The Terror of The Void

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In my last paper to this association[1] I invoked the Horizon in art as a boundary between the material earth and the immaterial heavens, a boundary that provokes dreams of transcendence both literal and figurative.[2] In this paper[3] I wish to rotate the boundary through ninety degrees and consider the surface of representation as a semi permeable membrane. Take the example of Duchamp's 'Large Glass'[4] which is structured around the horizon or 'gilled cooler' or the bride's garments as a closed border between the bachelors' domain and the Bride's blossoming. In his last major work, 'Etant Donnés' the border becomes an old wooden door that obscures the tableau beyond but for a keyhole that allows only a fragment of the bride's domain to be seen.[5] The horizontal border has become a vertical one that keeps the viewer from the bride (the object of desire) just as the horizon seems to separate material things from infinity and/or the void. Twentieth century artists such as Malevich, Klein, Rothko, Kapoor and Turrell have all invoked the void as a desirable space of potential for transcendence rather than as an object of sublime terror.[6] In this paper, imagining the void will be linked with the condition of reverie implied by Michael Fried's interpretation of merger and absorption into an artwork. I hold that the

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[1] 'Horizon: Transcendant Visions; Turner to Turrell', RLA Press, (Sydney, 2002) 36-53.

[2] Caspar David Friedrich, 'Monk by the Sea', 1809. Editor's note, all references to various works of art corresponded to slides that Tony Bond displayed during his talk.

[3] Editors' Note: This paper was originally presented as one of three keynote addresses at the 'Dark Side' conference. We have attempted to maintain its integrity as the transcript of an address rather than as a written piece of prose so as to keep the content as true to the original rhetorical spoken form as possible. As such, overly rigorous referencing and footnoting has not been our priority.

[4] Marcel Duchamp, 'The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors Even', 1915.

[5] Marcel Duchamp, 'Etant Donnes:1. La chute d'eau & 2: Le gaz de eclairage', 1968 (The door)

[6] Yves Klein: 'Monochrome YKB, 1961, James Turrell, Roof Void of the Tsumari Installation', 2000.

pictorial surface can be likened to a veil separating the material world from the imaginary space beyond and that this passage into reverie implies some kind of movement into unconsciousness. The desired passage is now horizontal penetration of the veil rather than vertical ascent to the heavens.

The optically permeable membrane of the surface of a painting may be thought of as such a veil that both reveals and conceals in the manner of the Temple Veil that conceals the Ark of the Covenant thereby protecting us from direct contact with divine light while announcing its presence and thereby allowing us to safely pay it attention. I will argue that attention to this semi-permeable surface of painting does not preclude entry but can actually aid imaginary projection and merger. The metaphor of the veil assists us to connect this imaginary passage with a movement from the material world, which can be accessed by conscious apprehension, to another kind of space.

The painted surface exists in a pivotal place like the theoretical membrane that separates the concrete world from our knowledge of it. Our perception and understanding is always contingent and partial, knowledge lies alongside the world more or less closely, but it can never be the thing itself. In a way it is like a sheet draped over a form; it can describe the object but never partake of its being. This phenomenological dilemma may sometimes be taken to suggest a kind of separation from the divine or from some oceanic state in which such boundaries would be dissolved. This fundamental experience of separation between consciousness and its object may be experienced as a loss. Repairing this loss has, I suspect, consciously or intuitively driven many of the developments of modern art. Frank Auerbach[1] claimed that it was first necessary for him as a painter to become the thing in order to be able to make its sensation in paint.[2] This transference to the inanimate must also entail a moment of occlusion or loss of consciousness that is in some way commensurate with the experience of absorption on the part of the viewer.

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[1] Frank Auerbach, 'Autumn Primrose Hill', 1985.

[2] What one hopes to do is somehow become the subject, and out of that identification to make a vivid memorial.

