BROKEN VESSELS:
The im-possibility of the art of remembrance and re-collection in
the work of Anselm Kiefer, Christian Boltanski, William
Kentrige and Santu Mofokeng.

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TEXT VOLUME
This thesis is structured around investigating the philosophical and aesthetic problematics, politics, and possibilities of representing the past for the purposes of demythifying the present as well as commemorating the losses of history, as explored in the artworks of Anselm Kiefer, Christian Boltanski, William Kentridge and Santu Mofokeng.

The first chapter begins with Theodor Adorno’s philosophical understanding of myth and history: how he is influenced by and then develops Karl Marx’s critique of society, Sigmund Freud’s critique of reason and its subject, and particularly Walter Benjamin’s ideas of history as catastrophe, the role of the historian and his messianic materialism. The second section looks at Theodor Adorno’s dialectic of art and society: immanent criticism in aesthetic practice, mimesis, and the shift in conceptions of allegory from Walter Benjamin’s understanding to that of Jacques Derrida. The last section of the chapter looks at Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist theories against boundary-fixing, within that the ethical relation to the ‘other’ and the theorist/artist as psychic exile.

The second chapter deals with the politics of remembrance and representation — beginning with Theodor Adorno’s historic interpretation of the Mosaic law against the making of images and Jean-Francois Lyotard on the im-possibility of representing the unrepresentable. The chapter is divided in two parts between the post-Holocaust European artists Anselm Kiefer and Christian Boltanski, and the post-apartheid South African artists William Kentridge and Santu Mofokeng. It explores, within these artists’ specific contexts, their formal and philosophical approaches to
myth and history, and the problematics of image-making, representing the unrepresentable, and commemorating the immemorial.

The thesis concludes by considering different conceptions of melancholia as they relate to these artists: the Freudian psychoanalytic approach, Benjamin’s notions of the artist-genius, and Julia Kristeva’s Lacanian reading of the humanist melancholic, concluding with the mythic-historical Kaballist notion of melancholia as the historical burden or responsibility to commemorate loss.
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Introduction

The chapters in this thesis cover approaches to post-Holocaust¹ and post-apartheid memoration, spanning a range of topics and concerns while they revolve around certain crucial problematics. Their aim is to address the politics of representation and remembrance while recognizing the responsibility of bearing witness. A key concern of this debate is the attempt of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Francois Lyotard to address both the role of the historian and the artist as those who represent the past. South Africa has been contextualised here within a European discourse as these philosophers provide a model for thinking about a theme on which comparatively little has been written by South African scholars — addressing concerns about the mythification of the present and the commemoration of the losses and suffering of the past. For to say ‘after Auschwitz’ as in Adorno’s famous dictum or ‘after apartheid’ emphasizes without becoming a telos of prior history, that they have retrospective effects and prompt belated recognitions that can pose urgent questions to aspects of history that have had a different ‘face’ (LaCapra 1998:6). The exploration and interpretation of Holocaust memories is central to the

¹. The term ‘Holocaust’ is utilized throughout this thesis. The term can potentially mystify the actual events, for “Holokausten means to bring a (wholly) burnt offering; it was not the intention of the Nazis to make a sacrifice of this kind, and the position of the Jews was not that of a ritual victim” (Laqueur qtd. Biro 2000: 293). But as LaCapra (1994: 45) argues ‘Holocaust’ is perhaps one of the better choices in an impossible, tension-ridden linguistic field where resorting to terms such as ‘annihilation’ or ‘final solution’ might inadvertently repeat Nazi terminology. The term has also had a role in the discourse of the victims themselves, and the rather prevalent use of the term (including its use by nonvictims) has to some extent helped to counteract its sacrificial connotations without entirely reducing it to cliche.
artwork of such European artists as Anselm Kiefer and Christian Boltanski — juxtaposing their utilization of memory with that of the South African artists William Kentridge and Santu Mofokeng, reveals varied attempts to rob myth of its power over consciousness and action, as well as to bear witness.

