

2006

The import of the sensation of the abyss

David J. Prescott-Steed
Edith Cowan University

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The Import of the Sensation of the Abyss

by

David John Prescott-Steed
BA (Hons)

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, Edith Cowan University

Faculty of Education and Arts

July 2006

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

Abstract

This research argues the significance of the concept of the abyss as a means to understanding key contemporary ideas such as the self, identity, reflexivity, indeterminacy, ideology, radical doubt, lack, and xenophobia. Proposing the analysis of interpretations of the abyss as informative in developing an understanding of ourselves in terms of our cultural, geographical and historical contexts, I draw on a range of visual images, explorations of language use, research into cultural constructs, religious practices and historical events. The reflections on the abyss contained in this thesis contribute to broader research by connecting the developing concept of the abyss to aspects of the material and cultural contexts of the historical periods examined. Self-reflexive creative production is the *modus operandi* for my critical engagement with the subject matter. The claim that research and creative practice inform one another dialogically is exemplified by a discussion of the role of research as a tool for contextualising my own visual art practice, as well as for acknowledging both my intellectual and my emotional negotiation of the theory.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;*
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in a text; or*
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Acknowledgements

Becker (1982, p. 1) writes that “all artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number of people”. In his (1982, p. 25) view, the individual artist “works in the centre of a network of cooperating people, all of whose work is essential to the final outcome”.

The PhD has been the most intensive and most rewarding course of study that I have undertaken. Since its commencement I have received both direct and indirect support from many people who take part in the various corners of my daily life. Even as the research process continued to demand my extended and undivided attention, the support offered to me proved to be a source of much comfort and served to reinforce my motivation. Among the many, of course, are an exceptional few.

I would first like to thank my wife, Julie, for her patience and understanding, for her unreserved support throughout my immersion in this research project, for lending me her feet when I felt I had misplaced my own, and for joining me on my path through the simplicities and the complexities of the depths of the abyss. Julie has continued to be a loving companion, a smiling face waiting for me at the surface, helping me catch my breath and giving me the strength for another descent.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to my Principal Supervisor Doctor Christopher Crouch who approached this project with great enthusiasm and who has taught me so much since its inception. Over the past three years Chris has become a valued friend and continues to be a highly respected colleague. His academic and artistic insight, his constructive

criticism and his good humour, have been invaluable in helping me to navigate my way through this relentlessly challenging and vastly enjoyable experience. Chris has shown me how to remain focussed on the particularities of the tasks at hand without losing sight of the bigger picture surrounding them.

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Introduction

In this paper I examine representations of the abyss in contemporary Western visual culture. Although a more detailed interpretation of the abyss will be provided in due course, at this point I wish simply to note that the abyss can be described as “1. The great deep believed in the old cosmogony to lie beneath the earth; the primal chaos; the bowels of the earth; the infernal pit, hell. 2. A bottomless chasm; any unfathomable cavity or void space. Freq. *fig.*” (Brown, 1993b, p. 11). The latter part of this definition, in particular, presents the abyss as that which is indeterminable. In keeping with this interpretation, the feature of everyday thinking that I focus on is indeterminacy.¹ There are a variety of representations of this metaphor. The role of those that I am examining is their use as cultural reference points for the reflexive organisation of sensations of indeterminacy in everyday thinking. By providing an introduction to the study, this chapter outlines my motivation for conducting this research as well as identifying its overall significance. It is necessary that this introduction also sets out the objectives of this investigation, as well as the methodological framework that I have used to achieve them. In this introduction, I take the opportunity to present any assumptions that are pertinent to this study and I also take the opportunity to clarify the cultural context in which the study takes place.

My theoretical inquiry is directly related to the fields of cultural theory and visual culture. It is for this reason that this introduction establishes the expectation that the research has an ongoing impact on my own creative

¹ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* states that something which is *indeterminate* is “[n]ot marked or specified, not fixed in extent, amount, or character; having no definable value Indeterminacy is the quality of being indeterminate” (Brown, 1993b, p. 1347). This term will be articulated further in due course.

practice. This paper is a piece of reflexive research that I have used to inform my creative practice. Reflexivity is an opportunity for cultural negotiation in which the individual “acts and is also acted upon” (Kondo, 1986, p. 75). This approach to the paper gives me the opportunity to contextualise my praxis within a broader field of cultural production. An outline of the overall structure of this study concludes this introduction.

I arrived at my research focus in this way. Leading up to the commencement of this research project, it was not so much the *abyss* that I had been thinking about but rather the notion of the *unknown*. I was interested in the role that the unknown played in my everyday thinking and it was this interest that eventually led me to develop the series of discussions about the abyss and indeterminacy that constitute this paper. I shall briefly outline this formative period because it helps to clarify my motivation for conducting this research and it also introduces the character of the project as a whole.

I was initially interested in the notion of the unknown because I felt that it was something that I needed to step into (figuratively speaking) in order to learn new things during everyday life, in order to grow as a person in general and to develop my theoretical and creative practical inquiry in particular. Negotiating the unknown is something that I felt I needed to be doing in order to realise my potential in all or any of these aspects, as opposed to being limited by relentless familiarity and by unchallenged self-affirmation.² I believe this to be a necessarily reflexive process in order for it to support the revision and improvement of cultural knowledge. It is in this sense that I considered the unknown to represent that place which would

² According to *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, a *negotiation* is the “action of crossing or getting over, round, or through some obstacle” (Brown, 1993a, p. 1900). The ways in which the individual negotiates the concept of an abyss, and what can be learned about the individual from the observations of these, are the primary focus of this study.

always have something to teach me. It also seemed to me to be that place in which my future theoretical and practical concerns could be located, although at this stage I had not yet recognised how literal this proposition would turn out to be.

As both my theoretical inquiry and my creative practice have developed over the past few years, I have been interested to find that the more I learn the more I feel I do not know. In other words, I often considered my theoretical and practical inquiries to be characterised by an increasing awareness of my own ignorance, by an increasing awareness of the vastness of that unknown which is particular to me. I say particular, because I acknowledge that the notion of the unknown is a necessarily subjective one, and that what is unknown to me may be known to another individual and vice versa. Therefore, I have maintained the understanding that the process of negotiating the unknown is necessarily self-reflexive. This proposition is supported by Nietzsche's premise that "if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee" (1911, p. 97). This suggestion interprets the abyss as facilitating ongoing self-reflection. However, it is worth noting here that reflection differs from reflexivity in that reflection is passive and reflexivity is active. Whereas the notion of reflection implies a mirroring of an established phenomenon, a reflexive negotiation is one that requires an ongoing involvement in the construction and interpretation of cultural information. I believe that Nietzsche's understanding of the abyss facilitates reflexivity when considered in light of the contemporary Western ideological conditions.

The notions of the unknown and the known are contingent upon one another. Therefore, as well as continuing to make me aware of my ignorance, my experience of learning has also reinforced an awareness of my potential

for further learning. As the unknown seems to grow the extent of my potential does also. It is in this way that my continued interest in the unknown, as a means for revising and developing my understanding of the world, seems increasingly valuable.

These formative thoughts, regarding the notion of the unknown, centred on ideas of my ignorance, my theoretical potential, and my creative potential. They also centred on ideas of the uncertainty that I would need to negotiate in order to redefine the limits of my understanding every time that I inquired beyond them. After a short period of time I made two important developments in the way I grounded these ideas, developments that eventually informed the focus of this paper. I began to refer to the unknown as the *abyss* once I located its interpretation as “any unfathomable cavity or void space” (Brown, 1993b, p. 11). For me, the abyss is the most fitting metaphor for a discussion about the unknown in as much as this description presents it as infinitely unknowable, endlessly indeterminable.³ I already thought of the unknown as that place where my understanding was absent, where my cognition was rendered void and so I found that the abyss provided me with a cultural reference point for my interpretation. This development was my first step to establishing the cultural paradigms of the abyss. This is because I am unable to measure the extent of my unknown (I cannot determine what I do not know) and I cannot assign to it any

³ Hawkes (1972, p. 1) asserts: “The word *metaphor* comes from the Greek word *metaphora* derived from *meta* meaning ‘over’, and *pherein*, ‘to carry’. It refers to a particular set of linguistic processes whereby aspects of one object are ‘carried over’ or transferred to another object, so that the second object is spoken of as if it were the first”. In *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, metaphor is defined as a “figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is considered as representative of some other” (Brown, 1993b, p. 1756). In the context of this paper, the concept of an abyss is presented as a metaphor for the indeterminable, one that opens the way to an examination of indeterminacy in everyday thinking. In this paper I argue that a negotiation of the abyss is necessarily founded in the sensation of indeterminacy.

limitations. The abyss, likewise, evades limitations by being understood as unfathomable and so is also unknowable.

I put the second development into effect by beginning to refer to my uncertainty as my indeterminacy. Indeterminacy can be described as a feeling of being “uncertain”, “doubtful” or “inconclusive” or, alternatively, it can be understood as the sensation of “having more than one variable and an unlimited number of solutions” (Krebs, 1995, p. 429). With this in mind, the words uncertainty and indeterminacy are metonyms. I believed that by streamlining my use of terminology in this way I could continually reinforce the idea, throughout my discussions, of an interrelationship between the abyss and the individual. My use of the word indeterminacy seemed a more fitting way to talk about experiences of the unknown and to begin to express the role of the abyss in my everyday thinking.

My indeterminacy, and subsequent questioning, as to how I might go about formulating the discussions that I wanted to engage in, was what mobilised these developments. It is in this way that they are themselves the outcome of a negotiation with the unknown. This observation supported my understanding that the process of developing discussions about indeterminacy and the abyss would necessarily be self-referential. This is not simply because the unknown is subjective and I would need to be constantly mindful of my own everyday experience throughout the paper, but also because the research could be thought of as a reflection of its theoretical focus, documenting a process of stepping out into the unknown, of seeking one’s own development, of desiring to engage in an unfamiliar experience. This paper demonstrates the way that the abyss can be used as a reference point for a discussion about indeterminacy in everyday thinking and, by being the product of theoretical inquiry, presents itself as the product of a

negotiation with indeterminacy. This paper is the result of my own creative inquiry, of my 'stepping out into the unknown' in the hope that I might bring about new cultural knowledge.