Auerbach, like most of the painters I will show today, emphasizes the materiality of the paint. This marking and working over of the paint denotes the trace of the artist's body in front of the canvas. By extension, the viewer's presence is at one remove from the subject, thereby creating an authentic experience for the viewer; we stand in front of the marks that were made as a direct response to the scene (real or imaginary) that inspired the work. While this insistence on the surface and the exposure of facture may seem to work against the illusion of a window onto space beyond, I want to suggest that perversely, it actually enables absorption more kinesthetically than is ever possible in a purely illusionist image in which visual and intellectual projection might occur but affective participation is denied.

Absorption in a picture, according to Diderot, can be so complete that a viewer may seem to be effectively absent from the real world of consciousness for the duration of their reverie. I would like to suggest that such a complete passage from the conscious world this side of the canvas to an imaginary space beyond is a form of transcendence. I would like to conjure another kind of passage by suggesting that consciousness in a way mirrors the nature of the void. Both the void and consciousness are by their nature boundless and indefinable. They are like two balanced universes; the experientially internal one of the mind, and the external infinity it mirrors. I see this as an astronomical metaphor where the two universes are joined as it were by a black hole, a singularity that might sometimes take the form of an artwork. As we will see, some paintings actually invoke the black hole as portal.

In *Courbet's Realism,* Michael Fried describes a kind of quasi-corporeal merger that is facilitated by the structure of the image and its semiotics.[1] He cites the black hole of the *tarare* in 'The Sifters' and the grave that opens at the margin of the canvas in 'Burial at Ornans' but I would like to look at more material qualities of the artwork that assist the viewer to enter the image imaginatively or to enter a state of reverie through their experience of the painting.

Monet's loose brushwork in the late waterlily paintings from Givernay exemplify the dual experience of surface and space.[2] The

[1] Gustave Courbet, 'The Sifters', 1854.
[2] Claude Monet, 'Waterlilies, The Clouds', 1903

openness of the layered brushwork is literally transparent although many layers of colour make the surface quite crusted and materially assertive. In some of the greatest paintings at the Orangerie and in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the large scale of the paintings extends the surface beyond our cone of vision and this, allied to the loss of horizon and ground, sets us adrift in space. In order to see the whole work we must move our head or even our entire body as if we were in a landscape rather than looking at a framed image of one. This movement enhances our kinaesthetic experience of the work. Monet's marks resolve and dissolve into form as we move our gaze across the surface; they might simultaneously represent ripples in the water, reflected light and objects floating on the surface. At the same time they present us with a kind of veil through which we can imaginatively project.

Peter Fuller, in his discussion of paintings by Robert Natkin, invoked D W Winnicott's theories in which the painted surface is identified with a security blanket that allows the weaned child to maintain some tactile contact with the undifferentiated/oceanic world from which it has been ejected. There may be some truth in this that helps us to enter a state of reverie in front of certain kinds of painting, but there are many other associations with veils, curtains, arras etc that make it a very powerful metaphor at least. Monet certainly sustains this tactility and the authentic experience that it is supposed to facilitate.

Blanchflower[1] conveys the experience of the void through intensely material means. His long dialogue with the infinite began as a student when he walked the English countryside following the ancient spiritual paths that link the standing stones set in place by the first European astronomers. The pilgrimage itself kept him out at night camping at Stonehenge or in the Orkneys, so already the nocturnal sky was making a deep impression on him. The stones however are themselves extraordinary testimony of man's early philosophical commitment to binding the infinite in some concrete form. The stones are arranged to act as calendars, almost certainly to help with cyclical agricultural

[1] Brian Blanchflower, 'Canopy L1 Scelsci', (after the composer who specialises in single note compositions).

practices, and certainly these sites would have been profoundly sacred, the community's survival literally depended on them. But by revealing the movements of the universe, they also implied a certain control over nature by a conscious mind. The designers had tapped into extraordinary power. For me, the most marvellous thing is that spiritual mysteries and profound phenomenological issues are founded on the most fundamental process of mucking about with the soil.

