

**Creative Misreadings: Allegory in Tracey Rose's *Ciao Bella***

By

Genevieve Bateman

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for Master of Fine Art at Rhodes  
University

June 2006

## **Abstract**

This thesis will aim to investigate the extent to which Tracey Rose's *Ciao Bella* can be said to allegorically perform a dialectical enfolding of the dichotomous categories of meaning/nonmeaning; image/text; past/present and original/translation. The dual concepts of performance and performativity will be utilized as a means to explore the notion of interpretation as a meaning-making process and as an engagement between artist, artwork and viewer that is necessarily open-ended and in a state of constant change and flux. Rose's performance of *Ciao Bella* will be read as one that questions the illusion of unmediated representation by parodying and creatively misreading a multiplicity of visual, textual and musical representations so as to foreground the politics of representation. The representational figure of allegory, as one that defines itself in opposition to the Romantic conception of the unified symbol, will be put to work so as to reveal the ways in which Rose's performance works to critically undermine various positivistic attitudes toward self-identity, gender, race, politics, history, authorial intention and interpretation.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One</b> Making Meaning: Interpretative Strategies in and of <i>Ciao Bella</i>	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter Two</b> Political Allegories: Benjamin, Brecht and Bakhtin	<b>25</b>
<b>Chapter Three</b> Allegory as Translation	<b>55</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> Mourning Meaning: Where to Now?	<b>70</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>73</b>

## List of Illustrations

**Figure 1:** Tracey Rose, *Cicciolina*, (2001). Lambada print. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 2:** Tracey Rose, *Lolita*, (2001). Lambada print. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 3:** Tracey Rose, *Lovemefuckme*, (2001). Lambada print. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 4:** Tracey Rose, *Bunny*, (2002). Lambada print. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 5:** Tracey Rose, *Mami*, (2001). Lambada print. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 6:** Tracey Rose, *Venus Baartman*, (2001). Lambada print. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 7:** Tracey Rose, *Silhouetta*, (date). Lambada print. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 8:** Tracey Rose, *Regina Coeli*, (date). Lambada print. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 9:** Tracey Rose, *MAQEI*, (2002). Lambada print. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 10:** Tracey Rose, *Ciao Bella*. (2001). Video projection. Installation view of *Ciao Bella* in the Goodman Gallery. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 11:** Detail from *Ciao Bella*. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 12:** Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still # 11*, (1978). Gelatin-silver print, 7 ½ by 9 ½ inches. (Reproduction taken from, Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, (1997). [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org)).

**Figure 13:** Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still # 16*, (1978). Gelatin-silver print, 7 ½ by 9 ½ inches. (Reproduction taken from, Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, (1997). [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org)).

**Figure 14:** Detail from *Ciao Bella*. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 15:** Detail from *Ciao Bella*. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 16:** Detail from *Ciao Bella*. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 17:** Detail from *Ciao Bella*. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 18:** Detail from *Ciao Bella*. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 19:** Detail from *Ciao Bella*. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 20:** Detail from *Ciao Bella*. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 21:** Detail from *Ciao Bella*. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 22:** Detail from *Ciao Bella*. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 23:** Detail from *Ciao Bella*. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 24:** Detail from *Ciao Bella*. (Reproduction courtesy of the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg).

**Figure 25:** Hannah Hoch, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, (1919). Photomontage. (Reproduction taken from *Cut and Paste: A history of photomontage*. [www.cutandpaste.info/](http://www.cutandpaste.info/)).

**Figure 26:** Hannah Hoch, *Grotesque*, (1963). Photomontage. (Reproduction taken from *Cut and Paste: A history of photomontage*. [www.cutandpaste.info/](http://www.cutandpaste.info/)).

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis would not have come to its completion if it were not for the unending patience, support and much needed guidance from a number of people during this trying time. Firstly, many thanks go to my supervisor, Gerhard Schoeman for all his time and effort in reading and re-reading my work so carefully and for all his insightful comments, criticisms and suggestions. I would also like to thank Brent Meistre and Michael Herbst for their helpful input and patient understanding. Thanks also go to my mother and father for their incredible emotional and financial support throughout my degree as well as to my husband for keeping me motivated and sane. Lastly, thanks to the Goodman Gallery, in particular David Brodie, for supplying valuable information and visual material.

Notice:

Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.

By order of the Author

- Mark Twain, *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.1886

## Introduction

There no longer seems to be a dominant, uniquely relevant theory, nor much common ground between different theories. It's not that I have no desire for one – everyone wants a true model – but it is part of being a critic to question this desire. Every such model is a kind of intellectual totalitarianism, masquerading as an intellectual utopia. So, I feel free to use them all, hopefully discreetly, as so many facets in a cubist collage, each made ambiguous by the company of its neighbor. Hopefully there's some coherence in the picture I create, but it is not binding, and its ground can shift. Donald Kuspit, inner sleeve of *Redeeming art: critical reveries* (2000).

Tracey Rose's *Ciao Bella* (2001), a triple screened DVD projection, was first shown in the main exhibition of the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001 entitled "The plateau of mankind". This thirteen minute video piece has been described by Michael Rush (2003: 112), in his book *Video art*, as an "elaborately costumed feminist send-up of the Last Supper", as twelve female characters, all played by Rose, sit around, and on top of, a long white table that extends the three projected screens. These female personages were also represented in a series of still photographs (**Figures 1-9**) that accompanied the exhibition and have assisted me in my attempts to name and identify the various hybrid and ambiguous characters and the various roles they individually perform. Rush's depiction of *Ciao Bella* as a feminist subversion of the at once familiar Last Supper scene seems apt and has been the focus of the various articles written on this video piece since its first showing. Brenda Schmahmann included this work in the traveling exhibition "Through the looking glass" and discusses this video artwork in the accompanying book *Through the looking glass: representations of self by South African woman artists*. In the chapter "Enactments", Schmahmann (2004: 79) aligns *Ciao Bella* with the notion of femininity as "an enactment or form of role-playing" and describes the setting of this work and its "curious inversion" of The Last Supper's "patriarchal prototype" as an "arena in which various personages" are able to "perform their femininities".

These elements of feminist subversion is clearly evident in this video piece, though to call it merely feminist and political is perhaps to oversimplify the complexity and multiplicity of Rose's performance. Tracy Murinik (2001) is also aware of the potential dangers in oversimplifying the complexity of this work as merely a political subversion of gender and racial roles. She states that Rose's work,

is always strongly political, although not predictably so, and, although specific to each context it inhabits, is not necessarily centered upon a politics of place. Choosing to bypass the aesthetics of Rose's works to give priority only to the strong socio-political insights that she draws, however, would amount to missing a critical element of what she does. In the way that she creates, these concepts are not mutually exclusive. They are critical elements that reveal and refer to one



Figure 1



Figure 2



**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**



**Figure 5**



**Figure 6**



**Figure 7**



**Figure 8**



**Figure 9**

another in the most intimate ways, which, in so doing, provide a densely rich framework to negotiate.

In an interview with Carl Collison (2006), Rose, with reference to her most recent work *Lucie's Fur Version 1:1:1*, talks of her subversion or 'de-mythologizing' of Christianity. She states that Christianity, in her view, "functions on binaries: Yes/No; Black/White; Good/Evil; God/Devil; absolutely no in-between. There's no room for anything grey! It's not grey, its play! There's something so pleasant about the non-classifiable". Rose's decisive move to make art that expresses, or places itself within this space of the "non-classifiable", calls for an interpretation that looks at how *Ciao Bella* works within this grey and playful realm. By extension, Rose's status as a coloured South African "figures as a glitch" (Jamal 2006) in a racial registry founded on the black/white binary thus placing her identity in this playful space of the non-classifiable. By placing herself at the center of her artwork, "Rose introduces the importance of play, of the performative, in the making of art", and reveals the extent to which one's socio-historical and cultural identity should be constantly revised and re-evaluated.

In light of this, my interpretation attempts to work within a similar 'in-between' space by following a dialectical method, one that understands the processes of flux and oscillation between the various dichotomous categories evoked and undermined in Rose's performance of *Ciao Bella*. It therefore focuses on Rose's performance as a *process* that produces meaning as well as the processes involved in the viewer's own production of meaning, as opposed to an interpretation bent on systematic and rigid classification. Rather than a use of dialectics – in the strict Hegelian sense – as an operation to unify in synthesis the thesis and anti-thesis binary, my dialectical method will follow closely from David Harvey's (1996: 49) assertion that,

[d]ialectical thinking emphasizes the understanding of processes, flows, fluxes, and relations over the analysis of elements, things, structures, and organized systems.

The process of transcribing the visual performances in *Ciao Bella* has proved to be a difficult task. Instead of making things clear by describing word for word the various actions performed by Rose in her video piece, this project has rather emphasized the realm of ambiguity in which this artwork works. In other words, a process I began in order to better understand the complex and roving narrative of *Ciao Bella*, has only served to underscore my confusion. This places me in a difficult position for, if I am unable to allot the video piece any form of clear denotative

meaning, where do I begin speaking of its connotative and multilayered levels of meaning? My only recourse then would be to concentrate on the ways in which this artwork retains obscurity and to what ends. In other words, I have decided to focus on the ways in which this artwork *works allegorically* – through parody, contradiction and ambiguity – in order to understand *Ciao Bella's* processes of making and obscuring meaning. In their essay on allegory entitled “The difference of allegory” Clive Dilnot and Maruja Garcia-Padilla (1989: 43) assert:

[A]llegory is by no means fundamentally confined (as tradition has it) to issues of content (interpretation). It is a means of *speaking other*, but that *other* involves reflection on the formal and the structural, on the configurational and the representational processes, as much as it does on the content of what is spoken.

By reflecting on the “configurational and representational processes” in *Ciao Bella*, I aim to show the ways in which this artwork disallows an interpretation that wishes to allot it any form of unified meaning. I do this by focusing on the ways in which this work undoes various representations and the meanings attached to them in a self-reflexive and allegorical fashion. I have decided to read *Ciao Bella* then, as a performance by the artist, Rose, that embodies an allegorical perspective, or rather, follows an allegorical procedure in her appropriation and re-interpretation of past artworks – visual, textual and musical. This allegorical procedure is by no means hermeneutic – as Craig Owens (1994: 54) notes that “allegory is not hermeneutics” – rather Rose rips these appropriations out of their various historical and cultural contexts in order to re-interpret and perform them anew. As Dilnot and Garcia-Padilla (1989: 43) elucidate:

Allegory breaks the natural linkage which still subsists for us between a thing and the meanings which accrue to it. Instead, it takes meaning from elsewhere than the vehicle it deploys, and stamps it on to the vehicles it selects, takes up things and uses them to stand for other meanings.

Craig Owens holds (1994: 54) a similar view of allegory as he states, in his two part essay “The allegorical impulse: toward a theory of postmodernism”:

Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. And in his hands the image becomes something other (*allos* = other + *agoreuei* = to speak). He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured: allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds another meaning to the image.

By extension, the overt artificiality and constructed nature of *Ciao Bella* can be said to self-reflexively utilize extravagant modes of representation in “an attempt to use representation

against itself to challenge its authority, its claim to possess some truth or epistemological value” (Owens 1994: 88). In this way, *Ciao Bella*’s images may be said to:

simultaneously proffer and defer a promise of meaning; they both solicit and frustrate our desire that the image be directly transparent to its signification. As a result, they appear strangely incomplete – fragments or runes which must be *deciphered* (Owens 1994: 55).

I read Rose’s performance as an interrogation of various notions that have at times appeared as “natural” or “unproblematically common-sensical” (Hutcheon 1988: xiii). These notions include, according to Hutcheon (1988: xiii), “history”, “the individual self” and “the relation of language to its referents and of texts to other texts”. This thesis zones in on these concepts in order to investigate the ways in which Rose’s interpretive performance manages to problematize what is “given” or “goes without saying” (Hutcheon 1988: xiii) in contemporary culture. In other words, this dissertation focuses on the aesthetic and political functions within *Ciao Bella* by utilizing the semiotic figure of allegory as a means to investigate how this artwork works to complicate various notions surrounding history, interpretation and meaning, as well as racial and gender based identities.

Allegory, as a figure of speech and means of representation in which anything can mean anything else, has been most commonly utilized through the ages as a means to keep secret in political and esoteric domains. Allegory’s resurgence in contemporary theory and art making practices will be looked at in view of its political and aesthetic uses in the writings of two influential thinkers, namely, Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man. Firstly, Benjamin’s and de Man’s theories are used to investigate the extent to which *Ciao Bella* works to subvert – politically – Lacan’s (1997) conception of the symbolic order and its rigid classification of gender roles and femininity; secondly, to gauge how *Ciao Bella* may subvert traditional art historical epistemologies that work to uphold notions such as originality, authenticity, authorship and authorial intention.

The first chapter introduces the concepts of performance and performativity, which are central to my reading of *Ciao Bella* as an allegorical performance. With the help of Mieke Bal’s writings on art and semiotics and Umberto Eco’s postmodern fictions, I aim to reveal the extent to which Rose’s allegorical performance interpolates the viewer to participate in the production of *Ciao Bella*’s meaning. In other words, *Ciao Bella* can be read as Rose’s performance of her

own interpretation of the historical and culturally significant things around her, thus allegorically performing the viewer's own interpretive engagement with *Ciao Bella*. My interpretation of *Ciao Bella* follows a similar method of montage and pastiche, which will be put to work in the second chapter. In this chapter I utilize a variety of theoretical ideas, with which to performatively mirror Rose's intertextual performance. Furthermore, this constellation of ideas will be compressed as palimpsest; reading *Ciao Bella* as palimpsest means reading Rose's performance through various historical periods – such as the seventeenth century baroque *Trauerspiel*, Rabelais's medieval carnival and Brecht's avant-garde epic theater. Finally, the aim here is to investigate the extent to which her performance may be said to display various socio-political concerns, including feminism.

The third chapter aims to extend this palimpsest by focusing on Rose's opening recital: dressed as the schoolteacher character 'Mami', she performs a distorted version of Shakespeare's verse which begins with the famous lines "All the world is a stage". 'Mami's' opening recital is read through Benjamin's essay "The task of the translator", as well as de Man's (1986) deconstructive reading of it, in order to reveal the extent to which their seemingly anti-thetical uses of allegory can be thought of dialectically. Concomitantly, my discussion on translation, as guided by Benjamin and de Man, works to reveal the ways in which 'Mami's' verse can be seen to display the disjunctions and ruptures within the allegorical mode. By extension, the allegorical paradigm of the palimpsest is used to explore the extent to which the borders between the dichotomous categories of meaning/nonmeaning; image/text; original/translation and past/present can be said to be dialectically enfolded in Rose's performance of *Ciao Bella*.

## Chapter One

### Making Meaning: Interpretive Strategies in and of *Ciao Bella*

In the illusory bables of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost.  
Robert Smithson quoted by Craig Owens (1994).

Mieke Bal's (1994) influential work on semiotic theory in her book *On meaning-making: essays in semiotics* provides a lucid discussion on the usefulness of semiotics to art history. She (1994: 5) makes the claim that this paradigm or theoretical framework functions in an interdisciplinary way allowing for it to be utilized across various academic departments within the humanities: "As a field, semiotics constantly crosses the boundaries of other fields". In terms of visual art and art history, semiotics can be usefully employed to understand the workings of interpretation and its process of signification or semiosis as the construction of meaning on the part of the artist and her viewer. This process of constructing a visual artwork, or text, using visual, textual and auditory sign systems – as Rose does in her making and performance of *Ciao Bella*, and as I do in my own interpretive engagement with her artwork – is analyzed briefly in what follows in terms of Bal's semiotic theory and its usefulness to art history and visual culture.

Due to the complex nature of Rose's video performance and its undeniable status as pastiche – its overtly intertextual layering of historical and contemporary art works, visual, musical and literary – allows for a consideration of *Ciao Bella* as one that displays the aesthetic and conceptual concerns of what has been termed the postmodern. Rose's use of intertextual referents and pastiche can be compared to the fictional work of another semiotician, Umberto Eco. I specifically utilize his postmodern fictions as a way of revealing what kind of postmodern artwork I think *Ciao Bella* is and to what ends I think it works. Concomitantly, Eco's theoretical work on interpretation, specifically his call for a dialectical approach between openness and form, is looked at in terms of the direction in which my interpretive project wishes to go, or rather, the direction in which Rose's performance leads me.

My discussion on Eco's postmodern fictions and his interpretive strategies leads me to my main consideration of *Ciao Bella* as an allegorical performance, one that displays a certain allegorical perspective in Rose's use and subversion of various concepts and images appropriated from the well of our culture's historical knowledge. Following Craig Owens's

(1994) recognition of the resurfacing of an allegorical mode of perception within contemporary art practices, as put forth in his two part essay “The allegorical impulse: toward a theory of postmodernism”, I attempt to show a similar allegorical impulse at work within *Ciao Bella*. More specifically, this consideration of allegory serves as an introduction to the following two chapters, both of which will be framed by the figure of allegory.

## Performing Allegory

The figure of allegory is succinctly defined by J. Hillis Miller (1981: 356) in his essay “The two allegories”, as follows:

*Allegory* – the word means to speak figuratively, or to speak in other terms, or to speak of other things in public, from the Greek *allegorein*, *allos*, other, plus *agoreuein*, to speak (in public), from *agora*, an assembly, but also the marketplace or customary place of assembly. If agoraphobia is fear of open spaces, would allegoraphobia be the fear of that form of language which speaks otherwise? The word *allegory* always implies not only the use of figures, but a making public, available to profane ears, of something which otherwise would remain secret. The something other can only be made public, visible and audible, “theatrical” in the root sense of open to seeing, by such means.

According to this description of allegory, one can align this theatrical figure of speech and representation to the notion of performativity in that the figure of allegory is not only a concept but an operation<sup>1</sup>, an operation that works to speak other, make public, visible and audible that which would otherwise remain secret. In the introduction to a collaboration of essays entitled *Performing the body. Performing the text*, Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (1999: 1) note:

Since the 1960’s, visual art practices, from body art to Minimalism, have opened themselves to a dimension of theatricality that in such a way as to suggest that art critics and art historians might reassess our own practice of making meaning through an engagement with the processes of art production and reception as performative. In this way, artistic meaning can be understood as enacted through interpretive engagements that are themselves performative in their intersubjectivity. Thus, the artwork is no longer viewed as a static object with a single prescribed signification that is communicated unproblematically and without default from the maker to an alert, knowledgeable, universalized viewer.

---

<sup>1</sup>In their collection of essays entitled *Formless: a user’s guide*, Yves Bois and Rosalind Krauss (1997) define the formless as an operation. This conception is drawn from their quotation of Bataille, which introduces their book, in which he states: “A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus the formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world...”

This view on the performativity of interpretation, as well as the performativity of allegory, is utilized in my own interpretive strategies in reading *Ciao Bella*. I have outlined my interpretive project to be one that focuses on the ways in which this video artwork complicates notions surrounding interpretation and meaning. By intentionally appropriating a multiplicity of related and unrelated representations and fragmenting, or rather, allegorically disseminating<sup>2</sup>, their respective bodies of meaning, Rose's performance, as I argue, relates an ambiguous message, one that "is at once particularly rich in information and yet very difficult to decode" (Eco 1989: 63). I would even go so far as to say that *Ciao Bella* is almost impossible to decode fully and that the process of decoding it cannot be confined to one Masters dissertation only. The notion of the performative, as elucidated above, is therefore useful to me in foregrounding the open-endedness of Rose's performance and my own interpretive process, one that should "thus be understood as a process rather than an act with a final goal" and one that "acknowledges the ways in which circuits of desire and pleasure are at play in the complex web of relations among artists, patrons, collectors, and both specialized and non-specialized viewers" (Jones & Stephenson 1999: 1).

By thinking of the viewer's interpretive engagement with the artwork as performative and one that remains open-ended and in flux, Jones and Stephenson reveal the extent to which their thinking may be aligned to Harvey's conception of dialectics (as discussed in the introduction). It is in this dialectical consideration of interpretation, as a performative engagement, that meaning cannot be handed down intact from the artist to the viewer via the work of art. Interpretation, then, is rather made or constructed in the process of signification the viewer follows in order to make sense of or understand the work before them. Hence the term "meaning-making" as employed by Mieke Bal.

This view of interpretation as an inter-subjective activity that necessarily *produces* meaning, seems to discredit the traditional views art critics and art historians have held that as 'professional spectators' they have the ability to decode the artwork's 'true meaning'. To avoid such an authoritarian imposition of meaning onto an artwork, meaning should be viewed as a

---

<sup>2</sup> Unlike a Hegelian system of dialectical thought in which nature, history and the work of art move dialectically toward a final goal "which will be their absolute spiritualization" and "their vanishing or disbodiement in the fulfillment of a total meaning", Benjamin's conception of allegory works to foreground the decay inherent in nature, history and the work of art, in a way that brings "into the open detached and fragmentary bits of matter not transfigured by any totalizing idea" (Hillis Miller 1981: 363).

negotiation “between and across subjects and through language”, a negotiation that remains “in flux and contingent on social and personal investments and contexts” (Jones & Stephenson 1999:2). This dialectical consideration of meaning-making as an exchange and negotiation between artist, artwork and viewer, is asserted by Jones and Stephenson (1999:2):

By emphasizing this lack of fixity and the shifting, invested nature of any interpretive engagement, we wish to assert that interpretation itself is worked out as a performance between artists (as creators, performers, and spectators of their own work) and spectators (whether ‘professional’ or non-specialist).

