible. This disclaimer is necessary, for what follows is a second order activity, and an attempt to understand the implications of Derrida's text, so that we might assess how the aesthetic negativities of sublime irresolution in painting and visual art practices are at risk from, and in competition with, a deconstructive and textual sublime.

Derrida begins this discussion of the sublime with a double: the colossal column, in which the differences between the words column and colossal are synthesised via the notion of 'cize', a doubled word which means both measure and cut, which serves as an entry into Kant's theme of the colossal, found in *The Analytic of the Sublime*. Here the column is the frame (the parergon) to the colossal 'work' of the sublime, which remains unrepresentable.

In the Kantian schema this colossal sublime, which pertains to the reasoning mind, is a word which approximates the unrepresentable, which however, is represented by this word, the colossal. As such, Derrida draws our attention to the idea that the colossal (sublime) can only be 'almost representable' or 'almost too large'. For Derrida this 'almost too' "did not slip from the Kant's pen" (Derrida 1987, 125), but is a qualification mounted by Derrida which emphasises that the sublime is approached through the representations of language, and therefore strictly cannot avoid being understood. Nor is it only the property of the reasoning mind; it can only be 'almost unrepresentable' by reason of its (colossal) size (cize) as an effect of a textual discourse. Derrida continues this assault by associating this 'almost-too-large' colossal size of the sublime with "the phallus, which doubles as a corpse; but never be in a hurry when its a matter of erection, let things happen" (ibid, 127). Such ironic double

play displaces/endorse the reasoning Kantian sublime subject position, by revealing its discursively embodied and detumescent/erectile masculinity<sup>9</sup>.

The style of this philosophical text is saturated poetic strategies, with doublings, allusions, metaphors and disruptive connotations. For this text both produces understanding, but undercuts it at the same time, and the reader is left floundering, at risk, catapulted into multiple and unstable meanings. This is a style of philosophical writing in which the reader is unable to impose a rational order, or sustain the distinctions between understanding and practicing a deconstructive and philosophical negativity.

However this text also to some extent enables us to understand that it is a philosophical critique of the dialectical and binarist 'violence' of the Kantian sublime. For Derrida, in Kant's version of the sublime "pleasure only 'gushes indirectly.' It comes after inhibition, arrest, suspension ... followed by a brusque outpouring ... the accumulation presses to the limit" (ibid, 128). The violence of this rupture joins pleasurable attraction and repulsion, so that the poles of positive and negative irresolvably reverberate. For Kant, such sublime irresolution becomes 'a negative pleasure' (ibid, 129), a dialectical pleasure operating between sublime experience and understanding. Derrida's critique being that such a dialectics preserves a binarist hierarchical relation between reason and its 'others'.

It is this violence that Derrida deconstructs, so that the negativity of otherness, and the disruptiveness of textual practices of negativity are preserved, even as they are paradoxically rendered 'positive'. For the practicing of negativity instantiates an ethical openness to difference, a positive outcome. However, in contrast to Kant's binarist and dialectical account of the sublime which sustains a binarist hierarchy between the negativities of otherness and the positivities of reason, in Derrida's account of the sublime, binaries are strategically reversed, so that the positivities of rational understanding are not secured against the negative pleasures of sublime experience, but are displaced by a deconstructive

<sup>9</sup>Dorothea Olkowski claims that where Derrida genders the sublime as an embodied and masculine event, he sustains the traditional phallogocentric binary whereby the sublime constitutes masculine identities. Women in this schema remain the constitutive and excluded outside to a masculine economy, where the sublime is a category premised on the "cize of man that goes back through Kant to Plato and Oedipus and beyond" (Holland 1997, 19).

practicing of negativity. Such deconstructions are effected through that undecidable figure called the *passe-partout*, which operates between the positivities of philosophical understanding, and the negativities of an argumentative style, that opens the reader to infinite differences 'to come'.

Here "the cise of the colossus is neither culture nor nature, both culture and nature. It is perhaps, between the presentable and the unrepresentable, the passage from one to the other as much as the irreducibility of the one to the other. Cise, edging, cut edges, that which passes and happens, without passing, from one to the other" (ibid, 143).

This disseminating cise, this inbetweenness, or the "passing-from-one-to-the-other" (ibid, 144) is a displacement of a dialectical and binarist subject position figured by Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime*.

The closing passages of *The Colossal* consider how the Kantian sublime is structured not only by the (colossal) inadequacy of reason, but this possibility also figures a "colossal *Darstellen*, of the erection *there in front (la-devant)* ... which "rises up and rises up again in its immense cise" (ibid) as a "Colossal *Fort: da.*" (ibid, 145). It is this colossal binary that Derrida breaks up via a style of writing, which is structured by repetitions and double meanings (traits) which enact a deconstructive process that undercuts clear rational argument. Here the 'argument' is made via the deferrals and indeterminacy of a quasi-poetic language saturated by metaphor, allusion and ambiguity. We might approach a fuller mis/understanding of this deconstructive process, by way of a consideration of Derrida's conclusion to this essay. Here he quotes Kant's text, in which the mathematical sublime is figured as

"A tree judged by the height of man gives, at all events, a standard for a mountain; and, supposing this is, say, a mile high, it can serve as unit for the number expressing the earth's diameter, so as to make it intuitable; similarly the earth's diameter, for the known planetary system; this again for the milky way; and the immeasurable host of such systems, which go by the name of nebulae, and most likely in turn form such a system, holds out no prospect of a limit (Meredith, 105)" (Derrida 1987, 146-7).

This substitutional, linear and dialectical logic quoted above is pre-empted in the foregoing quote, by a different deconstructive logic, in which Derrida uses a quasi-poetic, or deconstructive style, which mimics this infinitely proliferating logic, but displaces it through the 'traits' of dissemination. Derrida's deconstructive poetics goes like this:

"death knell (*glas*) and the galactic of the Kolossus. In the interval between the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime, a tree had been projected into the Milky Way. There a bridge over the abyss which threatens to swallow everything, on the edge of which the analytic of the sublime is broached. Now this whirlpool which tears up the tree and throws it, immensely, into the milky dissemen (*la dissemen*)" (Ibid, 146).

It is between these two versions, between Kant's linear and substitutional logic, and Derrida's sublime and disseminating excess, that the reader negotiates some mis/understanding/experience of the sublime. Dissemination is the privileged term here, and is part of a deconstructive process in which the 'trait' figures a different sublime threshold, not predicated on the oscillational, and dialectical, relation between oppositions, between terror and thrill, or attraction and repulsion, but as the workings of a deconstructive "*parergon*: neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it *gives rise* to the work. It is no longer merely around the work" (Derrida 1987, 9). The 'trait' according to Julian Wolfreys "always implies a repetition, of withdrawal or retreat, and return or remarkability" (Reynolds 2004, 87) and

"leaves a mark, but one that never returns as itself. Whether one is speaking of *trait* or *subjectile*, one is therefore concerned with 'lines of demarcation, marks or boundaries, limits, frames, and borders that leave traces of having overstepped the mark'. Such an act of overstepping dismantles the most reassuring conceptual oppositions ... This border is named by Derrida as the *parergon* in *The Truth in Painting*" (ibid, 88).

It is the *passe-partout*, a double sided metaphor for this parergonal framing, that opens up the "possibility for decryption and framing the reading to come" (ibid, 89) that constitutes a possibility for a 'deconstructive sublime', not framed

by the metaphysics of the (present) subject, but as an invitation to the practicing of sublime deconstructive negativity. This *passe-partout* is identified by Wolfreys as

"both a master-key, a shibboleth ... allowing access anywhere or to any encrypted secret, and also as a frame composed of two sheets of transparent material mounted back to back; moreover it is also the adhesive tape holding the two sheets together. The figure of the *passe-partout* is thus an excessive and sublime, *trait* in its own right, having no single identity but providing the function of *techne* by opening up the possibility for decryption and framing the reading to come" (ibid).

Despite this production of indeterminate meaning, we are invited to conclude, and register via the positivities of understanding, that Derrida's sublime and deconstructive disseminations displace the linear and substitutional logic of Kant's mathematical sublime, and disrupt the boundary between sublime experience and understanding which secures the autonomy of aesthetic negativity. We are also invited to conclude that the style or method of argument is itself a form of argument, one which de-subjectifies the reader, and where such a practice of negativity is itself an alternative form of philosophical 'argument'.

In concluding this discussion of Derrida's deconstructive sublime, such infinite and sublime disseminations, open to meanings to come, disrupt a dialectics of the integrated subject and a metaphysics of presence. Instead a deconstructive 'metaphysics of absence' figures sublime infinities to come and displaces a dialectical Kantian sublime discourse which sustains hierarchical and binarist distinctions. By extension, this is also a defeat of the autonomy of aesthetic negativity, also informed by a constitutive and dialectical relation between aesthetic experience and understanding. This defeat of the autonomy of aesthetic negativity, constituted by the dialectical boundary between experience and understanding, is effected by the boundarylessness of a deconstructive sublime. *The Colossal*, like *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* articulates and "ground(s) the nonaesthetic sense of negativity" (Menke 1999, 167). In this Derridaen arrangement negativity shifts from being servile in aesthetics to being sovereign in non-aesthetic and deconstructive texts.



The casualty of this deconstructive 'victory' is aesthetic negativity, of which poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution are exemplary. This thesis has demonstrated that these de-subjectifying signifying processes, like deconstruction, also invite the practicing of negativity and place reason in crisis. However, against Derrida's efforts, which renders negativity servile in aesthetics and sovereign in deconstruction, I suggest that aesthetic and deconstructive practices of negativity are neither servile nor sovereign in relation to one another, but *different* practices of negativity. For where aesthetic practices of negativity engage a dialectical relation between experience (in which meanings are deployed employed and disaggregated) and understanding (which frames or supplements that experience), deconstructive practices of negativity degrade that boundary, and implode that dialectical relation. I suggest that deconstructive and aesthetic practices of negativity, despite their structural differences, are equally capable of critiquing a discourse of reason and of the integrated subject. Neither is the privileged purveyor of negativity, and both are irreducible, but related, genres of a larger discourse of negativity.

That being so, it is also necessary to register the discursive competition and structural differences between aesthetic negativity and deconstruction. As argued above, aesthetic negativity requires a boundary between the negativities of experience and the positivities of understanding in order to sustain its autonomy, or negativity, that cannot be appropriated by reason<sup>10</sup>. From this perspective Adorno's insights are very productive, insofar as he conceives of aesthetic negativity as a critique of reason. Aesthetic negativity may therefore be conceived of as a discursive, and even political, response to a capitalist and instrumentalist modern culture. Its criticality is even more valuable in contemporary society ever more taken up with accumulation and instrumental reason. This does not mean that aesthetic negativity is the only practice of negativity, but is one amongst several, including that of deconstruction, whose aims are to disrupt and critique dominating rationalities.

Perversely perhaps, philosophical deconstruction invites and abuses its own critical insights. For the logic of the *passe-partout* requires the erosion of  
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<sup>10</sup>Christoph Menke's *The Sovereignty of Art* makes the case that aesthetic negativity is sovereign because of its autonomy.

boundaries and the conflation of negativities in a double act which both preserves and displaces the boundary between practicing negativity and understanding. However, against this interpenetrating and anti-hierarchical logic, Derrida sustains a hierarchical boundary between deconstructive negativity and aesthetic negativity. Seen from this perspective, a deconstructive sublime practicing of negativity, figured in *The Colossal*, is a displacement of traditionally sovereign aesthetic negativity in art, so that this sovereignty shifts to philosophical deconstruction. Such degradation of aesthetic negativity has had discursive effects, not least of which the degradation of painting as the supposedly privileged locus of aesthetic negativity.

The ensuing discussion of contemporary paintings and visual art practice registers the impact of that contest in which deconstructive methods have degraded the autonomy of aesthetic negativity. This discussion demonstrates that Glenn Brown's and Jeremy Wafer's works engage deconstructive insights within the modalities of poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution, even as they sustain aesthetic practices of negativity. Such deconstructively attuned modalities are available to the positivities of understanding, whereas the negativities of aesthetic experience disaggregate unambiguous or resolvable meaning. This dialectical arrangement challenges a deconstructive enterprise at odds with both the autonomy of aesthetic experience and dialectical relations which sustain/negotiate the distinctions between oppositions.

#### **4.5. A postmodern sublime**

Glenn Brown's painting practice addresses two versions of the sublime. Firstly, identifiable in terms of a science fiction genre, as a version of the terrific sublime, which positions the viewer in front of vast and dystopian galactic events; and secondly via a signifying process where meaning is rendered sublimely irresolvable. The former may be understood as an exemplar of a traditional aesthetics of the sublime which sustains binarist distinctions and traditional hierarchies, whereas the latter disfigures such distinctions by engaging that signifying process called sublime irresolution within the style of these paintings. This disruptive style copies, dissimulates and seduces like *'Nietzsche's woman'*<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> To quote from the Serpentine Gallery Catalogue Essay on the work of Glenn Brown by Alison Gingeras, Brown says

With regard to the first category, Brown's two enormous paintings *The Loves of the Shepherds* (after "Doublestar" by Tony Roberts) 2000 (Figure 7), and *Dark Angel* (painting for Ian Curtis) after Chris Foss 2002 (Figure 8), code an immense and potent energy, galactic distance, the triumph of technology, and the ascendancy of man in an encounter with inhuman alterity. *The Loves of Shepherds*, like Turner's *The Fall of an Avalanche at Grisons*, uses the shock tactics of the terrific sublime that both overwhelm the viewer and secure his or her safe and distanced viewership. *The Loves of Shepherds* delivers this traditional aesthetics of the sublime as an encounter between solar power and human technological endeavor. Here the sublime otherness of galactic or solar energy threatens those dystopian machine-worlds being drawn toward it.

*Dark Angel*, like *The Loves of Shepherds*, depicts dystopian and technologically developed colonies/space ships adrift in the universe. Both paintings address the viewer in terms of the traditional coding of an encounter with sublimity, via the typology of the terrific sublime and the genre of Science Fiction imaging, as the autonomous subject standing before, and contemplating, an infinite, sublime and excessive space. This genre of infinite spatial extension establishes a distance between self and otherness<sup>12</sup>, and reiterates the traditional dyad in which the self is opposed to, and constituted by, otherness. What we encounter in these science fictions by Brown is the subject in control. For unlike aesthetic practices of negativity, these paintings subjectify the viewer by sustaining a binary, where optical control (of the viewer being able to see everything) contains and regulates that which is represented (sublime, non-human and infinite otherness). These are not deconstructions of the traditional sublime subject position. They do not mobilise the signifying process called sublime irresolution, nor do they invite the practicing of negativity.

"my bodily involvement is as a voyeur. It sounds dreadful, but I am perhaps only here in spirit. I could partake in the pleasure of the paint, but I prefer the *invisible hand of the dematerialized artist, making dematerialized fake brush marks* (author's emphasis)". (Gingeras 2004, 16) Gingeras describes Brown's style of painting in terms of its "intricate accumulations of thin swirls of alternating colours. These perfectly flat, highly controlled pools of paint mimic the vigorous strokes of a brush as well as the sensual materiality of thickly applied paint." (Gingeras 2004, 16)

<sup>12</sup>It is such distancing techniques that both Derrida and Zylinska critique. Derrida does so in *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* in his mocking style where he both invokes and denies 'Nietzsche's woman', as the figure of distance. Zylinska's book *On Spiders, Cyborgs and Being Scared: The Feminine and the Sublime* explores the work of women artists (Orlan, Anderson and St Aubin de Teran) which challenge such distancing techniques associated with the terrific sublime and with Kantian subject-object distinctions, by challenging the active/passive dichotomies that sustain binarist hierarchies and gendered differences and distances.



*Figure 7: Glenn Brown. The Loves of Shepherds  
(after "Doublestar" by Tony Roberts). 2000*



*Figure 8: Glenn Brown. Dark Angel  
(painting for Ian Curtis) after Chris Foss. 2002*

Secondly, Brown's paintings do engage a sublimely irresolvable process when he copies/distorts the paintings of old, and modernist, masters, (Rembrandt, Fragonard, van Dyck, Dali and Auerbach). The paintings *The Riches of the Poor* 2003 (Figure 9), *Dark Star* 2003 (Figure 10) and *Sex* 2004 (Figure 11), are recognisable both as copies and as new interventions. The style of these paintings render the lushness of the original, via a painstakingly precise technique which mimics to a large extent the style of Auerbach (although also that of Dali). Style becomes a virtuoso performance in which every mark is perfectly rendered. This virtuoso style is experienced as a "thrilling event", even as it is understood as optical mastery<sup>13</sup>. These oppositions proliferate and overlap, so that this style of painting becomes so overcrowded with unstable oppositions that it registers the signifying process called sublime irresolution. In this process, as in Poussin's *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, sublime meaning is not registered in what is represented, but via a process where the excesses of meaning disable conceptual mastery.

I suggest that this failure of meaning is inaugurated by the irresolvable interplay of oppositions. For on the one hand, these paintings by Brown register an experience of abjection<sup>14</sup>, whilst on the other this virtuoso style of painting registers a knowing optical mastery. For example, in *Dark Star* 2003, a distorted copy of a painting of a young woman by Rembrandt is represented as a leering old crone. In *The Riches of the Poor* 2003, a skinless and ecstatic figure is rendered as a copy of Auerbach's agonistic and authentically expressive style of painting, so that perfectly rendered 'faux' paint reads as flesh. Or, in *Sex* 2004, a representation of van Dyck's portrait of a man is debased as a portrait of a blind, but seeing creature whose clouded eyes suggest an unspeakable and disgusting threshold, and whose coloured nose suggests something of a liar<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup>This interface between experience and understanding is amplified by an *actual encounter* with these paintings, where the virtuosity of style registers as a visual experience of the painting.

<sup>14</sup>In *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* 1982, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Kristeva makes connections between the sublime and abjection. The sublime is that unstable threshold which registers the abject, even as it is also an aesthetic opportunity to control that threatening otherness. According to John Lechte, from Kristeva's analytical perspective "the abject is above all ambiguous, the inbetween, what defies boundaries .... Abjection, therefore, is fundamentally 'what disturbs identity, system, order'" (Lechte 1990, 161).

<sup>15</sup>The children's story of Pinocchio's nose elongating as he lies, is the basis of this interpretation.