The near monochrome of Blanchflower recent paintings generates an extraordinary sense of space and intense yet subdued light that invite visual absorption. It is as if we could almost walk into their mist and emerge in Monet's garden or in some unimaginable void. And yet they are intensely material objects. They are painted on coarse hessian sheets that have been stiffened with binder until they are like boards. The paint layers are then built up by stippling with stiff blunt brushes almost as if they were accidental accretions that emphasise and exaggerate the coarse support.

Blanchflower applies successive layers of colour that always leave glimpses of the previous layers. The artist has dispersed metallic powder through the pigment to create a mineralised effect. When one comes close to the paintings the surface takes over and they are like the rocky surface of the earth itself. And yet as one retreats, the colour transforms into infinite space. For me, this is the most marvellous manifestation of infinity in clay. In some ways, this is the two-dimensional equivalent of the *Void Fields* of Anish Kapoor.

In his homages to Yves Klein, Anish Kapoor's greatest achievement has been to manifest the experience of the void in an extraordinarily concrete way.[1] If Blanchflower creates the possibility of sensory merger, Kapoor creates a literal and phenomenal void. He created a portal onto the void within blocks of incredibly dense and ancient Cambrian sandstone, possibly the oldest sedimentary rock on earth. At first glance the spots on top of these great stones seem like applied black velvet but on closer inspection they are revealed as holes in the rock. There are no apparent sides to the holes and there is no visible end to the space. He has created the experience of a black hole within matter by hollowing out the stone leaving only a thin shell at the

[1] Anish Kapoor, 'Void field', 1989.

top at the brink of the void. The hollow has been lined with a dark blue pigment to give spatial depth to the darkness. This is a very sophisticated piece of conceptual art. In my view, it takes a monumentally rich and complex meaning and embodies it in a profoundly simple material form. The fit between means and ends is exemplary.

For most viewers the ideas that the work immediately embodies seems to be 'being' and 'non being' or, quite literally, black holes in space. Many people have expressed disquiet at the thought of putting their hand in the hole as if it might pass through into another universe and disappear entirely and yet it is very tempting to try! One visitor to whom I had explained McEvilley's metaphor of Kali's womb (which brings life into being and then consumes it back in death) said that they had in fact been thinking of the caves of Marabar as told in Forster's *A Passage to India.* The young English woman becomes disoriented by the profound darkness and the echoes in the cave and in her terror brings about catastrophe for her young Indian guide. This story hints at the terror that may await us through the portal or behind the veil.

One tiny and atypical painting by Edward Hopper, 'Nude Crawling Into a Bed' works more like a metaphor for absorption than an experiential evocation of the void.[1] Nonetheless its loose and even slippery brushwork supports the possibility of imaginary entry. The intimate subject matter, the dark tonality and the broad-brush work are more typical of a study by Rembrandt. Hopper has brought the figure very close to the picture plane. The figure faces the same way as the viewer and moves into the space of the painting. This proximity to the viewer, and the insistent quality of the painted surface, makes for a strong kinaesthetic bond between the figure and the viewer. The room is divided by the play of light and shade, creating a screen of illumination parallel to the picture plane (and metaphorically reproducing it). The figure of a woman moves through this screen. Her buttocks and legs are brightly illuminated as is the near edge of the bed but all beyond is dark and mysterious. The woman passes into the dark recesses of the bed and the space beyond. This implied movement from the illuminated surface into the veiled interior evokes a movement from consciousness into reverie or sleep. Because of the

[1] Edward Hopper, 'Nude Crawling Into a Bed', 1903.

strong visual association between the viewer and the figure there is also an implied sense of embodiment or merger on the part of the viewer.