The first chapter focuses on Theodor Adorno’s immanent criticism, his dialectic of art and society, and Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist understanding of the role of the historian/theorist/artist. Formulating his ideas on philosophy, Adorno draws primarily from three sources. His critique of the ‘culture industry’ supplements Marx’s understanding of capitalism to expose the hidden, still potent elements of dominating totality that ideology seeks to mask. Furthering this, for the purpose of reinterpreting the progressive stages of emancipation from nature and class domination, Adorno reconstructs the triad of subject/object/concept, drawing from Freud’s psychological critique of reason and its subject. Moreover, Walter Benjamin’s ideas on historical rupture and utopian longing influenced Adorno in his understanding and questioning of the role of the historian. Kiefer, Boltanski, Kentridge, and Mofokeng are linked to Adorno and Benjamin in their attempts to articulate and identify historical origins, constructing history from the perspective of the present to utilize it as a critical tool to demythify the present.

In his dialectic of art and society, Adorno holds that art can potentially act as a criticism of the existing state of affairs. The process-like, temporal character of aesthetic experience is emphasized — based as it is on both memory and anticipation. The precondition of these mimetic movements is seen to be the otherwise irreducible separation from the world bound to language and consciousness, which Adorno draws from Benjamin’s Kabbalist notion of the former originary foundation of language. Art that self-consciously and critically exposes its illusory claims to wholeness, whose moments and elements exist in constant struggle with one
another, is seen as a possible way of contesting the given, petrified arrangement of reality. This self-criticism is key to Adorno’s philosophy of negative dialectics and aesthetic theory — with an emphasis on the breaks (Brüche) and gaps in the systematic unity of bourgeois thought, and is furthered by the poststructuralist Jacques Derrida. In their immanently critical ‘doubt’, Kiefer, Boltanski, Kentridge, and Mofokeng produce works which work against the pretence of wholeness, focussing their interpretive efforts on the fractures, ambiguities and contradictions, in turn echoing the processes of memory.

Adorno’s notion of immanent criticism relates to Benjamin’s conception of allegorical intention. Whilst for Benjamin allegorical discourse is linked to the expressionless-sublime, where the experience of unsurpassable emptiness paradoxically creates an ‘horizon’ in which transcendence becomes possible, Derrida argues that such transcendence or reconciliation of opposites and differences is always deferred or delayed. Derrida’s ambiguous conception of mimesis in allegory is that it simultaneously prefigures and preserves, erasing it by repetition while still maintaining a trace of the original. Echoing Benjamin’s ideas on the primordial anterior, Derrida’s argument that every beginning is actually a doubling — in every act of representation there is already a reference to something past — is a crucial philosophical theme in the works of Kiefer, Boltanski, Kentridge and Mofokeng. What results is a play of absence and presence which takes shape in traces, metaphors, allegories, signs and images.

In the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean-Francois Lyotard, text replaces mind as the locus of enunciation and difference replaces identity as the strategy of reading (Poster 1989: 22). The tendency in poststructuralism is to regard ‘truth’ as a multiplicity, to exult in the play of diverse meanings, in the continual process of reinterpretation, in the contentions of
opposing claims. Central to this is Derrida’s deconstruction of the ‘either/or’ of the history of philosophy, scrutinizing and calling into question distinctions, dichotomies, dualisms and boundary-fixing. In this vein, Derrida brings out the aporetic quality of Levinas’ ethical face-to-face encounter, suggesting instead that there is both sameness and radical alterity, symmetry and asymmetry, identity and difference in the relation to the ‘other’. This relates fundamentally to the politics of representation which is often problematically centred around polar opposites — such as race in the context of South Africa or cultural identity in the context of post-war Europe — rather than recognising the slippage, the neither/nor of such dialectical relations. Derrida, Adorno and Benjamin agree that one must posit oneself as a psychic exile so as to be conscious of all forms of boundary-fixing and the violence that that entails — a position that Kiefer, Boltanski, Kentridge and Mofokeng adopt. Within all this is an argument against the politics of forgetting, while recognizing the problematics of remembrance.

It is in this context of the politics of remembrance and representation that the second chapter is framed. For as much as the act of remembrance is a form of retrieval, recollection, restoration and commemoration, it can also be seen as forgetting, displacement, distortion or erasure. Acutely aware of the problematics of representation, Adorno reformulated his theories into an historic Bilderverbot — a prohibition on image-making that may create a fetishistic, libidinous relation between the viewer and object. At the same time, within his writings is an acknowledgement of the fundamental importance and responsibility of representation because of its ability to convey knowledge and, more importantly, bear witness. It is in this Levitican injunction to remember the past for the future to come that Adorno and Lyotard are linked dialogically. Lyotard recognises that one has to represent yet must not represent, arguing that postmodern art should present in such a way that testifies to the eventhood that representation