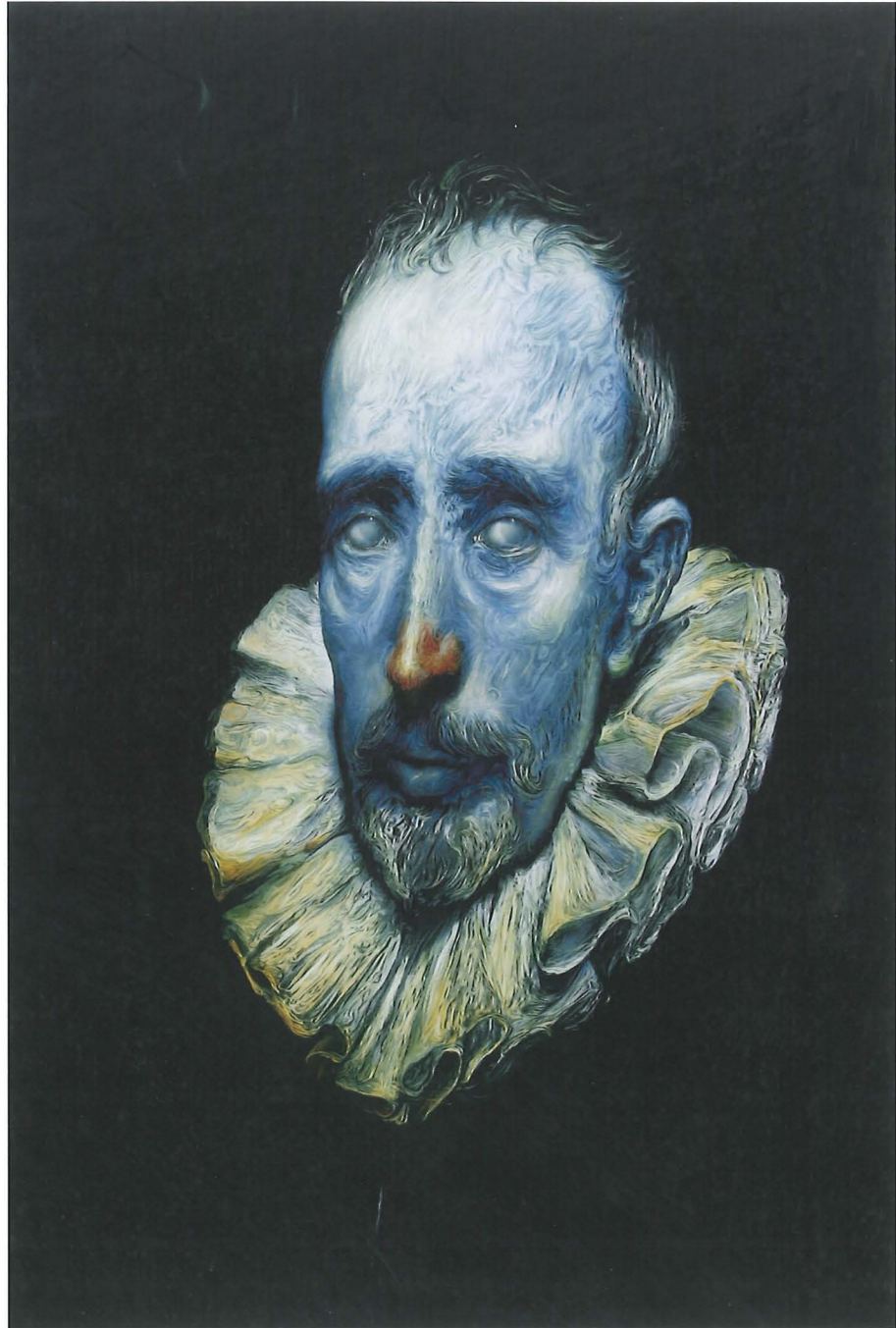


*Figure 9: Glenn Brown. The Riches of the Poor. 2003*



Figure 10: Glenn Brown. *Dark Star*. 2003





*Figure 11: Glenn Brown. Sex. 2004*

These representations and condensations of meaning, and this style of painting, set the scene for a process in which meaning fails. I suggest that this failure is inaugurated by the inability to synthesise an understanding of these disgusting degradations of the originals, and their abject consequences, with an experience of the style of painting, in which every detail is perfect and controlled. In this process irresolvable contradictions emerge between understanding and experiencing the effects of optical mastery, and equally of experiencing a sense of abjection, even as one understands how it produced. Meaning is disabled when too many oppositions are crowded into and over, one another. These overlappings and deferrals effect a sublime and irresolvable charge, a moment within and outside of understanding that registers as an aesthetic specific practicing of negativity.

This promiscuous and vulgar style<sup>16</sup>, like '*Nietzsche's woman*' dissimulates, for it codes visual mastery, even as it represents that which is awful, repugnant, and abject. In Brown's painting titled *Oscillate Wildly* 1999 (*Figure 12*) the precision, perfection and seduction of the style, offsets that which is also present (in representation), and absent (as a register of the disavowed, the base, and the unspeakable), and contained as a discursive register in the viewer's imagination. This is a sublime threshold that registers the abject terror of the represented/implied slithery, self-consuming, colourless, ever proliferating, creeping, impotent 'thing'. It is a threshold where meaning coheres, only to fail. The viewer is unable to resolve interpenetrating registers where absence and presence, otherness and selfness slide into, and over one another. These binaries refuse to cancel one another out. Here order will not prevail.

Furthermore, the abjection that confronts us in an encounter with these sublimely irresolvable paintings by Brown, is not only that which disturbs identity, system, or order, but is also a dissimulating and pleasurable 'play' at such a disturbance. For although both order and disorder are powerfully coded in Brown's style of painting, the sublime exchange that operates here is still pleasurable, a perpetual on/off and irresolvable beat, which simultaneously

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<sup>16</sup>Brown claims "My desire to paint with detail and dexterity is due to the fact it is seen as bad taste' .... 'To use skill and craftsmanship is vulgar to the art establishment". (Gingeras 2004, 17)



*Figure 12: Glenn Brown. Oscillate Wildly. 1999*

invites the positivities of visual mastery and the negativities of abject disgust. It is this playful deferral between these two registers that resists the development of a hierarchy between these two opposing terms. These terms are irresolvably and simultaneously rendered both positive and negative.

In these paintings, the modality of that signifying process called sublime irresolution thus registers both a compression of signifiers, and a pleasurable interplay of oppositions as we have seen in Poussin's and Turner's paintings. But the modality of sublime irresolution employed in Brown's paintings is also a copying and dissimulating play which renders meaning excessive. We might identify this as a postmodern sublime modality, both playfully knowing and experientially abject. This dissembling modality, like *'Nietzsche's woman'*, pretends to be what it is not. For knowing play and abject experience are contaminated by the idea of the copy, even as the boundaries between what is experienced and what is understood are mutually eroded and enfolded. Such incomprehension registers as a sublimely irresolvable event. This modality also resembles the disaggregations of meaning in deconstruction. But unlike Derrida's *passe-partout*, this modality of sublime irresolution does not open the viewer to differences 'to come'. Instead the viewer remains caught up within differences which irresolvably rub up against, over, and within one another. Brown's sublimely irresolvable paintings sustain a traditional negative aesthetics of the sublime where experience and understanding, abject play and knowing disruption, are irresolvably positioned in and against one another. Such disaggregations of meaning register as an aesthetic experience, not as textual disruption, nor as philosophical mis/understanding.

These paintings also engage a register of understanding that is extrinsic to the experience of sublime irresolution sketched above. This register is activated by categories of understanding, imported into an encounter with these paintings, so that we are able to identify these paintings as examples of a postmodern and a deconstructive sensibility. For these paintings by Brown are an appropriation of Auerbach's authentically expressive modernist style. In Brown's paintings this style is delivered as trope, a pastiche of Auerbach's style of painting. This trope is not internal to the processes of viewing, but is imported into it as a deconstructively appropriate understanding of Auerbach's style and of the discursive implications of it. Such knowledge enables the viewer to understand

how Brown's paintings mimic Auerbach's agonistic painterly gestures, but render these copies of that modernist master, via a style of painting, as the complete absence of paintbrush marking. This mimicry or play erodes the meaning of the brushmark as an expression of an agonistic sensibility, and figures this appropriative style as a postmodern pastiche of Auerbach's modernist agony and authentic feeling. Brown's practice thereby knowingly deconstructs those modernist assumptions by debunking Auerbach's authentic agonistics via a postmodern style of painting.

In conclusion, Brown's sublimely irresolvable genre of paintings register the impact of deconstruction by engaging both a supplement which enables us to understand how these paintings disrupt modernist assumptions, and also a particular modality of sublime irresolution which to some extent resembles Derrida's figure called '*Nietzsche's woman*'. Yet Brown's paintings also sustain a dialectical and irreducible relation between experience and understanding. For these paintings thrill and terrify the viewer as an aesthetic specific and sublime event in which meaning and understanding fail. These paintings are the articulation of a negative aesthetics whose modalities resemble those of philosophical deconstruction, yet whose affects are aesthetic specific.

#### **4.6. A post colonial sublime poetics of the inbetween.**

Jeremy Wafer's visual art practice has a great affinity with Derrida's deconstructive sublime, even as this practice registers as aesthetic experience. Like Derrida's deconstructive figure of the *passe-partout* in his text *The Colossal*, Wafer's practice figures an infinite displacement of meanings to come. This syncretic visual art practice blurs the boundaries between the sublime and the poetic, between sculpture, painting and photography and deconstructs the binarist assumptions of South African colonial and modernist landscape painting by deploying a post colonial sublime poetics of the inbetween.

We might start with Wafer's interrogation of sublimity in terms of two themes: landscape and infinite systems. South African colonial and modernist sublime landscape painting, for example, in the works of Thomas Baines and Pierneef<sup>17</sup>,

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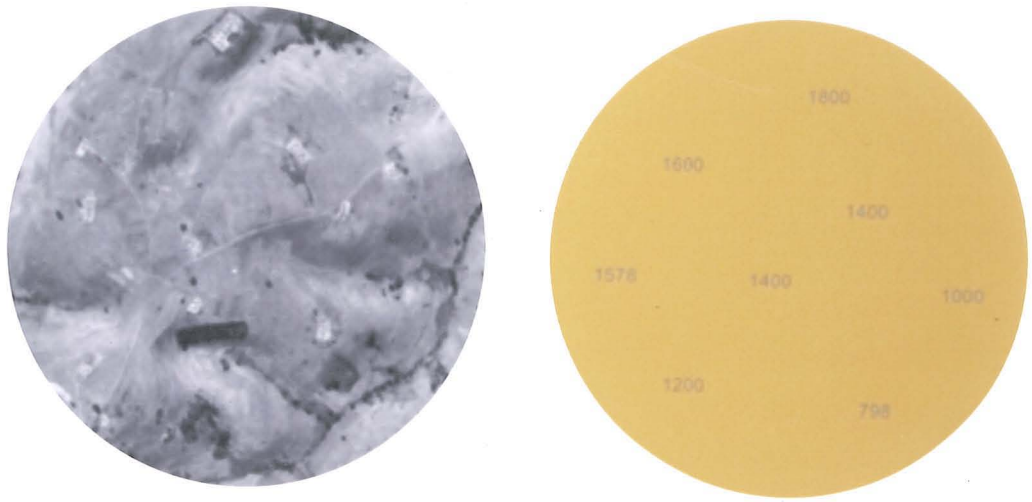
<sup>17</sup>Thomas Baines' sublime paintings register a subject position that requires a division between the viewer and the extended, empty and luminous landscape. These paintings represent a colonial subject position, curious about the

mimicked its metropolitan referents, insofar as such landscape painting sustained the traditional and distancing relation between sublimity and the viewing subject. These traditional and colonial practices presumed a vertical relation between the viewer, standing in front of the sublime landscape, and the painting, which in turn represented an infinitely extending space within the picture plane. Wafer's photographic/painting work titled *Nhlube and Ochre*, 2002 (*Figure 13*) sets up the same bodily relation between the viewer and vertical representation so that visual and embodied mastery is problematised.

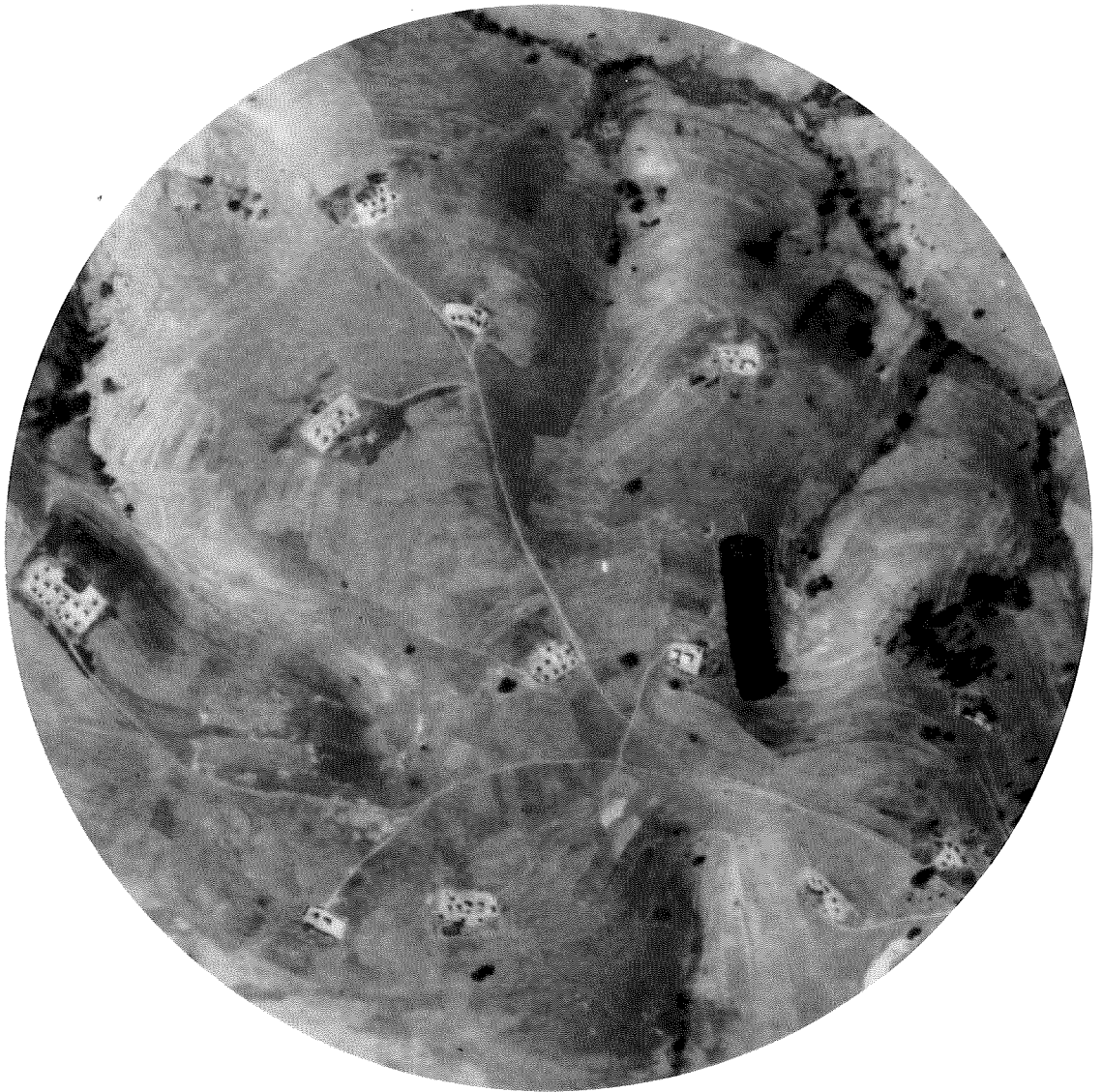
*Nhlube and Ochre*, a double image of a photograph and a painting, which exists in both one meter and two meter square dimensions, presents the viewer with a sublime experience inaugurated by a spatial encounter which challenges the verticality of a viewer's relation to the vertiginous image on the wall. For the photographic aerial view of Nhlube (*Figure 14*) taken by the South African Office of the Surveyor General from an aircraft on a specified flight plan at a particular time and date, is not a view into an infinitely extending space, but is rather a view down on to a specified place, articulated via an anonymous matrix which organises imaging in terms of an infinite, but rational grid. The viewer may have no knowledge of this matrix, but is in no doubt that the all encompassing view he/she is presented with of a particular place exists in a different and vertiginous, plane to that which he/she usually associates with sublime landscape paintings. The corresponding ochre disc, by contrast sits reassuringly in its 'proper' place on the wall as a perverse grounding to that vertiginous drop. This spatial positioning between verticality and vertigo is the first sublime opposition.

Furthermore, the painting/ochre disc itself exists between two oppositional registers. On the one hand it is an address of rational and numerical systems which code height in terms of the protocols of a contour map, and on the other, it works with the language of painting in that it is a colour field with a delicately friable and painterly surface. This doubling slams affect and concept together

topographical details of the vast South African landscape and at a remove from its indigenous inhabitants. Pierneef extends this colonial perspective into his modernist renditions of the South African landscape. Pierneef's paintings register the size and emptiness of the landscape, by juxtaposing this awesome beauty with singular domestic and European style houses. Such juxtapositions render the landscape a figure of the European and white imagination, a space of apartheid, and a locus of Afrikaner identity.



*Figure 13: Jeremy Wafer. Nhlube and Ochre. 2002*



*Figure 14: Jeremy Wafer. Nhlube. 2002*



and this is the second instance where the viewer is irresolvably positioned between these two meaning generating registers associated with the sublime.

The aerial photograph, paired with the equal sized ochre disc painting<sup>18</sup> (with topographical markings, and the contour lines which designate the heights and depths of the companion photograph), sets up further contradictions. This pairing invites a disruptive and sublime comparison: for on the one hand, the position of the numbers on the ochre disc and the reading of hills and valleys in the photograph are understood as co-ordinates; yet conversely this understanding slips and refuses purchase when the two images are seen together for we cannot apprehend space and comprehend measurement at the same time. It is this inability to see and think simultaneously, together with the contradictions noted above, that constitutes the third sublime 'cut' of these works, and the viewer's imagination is opened up to that violence that is associated with the experience of the sublime.

As we have already seen, Derrida in *The Colossal* associates this violent and sublime exchange with a Kantian dialectics which preserves subject/object; self/other dichotomies. *Wafer's Nhlube and Ochre* does not endorse such a binary code, but problematises it. For although this image assembles binary oppositions (vertigo/verticality, affect/concept, perception/thought), the overall effect of these assembled meanings does not effect the strenuous irresolutions of the sublime in which differences are implacably held against one another.

Instead, in *Nhlube and Ochre* sublime signifiers are arranged in a way that they defer and slip into and around one another. For example, this image is an encounter with visual plenitude in the form of an information laden photograph, whose plenitude is matched by the adjoining panel, and whose pure painterly affect is activated, and disrupted, by alien conceptual numerical codes. These interpenetrations of meaning result not only in a sublime gap that opens up between concept and affect, but also produce a poetic ambiguity/undecidability about the status of these readings. It is this sliding, or displacement of meanings between oppositions, and over and under them, that installs the oppositional and binarist logic of sublime irresolution, into a slippery and mobile,

<sup>18</sup>The ochre is collected from mine dumps in Johannesburg and mixed with acrylic paint and applied by hand.

deconstructive poetics. The modality of sublime irresolution in *Nhlube and Ochre* is an effect of the rubbing together of concepts and affects in an indeterminate way, that forecloses an economy of appropriation or mastery.

In *Nhlube and Ochre*, visual mastery is simultaneously evoked and displaced. If alterity is coded in these works it is through the metaphor of distance, which is affectively coded in the vertiginous drop of the aerial photographs, and mathematically coded as variations in height in the paintings. But the very mechanisms for the evaluation of this distance are troubled by the contradictions between the two images, by the inability to see and think simultaneously. This is a practice informed by inbetweenesses, not irresolvable difference: between vertigo and verticality, between conceptualisation and affective experience, where meaning slips between these oppositions. It is this hiatus that produces a displacement of visual mastery. This irresolution and undecidability in *Nhlube and Ochre* is thus another articulation of Derrida's *passe-partout*, where meaning undecidably and multiply slips *between* oppositions, and where this process opens the viewer to differences 'to come'.

In Wafer's work this sublime practice of negativity delivers critiques, not only of the integrated subject and of instrumental reason, but also of the political and cultural imperatives of post-apartheid South Africa. These cultural imperatives demand a critique of mastering metropolitan subject positions, and install new post-apartheid subjectivities. But crucially this replay exists as an aesthetic specific encounter between the viewer and the aesthetic object (the double image), and not as an effect of a philosophical and textual practice of negativity. In this regard, Wafer's practice sets up a dialogical encounter which installs the viewer into the practicing of negativity and the defeat of binarist hierarchies, with no degradation of the aesthetic responses of the viewer.

For example, when we consider Wafer's photographs of ant holes and termite mounds, like Derrida's disseminations in the concluding paragraphs of *The Colossal*, whereby "this whirlpool which tears up a tree and throws it, immensely, into the milky dissemen (*la dissemen*)" (Derrida 1987, 146), these photographs are a meditation on an economy of infinite dissemination that does not invoke the mastering subject. For *Termite Mound* 2001 (*Figure 15*) and *Anthole* 2001 (*Figure 16*) are portals into non-human systems which



*Figure 15: Jeremy Wafer. Termite Mound. 2001*



*Figure 16: Jeremy Wafer. Anthole. 2001*

are infinitely repeated in nature. Landscape here is invoked as the site of infinite and organic systems of co-operation. Such systems of co-operation may invite analogies of human co-operatives, but the significance of these images lies in their lack of the 'will to power' that inevitably accompanies human co-operatives. In that sense they stand as meditations of post-human organic wholes, reminiscent possibly of Deleuze's perpetually becoming Rhizomes, devoid of authorship and exemplars of a post-human order. Or to say it differently, these photographs invite a critique of the modern autonomous, rational and integrated subject by presenting the viewer with a metaphor for infinite and organic systems of co-operation.