So what does it look like when we pass through the permeable membrane and enter the imaginary space beyond or leap into the void? The Russian Suprematist Kasimir Malevich first painted a black square[1] in 1912 and exhibited it in 1915. While it could be seen as a revolutionary gesture or a negation of representation, it was also a kind of event horizon, a portal into the infinite and as such a space for contemplation of the void. The void here is seen not as a blank but as potentiality. The parallel between the 'clean slate' of a revolutionary manifesto and the idea of the plenitude of the void is a striking one. In both cases the conventional safeguards and conventions of everyday life that help keep us sane are abandoned.

It should also be noted that Malevich paid obsessive attention to the facture of his paintings, the black is layered and intimately touched by the artist. This is not only a conceptual statement but it is also intended as an experiential one. Once again, the touch of the artist's hand evokes the possibility of touching with the mind and imaginatively penetrating the surface.

Bob Law provides an ambivalent view of transcendence and absorption.[2] His black works followed a series from the late 1960s that started with large colourful abstracts called *Who is afraid of Barnet Newman* then the series *Nothing to be afraid of* in which large blank canvasses were framed by a delicate biro line and dated. Law explained to me at the time that behind the art world joke there was an element of terror. 'There is nothing to be afraid of' is something people tend to say to someone having a nervous breakdown without realising that it is precisely *nothing* that is most to be feared!

'Blue Black Indigo Black' is in fact a transcendent work like the famous Malevich black square. It can be used as a Zen space for meditation; it contrives to create the experience of an infinite space or a void through its subtle layering of the colours – blue, indigo and black. The viewer who spends a few moments in front of it will begin

[1] Kasimir Malevich, 'Black Square', 1929.
[2] Bob Law, 'Blue Black Indigo Black', 1975.

to see into the black as if through veils of dark light. In this case the surface is also very important but it is very flat, matt and undifferentiated. It needs to be like this to allow the optical penetration of the layers without the distraction of incident at the surface.

In my title, I promise *TERROR* but so far we have mostly considered the seduction of the void.

As Bob Law suggests a retreat from conscious control might not always lead to a sublime experience. In 'Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers Camp', Stephen Willats gives us a picture of alienated youth who flee consciousness by means of glue sniffing.[1] While this is in a sense a social document and a conceptual artwork that shares none of the optical and kinaesthetic properties of the other works in this paper, I include it because it embodies a marvellous material metaphor operating around the fence and the hole in the fence.

Its physical context was a residential tower block originally built to re-house families displaced by slum clearance at the other end of London. The site chosen for the tower was an isolated area in the middle of a wasteland typical of urban fringes. Between the wasteland and the housing project there was a cyclone wire fence. The work takes the form of four photographic triptychs, with an image from the estate on one side and the wasteland (which Pat Purdy, his subject, called the 'lurky place') on the other. In the middle was a smaller panel with a close-up photograph of a hole in the fence. Objects associated with the 'lurky place' were attached to the middle panel of the triptych. Pat Purdy described how the kids on the estate would crawl through the fence and create camps on the wasteland. In these camps they escaped the deterministic environment of the project by inhaling the fumes from heated glue cans. A can of Evo-stick applied to the image of the hole in the fence could be seen to have reversed its meaning as it passed from one world to another. In the world of the towers it would be a pragmatic object associated with binding and restoring, while once it passed through the fence into the 'lurky place' it became the focus for a dysfunctional ritual, albeit one of self-determination. The fence is the boundary between determined space and the indeterminate;

[1] Steven Willats, 'Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers Camp', 1980.

passage through it allows a moment of transformation into freedom but also, potentially, mental destabilisation and subsequent terror.

We began with a look at Duchamp's infamous doorway from 'Etant Donnés' in Philadelphia.[1] If one bends down and peers through the keyhole, this is all one can see. It does not matter how much one strains to catch a glimpse beyond the oval hole punched through the interior wall - parallax makes it impossible. However, when Baquié made a perfect replica based on the manual for its construction supplied by Duchamp he revealed what few have previously seen. The bride is horribly mutilated. Although Duchamp spent many years on this figure with several studies and templates for producing it dating back to 1947, he has created the absolute minimum of the body required to fill the view from the keyhole.[2] It is a very precise piece of butchery, perhaps a kind of revenge on the bride whose blossoming in the large glass happens without the help of the bachelors. Duchamp arranged a moratorium on the revealing publication of the manual for fifteen years after his death. It is as if, once again, he has deliberately planned a revelation within this elaborate act of concealment. I cannot help wondering if it represents some kind of confessional. Then again, Duchamp often said things like 'it is better to do some things in art than in real life' or 'we can do things to machines we should not do with humans' so perhaps this is his final surrogate crime. In any case, he died shortly after completing it.