The Import of the Sensation of the Abyss is a testament to the processes it articulates, but this is the result of an Action Research approach to the subject matter. By being unable to avoid a certain degree of self-reference, this research project demands a reflexive approach to the abyss. This means having to take into account the effect of my personality or presence on what was being investigated. To conduct a series of discussions about the abyss and about indeterminacy, without acknowledging that this paper was a product of my own stepping into the unknown, would undermine my arguments and overlook their role in my everyday thinking. In order to talk about negotiating indeterminacy in an authentic way I felt that it was necessary to make my own process of negotiation explicit throughout the paper. My compliance to an Action Research model of investigation guides and empowers this situation. What it also does is provide a suitable theoretical framework from which I can draw information for the development of my own creative practice. The importance of praxis in this project has meant that in order for the theory to sufficiently contextualise the practice the relevance of the former to the latter needs to be explicit throughout. A continual reference to, and substantiation of, the relationship between my theoretical and my practical concerns confirms this process.

Self-Reflexivity and Radical Doubt

Self-reflexivity and radical doubt are two key terms that I have made reference to so far in order to signpost the ideological framework within which this paper has been developed. I shall now discuss these terms and identify their role in the development of this research.

The notions of self-reflexivity and radical doubt inform the construction of knowledge in my own cultural context, in late modernity in Australia, and it is for this reason that they inevitably impact upon the development of this cultural research. It is intended that my discussion of these terms will go some way to establishing the ideological framework in which this research has been conducted as well as that in which my creative practice continues to develop.

To start this discussion I shall refer to Lewis (2002) who makes the following point:

Culture is constructed by humans in order to communicate and create community. While society and community are assemblages of people, culture is an assemblage of imaginings and meanings. Culture begins with an imagining of the world about us; these imaginings are represented in some way formed in discourse, language, symbols, signs, and texts – all concepts applied to meaning systems. [They] can never be fixed or solidified, but remain assemblages that can be dismantled through time, space, and human action ... The meanings are put together for a purpose within a particular historical and spatial (material) context. (p. 13)

Agreeing with this point of view, Sampson (1989, p. 2) discusses the terms of social constructionism, arguing that “selves, persons, psychological traits, and so forth, including the very idea of psychological traits, are social and historical constructions, not naturally occurring objects”.

The interpretations offered by Lewis and Sampson support the constructedness of various aspects of cultural life, support for which can be found in other cultural discussions. For example, in her discussion of creativity McRobbie (2003) makes mention of Giddens’ suggestion that “individuals must now ‘be’ their own structures”. Also, Rorty (1989, p. 9)

understands that truth is constructed by our languages, when “intellectual and moral progress [becomes] a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than an understanding of how things really are”.

Helping to identify the impetus for an interpretation of culture and cultural knowledge as social constructions, Inglis (2005, p. 65) makes the observation that “modern culture involves a questioning and relinquishing of traditional ways of doing and seeing things [It] seems to dissolve and destroy traditions, constantly replacing them with ever novel phenomena”. However, Inglis (2005) is of the opinion that traditions are simply cultural constructions in the first place, saying:

What we take to have been traditions handed down from generation to generation ... have in fact been quite self-consciously assembled by certain politically motivated groups promulgated by elites and taken on by a mass public eager for a sense of historical stability and continuity. (p. 66)

The understanding that knowledge is a cultural construction, rather than an account of empirical truth, reflects the way that “the reflexivity of modernity turns out to confound the expectations of Enlightenment thought” (Giddens, 1991, p. 21). A criticism of knowledge as a whole is facilitated by the notion of radical doubt. Giddens (1991) makes the claim that modernity:

institutionalises the principle of radical doubt and insists that all knowledge takes on the form of hypotheses: claims which may very well be true, but which are in principle always open to revision and may have at some point to be abandoned. (p. 3)

Reflecting on this assertion, radical doubt impacts upon the act of knowing and upon the development of cultural knowledge, whether the focus of this

knowledge is the project of the self or the product of other areas of cultural life. To approach the act of knowing in terms of radical doubt requires undermining the assumption that knowledge is stable and finite. By asking that knowledge remain open to revision at all times, radical doubt ensures that knowledge is thought of as a puzzle with innumerable possible outcomes. These may, in turn, be constructed and reconstructed as new information comes to hand. Radical doubt invigorates the potential for the creative individual's cultural knowledge to develop.

The key point here is that, in light of radical doubt, cultural knowledge lends itself to reflexive organisation. Reflexivity is defined as "an immediate critical consciousness of what one is doing, thinking or writing" (Appignanesi & Garratt, 2005, p. 73). Giddens' (1991, p. 21) suggestion that the "reflexivity of modernity actually undermines the certainty of knowledge" shows that reflexivity feeds directly back into the ethos of radical doubt. Cultural interpretations of the external world, of natural phenomenon, and of issues pertaining to the project of the self, may each be reflexively organised. It is in this way, Rorty (1989, p. 9) claims, that "intellectual and moral progress [becomes] a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than an understanding of how things really are".

Using the metaphor of the abyss I am able to contextualise my personal creative practice within a broader field of cultural discourse. It is my understanding that, in order for my praxis to offer critical commentary on any aspect of the cultural context in which it exists, it must be reflexively organised and also take on the form of hypotheses. The individual cannot remove his or her self from the cultural equation and so the research process, whether theoretical or practical, remains inherently self-referential. It is in keeping with this understanding that I consider the self to be an essential

bridge between cultural systems and the artwork that articulates them in a creative manner. Grodin and Lindlof (1996, p. 3) suggest that “[d]iscourse about the self is an everyday phenomenon; it is also a key preoccupation of scholars who examine human lives”. This point of view motivates my belief that an attempt to eliminate self-reference from the presentation of research, or from an articulation of creative practice, threatens to erode the forum of cultural exchange by failing to make explicit reference to its only foundation, the everyday thinking of the individual.

If cultural knowledge may be self-reflexively negotiated, and if metaphors guide the evolution of cultural knowledge, for me the abyss is the product of a self-reflexive and critical negotiation of everyday life. It is fitting, then, that my discussion focuses on the way that the abyss has been, and continues to be, used as a cultural reference point for the representation and interpretation of sensations of indeterminacy.

Because the known is culturally constructed it, in turn, frames the unknown. The abyss is a metaphor I am using for the unknown. I will be addressing the ways that the abyss is constructed and as well as the cultural function of these. However, the unknown cannot be sufficiently determined and so knowledge of the abyss is inherently unresolvable. So long as the abyss remains open to continuous revision it can only be reflexively interpreted and representations of the abyss, therefore, refer directly back to the reflexive process itself. By attempting to give form to the formless, representations of the abyss function as paradigms of indeterminacy. Keeping in mind Nietzsche’s premise regarding the gaze of the abyss, I put this to task as I examine representations of the abyss not as a way of knowing the unknown but as a means to demonstrating the way they are telling of the everyday thinking of the individual (see page 13 for quote).

There appears to be no shortage of publications in which the metaphorical function of the abyss is applied, no shortage of publications in which the word abyss exists in the title as a key to their contents (see Appendix A). These examples include *Success and Failure in Schools: avoiding the abyss* (Davies, 2000); *Hells Angels: into the abyss* (Lavigne, 1996); a poem entitled *The Christ of the Abyss* (Dawe, 1994, p. 45); *Ghosts of the abyss: a journey into the heart of the Titanic* (Lynch & Marschall, 2003); as well as *On Looking into the abyss: untimely thoughts on culture and society* (Himmelfarb, 1994). However, there seems to be a gap in the literature in so far as I have located only a very limited range of research that goes beyond the metaphorical function of the abyss itself.

Throughout this research I am not just using the abyss as a metaphor but rather I am examining the use of this metaphor. In the time that I have been conducting this research, I have not come across any text that begins to critically compare representations of the abyss and I certainly have not located any self-reflexive research that conducts this comparison through reference to contemporary cultural practice. The extensiveness of Appendix A suggests that there has been much invested in the various meanings associated with representations of the abyss. Maybe it is for this reason that the issue of the inadequacy of these representations has not been addressed!

The Abyss and Indeterminacy in My Creative Practice

While developed with the intention that it exists as a stand alone document, I have used this research to inform the evolution of my creative practice. The dynamic between theory and practice can be referred to as praxis. Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram, and Tincknell (2004) say:

As Williams puts it, 'praxis is practice informed by theory and also, though less emphatically, theory informed by practice'. In a typical Williams formulation ... praxis describes 'a whole mode of activity in which, by analysis but only by analysis, theoretical and practical elements can be distinguished, but which is always a whole activity, to be judged as such'. (p. 90)

My creative practice is a material reflection of my ongoing theoretical concerns. The theory informs the development of the creative work and my reflection upon the creative work feeds back into the research process. I believe that both parts of praxis must be developed reflexively if they are to adequately reflect the cultural context upon which they are contingent and if they are to contribute to the broader field of cultural production. It is my understanding that an emphasis on praxis works against two potential outcomes. The first of these is reflected in the individual who interprets theoretical concerns without producing the output to which these can be applied. The second of these is reflected in the individual who, concerned only with creative output and not theory, finds themselves lacking in their ability to adequately contextualise their output within a broader field of cultural concern. The way that my theoretical inquiry informs my creative practice is demonstrated in full in the praxis chapter. However, I have aimed to make the role of praxis in this research explicit by acknowledging the relevance of the various stages of this research to my visual inquiry as the opportunity arises for me to do so.

In keeping with the parameters of reflexivity, my creative practice is ongoing and is not developed with the intention of culminating, at the completion of this study, in an exhibition. Where particular pieces of artwork are exhibited, these instances reflect the progress of my practice so far rather than indicate

its resolution. Having existed previous to this research project, my creative practice will continue after this project has been concluded.

An introduction to the role of the abyss in my work can be articulated in the following way. The reflexive project of the self is ongoing and my practice, developed in a reflexive manner, follows this path. Creative practice, then, also becomes one in which questions are continually asked, where inquiry leads to new inquiry. The process of self-identification is a process of creative inquiry where the construction of the individual is creatively negotiated. This is a process of continuously bringing a sense of resolution to the problem, or puzzle, of the self. Indeterminacy has been established as a pervasive feature of this negotiation. This understanding can be applied to the notion of creative practice, in this way framing it as the ongoing reflexive negotiation of indeterminacy through creative problem solving. In terms of my creative discipline, this means a process of visual creative problem solving.

The self and creative practice may both be developed in a reflexive manner. They both require active engagement on the part of the individual. This research and my creative practice are an ongoing process of questioning and so are both constructed upon the sensation of indeterminacy. Where the metaphor of the abyss can be useful in the articulation of sensations of indeterminacy, this concept can provide an appropriate point of reference for research and creative development. In the abyss, I believe to have found a subject matter that sits comfortably as a critical foundation for my praxis.