### **Between the Visual and the Textual: Bal’s Visual Semiotics**

And the proper name, in this particular context, is merely an artifice: it gives us a finger to point with, in other words, to pass surreptitiously from the space where one speaks to the space where one looks; in other words, to fold one over the other as though they were equivalents. But if one wishes to keep the relation of language to vision open, if one wishes to treat their incompatibility as a starting- point for speech instead of as an obstacle to be avoided, so as to stay as close as possible to both, then one must erase those proper names and preserve the infinity of the task. (Foucault 1970: 9-10)

In his book entitled *Why are our pictures puzzles? On the modern origins of pictorial complexity*, James Elkins asks some fundamental questions regarding the activity of interpretation. He explores the underlying compulsion that seems to drive art historians, himself included, to write about art and their ongoing attempts to decode messages hidden and unspoken within pictures. For this is the central concern: pictures do not speak and for this basic reason they do not communicate or ‘say’ anything. As Elkins (1999: 255) states:

Art history as a whole may be a collection of ways of coping with a feeling of helpless bewilderment – a feeling that grows whenever we take time to attend to the persistent, senseless silence of images.

Art historians therefore seem to oscillate toward more complicated images rather than simpler pictures in order to keep this sense of meaninglessness at bay. In other words, contemporary art theory tends to focus on images “that are so dense with signs that they are already half inside language” (Elkins 1999: 256). But, as Elkins (1999: 256) reiterates, “even the most fascinating and absorbing pictures, the ones that call for the full expertise of the discipline, are fundamentally meaningless: if they were not, they would not be pictures – they would be texts”. Yet, Rose’s performance of *Ciao Bella* is not purely visual in that it can be read, for example, as a painting, a theatrical performance, a musical, and/or a lesson introduced by a

teacher. Rose's combination of "the visual and the verbal, mass media and high art, artistic practice and aesthetic theory" (Hutcheon 1989: 118) in *Ciao Bella* works to subvert these binary oppositions. By doing so, Rose investigates the "borders along which each [binary concept] can be opened, subverted, altered by the other" (Hutcheon 1989: 119). Rose's complication of the text/image opposition brings to the fore a concern that has raised much debate between art historians. On the one hand, art historians such as Elkins foreground the interpretive dangers in conflating the visual and the textual, while, on the other hand, semioticians, like Bal, have attempted to formulate a visual semiotics in order to read visual images. More specifically, Elkins views the graphic nature of marks as a retention rather than communication of meaning, while Bal's formulation of a visual semiotics works to uncover visual narratives in pictures that may reveal or communicate meaning.

The debate begins with Elkins' (1995) article "Marks, traces, *traits*, contours, *orli*, and *splendores*: nonsemiotic elements in pictures" in which he denies the productive possibilities of visual semiotics:

Semiotics, I think, has several deleterious effects on the ways we understand pictures. Despite its claims to be neutral between linguistic and other sign systems, semiotics slights the meaning of marks, bringing visual narratives unpleasantly close to written ones (so that without illustrations in the texts, it would sometimes be difficult to tell if a semiotic account were referring to a painting or another text). In the end, semiotics shrinks the notion of what a picture is, assimilating pictures to texts and overlooking their painted strangeness. Semiotics makes pictures too easy; I want pictures to be harder to look at and harder to describe, so that we cannot get as quickly from the slurry of marks to orderly historical meanings.

Bal's (1996) responding article, entitled "Semiotic elements in academic practices", replies to Elkins' opinion that semiotics is merely redundant and does not complicate pictorial meaning by revealing the ways in which Elkins largely misread her work with Norman Bryson, specifically their paper "Semiotics and art history"(1991). She ends her response by stating:

On the one hand, I have focused on issues pertaining to the *practice* of cultural analysis these readers are all, in one way or another, engaged in; on the other, I have tried to put on the table the hidden monodisciplinary obsessions lurking within interdisciplinary pretensions.

She continues:

It is to visual semiotics that I find myself being drawn because it does challenge semiotics to articulate tentatively, hesitantly, but decisively and innovatively not "what really happens in

pictures” but what (some) pictures can make their viewers do, as “something which stands *to somebody* for something in some respect or capacity”<sup>3</sup>.

In terms of *Ciao Bella*, this debate between pure visuality and productive visual semiotics can perhaps be most useful if they were considered dialectically. This video artwork displays some of the visual traits of a painting – most obviously in the way that Rose framed the three DVD projections together in a gilt Baroque-like frame (**Figure 10**) – as well as elements included in theater productions, such as music, speech acts, gestures, costume, make-up, a painted backdrop and props. On the one hand then, it seems that, not only visual but also a variety of semiotic procedures could be applied to this video piece, as it is not purely visual but also textual and auditory. On the other hand, following Elkins, this video piece also retains obscurity, as graphic marks do and should; not all of Rose’s gestures can be articulated, not all of her characters can be classified and not all of her musical and textual allusions can be accounted for. In what follows, I investigate Bal’s formulation and use of visual semiotics as an interpretive tool, in order to reveal the extent to which Rose complicates this process of visual semiotics and to what possible ends.

### **Interpretation as Meaning-Making**

In “Semiotics and art history”, which appears in Part III of her book *On meaning-making: essays in semiotics* – Mieke Bal (1994) and her co-author Norman Bryson discuss and propose various semiotic methods in approaching visual art. This usage of semiotic theory within visual art discourse is, in my view, fundamental in attempting to reveal the process of signification or semiosis, as advocated by Peirce, which involves the “production and the interpretation of signs, both equally fundamental” (Bal 1994:165). Rose’s usage of *visual* sign-systems – gesture, clothing, make-up etc. – as well as her usage of linguistic sign-systems – by performing a verse, asking questions, shouting, and singing – will be ‘read’ and interpreted by my own use of sign-systems. By extension, my interpretation or reading of the visual artwork is mediated through my reading and interpretation of various theorists, as well as my own ‘cultural baggage’, which I inevitably bring to the work.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Allegory as a figure which stands in for, or speaks of, something else.



Figure 10



Figure 11

In the Eighth chapter of the collected essays in Part III of this book, the authors introduce two traditions within semiotics, stemming mainly from Peirce's and Saussure's conceptions of the sign. Due to the enormity and complexity of both these theorist's writings and conceptions, I will focus on Peirce's theory of semiosis, which, as noted by Bal and Bryson (1994: 165), "provides a logical basis for a reader- or reception- orientated theory of art". Due to the fact that my interpretation also involves this process of semiosis, I need to clarify how this process functions. Bal and Bryson (1994: 165-166) explain that,

[t]he process of semiosis works through three positions: a perceptible or virtually perceptible item – the sign or *representamen* – that stands in for something else; the mental image, called *the interpretant*, that the recipient forms of the sign; and the thing for which the sign stands – the *object* or *referent*.

According to this schema, the characters performed in *Ciao Bella* are signs or representamens, which stand in, allegorically and semiotically, for other things – be it stereotypical feminine roles, myths, etc. The viewers then shape images in their minds that they associate with the represented characters. These mental images are the interpretants. Furthermore, each interpretant points to an object/idea, and this object/idea is different for each viewer, as each viewer brings their own collection of mental images to the artwork. By virtue of this, the object/idea for which the represented character stands "is therefore fundamentally subjective<sup>4</sup> and reception-determined" (Bal 1994: 166). Peirce (as quoted by Bal & Bryson 1994: 166) elucidates his conception of the sign as follows:

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I shall call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that *object*, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen.

---

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Benjamin's (1998: 233) assertion that, "the triumph of subjectivity and the onset of an arbitrary rule over things, is the origin of all allegorical contemplation".

In this quotation, a similarity to the Derridian<sup>5</sup> conception of the dynamic nature of the sign – its meaning as constantly deferred – is evident as opposed to Saussure’s dichotomistic theory of the sign as signifier/signified. Moreover, in Peirce’s definition of the sign, interpretation is viewed as constantly shifting as “no viewer will stop at the first association” (Bal 1994: 166). As a result – the way that the interpretant<sup>6</sup> or mental image becomes a new sign which yields a new interpretant – “we are in the process of infinite semiosis” (Bal 1994: 166). Meaning, then, is caught up in a process of infinite deferral and cannot be fixed. What can be discerned then, from a Peircian formulation of semiosis, is the fact that a work of art can “no longer be viewed as a static object with a single, prescribed signification that is communicated unproblematically and without default from the maker to an alert, knowledgeable, universalized viewer” (Jones & Stephenson 1999:1).

This conception of the performativity of interpretation as a meaning-making process can be utilized as a critical strategy within the study of visual culture as it “enables a recognition of interpretation as fragile, partial, and precarious affair and ultimately, affords a critique of art criticism and art history as they have been traditionally practiced” (Jones & Stephenson 1999:2). More specifically, I propose that Rose allegorically performs this critical strategy in *Ciao Bella* by extensively appropriating images from art, popular culture and history, thereby constructing an intertextual web of ideas and meanings that, by virtue of their ambiguity and complexity, deny any form of linear or closed interpretations. I have decided to see *Ciao Bella* as an artwork that performs a postmodern impulse, in that, and with reference to Linda Hutcheon’s (1988: 3) theorizing of postmodernity, this artwork performs the contradictory nature of postmodernism, “one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges”.

In order to understand the ways in which *Ciao Bella* embodies this contradiction, let me consider, for the moment, Rose’s much discussed quotation of the famous Last Supper scene as

---

<sup>5</sup>In Derrida’s (1973: 138) ‘concept’ of *differance*, he explores this process of using a sign to stand in for something else: “When we cannot take hold of or show the thing, let us say the present, the being present, when the present does not present itself, then we signify, we go through the detour of signs”. In this conception then, and as Derrida (1973: 138) states, “[t]he sign would thus be a deferred presence”.

<sup>6</sup>Bal and Bryson (1994: 167) note that the interpretant “should not be conflated with the person doing the interpretation”, they use Vemeer’s *The Artist in His Studio* as an example of the representation of the interpretant. They write: “Because Vemeer cannot have seen this scene while painting it, we must conclude that he imagined it, as an outsider would see it, for example. ‘The scene was nowhere but in his head.’ Hence, the scene of the painting artist presented from the back is in the first place and emphatically a sign or rather, a sign of its own sign-ness”.

an example. By quoting this scene, Rose inevitably installs various levels of connotative meanings into her artwork, for example, Christian ideology, patriarchy, and Renaissance painting. Through her combination of this quotation with a multiplicity of other radically different and at times contesting quotations, like her placement of the porn star character ‘Cicciolina’ in the middle of this familiar composition (**Figure 11**), Rose ultimately subverts the previous bodies of meaning associated with this biblical scene. But this subversion is not only one-sided: the figure of ‘Cicciolina’ can be read as a stand in for the figure of Christ, as he takes up the center or focal point of the traditionally painted scene, and by virtue of this placement or re-placement, ‘Cicciolina’s’ own history is subverted and read through overtly religious connotations.

Bal (1999: 15) explains: “[S]uch visual quotations fragment<sup>7</sup> and pluralize visual representation into a polyphonic multitude whose aspects are neither arbitrarily collated nor “democratically” distributed”. In other words, *Ciao Bella* as an allegorical pastiche of history, art and feminine stereotypes does not place its quotations in any hierarchical or rigidly classified form, nor are these quotations arbitrarily put together. The montage-like quality of *Ciao Bella* – the hybrid characters gathered around a long white table on the stage-like setting – displays an important structural element within the paradigm of the palimpsest. Each appropriation – be it visual, textual or musical – is “read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship might be” (Owens 1992: 54). In this sense, my use of the term pastiche<sup>8</sup> here should therefore be viewed in a productive light in opposition to, and as guided by Hutcheon (1988: 27) again, Fredric Jameson’s description of pastiche as “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion.”

### **Quotation; Intertextuality and the Problem of Polysemy**

Following Bal’s (1999: 8) assertion that “quotation stands at the intersection of iconography and intertextuality”, it can be said that quotation reveals, or rather, opens a space in which iconography, as a visual tool, and intertextuality, as a linguistic tool, can be considered as dual

---

<sup>7</sup> With reference to quotation, Benjamin states: “To write history [...] means to quote history. But the concept of quotation implies that any given historical object must be ripped out of its context”. (Richter 2000: 25)

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Rosalind Krauss’s “Reinventing the medium”, in which she (1999: 290) states: “And, in the place of what was formerly an author, the operator of these quotes, in being redefined as *pasticheur*, was repositioned to the other side of the copybook to join, schizophrenically, the mass of its readers”.

concepts. Quotation thus also brings about a space within which the visual and linguistic traditions of interpretation can be integrated. Furthermore, the fact that *Ciao Bella* displays a mixture of “various visual and discursive modes” (Bal 1999: 8) makes this artwork interdiscursive. The term intertextuality, introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin, refers to the “ready-made quality” of linguistic and visual signs that an artist or writer finds available in the earlier texts and artworks that a culture has produced (Bal 1999: 8).

Intertextuality, unlike iconographic analysis which allows the historical precedent to advocate to the later artist what forms can be used, implies a certain active intervention on the part of the artist of the material handed down to him or her (Bal 1999: 8). This view of iconographic analysis, as one that retains control over a borrowed motif, is reflected in Angus Fletcher’s (1964) book *Allegory: the theory of a symbolic mode*. In the chapter “Value and intention: the limits of allegory”, Fletcher (1964: 304) defines allegory as a mode that “exerts a high degree of control over the way any reader must approach any given work”. This ‘traditional’ interpretation of allegory thus views this literary mode as one that advocates certain historical pretexts and their meanings to the reader, and, in doing so, works to “deliberately restrict the freedom of the reader” (Fletcher 1964: 305). The re-surfacing of an allegorical impulse within contemporary art-making practices and theoretical discussions reveals the extent to which this mode has been re-evaluated. Stemming from Benjamin’s (1998: 175) assertion that in allegory “any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else”, contemporary theoreticians and artists have appropriated this figure of speech and representation as a means to underscore the open-endedness of, and polysemous nature of, meaning.

Bal (1999: 8) notes that a second difference between intertextuality and iconography is “the place of meaning”. In terms of the place of meaning, iconographic analysis does not necessarily endorse that a borrowed motif also involves the borrowing of its meaning and frequently “avoids interpreting the meaning of the borrowed motifs in their new context” (Bal 1999: 8), while intertextuality “implies precisely that: the sign taken over, because it is a sign, comes with a meaning” (Bal 1999: 9). This is not to say that the later artist necessarily makes use of the previous meaning, but that he or she will “inevitably have to deal with it: reject or reverse it, ironize it, or simply, often unawares, insert it in the new text” (Bal 1999: 9). Furthermore, as considered by Bal (1999: 15):

One can push this reflection of the implications of the production of meaning through quotation and intertextuality further, in the direction of self-reflection, because the art historian, like any viewer of images, cannot help but bring to the pictures her own legacy of discursive precedents. Reading images entails the inevitable mixing of these signs with those perceived in the work.

This consideration, as further noted by Bal and her co-author Norman Bryson (1994: 201), leads to the issue of polysemy. If viewers/interpreters bring their “own legacy of discursive precedents” to the artwork, then there can be no such thing as a unified or fixed meaning. Allegory has become the figure *par excellence* of this inability to fix meaning as it “demonstrates the fundamental polysemous nature of signs” (Bal 1994: 201). The freedom implied in an artwork’s ability to mean something entirely outside of itself, with no constraints, is viewed positively by two thinkers in particular whom Richard Rorty (1982) has referred to as ‘textualists’, namely the literary theorists Paul de Man and Jonathan Culler. Both Bal and Bryson are aware of the implications such a view endorses though, and call for a certain amount of caution: “[F]or the play of interpretation is surely not entirely free, or else there would be no cause for chagrin about power relations and exclusions in academic practices” (1994: 202). Rather, both authors propose to see signs as *events*, and not merely *things*, that “take place in specific circumstances and according to a finite number of culturally valid, conventional, yet not unalterable rules which semiotics calls codes” (1994: 203).

This call for responsible reading by Bal and Bryson is echoed in the work of another semiotician, Umberto Eco. His postmodern novels, and here I will use *Foucault’s Pendulum* as an example, can be said to perform critiques of both semiotic extremes: textual closure and semiotic drift, or as mentioned before, infinite semiosis. Helen Bennett (1998), in her essay “The limitations of openness: Foucault’s Pendulum and Kabbalah”, discusses the dialectical approach Eco takes recourse to in order to critique these two semiotic extremes. For Eco, the semiotic process is to be viewed as “a dialectic between openness and form, initiative on the part of the reader and contextual pressure” (Eco qtd. Bennett 1998: 82). In his earlier work, Eco argued for a text’s openness and displayed an affinity with Barthes’ notions on the death of the author and the necessary co-operation of the reader to complete the meaning of the text. Yet, and as Bennett (1998: 81) notes in her quotation of Eco<sup>9</sup>, he also made clear that “[t]he *possibilities* which the work’s openness makes available always work within a given *field of relations*”. Just as Bal and Bryson call for a certain amount of caution in terms of the polysemic

---

<sup>9</sup> Eco, U. 1989. *The open work*.

nature of signs, with particular reference to the figure of allegory, Eco also calls for caution as openness can become negative when it prohibits meaning in its legitimation of all meanings; whilst, on the other hand, closure is just as flawed as it dictates one meaning while making all others wrong.

This call for a dialectical or middle ground approach to these two extremes of openness and closure are explored by Eco in his novel *Foucault's Pendulum* in which he contrasts two approaches to texts in order to underscore the destructive possibilities in each. Bennett (1998: 82) notes that,

the main characters turn intellectual history (especially of the occult and esoteric) into a semiotic game where language is never intended to represent a truth outside itself. They are reacting to the excessive closure of the Diabolicals; a group of interpreters who seek the hidden meaning behind all texts that will lead to the one fixed point on earth which is the source of all power.

The three main characters, as the “deconstructionist/interpreters in the novel” (Bennett 1998: 83), allow their semiotic game, linking ideas and finding connections between everything that they were reading and investigating, to over take them. ‘The Plan’, as they called their semiotic game, is then appropriated by the Diabolicals and regarded as the truth or hidden answer that they had been searching for. What began as a playful intertextual game, ends in death and destruction as the fanatic Diabolicals turn to violence in order to receive the answer to unlimited power that they believe exists and that they believe has been found by the main characters. In this way then, Eco condemns the overly open and playful nature of the intellectual’s semiotic game or Plan, by allowing the Diabolicals to ultimately destroy them. The novel in this sense becomes an allegory of Eco’s dialectical approach to interpretive possibilities as expounded in his semiotic theory.

This dialectical approach is developed by Eco in *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, a collection of three of his essays, which form the core of the book. This book also contains the papers of three leading contributors in their respective fields, each bringing their own views on interpretation, in relation to Eco’s formulations, allowing for a dialogue between and across the fields of philosophy, and literary theory and criticism<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> These contributors include the philosopher Richard Rorty, literary theorist Jonathan Culler and novelist Christine Brook-Rose.

In his essay, "Interpretation and history", Eco (1992: 25) introduces his view that it is the 'intention of the text' that disallows for infinite and regressive interpretation, whilst maintaining openness. As he states:

In some of my recent writings I have suggested that between the intention of the author (very difficult to find out and frequently irrelevant for the interpretation of a text) and the intention of the interpreter who (to quote Richard Rorty) simply 'beats the text into shape which will serve for his purpose', there is a third possibility. There is an *intention of the text*.

This consideration of, and focus on, the intention of the text in Eco's theoretical writings is echoed in Bal's (1999: 9) formulation of the artwork as a theoretical object and her claim that art 'thinks'. Her study on the notion of artwork as theoretical object works dialectically in its "attempts to trace the process of meaning-production over time (in both directions: present/past and past/present) as an open, dynamic process". By viewing the process of meaning making and interpretation as one that is open and dynamic, Bal resists the classification and closure of meaning that takes place when one too easily designates specific meaning to a sign or idea. In Bal's theorizing, visual images become active participators in the cultural dialogue that attempts to make sense of them and it is in terms of this notion that Bal claims art 'thinks'. She thus maintains her own dialectical middle ground between the extremes of openness and closure, as Eco does, by recognizing the productive possibilities in allowing the work of art its own intention.

Eco's novels also display a certain degree of similarity to Rose's performance of *Ciao Bella*, in that, as described by Rocco Capozzi (1998: 134), in his essay "Libraries, encyclopedias, and rhizomes: popularizing culture in Eco's superfictions":

Eco's hybrid novels are entertaining collages of quotations, intricate pastiche of historical, philosophical, and popular works that reflect the authors understanding of the universe of culture as field made up of bits and pieces of information and ideas that can be interconnected by our encyclopedic competence through a series of links.

It is as if Eco's reader must enter a library of information in order to fully comprehend the intertextual hybridity of his novels. His readers then become investigators as they search Eco's library in order to connect the bits and pieces of information further whilst realizing the extent to which this activity may be fully unrealizable. His novels are in this sense labyrinth-like as the reader finds herself enveloped within and lost in the labyrinth of the library of information he alludes to. His text in this way speaks of other texts and the process of writing and

interpretation as a process of reading. Again, we seem to be in an allegorical space of perception as it exists in the paradigm of the palimpsest: reading texts through other texts (Cf. Owens 1992). Rose's viewer can be said to follow a similar investigative procedure in his or her attempts to recognize the multiplicity of visual, textual and musical representations appropriated by Rose in her production of *Ciao Bella*. By extension, Eco's writings on labyrinths and encyclopedias will be very useful to me in my own attempts at developing an interpretive strategy that would attempt at a responsible reading without circumventing the polysemy of meanings performed in *Ciao Bella*.