I have suggested that entering the imaginary space of the void entails a degree of letting go of consciousness and loosening our grasp on this side of the veil. This opens up the spectre of entrapment within the representation, like the traveller who passes through the black hole in space; will they ever be able to re-enter normal space-time? While the terror of losing one's soul in an image is associated with primitive peoples, a trace of unease can still resonate in the modern psyche. While the void is often considered in utopian terms as embodying unlimited potential, when it is linked to a passage into the unconscious, then 'what dreams may come'? Who cannot recall holding back from the *whirly pits* at the end of an excessive night of adolescent

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[1] Marcel Duchamp, 'Etant Donnés' (view from the keyhole).

[2] Marcel Duchamp, details from 'Etant Donnés' behind the scenes.

intoxication? To go to sleep is one thing, but to pass out and be sucked up into that vortex is quite another.

Juan Muñoz has raised both the terror of being trapped in consciousness and the terror of entrapment in representation. Of Muñoz's 'Conversation Piece' (1994), we can say that the heads of his figures are derived from life, the bodies are made from clothing stuffed with soft material and then cast in resin. As anatomical representations, the figures are loose and provisional, and yet the materials out of which they are constructed contain the traces of other, absent bodies. Although many of Muñoz's sculptures initially seem playful, they also have a darker side. In reproduction, the figures made of fibreglass look as if their skin has been burned, scarred or melted. In reality, they are remarkably similar to calcified objects from a limestone cave, stalagmites that have been polished by the hands of countless visitors. The figures often seem to be in suspended animation, as if suddenly immobilised or turned to stone like Medusa's victims or the inhabitants of Pompeii, yet they seem to remain fully conscious. Sometimes in his sculptures, the eyes are propped open with matchsticks; there is no respite from either the world or from consciousness. The figures are like the desperate insomniac who was the subject of a horrible joke I heard recently:

> He had tried everything; sleeping on his side, on his back with earplugs, taking sleeping pills - nothing worked. He found himself staring red eyed at the ceiling. Finally, he blasted his head off with a shot-gun . . . but still he couldn't sleep.

I recall standing in front of 'Las Meninas' with Muñoz in the Prado in 1991.[1] We discussed all the exchanges of the gaze as analysed endlessly by Foucault. We stood where the king and queen would have needed to be for the artist in the painting to have been looking at them and for them to be reflected in the mirror at the back of the room. When one plays this game one becomes quite engaged with the circle of the family and all their visual exchanges. Then Juan said, 'now we go to lunch - but they stay!', 'And that' he said, 'is the terror of Spanish painting'.

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[1] Diego Velazquez, 'Las Meninas'. 1656.

Courbet's 'Man Mad With Fear' (1843) is a graphic image of the potential terror of representation that is entrapment, through merger, on the wrong side of the glass. In Courbet's self-portraits the artist is usually shown pressing up against the pictorial surface or the frame of the composition as if he was about to burst through the viewer's side of the canvas. In this painting, the figure of the artist leaps into the pictorial void — signified by the cliff at the lower right hand side — and into the viewer's space. Michael Fried has argued that such voids at the margin of a composition are linking spaces that provide entry for the artist and the viewer. In 'Man Mad With Fear' the void is 'fortuitously' left unfinished: precisely at the point where the artist is about to leap through the pictorial surface the paint breaks down into an abstract scumble. Representation is seen dissolving in front of our eyes. It is as if Courbet, having painted himself into entrapment, is providing a last desperate way home.