Chapter Outlines including Research Questions

The following is an outline of the chapters contained in this paper. In it I highlight the key questions that guide each chapter. I have presented the

chapter outline together with the research questions in order to ensure that the context of my critical questioning is clear.

Chapter 1. 'Contextualisation and Review of the Literature'.

It begins by attempting to answer the question, "What is an abyss?" Because representations of the abyss offer a finite interpretation of the infinite abyss, this question leads to the premise that these representations can all be deemed inadequate in some way. By identifying and discussing the key paradigms of the abyss, through reference to the Sumerians and other ancient civilisations, this chapter examines how representations of the abyss become cultural metaphors. Rorty's comments regarding the constructedness of cultural metaphors and their contingency in language and Nietzsche's suggestion of the self-reflective nature of the abyss, both raised in the introduction, inform my understanding that the metaphor 'abyss' is in some way telling of the individual.

In this chapter I also ask the question, "What is the cultural origin of the abyss and what might be the cultural conditions that led to the construction of this concept?" Having established an understanding of these conditions, acknowledging that cultures change over time, how have interpretations of the abyss migrated and evolved? By addressing these questions I am able to show how the abyss has been reflexively organised and why. The questions that are addressed in my contextualisation and review of the literature establish a frame of reference for the critical interpretations contained in the cultural case studies to follow.

The unknown and the unfamiliar are experienced by the individual through indeterminacy. The key observation to be raised in this chapter is that representations of the abyss function as culturally constructed reference

points for the reflexive negotiation of sensations of indeterminacy in everyday thinking. I also take the opportunity to intersperse the various sections of theory with comments regarding my negotiation of these in the context of my creative practice.

Chapter 2. 'The Pervasiveness of Indeterminacy in Everyday Thinking'.

This chapter shows that my decision to examine the role of the abyss in contemporary visual culture has been informed by the pervasiveness of indeterminacy in contemporary Western cultural life. It asks the question, "What are the cultural conditions that ensure the ongoing relevance of the abyss as a metaphor for the reflexive negotiation of indeterminacy in everyday thinking?" I offer an example of the function of the abyss through a reflexive interpretation of my migration experience and as a reference point for the ongoing construction of my self-identity. This approach to the subject matter re-affirms the self-reflexive function of this research.

Chapter 3. 'Contemporary Cultural Case Studies'.

Using case studies that address the function of the abyss in the reflexive interpretation of natural environments, I ask the question, "How is the abyss used as a visual metaphor in the late modern age?" In the first set of studies I refer to television broadcasts such as *The Abyss* (Fisher, Brownlee, Farkas, Blackman, & Cooper, 2002) and *Surface* (Pate et al., 2005a) to discuss the way that the abyss has been used for the interpretation of aquatic natural environments, that have been constructed from *within* abyssal environments. In the second set of studies I make reference to photographs by Schwartz (2004) and Aharanot (2003) to discuss the way that the abyss has been used for the interpretation of non-aquatic natural environments, that have been constructed on the *edge* of abyssal environments. I raise associated issues regarding the demonisation and commodification of the abyss.

Chapter 4. 'The Abyss in Contemporary Creative Practice'.

In this chapter I ask the following questions: "How has the abyss been used as a visual metaphor in contemporary creative practice? In light of the self-referential function of the abyss, does the creative process become a process of self-reference, a reflection not so much of an abyss but of the limitations or the indeterminacy of the artist? If it is impossible to sufficiently determine the indeterminable, can it be suggested that representations of the abyss are also inadequate in some way?" (These questions are also addressed in terms of my own creative practice in the chapter dedicated to praxis). In this chapter I begin to address these questions, discussing the role of the abyss in the work of Anish Kapoor and James Thiérree and examining the way that each artist has represented this notion. In the first instance, I discuss a strong sexualisation of the abyss that is evident in aspects of Kapoor's void sculptures. Following on from this, my discussion of Thiérree's *La Veillée des Abysses* focuses on his defamiliarisation of the familiar in daily life. The discussions provided in this chapter help to contextualise my own creative practice within a broader field of cultural production.

Chapter 5. 'Praxis: Construction across Lack'.

This chapter raises the following questions: "How does my own creative practice, demonstrate a productive and innovative negotiation of the theoretical concerns presented in this paper? How does the issue of the inadequacy of representations of the abyss inform my creative practice?" In other words, "How have I negotiated this problem of the abyss?" It is at this point that I discuss a series of conceptual artworks as well as my solo exhibition entitled *Constructions Across Lack* (2006). I offer material descriptions of all the examples to which I make reference as well as an outline of the theoretical considerations that support and frame them. All of the artwork that is discussed in this chapter has been informed by this

research project in some way. Creative practice may be regarded, like the construction of the individual throughout self-identification, as an ongoing and reflexive negotiation of indeterminacy. In this chapter I address my belief that the significance of the abyss is inseparable from my creative practice.

Chapter 6. 'Conclusion'.

This is the final stage in my documentation of this research into the abyss. In as much as reflexive practice is ongoing I also use this conclusion to ask the question, "Upon reflection of this research project, what issues have arisen that I may draw on when planning the next stage of my theoretical and creative inquiry?" I draw from my theoretical concerns to formulate some projections pertaining to the future of my creative practice.

Action Research Methodology

Links can be drawn between the model of Action Research and the abyss. A negotiation of the abyss is tantamount to a negotiation with novel experiences. With each moment that the individual moves through time, into an indeterminable future, the individual can be observed as being engaged in a reflexive negotiation with an abyss. The future can be referred to as an abyss which always remains beyond the adequate determination of the individual and that, in this way, can only be over-determined. This has links with Action Research because, with each moment that research is being conducted, this methodology is open to the negotiation of new and previously unforeseeable data. So long as Action Research may be understood as a negotiation in the moment in light of the possibility of new information either occurring or not occurring, this methodology deals with an abyss of its own. Action Research accommodates the sublime, the possibility for "something or for nothing to happen" (Jean-Francois Lyotard, 1989, p.

198). It is in this way Action Research accommodates the reflexivity of the individual and the necessary versatility of everyday thinking.

Action Research is a qualitative methodology that promotes the notion of 'reflexive practice'. Dick (1999) provides the following interpretation of Action Research:

Action research can be described as a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time. In most of its forms it does this by

- using a cycle or spiral process which alternates between action and critical reflection and
- in the later cycles, continuously refining methods, data and interpretation in the light of the understanding developed in the earlier cycles.

It is thus an **emergent** process which takes shape as understanding increases; it is an **iterative** process which converges towards a better understanding of what happens.

In most of its forms it is also participative (among other reasons, change is usually easier to achieve when those affected by the change are involved) and qualitative.

It is in this way that Action Research can be understood as a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Action Research provides a structured approach to inquiry that suits my examination of representations of the abyss. It also supports the development of reflexive writing.

This examination presents a focus on visual culture, and on the practices of those artists who are engaged in theoretical frameworks that are relevant to this paper. Such case studies can address the way that these practitioners act, reflect, revise and revitalise their own paths of visual inquiry. Inevitably, this

approach is applied in the praxis component of this paper, in which evidence of this methodology in my own creative practice is demonstrated. The individual acts and is acted upon in cultural life and has the opportunity to reflect on this negotiation. The individual may revise the course of action that had been taken and proceed to revitalise their inquiry.

While Action Research methods have in part informed the research design they here work in conjunction with other methods, and in particular with the process of reflexive negotiation with a series of case studies that have been significant in informing my research. On a theoretical level this approach accommodates the reception of new information and events that come to light. The advantages of adopting an Action Research methodology in my own creative practice are demonstrated in the praxis component of this paper. My practical inquiry, like my theoretical inquiry, is best served by the methodology that promotes continuous self-regulation and reflexive self-assessment.

Chapter 1

Contextualisation and Review of the Literature

Introduction: The Problem of Defining the Abyss

In this chapter I identify key paradigms of the abyss and the way that they have been used as visual metaphors. Brown (1993a, p. 2093) states that a paradigm presents “a mode of viewing the world which underlies the theories and methodology of science in a particular period of history”. Paradigms of the abyss mark historical ways of thinking about the unknown, the unfamiliar as well as the sensations of indeterminacy that may accompany experiences of either. Representations of the abyss present as cultural attempts to resolve questions of origin and destiny, as well as to construct a sense of human context between an unfathomable past and an unfathomable future. It is in this way that they are invested in the search for the authentic self.⁴

According to Canning (in Taylor & Winkquist, 2001, p. 189), “[l]ife’s history is the evolution of indeterminacy”. In this chapter, my examination shows the way that representations of the abyss have been invested in this ongoing negotiation. I have limited my discussion to a Northern European paradigm of the abyss as well as Middle Eastern examples, having excluded mention of those pertinent to Californian Indians and Indigenous Australians, for example. In order to demonstrate a self-reflexive approach to this research project, and in order to gather and critically examine information that may constructively inform my own creative practice, I am drawing from interpretations of the abyss with which I share a cultural heritage.

⁴ Krebs (1995, p. 47), states that *authenticity* denotes “undisputed origin or authorship; genuine”, as well as reliability or accuracy.

Referring to creation myths of the Sumerian, Babylonian, Judaeo-Christian, and Norse cultures, I raise the question, 'What is an abyss?' These examples make mention of an abyss filled with water and the Gods. Here, the abyss stands as a metaphor for self-creative potential. The abyss is also represented in the form of hell, as a limbo or abode of the dead that is filled with fire and grotesque monsters. I refer to the Judaeo-Christian tradition for a discussion of this interpretation. In this case, in particular, the abyss stands as a metaphor for self-destructive potential. In other words, creation can be interpreted as an abyss which informs the construction of the self, and hell can be interpreted as an abyss which tears this construction asunder. What becomes evident in this chapter is that the abyss is fundamentally unstable and that this instability enables it to maintain more than one figurative function. However, with this spectrum of interpretations already in mind, it would be neither appropriate nor productive to navigate my way through the diversity of characterisations of the abyss in an attempt to construct a conclusive and authoritative visual interpretation of it.

My reluctance to use these paradigms in an attempt to resolve the visuality of the abyss stems more from their similarities than it does their differences. A common understanding found in historical paradigms is that the abyss is seemingly infinite, indeterminable and unfathomably deep. Because the indeterminable cannot be determined, and because the unfathomable cannot be fathomed, I argue that by attempting to give form to the formless these paradigms cannot avoid being inadequate in some way.⁵ This point can be supported through reference to Lyotard and Perloff. Lyotard (1987) says:

⁵ By attempting to determine an unfathomable abyss, these definitions go some way to undermining themselves. Definitions of the abyss, in this way, contradict their own foundations. This seems quite appropriate considering that the abyss is also defined as being groundless, standing contrary to the very notion of ground and of foundation.