The literary motifs discussed above in relation to Eco's intertextual fabulations of palimpsests, labyrinths and libraries, are further developed by Capozzi in his exploration of Eco's writings and formulations of interpretive methods. He (1998: 133) refers to Eco's essay "Dictionary vs. encyclopedia", an essay in which Eco puts forth "a study of rhizomes and encyclopedia versus trees, binary systems, codes, and dictionaries". In this essay, Eco (qtd. Capozzi 1998: 133) develops the notion of the competence of an encyclopedic project as one that "is governed by an underlying metaphysics or by a metaphor (or an allegory): the idea of labyrinth". Eco defines "three types of labyrinths: the classical (linear), the manneristic (a maze), and a net" (Capozzi 1998: 133).

The labyrinth structured as a net is the type that, as Capozzi (1998: 134) quotes him, Eco is most drawn to:

In a labyrinth of the third type is a net (maybe the word meander characterizes it as different from the maze and from a plain labyrinth). The main feature of a net is that every point can be connected with every other point, and, where the connections are not yet designed, they are, however, conceivable and designable. A net is an unlimited territory. A net is not a tree... on the contrary, the abstract model of a net has neither a center nor an outside. The best image of a net is provided by the vegetable metaphor of the rhizome suggested by Deleuze and Guattari.

In view of this formulation, *Ciao Bella*, as a postmodern allegorical montage and pastiche, can be read as a labyrinth that resembles a similar net or rhizome-like structure that, by extension, leads its interpreter to create his or her own labyrinth or rhizome-like interpretation. In other words, the labyrinth-like quality of Eco's fictions, and theoretical formulations, and Rose's interdiscursive performance work to foreground "encyclopedic intertextuality and infinite semiosis" (Capozzi 1998: 133) and in this way can be utilized as "tools for understanding and

communicating knowledge” (Capozzi 1998: 141). By extension, Eco, again quoted by Capozzi (1998: 134), elucidates that,

[t]he universe of semiosis, that is, the universe of human culture, must be conceived as structured like a labyrinth of the third type: (a) It is structured according to a network of interpretants. (b) It is virtually infinite because it takes into account multiple interpretations realized by different cultures ... (c) It does not register only ‘truths’ but, rather, what has been said about the truth or what has been believed to be true...

Bal’s (1999: 9) discussion on the undecidability of the visual can be seen to display a close connection to Eco’s formulation of semiosis as a net-like, or rhizome, labyrinth. She elaborates the following, which I will quote at length for the importance of these insights to my discussion:

The undecidability of the visual is understood to be paradigmatic of the production of meaning in general. Instead of classifying and closing meaning as if to solve an enigma, this study of what Freud would call *Nachträglichkeit* attempts to trace the process of meaning-production over time (in both directions: present/past and past/present) as an open, dynamic process, rather than to map the results of that process. Instead of establishing a one-to-one relationship between sign or motif and meaning, I emphasize the active participation of visual images in cultural dialogue, the discussion of ideas. It is in this sense that I claim art “thinks”.

As I have already discussed, Bal’s claim that art ‘thinks’ can be productively compared to Eco’s call for an interpretation that focuses on the *intention of the text*, for surely this consideration implies that the text, following Bal, ‘thinks’. By extension, Eco’s call for a dialectical approach between openness and form, in that a work’s openness has to be considered in terms of the given field of relations or cultural codes within which the artwork works, follows Bal’s consideration of the ways in which visual images actively participate in a cultural dialogue. In this sense, *Ciao Bella*, as an interdiscursive artwork that displays both iconographic and intertextual quotations, can be considered as a ‘theoretical object’, one that performs its own theoretical thinking, and by extension, one that guides its viewer’s interpretations. More specifically, the interdiscursivity in *Ciao Bella* “accounts for pluralized meanings – typically, ambiguities – and stipulates that meaning cannot be reduced to the artist’s intention” (Bal 1999: 10).

## Allegorical Intentions: The Open-form of the Baroque

So far I have attempted to show, with the use of Eco's interpretive strategies, as elucidated in his theoretical and fictional work, the extent to which *Ciao Bella* can be seen to display a level of openness and complexity as opposed to linearity and closure. By extension, the open form of Rose's performance denies a rigid interpretation bent on classifying and ordering – as is seen in dictionary definitions and binary systems – but, rather, *intends* an interpretation that performs a similar openness – as seen in Eco's formulation of the rhizome and net-like labyrinth structure. This view on the open-endedness of interpretation as somewhat of a 'meandering' through the rhizome-like labyrinth of the open work is perhaps best exemplified in Rose's quotation of the baroque.

The baroque<sup>11</sup> – as a historical genre and as a contemporary perception – cannot be thought of without alluding to concepts such as the fold<sup>12</sup>, the labyrinth and the excessively decorative. Paul Edmunds (2003), in his review of this video work as it was displayed in Grahamstown, reveals the first and perhaps most evident baroque quotation. He states: "The three back-projections sit seamlessly alongside one another inside a long gilt, Baroque-like frame" (**Figure 10**). By framing her artwork with reference to the baroque, Rose allows her entire artwork to be read through this frame. Concomitantly, *Ciao Bella* begins, after 'Mami's' introductory recital, with the dramatic lift of red velvet curtains (**Figure 14**) to reveal a painted background, echoing the fold as an emblem of the baroque and calling to mind Benjamin's (1998: 191) "thousand folds<sup>13</sup> of allegorical drapery". Eco (1989: 7), notes that the baroque form works in opposition to the classical Renaissance form – also quoted by Rose in her appropriation of the Last Supper table formation – and reveals that the:

<sup>11</sup> In my discussion of Rose's quotation of the baroque, I refer to two very distinct uses of the concept. In the first instance, I make reference to the stylistic features of the historical period, for example, the decorativeness and excesses celebrated in baroque interiors and baroque painting. On the other hand, I also make reference to the concept of "baroque reason" (Buci-Glucksmann 1994) : the baroque as a certain kind of contemporary perception, a lens through which certain concepts, relating to art history or contemporary culture for example, can be reconsidered, as seen in the writings of theorists such as Benjamin (1998), Buci-Glucksmann (1994), Bal (1999), and Deleuze (1993).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Deleuze (1993) and Foucault (1970)

<sup>13</sup> Concomitantly, Benjamin's reference to the fold, not only works to reference the baroque but also concepts surrounding the politics of power and domination, as the fold can also be read as a reference to the folds of the sovereign's royal robes. By extension, these folds in *Ciao Bella's* red curtains pertain to the strategies Rose employs in her subversion of power and domination – in terms of a feminist subversion as well as her subversion of authorship.



Baroque form is dynamic; it tends to an indeterminacy of effect (in its play of solid and void, light and darkness, with its curvature, its broken surfaces, its widely diversified angles of inclination) ...

This framing also works to conflate two very different art mediums, that of video and painting, and in so doing, this video work can also be read as a 'moving' painting. The dynamic nature of the baroque form can be seen in *Ciao Bella* by virtue of its kinectic nature and the fact that it does not have a definitive focal point. This lack of a singular focal point is most obvious in that all the characters depicted enact their own individual plays, thereby making it difficult for the viewer to watch them all at the same time. As Eco (1989: 7) points out:

Its search for kinetic excitement and illusory effect leads to a situation where the plastic mass in the baroque work of art never allows a privileged, definitive, frontal view; rather, it induces the spectator to shift his position continuously in order to see the work in constantly new aspects, as if it were in a state of perpetual transformation.

The open form of *Ciao Bella* then, as exemplified in its baroque quotations, reveals to the viewer or interpreter "a world in a fluid state which requires corresponding creativity" (Eco 1989: 7) on his or her part. Bal, in her seminal work on baroque quotation entitled *Quoting Caravaggio: contemporary art, preposterous history*, discusses the resurgence of the baroque in contemporary art with reference to an exhibition titled "Going for Baroque" in which she states:

In mounting the exhibition, its curator, Lisa G. Corrin, convincingly presented a visual statement about an ambiguity in the division of roles between the ancient and the contemporary that entices us to rethink "history" and, specifically, our connection to the Baroque.

This re-thinking or re-vision of history as a concept is expounded in Bal's (1999: 7) formulation of 'preposterous history' in which she advocates a way of dealing with the past today in order to reveal the extent to which the present and the past are entangled and inseparable. This thinking entails a "way of 'doing history' that carries productive uncertainties and illuminating highlights – a vision of how to re-vision the Baroque". Bal's formulation of 'preposterous history', and the ways in which *Ciao Bella* can be said to do history preposterously, will be considered at length in the second chapter. Further on in this chapter I will utilize the theoretical considerations of the baroque and its theater in the writings of Walter Benjamin in order to illuminate the ways in which this video piece works within the theatrical space of the baroque and to what possible political ends.

For now though, I would like to return to the primary discussion of this chapter, which I framed from the beginning in terms of the notion of the allegorical performativity of interpretation. This involves a different conception of understanding, or analyzing, an artwork – a conception that understands, rather, the *process* of interpretation as one that is open and dynamic. Rose’s activity of quotation, and, in this case, her quotation of the baroque, opens up a dynamic space for her viewer, a space in which the viewer is dynamically entangled in the meaning and making of the artwork. As Bal (1999: 13) elucidates:

...I contend that the subject’s agency, which matters in a way that his or her intention or psychic makeup does not, consists not of *inventing* but of *intervening*, of a ‘supplementation’ that does not replace the image it explains but adds to it. It is in this sense that I would like to propose the specific, verifiable, and I submit, relevant, idea of quotation in contemporary art practices as a valid ground for an interpretation that accounts for a different sense of “understanding”. This interpretation neither contradicts historical evidence that it may accept but does not make central, nor projects present concerns upon it, it does not construct a fictitious intention or unconscious psychic makeup, nor is it totally relativistic subjectivism in which anything goes but which is rigorously contemporary in its effect. Rather it makes the historical art more important because it keeps alive and does not isolate it in a remote past, buried under concerns we do not share.

Thus, the viewer’s interpretation does not replace the image or artwork it intends to explain or understand, but rather works to *supplement* it. The same can be said of allegory, as Orton (1994: 115, qtd Schoeman 2001: 3) notes: “[A]llegory takes over a truth or meaning and adds to it not to replace it but to supplement it”. Orton’s claim that allegory works to supplement meaning rather than replace meaning seems at odds with Owen’s view that the allegorist does not restore the original meaning of an image but works to make it mean something other. The allegorist Rose, as an interpreter, viewer and confiscator of past images, does not replace their original meanings with her own completely different meanings. This kind of replacement would obscure the subversive socio-historical and political strategies at work in *Ciao Bella*, as the subversion would only be communicated as such if some original meaning remained intact, however spectral.

Yet, and to agree with Owens on this point, Rose does allow her appropriated images to speak other, mean other, in ways that work to put into question various historically and socially embedded concepts. It can be said then that Rose does not *replace* the meanings of past images with her own, even when she uses and abuses them in her artwork, but rather, works to re-

evaluate and re-consider these images in the now-time<sup>14</sup> of her present. This active participation in the renewal of past images in her present, her re-visioning of the baroque, for example, displays an allegiance with the theoretical and historiographic concerns of Benjamin and his use of allegory.

In his 'Theses on the philosophy of history', Benjamin (1999a: 247) writes: "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably". Helga Geyer-Ryan (1994: 201) notes that in Benjamin's theoretical use of allegory he works to "redeem images from their traditional, corrupt meanings, and to force new revolutionary meaning out of them". Benjamin's political concerns and his usage of allegory as a means to redeem images from their traditionally corrupt meanings will be discussed at length in the next chapter with reference to the theatrical space of *Ciao Bella*. As Buci-Glucksmann (1994: 67) elucidates on the role of theater in this allegorical perception:

The approach which awakens the forgotten is therefore archeological and interpretative; its scanning of historical time bases itself upon an acute consciousness of crisis and catastrophe, making time capable of being seen and thought. This is precisely what theater does by catalyzing an essence of time which cannot be reduced to the physical, mechanistic, empty time of chronology, or to its expression in the event.

---

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Benjamin's (1999a) conception of *Jetztzeit* or now-time. Bal (2001: 122) uses Benjamin's term *Jetztzeit* as a means to underlie the "primary effectivity" of Louise Bourgeois's *Spider* "in engaging the viewer in the act of viewing, each time anew". Cf. Weigel (1996). *Body- and image-space. re-reading Walter Benjamin*.

## Chapter Two

### Political Allegories: Benjamin, Brecht and Bakhtin

Various theoretical discussions of *Ciao Bella* have retained a focus on the socio-political impulses at work within Rose's recorded performance. These concerns are no doubt evident in this artwork as Rose uses her own body as a canvas on which, or, rather, through which, to enact a multiplicity of characters in ways that work to subvert feminine stereotypes as well as emphasizing the constructed nature of individual subjecthood. One cannot but be reminded of the work of Cindy Sherman when viewing Rose's *Ciao Bella* as both share a "theatricalized take on feminist imagery" (Jones 2003: 19). Ernst van Alphen (1997: 244) notes that Sherman's work, specifically her *Untitled Film Stills* (Figures 12 & 13), reveal the feminist attitude of the 1980's that "gave a new and more fundamental dimension to the conviction that identity is not authentic but socially constructed." In her deconstruction of the traditional portrait Sherman stages femininity and through this staging subverts the notion of an authentic feminine self, emphasizing the extent to which subjectivities are constructed and shaped by what Lacan (1997) terms the symbolic order. Van Alphen's (1997: 244) quotation of Rosalind Krauss exemplifies this deconstructionist attitude:

Indeed, almost two decades of work on the place of woman within representation has put this shift into effect, so that a whole domain of discourse no longer conceives of stereotype as a kind of mass-media mistake, a set of cheap costumes woman might put on or cast aside. Rather stereotype – itself baptized now as 'masquerade' and here understood as a psychoanalytic term – is thought of as the phenomenon to which all woman are submitted both inside and outside representation, so that as far as femininity goes, there is nothing *but* costume.

Rose's performance of *Ciao Bella*, in which she dresses herself up in costume and make-up in order to masquerade herself as a variety of different feminine stereotypes, seems to align itself with Krauss's assertion that all femininity, inside and outside representation and discourse, is worn as a costume and enacted by individual subjectivities rather than being an essential quality. The activity of deconstruction that both Sherman, through her subversion of traditional portraiture, and Rose, through her subversion of feminine stereotypes, follow makes way for a re-construction and re-invention of feminine subjectivity and identities. Taking one's cue from Jones (2003: 22), one might note that in Rose's work, "the sense of personal freedom and authority that is now owned by the social and political body allows the artistic one to explore



**Figure 12**



**Figure 13**

all possibilities, to reinvent, reconsider, review everything before us". In deconstructing feminine stereotypes and their place in the dominant ideology or symbolic order, Rose and Sherman allow for a space of freedom and play in which these stereotypes can be re-invented and re-considered allowing for them to be allegorically imbued with new meaning by the reader/viewer/writer.

In her collection of essays entitled *Fables of desire*, Helga Geyer-Ryan (1994: 1) sets out her theoretical project as one that aims "to bring the challenge of post-structuralist and especially feminist theory into dialogue with the legacy of the Frankfurt School". She (1994: 1) also explains that the main concern of this debate "is the attempt of feminism to blaze a trail between modernism and postmodernism". Geyer-Ryan (1994: 1) notes that feminism as a political practice "is deeply committed to the struggle against domination and exploitation" and therefore needs to utilize modernism's "analytical categories of the subject, of the individual, of consciousness, of value, of action and of liberation". In its theoretical considerations, feminism tends to be more extreme as it works to dismantle "every concept handed down by cultural tradition" and seeks to "expose the specific interests concealed by groundless claims to permanence and universality" (1994: 1). Geyer-Ryan notes though that, this activity of deconstruction can lead to and place the feminist project of liberation and action in an "abyss of unheeding relativism in which no firm ground on which to choose and to and act can be found" (1994: 1). In terms of these two aspects of feminism, Geyer-Ryan (1994: 1) suggests that,

[i]t is this tension between the need for reconstruction, the need to tell a new tale, and the desire to deconstruct whatever masquerades as given, which lies at the heart of *Fables of Desire*.

This chapter aims to follow Geyer-Ryan's theoretical project in her attempts to bring feminist theory into dialogue with the Frankfurt school. More specifically, her discussions on Benjamin will be focused on in order to investigate the tension between the need for deconstruction and re-construction in feminist theory and practice. The appropriation of Benjamin's 'modernist'<sup>15</sup> writings on allegory by contemporary theorists, including Clive Owens, Fredric Jameson and Helga Geyer-Ryan, to name a few, reveals the extent to which his 'modernist' theories may be dialectically enfolded with the aesthetic and political concerns of what has been termed the postmodern and vice versa.

---

<sup>15</sup> At least in terms of their historical time frame.

My discussion also attempts to work within the inherent contradictions at play within postmodernism and *Ciao Bella* by focusing on the ways in which this artwork “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (Hutcheon 1988: 3). This discussion aims to complicate the political impulse at work within *Ciao Bella* by looking at the ways in which Rose’s performance can be seen to be implicated in the very dominant modes of thought she attempts to subvert. I make reference to the theatrical and playful space of *Ciao Bella* so as to explore the extent to which this video piece can be said to display and communicate political and feminist concerns while dialectically denying a totalized appropriation of its ‘message’ into a political or feminist discourse. More specifically, Rose’s theatrical performance is read through, a constellation of political writings on theater and the carnivalesque as put forth by Benjamin, Brecht and Bakhtin. In doing so, I attempt to show how this video performance can be discussed in terms of Benjamin’s writings on allegory in the German baroque *Trauerspiel*, Brecht’s epic theater and Bakhtin’s re-visioning of Rabelais’s medieval carnival.

Rose’s dissemination of feminine stereotypes and her re-construction or enactment of these representations through various hybrid characters are discussed in terms of allegory and its workings as a transgressive semiotic figure that necessarily breaks the natural linkage between representations and their meanings. By extension, this consideration of allegory is compared to the workings of the carnival space as an instance of momentary social liberation and freedom in which rules and order are temporally replaced by chaos and travesty. More specifically, I argue that the representation of the grotesque and dismembered body in *Ciao Bella* can be aligned to the operations of the abject – *vis-à-vis* Bataille’s conception of the formless – within the carnivalesque as well as allegory. The allegorical perspective displayed in Rose’s own interpretation of the images, music and texts that surround her – and her performance of this interpretive strategy in *Ciao Bella* – allows for this video work to be read as a ‘theoretical object’<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, as I argue, the movement of events in this performance can be read as a self-conscious narrative that demands paradoxically both the detachment and involvement of the viewer. This oscillation between absorption and detachment will be discussed in terms of

---

<sup>16</sup>The term ‘theoretical object’ is one I have appropriated from Bal’s thinking, as discussed in my first chapter, in which the art object has its own agency and its own capacity to ‘think’. Moving away from traditional art history and hermeneutics, which places the artwork in relation to the fixed historical time of its making, Bal sees the art object as an active producer of “the viewers subjectivity” (Baum 2001: 101) and “interpretations of the culture they occupy” (Baum 2001: 101) across time, including the present.

the Brechtian distancing techniques, or *Entfremdung*, as displayed in his epic theater and as discussed by Benjamin, and the differences between this form of detached cathartic liberation and Aristotelian catharsis. The movement of *Ciao Bella*, its looping narrative and its dislocation of causal events, is considered in terms of the politically motivated strategies of Brecht's epic theater in order to reveal the extent to which these apparently contradictory responses can be dialectically enfolded.

The grotesque and its functioning in the carnival space is analyzed with the help of Bakhtin's writings as well as in terms of the abject – as expounded in Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theories and Hal Foster's writings on the im-possibilities of representing the abject. Furthermore, I work at revealing how the functioning of the abject within the symbolic order – as a destabilizer of the subject / object opposition – can be aligned to Baroque thought in that, and as noted by Bal (1999: 28), “Baroque abandons the firm distinction between subject and object.” Abjection and baroque thought therefore point to, and exist, in this void between subject and object. In a covalent way, allegory works to reveal the gap or slippage between signifier and signified. As a form of representation, the figure of allegory “shamelessly proclaims that there is a gap within the sign” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 108) and works to undo, and in undoing reveals, the unbridgeable gap between materiality and meaning. As Gershom Scholem (1955: 26) writes:

Indeed the allegory arises, as it were, from the gap which at this point opens between the form and its meaning. The two are no longer indissolubly welded together; the meaning is no longer restricted to that particular form, nor the form any longer to that particular meaningful content. What appears in allegory, in short, is the infinity of meaning which attaches to every representation.

Benjamin's re-reading of allegory, in the baroque *Trauerspiel*, and his interpretation of Brecht's politically motivated epic theater is utilized in my own interpretation of *Ciao Bella* so as to view Rose's contemporary performance and its re-visioning of historically produced feminine stereotypes through these two historical forms of theater. I also investigate the potentially transgressive and liberating forces within the carnivalesque, as enjoyed and expounded by Bakhtin, in relation to the transgressive writings of Bataille and his conception of the formless. The formless, as discussed by Bois and Krauss with reference to Bataille's writings, is considered so as to complicate the feminist appropriation of abjection as a means to understand and classify the feminine. Working within this framework, I aim to follow a similar

re-reading of history as Rose does in her video piece, thus aligning my method with Bal's call to re-vision the past 'preposterously' – to think of the art object as one that transcends linear historical time, thus displaying the possibilities of interpreting the culture of both the present and the past. This thinking of the present and the past as enfolded and influenced in and by the other is also evident in allegory's desire to capture the transience of nature by making the past a concern of the present. Benjamin's (1999a: 253) assertion that historical images should be "blasted out of the continuum of history" and "recognized by the present as one of its own concerns" so as to ensure that these images of the past do not "disappear irretrievably" (Benjamin 1999a: 247) reveals his political thinking and his wariness of viewing history as a linear progression toward an ideal. Rather, Benjamin's thinking reveals the extent to which images of the past should be re-viewed and re-evaluated as part of our present concerns so as to remain aware of the potentially negative and positive forces at work within concepts of freedom and domination.