In *Termite Mound* and *Anthole* this sublime impulse is preoccupied with infinitely proliferating systems, like Derrida's disseminations sketched in *The Colossal*. For termite mounds and ant holes are parts of infinitely extended, and indeed colossal systems of subterranean co-operation. The idea of a co-operative suggests an economy, but not one predicated on exchange, on binarist hierarchies, or on capitalist exploitation. Rather the economy of a non-human co-operative implies an ideal economy in which order and productivity are linked. We are installed into the infinite dis-seminations of meaning invited by deconstruction, although this is an idealised process in which non-human alterity remains the privileged trope. Derridaen deconstruction would seek to problematise, not idealise, such alterity.

If *Termite Mound* and *Anthole* invite a consideration of infinite dis-seminations, so too does the double image *Nhlube and Ochre* which positions the viewer in the terrain of the mathematical sublime, within a logic of immense mathematical proliferation. This logic is informed by an actual matrix from which the aerial photographs are anonymously ordered by the artist on the internet. This matrix is assembled by the Surveyor General's Office, which makes available to the public, aerial photographs taken of the entire surface of South Africa. Such photographs exists in terms of designated flight plans by aircraft taking these high resolution images, which are made available in scales of 1:10,000 to 1:100,000. The availability and production of these images which is both scheduled and random, enables the coding of an infinite number of possible outcomes. It is the infinite size of these proliferating matrices that

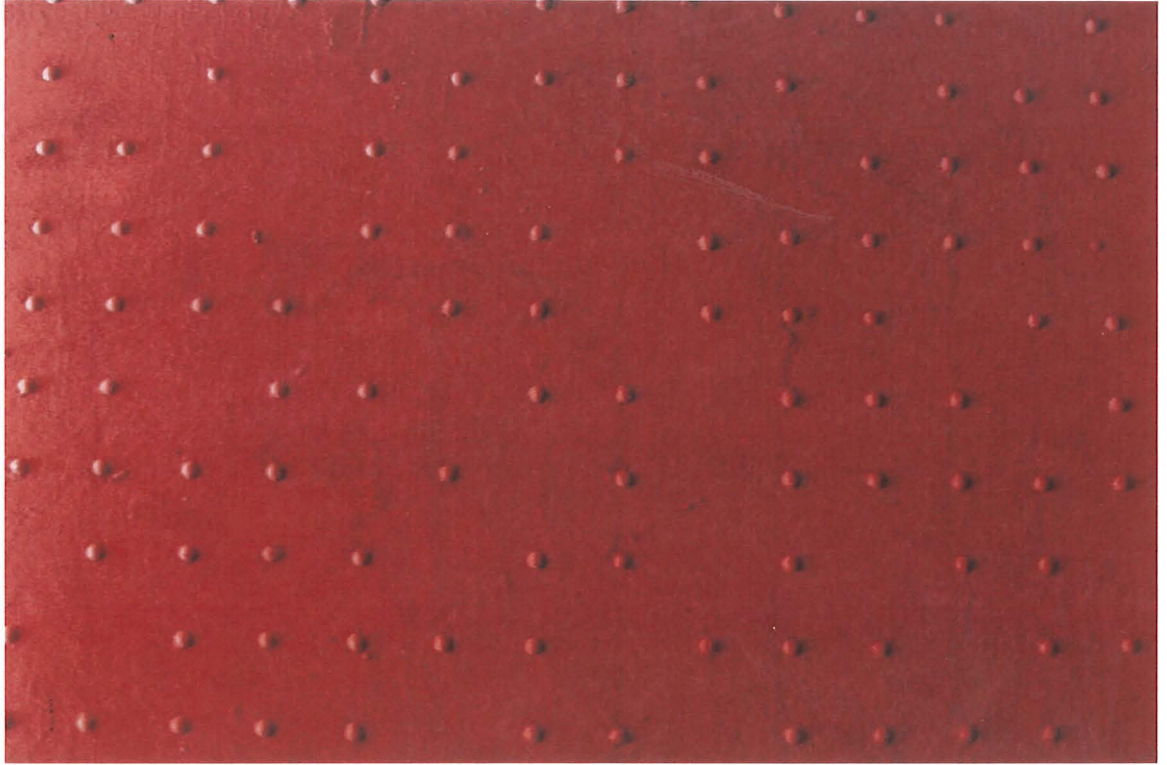
cannot be thought, even as they point to an economy of colossal, rational and random, dis-semination<sup>19</sup>.

This sublime and deconstructive logic is taken back into painting in *Red Field* 2002 (*Figure 17*) which exists as a flat surface punctuated by a grid of raised 'blisters' and painted uniformly with a mixture of industrial red oxide and acrylic primer. The paint and primer produce a sumptuous and tactile painterly surface in which the trope of the brush mark, as an index of the tradition of abstract painting, figures a human presence. However, what also engages the viewer is the arrangement of the grid which suggests an infinite code (taken from the random permutations of the roll of a dice) whose logic is not apparent. It is the mysteriousness of this seemingly random logic that draws the viewer into the consideration of a size that cannot be thought, and this realisation demands of the viewer a loss of mastery and submission into an infinite and random excess.

Such sublimity in *Red Field* is also offset by the full-blooded red colour, the trace of the human painterly mark, and above all by the metaphorical associations that are evoked by the 'blisters' themselves. For these features are an elaboration of a culturally alert schema which exists throughout Wafer's oeuvre as an engagement with the African practice of bodily scarification through the amasumpa motif. In traditional Zulu pottery raised blisters of clay are arranged in patterns which echo the practice of producing geometrically ordered markings on the skin through rupturing and infecting the skin, so that the livid scars leave their mark. The 'blisters' in *Red Field* take on another meaning when considered in this light. For they mark a syncretic encounter, as an exchange between elaborate Zulu social and aesthetic codes, and the practice of minimalist and Western abstract (modernist) painting with its sublime metaphysics of absence. This doubling of genres in *Red Field* prevaricates on the issue of economies of appropriation or of squandering. As such, from a eurocentric perspective, the 'blisters' in *Red Field* ambivalently code an opening toward cultural alterity (even as their arrangement in a random grid, codes an openness to the alterity of the infinite). This double

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<sup>19</sup>Following Olkowski's critique of Derrida's *The Colossal*, which argues that Derrida follows Kant and Plato by associating the sublime with an economy of the colossal, we might note that Wafer's practice is an addition to those masculinist ambitions.



*Figure 17: Jeremy Wafer. Red Field. 2002*

openness to alterity, situated in an ethics of being-open-to difference, obscures the operation of an economy of appropriation whereby culturally discrete (Zulu) codes are pressed into the service of cultural hybridisation. This pressing (as the articulation of an economy of appropriation) however remains unstable, its operations are poetically ambiguous, even as both genres are amplified, rather than diminished, in this exchange. This image (like the many other Wafer images that employ the same syncretism) poetically synthesises African and European value systems, without hierarchy, as the articulation of a new, and ideal, post-apartheid order.

Syncretic openness to difference, to *the inbetween*, characterises Wafer's practice. It has a hybrid identity, operating between sublime tension and poetic deferral, between aesthetic experience and deconstructive supplementarity, and between differing cultures. As such *Red Field* invites correspondences between a mathematical sublime and its infinite dis-semination, but slides this economy of sublime 'gifting', via the exchanges of competing cultural power, into an ethics of being-open-to-difference. We will return to Wafer's preoccupation with sustaining a perpetual openness-to-difference, but for the moment we need to consider how the sculptures, which are also exhibited with the photographs and paintings, operate as aesthetic specific markers of poetic presence, which to some extent resist the deconstructive supplementarity that otherwise informs Wafer's practice.

Where the photograph/painting couplet in *Nhlube and Ochre* codes an irresolvable relation between verticality and vertigo, affective experience and conceptual understanding, and thereby invoke an experience of sublime irresolution, the *Spindle 2002 (Figure 18)* sculptures address the viewer as discrete and poetic objects. They bear the imprint (as does all of Wafer's work) of minimalist modularity and materiality, but they also code the classical balance and spirituality one associates with the work of Brancusi. These spindles, in spite of their industrial materiality, address a register of idealised human feeling and poetic desire. This is communicated in terms of the painterly, chalky white surface which bears the traces of sculptural molding and aesthetic desire, and also via the arched form of these pointed 'pods', and their seemingly random display on the floor. These are forms which are full but not replete, for they give off subtle poetic pleasure. They are gifts rather than puzzles. They





*Figure 18: Jeremy Wafer. Spindle. 2002*

confirm presence and desire, and are not an address of an agonistics of visual mastery and of spectatorial displacement. As such they operate as an antidote to the project of sublimely deconstructive dis-semination found in the photographs and paintings. They provisionally 'repair' an integrated subject even as they install the viewer into an openness-to-difference. They are *par excellence*, exemplars of an aesthetic specific poetic ambiguity.

These ovaloid forms, here generically designated as *Spindles*, appear in various guises in Wafer's oeuvre. They also appear with raised markings that resemble Zulu amasumphu motifs, and again raise the issue of cultural syncretism and the ethics of being-open-to-difference. As such they figure as symbols of an idealised moment of cultural integration, which is open to ideological appropriation, and hence to a form of closure within idealisation.

It is perhaps against this possibility of appropriation and idealised closure that we need to consider Wafer's consistent engagements with landscape, infinite systems, borders, maps, alterity and an ethics of displacement. For these meditations offer no closures, nor any irresolution, but are engagements with systems of infinite and sublime dissemination, as aesthetic specific modalities which resemble Derrida's figure called the *passe-partout*. These modalities invite a practicing of negativity not predicated on binarist hierarchies, but one open to multiplicity and differences.

Such modalities appear in a variety of Wafer's works, but for the moment we will confine ourselves to an engagement with *Stones 2001* (Figure 19). This work consists of 100 framed photographs of stones which are 10 centimeters square in size. These stones are not significant in any way except that they were found and photographed in Nieuw Bethesda, a small and isolated town in the center of the country in the Karoo which has attained an iconic status because of its centrality, its isolation and its artistic and religious culture<sup>20</sup>. Nieuw Bethesda has presence. Wafer's photographic exhibition of its stones on a one kilometer stretch of fence near this town is a literal displacement of this presence. These 10 centimeter square photographs were placed exactly 10

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<sup>20</sup>Nieuw Bethesda has developed into a cultural center over the last 20 years, building on the reputation of outsider artist Helen Martins whose home and garden are a testament to spirituality and creativity.



*Figure 19: Jeremy Wafer. Stones. 2001*

meters apart along a one kilometer distance of farm fencing within walking distance of the town. Indeed the end/beginning point of this intervention is so situated that the viewer can see the grid of the town spread out before him/her. This work was extended as these photographs were then placed on fences along the main highway at 100 kilometer intervals between Nieuw Bethesda and Durban, and could, as the artist suggests, by extension be placed every 1000 kilometers between Durban and Australia. These photographs were also displayed as a single image of 100 by 10 square centimeters in a line 10 meters long at the Grahamstown festival in 2001. Here we encounter infinite systems of proliferation and substitution, registered within the (Kantian) mathematical sublime, where "the immeasurable host of such systems, which go by the name of nebulae, and most likely in turn themselves form such a system, hold no prospect of a limit" (Derrida 1987, 147).

*Stones* are not only an infinite set of substitutions of the terrain, of the material, the stones, of this town, but are also as a set of photographs which mark an indeterminate fence in the Karoo. Fences are not only boundaries which contain and defend livestock, possessions, rights, but carry the ideas and histories of economies of exchange, of rights of mastery, of exclusion and inclusion. In so activating a fence, Wafer also activates its relation to histories of appropriation and colonisation, between Boer and Xhosa or the Koi San, or between farmer and squatter. The photograph of the stone on the fence, and not in the gallery, is of course the most peculiar and disruptive feature of this work, implying not only a conceptual critique of the nature of fences and of colonisation, but also of the relation of art to that of the physical landscape.

For this work is an artistic intervention into the landscape, its location on the fence figures both a phenomenal experience and a conceptual critique of colonial landscape painting, which disavows such phenomenality, and historically was pressed into the service of the mastering white and European subject. As such *Stones*, challenges the traditional representations of the sublime found in colonial and easel paintings by displacing distancing notions of mastery with an immediate experience of a particular place and its histories. This experience is paradoxically again displaced by the photograph of the photograph, in which the viewer is left with a sense of multiple displacements, discomforts and imaginings. It is this very deconstructive discomfort, this

production of a sense of alterity, which provokes the viewer into a consideration of an ethics of displacement, in which this erosion of visual mastery is infinitely multiplied by the systemic repetition and proliferation (trait) of the motif. Here the viewer is installed into a deconstructive post-colonial economy of infinite and sublime dis-semination.

If *Stones* registers a deconstructively appropriate understanding, it does not degrade aesthetic experience. It presumes both a phenomenal/aesthetic experience and an interrogation of that phenomenality. Such (deconstructively appropriate) doubling between affect and concept consistently characterises this practice. We might recall how in *Nhlube and Ochre*, the signifying process called sublime irresolution confronts the viewer with a compendium of binary oppositions, yet is displaced into a poetics of ambiguity, which renders this aesthetic experience as hybrid, impure and inbetween. The same migration between aesthetic experience and conceptual understanding features in *Red Field* which negotiates the interface between western and Zulu aesthetic traditions. Traditional aesthetic experience only registers in those sculptural poetics of the *Spindle* sculptures, which repair that dialogical relation between the aesthetic object and the viewer, even as it sustains a poetic practice of negativity.

Wafer's visual art practice thus records something of the methods of Derrida's deconstructive sublime. Yet it does not degrade aesthetic practices of negativity or conflate different practices of negativity. This visual art practice breaches differences, even those antagonisms between an aesthetic of negativity and deconstruction. It does so by sustaining aesthetic specific practices of negativity, even as it blurs the boundaries between sculpture, photography and painting. This post colonial sublime poetics of the inbetween engages the differences between deconstructive philosophy and visual art practice, and between western and African aesthetic values, even as it delivers a critique of traditional sublime and colonial assumptions.

In this process both the traditional identities of sublime irresolution and poetic ambiguity have been rearticulated. For although Wafer's practice employs the irresolvable contradictions between oppositions, between affect and concept for example, these oppositions are not recirculated, but are displaced by a sublime

poetics. This sublime poetics registers an openness to differences, and as such records the impact of deconstruction, which erodes the boundaries between discrete discursive practices.

#### **4.7. Conclusion.**

This discussion of the paintings and visual art practices of Brown and Wafer is framed by the tensions and correspondences between philosophical deconstruction and aesthetic practices of negativity. This chapter has made the case that Derrida's two texts investigated in this chapter, not only deconstruct the rational, dialectical and binarist assumptions of traditional (Kantian) philosophy, but also disrupt the dialectical relation between experience and understanding and degrade the autonomy of aesthetic negativity. In *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* Derrida's quasi-poetic style invites a deconstructive practicing of negativity which always doubles as (an inadequate) form of philosophical argument. Such deconstructive practicing of negativity requires the conflation/doubling of the boundary between processual enactment as experience, and understanding the philosophical consequences of such deconstructions. It is this doubling that deconstructs conceptual mastery and opens readers to difference. Likewise Derrida's text, *The Colossal* ruptures the boundary between a textual practicing of negativity and the philosophical deconstruction of the Kantian sublime. This text produces a deconstructive sublime, both a textual practice of negativity and a philosophical argument, which instantiates a sublime inbetweenness 'to come'.

This chapter has made the case that these deconstructive methods degrade the autonomy of aesthetic negativity. For although both aesthetic and deconstructive practices of negativity de-subjectify reader of texts and viewers of paintings, their methods for doing so differ. A deconstructive method ruptures boundaries (between aesthetic experience and understanding), conflates oppositions (quasi-poetic style and the feminine), and defeats/invites philosophical understanding. By contrast, the interpretive method deployed in this thesis identifies aesthetic practices of negativity in paintings and visual art practices which sustain a dialectical relation between the viewer and the painting. Aesthetic practices of negativity sustain their autonomy by preserving the gap between experience and understanding. Even if aesthetic practices of

negativity, of which poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution are exemplary, de-subjectify the viewer by conflating oppositions in ways that resemble those of deconstruction, this failure of meaning registers as an experiential and aesthetic specific event not identical to deconstructive textual practice or deconstructively appropriate understanding.

In comparing the differences between deconstruction and aesthetic practices of negativity, this chapter has also demonstrated how contemporary paintings register the impact of both. In this regard, Brown's paintings register the aesthetic negativities of sublime irresolution even as these paintings also deconstruct modernist assumptions and blur the boundary between knowing play and abject experience. The modality of sublime irresolution employed in these paintings registers the impact of deconstruction, being comparable to Derrida's figure called '*Nietzsche's woman*'. Wafer's visual art practice also registers the impact of a deconstruction, insofar as Wafer's visual art practice, like Derridaen deconstruction, disrupts boundaries between for example, sculpture, photography and painting and between the signifying processes called sublime irresolution and poetic ambiguity. Wafer's practice deconstructs the binarist assumptions of traditional colonial landscape painting, and registers a modality of Derrida's deconstructive figure called the *passe-partout*, even as they sustain their aesthetic specificity.

This account of the tensions and correspondences between Derrida's two deconstructive texts, and these contemporary painting and visual art practices, has been an attempt to mark, and to some extent stabilise, the unstable threshold between practicing negativity and understanding its discursive significance. This chapter has also been an attempt to negotiate the unstable boundary between negative aesthetics and philosophical deconstruction, whose de-subjectifying operations have so much in common, yet where these processual enactments of negativity register a discursive competition. Against the degradations of aesthetic negativity by philosophical deconstruction, this study makes the case for a certain kind of discursively situated aesthetic autonomy, whereby aesthetic practices of negativity in contemporary paintings and visual art practices effect their own aesthetic and disaggregating 'deconstructions', even as they register the impact of deconstruction in how they do so. These insights enable me to suggest that aesthetic negativity and

deconstruction are two competing genres of a discourse of negativity, which are themselves embroiled in an irresolvable and irreducible inter-relation.

Although this discussion registers the indubitable value of the aesthetic practices of negativity, it is also driven by a curiosity to find out how paintings deliver such practices of negativity. The next chapter extends these insights into a discussion of how the contemporary paintings of Rosa Lee and Therese Oulton both engage and resist the deconstructive imperatives of Irigaray's feminist and philosophical project, called *écriture féminine*, which also invites practices of negativity.



## Chapter Four

### ***Ecriture feminine* and aesthetic practices of negativity.**

#### **5.1. Introduction.**

This chapter explores the relation between the negativities of *écriture féminine* and the aesthetic negativity of sublime irresolution in contemporary (feminist) paintings. This discussion challenges some of the deconstructive methods of *écriture féminine*, which conflate textual and aesthetic practices of negativity with the feminine. This chapter demonstrates how selected contemporary paintings by Rosa Lee and Therese Oulton record the impact of *écriture féminine* within the modalities of sublime irresolution, even as they invite aesthetic specific practices of negativity.

In negotiating the relation between a deconstructive discourse of *écriture féminine* and aesthetic negativity in painting, this chapter deploys the dialectical method mobilised throughout this study. This interpretive method presumes that poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution are aesthetic practices of negativity which de-subjectify the viewer by disabling conceptual mastery, but do so from within the boundaries of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic negativity from this perspective has an experiential and de-subjectifying autonomy which cannot be appropriated to the positivities of understanding, including that of a deconstructive supplement or a feminist politics. We engage the positivities of understanding as a second order practice insofar as we are able, for example, to distinguish differences between the political negativities of the feminine and aesthetic practices of negativity. *Écriture féminine*, like Derrida's deconstruction, refuses such a dialectics, and disrupts phallogocentric assumptions in philosophical texts by conflating a politics of the feminine with deconstructive and aesthetic practices of negativity.