We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to “make visible” this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are ideas of which no presentation is possible. (p. 78)

This comment supports the premise that, as long as the indeterminable cannot be determined, representations of it remain inadequate. In terms of the abyss, so long as it stands as a metaphor for the indeterminable as I shall show, the abyss may only be inadequately represented. Necessarily subjected to this premise are all the examples to which I refer in this paper. Whether they are television broadcasts, paintings, photographs, sculptures, or my examples of own artwork, at no point do I anticipate that the abyss is being adequately represented.

As a result, it becomes my main concern to establish the way in which representations of the abyss may be adequately telling. It is my understanding that this question may be addressed not through an attempt to resolve the appearance of the abyss but rather through an examination of its cultural significance and, therefore, its function as a metaphor in certain aspects of everyday thinking.

The aspects to which I refer are experiences of indeterminacy, in line with the understanding that the abyss is indeterminable. When entering in the following discussions it is important to consider that representations of the abyss are constructed through indeterminacy. In other words, a sense of uncertainty about the abyss must factor into the process of its depiction so long as the abyss is conceived as that which exists beyond the reach of theoretical and visual certainty. For this reason, representations of the abyss may only be as telling of the abyss as they are of the experience of

indeterminacy itself. Therefore, my discussions identify cultural examples that document cultural negotiations of indeterminacy. If, despite the unfathomability of the abyss, cultures have attempted to resolve it, then I am able to interpret this as an indication of the discomfort of indeterminacy in everyday thinking, particularly with regard to matters of human origin and destiny, and especially with regard to matters that involve the identification of the life-narrative of the individual.

I believe that characterisations and depictions of the abyss document a reflexive negotiation with indeterminacy. On the notion of reflexivity Giddens (1991) says:

The reflexive project of the self generates programs of actualisation and mastery. But as long as these possibilities are understood largely as a matter of the extension of the control systems of modernity to the self, they lack moral meaning. (p. 9)

Of course, a discussion of the historical cultural paradigms of the abyss does not equate to a discussion of modernity. However, Giddens says that programs of actualisation and mastery lack moral meaning when they are conducted under conditions of modernity and so it is in this respect that historical paradigms of the abyss, in their distance from these conditions, have been invested with moral meaning. This understanding is confirmed by the religious nature of the paradigms I shall present. The consequences of the lack of moral meaning are issues that can be raised in a later chapter during my discussion of the commodification of the abyss in contemporary consumer culture. Cultural constructions of the abyss can be understood as attempts to resolve it in a visual way, to resolve the discomfort of indeterminacy through the domestication of indeterminacy. It is in these terms that I read the historical paradigms of the abyss and it is this strategy

that I adopt in order to prevent my examination from falling into the problem associated with defining it.

My examples refer either to original chaos or hell, either an interpretation of the creation of the universe or of a punishing place beyond death. It is in this way that representations of the abyss also refer to a place beyond social norms. They express a determination and domestication of the indeterminable and the unknown that facilitates its use as a tool for social organisation and, in turn, social control. Depictions of the notion of original chaos and of the notion of hell can appear chaotic. The former may do so because, in as much as this notion refers to the birth of the universe, it also refers to a realm previous to order. The latter may do so because it refers to a space beyond social norms, the hell of disorder and social anarchy. However, even where they depict as chaos, it may be acknowledged that it is necessary for these depictions of the abyss to have been pictorially constructed in an organised manner. This is so that they may clearly represent a particular interpretation of it and, in the instance of hell, so that they may be successful in promoting social conventions, being suggestive of the punishment that may exist beyond them. They may depict the chaotic and the unorganised, but their intentions are not, nor can they afford to be.

In defence of my approach to the subject matter I again refer to Lyotard. He (1987, p. 78) suggests that the “[i]deas of which no presentation is possible ... impart no knowledge about reality (experience)”. I disagree with this judgement for the following reason. The problem of depicting the abyss stems from the individual’s attempt to determine the indeterminable. Each interpretation of the abyss is a metaphor that has been culturally constructed and subsequently communicated by the individual. If indeterminacy is self-referential then the abyss, by being useful as a metaphor for the

indeterminable, also lends itself to self-reference. This consideration recounts Nietzsche's premise of the 'peering' abyss (see page 13 for quote). It is my understanding that paradigmatic representations of the abyss appeal to the notion of self, i.e. that they can be culturally read as a way of reading the individual.

Zizek (1997, p. 81), referring to Lacan, raises the notion that "if our experience of reality is to maintain its consistency, the positive field of reality has to be 'sutured' with a supplement which the subject (mis)perceives as a positive entity, but is effectively a 'negative magnitude'". Creation mythologies and depictions of hell show the role of the abyss in culturally reflexive attempts to master interpretations of the natural world, of natural phenomenon. They are attempts to know the unknown where the abyss is a reference point with which these can be organised and sutured into the life narrative of the individual. This situation informs the way that representations of the abyss can be culturally read and, in turn, the way that the abyss is negotiated in my creative practice.

Abyss around the World

The abyss has functioned, and continues to function, in a variety of cultural contexts but I shall start by referring to a definition that is particular to my own English speaking contemporary Western cultural context. In this context, the word abyss is derived from the Greek word *ἀβυσσος* (*a-*, privative [expressing negation], *bussos*, bottom) and the Late Latin word *abyssus* (bottomless gulf) (Brown, 1993b, p. 11). Spivak (in Derrida, 1976, p. lxxvii) employs this understanding in a discussion about deconstruction, suggesting that "[t]he fall into the abyss ... inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom".

The abyss is interpreted as a “great deep believed in the old cosmogony to lie beneath the earth; the primal chaos; the bowels of the earth; the infernal pit (Brown, 1993b, p. 11).⁶ “This word, in its leading uses, is associated with the cosmological notions of the Hebrews, having reference to a supposed illimitable mass of waters from which our earth sprung, and beneath whose profound depths the wicked were punished” (Olsen & LaRowe, n.d.). Something that perceivably resembles an abyss can be described as abysmal though, colloquially, this words suggests it is “extremely bad” (Brown, 1993b, p. 11).

The New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia notes that the word abyss is written “some thirty times in the Septuagint [and] is the equivalent of the Hebrew *tehom*, Assyrian *tihamtu*, and once each of the Hebrew *meculah*, ‘sea-deep’, *culah*, ‘deep flood’, and *rachabh*, ‘spacious place’” (Knight, 2003).

Informing the image of a chaotic abyss, Encyclopædia Britannica Online (2005) says that in Greek cosmology, chaos is:

either the primeval emptiness before things came into being or the abyss of Tartarus, the underworld. In Hesiod’s Theogony, there was first Chaos, then Gaea and Eros. The offspring of Chaos were Erebus (Darkness) and Nyx (Night). Ovid gave Chaos its modern meaning: the original formless and disordered mass from which the universe is created. The early church fathers applied this interpretation to the creation story in Genesis.

The first chapter of the Old Testament, Genesis, offers a Judaeo-Christian interpretation of the beginning of the universe. The story of Genesis tells of a

⁶ Because I have raised a link between the abyss and indeterminacy, it is important to note that indeterminacy and chaos are not the same. Whereas chaos suggests a state of utter confusion and disorder, indeterminacy suggests more a lack of definiteness. In this sense, indeterminacy can be referred to as a sensation experienced by the individual in response to a scene of disorder, for example.

place before the creation of the universe where “The earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the deep” (Tyndale's Old Testament, 1992, p. 15). This ‘deep’ denotes the original chaos because it is first and ‘formless’. Creation mythology maintains an abyss that is elemental, a body of water. According to Genesis, the beginning of mankind is marked by something of a dark and chaotic ocean, a vast and watery abyss.⁷

The Septuagint is considered to be the most highly regarded translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek (Ferguson, 1990, p. 839). In this translation of Genesis “the primeval watery abyss that God divided in two in order to form the heavenly and terrestrial oceans is ... rendered *αβυσσος* [abyss]” (Whalen, 1967, p. 61). The abyss can be thought of as a stage for Genesis, for the creation of the universe, a birth place that may be compared to the notion of a womb that gave birth to the universe. Judaeo-Christianity supports the belief that the abyss is the origin of humankind.

Primarily an adjective, the word abyss “was first used in popular English literature ... sometime before 1010” (Parker, 2005). From *abyssimus* (superlative of Latin *abyssus*), and through the French *abisme*, is derived the poetic form *abysm* (Brown, 1993b, p. 11). This word was pronounced *abîme* in the Middle English period (from 1150 until 1349 or until 1469) and pronounced as late as 1616 in order to rhyme with ‘time’.

Though the word *abime* is rarely used in modern English, an example of such poetic licensing can be found in the work of the French writer Baudrillard. In

⁷ The understanding that the abyss plays a role in the identification of human origin is evident in heraldry. Heraldry is the study of coats of arms and family trees. The shield displaying a coat of arms is referred to as an escutcheon and, in heraldry, the word abyss denotes the “centre of an escutcheon. For example, to bear a fleur-de-lis in abyss is to have it placed in the middle of the shield free from any other bearing” (Wolf, 2004).

this example, *abyme* is used to flavour Baudrillard's suggestion of there being vertigo in "empty essence a vertigo *mise-en-abyme*" (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 187). The notion of *mise en abyme* is interpreted by Walker (n.d.):

The principle of *mise en abyme* is that of a miniaturised form within the work, which reflects, either the work as a whole, or at least a major theme. The term was coined by Gide who borrowed it from the heraldic custom of crest design, whereby a crest would contain one or several miniature versions of itself within its borders (*l'abyme*, literally meaning abyss, refers to the interior space of the *blason* or crest). *Mise en abyme* might therefore be described as the Russian doll principle in art. *Mise en abyme* participates in artistic reflexivity in the sense that it draws attention to the constructedness of art, and also in the sense that the fragment *en abyme* acts as a kind of mirror image of the larger work or meta-film. A classic example of theatrical *mise en abyme* would be *Hamlet*, in which the play within the play mirrors the father's murder In modernist texts such as Gide's, *mise en abyme* also constitutes a questioning of the concept of origin as it opens up the possibility of infinite regress. (p. 1)

I shall take a moment to pick up on the notions contained in this passage, of "artistic reflexivity" and the "constructedness of art", in order to identify how they echo my observations about the role of reflexivity in the construction of cultural metaphors, of which the abyss is one.