### **The Baroque and the Carnavalesque: Benjamin and Bakhtin**

Rose begins her allegorical performance, or rather, performances, dressed as the character 'Mami'<sup>17</sup>, who resembles the stereotype of a schoolteacher. 'Mami' introduces the 'play' by reciting a distorted version of Shakespeare's famous verse, "All the world is a stage" (**Figure 14**). This introduction, together with her placement of red velvet chairs in the gallery space in front of the DVD projection (**Figure 10**), no doubt allows for her video art work to be read as a play. In her article on Rose's *Ciao Bella*, which she wrote for the Venice Biennale catalogue, Tracy Murinik (2001) reveals that:

Rose has commented that theater has always been an integral socially accepted domain – a place where questions can be posed and new roles adopted, especially when those possibilities do not readily exist in the immediacy of one's lived environment".

---

<sup>17</sup> It should also be noted that the word "Mami" has derogatory connotations for many African-Americans, given that this was the name given to the black maid/slave in American homes in the South.

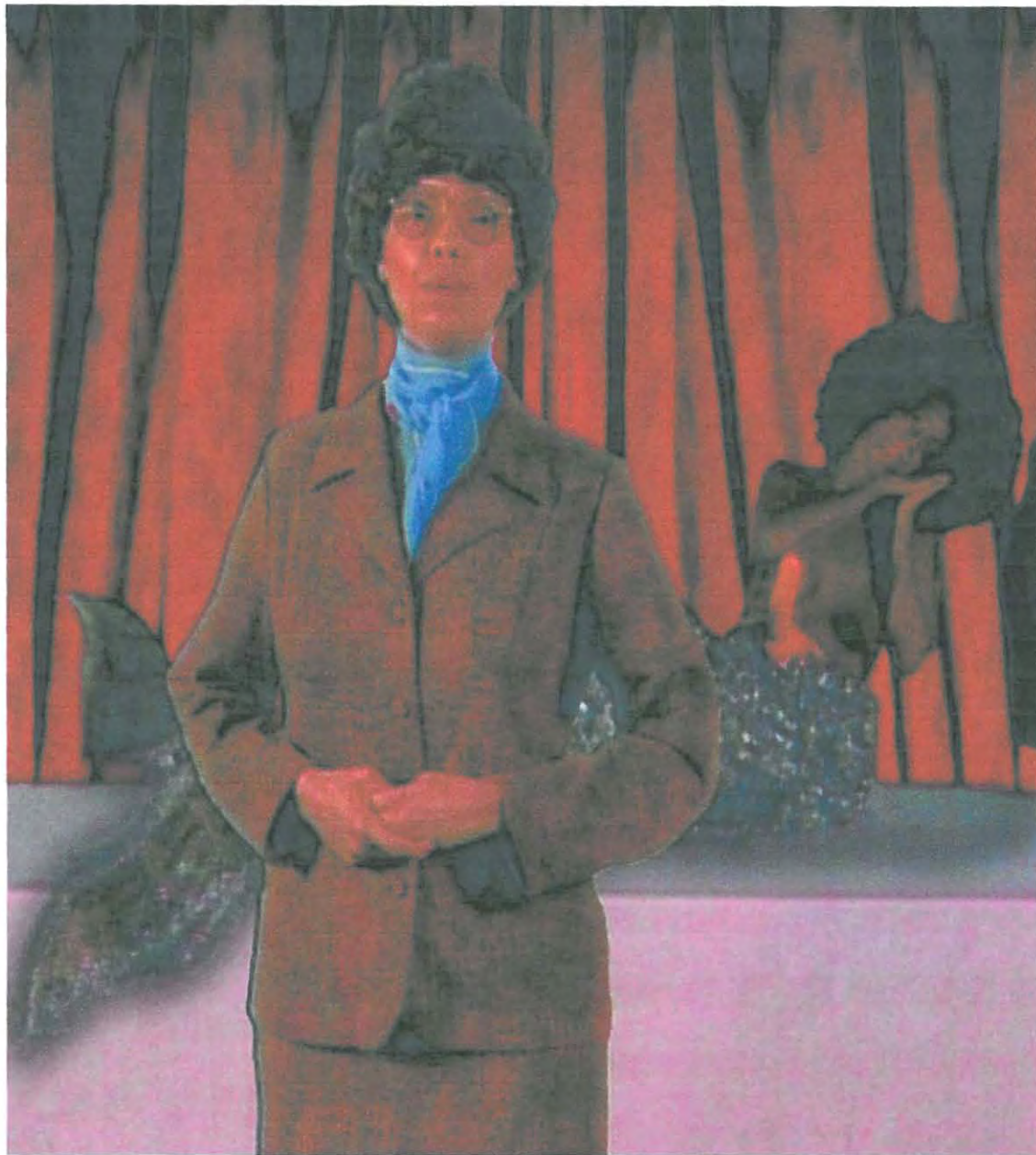


Figure 14

Rose's allusion to Shakespeare's famous verse not only aligns *Ciao Bella* with the mode of theater and its status as a socially accepted domain within which the audience may identify with the performance and its actors, but also makes reference to the notion that every day life may in fact be comparable to a play in which men and woman are merely players. The seventeenth century audiences of Shakespeare's plays in the period in which they were written and performed, were of a different kind to the modern audiences of today. Seventeenth century audiences participated in the public performances in a manner that would today be considered boisterous and rude. They voiced their opinions about the play they were watching by shouting insults, throwing tomatoes and the like at the performers if they disliked the characters and their actions, or exclaiming loud praise and laughter. The changes in audience behavior brought about in the period of radical social change during the industrialization and urbanization of early capitalism is discussed at length in Richard Sennett's extensive study entitled *The fall of public man*. He (1977: 27) explains that the urbanization and rapid population growth in cities brought about a certain kind of self-awareness – a crowd anxiety – that resulted in,

the notion that strangers had no right to speak to each other, that each man possessed as a public right an invisible shield, a right to be left alone. Public behavior was a matter of observation, of passive participation, of a certain kind of voyeurism.

The modernized public men and women of the nineteenth century displayed less expressive personality in their social interactions in public among strangers than the men and women of the eighteenth century. They became more private and withdrawn, weary of the overwhelming strangeness of the crowd, preferring silent and passive observation rather than active self-expression. This modern sense of alienation made itself felt in the changing attitudes of theatergoers in the nineteenth century. No longer actively participatory, modern audiences felt more comfortable as witnesses to the actor's expression than as active conveyors of expression themselves (Sennett 1977: 195). Sennett's observations illuminate our own contemporary attitudes as spectators. The theater, as well as film, has indeed become a socially accepted domain in which cathartic liberation and temporary release from, or identification with, the normalities of every day life is made possible. Yet, as expounded by Sennett, the modes of cathartic release in modern day cinemas and theaters are instances in which audiences remain passive and silent, only allowing themselves to experience this momentary liberation *through* the actors on stage/film.

The theatrical space of the carnivalesque, on the other hand, can be described as a socially accepted space or time in which rules are transgressed and roles reversed – high becomes the low; king becomes peasant; man is reduced to animal. Carnivals provide socially acceptable spaces in which individuals are allowed, and allow themselves, to participate in their own liberation from, and transgression of, the norms and rules that structure their every day living. Although *Ciao Bella* does display certain theatrical elements, aligning Rose's performance with the theater, it also pertains to the characteristics of the carnivalesque in many instances. Rose's transgressive theater includes violent disruptions, nakedness, sado-masochism, verbal outbursts and morphing figures, all veiled by a lighthearted and comic tone. Schmahmann (2004), in her work entitled *Through the looking glass*, also recognizes the potentially transgressive space of the carnivalesque as one that is performed in *Ciao Bella*. In her chapter "Enactments", she (2004: 80) states, with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin, that "carnivals have historically provided spaces in which categories are confused and disrupted". In its disruption of hierarchies and social positions, the carnivalesque provides a space "for liberation through laughter" (Schmahmann 2004: 80). In this sense, the carnival space, even more than the theater, provides a realm in which roles can be reversed and societal norms questioned in a world momentarily turned upside down. Schmahmann (2004: 79-80) also provides a lucid description of the 'play' as performed by Rose, which I will quote at length in order to provide a template from which the reader may follow my own reading of this 'play':

'Love me. Fuck me. Love me. Fuck me' are the words of a female boxer whose pugilist energies are directed at her own body. 'Tell me, are my thighs too large? And tell me. Are my legs too short? And tell me, are my toes too small? And tell me, are my calves too thin?' asks an ambiguously sexed and tiny Lolita seated on the edge of the table in the manner of Humpty Dumpty on his wall. Apparently unsatisfied with the assurances provided by an Afro-haired and chip eating mermaid who intones soulfully 'You are so beautiful to me', Lolita leaps off the table and runs to the foreground where she screams abuse at the viewer. Meanwhile, one hears the taut gyrations of a trampoline as a Playboy bunny girl bounces up and down behind the table, the rustle of shakers wielded by a cheerleader who is partially obliterated by the work's right margin, and the rhythmic sound of lashes as a smiling Ciccioletta, crouched on the table, enacts the role of flagellant. A Marie Antoinette mostly prefers silence; with pursed lips and nursing a ballroom mask representing an infantile male, she focuses her energies on the task of cutting and apportioning chocolate cake. Sarah Baartman descends into view as the operatic mermaid begins a hymn invoking the idea of communion, then mutates into her bottled genitalia which in turn acquire wings and ascend heavenwards – a spiritual transformation that is unceremoniously interrupted by the bunny girl, who takes on the role of a gun-wielding guerrilla. The ensuing bloodbath is cleaned up by 'Mami', a bespectacled individual in a suit suggestive of Maggie Thatcher's sartorial tastes. Stoically, and with total self-control, she wipes the viewer's blood-soaked window/windscreen onto this strange scenario, and, magically, all the personages at this reworked Last Supper come to life. 'Ciao, Ciao, Ciao' they sing happily, in the manner of players bidding farewell at the end of a musical, and the image on the triple screen dissolves into a heavenly blue.

This description of *Ciao Bella's* somewhat bizarre narrative evokes the extent to which Rose's performance pertains to carnivalesque reversal and disruption, not only in terms of the absurd events performed by a motley crew of strange characters, but also in terms of their consequent displacements of conventional meanings. Instead of utilizing costume, gesture and narrative as a means to evoke in her characters their traditional, or rather historically embedded, meanings accurately, Rose uses these visual tools in ways that disrupt the meanings normally associated with her appropriated characters. This disruptive element in Rose's performance can be aligned to the workings of allegory as an operation that works to undermine the false totality evoked in the conception that representations and their meanings are inextricably tied to each other.

Benjamin's seminal work on allegory, a mode of perception that has resurfaced in contemporary art making practices, like Rose's *Ciao Bella*, and theoretical writings, began with his study on the baroque German *Trauerspiel* – translated as “mourning play” – “a literature that was esoteric, disparaged, difficult” and “extreme” (Handelman 1991: 123). Benjamin was drawn to this form of tragic theater as it “transmuted things into allegories” (Handelman 1991: 124) and thus became an object of study that exemplified his critical stance against the influence of the Romantic conception of the symbol on aesthetic practices and judgments, a conception that lacked what he called “dialectical rigor” (Handelman 1991: 124). In the Romantic realm of the symbol: “the beautiful merges with the divine in an unbroken whole” (Handelman 1991: 124). It is against this “false totality” (Handelman 1991: 124) that Benjamin posits allegory as a mode of practice and perception in which “the image is a fragment, a ruin” (Handelman 1991: 124). This view is perhaps best exemplified in his much-quoted aphorism, which I will also quote here: “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things” (Benjamin 1998: 178).

Terry Eagleton (1981: 144), in his essay “Carnival and Comedy: Bakhtin and Brecht”, points out that Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and his world* “is a precise enactment of Benjamin's (1999a) own political aesthetic, as elucidated in his essay “On the concept of History” written in the same year (1940) as Bakhtin's re-visioning of Rabelais's literary work. In a manner that Benjamin (1999a: 252-253) advocates with his statement that, history is not the site of “homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]”, Eagleton (1981: 144) notes that Bakhtin manages to blast “Rabelais's work out of the homogenous

continuum of literary history, creating a lethal constellation between that redeemed Renaissance moment and the trajectory of the soviet state.”

Even though the melancholy that pervades Benjamin’s writings, specifically in his re-reading of allegory in the German baroque *Trauerspiel*, seems at odds with Bakhtin’s focus on the liberating effects of the carnival and the comic in Rabelais’s work, their writings reveal a similar thrust toward liberating or redeeming images from their previously corrupt meanings. Eagleton (1981: 145) elucidates this point when he states that:

Benjamin prises images loose from the authority of the past so that they may plurally interbreed; and this liberation of the image into polyvalence has for Bakhtin the name of carnival.

Allegory’s proclamation of the gap that exists between signifier and signified and its demonstration of the fundamentally “polysemous nature of signs” (Bal 1994: 201) works semiotically, or ‘preposterously’, in a covalent way to the deconstructive nature of the carnival space, a social space in which the authoritative realm of Lacan’s symbolic order – the paternal realm in which nature and man are named, classified and kept in order – is momentarily displaced. As Eagleton (1981: 145) expounds:

In a riot of semiosis, carnival unhinges all transcendental signifiers and submits them to ridicule and relativism; by the “radicalism of humour” (Jean Paul), power structures are estranged through grotesque parody; ‘necessity’ thrown into satirical question and objects displaced or negated into their opposites. A ceaseless practice of travesty and inversion (nose/phallus, face/buttocks, sacred/profane) rampages throughout social life, deconstructing images, misreading texts and collapsing binary oppositions into a mounting groundswell of ambiguity into which all articulate discourse finally stutters and slides.

To Benjamin (1998: 209) this “mounting groundswell of ambiguity into which all articulate discourse finally stutters and slides” is a reason for mournfulness, as he states with reference to the baroque antithesis of sound and meaning in the *Trauerspiel*: “[M]eaning is encountered, and will continue to be encountered as the reason for mournfulness”. By contrast, this disarticulation of discourse is for Bakhtin potentially liberating. Eagleton (1981: 145-146) writes:

Carnival is more than deconstruction: in rendering existing power structures alien and arbitrary, it releases the potential for a golden age, a friendly world of ‘carnival truth’ in which ‘man returns to himself’.

For Bakhtin then, the carnival space becomes a positive utopia in which man is free and liberated from all domination and power. Eagleton's (1981: 145) assertion that, "through this crude cackling of an ambivalently destructive and liberatory laughter emerges the shape of an equally negative and positive phenomena: utopia", reveals the two faced dimension of the carnival and its utopic possibilities. In opposition to Bakhtin's optimism, Benjamin's utopia is "unteleological: infinitely remote from all epochs, an end rather than a goal" (Eagleton 1981: 146). In other words, Benjamin recognizes the image of utopia and happiness – freedom from domination – as a dialectical image, one that reveals both liberation and potentially totalitarian and fascist ends. In his messianic conception of history, utopic happiness is bound up with the transcendental and is thus endlessly deferred, as he states that "our image of happiness is indissolubly bound with the image of redemption" (Benjamin 1999a: 256).

Bakhtin's celebration of the freedom and liberation as expressed in the grotesque and socially disruptive imagery in Rabelais' medieval carnivals can be compared to the surrealist project – as headed by Breton – and their celebration of the marvelous, love, chance and the unconscious. Although Benjamin felt a certain affinity with Surrealism's subversive project, he also recognized a certain danger in their failure to recognize the extent to which their project may have been implicated in the very dominant forces of power they were attempting to subvert. Eagleton (1981: 148) quotes Benjamin, in the context of Benjamin's questioning of the political motivation and revolutionary potential of surrealism in his essay "Surrealism":

But are they successful in welding this experience of freedom to other revolutionary experience that we have to acknowledge because it has been ours, the constructive, dictatorial side of revolution?

Following Bataille's own reservations about the true revolutionary impulse at work within Breton's appeal to the unconscious through chance games, Krauss (1997: 64) reveals the extent to which these games – all collectively named *cadavre exquis* (exquisite corpse) – reveal more about "form and thus reason, or consciousness" than the mysteries of the unconscious mind.

For if there is a quality of anarchic freedom and explosive creativity in the exotic hybrids produced by the graphic versions of this technique or in the hyperbolic images spun by its verbal practice, it has surely escaped no one that the syntax of these creations is highly determined. The folds that mark each participant's contribution off from the other correspond roughly to the sentence structure (of French) – subject, verb, object, modifier – on the one hand, and to the anatomical distribution of the human body into legs, torso, arms, head, on the other. And indeed, it might be argued, that with such dependence on the figure's (or the sentence's) structure, it is form and thus reason, or consciousness, that rules over the "exquisite corpse" (Krauss 1997: 64).

The extent to which the potentially liberating space of the carnival is bound up in, and works to uphold, the dominant and authoritarian power, is discussed at length further on in this section. For now, I would like to focus on the similarities between Benjamin's interpretation of the baroque *Trauerspiel* and Bakhtin's celebration of the carnivalesque with reference to the ways in which *Ciao Bella* may be said to display the features of both.

### **Abject Bodies: Corpses and other Travesties**

When, as in his essay "Abjection", Bataille brings the political and the psychosexual together, it is to demonstrate the scandal of the identification between the two heterological, untouchable elements: the very high and the lower-than-low. It is to describe, that is, the collapse into a single couplet of anality and sadism, as the sovereign assumes his role as sacrificial and thus projects himself into the place of the victim, so that what is at the top (within the structure of the anal-sadistic) is the lower-than-low (Krauss 1997: 14).

The carnival space of *Ciao Bella* is perhaps most exemplified in the setting of this video piece, a setting that depicts a gross travesty of *The Last Supper*. In his book on the work of Rabelais, Bakhtin (1984: 279) notes that banquet images, images of feasting and merriment, play an integral role in Rabelais's carnivalesque depictions. Inseparably tied to these images of feasting are the images of the grotesque body, a body that has breached the "confines between the body and the world" (1984: 280) and, in the act of eating, "it triumphs over the world, over its enemy, celebrates its victory, grows at the world's expense" (1984: 280-281). In his discussion on the grotesque<sup>18</sup>, Bakhtin (1984: 303) expounds, "Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style". The baroque can also be said to include these elements of exaggeration and excessiveness in that its style can be described as overly decorative, superficial and playful (Bal 1999: 6).

Rose's performance of *Ciao Bella* no doubt displays elements of excessiveness and exaggeration attributed to the grotesque as well as the baroque. Two characters in Rose's performance indulge in, and work with, food. The character 'MAQII' (Figure 16), a figure that parodies the historical character of Marie Antoinette with her excessively painted face, which is at times obscured by an androgynous mask, compulsively cuts cake for the various characters who occupy a place at the banquet table. The mermaid, who enjoys a plate of chips with

---

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Eagleton (1981: 145) and his discussion of the grotesque in terms of semiotics: "The grotesque is intrinsically double-faced, an immense semiotic switchboard through which codes are read backwards and messages scrambled into their antitheses".



**Figure 15**



**Figure 16**

ketchup (**Figure 15**), takes a central role in the violent ending of *Ciao Bella* by throwing her chips and sauce at the screen. The mess 'MAQII' creates of the cake in front of her and the bloody and visceral sauce<sup>19</sup> that drips over the screen to be cleaned up by 'Mami', reveals the extent to which this banquet is one that traverses the normalities of table rules – all table manners are thrown out at the viewer.

Adding to the overall travesty of messiness and violence, Rose's enactment of 'Cicciolina' and 'Venus Baartman' displays the grotesque body in all its excessive and hyperbolic tendencies. In these enactments we see a specific grotesque style of representing the "confines between the body and the world" that is radically different from the depiction of these confines in "classic and naturalist images" (Bakhtin 1984: 315). 'Cicciolina's' over-sized paper vagina, displayed between her thighs as she squats on the table exemplifies the excessive nature of grotesque exaggeration (**Figure 17**). 'Venus Baartman's' transformation into her own labia in a jar (**Figure 19**), essentially taking the place of her previously contained, however naked, body (**Figure 18**), displays the stylistic features of the grotesque's working to transgress the boundaries between inside and outside. As Bakhtin (1984: 317-318) explains:

Thus the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths.

The potentially liberating space of the carnivalesque which "involves above all a pluralizing and cathecting of the body, dismantling its unity into freshly mobile parts and ceaselessly transgressing its limits" (Eagleton 1981: 50), can thus be said to utilize the abject as a means to displace and traverse the regulatory systems within the symbolic order. Abject dismemberment finds its apotheosis in the violent 'ending' of Rose's 'play' in which the character 'Bunny' finally stands up, after compulsively bouncing up and down behind the table, with a shotgun in hand and proceeds to dismember her fellow 'players' (**Figure 20**). The violent and ambiguous 'closing' scene, which is revealed only when 'Mami' finishes cleaning the abject 'blood-stained' screen, shows these now dismembered players as they sing happily 'ciao, ciao, ciao', thus in a contradictory way both beginning and ending the performance.