Even if this thesis challenges the methods of *écriture féminine*, it also values a deconstructive and feminist political project. My argument is not that paintings challenge phallogocentric values, but that aesthetic practices of negativity cannot be conflated with a politics of the feminine. Insofar as aesthetic practices of

negativity are overwhelmed by such a politics, feminist deconstructive theory erodes, and degrades, the specificity of paintings and visual art practices. Against such an outcome this study preserves the distinction between aesthetic negativity and a politics of *écriture féminine*. To do so is to insist that the disruptions of paintings cannot be subsumed into the deconstructively appropriate understandings we bring to aesthetic experience.

## **5.2. *Écriture féminine*.**

This chapter takes Irigaray's essay *Speaking of Immemorial Waters* in her book *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, translated by Gillian C. Gill in 1991, as exemplary of a deconstructive and feminist *écriture féminine*. *Speaking of Immemorial Waters*, like Nietzsche's and Derrida's deconstructive texts discussed earlier, disrupts a traditional philosophical style of argument with a poetic, feminine and deconstructive style of writing. *Écriture féminine* is associated with the feminist writings of Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray<sup>1</sup>, and to some extent with Julia Kristeva's notion of a disruptive and feminised semiotic, but also developed elsewhere<sup>2</sup>. *Écriture féminine* presupposes an essential feminine language which deconstructs phallogocentric assumptions by "posing plurality over against unity, multitudes of meaning as against single, fixed meaning, diffuseness as against instrumentality. That is to say whereas Western discourse - 'the masculine' - tends to limit meaning by operating a linear and instrumental syntax, a feminine language would be more open, would set up multiplicities of meaning" (Annette Kuhn in Felski 1989, 32).

According to Christine Battersby, an Irigarayan feminine aesthetics, (in contrast to a masculine aesthetics), involves jamming the 'theoretical machinery' of a hegemonic phallogocentric discourse of art and painting, which preserves the otherness of the feminine. For a female optics and topography

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<sup>1</sup>According to Toril Moi the term *écriture féminine* is linked to Cixous' disruptive, poetic and feminine style of writing, which derives from Derrida's notion of *differance*. Similarly, Irigaray's engagement with *differance* is identified as "le parler femme, or 'womanspeak'" (Moi 1985, 144). However, for the purposes of this study, and in keeping with the proliferation of the term *écriture féminine* in subsequent deconstructive feminist writing, this term *écriture féminine*, designates an entire field of feminist textual and sexual politics emanating from deconstruction.

<sup>2</sup>For example see Joanna Zylinska's *Decriture féminine: the discourse of the feminine sublime* in *On Spiders, Cyborgs and Being Scared: The Feminine and the Sublime* and Andrea Duncan's *This phenomenological écriture* in *The Feminine Case: Jung, Aesthetics and Creative Process* eds. Tessa Adams and Andrea Duncan.

"involves a different relationship to time and space. Irigaray opposes an optics that privileges straight lines, particles and clean-cut identities. Instead she proffers a morphology of the female body, structured by gradation, shadows, flows and intensive magnitudes." (Battersby in Deepwell 1995, 131).

Irigaray's feminine aesthetics, like deconstruction, disrupts boundaries between the personal and the political, a politics of the feminine and negative aesthetics, aesthetic experience and philosophical understanding, the body of the artist and the artwork, craft and high-art, to name but a few. It is an aesthetics that knows no boundary. It is a 'sublime' negative aesthetics that will not submit to rational understanding, nor service a metaphysics of presence (of the integrated and phallogocentric subject), nor indeed traditional aesthetics. This is a negative and feminine aesthetics 'to come'.

This conflation of traditional oppositions, as the articulation of an essential feminine imaginary/aesthetic, is also a very precise strategy which not only resembles a deconstructive master-narrative, but also deconstructs this, in the service of a disruptive mistress-narrative. *Ecriture feminine*, from this Irigarayan perspective, inspired a generation of feminist art theorists seeking to ground and identify an aesthetics of the feminine. In this regard Joanna Zylińska's book *On Spiders, Cyborgs and being Scared: The Feminine and the Sublime* is a particular articulation of *écriture féminine*. This book collapses distinctions between the negativities of the feminine and the sublime, and the deconstructive practicing of negativity. Zylińska calls this process *decriture féminine*. Such sublime interventions are textual practices which 'retreat' into metaphor and the poetic. *Decriture féminine* does not capitalise on difference and embraces

"femininity as a mark of non-binary difference ... it challenges the ideas of clarity, mastery, presence. Celebrating the event, immersion or plunge, it collapses distinctions between theory and practice, or primary and secondary texts. ... Contradictory, insubordinate and a-rational, *decriture féminine* is also a discourse of transgression. ... The self no longer remains 'at certain distances' from its source of enticement and fascination, but rather embarks on a fearful encounter with the other who poses a threat

to its integrity but who also offers a promise of bliss (*jouissance*)” (Zylinska 2001, 77).

This sublime and textual encounter is not predicated on an economy of exchange, but in terms of an economy of the gift. Such gifting invites Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference, as an amorous body-to-body encounter, which disrupts the standard subject/object, mind/body, aesthetic/ethical oppositions. Instead the feminine sublime is a ‘poethics’ “the conjunction of poetry and philosophy” (ibid). This is an ethics of “uncertainty and undecidability” (ibid). As suggested before *decriture feminine* is also a version of Derrida’s infinitely disseminating master trope, the *passe-partout*. This *decriture feminine* sublime inhabits excess, the everyday, alterity, heterogeneity and the minuscule. It scrambles distinctions that would sustain the differences between the aesthetic and the philosophical, or between the feminine and practices of negativity. *Decriture feminine*, like the de-subjectifying processes called poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution, can only be experienced as an event as a

“writing of an impossible description” (ibid, 37) and “understood as an occurrence, a flash, or a permanent beginning which undermines the continuity of being with its immediacy and its constant return to a zero point” (ibid, 38).

This deconstructive and feminine sublime infests a traditional aesthetics of the sublime with an ethics of alterity. Such an event collapses the distancing techniques of a metaphysics of presence and refigures the sublime as an effect of a new kind of theory/practice called the feminine sublime. I suggest that Zylinska’s account of this *decriture feminine* presents it as a philosophical supplement, not a textual practicing of negativity. It synthesises a negative aesthetics of the feminine with a politics of the feminine, and displaces aesthetic experience into deconstructively appropriate understanding.

Against a deconstructive discourse of *écriture feminine* (which includes *decriture feminine*) this thesis challenges the idea that there is an essential feminine language of painting, which operates as the negative inversion of a supposedly universal masculine language of painting. Negative aesthetics, I suggest, are not the preserve of the feminine. The aesthetic specific negativities of poetic

ambiguity and sublime irresolution theorised in this thesis, involve signifying processes which disable conceptual mastery irrespective of one's gender or cultural identity. From this perspective, aesthetic experience *can be* gendered by importing a conceptually available supplement which gives such experience a particular kind of identity. Such supplements do not invite aesthetic practices of negativity, for these supplements engage a negative politics of the feminine that is distinct from aesthetic negativity. This thesis consistently presents the relation between aesthetic negativity and the politics of the feminine as a dialectical one. For example, the associations between the feminine and decoration, or between the feminine and a morphology of flows, gradations and intensities are discursive constructs and are not informed by any essential link between a politics of the feminine and negative aesthetics, but by a set of discursive interests which strategically link the negativities of the feminine to those of textual or aesthetic disruption.

It is from this dialectical perspective that this investigation approaches Irigaray's *Speaking of Immemorial Waters* as a text which employs a deconstructive method that disrupts phallogocentric assumptions. Here style and politics are conflated in the service of doing philosophy. This is a text that is both a practicing of negativity, and a theory about that practice: it is both the 'work' and a philosophical supplement to that deconstructive 'work'. This deconstructive text addresses the phallogocentric assumptions of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and deconstructs these by bringing forward the repressed and essential 'languages' of the feminine: fluidity, openness, amorousness, mimicry, poetic unruliness and multiplicity. This text collapses the distinctions between the political negativities of the feminine and poetic/sublime style.

We have seen how Derrida effects a similar collapse by associating the feminine with a quasi-poetic style, via the figure of '*Nietzsche's woman*' which delivers the reader to an agonistics of undecidability. Irigaray's *Speaking of Immemorial Waters* invites a textual practicing of negativity and a feminist politics of becoming, whereby the negativities of the feminine are rendered positive<sup>3</sup>. Even if Irigaray's text invites a textual practice of negativity, this textuality is to some

<sup>3</sup>This political practicing of negativity is indebted to Hegel's dialectic, in which contradictions may be overturned via a process whereby the negativities of the feminine are rendered positive. This dialectical process is an address of identity politics, not of textual deconstruction.

extent, available to the positivities of understanding. For in struggling with the indeterminacies of this text we can stabilise such practices of negativity with supplementary conceptual understanding, which enables us to understand the philosophical implications of such practices of negativity. Any reader of this text may well experience the negativity of this lyrical, amorous, feminine, deconstructive and poetic style of writing which disables understanding, but such readers are also invited to understand the discursive meanings and philosophical/political consequences of those meanings and that style of writing. The following section is an attempt to understand how Irigaray's philosophical and deconstructive text conflates, or doubles, the negativities of the feminine with the negativities of the poetic and the sublime.

### **5.3. Speaking of Immemorial Waters**

*Speaking of Immemorial Waters* is a critique of Nietzsche's book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: a book for everyone and no one*, in which Irigaray exposes the phallogocentric 'violence' of this book, by means of an outright tirade against its central themes: the eternal return, the abyss, and the will to power. This critique is delivered as a feminine and amorous mimicry of the style of Nietzsche's book, which is itself written in an allusive, poetic and metaphorical style. Irigaray installs an alternative, and feminised, moment of becoming into the assumptions of the phallogocentric text she has just critiqued, through a fluid and watery feminine poetics which is positive, multiple, mobile and heterogeneous. This is a philosophical and deconstructive manoeuvre which conflates a poetic style with the feminine. It is this doubling of these negativities that deconstructs the phallogocentric assumptions of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

The idea of doubling is central to Irigaray's philosophy, and according to Margaret Whitford, this philosophy is intentionally contradictory, where differences between the sexes are emphasised because "woman is not self-identical ... As the figure of the 'two lips', she is neither one nor two" (Whitford 1991, 138). For example, Irigaray uses hybrid terms like the 'other of the other', or the 'neither one nor two' as undecidable metaphors in which the reader is exposed to both a philosophical argument and a feminised, amorous and poetic experience. This is a philosophical exercise which uses (and abuses) a poetic style (and its non-philosophical negativity) in the service of feminist

deconstruction. Jonathan Culler illustrates this point by quoting from Derrida's *Marges*, that the initial reversal of hierarchical oppositions is the first step in this process which must be followed by another which "through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, (which) put(s) into practice a reversal of the classical opposition *and* a general displacement of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide a means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticizes" (Derrida in Culler 1983, 85 -86).

Irigaray disrupts Nietzsche's text, through a form of writing that doubles and proliferates oppositions. For *Speaking of Immemorial Waters* deconstructs the phallogocentric assumptions of *Zarathustra*, whilst invoking the generative energies of a feminine becoming. This text is both a textual practicing of negativity and a deconstructive feminist supplement to that practice. As such it engages a feminist politics of sexual difference which maintains the differences between the sexes, and actively promotes the idea of a becoming feminine imaginary<sup>4</sup>.

The Irigarayan idea of the feminine imaginary might be understood as a hold-all term which encompasses imagination, myth, discourse, embodiment and psychic construction, in which certain identities are produced and reinforced<sup>5</sup>. Irigaray is quite clear about what constitutes a masculine imaginary, as almost all existing western cultural, aesthetic, philosophical forms and forces are constructed by it. Its chief character is identified as an 'economy of the same' in which woman is the 'Other of the Same'. In contrast to this masculine economy for Irigaray a feminine imaginary is still yet to be developed. It is a becoming imaginary in which 'woman' is "*neither the one nor two*. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified as one person or two. She resists all adequate definition. Further she has no proper name." (Irigaray 1985, 26). If a phallogocentric<sup>6</sup> aesthetic imaginary is the current norm in Western society, a feminine imaginary is 'still to come'.

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<sup>4</sup>Irigaray draws on both Freud and Lacan's accounts of the imaginary, a term which applies to all embodied subjects, and which Elizabeth Grosz defines as "an internalized image or map of the meaning that the body has for the subject, for others in its social world, and for the symbolic order conceived of in its generality (that is, for culture as a whole)" (Grosz 1989, xviii)

<sup>5</sup>See Margaret Whitford's discussion of Irigaray's feminine imaginary in her book *Philosophy in the Feminine* 1991.

<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth Grosz identifies phallogocentrism as a term in which "patriarchal systems of representation always submit women to models and images defined for and by men" (Grosz 1989, xx).

Where becoming is a privileged term in Irigaray's philosophy, so too is the idea of disruption. For "the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which women would be the subject or the object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself ... (and where) ... the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and the negative image of the subject, they should signify with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side" (Irigaray 1958, 78). "It involves speaking from a position in the middle of the binaries (the so called 'excluded middle'), affirming both poles while undoing their polarisation" (Grosz 1989, 132).

Margaret Whitford illustrates the workings of Derrida's deconstruction by claiming that once the violence of the hierarchies has been exposed or recognised

"one attempts to prevent the opposition from merely reasserting itself by introducing some term or mechanism which prevents the field from returning to its original state. One can call these terms *indecidables*, undecideables, that is to say, terms which cannot be said to be one or other of the previous terms. .... The most familiar of the undecideables is of course *differance*, which can mean both difference (spatial) and deferment (temporal). However, to prevent the movement or the play which continuously displaces metaphysical oppositions from solidifying or ossifying by its attachment to a single term, Derrida uses ... different 'nicknames' for *differance* ... arche-writing, dissemination, supplement, parergon, hymen, trace, iterability and so on" (Whitford 1991, 127).

I suggest that Irigaray's *Speaking of Immemorial Waters* deconstructs Nietzsche's text by 'jamming' an undecidable, namely a poetic style<sup>7</sup>, as an amorous mimicry of Nietzsche's own poetic style into the business of doing feminist philosophy, whilst undoing the assumptions of phallogocentric philosophy.

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<sup>7</sup> Irigaray's deconstructive use of a poetic style is not the same as the quasi-poetic style in Derrida's *Spurs: Nietzsche's woman*. Derrida's quasi-poetic style self-consciously disrupts the aesthetic properties of the poetic by rendering it philosophical and critical. Irigaray's text also doubles a poetic style with the business of doing feminist philosophy, but does so in such a way that infuses this style with an affective quality that exceeds argument.



For example, in *Speaking Of Immemorial Waters*, Irigaray writes in the first person, as an 'I' who addresses 'you' (*Zarathustra/Nietzsche*), which sets up an intimate address, from which she castigates him as a lover might do.

"I am thrown into despair by this irresolvable oscillation ... But isn't this your game to ceaselessly to bring the outside inward" (Irigaray 1991, 12), and "your whole will, your eternal recurrence, are those anything more than the dream of one who neither wants to have been born, nor continue to be born, at every instance of a female other ... Eternal is the joy that carries with it the joy of annihilation, the affirmation of destruction" (Irigaray 1991, 27). ... "Such is the failure of the man who does not make his own boundary out of the skin of the other. He is turned back to the other side of the limit. A catastrophe that would have no place to be if he obeyed the music of that female other. If he let her carry him along without forcing her to follow his rhythm alone" (Irigaray 1991, 36).

In her critique of the sublime abyss she castigates Nietzsche for his terror of the fluid, multiple feminine other; a sublime terror which requires *Zarathustra* to sustain the distinctions between self and other and to remain perilously above the fluid, multiple, ever-evolving and immemorial waters of the feminine sublime.

"So it happens that you believe that between the one and the other is the void. The effect of difference is so powerful that its misperception reams our bottomless chasms. ... You bustle around so much just to keep on the move ... And the lure of the void under your steps you respond to by trying to make yourself lighter than you are. So that you don't plummet like a stone. And you hold so tightly to your circle as if it stopped you falling! Turning endlessly above the abyss, as if finding in that movement a fragile equilibrium" (Irigaray 1991, 44-45).

These themes are repeated again and again in this text, even as the fluid and lyrical style<sup>8</sup> of writing, as a philosophical strategy, mimics a poetic style.

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<sup>8</sup>Elizabeth Weed notes that Irigaray's disruption of the logic of western and phallogocentric syntax via the figure of 'woman' is not new, and her use of style is a cunning and strategic problematization of intelligibility, whereby the reader is both taken into the text, but also unable master of it. "For it is precisely the thematizable, the demonstrable, the formalizable, as she says in *This Sex*, that one must write against" (Weed 1994, 86). Irigaray's project however extends beyond Derridaen

Irigaray's use of poetic style which is feminised, is a deconstructive device, which jams "the theoretical machinery" of both traditional and Nietzschean philosophy, even as it prevents a violent hierarchy from reappearing in the text, one which would reinstall another binary opposition between Irigaray's text, and the text she is critiquing. Here a poetic style operates as an 'undecidable', laced with feminine becoming, textual multiplicity, and sublime excess.

Irigaray's deployment of *écriture féminine* is both consonant with and resistant to Derrida's figure 'Nietzsche's Woman'. *Speaking of Immemorial Waters* enables Irigaray to speak as a woman<sup>9</sup>, and not like a woman. This is a political practicing of feminine negativity, not only a textual practicing of negativity. Like Derrida's deconstructive texts, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* and *The Colossal*, *Speaking of Immemorial Waters* is characterised by an openness to multiplicity, fluidity and ever-proliferating difference, but unlike Derrida's texts it does not only challenge the reader with textual indeterminacy, but also presents the reader with a politics of the feminine. Irigaray's text thus invites double practices of negativity, the negativities of textual/aesthetic indeterminacy and of a politics of the feminine. The former is deconstructive, whereas the latter engages something of an Hegelian dialectic<sup>10</sup> whereby the negativities of the feminine are rendered positive. Here the positivity of the feminine is secured, unlike deconstructive practices which sustain an undecidability between positivity and negativity.

This textual politics, or *écriture féminine*, enables Irigaray to detail a version of the feminine sublime. In the section titled *Her Ultimate Depth Never Returns To The Light Of The Day*, Irigaray writes:

"And the sea can shed shimmering scales indefinitely. Her depths peel off into innumerable, thin shining layers. And each is the equal to the other as it catches a reflection and lets it go. As it preserves and blurs. As it captures the glinting play of light. As it sustains mirages. Multiple and still far too numerous for the pleasure of the eye, which is lost in that host of

undecidability into that of a female positivity, which in turn is itself rendered undecidable, as the operation of style.

<sup>9</sup>Strictly speaking Irigaray invites not *écriture féminine*, but *le parler femme*.

<sup>10</sup> Chapter One sketched this becoming process as an effect of dialectical negativity. Hegel's discussion of the master/slave dialectic in the book titled *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, details a dialectical process in which the contradictions between oppositions may be overcome, because the internal relationship between positivity and negativity can be rearticulated.

sparkling surfaces. And with no end in sight. And the surfaces are all equally deep and superficial. Unless one of them is made into a bridge that holds the person up, prevents him from sinking, that crosses over, but never penetrates" (Irigaray 1991, 46) ... "No rapture, no perch is greater than the sea. And man has still to come who will live that love out beyond the reach of any port. Letting go of his rock, his ship, his island, and even that last drop of oil on water, and so that he can feel the intoxication of such vastness" (Irigaray 1991, 47).

Irigaray thus deconstructs the phallogentric assumptions of Nietzsche's (sublime) text *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and simultaneously repositions the sublime as an effect of infinite, rapturous, amorous, watery and becoming feminine sublime. In so doing she invites a particular feminist supplement to the aesthetic category of the sublime. This is a sublimity not characterised by the will to power, the abyss and masculine resentment, or a masculine imaginary structured by an economy of the same (of exchange), but by a vast, affective, seductive, non-hierarchical, loving feminine imaginary situated in an economy of the gift, of the 'other of the other'. The openness and positivity of this operation which delivers this sublimity, is associated with a feminine imaginary, to which 'man' (including Nietzsche/ *Zarathustra*) is 'still to come'.