By drawing "attention to the constructedness of art" the principle of *mise en abyme* participates in a process of self-reference through self-awareness. It can be interpreted as a reminder that, whilst the work of art may present itself as a cultural comment, it is inevitably also a cultural product, constructed within a particular cultural context that carries with it constructed ideological systems. In this respect, the principle of *mise en abyme* functions as a reminder that art is not autonomous from culture but, rather, contingent within culture.

A metaphor such as the abyss, therefore, demands reflexivity by referring back to its own origin, its own cultural contingency. The abyss represents the indeterminable but it is culture that has constructed and maintained its indeterminacy.

In Stiebert's (cited in Laniak, 2003) terms, the individual should not "take such texts 'at face value,' [by] imagining that they represent actual social history rather [than as] ideological constructs that represent social agendas embedded throughout the writing and editing processes". This point reinforces my observation that to address the abyss is to address culture in some way. Therefore it is my understanding that the ideological constructedness of representations of the abyss, as cultural texts in a contemporary creative practice such as my own, is not to be overlooked. Hawkes (1972, p. 10) says that a "metaphor is part of the learning process". In these terms, the metaphor of the abyss may be a tool for learning but a part of its function is to remind the individual of how its function has come to be.

The notion of a watery abyss is not only still active in religious fields but also in scientific ones. By continuing to refer to the zone that exists deep beneath the surface of the sea as the abyssal zone, oceanography also maintains the assumption that the abyss is a watery mass. The abyssal zone consists of abyssal flora and fauna, abyssal sediment and an abyssal plain. Batson (2003, p. 28) says that this vast and flat plane, "covers approximately forty percent of the world's sea floor". The abyssal zone "is largely unexplored" and so remains very much a place that is unknown and possibly indeterminable (Goodwin, 2005). It certainly remains as a place of which insufficient understanding is available.

Although there is a strong association between the abyss and water, an alternative interpretation of the abyss associates it, instead, with fire. This interpretation of the abyss is commonly known as hell. A synthesis of these two interpretations, and these two elements, seems to be evident in Cavendish's (1977, p. 103) description of a place "opposite paradise, where the air is dark Blasphemers are hung up by their offending tongues over fire. Those who turned their backs on righteousness are sunk in a lake of flaming mire". Van Scott (1998) explains:

Fire and brimstone is a common symbol of infernal IMAGERY used to denote hell. Brimstone (a now-obsolete synonym for sulphur) derives from the Old English word *brynstan*, meaning "to boil." It appears in REVELATION in reference to the place of the damned, describing both the pain of the underworld [and] its putrid odor: "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolators, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone" (Rev. 21:8). (p. 123)

This interpretation of the abyss is in contrast to the notion of original chaos though they both convey an interpretation of the abyss that is elemental. What is important to reiterate is that interpretations of the abyss are based in belief. If the abyss represents the unknown then it holds no place for knowledge, it remains beyond the limits of knowledge, beyond human determination. Nietzsche (1984, p. 23) asserts that a "strong belief proves only its own strength, not the truth of what is believed". Interpretations of the abyss illustrate convictions in the unknown, but, because the unknown can only be inadequately determined, these convictions seem groundless. I would argue at this stage that interpretations of the abyss are founded only in the ideological paradigms that are active in a culture that refers to it. What is significant is not the end result of a visual interpretation of the unknown

but, rather, the pre-occupation with trying to resolve it. If the abyss cannot be adequately fathomed, what is the purpose of maintaining such determinations?

Myths are used to make sense of the world in as much as they “satisfy man’s craving for the answers to the universe” (Kramer, 1961, p. 183). Also, Levi-Strauss (1966, p. 93) says that “[t]he mythical system and the modes of representation that it employs serve to establish homologies between natural and social conditions”. His point of view helps to establish and stabilise the status of myth as a research tool in this research.

Creation mythologies and interpretations of hell can be understood as beliefs that are founded in the indeterminacy of the individual, in as much as they offer answers to questions of origin and destiny. They show cultures to be mindful of the unknown and the abyss provides a reference point for these beliefs. However, because it is groundless, the abyss also serves as a reminder of the inherent instability of these resolutions. The groundlessness of the abyss can be taken as a cultural clue that, sooner or later, a revision of the abyss may be necessary, that it may be unavoidable. Assumptions about the abyss present simply as projections into a void which fails to offer them any adequate foundation. For me, this indicates a cultural awareness that knowledge must be reflexively negotiated. It may be assumed that the details of various interpretations of the abyss offer information about the way that this awareness is negotiated.

That the task of determining the abyss is problematic is highlighted by the contradiction that is evident between its interpretation as a symbol of possibly infinite regress and its interpretation as a place of origin. The function of the abyss in creation mythologies provides an interpretation of

the origin of the universe and, in this way, an origin of human kind. In contrast, in the context of “*mise en abyme* ... [the abyss] constitutes a questioning of the concept of origin as it opens up the possibility of infinite regress” (D. Walker, n.d., p. 1). Yet, the metaphorical abyss is a cultural construction and therefore originates from the mind of the individual. Here there is a situation where cultures have considered their origin to lie in that notion which they have constructed. This suggests to me that the origin of the abyss can be found in the self and that at the same time, self-interpretation can be facilitated by a discourse on the abyss. If cultures have created the abyss as a vehicle for the organisation of self-knowledge, then the active construction of this cultural metaphor shows this negotiation to be a reflexive one. However, to this point my discussion has been concerned with establishing that the abyss, as a cultural metaphor and far from the assumption that it regresses infinitely, must have a finite cultural origin. Therefore the question still remains, “Where might the cultural origin of interpretations of the abyss be located?”

A Comment Regarding My Negotiation of this Theory in the Context of My Creative Practice

It is inevitable that, so long as I am critically concerned with the abyss, the problem of representation will be drawn into my creative practice. For this reason I enter the following discussions with the expectation that the examples offer clues as to the way I may carry out my visual articulation of these concerns, even if this happens to be by demonstrating how I should not proceed. As I invest such information in the development of my practice I am able to conduct an ongoing assessment of their appropriateness in contemporary visual contexts and of their success within the limitations of my overall project.

Proposing the Sumerians as a Key to the Origin of the Abyss

In recollection of Rorty's (1989, p. 9) proposition that "intellectual and moral progress [becomes] a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than an understanding of how things really are", I believe that the origins of the abyss, and therefore the origin of a contemporary reference to this metaphor, can be identified where culture begins. If the development of cultural knowledge is contingent on previous cultural developments, then it can be suggested that representations of the abyss that exist in contemporary Western culture echo an Eastern cultural heritage, by existing as the result of the evolution and migration of the abyss through cultural knowledge.

In my own creative practice I am using the abyss as a vehicle for a discourse about the unknown and so it is necessary for me to establish the assumptions of the abyss to which my practice responds. It is necessary for me to demonstrate an understanding of the historical significance of my theoretical interests because this assists my discussion of contemporary Western representations of the abyss.

The concept of "*mise en abyme*" can be thought of as a game that is characterised by a "questioning of the concept of origin as it opens up the possibility of infinite regress" Walker (n.d.). Through this discussion it is evident that the abyss has emerged, in one way, in response to the question of origin. I believe it is also worth noting that "the underneath of the underneath leads to a thinking of the abyss ... and the abyss would 'here' be one of the places or nonplaces ready to bear the whole of this game" (Derrida, 1987, p. 290). It is this game in which I find myself actively involved, by systematically working to identify the layers of cultural meaning that have been invested in the abyss and discussing them in a way that is informative of everyday thinking. In addition, I negotiate a game of

the abyss in my search for a sense of self-authenticity.⁸ It is a game of creative construction, an imaginative and theoretical negotiation.

The Sumerians are the authors of “the oldest known historical inscriptions” which reach as far back as the “third millennium BC” (Bottero, 2001, pp. 4-7). Champdor (1958, p. 8) suggests that, having developed the “art of writing”, Sumerian documents “mark the beginning of historical times”. While reference to an abyss can be found in the creation mythologies of the Nordics, Egyptians, Babylonians, Japanese, Mayans, Islamics, and Sumerians, as well as the Christians, I refer to the Sumerians for an understanding of the origin of the abyss as a visual metaphor, and for an interpretation of what might have been the impetus for the construction of this metaphor. For me, my attention to the Sumerians constitutes a digging underneath contemporary representations of the abyss as a way of thinking and re-thinking about this metaphor.

“Let us not forget that *The Origin* deals with the essence of truth, the truth of essence and the abyss ... which plays itself out there like the ‘veiled’ destiny [fatum] which transfixes being” (Derrida, 1987, p. 306). I do not propose the Sumerian representation of the abyss as the true interpretation of it. Simply, this seems to exist as the first documented cultural function of the abyss and, in this way, marks its inception as a cultural reference point for the negotiation of indeterminacy in everyday thinking.

⁸ Giddens (1991, p. 9) says “[a]uthenticity’ becomes a pre-eminent value and a framework for self-actualisation, but represents a morally stunted process”. He (1991, p. 202) also says that the “threat of personal meaninglessness is ... held at bay [by] internally referential systems”. For me, this implies that my negotiation of the abyss, as a means to reflexive self-interpretation, suspends my sense of personal meaninglessness. My appeal to the abyss for this suspension reflects my understanding that this suspension is in flux. Giddens (1991, p. 202) confirms that “[m]astery ... substitutes for morality”. I believe that this is a point about self-mastery, implicating it in the agency of self-actualisation.

With this in mind, I acknowledge the potential for the Sumerian abyss to inform my own reflexive organisation of indeterminacy and, in turn, I recognise its appeal in a search for an authentic self. However, in a contemporary context, I am exposed to a variety of interpretations of the abyss and I had to actively seek out the interpretation pertaining to the Sumerians. If I am to maintain a self-reflexive approach to this notion, the issue of a truth of the abyss does not guide my discussion. In order to achieve an understanding of the metaphorical abyss that can be communicated in theory and that can be applied to my creative practice, one that is not limited by the conventions and norms of my own cultural context, it is important for me to engage in a systemic identification of various interpretations of the abyss.

The Sumerians were a Mesopotamian culture who, by the fourth millennium B.C., inhabited an area between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers (Chavalas & Younger Jr, 2002, p. 92). The word 'Mesopotamia' is derived from the Greek meaning, literally, "an area between two rivers" (Brown, 1993b, p. 1751). Both these rivers extend from northern Syria and continuing through Iraq to the Persian Gulf (Honour, Birrell, & Faull, 1987, p. 88). The Sumerians were unknown until the 1850s and their origin is still a matter of uncertainty (Kramer, 1988, p. xx). For me, this seems quite apt in as much as the abyss, as an infinite space, is invested with the question of origin. The origin of the metaphor of the abyss, articulating indeterminacy, is itself in indeterminacy.