---

<sup>19</sup>American artist Paul McCarthy's *Pig Man*, a performance from 1980 in which he uses ketchup as a metaphor for blood and the excesses of American culture, displays a similar representation of blood and violence as Rose's *Ciao Bella*. Rush (2003: 98) quotes McCarthy as stating: "My work isn't about the blood... It is really about the ketchup".



**Figure 17**



**Figure 18**



Figure 20

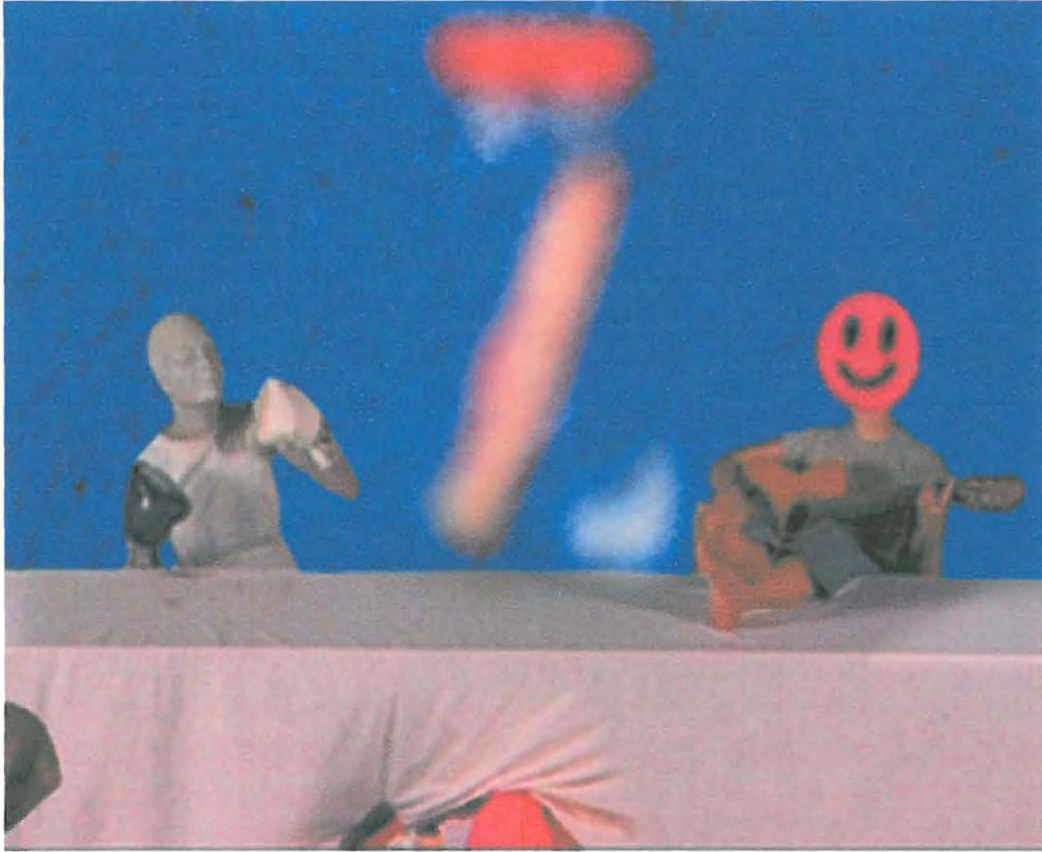


Figure 19

Concomitantly, Rose's violent butchering of her fellow selves, in her enactment of the character 'Bunny', displays a certain degree of affiliation with Benjamin's baroque allegorist:

The baroque flays and butchers the living flesh in order to inscribe some allegorical meaning there; since the living body presents itself as an inexpressible symbolic unity<sup>20</sup>, it is only in its brutal undoing, its diffusion into so many torn, reified fragments, that some provisional meaning may be ripped from its organic closure. (Eagleton 1981: 151)

The corpse, which becomes the emblem of the allegorical in the *Trauerspiel*<sup>21</sup>, is emblematic too of "Benjamin's decentered revolutionary subject, the *Unmensch* of the future" (Eagleton 1981: 150)). The "purged space" of Benjamin's *Unmensch* becomes "a deconstructed function of historical forces" (Eagleton 1981: 150). Like Bakhtin's "carnavalesque subject" Benjamin's *Unmensch*, "is at once 'emptied' and 'full', reconstructed by the very transgressive surge that deconstructs it" (Eagleton 1981: 150). Dead bodies, bodies ripped of their previous "symbolic unity", are now exposed and ready to be filled with new meaning, yet, in a dialectical twist, these bodies are also dead and meaningless – at once empty and full. The corpse, when considered in relation to its status as abject, is that place "where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982: 2). In her selection of writings entitled *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*, Kristeva (1982: 4) defines the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system and order", and she argues: "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection".

Foster (1996: 153) notes, with reference to Kristeva's theories, that "the abject is what I must get rid of *in order to be an I*". Thus the abject seems to function as a "fantasmatic substance" (Foster 1996: 153) that individuals resist, turn away from in disgust, in order to maintain their subjecthood. But this boundary between the subject and the objects around it, between the individual as differentiated from the Other, is not as straightforward as this, for the abject dislocates this opposition. As Kristeva (1982: 9-10) elucidates:

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives.

---

<sup>20</sup>Eco (2005: 141) asserts that, "[a] symbol can be either something very clear (an unambiguous expression with a definable content) or something very obscure (a polyvalent expression, which summons up a whole nebula of content)".

<sup>21</sup> As Benjamin (1998: 218 f) states, in his *Origin of German tragic drama*: "In the *Trauerspiel* of the seventeenth century the corpse becomes quite simply the pre-eminent emblematic property. The apotheoses are barely conceivable without it. They are resplendent with pale corpses (*Mit blassen Leichen prangen [sie]*); and it is the function of the tyrant to provide the *Trauerspiel* with them".

The subject leaves the maternal realm of the imaginary and enters the symbolic realm – the paternal, authoritative realm of classification; order and language – through the advent of the mirror stage. According to Lacan (1977:4), it is at this stage that the self is both split and affirmed as subject: split because it sees itself as other in the mirror and affirmed because it stands alone, apart from the world of objects, and the maternal, as a subject. The subject's position in the symbolic order is thus formed at this moment of differentiation between subject and object, and it is in abjection that the gap between subject and object is traversed and simultaneously upheld. This in turn points to the subject's simultaneous revulsion and fascination with the abject. As Geyer-Ryan (1994:108) explains:

Revulsion is a mixture of fear of losing one's identity and a fascination with this loss, where the pleasure of fusion, the pleasure derived from the abandonment of identity in the undifferentiated, becomes discoverable.

The functioning of the abject, or rather, the representation of the abject in *Ciao Bella* works to disturb the ridged and paternal realm of the symbolic order. Foster (1996: 153) notes:

Abjection is a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, "where meaning collapses"; hence its attraction for avant-garde artists who want to disturb these orderings of subject and society alike.

This space of abjection "where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1882: 2) is shared by the figure of allegory though the experience of the sublime. As Geyer-Ryan (1994: 108) writes:

The pleasure and fear (*Angstlust*) of revulsion, the memory of the space of pre-Oedipal emptiness in the imaginary, resurfaces in the post-Oedipal, symbolic space as the aesthetic experience of the sublime, the experience of 'sublimated' revulsion, finds its sign in the trope of allegory.

Geyer-Ryan (1994: 108) also adds that the maternal realm of the imaginary, the realm of the feminine body and of images, is foreclosed by the paternal realm of the symbolic order, an order in which "the word, and ultimately writing, are privileged over the body and the image". An attempt to retrieve the lost and abjected maternal realm of the imaginary, by bringing images into language and ultimately "resurrecting the body into the machinery of the sign" (1994: 109), achieves, according to Geyer-Ryan (1994: 109) two effects. The first effect is described in terms of de Man's formulation of allegory in which "the return of the repressed" returns under the sign of negation or as a "transgression with a revival of the abject position". In other words, de Man's allegorical perspective prefers to remain in a realm of negation in

which “discontinuities, aporias and endless deferrals of meaning” (Handelman 1991: 134) preside. The second effect refers to Benjamin’s conception of allegory as an equally negative and thus mournful figure, yet one that works toward, and as a possible tool for, redemption and new meaning.

The use of allegory in de Man and Benjamin is discussed at length in the following chapter in which these two different outlooks are considered in terms of allegory and translation. For now, the differing attitudes within feminist practice and theory – in terms of modernist and analytical preoccupations with the individual subject, society and culture which works to re-construct these previous discourses and their bodies of meaning, and the deconstruction of these previous discourses, as displayed in feminist theory with its negative connotations of “unheeding relativism” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 1) and abysmal negativity – are seen to be at work within the seemingly opposing attitudes in the work of de Man and Benjamin.

I would like to pose the question whether Rose’s allegorical performance of *Ciao Bella*, as one that works to transgress the authorial nature of the symbolic realm through her appropriation and consequent dissemination of previous artworks and feminine stereotypes and re-construction of these deconstructed bodies of meaning into new hybrid and polyvalent meanings, manages a degree of transgression and liberation that translates directly as a successful act of “emancipatory transformation” (Schmahmann 2004: 80), as feminist theorists would like it to. In other words, can feminist and socio-political artists represent the abject, or rather, will their various modes or methods of representing it work to disturb the orderings of subject and society, or will a repulsed audience merely dismiss their artworks? This ambiguity of effect, in representing the abject, is also discussed by Foster (1996: 156). He asks: “Can abject art ever escape an instrumental, indeed moralistic, use of the abject?” and, concomitantly, “can there be an evocation of the obscene that is not pornographic?” These are indeed difficult and pertinent questions, ones that need to be addressed in terms of the abject as represented in *Ciao Bella* in order to understand the socio-political issues at hand in this video performance. In order to do so, I shall now focus on three of the characters performed or played by Rose namely, ‘Cicciolina’; ‘Lolita’ and ‘Silhouetta’.

The common thread that binds these three figures together is the fact that they have been quoted by Rose from the work of three artists, two visual and one literary, all of whom caused

much debate as to the artistic value of their work. Jeff Koons' collection of photographs and sculptures, that show the artist in various explicitly detailed sexual positions and encounters with porn-star Cicciolina, has been labeled pornographic and kitsch by some and valued by others for the fact that he has overtly questioned the conventional aesthetic and socially accepted domains of high art. The African-American artist Kara Walker's "black-paper silhouettes depicting grotesque antebellum fantasies" (Cullum 1998:18) caused such a stir in 1998 that it "occasioned an entire conference at Harvard University" (Cullum 1998: 18). In her work, as elucidated by Jerry Cullum (1998: 19) in his paper "Stereotype This", Walker "uses the genteel nineteenth century convention of the silhouette to depict rude, crude scenes of miscegenation and coprophilia (the celebration of excrement, to put it politely), she does so to question both the past and the unhealed wounds of the present". It seems that Walker is here utilizing abjection in her representations as a way to destabilize and satirize the historically founded "stereotypes about antebellum African-Americans" (Cullum 1998: 19), as well as their present identities. The name Lolita has become a generic term for sexually precocious young girls following Vladimir Nabokov's controversial novel *Lolita* (1955), which tells the story of a love affair between a grown man and a twelve-year-old girl. Nabokov's novel caused much controversy when it was released and has been criticized by some as merely titillating and pornographic, while others see value in its social and psychological commentary.

In *Ciao Bella*, 'Cicciolina' – Rose painted white wearing black leather boots; a long blond wig; an oversized paper vagina between her legs and with her breasts exposed – takes center stage on the banquet table whilst whipping herself for the duration of the play. A tiny 'Lolita' sits on the edge of the table (**Figure 21**) – Rose dressed in a red and white dress with a pigtailed wig and a dildo peeking out from under her skirt – and asks the following questions: 'Tell me, are my thighs too large? And tell me. Are my legs too short? And tell me, are my toes too small? And tell me, are my calves too thin?'. Not quite satisfied "with the assurances provided by an Afro-haired and chip eating mermaid who intones soulfully 'You are so beautiful to me', 'Lolita' leaps off the table and runs to the foreground where she screams abuse at the viewer" (Schmahmann 2004: 79) (**Figure 22**). Lastly, a silhouette figure, to the far right of the projected triptych, morphs between what seems to be a nun praying, a figure dancing with a fan, and a figure playing a banjo (**Figures 23 & 24**).



**Figure 21**



**Figure 22**



Figure 23



Figure 24

Rose thus utilizes and re-stages the disruptive socio-political works of the above-mentioned artists in a ways that are potentially both politically motivated and progressively transgressive – a progressive transgression rooted in laughter. Rose’s double-coded display of the abject is ‘veiled’ in the light-hearted and comic tone of *Ciao Bella*, which allows the viewer a sense of enjoyment in the transgression performed<sup>22</sup>. According to Kristeva (1982: 8), the act of laughing “is a way of placing or displacing abjection”. This oscillation between placing and displacing abjection is, in my view, fundamental to the socially transgressive possibilities of *Ciao Bella*. As Clive Kellner (2002: 142) asserts: “Rose explores the abject by speaking through the mask” and in doing so, complicates the already ambiguous operations within abjection. Yet, one should add, this ambiguous operation can only go so far before it becomes subsumed in the overriding dominant ideology, an ideology that makes itself felt in the very politics at play in the art world, a world in which curators, patrons, and critics all judge the aesthetic value of artworks according to the trend of that moment.

In his essay “Frames of comic freedom”, Eco (1984:3) recognizes Bakhtin’s own recognition of the “manifestation of a profound drive towards liberation and subversion in medieval carnival” as depicted in Rabelais’s work, though he also notes that the “hyper-bakhtinian ideology of carnival as *actual* liberation”, is problematic. Eco (1984: 6) states succinctly:

Carnival can exist only as an *authorized* transgression (which in fact represents a blatant case of *contridictio in adjecto* or of happy *double binding* – capable of curing instead of producing neurosis). If the ancient, religious carnival was limited in time, the modern mass-carnival is limited in space: it is reserved for certain places, certain streets, or framed by the television screen. In this sense, comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions: on the contrary, they represent paramount examples of law reinforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule.

Eco’s pointing to the temporality of carnivalesque transgression and liberation – as well as its authorization by those in power – problematizes the optimistic feminist rhetoric which would like to view Rose’s performance of *Ciao Bella* as one which manages a degree of transgression and liberation that translates directly as a successful act of “emancipatory transformation” (Schmahmann 2004: 80).

---

<sup>22</sup> As Eco (1984: 3) writes: “By assuming a mask, everyone can behave like the animal-like characters of comedy. We can commit any sin while remaining innocent: and indeed we are innocent, because we laugh (which means we are not concerned with *that*).

Foster's (1996: 157) alternative for avant-garde artists "to rethink transgression not as a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde outside the symbolic order but as a fracture traced by a strategic avant-garde within the order", is in terms of Eco's statement also complicated. For the fact is that an act of travesty and rupture within the symbolic order may in a sense merely reinforce and serve to remind us of the "existence of the rule" (Eco 1984: 6). It seems paramount then to consider the potentially liberating space of the carnival and its utilization of the grotesque and abjection as performed in *Ciao Bella* in a dialectical way that both recognizes this transgression as a displacement of the paternal symbolic order, whilst, simultaneously, considering the functioning of this space as one that also works to uphold the dominant ideology and its rules.

Thus *Ciao Bella* manages this transgression to a certain degree in that Rose utilizes the socially accepted domains of the theater, the carnival and the masquerade, in order to re-stage feminine stereotypes in possibly productive and liberating ways. The oscillation between 'Lolita's' transgressive outburst, as she smashes her bowl of cherries and runs toward the screen to hurl abuse at the viewer, and the manner in which this violence ends, as she runs to hide underneath the table and its folds of white cloth as if embarrassed, can be read as a *mise-en-abyme* of the ways in which Rose's performance dialectically oscillates and operates between liberation and further control and domination. In watching *Ciao Bella*, the viewer is allowed to enter a non-threatening space of artificiality and 'play' in which the world is momentarily turned upside down and things aren't as they should be, whilst he or she is simultaneously reminded of the ways that things really are.

### **Postmodernism and the Avant-garde: Linking Brecht's Epic Theater and Rose's *Ciao Bella***

Before I begin this section in which I attempt to enfold, preposterously, Rose's theatrical performance of *Ciao Bella* and Brecht's epic theater, I shall briefly look at Jameson's negotiation of the postmodern with reference to his discussion of the video medium. In his chapter "Surrealism without the Unconscious", Jameson (1991: 69) understands the video medium "in its twin manifestations as commercial television and experimental video, or 'video art'", as the "most likely candidate for cultural hegemony today". In this chapter, he

complicates the assumed difference between commercial television – with its designated function as a mass media tool for ideological propaganda – and experimental video art which has been regarded as high, or avant-garde, art and as one that works to subvert conventional ways of looking within the same medium. Commercial television, in his view, can only be “grasped for what it is by positioning it dialectically over against” (Jameson 1991: 77) video art. Jameson (1991: 74) states:

The living room, to be sure (or even the relaxed informality of the video museum), seems an unlikely place for this assimilation of human subjects to the technological: yet a voluntary attention is demanded by the total flow of the video text in time which is scarcely relaxed at all, and rather different from the comfortable scanning of the movie screen, let alone the cigar smoking detachment of the Brechtian theatergoer.

Following Jameson’s dialectical enfolding of these oppositions, *Ciao Bella* – in its double-coded role as theatrical performance and video artwork – is compared to the political strategies of Brecht’s epic theater in order to investigate the extent to which Rose’s viewer can be said to oscillate between an involvement in and detachment from the happenings in *Ciao Bella*.

### **Carnavalesque Forgetting**

‘The dialectical relationship between avant-garde and post-modernism’, says Umberto Eco in 1985, ‘is similar to that which exists between forgetting and remembering. At certain moments in history a polemical break with the past is necessary. At other times we need to pause for breath.’ (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 28)

The temporality of carnivalesque liberation – momentary freedom from, and the transgression of, rules and accepted norms – takes on a further political dimension in Geyer-Ryan’s discussion of Brecht’s theater in her chapter “The rhetoric of forgetting: Brecht and the historical avant-garde”. She begins by noting that members of the “historical avant-garde of the period 1910-40” (Geyer-Ryan 1994:28) worked in opposition to the modernist project – a project that was devoted to memory as a medium through which to explore the dilemma of individual identity. The avant-gardists were, according to Geyer-Ryan,

not willing to tackle a task which, as far as they could see, would be never-ending: that of reconstructing the subject within the process of remembering. Their attack aimed to obliterate the unity of the subject, something which in their view – contrary to all appearances – was still the organizing force behind the pluralizing of the individual to be found in the work of the modernists.

In the section – from the same chapter – entitled “Brecht’s rhetoric of forgetting”, Geyer-Ryan aligns the political strategies of the carnivalesque and Brecht’s epic theater by focusing on the

theme of forgetting. She (1994: 43) states that the theme of forgetting is ever-present in Brecht's work as well as being an element of the carnivalesque and explains that, "forgetting brings about detachment not only from the family context but also from social distinctions in general". Geyer-Ryan (1994: 43-45) distinguishes six aspects that function within this space of carnivalesque forgetting – three of which I will focus on. Firstly, moral control is to be forgotten by external and internal agencies in order for these agencies to free themselves from all expected historically embedded social norms and values. Secondly, an attitude which aligns itself to the motif of *carpe diem* must be embraced so that the individual or individuals may lose themselves – forget themselves – in the moment. This *carpe diem* attitude leads to the third aspect of carnivalesque forgetting which involves the acceptance of the transitory nature of all things – an attitude fostered by Brecht – as it is in and through this acceptance that one is liberated from possible fear of the future.

The potentially subversive advantage of the carnival of forgetting lies in the fact that "a person plunging into it cannot be identified in anyway. Since both the person's name and individual physiognomy has been blotted out, *the person loses her legally liable identity*" (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 44). It can be said that Rose – through painting and dressing her body in order to take on and enact various different characters – embraces this attitude of forgetting, and, through this forgetting, temporally loses her "legally liable identity"<sup>23</sup>. Yet *Ciao Bella* does not display a wholesale forgetting, an attitude Geyer-Ryan also resists, in that Rose does not only deconstruct and forget her identity but also works to re-construct and reconsider it. In his description of the carnivalesque mode of identity deconstruction and reconstruction – forgetting and remembering – in Rose's performance of *Ciao Bella*, Lloyd Pollak (2001: 6) notes:

Although Rose addresses politics, history, gender, sexuality, race and feminine roles and identity, she cast her video, *Ciao Bella*, in the ebullient mode of the *Serenissima's* carnival and merrily camped it up with mask, motley and disguise. In this romping frolic through history, the luscious Rose rigged out in fabulous costumes – which she devised from throw-away materials such as bin bags – enacts the roles of 13 guests at an all-female Last Supper. The fact that Rose is black means her very colour undermines and subverts these Western stereotypes of feminine sexuality, but the artist deconstructs only to reconstruct again.

---

<sup>23</sup> The most obvious instances of Rose's blotting out of her self-identity can be seen in two figures, namely, the morphing silhouette figure and the pom-pom shaker whose arms and pom-poms are the only part of that body which can be seen.

Yet in this observation, Pollak seems to be missing a crucial point with regard to Rose's identity. Rose is not black but coloured thus placing her identity in a rather ambiguous realm 'in between' the black/white binary: she is neither black nor white and cannot be classified neatly or distinctly into either of these categories. Ashraf Jamal (2006), in his article on Rose's work entitled "The bearable lightness of Tracey Rose's *The Kiss*", recognizes this crucial ambiguity in Rose's identity and regards it as an important aspect of her artistic conceptualization and subversion as he states:

That Rose, as a coloured, figures as a glitch, a quirk, a protean and degenerate anomaly in South Africa's Manichean racial register, has, no doubt, impacted on her take on identity. She can be everything and nothing. She can easily spoof the fetishistic integrity of race as turn it on its head.