#### **5.4. Deconstruction and dialectics.**

The interpretive method employed in this written thesis cannot invite practices of negativity, even as this method enables us to make distinctions between different practices of negativity, and to understand the differences between aesthetic practices of negativity and deconstructive philosophical textual practices of negativity. Indeed, this method allows us to understand the discursive competition between philosophical deconstruction and *écriture féminine*, and aesthetic practices of negativity in painting and visual art practices.

The previous section offered an interpretation of how Irigaray's text invites the reader into a deconstructive practicing of negativity, via textual processes which have no boundary, and which like the sea are infinite, mobile, becoming, feminine and sublime. These are the 'immemorial waters' that will not be

contained or mastered by phallogentric discourse<sup>11</sup>. These are eternally becoming waters, indebted to Nietzschean and Hegelian becomings, but not confined to a masculinist politics of resentment<sup>12</sup>. This is a sublime event structured by a love 'to come'<sup>13</sup>, and the articulation of a feminine imaginary, not contaminated by a masculine economy of the same, but opened to the multiplicity of non-hierarchical difference, to love, all of which might be available to men, but whose 'home' is with the feminine. This feminine sublime is a discursive possibility which privileges the feminine, but which also keeps the edges between oppositions blurred in the interests of the figure of the 'neither one nor two'. This is a deconstructive operation, where the differences between the practicing of negativity and an understanding of that negativity, are unclear.

The ensuing discussion will explore how the contemporary painting practices of Rosa Lee and Therese Oulton engage the negativities of a politics of the feminine and the negativities of aesthetic specific signifying processes. This discussion presumes that these negativities are not reducible to one another. For example, a decorative style of painting, insofar as it is associated with the negativities of the feminine, registers a particular historical and discursive set of interests unambiguously available to understanding. In this regard, Lee's paintings engage feminine decoration, but disrupt the traditional assumption that such decoration is confined to the negativities of the feminine, by installing decoration into the positivities high art. This is a conceptually available, and dialectical manoeuvre, one which reverses masculine/ feminine and high-art/craft binaries so that the negativity of denigrated feminine histories is both preserved and rearticulated in terms of a positive, and becoming feminine imaginary<sup>14</sup> and a feminist politics of identity. This dialectical operation engages the positivities of understanding, and is a subjectifying event that is quite different to the de-subjectifying effects of poetic ambiguity and sublime

<sup>11</sup> By developing an account of the link between the feminine and the fluidity of water, Irigaray challenges Nietzsche's fear of water, his elemental love of the sublime abyss, and of eternal recurrence.

<sup>12</sup> Ressentiment is a Nietzschean term, to be distinguished from resentment. Ressentiment is a negative form of the 'will to power', insofar as it maintains fixed hierarchies, between good and evil for example.

<sup>13</sup> Frances Oppel's article titled '*Speaking of Immemorial Waters*': Irigaray with Nietzsche in *Nietzsche, Feminism and Political Theory*, ed. Paul Patton, offers a similar interpretation.

<sup>14</sup> Rosemary Betterton in her essay titled *Bodies in the Work: The Aesthetics and Politics of Women's Non-representational Painting*, details how some contemporary women abstract painters, mobilize strategies like mimicry, the critique of binarism, the celebration of the feminine, and the interrogation of female embodiment in the interests of the articulation of a feminine imaginary addressing gendered power relations.

irresolution. These insights oppose the deconstructive methods of Irigaray's *écriture féminine* sketched above, which blur the boundaries between oppositions in the interests of an indeterminate 'neither one or two'.

Selected contemporary feminist writing<sup>16</sup> draws on the insights of *écriture féminine* in an effort to theorise a feminine aesthetics of negativity<sup>17</sup>. Irigaray's deconstructive model is powerful and influential. But there is also 'violence' to it. Irigaray's *Speaking of Immemorial Waters* not only conflates the negativities of the feminine with those of deconstructive textual disruption, but like Derrida's texts discussed in the third chapter, also erodes or degrades, the autonomy of aesthetic experience. Irigaray follows Derrida by strategically violating settled norms which sustain the boundaries between philosophical understanding and aesthetic practices of negativity. In eroding this boundary, Irigaray challenges the supposedly phallogocentric and universal identities of both. Following Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz claims

"when poetry is separated from prose on the one hand and non-fiction or theory on the other, the self-image of phallogocentric knowledge is preserved. It is only when the poetic text threatens to insert itself into the very heart of 'serious' theoretical writings, blurring the boundaries between poetry, fiction and knowledge, that discourses more amenable to

<sup>16</sup>See Christine Battersby *Just Jamming: Irigaray, painting and psychoanalysis in New feminist art criticism*, in which she demonstrates how Irigaray's feminine aesthetics disrupts the binarist assumptions of Lacanian psychoanalysis by deploying a feminine optics based on female bodies. Janis Jefferies *Text and Textiles: weaving across the borderlines* details how textiles, associated with the feminine, disrupt the traditional binary between craft and high art. Hilary Robinson in *Border Crossings: womanliness, body, representation* makes the case that art works made by women register an essential embodiedness that articulates a feminine imaginary to come. Indeed the she-artist is the site of becoming, of the 'more than' and the 'inbetween'; all operating as emblems of a feminine deconstructive sublime. All these texts can be found in *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical strategies* ed. Katy Deepwell.

<sup>17</sup>See Griselda Pollock's chapter title *Gleaning in history or coming after/behind the reapers: the feminine, the stranger and the matrix in the work of Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger*, in *generations and geographies in the visual arts: feminist reading*. Here Pollock details a different feminist negative aesthetics, in which a sub-symbolic register, called the matrixial, is both a subjectifying moment and a filter for "archaic sensations and the most archaic forms of meaning, pictograms" (Pollock 1996, 268). Although this is another version of Kristeva's maternal semiotic, this matrixial register is another manifestation of *écriture féminine* in painting. Andrea Duncan's essay titled *This phenomenological écriture* in *The Feminine Case: Jung, Aesthetics and Creative Process*, synthesises Kristevan and Irigarayan insights with those of Jung to make the point that paintings register an archaic relation inaugurated by our phenomenal relation to our mothers. Such feminine negative aesthetics in painting, like Irigaray's essay *Speaking of Immemorial Waters*, is an articulation of an anima consciousness. Although also available to men, this phenomenological *écriture* has a special relevance for women, according to Duncan, insofar as this fluid and lucid domain of the feminine offers a renewal of a sublime relationship between mother and daughter, long buried by cultural matricide.

the positive inscription of the female body may be established" (Grosz 1989, 130).

Here poetry is overtly feminised and pressed into the service of feminist deconstruction. Irigaray also challenges the supposed autonomy of knowledges which purport to be universal. She states that when a language "presents itself as universal, and which in fact is produced by men only, is this not what maintains the alienation and exploitation of women in and by society?" (Irigaray in Grosz 1989, 128).

The appropriation of poetic style into deconstructive philosophy in the interests of disrupting the traditional dialectical relation which sustains the differences between aesthetic experience and understanding, may well service Irigaray's feminist deconstructive project. However, it rather limits the possibilities for painters who wish to retain aesthetic specific practices of negativity in painting, even as they might also be interested in challenging phallogocentric assumptions and developing a feminist discourse of desire. Irigarayan *écriture féminine* sets up a prescriptive norm for feminist art practice which involves rejecting traditional aesthetics practices, because of their purportedly contaminating phallogocentrism and aesthetic autonomy.

Against this deconstructive norm, the dialectical method deployed in this thesis, sustains the distinctions between the political negativities of the feminine and the aesthetic specific negativities of poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution. This dialectical method presumes that aesthetic negativity has a certain discursive and structural autonomy. Aesthetic practices of negativity from this perspective are not reducible to the positivities of understanding, even if we are able to understand something about them and their differences. This thesis thus challenges deconstructive methods which degrade aesthetic practices of negativity by conflating them with other negativities, or stereotyping them as instruments of a phallogocentric discourse. Such degradation<sup>18</sup> has been grist to the mill of deconstruction also interested in subverting the de-subjectifying effects of negative aesthetics.

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<sup>18</sup>Therese Oulton makes a similar point where she criticises deconstruction for 'cleaning out' the language of painting. She claims "You don't get a clean language: you've got a debased form" (Lee 1987, 22).

Rita Felski's book *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, published in 1989, makes the claim that a feminist aesthetics can only be a political project theorised as an adjunct to feminist theory in general. For Felski aesthetic meaning is constructed in terms of a broader and intertextual network of styles, genres and conventions. Felski's book is critical of a trajectory of what she calls negative aesthetics, which finds its feminist articulation in '*écriture féminine*'. This articulation of a subversive, deconstructive critique of patriarchy, Felski considers to be an impossible aesthetics of the feminine: the conflation of the political and the aesthetic.

However, where Felski is generally opposed to a discourse of negativity, my research project takes negativity as its central theme: the aesthetic specific negativities of poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution, the philosophical negativities of dialectics and deconstruction and their political and discursive effects, and the negativities of the feminine and of female experience. The following discussion of Rosa Lee's paintings is an exploration of how this practice registers both the negativities of a feminist politics of identity and the negativities of the aesthetic specific operations of sublime irresolution, and explores how these irreducible practices of negativity exist in a dialectical relation to one another.

### **5.5. A feminine sublime.**

The title of Rosa Lee's painting *Speculum No.7*, invites association with the title of Irigaray's book *Speculum of the Other Woman* translated by Gillian C. Gill. and published in 1985. Irigaray's book sketches a feminine imaginary which exists beyond the specularization of a patriarchal economy of the same. *Speculum of the Other Woman* registers a feminine imaginary and operates as a critique of the tradition of western philosophy by exploring the essential differences between women and men. In this text Irigaray reinterprets the western philosophical tradition from the perspective of women so that the negativity of the feminine is rendered positive.

I suggest that Lee's painting, like Irigaray's *Speaking Immemorial Waters*, engages a feminine imaginary and a politics of the feminine, and the autonomy

of aesthetic experience<sup>19</sup>. Lee's *Speculum No 7*. 1990 (Figure 20) presents the viewer with puzzles. Is it an abstraction, or is it figurative? Betterton suggests that this painting confounds meaning through a process in which a

“geometrically generated structure resists the assumptions of the intuitive nature of creativity, but at the same time underpins a surface which is detailed and decorative. Against the search for purity, closure and control, the contained object and the finished statement in minimalist painting, her work offers openness and the willingness to let the impurity of life spill into paint.”(Betterton 1996, 103).

Even if Betterton's account of this painting registers an inability to close an experience of this work with a conceptual supplement, it does sketch a discursive field that this painting is embedded in: decoration, minimalism and negative aesthetics.

In this regard Lee's *Speculum No.7* mobilises a consistent trope of minimalism, that of repetition<sup>20</sup>, but this repetition is rendered open, impure and excessive through its painterly qualities, which not only sustain the materiality of paint, but where repetition is rendered decorative<sup>21</sup>. Neither decoration, nor repetition are innately gendered, but in so figuring repetition as decorative, this painting invites a gendered reading, whereby such repetitive, intricate, controlled 'embroidery' as paint, signifies oppressed female histories and repressive

<sup>19</sup>Lee also distances herself from a frame which would attempt to capture her work only in terms of a feminist politics. She claims “I have become more interested in establishing or searching for patterns in the work ... more insistent rhythms, than about mere decoration, the superfluous detail which earlier paintings were grappling with”. She continues “In the end, meaning is embodied in the activity. What I know or can predict gives way to what is unfolding in front of me. The desire for both complication and simplicity. The slow, concrete building up of layers, the sense of furrowing backwards into the strands, the establishing of a rhythmic kind of progression - a routine, the juxtaposition of colours which end up denying themselves (Todd Gallery Catalogue 2000).

<sup>20</sup>Yayoi Kusama's visual art practice deploys similar strategies, whereby through excessive repetition, Kusama disrupts, feminises or indeed even makes 'hysterical' the hard edge, controlled and masculinist protocols, of for example, Donald Judd's Minimalism. Judd was Kusama's "first boyfriend" (Hoptmann 2000, 11). Kusama synthesised this excessive feminised Minimalism with traditional Japanese *Nihonga* painting and with Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism, in the service of a libidinal and obsessive painting and sculptural practice which served as a sublimation for her obsessional neurosis. In an interview with Damien Hirst she claims “I have been suffering from this disease for more than fifty years. Painting pictures has been a therapy for me to overcome the illness” (Hoptman 2000, 136). If Kusama's painting practice is born of individual experience, such experience also bears the marks and scars of being a woman, and of deploying such negativities in the service of rendering the negativities of the feminine, positive.

<sup>21</sup>See Margaret Walters, Rosa Lee: *Painting as Lace-Making in Modern Painters* Spring 1992. Also *Warped: Painting and the Feminine*, Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham 2001, and *Permission to Speak*: Worcester City Museum and Art Gallery Jan 1969.





*Figure 20: Rosa Lee. Speculum No7. 1990*

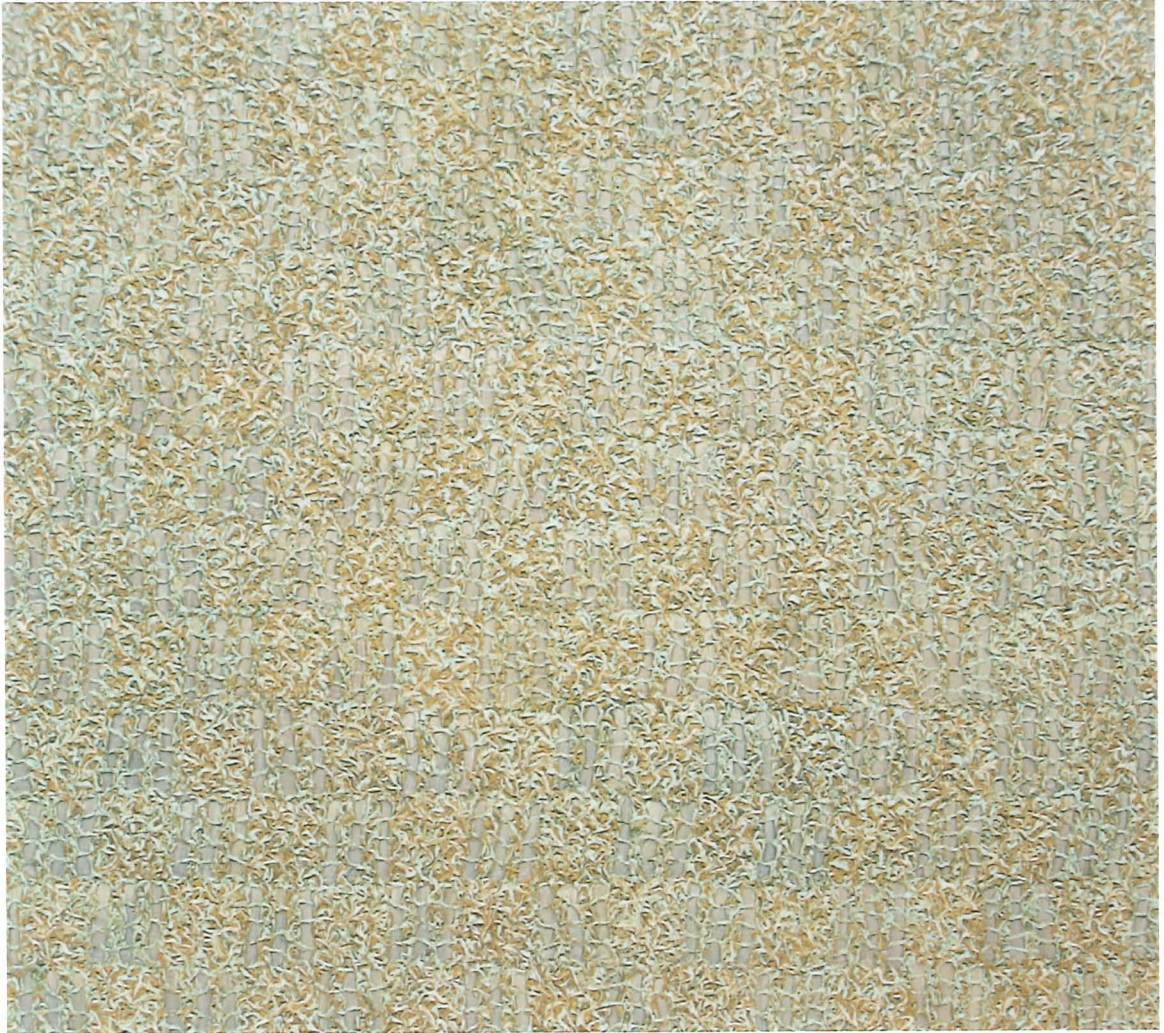
feminine crafts<sup>22</sup>. This painting thus 'jams' the negativities of the feminine craft and decoration into the protocols of high-art minimalism. Such disruptions are a political and clearly understood strategy, one which renders the negativities of feminine and decorative craft, positive.

Yet as Betterton notes, in *Speculum No.7* meaning proliferates and exceeds understanding. Such aesthetic disaggregations of meaning register as a particular type of experience which challenges or critiques conceptual mastery. Such a negative aesthetics is not feminine, but following Adorno, is an immanent form of criticality that displaces conceptual mastery and political understanding. I suggest that this painting both invites the positivities of understanding a feminist politics, and an aesthetic practicing of negativity which exceeds such understanding. These two moments exist in a dialectical and irreducible relation to one another.

Lee's painting titled *Screen 1998 (Figure 21)* likewise positions the viewer between two registers: aesthetic experience and political understanding. The screen that this painting is, codes both a rigid and mathematical underlying structure, even as its repetitions shimmer and mobilize the eye, so that visual mastery is disabled. In this regard, the distinction between 'figure' and 'ground' is problematised so that the viewer is confused about the status of the rigid and blocked matrix. These unresolvable oppositions are however displaced by an infinitely mobile and shimmering surface, whose own identity is unclear. Is this an organising or dissolving matrix underneath an infinitely proliferating 'skin/fabric' of paint? Questions arise as to whether this is a knitted, embroidered or painted surface, even as its painterliness is evident. And given that it is paint, how can paint be so woven? These unresolved oppositions, secrets, displacements and questions invite a sublime practicing of negativity.

We may try to understand this experience of sublime negativity, by attending to its modalities. For this is an experience of sublime irresolution with no sublime cut, or rupture or thrill. This is a sublimity of the minuscule, the secret, the

<sup>22</sup>Lee associates the decorative with women when she says "those humble arts, known sometimes as 'crafts' - borne of necessity, diligence, a desire to enrich through embellishment and adornment - all those anonymous women through time, all those hours dedicated to clothing and feeding and embroidering, making, bending and sweeping." (Lee in *Warped: Painting and the Feminine* curated by Maggie Ayliffe, 2000, 6).



*Figure 21: Rosa Lee. Screen. 1998*



over-elaborated, the obsessive .... not attuned to synthesis, or binary oppositions. It shimmers, pleases and defeats comprehension. We might thus give this experience of sublime negativity an identity, for such a sublime experience with no cut, which situates the viewer within shimmering, obsessive, secretive excess and hovers between painting and embroidery registers a feminine imaginary. Like Irigaray's sublime poetics sketched in *Speaking of Immemorial Waters*, the uncontainable excess registered in *Screen* could be understood as an example of the feminine sublime. It is when we conceptualise such aesthetic experiences, when we attend to the way they are organised, that we give them an identity and a politics.

The distinction between an experience of sublime negativity, and an understanding of the discursive and political implications of these experiences, is made possible by the dialectical interpretive method consistently mobilised throughout this thesis. These two paintings by Rosa Lee can be understood as a feminist deconstruction of the masculinist assumptions of minimalism by figuring decoration as excessive repetition. Furthermore, we might also understand the modality of sublime irresolution employed in Lee's paintings as an example of the feminine sublime. But these understandings are not the same as an aesthetic experience of negativity, which disables understanding.

### **5.6. Recuperating and subverting tradition.**

Rosa Lee, in her 1987 essay titled *Resisting Amnesia: Feminism, Painting and Postmodernism* explores how Therese Oulton's paintings recuperate the traditions of painting and resist philosophical deconstruction. Lee claims that Oulton's paintings are a "questioning of tradition - a renewal through disruption" (Lee 1987, 22).