The Sumerians considered the place before the creation of the universe to be a primeval sea, a kind of "first cause" and "prime mover" (Kramer, 1988, p. 76). This place is rendered a "boundless sea" by the Sumerians, and the Sumerian thinkers never considered that there might be anything "prior to the sea in time and in space" (Kramer, 1988, p. 76). Kramer (1988) agrees that

it is not unlikely that the Sumerians considered the sea to have existed “eternally” (p. 82). This abyss was personified as the primary god of the Sumerian people; the goddess named Nammu. Described as “the mother, who gave birth to heaven and earth”, the goddess Nammu is “written in a Sumerian tablet with the pictograph for primeval ‘sea’” (Kramer, 1988, p. 81).

I now direct my discussion to documentations pertaining to the Sumerian flood legend that is contained in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. This epic “was known to the Babylonians and Assyrians as ‘He who saw the Deep’” (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 1999, pp. xv-vi). According to Moran, it is “a tale of the human world, characterized by an ‘insistence on human values’ and an ‘acceptance of human limitations’” (cited in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 1999, pp. xxxii-iii). The flood is recounted in Tablet XI of the Gilgamesh epic (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 1999):

For six days and [seven] nights, there blew the wind, the downpour, the gale, the Deluge, it flattened the land. But the seventh day when it came, the gale relented, the Deluge ended. The ocean grew calm, that had thrashed like a woman in labour, the tempest grew still, the Deluge ended. (p. 93)⁹

This legend is not a creation myth but more reminiscent of the story of Noah’s Ark, for example. It seems to me that, although a flood legend is not necessarily a creation mythology, an aquatic creation mythology may be interpreted as a flood legend. With this in mind, I believe it is reasonable to suggest that the flood narrative contained in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* can be

⁹ A cuneiform tablet with the Sumerian flood story, ca. 1740 B.C.; Old Babylonian period, Mesopotamia, Nippur, is documented in an image from the University of Pennsylvania; Museum of Archeology and Anthropology. The “[c]uneiform inscription [is] in Sumerian. Clay; H. 10.2 cm (4 in.); W. 13.3 cm (5 1/4 in.); Thickness 4.5 cm (1 3/4 in.)” (2005).

regarded as the ultimate flood legend or, alternatively, the original flood legend.¹⁰ Murphy (1998) says:

I think that the account of the flood in Gen. 6-8 is based upon old traditions of real Mesopotamian floods, a la Gilgamesh, and that the biblical writers have freely used those traditions to make a theological statement about divine judgement and grace.

What can be detected from this information is a cultural migration of the abyss. The significance of water was not limited to the Sumerian flood story because water was also of vital importance in the everyday life. The Sumerian people, having established themselves on the land between two main rivers, relied heavily on irrigation for the maintenance of their crops. They had achieved a level of expertise in the art of irrigation, though they struggled constantly against the forces of the two rivers that surrounded them. Childe (1969) explains:

Arable land had literally to be created out of a chaos of swamps and sand banks by a 'separation' of land from water; the swamps drained; the floods controlled; and lifegiving waters led to the rainless desert by artificial canals. (p. 114)

A link between the devastation caused by irrigation flooding and the life-potential symbolised by water is evident. Given the topography of

¹⁰ This assumption is opposed in Sarfati's (2004) comments that "[e]nemies of biblical Christianity assert that the biblical account borrowed from the Gilgamesh epic. Followers of Christ cannot agree. So in line with the Apostle Paul's teaching in Corinthians 10:5, it's important to demolish this liberal theory." I do not consider reference to the Bible sufficient means to establishing the truth of it. It seems inevitable that the Bible will dismiss the notion that its origin lies in cultural appropriation, when its claim to absolute truth is threatened by self-criticism. For me, Sarfati's appeal to the demolition of critical appeal implies that the Bible is lacking in its ability to accommodate the hypothetical approach to knowledge afforded by cultural reflexivity. In my research, I choose to prioritise chronology over fundamentalism.

Mesopotamia, with its untamed, turbulent rivers and frequent floods, it is unsurprising that the Sumerians told of a story based on violent and destructive natural occurrences. This shows how cultural metaphors arise from material contexts.

On display at the British Museum, is a portion of a stone monument showing vases with an endless flow of water. It is identified as being “Neo-Sumerian, reign of Gudea, 2141-2122 BC. Probably from Girsu. WA 95477”. The association between the notion of the infinite and the physicality of the aquatic echoes the creation mythology of Sumerian culture. The stone portion shows the symbol of the circle being used as a model for this visual articulation of circularity, in this case depicting water in terms of an impression of the absence of origin as well as the absence of resolution. It demonstrates the depth to which the notion of endless water became embedded in the everyday thinking of the Sumerian people. I now ask, “What were the conditions that may have provided the impetus for the significance of these notions?”

These descriptions are suggestive of a Sumerian abyss as an infinite body of water reaching back as an irrefutable origin, as the origin of all origination. In an attempt to establish an interpretation of the limited self within the enormity of the universe and the unknown that it possesses, an interpretation of the abyss in this way provides cultural individuals with the opportunity to negotiate a resolution to their sense of authentic self.

Sumerian people had a separate word that literally meant abyss, thereby presenting the assumption that the abyss can be identified, that it can be adequately grasped through definition. This word, “Abzu”, has been translated into the English language as “[s]ea, abyss; home of the water-god

Enki [Enki is the son of Nammu; also, the god of wisdom and of the seas and rivers]" (Kramer, 1988, pp. 358-60). Tiamatu (Tiamat) referred to the abyss (ocean) (Guisepi, 2003). The Sumerian word "Abzu" also means "primeval source" (Guisepi, 2003). A variation of Abzu, "Apsu'", has been translated into the English language as "deepwater" and "beginning (one who exists from the beginning)" (Guisepi, 2003). The word "Zu", appearing as a component of Abzu, is Sumerian for 'wise' (Guisepi, 2003). Throughout Sumerian incantations, reference is made to "the abzu, the pure place" that is associated with "sacred water" (Cunningham, 1997, p. 116).

By subjecting the abyss to language the Sumerians set the stage for the problem of representing it. But what is also indicated is a significant cultural regard for the capabilities of language, a presence of faith in the possibilities for language to transgress the boundaries of cultural knowledge. As the forefathers of written language, the Sumerians set a precedent for the way that interpretations of the abyss are negotiated. It is for this reason I would argue that they also set a precedent in their acknowledgement of the role of the abyss in everyday thinking.

A Comment Regarding My Negotiation of this Theory in the Context of My Creative Practice

For me, the image of the cuneiform tablet with the Sumerian flood story from the University of Pennsylvania is interesting because it documents a landmark in cultural creativity, showcasing one of the earliest forms of writing. It marks the beginning of a written cultural commentary on the abyss that, after thousands of years, is echoed in my own cultural discourse. I have proposed that the Sumerians are a key to the origin of the abyss. They may also provide a cultural reference point for my approach to the abyss, to

a praxis that is characterised by the visual and written negotiation of this metaphor.

The presentation of the image itself is also interesting. The script on the stone attempts to articulate what can be thought of as the origin of the abyss, the origin of a culturally constructed unknown, an original indeterminacy. The abyss provides a theoretical backdrop for the object and this is accentuated by the fact that the image is shown, in a contemporary cultural context, with a black background. The image seems to float within an abyss, without any apparent visual relationship to a ground or any other spatial limitation.

Both the cuneiform tablet and the Neo-Sumerian stone portion support an association between water and the abyss and, for this reason, prove water to be an appropriate element for me to use in my creative practice. I am certainly able to keep this in mind when deciding on my use of materials for different artworks that make reference to this notion. However, I believe it is the notions of fluidity and flux in particular, supported by their reference to water, which are pertinent to this research project. For me, this is because they presuppose the issues of self and indeterminacy that I address, i.e. the fluidity with which the self is continually constructed in everyday thinking.

An Aquatic Origin for the Abyss: Discoveries Regarding the Black Sea Deluge

By referring to the Sumerians I have been able to introduce a very specific and organised interpretation of the abyss. The abyss featured in the Sumerian's creation mythology as a place of creation that brought them into being. Entering into a discussion of the possible impetus for the construction of this interpretation, what can be expected is mention of an event that involved a vast amount of water, an event that may have been so devastating

that the Sumerians came to think of it as the beginning of the universe or at least, and maybe more to the point, the beginning of their cultural life. I propose the Black Sea deluge as the origin of the abyss as it is represented in cultural texts.

In recent years Columbia University Geologists, Ryan et al. (1997), have made discoveries regarding the preponderance of flood legends, such as Noah's Ark in the *Old Testament* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* which documents the Sumerian flood legend. Ryan et al. suggest that these flood epics can be explained through an examination of the history of the Black Sea. Their discoveries have been applied to the rationalisation of flood epics such as Noah's Ark. It is my understanding that these same discoveries can benefit the rationalisation of aquatic creation mythologies; thus, inform an inquiry into the origin of the abyss.

The Black Sea is located in Eastern Europe, extending along the northern coast of Turkey. Spanning an area of approximately 430,000 square kilometres, and with a maximum depth of 2.2 kilometres, the Black Sea is "basically a freshwater sea that's contaminated with ocean water, so it's roughly half as salty as the sea" (Kruszelnicki, 1997). The results that Ryan et al. gained through the radiocarbon dating of shells from an underwater beach front, as well as the results of core samples taken from its base, "pointed to an abrupt inundation of the entire Black Sea Basin ... [that] occurred sometime around 5,550 BC" (Laing, 2003). Ryan et al. suggest that what is referred to, as the Great Flood, could have been the Mediterranean Sea filling the Black Sea at this time. The world's most recent ice age, lasted for approximately "100,000 years, and stopped about 10,000 years ago" (Kruszelnicki, 1997). It is believed that the Great Flood would have occurred

“as the ice sheet from the last period of glaciation was in retreat and global sea levels were rising” (Laing, 2003).

Archaeologists have discovered the remains of a man-made structure more than 300 feet below the surface of the Black Sea, providing dramatic new evidence of an apocalyptic flood 7,500 years ago that may have inspired the Biblical story of Noah. The expedition also spotted planks, beams, tree branches and chunks of wood untouched by worms or mollusks, a strong indication that the oxygen-free waters of the Black Sea's 7,000-foot-deep abyss may shelter intact shipwrecks dating back to the dawn of seafaring.