Rose's playful leap into carnivalesque forgetting not only undoes and deconstructs various notions surrounding self-identity, race and gender, but also works to reconsider, or rather, re-remember through the "ceaseless recreation of one's cultural and socio-historical identity" (Jamal 2006). Rose in this way opens a space in which the viewer, herself included, can reconsider and imbue her identity with new meaning in her own, and consequently the viewer's own, allegorical reconstruction.

### **Avant-garde and Kitsch**

During a time when modernists worked to "salvage the purity of high art" from possible contamination from modern mass culture, the historical avant-garde worked toward the "possible subversion and democratization of high-art" (Hutcheon 1988: 218). Due to this project of democratization "the historical avant-garde offers to the postmodern a model for contesting the fixity of the borders between art and life" (Hutcheon 1988: 218), a model that also recognizes its own complicity in the dominant artistic institutions. Furthermore, both postmodernism and the avant-garde work to contest and affirm certain modernist preoccupations and, in doing so, highlight the complexity involved in attempts to radically distinguish the 'modern' from the 'postmodern'. Jameson (2002: 1), in his book *A singular modernity: essays on the ontology of the present*, discusses the entangled relationship between the 'modern' and the 'postmodern' by making reference to certain traits in contemporary thinking that "suggest the return to and re-establishment of all kinds of old things, rather than their wholesale liquidation".

On the one hand, postmodernism and the historical avant-garde challenge the modernist “strategy of exclusion” that “resulted in the separation of high art from mass culture” (Hutcheon 1988: 218). Yet, on the other hand, the avant-garde shared with modernism a “general focus on the individual subject, personal speech and the specific text” (Hutcheon 1988: 218). This shared consideration has been translated into the dominant trends of postmodern thought in its own considerations of culture and notions on “collective discourse”<sup>24</sup>, “semiotic codes”<sup>25</sup> and “aesthetic conventions” (Hutcheon 1988: 218). By making these links between the historical avant-garde and postmodernism, Hutcheon (1988: 218) does not mean to conflate the two. This is to say that she does not wish to define the postmodern as neo-avant-garde but views, rather, the postmodern project as one that works toward inscribing “a new historicity and a new problematizing of the notion of historical knowledge” (Hutcheon 1988: 218). Hutcheon (1988: 218) also notes that the postmodern “shares none of the avant-garde’s Utopian orientation toward the future”, as it does not view art as being able to change society directly. Postmodernism does, however, view its own process of “questioning and problematizing” (Hutcheon 1988: 218) history and high art, for example, as a way to build frameworks for *possible* change.

In his essay, “The structure of bad taste”, Umberto Eco (1989) maps out the dialectic between the avant-garde and kitsch. This discussion complicates the binary opposition between the concept of high art – as ‘rare’ and ‘authentic’ – and low art – as kitsch and mass produced – by revealing the extent to which both, at times, may share similar stylistic procedures. In his mediation on the differences between what has been termed kitsch and the avant-garde, Eco defines kitsch as a form of communication that aims at producing an immediate effect and can, according to this assumption, be related to mass culture, whereas the avant-garde aligns itself and its artistic procedures with “high” culture. Furthermore, Eco (1989: 186) states that:

Whereas the avant-garde stresses the importance of the processes that lead to the work and turns them into the very object of its discourse, Kitsch focuses on the reactions that a work should provoke in its audience and sees these as its *very raison d’être*

Hutcheon’s discussion of the artistic projects of the historical avant-garde follows on from this description by Eco in that the historical avant-garde stressed its processes of art making as a

---

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Bakhtin on dialogism.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Bal and Bryson and Eco on semiotic codes.

“possible subversion and democratization of high-art” thereby turning this political preoccupation into the very object of its discourse. The stylistic procedures of kitsch involves a high degree of borrowing and pastiche, and contrary to the avant-garde, its use of quotation does not attempt to critically analyze or undermine what is considered High art or High culture. Instead, kitsch attempts to pass itself off as art in order to be more commercially viable or valuable. Yet Eco (1989: 215) also notes that it is not only kitsch that borrows from the avant-garde in order to subsume high art into mass culture and consumption. He states:

Given the spread of mass culture, it would be impossible to say that this sequence of mediations and loans is a one way street: Kitsch is not the only borrower. Today, it is often the avant-garde culture which, reacting against the density and scope of mass culture, borrows its own stylemes from Kitsch.

In terms of Rose’s project in her performance of *Ciao Bella*, it can be said that she follows a certain preoccupation with the avant-garde in that her performance reveals the processes at work in her art making and makes these interpretive processes the very subject of her artwork. Rose borrows images from mass culture as well as images from high art in order to dialectically enfold these oppositions and blur the possible boundaries between them. Furthermore, *Ciao Bella* shares the stylistic procedure that both the avant-garde and kitsch have in common, as elucidated in Eco’s (1989: 247) utilization of Levi-Strauss’s notion of bricolage<sup>26</sup>:

Both the avant-garde and kitsch would then seem to be involved in some kind of reciprocal *bricolage*, avowed in one case (and aiming at the discovery of new dimensions), tactic in the other (and trying to pass for an original invention, “the real thing”).

---

<sup>26</sup> Levi-Strauss structuralist formulated of the term bricolage – defined in two of his anthropological works on primitive societies, namely *Totemism* (1962) and *The savage mind* (1962) – refers to the ways in which the “non-literate, non-technical mind of so-called ‘primitive’ man responds to the world around him” (Hawkes 1977: 51). The use of myth – the invention of totems for example – allows the non-civilized and non-literate bricolour to establish “analogical relationships” between himself / herself and the world through a structural logic that seems to be made-up or ad hoc in relation to our own civilized ways of structuring and classifying.

The use of bricolage – the seemingly illogical or ad hoc structuring of nature and things – can be related to the practice of montage in that disparate things – ideas, scenes, images etc. – can be placed together to form an artwork or video installation with its own relational system and logic. This method of production is, in my view, clearly evident in the very montage-like structure of *Ciao Bella*, a structure that displays no form of linearity, chronology or closure – as exemplified in its looping and open-ended narrative. It can also be seen in the production and making of *Ciao Bella* as Rose is only able to perform alongside herself with the help of video editing and digital montage.

Another element of Rose's making and performing of *Ciao Bella* that exemplifies the art making principles of montage and collage can be seen in the fact that Rose makes her various costumes and disguises "from throw-away materials such as bin bags". This activity of collecting various materials – including foil, paper, plastic, cloth and old clothes – can be said to align Rose to one of Benjamin's nineteenth century urban Paris types: the ragpicker<sup>27</sup>. Rose, like the ragpicker, collects discarded materials for their use-value rather than their exchange value. Pierre Missac (1995: 61) notes that Benjamin's ragpicker can be read as the flâneur<sup>28</sup> of history: "the activity of the rag picker provides a kind of allegory for the work of the historian as Benjamin conceived it". In this way, Rose's activity of collecting becomes an allegory of her appropriation of various historical personages, events, texts and music which she combines in ways that put into question and problematize our historical knowledge as well as various historically embedded feminine stereotypes.

The ragpicking activity Rose follows in order to create, both conceptually and visually, her various characters can be compared to the surrealist photomontages of German artist Hannah Höch. Working in Berlin during a time of political upheaval and social disillusion following World War I, Höch rummaged through all kinds of print sources – newspapers, magazines, etc – in order to create radical photomontages that reflected and commented on the life, especially of woman, in the post-war environment.

---

<sup>27</sup>Missac (1995: 61) also notes that Benjamin's ragpicker can be read as the flâneur of books. His comparison between reading and collecting, with reference to Benjamin, sheds light on the activity of reading and writing that is central to my own performative interpretation of Rose's *Ciao Bella*. He writes: "Those who roam around in books do not worry about returning with empty hands. While their gesture is most often that of rejecting and ignoring, they can also seize and grab hold of very concrete prey – not only ideas but also texts or fragments of texts".

<sup>28</sup>"The flâneur plays the role of scout in the marketplace" (Benjamin 1999b: 21).



Figure 25



Figure 26

In her earliest work entitled *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* (1919-20) – “a title that refers menacingly to woman’s traditional realm” (Barlow 1991) – Höch combines paint with cut-out dada texts and photographic fragments that include “hardware, buildings, disconnected heads and bodies”, as well as “images of modern life” and the “modern machinery of war” (Figure 25).

Considered to be the inventor of the photomontage, along with her partner Raoul Hausmann, Höch developed an art form that would express the sublime technological advances and changes in her environment, advances that lead largely to the dismemberment of bodies, cities and lives during the war. In this way Höch collected and cut out various images and texts – fragmenting and deconstructing their origins – to place them together in a montage of disparate parts juxtaposed in order to create new meaning and subversive commentary. Her photomontage entitled *Grotesque* (1963), in which Höch renders her dismembered female bodies as monstrous (Figure 26), reflects a similar attitude to Rose’s feminist subversion of stereotypical feminine beauty. The avant-garde practices of Höch and her social commentary seems to function in a similar way to the avant-garde project of Brecht and his epic theater, a theater aimed to unify and mobilize the working class in the face of capitalist domination. By extension, Rose’s allegorical utilization of montage in her making of *Ciao Bella*, as discussed in relation to the political commentary evoked in Höch’s photomontages, can be compared to the montage-like quality of Brecht’s theater. In an effort to interpolate his model audience – the oppressed working class – to actively participate and think above the action presented in his plays, Brecht’s theater displays a “montage principle” (Eagleton 1981: 157) which, as noted by Eagleton (1981: 157),

encourages us to concentrate and relax, not only in sequence but in a complex rhythm whereby we also relax during the stage action and concentrate during the breaks.

The alignment of Brecht’s avant-garde theater and Rose’s postmodern performance of *Ciao Bella* is perhaps best exemplified in Hutcheon’s (1988: 220) chapter “Political double-talk”, in which she discusses the similar political strategies at work in the plot structures of Brecht’s epic theater and postmodernist art. She states that both “share challenges to the concepts of linearity, development, and causality which, Brecht argued, all work to reinforce the dominant ideology in power”. In her assertion that both postmodernism and Brecht’s epic theater utilize

parody as a means to problematize historical knowledge, Hutcheon unintentionally recalls the operations of allegory as a means to re-vision and re-evaluate the past within our present. The allegorical operations within Brecht's theater and Rose postmodern performance of *Ciao Bella* work to,

parodically rewrite the historical events and works of the past, thereby questioning the stability of the meaning of both. By incorporating known historical events and personages within their texts, both [epic theater and postmodernist art] manage to problematize historical knowledge and to break any illusionist frame (Hutcheon 1988: 220).

### **Comedy and Humour in Brecht's Epic Theater**

The liberating effects of laughter in the carnivalesque, as discussed in terms of Bakhtin and Kristeva, plays a key role in Brecht's theater as it "strives to combine elements of the modes known to Freud as 'comedy' and 'humour'" (Eagleton 1981: 156). Comedy, in Brecht and in the carnivalesque, "permits us a pleasurable economy released in laughter; it is incompatible with any strong effect" (Eagleton 1981: 156). While humour can be described as a substitutive device, one that works "a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it" and "acts as a substitute for the generation of these affects" (Eagleton 1981: 156) by putting itself in their place. This use of the comic and humour by Brecht allows for the audience to think above the action in the play – to inhibit Aristotelian catharsis in favour of potential liberation through laughter. As Eagleton (1981: 157) states:

Comic distanciation in Brecht is mainly a matter of the estrangement effect, which inhibits 'Aristotelian' empathy and thus leaves the audience's psychical energy unbound for potential liberation through laughter. But if Brecht is not mainly a question of laughter, this is partly because the available energy is displaced in another direction – not exactly into humour, but into thought.

In his discussion of model first level and second level readers – in his essay "Intertextual irony and levels of reading" – Eco (2005: 223) succinctly explains two ways of understanding "catharsis in Aristotle's poetics, and in aesthetics in general" in terms of homeopathic and allopathic interpretations of catharsis. In relation to homeopathic interpretation, Eco (2005: 223-224) states:

[C]atharsis stems from the fact that the spectator of tragedy is genuinely seized by pity and terror, even to the point of paroxysm, so much so that in suffering these two passions he is purged of them, and emerges liberated by the tragic experience.

While in allopathic interpretation:

[T]he tragic text places us at a distance from the passion that is represented in it, through an almost Brechtian kind of estrangement, and we are liberated from passion not by experiencing it but by appreciating the way it is represented.

By making these distinctions between homeopathic and allopathic catharsis, Eco reveals the extent to which a blockbuster Hollywood film – for example – can be understood in terms of homeopathic catharsis and therefore needs only a first level reader/spectator – a viewer who is absorbed by the plot through empathy and identification with the characters in the film. In Brecht's theater and in *Ciao Bella*, catharsis is allopathic and demands a second level reader or spectator, one that can think above and appreciate the tragedy for the ways in which it is represented. Allopathic catharsis can be said to demand a self-reflexive reader/ viewer, one who is, or is made, aware of his or her own looking/watching. In other words, both *Ciao Bella* and Brecht's theater demand a viewer who is active in their receiving, rather than passively watching/absorbing, and, in doing so, the viewer becomes a participant in the meaning-making process. In this sense, the viewer is not a passive recipient of ideological propaganda, but rather, an active participator who is challenged to think above the action represented.

Hutcheon (1988: 219) notes that this Brechtian distancing technique places “the receiver in a paradoxical position, both inside and outside, participatory and critical: we are to be thoughtful and analytic, rather than either passive or unthinkingly empathetic”. This oscillation between inside and outside can be said to be performed by Rose herself, in that some of the enacted characters move in and out of the projected screens and can thus be read as allegorical performances, or internal focalizers (cf. Van Alphen 1998), of the viewer's own dialectical involvement and detachment. By extension, the figure that shakes the pom-poms, to the far right of the right hand side screen, can be said to function as a *mise-en-abyme* of this inside/outside movement as only the shaking pom-poms are visible in the screen while the body shaking them is invisible, standing outside the screen (**Figures 23 & 24**). Furthermore, these shaking pom-poms seem to be cheering the rest of the characters on, even though none of them take any notice of the cheerleader, and in doing so reveals the extent to which Rose self-reflexively points to her own performing and art making. It can also be said that the cheerleader not only cheers on her fellow characters' individual performances, but, in an enunciative fashion, works to urge the viewer to perform their own interpretation – one that is both

participatory and critical. As Hutcheon (1988: 219- 220) elucidates, in terms of Brecht's thinking:

Brecht made it possible for self-reflexivity (or the baring of convention) to be considered as potentially politically progressive, rather than as just having a formal (or formally evolutionary) function, as the Russian Formalists had suggested. Hystographic metafiction, in particular, offers many parallels with epic theater. Both, for instance, place the receiver in a paradoxical position, both inside and outside, participatory and critical: we are to be thoughtful and analytic, rather than either passive or unthinkingly empathetic. Both are equally accessible and entertaining, and equally didactic. For Brecht, the entire act of enunciation was important: the text's reception and production as well as the social and cultural relations in which they operate...The "particular historical field of relations" (Brecht 1964, 190) in which art is written, received and in which its action takes place is central to both, though in Brecht's work there is more of a sense that these relations are open to change *by art itself*.

Benjamin begins his essay "What is epic theater?" with the notion, central to the viewing of epic theater, of 'the relaxed audience'. He (1999a: 144) elaborates that Brecht "indicates above all that this theater desires an audience that is relaxed and follows the action without strain". Eco (1989: 135) notes that Brecht demanded that the lights be on at all times and that the public be allowed to smoke in order to "prevent his audience from being hypnotized by the events in his plays". Unlike a full length film or a stage production that involves the audience through empathy and character identification, *Ciao Bella* and Brecht's theater, involves the audience through astonishment and interruption. As Benjamin (1999a: 147) states:

The special character of the relaxed interest of the audience for which the performances of the epic theater are intended is the fact that hardly any appeal is made to the empathy of the spectators. Instead, the art of the epic theater consist in producing astonishment rather than empathy. To put it succinctly: instead of identifying with the characters, the audience should be educated to be astonished at the circumstances under which they function.

This notion of interruption is further developed by Benjamin as he notes that according to Brecht, the task of the epic theater "is not so much the development of actions as the representation of conditions" (Benjamin 1999a: 147). This focus on the representation of conditions functions to "discover the conditions of life" and "to alienate them". By extension, "this discovery (alienation) of conditions takes place through the interruption of happenings" (Benjamin 1999a: 147). In *Ciao Bella*, each of the characters seem to exist within their own individual time zones without much, or any, interaction between them. Furthermore, each character obsessively repeats the same action over and over again – 'Mami', 'Bunny', 'Venus Baartman' and 'Lolita' being the only exceptions. Yet even these four characters and their

actions, though they do more than just repetitively box themselves, are just as confusing and astonishing. 'Mami's' introductory recital reveals little or nothing of why the characters are doing what they are doing or why they are even in the play. 'Venus Baartman', after descending onto the stage and quietly flapping her wings while turning around, suddenly begins to spin out of control before unexpectedly transforming into her own labia in a jar. 'Lolita's' sing song ends just as unexpectedly as she smashes her bowl of cherries to run up to the screen and hurl abuse at the astonished viewer. 'Bunny', after bouncing up and down for the entire duration of the 'play' suddenly stands up and shoots everyone without any good reason. The story ends with the viewer as confused as they were when it began.

In terms of these interruptive happenings, it can be said that *Ciao Bella* displays none of the absorptive strategies employed by conventional film – such as character development and identification, or narrative and plot developments – but rather works to astonish and interrupt the viewer out of their comfort zones of passive watching<sup>29</sup>. Brecht's socio-political project worked at interrupting the working class – his model audience – out of their positions of passive acceptance, a task that Benjamin (1999a: 149) found potentially revolutionary:

It was a particularly daring undertaking to keep a social drama free of the effects which empathy produces and which the audience was accustomed to. Brecht knew this and expressed it in an epistolary poem that he sent to New York workingmen's theater when *Mother* was produced there. 'We have been asked: Will a worker understand this? Will he be able to do without his accustomed opiate, his mental participation in someone else's uprising, the rise of others; the illusion which whips him up for a few hours and leaves him all the more exhausted, filled with vague memories and even vaguer hopes?'

Yet, the quoted poem reveals the extent to which Brecht understood that not all of his model spectators – working class men and woman – would fully understand his plays, let alone begin a revolution that would bring down the capitalist modes of production under which they suffered. In a similar way, my interpretation of Rose's carnivalesque deconstruction of

---

<sup>29</sup>This is not to say that passive absorption, when standing in front of a work of art, for example, is a contemptuous mode of looking or viewing. In fact, at times the most successful works of art are those that are able to transport and transfix the viewer, through the painting's own absorptive and anti-theatrical quality, as expounded in major theoretical writings such as Micheal Fried's book *Absorption and theatricality*. In this work, Fried (1980: 131-132) discusses the dialectical positioning of the viewer/holder: "The primary or *dramatic* conception calls for establishing the fiction of the beholder's nonexistence in and through the persuasive representation of figures wholly absorbed in their actions, passions, activities, feelings, states of mind... The secondary or *pastoral* conception, which in the end is probably best understood as an offshoot or even a special case of the dramatic, calls for establishing the opposite but in important respects equivalent fiction of the beholder's physical presence within the painting, by virtue of an almost magical recreation of the effect of nature itself".

historically embedded feminine stereotypes recognizes the temporality of the consequent liberation, denying the positivistic feminist interpretation that regards the carnivalesque in *Ciao Bella* as a means toward “emancipatory transformation” (Schmahmann 2004: 80). The following chapter will aim to explore the im-possibilities of the viewer ever fully understanding Rose’s performance by focusing on Benjamin’s (1999a: 151) assertion that, “[t]he didactic play and epic theater are attempts to sit down on a dais”.

In the following chapter I utilize the metaphor of translation as a medium through which to investigate the extent to which my interpretation of *Ciao Bella* can be read as a successful translation of the visual performance into a textual interpretation. By extension, Benjamin’s essay “The task of the translator” is utilized in order to dialectically enfold the antithetical usage of allegory in Paul De Man – and his assertion that authorial intention is untranslatable – and Walter Benjamin’s use of allegory as a means to liberate and enrich the original through its translation.

## Chapter Three

### Allegory as Translation

In the preceding chapter I discussed Rose's utilization of parody and allegory as a means to call into question "the notion of the original as rare, single, and valuable (in aesthetic or commercial terms)" (Hutcheon 1988: 93). Through her use of parody as an allegorical operation Rose is both 'deconstructively critical', in her dissemination and de-authorizing of past representations, and 'constructively creative', through her re-construction and re-authorization of these fragments into her montage-like video performance. In this way, *Ciao Bella* points paradoxically to "both the limits and the powers of representation – in any medium" (Hutcheon 1988: 98). In other words, Rose's allegorical use of parody points to a "contesting revision or re-reading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history" (Hutcheon 1988: 85). As Hutcheon (1988: 94) notes: "parody works to foreground the *politics* of representation".