Likewise, this discussion explores how selected paintings by Therese Oulton both deploy, and subvert, the traditions of western oil painting. For example, Oulton's practice engages a traditional repertoire of painting: the tactile properties of paint, chiaroscuro, the representation of both monumental and minuscule scale, to name a few. It is practice that operates between abstraction and landscape painting. Yet Oulton's practice subverts this traditional repertoire by challenging some of its subjectifying effects by deploying the de-

subjectifying signifying process called sublime irresolution. Oulton's painting practice thus has affinities with deconstruction insofar as it subverts the phallogocentric assumptions of traditional Romantic sublime landscape painting, but its de-subjectifying operations are different to those of deconstructive philosophy.

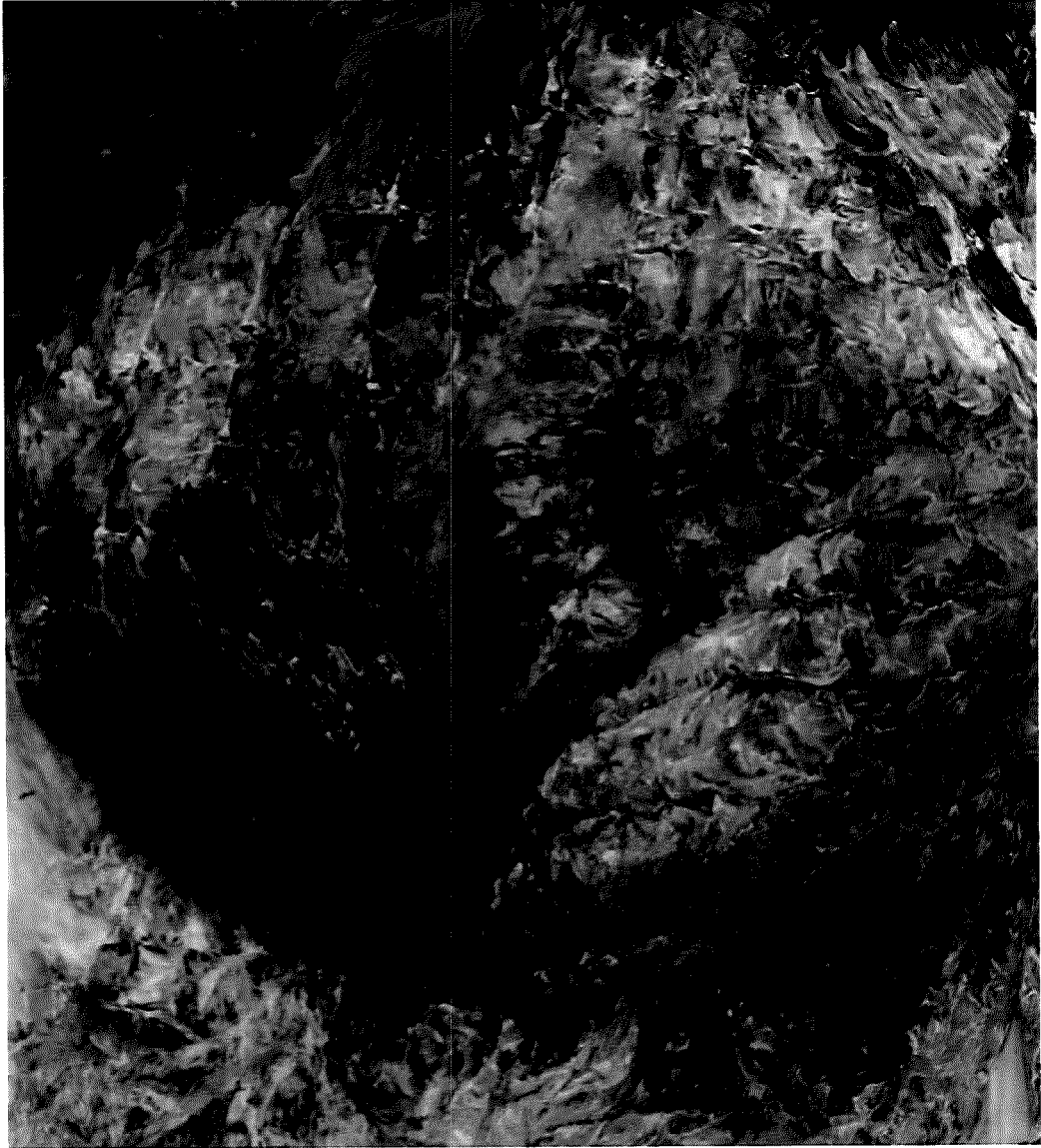
For example, Oulton's painting titled *Dissonance Quartet No.1* 1985 (Figure 22) is not unlike Turner's *The Fall of an Avalanche at Grisons* in its coding of sublime energy. *Dissonance Quartet No.1* is not a representation of anything known<sup>23</sup>, but an abstraction that is not quite abstract, for it still defines space, but a space in which scale is distorted. Even as it intimates the fantastically large, it also insists on its own material facticity, in terms of the repetition of motifs and the small delicately layered brushmarks. Stuart Morgan's review of Oulton's work explores how this disruption works:

"Faced by walls of worked impasto, the viewer struggles for dominance. Inability to tell parts from wholes, to know whether imagery is intentional or accidental ... forces a postponement of consumption. ... Scale is lost: this could be a view down a microscope or a mountain seen from a helicopter. Coordinates jar: the fleshiness of the great Venetians, the apocalypticism of the British Romantic landscape tradition. ... All these planned disjunctions result in an art that heightens and exposes tensions revealed in the work of the eye - tensions between mind and body" (Morgan 1985, 118).

Such practices of negativity in *Dissonance Quartet No.1* install a process of reading which positions the viewer on a sublime threshold. When I interviewed Oulton, she identified this sublime 'edge' as being on the edge of representation, and that this position "tips you out of the known and toward a boundary that you don't wish to approach" (Interview with Lola Frost in September 2004). Oulton's practice, like Turner's, engages the traditional

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<sup>23</sup>Mick Finch identifies this feature of Oulton's practice as 'faktura', a term which insists on the the facticity of painting in itself, where it is not a model for the socio-philosophical. This feature of painting 'in-and-for itself' elides the appropriation of painting to modes of thinking informed by unambiguous understanding. From this we might conclude that Oulton's paintings hover between 'faktura', as painting-in-itself and "painting as representation (which) empowers that which is known prior to making the painting"(Finch 1997, 20).



*Figure 22: Therese Oulton. Dissonance Quartet No.1. 1985*

meanings of the sublime in which nature is rendered awesome and terrifying, but she pushes the boundaries of representation in the interests of a subversive sensibility which does not settle and which perpetually defers and destabilises meaning. This disabling of the positivities of understanding, like deconstructive practices of negativity, produces an agonistics of the sublime. But unlike deconstructive practices, such an agonistics is not produced by degrading the aesthetic specific traditions of painting, but by amplifying them.

In this regard, Oulton's painting titled *Counterfoil* 1987 (Figure 23) resists the scopic mastery of the unimpeded view of the landscape that Turner's painting *The Fall of an Avalanche at Grisons* opens up, in which the viewer is positioned above a catastrophic and sublime event. In Turner's painting scopic mastery is endorsed as an overall view of a natural disaster and the otherness of nature. *Counterfoil*, by comparison, refuses such a bird's eye view and a binarist politics associated with phallogocentric domination<sup>24</sup>. By refusing an all-seeing gaze this painting inaugurates what might be construed as a feminist deconstruction of the phallogocentric assumptions of Turner's painting.

*Counterfoil* is not limited to such a feminist and deconstructive interpretation, insofar as it also engages the viewer in terms of aesthetic specific practices of negativity. For example the painting frustrates the normal expectations of landscape painting by collapsing spatial representation and by presenting the viewer with piecemeal engagements with surface flatness and the viscous thickness of paint. The viewer's gaze moves in and out of focus, attentive to forms which are variations of the same, to surfaces which shift, to the interplay between viscosity and opacity of paint. As Andrew Renton remarks

"contrapuntal rhythms of generation, regeneration, and degeneration are set up. ....The object of Therese Oulton's paintings becomes the removal of the object; the gentle dismembering of the skeletal form. What is disclosed is nothing but the fragile seams and spaces, breaks and flows, of an ever renewing texture" (Renton 1990, 8).

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<sup>24</sup>See Chapter 9 "Phallogocentricism": Derrida and Irigaray in Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century Thought*.



*Figure 23: Therese Oulton. Counterfoil. 1987*



In inviting both an aesthetic specific, and a deconstructive feminist interpretation, *Counterfoil* critiques the assumptions of phallogocentric hierarchies found in the tradition of Western and modernist oil painting, even as it registers the richness and power of aesthetic practices of negativity embedded in that tradition.

David Cohen, Peter Gidal and Angela Moorjani<sup>25</sup> identify Oulton's practice as a dialectical mobilization of contradictions, even as it also exceeds containment in the idea of dialectics. Peter Gidal identifies this dialectic as "an operation and a process at each moment and in each gesture against the coming-into-being of excess. Thus this painting cannot be consumed as spectacle". Rosa Lee identifies the lack of closure as the refusal of any single meaning, whereas Stuart Morgan identifies this mobile dialectics as "hovering between polarities" (Morgan 1986, 5). I suggest that all these commentators attend to how Oulton's practice mobilises that signifying process called sublime irresolution. It is this aesthetic specific practicing of negativity that distinguishes Oulton's painting practice from Irigaray's philosophical deconstruction. For Oulton's practice is not only a feminist deconstruction of the protocols of scopoc mastery. It also positions the viewer within the problematics of traditional sublime concerns: on the 'edge' between cognition and affect, between (the alchemy of) the material and the spiritual, between abstraction and figuration and between subversion and regeneration. Oulton's paintings engage an irreducible inter-relation between the aesthetic negativities of sublime irresolution and the positivities of a feminist politics.

Oulton's practice marks the field of the sublime in particular way. If we consider the two paintings titled *Samphire* 1988 (*Figure 24*) and *Correspondence No.2* 1990 (*Figure 25*) both are characterised by abstract rhythmical cellular proliferations that do not code any sense of landscape. What they do code is the sensuousness of paint and a mobile visual field interrupted by contrasting 'zips' of colour. In the case of *Samphire* this is a diagonal and vibrant 'dance' whereas in *Correspondence No.2* these differences are vertical strips of 'light'. In both cases the differences between the figure and the ground are only marked in terms of light over dark. Yet what is also apparent is that these differences are

<sup>25</sup>See David Cohen: *The Jewels Of Art History* in *Modern Painters* Spring 1988; Peter Gidal: *Fool's Gold* catalogue Gimpel Fils 1984; Angela Moorjani in *Dislocating the Maternal Metaphor* in *The Aesthetics of Loss and Lessness* 1992.



*Figure 24: Therese Oulton. Sapphire. 1988*





*Figure 25: Therese Oulton. Correspondence No.2. 1990*

new formulations of the same. In *Samphire* the lively yellows and blues are a reconfiguration of the browns and pinks, whereas in *Correspondence No.2* the vertical 'zips' on the right, are a play on the accumulations of the light of the 'seams' in the overall field, whereas the broader vertical band is an accumulation of the 'milky' of the insides of these molecular permutations. And finally on top of both these vertical interruptions are crescent like 'figures' composed of further elaborations of these already established motifs.

In understanding how sublime irresolution is deployed in these paintings we might observe that there is a logic at work here: all parts are part of the whole and all differences are elaborations of the same, in an ongoing, mobile and becoming operation. Here oppositions slide in and out of one another and become new formulations of the same. We might therefore identify this modality of sublime irresolution as a mobile becoming feminine sublime. This infinitely proliferating and mobile field of vision, is comparable to Irigaray's 'immemorial waters' figured through repetition, touch and infinite becomings. This becoming sublime is also indebted to the tradition of Western painting, and in particular Turner's paintings, which also engage a mobile and oscillational, or becoming modality of that signifying process called sublime irresolution.

If Oulton's earlier paintings, like *Counterfoil*, *Samphire* and *Correspondence No.2* were enthusiastically taken up by feminist commentators because these paintings critique phallogocentric values in the tradition of painting, and articulate a becoming feminine imaginary, her recent paintings are more concerned with the subversive possibilities contained within the tradition of painting. When we consider the two paintings *Clair 2002* (Figure 26) and *Obscur 2002* (Figure 27), the oppositions between light, dark and clarity and obscurity are contained in their titles. The visual vocabularies of *Obscur* and *Clair* are not dissimilar to those of *Correspondence*, given that the relation between the figure and the ground is one where each is still a logical permutation of the other. Each painting emerges out of an intentionally generated contradiction. To quote Oulton

"like a religious drama, so that the excess of light and of dark is always a 'becoming grey'. This is a fresh conceptual dilemma and a source for new motifs - situated in the logical problematics of visibility and non-visibility. It



*Figure 26: Therese Oulton. Clair. 2002*





Figure 27: Therese Oulton. *Obscur*. 2002

is a drama between going towards too much and too little and what that does to the motifs" (Oulton interview with Lola Frost September, 2004).

In *Obscur* and *Clair*, the tending toward dark and light in either, and the consequent grey/blue of each, is the result of the application of the recuperative and subversive logic that is found throughout this practice. In this regard Oulton recuperates Turner's engagement with colour and light, conceived of as symbols of a becoming and regenerative divinity. But *Obscur* and *Clair* also subvert the symbolic meaning of colour and light in Turner's paintings, and instead mobilise an intentional set of contradictions in which meaning is deferred and multiplied. For example, the darkness and lightness of these paintings engages an oppositional logic insofar as in the smallest fractals contained within these tonal registers, become in turn, sparkling components in a drama of clarification and obscurity.

Oulton's practice provokes critical thinking as to what its subversions achieve, but it also goes beyond such criticality and most significantly, it invites an aesthetic specific practicing of negativity. Against the presumptions of *écriture féminine*, in Oulton's paintings, such negativity is not gendered or essentially linked to a feminine imaginary, but is the outcome of an intentional mobilization of contradictions contained in the language of painting. Oulton's painting practice both recuperates and subverts the traditions of painting, figured by her romantic and modernist forbears. This is a practice which dialectically synthesises aesthetic practices of negativity with a feminist and deconstructive supplement. These two discourses are not conflated in this practice, nor is the aesthetic specificity of sublime irresolution degraded. The way sublime irresolution is organised in this practice, as a mobile and becoming event, oscillating between oppositions, registers a bewildering array of engagements and subversions that refuse any closure or any position. This is an aesthetic specific practice of negativity which, like Irigaray's *Speaking of Immemorial Waters*, "defers the possibility of ultimate arrival" (Zylinska 2001, 38).

## 5.7. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the differences between Irigaray's feminist deconstructive and textual practice of negativity, and aesthetic practices of

negativity in selected contemporary painting by Rosa lee and Therese Oulton. It has demonstrated how Irigaray's *Speaking of Immemorial Waters*, like Derrida's *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* discussed in Chapter Three, collapses the distinction between textual/aesthetic disruption and the feminine. Like Derridaen deconstruction, *écriture féminine* degrades traditional distinctions which sustain the differences between the negativities of aesthetic experience and the positivities of understanding, and blurs the boundaries between aesthetic negativity and a feminist politics.

This investigation has negotiated this interface between *écriture féminine* and contemporary paintings by deploying the dialectical interpretive method mobilised throughout this thesis. This method presumes an irreducible inter-relation between the unspeakableness of aesthetic experience and the positivity of analysis and understanding. From this dialectical perspective we are able to understand the correspondences between a deconstructive feminine sublime and the modalities of sublime irresolution in Lee's and Oulton's paintings; and the differences between a feminist politics of *écriture féminine* and the negativities of aesthetic experience.

To make this claim is to resist that well developed discourse, generally called *écriture féminine*, that so excited a generation of feminist artists and theorists in the 1980' and 1990's in its promise to deliver a negative aesthetics of the feminine. Against this possibility, this chapter has argued that aesthetic negativity has no feminine, or masculine, gender. Instead this chapter has made the case that an aesthetics of negativity inhabits selected contemporary (feminist) paintings and that its de-subjectifying modalities are not confined to, even if they bear the imprint of, deconstructive and feminist interests.



## CONCLUSION

### 6.1. Theoretical contribution.

This written thesis investigates aesthetic negativity in paintings as a contribution to a revival of negative aesthetics after the impact of philosophical deconstruction. It does so by identifying two signifying processes called poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution which disaggregate meaning in paintings and visual art practices. The thesis sustains the relation/divide between the negativities of aesthetic experience and the positivities of understanding, even as it offers an account of how paintings deliver aesthetic negativity, and investigates some of the discursive implications of that delivery.

The thesis has explored the tensions and correspondences between negative aesthetics and philosophical deconstruction. It has investigated how deconstructive methods oppose dialectical methods by blurring the boundary between experience and understanding, thereby degrading the autonomy of aesthetic negativity. By contrast, the dialectical method deployed in this study sustains the boundary between experience and understanding which preserves the autonomy of aesthetic experience, even as this method enables us to differentiate between different practices of negativity so that, for example, the negativity of a politics of the feminine is not conflated with the negativity of aesthetic experience.

In spite these antagonisms, this thesis has also investigated how aesthetic practices of negativity in paintings, and deconstructive non-aesthetic practices of negativity resemble one another insofar as both de-subjectify viewers of paintings and readers of texts. This investigation also recorded resemblances between Derrida's deconstructive figures (for example '*Nietzsche's woman*' and the *passe-partout*) and the modalities of sublime irresolution and poetic ambiguity in Brown's and Wafer's paintings and visual art practices; and between Irigaray's 'immemorial waters' and the modalities of a feminine aesthetics of the sublime in Lee's and Oulton's paintings. Understanding the modalities of sublime irresolution and poetic ambiguity and their resemblances to deconstructive figures and methods, is not identical to experiencing the de-subjectifying effects of aesthetic practices of negativity.

This thesis has had a lot to say about understanding something of the negativity of aesthetic experience. We are able to understand the identities of poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution, how they differ, their discursive situation, that they de-subjectify viewers and how they do so. We are also able to understand that deconstructive and aesthetic practices of negativity differ and that the negativities of sublime and poetic experience are different to a politics of *écriture féminine*. This thesis has demonstrated that postmodern, post colonial and feminist paintings and visual art practices register the impact of deconstruction within the modalities of poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution at work in such work, even as they also engage the autonomy of aesthetic experience.

This written thesis has consistently presented aesthetic negativity as the property of the dialectical relation of between the viewer and the painting, and as an effect of the irreducible inter-relation between unspeakable experience and understanding. This study has developed this insight by recourse to various philosophical theories of negativity, in particular to the insights of Adorno. If philosophy provides a vocabulary for understanding aesthetic negativity, philosophy also threatens the discursive autonomy of an aesthetics of negativity insofar as a philosophical 'frame' threatens to displace the aesthetic 'work' of negativity. This divide, and the power relation set up by it, is also implicit in the dialectical method employed in this thesis. However against any idea that this thesis is the primary and dominant text, this study demonstrates that understanding negativity is a second order practice, not reducible to the autonomy of aesthetic experience which remains, as Marin and Lyotard claim, to some extent unspeakable or unrepresentable. It is these irreducible but interrelated differences between a first order aesthetic practicing of negativity made possible by paintings and visual art practices, and a second order of understanding how paintings deliver such practices of negativity, that has been the pivotal object of this investigation.

There are two reasons for the centrality of this insight and these dialectical methods. Firstly, this insight resists the collapse of aesthetic practices of negativity into (deconstructive) theory. In particular where paintings and visual art practices are 'known' as versions of their deconstructive supplements,

instead of being encountered for their own disruptive effects. This thesis has argued that the disruptions of aesthetic practices of negativity are degraded by deconstructive methods and by *écriture féminine* whose textual/sexual disruptions conflate aesthetic negativity with a politics of the feminine.