“It is beyond our wildest imagination,” explorer Robert D. Ballard, leader of the expedition, said yesterday. “Wood is existing much shallower than we thought. When we do go deep, it can only get better”. (Gugliotta, 2000, p. A01)

Ryan et al. believe that around 5,000 BC., having mostly dried up during the last ice age, the Black Sea (or Euxine Basin) was inhabited by “Neolithic farmers and foragers (1997, p. 1). The Black Sea is surrounded by steep hills and so is situated near very little flat land. If these postulations are correct, the Mediterranean Sea would have flooded the Black Sea as the Bosphorus Strait between the two seas became breached. The observations of Ryan et al. of dozens of bedrock cross-sections suggest that there occurred an inflow in excess of 50km³ per day (1997, p. 124).

Kruszelnicki (1997) refers to one of the authors who contributed to this research, who suggested that the Black Sea Basin filled with “the force of 200 Niagara’s, and [with] a roar that could be heard at least 100 kilometres away”. Laing (2003) says that “[i]t has been estimated that the volume of water it took to fill the Black Sea Basin accounted for the lowering of the world's oceans by as much as one foot!” It is believed that the occurrence of this flood would have led to the deaths of thousands of people. Kruszelnicki

(1997) suggests that the few survivors of this deluge would have moved “to Russia and Ukraine, ... Romania, Bulgaria and Greece [,] ... to Georgia and India [,] to Turkey and the Middle East. Wherever they went, these people took the story of a Great Flood with them” (p.1). Ryan et al. (1997) raise the point that “such ‘wave-of-advance’ population movements (Sokal et al., 1991) could have been induced by the permanent expulsion of inhabitants which had adapted to the natural resources of the formerly-emerged Black Sea periphery” (p. 125).

Archaeologists have long been interested in the Black Sea, because its waters are anoxic--lacking in oxygen--below a depth of 500 feet. In theory, organic material that shipworms quickly gobble elsewhere would lie untouched in the Black Sea's sterile depths Today the top 500 feet of the Black Sea supports a thriving marine life, but the rest is as dead as the ancient day when the flood waters settled. (Gugliotta, 2000, p. A01)

It is apparent that the nature of origin, that water represented, was integral to the ideas of the Sumerian people. It appears that the event of the flood would likely have facilitated the Sumerian creation belief. The discoveries of Ryan et al. can be used to identify the context from which the interpretations of the abyss have stemmed. A person fleeing the flood might well have seen many drowned and drowning bodies sinking into the tumultuous waters depths to where their villages now lay. Ryan et al. (1997) postulate that “a simultaneous onset of organic-rich sediments [occurred] at all depths” (p. 120). What this means is that, as a result of the movement of the water over the surface of the earth, as well as the dark colour of the sediment, it would have become extremely murky throughout.

Coupled with the fact that the water was already darkened in as much as it was getting deeper, villagers would have witnessed the same bodies of the

dead, the injured as well as those others who were trying desperately to stay afloat, drifting out of the sight into a blackened body of water, waving for help to those who were clinging to the land at the edges of the torrent. It could certainly have appeared as if the watery abyss had created an underworld of the villagers' homes. With the likelihood that the deluge killed thousands of people, it seems viable that this event also founded the definitions of an abyss as the abode of the dead, or a spirit prison. The former characterisation of the abyss as an abode of the dead is more suggestive of an afterlife than a place of punishment as suggested by the term 'spirit prison'. However, both of these characterisations of the abyss contribute to an association between abyss and hell (an association that is addressed in the next section).

It is little wonder that the narrative of this deluge, as it was passed on to and documented by the Sumerians, did not promote a cheerful people. One historian offers the following examples of the Sumerian perspective on life. One Sumerian wrote, "Tears, lament, anguish, and depression are within me. Suffering overwhelms me. Evil fate holds me and carries off my life. Malignant sickness bathes me" (Marcus, 1998). These expressions of being 'overwhelmed' by the "[e]vil fate" which "carries" life away can be understood as 'sensations' of the flood. Human lives would certainly have been carried away by the force of the water (water, through this context, seems to have become closely associated with tears). The expression of oneself being bathed in sickness, again, is a significant reference to water as a place of sorrow and disintegration. It appears that the two aforementioned Sumerian mythologies, both articulating the aquatic theme, mark the earliest identifiable references to an abyss.

It is in these terms that the Black Sea Deluge would have proven to be an enormous visual spectacle, though arguably one far removed from any entertainment value. The Black Sea Deluge, accompanied by the sounds of rushing water and the sounds of people in distress, can be understood as a source of a great deal of visual information. Comprising scenes of devastations, death and despair, the images impressed onto the minds of those who survived to pass on the story of this deluge. It is my understanding that the need for an organised interpretation of a seemingly chaotic natural event provided the impetus for the metaphor of the abyss to arise in cultural texts.

A Comment Regarding My Negotiation of this Theory in the Context of My Creative Practice

It may be that the words written by Sumerians, describing their sickness and lament, mark early attempts to use the abyss as a reference point for individual self-interpretation, to peer into the abyss as a way of peering into the self. If the propositions regarding the deluge are accurate, such expressions are the result of a deluge-fleeing migration experience. My own migration experience was not in response to a deluge though I now also use the abyss for the interpretation of this experience and, inevitably, as a means to my self-interpretation. I address my migration experience later in this paper. For now, it is enough for me to make the point that the Sumerian's and myself appeal to the abyss to invest and communicate a variety of meanings in daily life and in the wake of an imposed migration.

The Abyss in Babylonian Creation Mythology

One stage in the journey through time of the metaphorical abyss was its appropriation into Babylonian cultural life. When Babylonia took control of Sumer and Akkad around 2000 BC., Sumerian culture "was adopted almost

in its entirety” (Guisepi, 2003). The *Enuma-elish*, which explains Babylonian creation mythology, maintains the belief that mankind originated from a watery abyss. I shall now provide a summary of this story that has been informed by Kramer (1961, pp. 120-1).

Babylonian mythology tells that in the beginning were Tiamat (the great chaotic primeval ocean and the dragon, a great maternal goddess), Apsu (the god of fresh water, male), and nothing else. In the *Enuma-elish*, Tiamat and Apsu are the two deities used to identify the origin of the universe as nothing but water, a body of water without end. From the unfathomable and original ocean that they constituted, their children (other Gods) were created. From Tiamat and Apsu, Muumuu was born (the first of a pantheon of gods). Muumuu was a mist or water vapour and spent all his time around Apsu as a counsellor. The tale explains that, because there was ‘nothing’, there was nothing to do and so the other younger Gods played constantly and noisily in order to try and relieve their boredom. This behaviour was disruptive enough to prevent Tiamat and Apsu from resting and this upset Tiamat greatly.

One day, the complaint regarding the behaviour of the younger Gods escalated so much that Apsu put forth word that he intended to kill the younger Gods. During an attempt to carry out his intentions, Apsu managed to kill some of them though he was eventually overpowered and was, himself, killed. When Tiamat received news of the death of Apsu she became furious and decided to end the dispute once and for all by killing the noisy Gods herself. Tiamat set to task at once by organising an army of demons as well as by informing the disruptive gods of the punishing fate that awaited them. Despite her efforts the younger Gods, notably Marduk, eventually trapped Tiamat and succeeded in killing her as well. Upon her death,

Tiamat's carcass was used to create the universe, with her blood becoming the oceans.

For me, this Babylonian creation story strongly echoes the Black Sea deluge. Parallels can be drawn between the image of the younger Gods (the offspring of the oceans) and their rebellious and chaotic behaviour, and the disruption of the Black Sea Basin that was caused by the overflow of the Mediterranean Sea and which resulted in death and havoc for the villagers. It is possible that the Bosphorus Strait finally breached one night as the villagers of the Euxine basin slept, its waters rushing unexpectedly into the basin and sweeping up everything in their current. In any case, in as much as it continued for a number of days, therefore continuing over a number of days and nights, the flood would no doubt have removed any hope that the villagers had of resting for quite some time.

Keeping in mind Babylonia's adoption of Sumerian culture, a cross-cultural reading of this abyss narrative can suggest that the deluge signified Tiamat's eruption into the Euxine Basin, angry and ready to cause death, destruction, and chaos in general. Her salty ocean water rushed into the place where Apsu's dead body lay, the fresh water lakes that the villagers used in their daily lives, and where her salty water mixed with his fresh water. In as much as Apsu is understood as the God of fresh water, it may be in this way that Mesopotamians constructed and organised interpretation of the Black Sea's relatively low salt level.

This creation myth communicates a story of turmoil and disorderliness. However, it is a culturally reflexive interpretation of the natural world. The abyss plays a major role here in the resolution and domestication of indeterminacy resulting from a natural phenomenon. But the deluge did not

occur one day or night in the life of Babylon. It occurred centuries before Babylonia dominated Mesopotamia. The way that this notion was negotiated in everyday thinking had been informed by a pre-existing cultural paradigm. What can be seen here is an early stage in the time and space migration of the abyss, one that reached beyond the context of the deluge and informed another culture's understanding of it. The narrative of Babylonian creation invested meaning in the abyss that later civilisations could come to draw on for the construction of their own interpretation.

A Comment Regarding My Negotiation of this Theory in the Context of My Creative Practice

The Babylonian myth communicates the belief that humankind was created out of the belly of the abyss. It supports the interpretation that the abyss is a vehicle for the creation of selves. When I think of self-creation I also think of self-creativity. This is because the notion of reflexivity, invested in my contemporary cultural context, demands the individual's active negotiation of self-construction. My reading of the myth is conducted with this notion of self-empowerment in mind.

The Babylonian creation myth informs my creative practice by implicating the abyss in the notion of creative practice, suggesting that creativity emerges from the abyss. Rather than providing me with clues as to my use of materials in the development of artworks, this myth informs the way that I may formulate an overall interpretation and articulation of my practice.