The similar socio-political strategies of the historical avant-garde and postmodernism were also investigated vis-à-vis Brecht's epic theater and *Ciao Bella*. This chapter aims to extend this palimpsest, reading Rose's performance of *Ciao Bella* through Brecht's epic theater, by focusing on the ways in which both forms of 'theater' value the process of art making and interpretation over a finished product as exemplified in the open-ended narratives and enunciative situations in each. To quote Hutcheon (1988: 219):

Because the work of Brecht, like that of postmodernism, values process ("the course") over product ("the finish"), the text qua formal text has no fixed and final value in and for itself. It is not a closed and fetishized object, but an open process with an enunciative situation that changes with each receiver, whose ideological positioning as consumer (by both realist theater and fiction) is what epic theater and postmodernism attempt to subvert.

The circular and open-ended – as opposed to closed and linear – nature of *Ciao Bella*'s 'narrative' or 'plot' is perhaps most evident in the title. By naming her video piece after this familiar Italian phrase which holds within it two opposite meanings – meaning both hello beautiful and/or goodbye beautiful – Rose seems to be pointing to Benjamin's (1998: 174) assertion that in allegory "one and the same object can just as easily signify a virtue as a vice", making any activity of reading problematic and, as evinced by Owens (1994: 71), an activity that "must remain forever suspended in its own uncertainty". By extension, the character

'Mami' introduces the 'play' – by reciting distorted and fragmented version of Shakespeare's famous verse – and ends it – by cleaning up the mess made by the mermaid and the playboy bunny girl. But is that the end, or the beginning? Isn't 'Mami' just cleaning up so that she can prepare the stage for her introductory recital? The fact that the dismembered characters left on *Ciao Bella's* stage happily sing 'ciao, ciao, ciao' "in the manner of players bidding farewell at the end of a musical" (Schmahmann 2004: 80), further complicates the 'ending' as they could just as well be saying 'hello, hello, hello'. The character 'Mami' can also be said to embody her own contradiction – as do many of the characters in *Ciao Bella* – in that she is both a teacher – in the way she is dressed as well as her manner of addressing the viewer – and a maid – in the way in which she cleans the screen with soap and sponge and by virtue of the fact that the name 'Mami' connotes black slavery. She thus ambiguously embodies the binary opposites of master and slave, dominator and dominated, oppressor and oppressed.

'Mami' faces the spectator and performs her verse for us, the audience, in a similar way to a teacher addressing her class (**Figure 14**). Benjamin (1999a: 148) notes that it is in the enunciative function of the didactic play that audience participation is fostered:

In every instance, the epic theater is meant for the actors as much as for the spectators. The didactic play is a special case largely because it facilitates and suggests the interchange between audience and actors and vice versa through the extreme paucity of the mechanical equipment. Every spectator is enabled to become a participant. And it is indeed easier to play the 'teacher' than the 'hero'.

By facilitating and suggesting an "interchange between audience and actors and vice versa" (Benjamin 1999a: 148), the didactic play works to bridge the gap between the audience and the actors on stage. This politically motivated attempt works to bring about the working class's active participation and intervention in the action represented so as to challenge their passive acceptance of the capitalist modes of production in which the live and work. Benjamin (1999a: 150-151) writes:

The abyss which separates the players from the audience as it does the dead from the living; the abyss whose silence in a play heightens the sublimity, whose resonance in an opera heightens the intoxication – this abyss, of all elements of the theater the one that bears the most indelible traces of its ritual origin, has steadily decreased in significance. The stage is still raised, but no longer rises from an unfathomable depth; it has become a dais. The didactic play and the epic theater are attempts to sit down on a dais.

The following section works to reveal the extent to which *Ciao Bella* can be said to function as an attempt “to sit down on a dais” (Benjamin 1999a: 151) – to lessen the abyss between audience and ‘actors’, artwork and interpreter as well as the original and its translation – by focusing on ‘Mami’s’ introductory recital. ‘Mami’s’ verse, and her ambiguous performance of it, can be read, and will be used, as a *mise-en-abyme* of the ways in which Rose’s performance of *Ciao Bella* retains obscurity and to what possible ends. Furthermore, this discussion aims to show the extent to which Rose’s allegorical performance of *Ciao Bella* foregrounds polysemy, openness and undecidability as a way to avoid a recuperative translation of her performance into various socio-political discourses<sup>30</sup>. To do this my discussion focuses on de Man’s deconstruction of Benjamin’s essay “The task of the translator”, which he uses as a means to justify his assertion that, according to Norris (1988: xvi),

it is in the nature of our predicament as human readers that we should always be drawn to misinterpret texts by seeking out moments of transcendent, visionary insight which language is in fact, by reason of its temporal or contingent character, unable to achieve.

De Man’s polemic writings on the finitude of our understanding and ability to communicate fully what we mean – as artists, writers, readers and interpreters/viewers – through the seemingly ‘inhuman’<sup>31</sup> realm of language, seems to echo Elkins’ outright attack on the use of semiotics as a means to ‘read’ images. Elkins suggests that there always-already remain aspects of images that are un-describable or unexplainable in or through language and thus many attempts to read images will be misreadings. In the following discussion I will utilize Bal’s writings on Benjamin’s ‘image’ of translation as a means to traverse this apparent gap between the visual and the textual.

---

<sup>30</sup> Rose’s sway toward the formless over form implies her own political agenda, one that works to “bring things down in the world” (Bataille qtd. Bois and Krauss 1997). By extension, Rose’s performance of *Ciao Bella* can be said to celebrate the formless, by maintaining a position of playfulness and ambiguity, in a similar vein to Bataille (qtd. Bois and Krauss 1997), as exemplified in his statement: “[A]ffirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit”.

<sup>31</sup> De Man (2002: 96) explains that the inhuman in language consists of: “linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language – independently of any intent or drive or an wish or any desire we might have”.

## A Palimpsest: Reading Mami's Verse through Paul de Man's Reading of Walter Benjamin's "The task of the translator"

*Ciao Bella* begins on a stage-like setting. As the three screens fade in from black they reveal a long white table that stands on what seems to be a stage, with thick red velvet curtains hung in the background. 'Mami', Rose dressed as a school teacher, enters the first panel on the right to stand in front of this empty table and begin her recital:

All the world is a stage  
And all the men and woman (womb-man) merely plays  
They have their exits (exists) and entrances (en-trances)  
And one then in time plays many parts  
At first the infant, newly and spewly in the nurse's arms  
And then the whining Lolita, legs apart  
Then the maiden, teasy and verse (?) prior to willful terms bitch, whore  
and virgin  
Then the mother, full of strange omens and affections  
Jealous in honor, possessive in protection of her creation  
A bubbled utopic situation  
The sixth stage shifts into the wizened old crone  
Bespectacled on nose

At least this is what I think she says. Firstly I am not sure if I am hearing the spoken words correctly for the main reason that Rose intentionally performs some of these words ambiguously. For example, the word "exit" is pronounced by Rose to sound a bit like "exists", and the same applies to the word "entrances" which seems to be pronounced as "en-trances", connotating the state of being in a trance. I cannot say for sure though, because I have not asked or even spoken to Rose in order to clarify this ambiguity. By extension, I feel that it would be inappropriate to attempt to clarify the specific words spoken and performed by Rose, by approaching the artist and requesting the poem or verse as it was originally written, for the reason that I feel Rose intentionally performs this verse ambiguously in order to defer any definitive translation on my part.

This intentional ambiguity in Rose's performative utterances can be compared to Bal's reading, or rather, hearing of, Coleman's installation, *Photograph* (1998-9) – a series of "projected images with synchronized audio narration" (Bal 2002: 184). In the chapter "Performance and performativity" from her book *Travelling concepts in the humanities. A rough guide*, Bal attempts to analyze the content of the installation's voice-over by attempting a transcription of

what the voice seems to be reading. She (2002: 190) notes that the romantic nature of what the female voice seems to be reading, “pushes ‘quotation’ into your face even though the words, like the voice, are impossible to trace to specific sources – ‘I hear or think I hear words that sound romantic’”. In her attempt to transcribe some of these spoken passages, Bal is aware of her misquotation and makes reference to the artist’s conscious move to de-authorize the spoken passages by, firstly, keeping the speaking or performing voice exterior and removed from the work and secondly, by refraining from giving access to the written text that the voice reads. This attempt to re-call the spoken words from their connection to past discourses – romantic poetry – is elucidated by Bal (2002: 190) as follows:

But in its re-emergence, each snippet from the past is torn off from its fabric. Memory cannot transport its time frame. For this reason, so Coleman’s work ‘reasons’, the attempt to recall, trace, place in the fabric of past discourses what we read or hear in the present is an act of memory that colludes with such acts of distortion as lying, pretending, and cheating. As I transcribe what I hear, stitching words into the new fabric of my analysis, I perpetrate these crimes, adding yet another layer to the de-authorizing acts of the artist.

*Ciao Bella* can be said to ‘reason’ in a similar way. By her overt misappropriation of Shakespeare’s verse – her quotation of only fragments or parts of it and her re-making or changing of those parts – Rose de-authorizes the author Shakespeare and by extension de-authorizes her own voice and authorship through her ambiguous pronunciation of certain words. Yet, through her re-construction of this now de-authorized verse, Rose re-authorizes this verse in her re-inscription and performance of it in her own ‘play’. Concomitantly, my own textual transcription of Rose’s performed verse adds to this de-authorization as I am not sure if what I hear and transcribe is what the author Rose is saying. My own transcription then is and can only be a creative misreading of Rose’s own creative misreading of Shakespeare’s verse.

‘Mami’s’ recital retains a certain irony, for as Rose enters, she essentially introduces the piece in order to direct our interpretation in some manner – providing a foundation of understanding from which to read further. Yet this introduction, with its strange distortion of not only the Shakespearean appropriation, but, moreover, in the way she pronounces and places words, makes for less clarification and more confusion. More specifically, the intentionality behind the distortion of the introduction to *Ciao Bella*, leads me to maintain this level of undecidability and avoid attempting to clarify exactly what Rose is actually saying. Essentially, my interpretation will attempt at maintaining a position within this grey realm: by attempting to keep my

understanding of this incantation as open-ended as possible and by looking at the *processes* involved in my transcription of Rose's oral performance – and the entire video piece as well – into a textual interpretation or translation.

The term translation is specifically used here as a metaphor for this process of interpretation via transcription that will be looked at in what follows. Translation will be made analogous with the act of interpretation, guided mainly by my reading of Umberto Eco's (2001) book *Experiences in translation*. In the second chapter of this specific work entitled "Translation and interpretation", Eco (2001:67) introduces this analogy in reference to Jakobson's formulation of three types or levels of translation: intralinguistic, interlinguistic and intersemiotic.

According to Jakobson, interlinguistic translation occurs when we have "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of some other language" (Eco 2001: 67), in other words, translation proper. Intersemiotic translation occurs when we have "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign systems" (Eco 2001: 67), which has also been referred to by Jakobson as "transmutation" (Eco 2001: 67). An example of this intersemiotic level of translation can be seen in the translation or transmutation of *Ciao Bella* as a visual performance into a textual interpretation. Intralinguistic translation, also referred to as "rewording", is defined by Jakobson as "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language" (Eco 2001: 67).

Eco (2001: 69) notes that Jakobson employs the term interpretation three times in order to define these three types of translation and goes on to show how Jakobson "was fascinated by the fact that on several occasions Peirce had turned to the idea of translation in order to define the notion of interpretation". Eco (2001: 71) expounds on Jakobson's view that "the problem of translation is indeed fundamental in Peirce's views and can and must be utilized systematically" (2001: 71), by stating:

Jakobson was simply saying that the notion of interpretation as translation from sign to sign allows us to get around the diatribe about where meaning lies, in the mind or in behavior, and he does not say that interpreting and translating are always the same operation, but that it is useful to tackle the notion of meaning in terms of translation.

This conception of translation as a useful figurative analogy to the problem of interpretation is the foundation for my reading of Benjamin's essay "The task of the translator", as read through de Man. Accordingly, I have reworded Benjamin's essay "The task of the interpreter". In the following discussion I make use of the form of translation as a metaphor for my attempt at describing and re-scribing the internal structures of *Ciao Bella* as performed by Rose into a textual transcription. By extension, what follows will take on an immanent form<sup>32</sup>, focusing on the inability of my translation to represent in text the original visual performance, thus marking out the space in which both Benjamin and de Man's theories seemingly coincide. I also turn to Benjamin's essay and de Man's (1986) reading of it in order to reveal the extent to which 'Mami's' verse displays the disjunctions and ruptures within the mode of translation: firstly, by avoiding a recuperative translation of Shakespeare's verse, and secondly, disallowing a recuperative translation of her own verse.

### **The Task of the Interpreter**

In the chapter "Unreal presences: allegory in Paul de Man and Walter Benjamin", Helga Geyer-Ryan (1994:193) points to George Steiner's frontal attack on the deconstructionist activity of Paul de Man and his "deep rooted suspicion of ideology in literary works". In his book, *Real presences*, Steiner (1991:7-8) advocates a responsible way of reading and appreciating artworks in a way that would materialize their meaning, or meanings, as present. He writes:

An interpreter is a decipherer and communicator of meanings. He is a translator between languages, between cultures and between performative conventions. He is, in essence, an executant, one who 'acts out' the material before him so as to give it intelligible life.

Furthermore:

Unlike the reviewer, the literary critic, the academic vivisectioner and judge, the executant invests his own being in the process of interpretation. His readings, his enactments of chosen meanings and values, are not those of external survey. They are a commitment at risk, a response which is, in the root sense, responsible.

As stated earlier, Rose's performance of her artwork calls for a similar performativity on the part of the interpreter. This performativity, in relation to what Steiner has stated above, seems

---

<sup>32</sup> My use of the concept 'immanent form' relates to the activity of critically engaging with a text or artwork from within their given structure. In other words, my discussion will focus on the internal structure

to function as a “response which is, in the root sense, responsible”. Furthermore, a responsible response would need a certain level of investment on the part of the interpreter, and, by extension, an interpretation that “acts-out” the artwork before him or her in order to “give it intelligible life” (Steiner 1991: 7). Steiner (1991: 8) also states that, “[w]e are answerable to the text, to the work of art, to the musical offering, in a very specific sense, at once moral, spiritual and psychological”. This assertion reveals a certain level of metaphysics and theology, which seems to echo the messianic tone of Benjamin’s writing as well as his view of allegory as being necessarily, and to political ends mostly, redemptive. As Geyer-Ryan (1994: 201) notes:

In salvaging images, Benjamin is concerned to redeem corporeality, materiality, sensuality, and hence ultimately actual or – to use perhaps a better term, coined by George Steiner – real presence.

But Benjamin’s writings show a close affinity with de Man too as the allegorical form plays a central role in their linguistic theories; both are concerned with the “existential emptiness of the linguistic sign when the divine guarantee of meaning has perished” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 194). In this way, Benjamin seems to hold the middle ground between the ostensibly different conceptions of meaning and authorial intention in de Man and Steiner; one arguing for the presence of meaning – through subjective investment – and the other arguing – through the repression of subjective experience – for its essential absence. More specifically, Steiner’s views as elucidated above reveal a certain affinity with traditional and transcendental epistemologies, while de Man intentionally engages in an immanent form of deconstruction in order to reveal the potentially totalizing effect of these traditional epistemologies and their truth claims.

Jim Hansen (2005: 669) notes, in his essay *Formalism and its malcontents: Benjamin and de Man on the function of allegory*, that both Benjamin and de Man view negation as “the task of modern critical consciousness”. He adds that both Benjamin’s book on German tragic drama and de Man’s “Rhetoric of temporality” consider aesthetic or literary meaning, “by staking a claim for the negating immanence of allegory over and against the mythic and universalizing implications of its more popular sibling, the symbol” (Hansen 2005: 669). The romantic conception of the symbol “works to overcome the immanence-transcendence dialectic by

---

of *Ciao Bella*, specifically ‘Mami’s’ verse, in order to uncover the ways in which Rose’s performance can be said to display the disjunctions and slippages within the mode of translation.

reconciling material form to transcendental ideal” (Hansen 2005: 670) and acts as a kind of “a priori undialectical totality” (Hansen 2005: 670). On the other hand, allegory is “never as subtle, as timeless, or as beautiful as the well wrought world of the symbol” (Hansen 2005: 670). Allegory is rather a mournful figure that does not idealize as the symbol does but rather “embodies as it acknowledges the loss of specificity, originality, and revelation” (Hansen 2005: 670).

Both Benjamin and de Man use the allegorical form to “expose images, the figural, and the aesthetic, as ideological illusions smoothing over the existential emptiness of the linguistic sign” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 201). Benjamin works at destroying these ideological illusions in order to “redeem images from their traditional, corrupt meanings, and to force new revolutionary meaning out of them” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 201). For de Man, however, this exposure of the figural and aesthetic as ideological illusions results in all figures of speech becoming, and remaining, fixed as allegories. Furthermore, these deconstructed or disseminated bodies of meaning cannot, in de Man’s view, be reassembled “under a new light of meaning” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 201) or redeemed in any sense. Instead, de Man decides to persevere “in the limbo of emptiness and undecidability” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 201). In other words, Benjamin starts off with an activity of unmasking and disfiguring in an immanent critique closely aligned to de Man, only to turn to a political and transcendent outcome.

De Man, on the other hand, views Benjamin’s call for “new revolutionary meaning”, as a potentially totalizing system of its own, and is therefore weary of allegory’s revolutionary potential. Yet, it is Benjamin’s (1999a) essay “The task of the translator” that de Man turns to in order to reveal the extent to which meaning and authorial intention cannot be unproblematically transferred from one language to another through translation. In fact, Benjamin (1999a: 70) begins his essay on translation by telling us that “no poem is intended for the reader” and that the essential quality of the literary work “is not statement or the imparting of any information”. As Hansen (2005: 668-669) states:

Benjamin’s thinking seems to partake of the kind of immanent criticism – conscious of its own situatedness – that de Man fosters, a criticism that does not work to resolve inconsistency through the fiat of some utopian, teleological, or extrinsic harmony. Rather, in de Man’s reading, Benjamin’s thought outlines how the inconsistencies of figures of speech and referentiality reflect the internal structures of language.

Bal (2002), in the chapter “Image” from her book *Traveling concepts in the humanities: a rough guide*, uses Benjamin’s essay on translation as a way of reconsidering art history and its reading of images. More specifically, her (2002: 59) aim is to “trace the travel between art history – a specific, albeit dominant area of visual studies – and literary studies – a specific, albeit dominant, area of language studies – with the help of Benjamin’s image of translation”. Benjamin’s (1999a: 76) image of translation, which Bal refers to here, reads as follows:

While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds<sup>33</sup>.

The reference to the fold makes this image clearly baroque and exemplifies Benjamin’s view of history and art history as being, “neither a reconstruction of nor an identification with the past; it is a form of translation” (Bal 2002: 64). Translation in this historical sense then works at traversing the gap between our present and the past, and displays Benjamin’s affinity with the figure of allegory as a means to redeem images from the past, lest they disappear irretrievably. This allegorical perception as redemptive is revealed in Benjamin’s celebration of translation, as Bal notes, in relation to “liberation”, “transformation” and “renewal”, supplementary to the original rather than being subservient to it (Bal 2002: 64). The meaning and intention, then, of the original is not transferred directly through the translation but is richly enveloped by the latter, simultaneously recovered and re-covered or veiled.

De Man, suspicious of the recovery of meaning through translation, claims that Benjamin’s essay reveals the extent to which translation is impossible<sup>34</sup>. This polemical claim made by De Man is supported by, firstly, his reference to the etymology of the German word for task, and secondly, by pointing to two specific translations of Benjamin’s text, one in English and one in German, and the inconsistencies between them. He (1986: 80) notes:

If the text is called “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” we have to read this title more or less as a tautology: *Aufgabe*, task, can also mean the one who has to give up.

---

<sup>33</sup>Here again, Benjamin’s image alludes to the baroque imagery of the fold, apparent in the red velvet curtains in *Ciao Bella*, as well as to the royal robe of the sovereign. By extension, these ample folds align *Ciao Bella* to the baroque as well as referring to Rose’s political subversion and deconstruction of authority and power relations within Lacan’s symbolic order.

<sup>34</sup>This observation follows my own claim, made in the first chapter, that it is my view that a complete understanding, or decoding, of *Ciao Bella* is impossible due to the ambiguous message it relates.

Thus the translator, in De Man's (1986: 80) view, "has to give up in relation to the task of redefining what was there in the original", because the translation "can never do what the original text did". By extension, de Man (1986: 86) sees this essay on translation as a mise-en-abyme of that which it exemplifies, as he states that, "[t]he text about translation is itself a translation, and the untranslatibility which it mentions about itself inhabits its own texture..." He (1986: 82-83) finds in Benjamin's text an equating of criticism to the mode of translation and states that, according to Benjamin:

The act of critical, theoretical reading performed by a critic like Friedrich Schlegel and performed by literary theory in general – by means of which the original work is not imitated or reproduced but is to some extent put in motion, de-canonized, questioned in a way which undoes its claim to canonical authority – is similar to what a translator performs.