Secondly, in sustaining the irreducible inter-relation between aesthetic experience and understanding (and the autonomy of aesthetic experience), this thesis revisits the dialectical possibilities of negative aesthetics, but registers the impact of deconstruction. Even if aesthetic experience has its own unspeakable autonomy which registers as an event, such a practicing of negativity exists in a disruptive relation to the positivities of understanding. From this perspective aesthetic negativity is a 'deconstructive' and de-subjectifying technique that pre-empts, and extends beyond, philosophical deconstruction. That being so, this thesis has been an effort to negotiate the unstable and irreducible inter-relation between aesthetic negativity and deconstruction.

This study has recorded my interpretive encounters with paintings and visual art practices dating from the 17th century to the contemporary. Such encounters have been amplified by both the philosophical insights sketched above and the interpretive accounts of others, but are primarily structured by visual art practices and paintings themselves. This privileging of the 'truth of experience' needs to be seen in the context of critical discourses which ask us to interrogate, and understand such truths and experiences. Bearing this in mind, this thesis has demonstrated that paintings and visual art practices are privileged sites of negativity, and as such are complex, profound and critical interventions. This study engages this aesthetic richness as a contribution to a renaissance of negative aesthetics after its encounter with deconstruction.

If these are the theoretical achievements of this research project, we may also consider what its means were.

## **6.2. Negative aesthetics and deconstruction.**

The first two chapters of this thesis developed an understanding of how the signifying processes called poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution invite the practicing of negativity. These chapters detailed how these processes are

encountered in selected paintings by C.D. Friedrich, Poussin, Turner and Rothko. These engagements were informed by the art historical insights of J.L. Koerner and Louis Marin, whose writings engage those signifying processes without theorising them. The philosophical insights of Kristeva, Merleau-Ponty, Kant, Nietzsche, Adorno and Lyotard inform an understanding of what these two signifying practices entail, and how they invited the practicing of negativity.

The first chapter considered how Kristeva's and Merleau-Ponty's dialectical theories, following Hegel, negotiate the contradictions between oppositions so that negativity is both preserved, and in some way rendered positive. From a Kristevan perspective, poetic events disrupt the discursive logic of the symbolic phenotext by mobilising the heterogeneities and negativities of the semiotic genotext. The outcome of such disruption is the practicing of negativity, which for Kristeva has the positive effect of producing an ethics of the subject-in-process.

Merleau-Ponty's contribution to this understanding of the negativities of poetic ambiguity, is his philosophical and phenomenological notion of 'the Flesh', which likewise defeats conceptual mastery and mobilizes negativity via an understanding of the intertwinedness of all phenomena and discourses. Here the practicing of negativity is both preserved, and rendered positive, because it opens us up to differences. Kristeva's essay titled *Giotto's Joy* and Merleau-Ponty's chapter titled *The Intertwining - The Chiasm* enable us to understand the de-subjectifying effects of practicing negativity. However where these two philosophical texts emphasise the negativity of instinctual drives and of phenomenological experience, this research project is oriented towards the capacities of paintings, whose aesthetic and signifying operations de-subjectify the viewer by disaggregating conceptual mastery and opening the viewer to differences.

Jonathan Culler's structuralist insights, and J.L. Koerner's analysis of the de-subjectifying effects of Friedrich's painting *The Cross in the Mountains*, present poetic ambiguity as an effect of structures of signification and of a romantic syntax. These insights enabled me to argue that the negativity of poetic ambiguity in paintings is not inaugurated only by our unconscious drives or phenomenal experience, but by particular signifying structures in paintings

which disaggregates meaning. Such signifying processes draw on our unconscious drives, our phenomenal experience, our discursive understanding and aesthetic competences. Each painting does so in its own particular way as an address of each of our capacities, histories and temperaments. The (anti-structuralist) claim being that the negativity of poetic ambiguity is the property of the dialectical and aesthetic relation between the experiences of viewer and the structures of the painting.

Furthermore, the aesthetic negativities of poetic ambiguity encountered in Friedrich's painting titled *Garden Terrace*, are not identical to the feminine negativities of Kristeva's semiotic register associated with a pre-oedipal, pre-discursive maternal realm. This critique of the conflation of the feminine with semiotic disruption, is made in advance of a more full scale critique of *écriture féminine* developed in Chapter Four, which conflates negative aesthetics with a politics of the feminine.

If poetic ambiguity in painting invites the practicing of negativity, it does so in a particular way. The claim being that it opens the viewer to differences because meaning is rendered slippery and ambiguous. The signifying process called sublime irresolution, by contrast pits differences irresolvably against one another and prevaricates on the disruption or maintenance of distinctions or boundaries. These differences mark these processes as two modalities of a discourse of aesthetic negativity, whose disruptive effects persist in paintings from the 17th century to the present.

Chapter Two investigated Louis Marin's discussion of Nicholas Poussin's painting *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* in his book *Sublime Poussin*, which details something of that signifying process called sublime irresolution. Here meaning is disaggregated because the viewer is unable to integrate irreconcilable oppositions. This unspeakable, indeed unrepresentable, experience invites a sublime practicing of negativity.

In understanding what such a sublime practicing of negativity entails, Chapter Two investigated Kant's two texts *The Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgement* and *The Analytic of the Sublime*. The former informs this study's persistent engagement with dialectics and with a discursively situated aesthetic autonomy. For like

Kant's *Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgement*, the interpretive method deployed throughout this thesis, sustains the irreducible differences between the negativities of aesthetic experience and the positivities of understanding. Kant's text enables us to understand that there are negative types of 'aesthetic ideas' that disable rational understanding. Where Kant's *Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgement* productively engages the autonomy of aesthetic negativity, his account of the sublime in *The Analytic of the Sublime* privileges the positivity of reason over the negativities of sublime excess, thereby consolidating a binarist relation between these oppositions.

Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, engages a version of the sublime at odds with the Kantian sublime. For the Nietzschean sublime is a polyvalent, de-subjectifying and aesthetic opportunity to encounter that which is repressed by a Kantian account of the sublime. Nietzsche's account of the sublime inaugurates an anti-binarist critique of Kantian metaphysics that was taken up by poststructuralist and feminist theory in the late 20th century. This critique informs both Adorno's and Derrida's engagement with negative aesthetics. In Adorno's book *Aesthetic Negativity* sublime art (and indeed all art) is the privileged locus of aesthetic negativity. In this schema, aesthetic negativity is an effect of a dialectical relation between the viewer and the aesthetic object. Sublime art inaugurates a processual relation between oppositions so that, for example, subject/object or conceptual/non-conceptual distinctions are disabled. It is this immanent process that invites the practicing of negativity as a critique of reason. From this perspective, sublime art is a de-subjectifying opportunity to practice negativity. Similarly, Lyotard's essay titled *The Sublime and the Avante-Garde* is a theory of the sublime which registers the sublime as an event, via the diagnostic question "Is it happening?". This question, like the negativity of Kant's 'aesthetic ideas', records a moment of indeterminacy as an experience of aesthetic negativity that cannot be conceptualised or represented.

These philosophical theories of the poetic and the sublime variously engage an aesthetics of negativity which registers in both philosophy and painting from the 17th century to the present. The first two chapters of this thesis sketched this aesthetics of negativity in philosophy and in painting, in the interests of demonstrating that the two signifying processes called poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution invite aesthetic practices of negativity. I have given these

signifying processes an identity by drawing on the insights of these philosophers of negativity and art historians who identify sublime or poetic effects in paintings, and synthesising these insights with an account of sublime or poetic experience of paintings.

With regard to that signifying process called sublime irresolution, Marin's account of sublime unrepresentability in painting, Adorno's dialectical account of negative aesthetics, and Lyotard's diagnostic of a sublime event, serviced my analysis of its de-subjectifying effects in painting. Sublime irresolution from this perspective, like poetic ambiguity, registers a processual encounter between the painting and the viewer which disaggregates meaning. This failure of meaning both invites the practicing of negativity and registers as an aesthetic event, available to the diagnostic question 'Is it happening?' The difference however is that my engagement with aesthetic negativity, unlike Adorno's and Lyotard's, is also oriented toward understanding *how* paintings deliver such practices of negativity.

In this regard Chapter Two investigated the differing modalities of sublime irresolution encountered in Poussin's *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, in Turner's *Seascape with Storm coming on* and *The Fall of an Avalanche at Grisons*, and Rothko's *Red on Maroon*. Each of these paintings delivered differing modalities of that signifying process called sublime irresolution. From this we might conclude that although sublime irresolution and poetic ambiguity, persistently invite the practicing of negativity, these are not immutable or universal, instruments of an aesthetics of negativity. Instead we need to see them as discursive opportunities, unspeakable in their effects, but in concert with other discursive formations also at work in paintings.

Where the philosophies of Kristeva, Merleau-Ponty, Kant, Nietzsche, Adorno and Lyotard variously engage dialectical negativity, Derrida's and Irigaray's are informed by deconstruction, a practice at odds with dialectical negative aesthetics. The last two chapters register the tensions between these two philosophical deconstructive methods and aesthetic practices of negativity. Deconstructive negativity, like aesthetic negativity, disrupts meaning. Derrida's deconstructive method disrupts boundaries, including the boundary between experience and understanding, a boundary which preserves the autonomy of

aesthetic negativity. Derrida's deconstructive project thus degrades aesthetic autonomy and requires him to construct a boundary in which aesthetic negativity is rendered servile to a sovereign and textual and non-aesthetic deconstructive practicing of negativity.

Chapter Three investigated these antagonisms via a reading of Derrida's text called *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, where a quasi-poetic style of philosophy is a valediction of Nietzsche's style of writing and where Derrida conflates the untruth of this style, with a dissimulating and agonistic figure called '*Nietzsche's woman*'. Here a quasi-poetic and deconstructive style of writing disrupts a traditional style of philosophical writing, by infesting it with its negative others: the feminine, poetic style, dissimulation and untruth. In this process the reader is invited into a textual, non-aesthetic and deconstructive practicing of negativity where the boundaries between the feminine and textual disruption are collapsed. A quasi-poetic style of doing philosophy, as a compendium of these negativities, not only deconstructs a rational and traditional style of philosophy, but also disrupts the autonomy of aesthetic experience.

Likewise, an engagement with Derrida's text *The Colossal* delivers the reader to a deconstructive practicing of negativity through a style of writing that defers meaning and disrupts boundaries. In this process a rational style of doing philosophy is degraded inasmuch as the binarist assumptions of a Kantian sublime are deconstructed. Instead this text figures a deconstructive sublime, without boundaries and hierarchies and open to differences 'to come'. Here the sublime is a textual practice where understanding is disabled and meaning rendered excessive via the figure of the *passe-partout*. *The Colossal* is a text in which the reader is invited to practice non-aesthetic deconstructive and sublime negativity. Derrida's deconstructive sublime thus erodes the boundaries between aesthetic experience and understanding and degrades the autonomy of sublime aesthetic experience.

It is against the degradation of the autonomy of aesthetic negativity that this study has not only sustained the differences between aesthetic negativity and non-aesthetic, or deconstructive negativity, but has insisted that aesthetic negativity is the product of a particular kind of experience. From this perspective aesthetic experience is the product of a first order encounter



between the viewer and the painting where meaning is disaggregated, even if as a second order practice we might understand the effects of, and the differences between, practices of negativity. The relation between such unspeakable aesthetic experience and understanding the implications of that experience, is also a dialectical one. The dialectical interpretive method employed in this chapter informed my engagement with the painting and visual art practices of Glenn Brown and Jeremy Wafer. I argued that the modalities of sublime irresolution and poetic ambiguity of these paintings and visual art practices register the impact of deconstruction insofar as we can understand these practices in terms of deconstructively appropriate supplements.

In this regard Chapter Three demonstrated how Brown's paintings deconstruct modernist assumptions by copying old master paintings, but deliver these copies as new postmodern interventions, via a style of painting which not only playfully disassembles, but which positions the viewer on a sublime and irresolvable threshold between mastery and abjection. This modality of sublime irresolution is comparable to Derrida's figure called '*Nietzsche's woman*', yet Brown's paintings register as aesthetic experience.

Jeremy Wafer's visual art practice also engages those signifying processes called poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution, via a modality of sublime/poetic inbetweenness, that resembles Derrida's master trope called the *passe-partout*. Wafer's syncretic practice blurs the boundaries between sculpture, painting and photography, negotiates the differences between African and Western aesthetic traditions, invites aesthetic experience and deconstructive understanding, even as it delivers a critique of traditional sublime and colonial aesthetics. This post colonial 'sublime poetics of the inbetween', engages an aesthetics of negativity, but one marked by deconstructive assumptions.

Chapter Four investigated how Irigaray's text *Speaking of Immemorial Waters* mobilizes a poetics of the sublime as the practicing of negativity via an amorous, feminine and poetic style of writing that deconstructs the phallogocentric assumptions of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The difference between this and Derrida's sublime practicing of negativity, is that Irigaray is interested in positivising the negativity of the feminine in the interests of a feminist

politics, whereas Derrida's 'sublime poetics of the inbetween' (the *passe-partout*) engages the textual negativities of deconstructive undecidability.

It is this conflation of aesthetic negativity with textual and deconstructive negativity and a feminist politics of negativity, which characterises that discourse called *écriture féminine*, that this chapter takes issue with. The claim being that the practicing of negativity inaugurated by the operations of poetic ambiguity and sublime irresolution are gender neutral. Like deconstructive texts, these signifying processes invite the practicing of negativity, but do so by sustaining the boundary between aesthetic experience and understanding. Deconstructive *écriture féminine* refuses such dialectical distinctions and instead disrupts the boundaries between experience and understanding, and between the feminine and textual deconstruction, in the service of a feminist politics.

Chapter Four demonstrated how the painting practices of Rosa Lee and Therese Oulton register the impact of *écriture féminine*, but without losing their aesthetic specificity. Lee's paintings register a deconstructive supplement insofar as they deconstruct the boundaries between feminine craft and high art. Oulton's paintings deconstruct phallogentric assumptions embedded in the traditions of western painting. As in Lee's paintings, these deconstructions of phallogentric assumptions are fully understood. Furthermore, in both these painting practices, the modalities of sublime irresolution deployed in these paintings register a feminine sublime. However, this thesis has made the case that understanding the feminine, political and deconstructive significance of these paintings is not identical to the aesthetic specific practicing of negativity that paintings by Lee and Oulton also invite. This insight enables this chapter to critique the deconstructive assumptions of *écriture féminine* which conflate a politics of the feminine with textual and aesthetic practices of negativity.

This thesis has thus provided a vocabulary for identifying, and to some extent understanding, negativity in painting from the perspective of the viewer. Being a joint theory/practice research project, I will conclude this conclusion by giving an account of how this vocabulary and these insights impact on my painting practice.

### 6. 3. Mobilising negativity in painting.

The following discussion is a) a contextualisation of my current practice, b) an account of how my paintings, developed during this research project, engage practices of negativity and, c) a brief consideration of their feminist politics.

a) Where the paintings titled *Peaceful, Powerful, African, for Women* 1989 (*Figure 28*) (70 x 110 cms.) and *Another Dance, On the Other Side* 1994 (*Figure 29*) (135 x 195 cms.) position the viewer on the outside, looking into a sublime landscape or labyrinthine field, the paintings titled *Plunge* 1999 (*Figure 30*) (120 x 190 cms.) and *No Void* 1998 (*Figure 31*) (90 x 170 cms.) are an entry into a mobile interior which is recognisable as both a landscape and an infinitely proliferating field, or sublime matrix. My engagement with a sublime matrix is thus a long standing one, but one foregrounded after my (provisional) departure from South Africa and entry into Britain, at the beginning of 1996. This departure marked my disengagement with a discourse of post colonialism, one pre-occupied with the crisis of the end of apartheid in South Africa, as exemplified in the painting titled *Progress and Democracy* 1993 (*Figure 32*) (65 x 85 cms.). Embarking on this doctoral study in 2001, was an attempt to understand what the implications of this new type of sublime painting were.

b) The two paintings titled *In and Out* 2001 (*Figure 33*) (135 x 188 cms.) and *Becoming Excessive* 2003 (*Figure 34*) (130 x 150 cms.) engage two differing moments of a sublime matrix/interior landscape. Sublime meaning in *In and Out* is activated between two registers: a purple/maroon open and vertical slit is encased by a (vibrating) mound, which in turn is flattened by two mysterious horizontal 'veils' at the top and the bottom of the painting. The viewer's gaze thus hovers irresolvably between a vertical, embodied and pulsating opening and a wider horizontal aperture that encompasses and flattens the first slit. Here an embodied perforation becomes a threshold into a more immense, mysterious sublime matrix. In the painting titled *Becoming Excessive* the viewer encounters a system of obsessive marks, a register of a hot mobile energy which burrows inward into one, and then into two tunnels. Here sublime meaning is activated by the viewer's eye shifting from event to event even as it struggles to collect this multiplicity into a whole. Such visual mobility and irresolution both disables/invites cognition.