Peter Booth was well known for his black portal paintings in the early 1970s.[1] They have similar qualities to Blanchflower's monochromes in that they are at once standing stones or, in this case, the silhouettes of buildings at night and passages beyond in the manner of Malevich. Like Malevich, Booth worked substantially on the surface of the paint, thereby emphasising touch and making the surface very present to the viewer. We are invited to step through into the unknown. One might on the other hand see these black monumental slabs as melancholic nocturnes that indeed suggest that through the portal there would be the possibility of nightmares.[2]

In some ways the positive and negative potentiality of any release of conscious control are always with us in art. Somehow we need to find a balance and have something to hold onto. We dare not be carried along by the tide. Ecstasy is sometimes followed by the morning downer just as flower power ended in Manson's carnage. In the 1960s, on the other hand, R.D.Laing treated his patients by encouraging them to follow their madness to take the journey as a necessary form of passage but to record it and share every detail with the analyst. He recorded one such journey that took the patient through the vortex to a confrontation with divine light and final resolution.

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[1] Peter Booth, 'Painting', 1971.

[2] Peter Booth, 'Painting', 1982.

At the last RLA conference I spoke about Vincent Van Gogh, describing how the power of the sun might seem to dissolve the boundary of the horizon, but it is worth refreshing our memory of Bataille's interpretation in this context of the dark side. Describing this painting of the 'Sower'[1] in the letter to his brother Theo in August 1888 he says:

> I think of the man I have to paint, terrible in the furnace of the full ardors of harvest, at the heart of the south. Hence the orange shades like storm flashes, vivid as red-hot iron, and hence the luminous tones of old gold in the shadows.

Bataille identified Van Gogh with Prometheus who stole the secret of fire from the sun only to be hideously punished by the gods. For Bataille, Van Gogh was a sacrificial figure and indeed beyond the glorious fiery disc there may be ashes and the void. There is in fact no reason to differentiate Van Gogh's ear from Prometheus's liver. If one accepts the interpretation that identifies the purveying eagle (the *aetos* Prometheus of the Greeks) with the god who stole fire from the wheel of the sun, then the tearing out of the liver presents a theme in conformity with the various legends of the sacrifice of the god. The roles are normally shared between the human form of a god and his animal avatar: sometimes the man sacrifices the animal, sometimes the animal sacrifices the man, but each time it is a case of automutilation because the animal and the man form but a single being. The eagle-god who is confused with the sun by the ancients, the eagle who alone among all beings can contemplate while staring at 'the sun in all its glory', the Icarean being who goes to seek the fire of heavens is, however, nothing other than an automutilator, a Van Gogh. The cypress trees in Van Gogh's late paintings were not only symbolic of death but have the form of black fire rising from the void.

Like Van Gogh, the German artist Anselm Kiefer has moved his studio to the South of France where he also paints the sunflowers that he grows there.[2] Unlike Van Gogh he waits until the end of the season when the flaming yellow turns to a vortex of black seed. The great

[1] Vincent Van Gogh, 'The Sower, Arles', 1888.
[2] Anselm Kiefer, 'Sol Invictus', 1996.

black heads appear as an after-image of the light of the sun and the scattered seeds form dark galaxies in the heavens. Both these artists describe the power of the light and demonstrate the dangers for mortal men who aspire to transcend the material world by approaching too close to the source.

Kiefer, however, has found the light side as well. His new studio near the head of the Ardêche Gorge covers many acres of hillside where he is constructing a labyrinth of underground chambers and vast glasshouses where Provençal sun dazzles the visitor emerging from the saturnine caves below. In these spaces, he is making permanent installations that will one day be open to the public. The whole complex will provide the experience of a journey with Persephone between heaven and hell and back again.[1]

[1] Anselm Kiefer, 'Hell', Anselm Kiefer 'Emanation' Anselm Kiefer, 'Star Field'.