Following de Man, one might say that Rose does not attempt to imitate Shakespeare's verse in any way but can be seen to question – in a similarly critical manner – its claims to canonical authority. She does so by parodying its original form and by retaining some original fragments, making her verse uncannily familiar in that it contains some fragments of the original. This appropriation's origin can be found in Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, in which the character *Jacques* performs the famous verse in this play as follows:

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,  
Mewly and puking in the nurse's arms.  
Then, the whining school-boy with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like a snail  
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,  
Sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress's eyebrow. Then, a soldier,  
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,  
Jealous in honour, sudden, and quick in quarrel,  
Seeking the bubble reputation  
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then, the justice,  
In fair round belly, with good capon lin'd,  
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws, and modern instances,  
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,  
With spectacles on nose, and pouch on side,  
His youthful hose well sav'd, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,

It second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

In comparing the original to Rose's translation one sees that she does attempt to transfer the historically contextual meaning of this extract from Shakespeare's play through an intralinguistic<sup>35</sup> translation. In other words, Rose does not invest in rewording Shakespeare's famous verse from its outdated and at times obscure use of the English language into a more contemporary form of this same language allowing a renewal of its original meaning. Rather, she echoes fragments of this verse in order to parody the original performance and its place in history, and in doing so, Rose re-thinks this Elizabethan play and its own inherent irony and parody, within the context of her own present. Benjamin uses the echo as a trope in his essay on translation. He (1999a: 77) writes:

Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the centre of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.

Bettine Menke focuses her essay "‘However one calls into the forest...’: Echoes of Translation" on the above citation. She (2002: 86) notes that, "[t]o let reverberation say something ‘different’ characterizes the echo as a trope". Menke explores this use of the echo in relation to Baroque echo games in which a statement by an actor is reverberated by another in a fragmentary way, so as to undermine or subvert the original statement, and, in doing so, parodies it. Thus these echo games play out the division between sound and meaning or signifier and signified, with the focus being, to quote Menke (2002: 85), "on the joke of repetition, on identity and difference within repetition". Carol Jacobs (1999: 87) also discusses this reference to the echo in her essay "The monstrosity of translation" in which she states:

[T]ranslation's call into the forest of language is not a repetition of the original but the awakening of an echo of itself. This signifies its disregard for coherence of content, for the sound that returns its own tongue become foreign. Just as the vase of translation is built unlike fragment on unlike fragment, only to achieve a final fragmentation, so the echo of translation elicits only fragments of language, distorted into a disquieting foreignness.

---

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Umberto Eco's (2001) *Experiences in translation* where he states: "Intralinguistic translation, also referred to as 'rewording', is defined by Jakobson as 'an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language'".

These correlations of translation to concepts such as fragmentation, incoherence and foreignness echo Benjamin's views on the workings of allegory in the baroque *Trauerspiel*. As discussed previously, Benjamin's melancholic allegorist contemplates the decay and ruination inherent in all things transient, seeing only fragments and ruins. Allegory as a mournful figure is exemplified in Benjamin's (1998: 223) assertion that, "[f]or an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory" – an impulse stemming from impossibility. Allegory thus mourns its inability to rescue things for eternity. Yet there is also an aspect of Benjamin's writing that indulges in a certain amount of play, as Handelman points out that Benjamin himself noted that the word 'Trauerspiel' holds two separate words within its sphere, there is not only mourning [*Trauer*] in the *Trauerspiel* but also [*Spiel*], play. Handelman (1991: 129) writes:

One might well extend Benjamin's insights here to the "playful" aspects of postmodernism, which itself displays a kind of baroque allegorical sensibility, often exhibited in elaborate self-conscious displays of artifice, in plays of surface and self-reflexivity. In a deconstructionist textual interpretation, for instance, the arbitrary free play of signs is foregrounded and the target text is reduced to fragments. In postmodernism, the modernist mourning and nostalgia is attenuated; [yet] there is little of the sad desire or anguished yearning for the transcendent in the secular that marks modernism and the baroque. And there is little sense either of the fall or of any coming apocalypse. Instead of the drive toward redemption, an ironic pleasure is taken in the very transience and emptiness.

It can be noted that in terms of de Man's literary criticism and use of allegory this drive toward redemption is indeed replaced by – in his post-structural usage of allegory – an "ironic pleasure" in the very transience and emptiness of meaning that is exposed by the figure of allegory. By extension, Rose's postmodern performance of *Ciao Bella* seems to take on a similar ironic pleasure in breaking down meaning – though her parody of, and dissemination of, concepts and their meanings. Yet *Ciao Bella* can be said to follow an essentially Benjaminian activity. Rose appropriates various bodies of meaning from the ruins of history – be it a Shakespearean verse, feminine stereotypes, or artworks from the past and present – and allegorically disseminates their previous meanings, in a violently fragmenting way. She does so in order to reassemble the remnants or fragments and re-represent them the context of her own artwork. In this way, Rose can be seen to follow a similar process to that of Benjamin's baroque allegorist who works to "'pile' these ruins and fragments, these allegorical "stereotypes" and "remnants" on top of each other without any strict teleology or goal" (Hansen 2005: 675). Furthermore, in her attempts to reconstruct these appropriated fragments,

by performing them and re-inscribing them into her own artwork, Rose's performance seems to succumb to the very mournfulness she seemingly attempts to ironize or play with.

The viewer can also be said to oscillate between a feeling of mournfulness and loss – in their inability to articulate “the mounting groundswell of ambiguity” (Eagleton 1981: 145) and disarticulation of meaning as performed by Rose – and feelings of pleasure and liberation in the playful and humorous attitude, which is also displayed in *Ciao Bella*. Thus the carnival of deconstruction and transgression performed in, and re-constructed in, *Ciao Bella* can be both enjoyable – as the viewer/interpreter understands and recognizes various parodic allusions and plays on contextual meanings – and a reason for mournfulness – in the realization that not all of the various intertextual and hybrid allusions can ever be grasped fully. Thus while one may enjoy the potentially liberating effects produced in Rose's excessive and comic deconstruction of various bodies of meaning, one may also experience a deep sense of loss in the realization that these fragmented bodies of meaning cannot be fully reconstructed and allowed to mean something complete and/or wholly other – be it within *Ciao Bella* and/or our interpretation/translation of it. It is in another of Benjamin's ‘images’ that this recurring fragmentation within translation is exemplified, as translated by Carol Jacobs (1999: 84):

Just as fragments of a vessel, in order to be articulated together, must follow one another in the smallest detail but need not resemble one another, so, instead of making itself similar to the meaning of the original, the translation must rather, lovingly and in detail, in its own language, form itself according to the manner of meaning [*Art des Meinens*] of the original, to make both recognizable as the broken part of a greater language, just as fragments are the broken part of a vessel.

In this image, both the original and the translation remain fragments of the always already fragmented and broken vessel that is language. Thus, although Benjamin seems to celebrate allegory and translation as a means toward the liberation of meaning in lost and dead ‘originals’, these translations are also always already fragmented and ruined. This is the mournfulness of translation. Yet, despite de Man's assertion that Benjamin's essay on translation exemplifies the inability to fully translate, which it in my view does, the fact that Benjamin wrote this essay as a preface to his own translation of Baudelaire's French “*Tableaux parisiens*” into his own German language reveals a curious detail. For what would be the point in translating something if you believe it cannot be translated? My only deduction would have to be that although Benjamin was aware of his inability to fully translate the original, he did so

any way, revealing the extent to which he felt the process of such a project was in fact a worthwhile attempt. As Benjamin (1999a: 79) states succinctly:

[T]he language of a translation can – in fact, must – let itself go, so that it gives voice to the intentio of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a *supplement* to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of intentio. [emphasis added, GB]

Benjamin asserts that the language of the translation should give voice to the intention of the original not as a copy – for a perfect copy would be impossible – but as a harmony, a supplement to the translation rather than a replacement. In relation to the image/text opposition discussed in the first chapter, this supplementation can also be related to the exchange of meaning in interpreting a visual artwork. The viewer's interpretation "consists not of *inventing* but of *intervening*, of a 'supplementation' that does not replace the image it explains but adds to it" (Bal 1999: 13).

My translation of Rose's performed verse tries to traverse the gap between her visual performance and my textual interpretation, by exploring Rose's own translation or allegorical re-thinking of the past, Shakespeare's verse, into her present. What I hope has been made sufficiently clear is that Rose's translation, and by extension my translation, does not fully traversed the gaps between present/past, sound/meaning, image/text, actors/audience or the original and its translation, but rather reveals the extent to which translation may effectuate a passage within this gap without ever building a solid bridge across it. Bal (2002: 65) evinces that "translation is an ongoing activity" and in view of this, my own process of interpreting or translating *Ciao Bella* should be viewed as a process that keeps working at this traversal, whilst always already enunciating the impossibility to fully translate or traverse the gaps.

## Conclusion

### Mourning Meaning: Where to Now?

The imaginative capability of Western man, which is fulfilled within Christianity, is the ability to transfer meaning to the very place where it was lost in death and/or nonmeaning. This is a survival of idealization – the imaginary constitutes a miracle, but it is at the same time its shattering: a self-illusion, nothing but dreams and words, words, words ... It affirms the almightiness of temporary subjectivity – the one who knows enough to speak until death comes (Kristeva 1989: 103).

In the previous chapter, I aimed to reveal the extent to which *Ciao Bella*, as a socio-political artwork that seems to work in a similar way to the enunciative functions of Brecht's epic theater and the didactic play, is unable to fully traverse the gap between audience and performance. On the one hand, Rose's performance of *Ciao Bella* can be said to work at lessening the abyss that separates the audience from her performance. She attempts to do so by, firstly, including known historical events and personages into her 'play', and, secondly, by addressing her audience directly – violently or didactically – as a means to interrupt her audience from falling into passive absorption. Yet on the other hand, Rose performs herself in polyvalent and ambiguous ways making it difficult for any spectator to fully decode her message – be it political or otherwise. In this way, Rose's use of allegory – exemplified in the polysemous nature of her intertextual and multilayered performance – can be said to call for the viewer's participation, in that her artwork displays the open form of the baroque, a folded form that is not closed and prescribed but open to various interpretative possibilities. The viewer's active participation can be seen as a process of unfolding, in Benjamin's (1999b: 802) sense:

The word 'unfolding' has a double meaning. A bud unfolds into a blossom, but the boat which one teaches children to make by folding paper unfolds into a flat sheet of paper.

Yet, as soon as one unfolds *Ciao Bella* into a flat sheet of paper it unfolds into a blossom – a *fleur de mal*. In this way, the viewer both creatively enriches Rose's performance through their interpretive engagement with it, and in a dialectical way, also works to undo the mystery of its making.

My discussion of Walter Benjamin's writings on the dialectical play of allegory in the baroque *Trauerspiel* attempted to align this mournful figure [allegory] – a figure bent on trying to make forever that which is always already lost – with Rose's seemingly ironic subversion of mournfulness. Benjamin's assertion that the convergence of the past and present is a dialectical

image at a standstill, an image that flashes up like lightning only to disappear again as suddenly<sup>36</sup>, alludes to that which is lost in attempts to fully traverse the gap between the original and its translation, performance and spectator as well as past and present. *Ciao Bella* can be read as a play on mourning, or as Kristeva (1989: 101) describes the *Trauerspiel*, a “playing with mourning”, in that Rose allegorically performs, however playfully, this melancholy. Kristeva (1989: 101-102) also states that it is in allegory that a melancholic tension between a thing and its meaning is best achieved:

By shifting back and forth from the disowned meaning, still present just the same, of the remnants of antiquity for instance (thus, Venus, or the “royal crown”) to the literal meaning that the Christian spiritualists context attributes to all things, allegory is a [dialectical] tenseness of meanings between their depression/depreciation and their signifying exaltation (Venus becomes the allegory of Christian love). It endows the lost signifier with a signifying pleasure, a resurrectional jubilation even to the stone and corpse, by asserting itself as coextensive with the subjective experience of a named melancholia – of melancholy jouissance.

It can be said that Rose’s allegorical performance works to reveal the mournful gap between signifier and signified through the intentional misreading of her quoted appropriations. These misreadings dialectically point to the depreciation of the sign’s signifying ability as well as to its signifying exaltation. Through allegory, *Ciao Bella* points to the depressive depreciation of meaning by way of Rose’s compulsive dissemination of and disowning of the remnants of past and present appropriations, thus foregrounding the transient and ephemeral nature of things material or real, ideas, concepts and subject-hood. Rose’s subversion of historical narratives, artworks/theater productions and feminine stereotypes maintains her performance of *Ciao Bella* as forever suspended in a de Manian realm of undecidability that denies a potentially totalizing and unified interpretation of her video installation. Yet, through her own interpretive activity of deconstructing and reconstructing of meaning, Rose also points to a certain melancholic pleasure that can be enjoyed, by the viewer, in this constant process of re-inscription and re-interpretation.

Thus, although melancholy prevails in the face of ultimate non-meaning, the ironic subversion of this mourning is performed playfully in *Ciao Bella* though Rose’s various ambivalent and “polyvalent resurrections” (Kristeva 1989: 101).

---

<sup>36</sup>As exemplified in Benjamin’s (1999a: 247) assertion that, “[t]he past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again”.

This constant dialectical process between allegory's critical deconstruction and potentially redemptive reconstruction – “the signifier's ability to be filled with meaning as well as reified into nothing” (Kristeva 1989: 101) – in my view, constitute the allegorical and open-ended structure of *Ciao Bella* and, by extension, the viewer's own participatory interpretation or translation.

## Bibliography

Bakhtin, M. 1984. *Rabelais and his world*. Tr. Iswolsky, H. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Bal, M.

1994. *On meaning-making: essays in semiotics*. Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press.

1999. *Quoting Caravaggio: contemporary art, preposterous history*. Chicago, III: Museum of Contemporary Art.

2001a. *Louise Bourgeois' Spider. The architecture of art-writing*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

2001b. *Looking in: the art of viewing*. Australia; G&B Arts International.

2002. *Travelling concepts in the humanities. A rough guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Barlow, M. 1999. Excerpt from the book, *Woman artists*. Chapter "Dada and Surrealism: reports from the unconscious". [www.hlla.com/reference/surreal.html](http://www.hlla.com/reference/surreal.html).

Bataille, G. 1985. *Visions of excess: selected writings, 1927-1939*. Ed. and Tr. Allan Stoekl. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Baum, R. 2001. "The risks of quoting". *Art Journal*. Vol. 60 (2): 101-102.

Bedford, E. 2003. *Fresh catalogue*. Iziko: South African National Gallery, Cape Town.

Benjamin, A. (Ed). 1989. *Journal of philosophy and the visual arts*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Benjamin, A & Hanssen, B. (Eds). 2002. *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*. New York & London: Continuum.

Benjamin, W.

1998. *The origin of German tragic drama*. Tr. Osborne, J. London: Verso.

1999a. Arendt, H. (Ed). *Illuminations*. Tr. Zorn, H. London: Pimlico.

1999b. *The arcades project*. Tr. Eiland, H & McLaughlin, K. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Bennett, H. 1998. "The limitations of openness: Foucault's Pendulum and Kabbalah". Bouchard, N & Pravadelli, V. 1998: 81-98.

Bloomfield, M. (Ed). 1981. *Allegory, myth and symbol*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bois, Y & Krauss, R. 1997. *Formless: a user's guide*. New York: Zone Books.

Bouchard, N & Pravadelli, V. (Eds). 1998. *Umberto Eco's alternative: the politics of culture and the ambiguities of interpretation*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

- Buci-Glucksmann, C. 1994. *Baroque reason. The aesthetics of modernity*. Tr. Camiller, P. London: Sage Publications.
- Capozzi, R. 1998. "Libraries, encyclopedias, and rhizomes: popularizing culture in Eco's *superfictions*". Bouchard, N & Pravadelli, V. 1998: 129-145.
- Collison, C. 2006. Interview with Tracey Rose. [www.28.co.za/](http://www.28.co.za/)
- Collini, S. (Ed). 1992. *Interpretation and overinterpretation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Culler, J. 1992. "In defence of overinterpretation. Collini, S. 1992: 109-123.
- Cullum, J. 1998. "Stereotype this!" *Art Papers*. November-December. 1998: 16-21.
- Deleuze, G. 2001. *The fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*. Tr. Conley, T. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- De Man, P. 2002. *The resistance to theory*. Theory and History of Literature, Volume 33. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Derrida, J. 1973. *Speech and phenomena, and other essays on Husserl's theory of signs*. Tr. by Allison, D. Evanston Ill: Northwestern University Press.
- Dilnot, C & Garcia-Padilla, M. 1989. The difference of allegory. Benjamin, A 1989: 40-53.
- Eagleton, T. 1981. *Walter Benjamin: or towards a revolutionary criticism*. London & New York: Verso.
- Eco, U.  
 1984. "Frames of comic freedom". Sebeok, T.A. (ed.) 1984: 1-9.  
 1984. *Semiotics and the philosophy of language*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.  
 1989. *The open work*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.  
 1990. *The limits of interpretation*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.  
 1992. "Interpretation and history. Collini, S. 1992: 23-43.  
 2001. *Experiences in translation*. University of Toronto Press.  
 2005. *On literature*. London: Becker and Warburg.
- Edmunds, P. 2003. "Tracey Rose at the gallery-in-the-round, Grahamstown". [www.arthrob.co.za/](http://www.arthrob.co.za/)
- Elkins, J. 1999. *Why are our pictures puzzles? On the modern origins of pictorial complexity*. New York: Routledge.
- Fineman, J. 1981. The structure of allegorical desire. Greenblatt, S 1981: 26-61.
- Fletcher, A. 1964. *Allegory: the theory of a symbolic mode*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Foster, H. 1996. *The return of the real*. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Foucault, M. 1989. *The order of things*. New York & London: Routledge.

- Fried, M. 1980. *Absorption and theatricality*. University of California Press.
- Geyer-Ryan, H. 1994. *Fables of desire. Studies in the ethics of art and gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Greenblatt, S. (Ed). 1982. *Allegory and representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Handelman, S. A. 1991. *Fragments of redemption: Jewish thought and literary theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.
- Hanson, J. 2005. "Formalism and its malcontents: Benjamin and de Man on the function of Allegory". *New Literary History*. Vol. 35: 663-683.
- Harrison, C & Wood, P (eds). *Art in theory 1900-1990*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Harvey, D. 1996. *Justice, nature and the geography of difference*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Hutcheon, L.  
1988. *A poetics of postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York & London: Routledge.  
1989. *The politics of postmodernism*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Jacobs, C. 1999. *In the language of Walter Benjamin*. Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Jamal, A. 2006. "The bearable lightness of Tracey Rose's *The Kiss*". [www.chimurenga.co.za](http://www.chimurenga.co.za). Chimurenga Online.
- Jameson, F.  
1991. *Postmodernism: or the cultural logic of late capitalism*. London: Verso.  
2002. *A singular modernity: essays on the ontology of the present*. UK: Blackwell Retail.
- Jones, A & Stephenson, A. 1999. *Performing the body. Performing the text*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, K. 2003. "Tracey Rose: post-apartheid playground". Bedford, E. 2003: 8-26.
- Kellner, C. 2002. Review. *Flash art*. May/June 2002:142.
- Kristeva, J.  
1989. *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*. Tr. Roudiez, L.S. New York: Columbia University Press.  
1989. *Black sun: depression and melancholia*. Tr. Roudiez, L.S. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kuspit, D. 2000. *Redeeming art: critical reveries*. New York: Allworth Press.
- Lacan, J. 1997. *Ecrits: a selection*. Tr. by Sheridan, A. Bristol: Routledge.

- Miller, H. 1981. "The two allegories." Bloomfield, M 1981:355- 370.
- Missac, P. 1995. Walter Benjamin's passages. Tr. by Shierry Weber Nicholson. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Murinik, T.  
2001. 'Ciao Bella'. Unpublished text that accompanied Tracy Rose's *Ciao Bella* when it was exhibited at the Venice Biennale.  
2001. "Ciao Bella: The sassiest way to say 'hi' & 'by' this season". [www.designindabamag.com](http://www.designindabamag.com)  
2004. The gospel of Tracy Rose. Perryer, S 2004: 30-36.
- Norris, C. 1988. *Paul de Man. Deconstruction and the critique of aesthetic ideology*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Orton, F. 1994. "Figuring Jasper Johns". Roberts 1994: 111-132.
- Owens, C. 1994. *Beyond recognition. Representaion, power, and culture*. Eds. Bryson, S., Kruger, B., Tillman, L., & Weinstock, J. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Perryer, S. 2004. *Art South Africa Vol 2 Issue 4 Winter 2004*. Cape Town: Bell-Roberts Publishing.
- Pollak, L. 2001. "Malicious view of African art". Cape Times: 6
- Richter, G. 2000. *Walter Benjamin and the corpus of autobiography*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Roberts, J (ed.). 1994. *Art has no history!* London: Verso
- Rush, M. 2003. *Video art*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.
- Schmahmann, B. 2004. *Through the looking glass: representations of self by South African woman artists*. Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing.
- Schoeman, G.  
2004. "*Felix in exile: William Kentridge's self-reflexive allegories of art and history*". *Acta Academica*.  
2004. "Melancholy constellations: Benjamin, Kiefer, Kentridge and the play of mourning". *Visual culture/explorations conference. Department of visual arts, University of Pretoria, 9-10 July*.
- Scholem, G.G. 1955. *Major trends in Jewish mysticism*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Sebeok, T.A (ed.) 1984. *Carnival!* Berlin: Mouton Publishers.
- Sennett, R. 1977. *The fall of public man*. Cambridge University Press.
- Steiner, G. 1991. *Real presences. Is there anything in what we say?* London: Faber.



Van Alphen, E.

1997. "The portrait's dispersal: concepts of representation and subjectivity in contemporary portraiture". Woodall, J (ed). 1997.

1998. *Francis Bacon and the loss of self*. London: Reaktion Books.

Weigel, S. 1996. *Body-and image-space. Re-reading Walter Benjamin*. London: Routledge.

Woodall, J (ed.). 1997. *Portraiture: facing the subject*. Manchester: Manchester University Press