Figure 28: Lola Frost. *Peaceful, Powerful, African, for Women*. 1989



*Figure 29: Lola Frost. Another Dance, On the Other Side. 1994*





*Figure 30: Lola Frost. Plunge. 1999*



*Figure 31: Lola Frost. No Void. 1998*

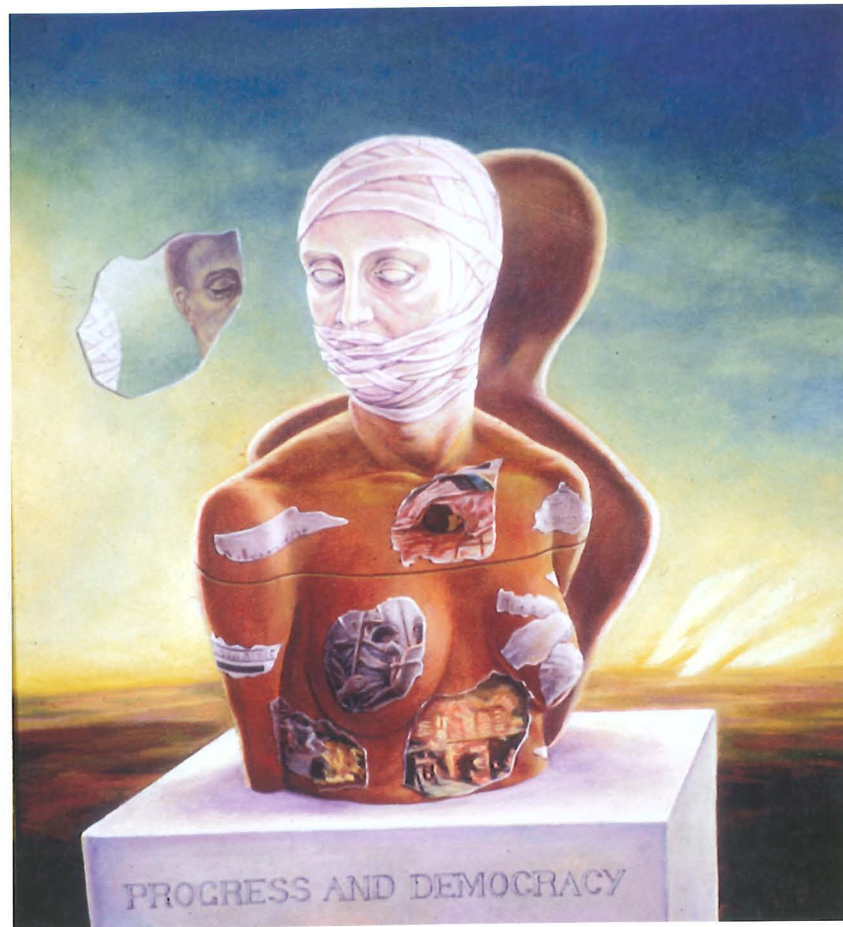
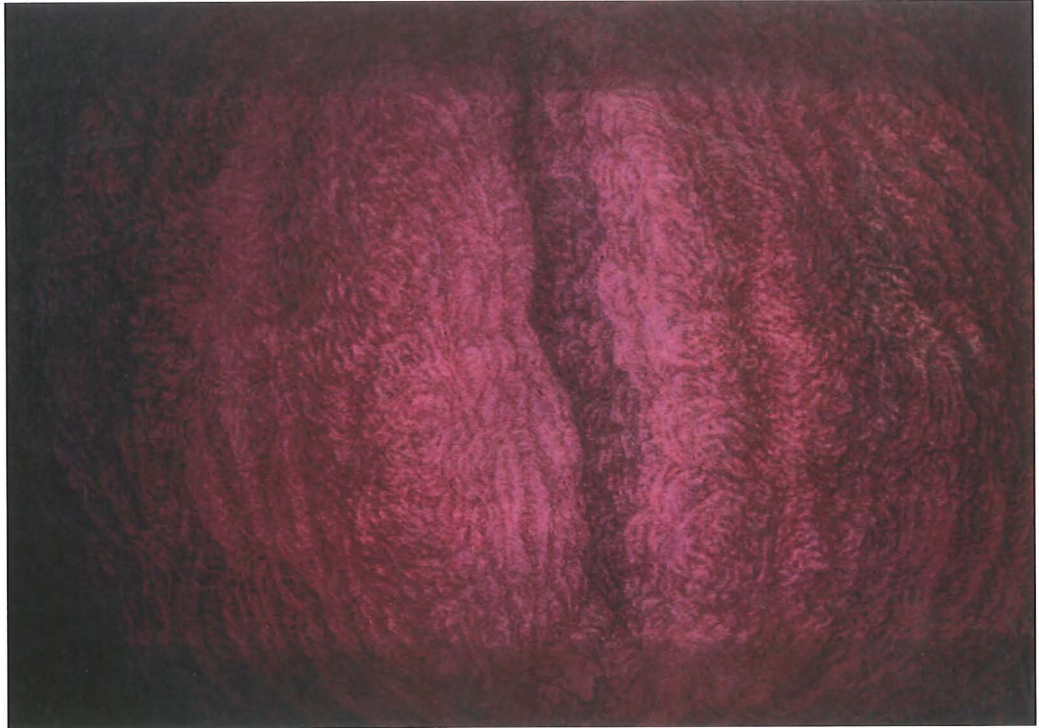
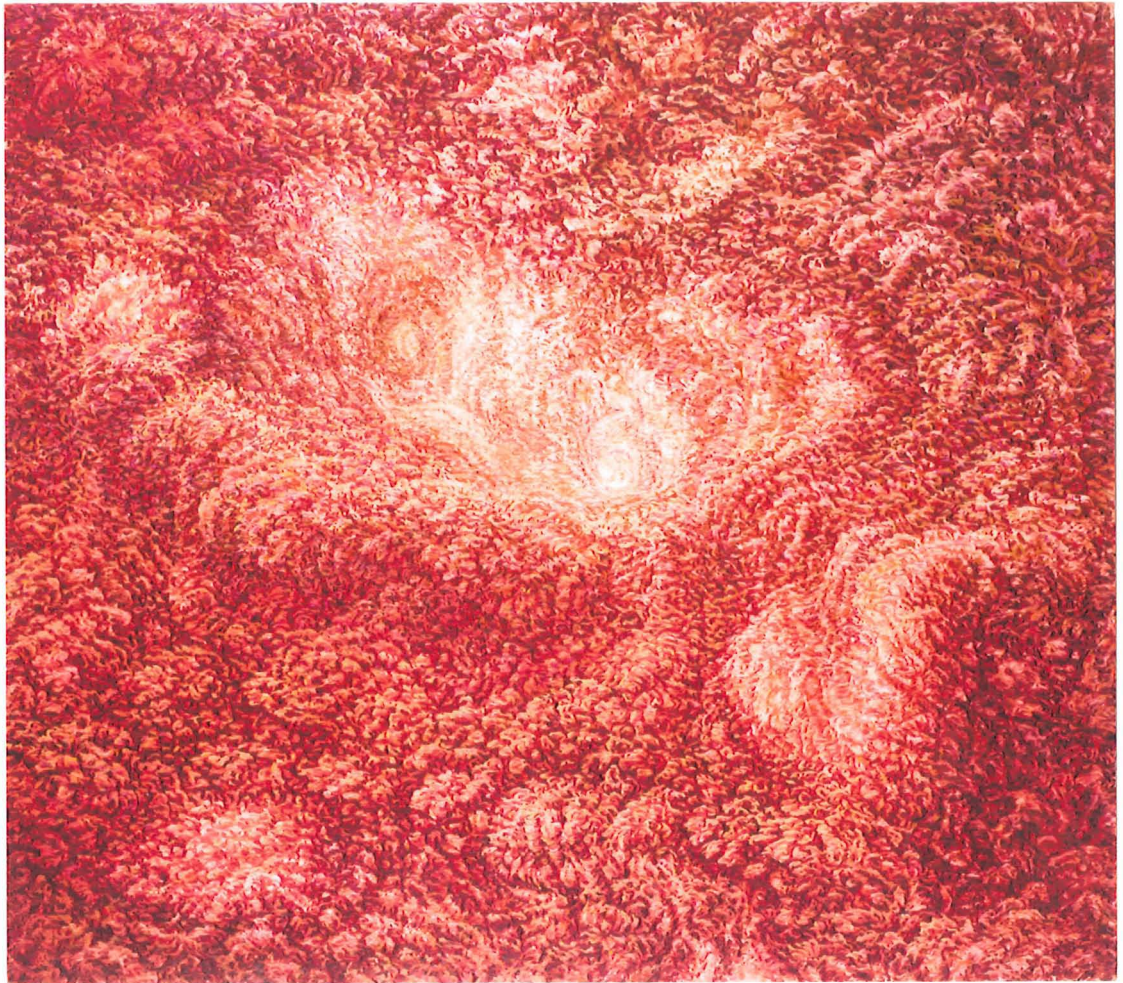


Figure 32: Lola Frost. *Progress and Democracy*. 1993





*Figure 33: Lola Frost. In and Out. 2001*

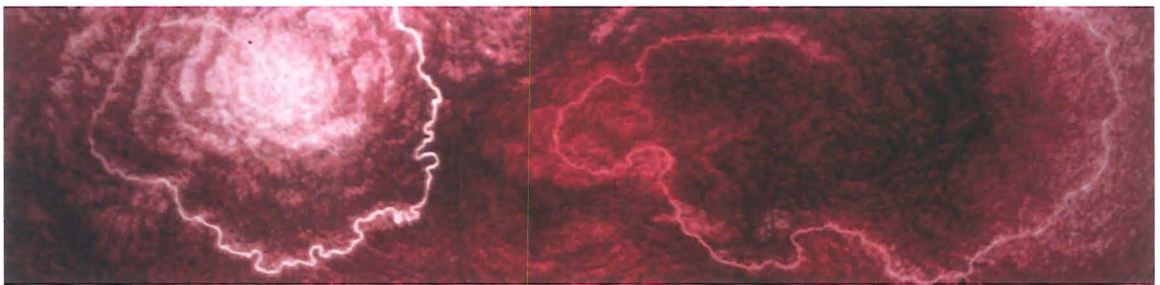


*Figure 34: Lola Frost. *Becoming Excessive*. 2003*

*On the Edge* 2002 (Figure 35) (700 x 200 cms.) is an enormous painting and consists of three panels. If *Becoming Excessive* is marked by vitality, *On the Edge* struggles against entropy. Although this painting is a version of the terrific sublime as the representation of imploding forces, an absorbing and galactic void, and a double 'electric' crackle, it also struggles with the possibility that the infinite totality of marks that constitute these forms, might be consumed into an obsessive layering of paint, relentlessly, and all consumingly, coloured magenta and purple. Here differences of tone are placed under pressure by the sameness of saturated colour, applied through small and layered brush strokes and latex resist layers. To paint in this way was to abandon myself to the failure and presentation of spatial representation, via chance configurations. It was a battle of a painting, yet one which fuelled my desire to place spatial representation (a visual code informed by the relationships between colour, tone and size of marks) under pressure through a process informed by drives, chance, improvisation, play, and more. It is these kinds of processes, I contend, at work in all the works discussed above, that involves a practicing of negativity. This is a sublime negativity, repetitive, excessive, not available to description or clear understanding, but to aesthetic experience and processual enactment.

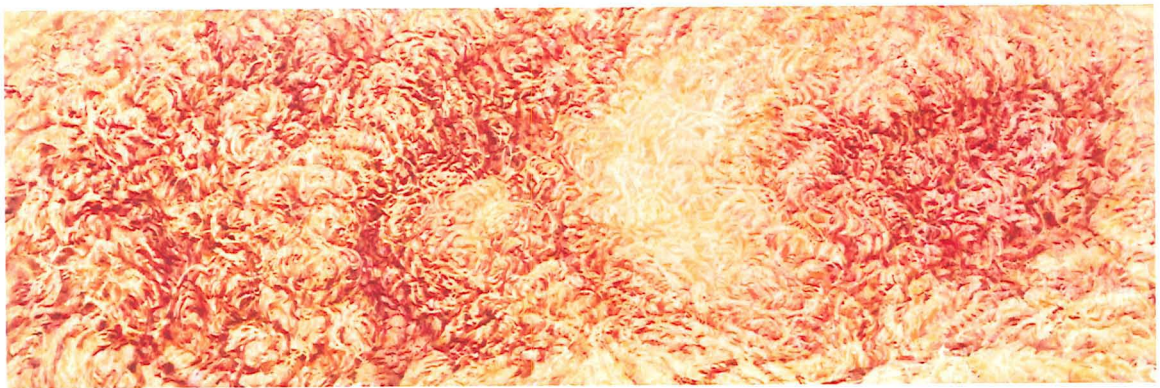
The eight small works presented for examination of this doctoral study are the best articulations of this system of working to date. The size of these paintings enabled me to bring a clarity and a richness to the mark making that I had struggled with in the bigger works. Each painting begins with a photograph, or collaged photograph, of trees or bushes in particular conditions of light, which determines the format, composition and spatial relationships of the painting. These fixtures exist as a set of restraints, from within, and against which, each painting is performed. Each painting is a collection of small painterly 'events', whose totality registers as the representation of a credible, and alternative, space, even as this space is infused with mobile energy and excess.

For example *Inbetween* 2004 (Figure 36) (25 x 78 cms.) was generated by the interplay between the negative imprint left when chance marks of latex resists, were overpainted with transparent colour, so that an image of something like a landscape emerged. This space consists of two zones: a sparkling and expansive one on the right and a tender and immersive one on the left. These zones are two moments in a delicate, ever mutating yellowish/orange field,



*Figure 35: Lola Frost. On the Edge. 2002*





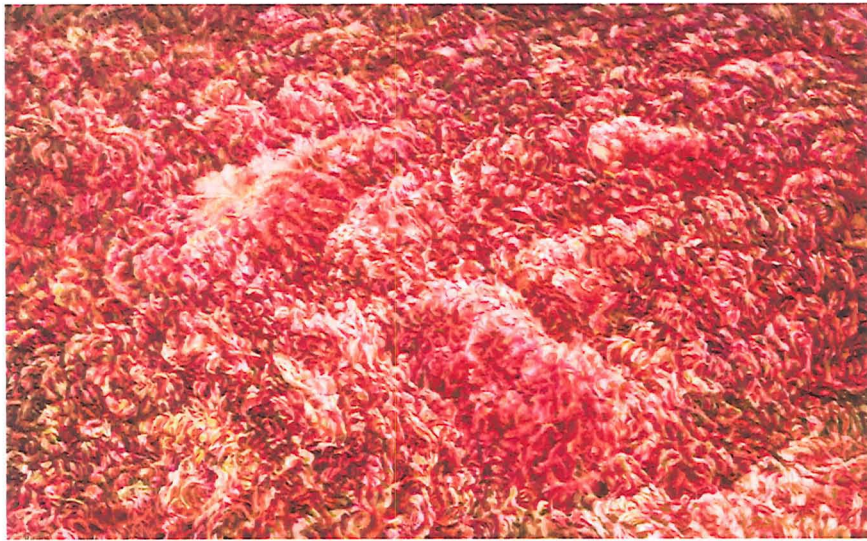
*Figure 36: Lola Frost. Inbetween. 2004*

which pulses with a mobile energy. The viewer's eye shifts from event to event, from whole to part, immersed in sublime excess. Like Rosa Lee's paintings this sublimity is less of the 'awesome cut', but rather of the 'too much'. Comprehension fails because meaning flutters, breaks up, and expands.

Similarly the paintings titled *Shift* 2007 (Figure 37) (26 x 41 cms.), *Twist* 2004 (Figure 38) (31 x 66cms.), and *Spasm* 2007 (Figure 39) (31 x 36 cms.) are fragments of a mobile matrix, even as each of these paintings gather together energies that shift, twist or convulse. In each of these paintings meaning gathers together, insofar as we can identify these active 'fields' as landscapes, only to threaten to fall apart into an almost meaningless collection of marks.

If the four paintings discussed above operate within relatively coherent chromatic ranges (yellow, orange, red), *Overflows* 2007 (Figure 40) (47 x 87 cms.), *Intersections* 2007 (Figure 41) (35 x 65 cms.) and *Condensations* 2007 (Figure 42) (47 x 60 cms.) are an effect of multiple colours working in and against one another. In *Overflows* the 'fabric' of this field, organised as an encircling container, consists of flickering planes of yellows, pinks, mauves and reds, punctuated, indeed perforated, by flashes of phthalo turquoise. These differences of colour destabilise the predictable representation space, so that it becomes a space that shimmers and moves. Likewise in *Intersections*, differences in colour become a register of an energy that disperses and morphs itself throughout the painting. Here the muscular and darker green/mauves contain the energetic explosions of warm light at the centre. *Condensations* by contrast is a journey into the minuscule, where fractals of light and colour explode a space, which seen from a distance seems solid and unified.

*Borderline* 2007 (Figure 43) (35 x 72 cms.), like all the paintings referred to above, consists of a mobile, tonally and chromatically saturated field which adjoins another void, figured as light beyond this infinitely proliferating matrix. This painting thus registers two tropes of the sublime: a sublime matrix figured throughout my current practice, and a more traditional sublime void as glowing light, found for example in sublime paintings by C.D. Friedrich. To approach this painting from this interpretive perspective allows us to understand, and differentiate between, two typologies of the sublime. This concluding discussion has however been an attempt to demonstrate how my painting practice is



*Figure 37: Lola Frost. Shift. 2007*



*Figure 38: Lola Frost. Twist. 2007*



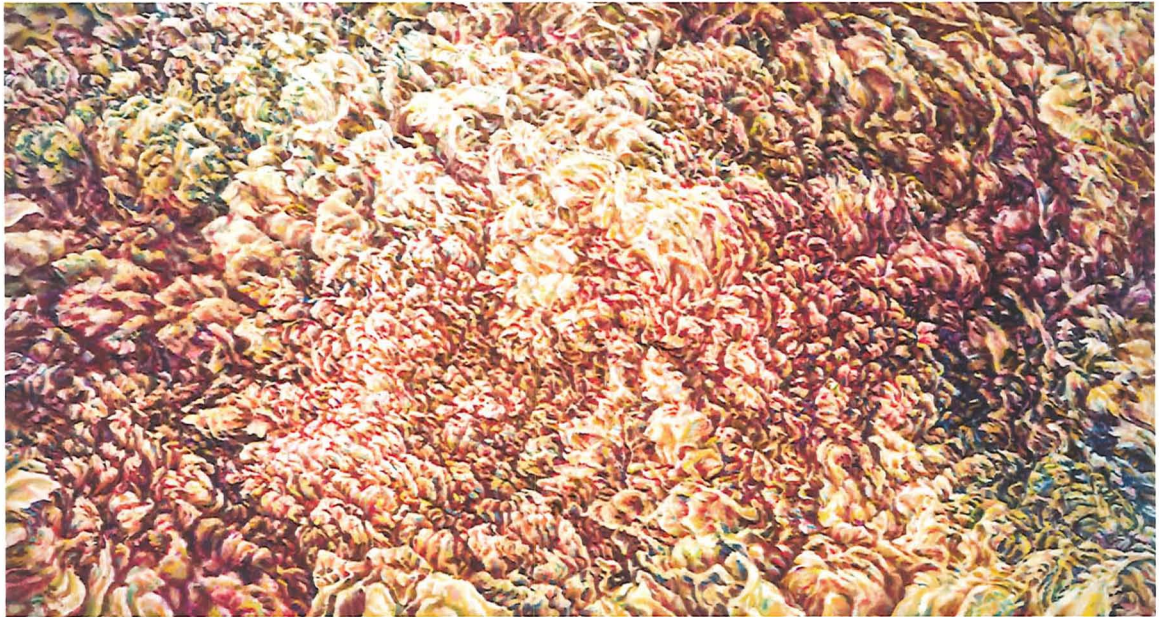


*Figure 39: Lola Frost. Spasm. 2007*



*Figure 40: Lola Frost. Overflows. 2007*





*Figure 41: Lola Frost. Intersections. 2007*



*Figure 42: Lola Frost. Condensations. 2007*





*Figure 43: Lola Frost. Borderline. 2007*

informed by aesthetic predicaments and practices of negativity, not approached through categories or types, but as an effect of the failure of meaning.

I will conclude this section with an imprecise resume of what this process entails. My current painting practice may be characterised as the articulation of a sublime matrix, or an 'otherworldly' space, where repetitive and excessive marks register a pervasive, drive-driven energy. It is also practice which mobilises the differences between oppositions, for example where meaning coheres and simultaneously threatens to fail, or where space is both static and mobile, or where the clash of colours threatens the coherence of tonal perspective. It is oppositions like these, which seem to activate the peculiarities of aesthetic negativities, whose desubjectifying effects are perhaps best identified through the question 'Is it happening?'. Each painting mobilises this possibility in its own way, and undoubtedly, each viewer experiences these predicaments from the perspective of his or her aesthetic competences, prejudices and discursive understanding. My point being however, that the aesthetic negativity of these paintings registers as a particular kind event that does not secure resolvable, unambiguous or categorical understanding.

c) We are however, able to bring categories of understanding to aesthetic experience, via the dialectical manoeuvre defended through out this study. Like Lee's and Oulton's paintings discussed above, my paintings are also an engagement with what is called the feminine sublime. The aesthetic effects of these paintings which erode/sustain meaning, can be understood as a register of a particular modality of sublime experience, where differences are linked up as infinite variations of the same. The infinitely proliferating sublime matrix, that is the foundational trope of this practice, thus sets the scene for an infinitely mobile and immersive set of relations, without borders. Like Irigaray's *Immemorial Waters*, such an immersive and relational<sup>1</sup> practice could also be understood as the articulation of a feminine imaginary, where the landscape as sublime matrix, becomes a metaphor for vibrating and en fleshed body parts, and where small quivering, repetitive brushmarks are registers of obsessive feminine desire.

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<sup>1</sup>Both Christine Battersby in her book *The Phenomenal Woman*, and Andrea Duncan in her chapter titled *This phenomenal ecriture* in the book *The Feminine Case*, associate the feminine with phenomenal relationality, informed by an en fleshed metaphysics and the embodied link between mothers and daughters.

My paintings are thus also political. They refigure sublime experience from a particular discursive perspective, one which for example, challenges the sublime effects of C.D. Friedrich's void, where the viewer, via the *Rückenfigur*, remains at a safe distance from threatening nothingness. The (feminine) immersiveness of my paintings is different to Rothko's immersive sublime fields for my practice is not marked by stasis. Instead, the infinitely proliferating and mobile matrix that my paintings mobilise, like Turner's sublime paintings, suggests an infinity that is always becoming and always excessive.

This is a significant politics, but from my perspective as a painter, it is only the beginning of painting. The valuable, difficult and interesting feature of painting is that it offers a process through which I am able to practice negativity. This research project has been an attempt to articulate that insight, both in my painting practice and in the written thesis. The latter has provided a vocabulary and a context for understanding what practices of negativity entail, whilst my painting is the delivery of aesthetic practices of negativity. This research has thus revealed a practice embedded in a politics of the feminine, but one which also exceeds such a politics, insofar as it registers an aesthetics of negativity not predicated on resolvable or unambiguous understanding. Like deconstruction, this is a practice that exceeds: it makes demands on the viewer that relate to, but which are not contained by, the feminist or deconstructive understandings we bring to it.

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