In addition, I am engagement in the process of reflexively updating and re-contextualising cultural metaphors. This is partly so that I may accommodate my preferred creative and philosophical principles. However, it is also so that I may draw from the meanings that have been invested in these

metaphors (meanings that may bear significance beyond the context of historical narratives), and to allow for the opportunity for new or renewed meaning to emerge as a result of a process of re-contextualisation. For me, this is a part of developing new 'creative languages'.¹¹

The Abyss in Egyptian Creation Mythology

Though the Sumerians and Babylonians offer a specific interpretation of the abyss, the notion itself is not limited to one cultural context in particular. Because it cannot be sufficiently determined the abyss remains theoretically unstable, but it is also geographically unstable. As traders and villagers moved around the lands it was inevitable that they would carry with them their customs and languages and also their mythologies. The Sumerians' belief in a watery abyss and, in turn, the understanding that water gives life, can also be identified in the beliefs of their neighbours, the ancient Egyptians. Recalling the irrigation techniques employed by the Sumerians, the Egyptian creation myth describing a watery origin was supported by the natural flooding of inhabited land.

The Egyptians made sense of their environment in a way that recalls the Sumerians and the Babylonians. Egyptian creation mythology comprised of the Gods of nature, the sun, the moon, and the River Nile. It tells of a beginning where:

there was only water, a chaos of churning bubbling water, this the Egyptians called Nu. Out of these chaotic waters rose Atum It is believed that he created himself, using his thoughts and will. In the watery chaos, Atum found no place on which to stand. In the place where he first appeared, he

¹¹ I engage in a negotiation of this kind when discussing my sense of self-authenticity, in the conclusion.

created a hill [Some] interpretations find that Atum was the hill. (Deurer, 1997).

Nu is a root syllable that means “an ocean infinite in extent and of fathomless depth, bearing the germs of all kinds of life” (*Book of the Dead*, 1960, p. 161). That [t]he power of Nu was “the self-created” (*Book of the Dead*, 1960, p. 163), makes this story communicative of an origin of self-creativity, one that presents water as the stage for this process. It associates the individual with the abyss, with fluidity, and with the active negotiation of self-constructive potential. It uses these reference points to render an assumption about the requirements for the success of the authentic self.

Like the Sumerians, water plays a major role in the Egyptian’s aquatic creation mythology. The Nile, which passes through Egypt, flooded annually until the Aswan High Dam was built in the 1960s. Deurer (1997) asserts that these inundations would have “no doubt caused chaos to all the creatures living on the land ... eventually the floods would recede and out of the chaos of water would emerge a hill of dry land, one at first, then more”. These floods were so regular that the Egyptians understood each one as the beginning of a new year. Weininger (2001) writes that the Egyptians invented:

the world's first calendar ... over 5000 years ago. To develop a calendar, you need a regular event that is predictable. And what was more regular and important to the ancient Egyptians than the rise and fall of the River Nile? The waters started rising around the end of June, and the flood period (achet) lasted until October, covering the land with rich black mud and preparing it for the sowing and growing period (peret). The harvest time (schemu) started at the end of February and ended with the new Nile flood. This predictable, ongoing cycle defined the agricultural year.

Though the flooding of the Nile was a regular occurrence, the existence of a major flood has been documented through their mythology. Egypt is very close to the Mediterranean Sea and so it is possible that the ancient Egyptians were directly affected by the Black Sea deluge. It seems possible that the flood mentioned in Sumerian and Egyptian creation mythology was the same event.¹²

A Comment Regarding My Negotiation of this Theory in the Context of My Creative Practice

For the ancient Egyptians, the recurring floods provided a continual affirmation of their beliefs about their origin, a reminder of their ideological and practical contingency on the power of the abyss. The installation of the Aswan High Dam changed the shape of day to day activity, identifying a shift in power from the ancient abyss to the new modern age.

The Aswan High Dam was one of many post World War Two feats of engineering that aimed to regulate water levels and, therefore, control the water supply for domestic and commercial use. It now provides approximately half of Egypt's power supply and has improved navigation along the river by ensuring a constant flow of water (Rosenberg, 2006). Under the control of people, water waits to do exactly what people want it to do. It is ready to do the bidding of humankind and the machine. With nature subdued and the chaos caused by previous flooding resolved, the future appears stabilised. Where water once meant destruction or even death, it now meant progress and life.

¹² Walker (1983, p. 7) makes the point that the *abyss* is sometimes called the "Fish of Isis" and represented the genital orifice of Abtu, which "swallowed" the penis of Osiris.

Given the historical connotations of water in Egyptian culture, these sentiments can be read in terms of the abyss. Interpreting the dam installation as a re-negotiation of the abyss implicates it in a domestication of indeterminacy and uncertainty as orchestrated by industrialisation. This theory informs my creative practice by drawing my attention to the constructedness of cultural activity and by highlighting the notion that the power over cultural metaphors rests with the individual.

If “[c]ulture is constructed by humans in order to communicate and create community” (Lewis, 2002, p. 13), at the basis of cultural construction is the construction of the individual. In its appeal to this notion, the Egyptian creation myth informs my interpretation of creative activity overall. By reading creative activity in terms of this myth, my practice presents as a hill that has emerged and that continues to emerge out of the seemingly unfathomable fluid and cultural vastness that contextualises it. My creative practice provides me with a concentrated reference point within a much broader sea of possibility and multiplicity. I have constructed it out of my thoughts and will, as a means to demonstrate my self-understanding, as a means to formally establish where I stand in relation to current cultural theory. This theory informs the ideology with which I approach my creative practice, certainly in terms of the metaphor for self-creativity that it provides. This metaphor can be taken into other areas of my cultural life.

The Abyss in Norse Creation Mythology

The last creation mythology that I shall refer to is that of Norse mythology and there are similarities between this and the previous examples. Again, what is evident is the use of the abyss as a cultural reference point that provides a sense of resolution to the matter of human origin. Unlike the previous examples, however, Norse mythology was passed on only verbally

until the Christian Scholar Snorre Sturluson compiled them as the *Prose Edda* in the early 1200s. Included in these poems is the Norse story of creation that starts at the site of a great abyss. In these, it is said that “[a]n infinite number of winters before the earth was created there was only the Great Abyss, a gorge of unfathomable depth. The abyss of emptiness was called Ginnungagap” (Rosala Viking Centre, 2005).

Here, the abyss is interpreted as a vast and bottomless void and which defines the centre of space. Ginnungagap is also described as an “open void” (Sturluson, 1966, p. 32). This is a chasm flanked in the south by the Muspell; a region of fire, and in the north by the Niflheim; a region of ice and frost (Sturluson, 1966, p. 33).

The creation aspect of the *Prose Edda* tells of an encounter between ice and fire during which drops of water fill the abyss. As a result, the God Ymir was formed as were a number of other Gods. Eventually, these other Gods revolted against Ymir. In this battle, a time of chaos within the realm of the Gods, Ymir was killed. Sturluson (1966) states, “They took Ymir and carried him into the middle of Ginnungagap, and made the world from Him: from his blood the sea and lakes” (p. 35).

The creation mythology of the Norse bears a strong resemblance to Mesopotamian beliefs about the beginning of the universe. They each make mention of the beginning as an abyss of nothingness and the blood of Ymir seems to have been put to similar use to that of Tiamat in the Babylonian creation tale. In addition, the mixing of ice and fire results in steam and this echoes the Babylonian God Muumuu who is described as a mist or water vapour. It may be that each mythology articulates a response to the environmental changes occurring at the end of the last ice age but it is

interesting that the realisation of creative potential stems from the death of Gods. In the following discussion, representations of the abyss as hell reinforce the interpretation that the abyss is a space that is lacking God, promising not the realisation of creative potential but the potential for endless destruction and punishment. I show how the abyss, in the context of hell, becomes a tool for the organisation of interpretations of culture rather than for a cultural organisation of interpretations of the natural world.

A Comment Regarding My Negotiation of this Theory in the Context of My Creative Practice

I believe that the image of drops of water slowly filling the abyss, during the original encounter, is interesting for the following reason. If the abyss seems infinite then the time taken to complete such a task would also seem infinite. Its full potential may at some point in time be realised although an end may not yet be sufficiently in sight. The abyss undergoes an ongoing process of self-filling that, nevertheless, creeps in anticipation of an eventual self-fulfilment. The water is in continuous motion and so with each drop that contributes to the void the overall volume changes, the moving body evolves. But the abyss is still contextualised by that which surrounds it, the space between the Muspell and the Niflheim. As time goes by, the abyss grows deeper and the depths grow darker. This information informs my creative practice in the sense that it confirms my interpretation of the cultural construction of the individual as a shaping of the void.

Interpreting the Abyss as Hell

In this discussion I examine the representation of the abyss as hell. This interpretation of the abyss enables it to be used as a tool for social control by representing that which is beyond a particular set of desired social norms. Contrary to the seeming creative potential of the abyss in creation myths,

and despite the chaos inherent in these also, representations of hell frame the abyss as a visual metaphor for infinite and punishing destructive potential. In this sense the abyss begins to represent an unfathomable end rather than an unfathomable beginning. It is also important to note that an interpretation of the abyss as hell, its deliberate construction as a negative space, has a practical function that includes warning the individual against potential death, whereas chaos (as it is described in the Old Testament) is much more ambivalent.

Defining the notion of hell raises the same issues of representations that defining the abyss does. In this discussion, I address some similarities between the abyss and hell that may have facilitated a conflation of these terms as well as the ongoing differences between these notions. I continue with my approach to the subject matter, referring to pre-established definitions of the abyss of hell as a way of examining interpretations of the individual. To support this approach I raised Nietzsche's suggestion that "if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee" (1911, p. 97). Himmelfarb (1994, p. 25) explains that "[w]hen Nietzsche looked into the abyss, he saw not only real beasts but the beast in himself". My discussion of hell addresses the implications of such a vision.

I would argue that, because the abyss is indeterminable and can be represented by darkness, it has been possible for the individual to arrive at the conclusion that an inability to see anything in the abyss means that there is nothing in it or, at least, nothing of value. I address what seems to have been an appropriation of the abyss for the purpose of augmenting or reinforcing the notion of hell as is evident in the New Testament. A hellish representation of the abyss suggests an evolution from its interpretation as a

seemingly unfathomable aquatic mass to a seemingly unfathomable fiery furnace.

In reference to the inadequacy that I have raised as an inherent feature of depictions of the abyss, the issue of what informs these is central to a discussion on the function of the abyss as hell. Whereas the Sumerians could at least have passed on first hand accounts of the Black Sea deluge in their construction of an abyss of creation, the fact remains that the afterlife is beyond the limits of life thus it does not constitute a part of material reality. Informing a discussion of this issue, Patten (1999) highlights Burke's suggestion that "[t]he point of excess for the imagination is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself".

It seems that the 'imagined' comes to the surface where there is no knowledge. Cavendish (1977, p. 111) confirms that "[w]herever else hell may be, it is in the human mind. The concept of hell, in Christianity and other religions, appeals to sado-masochistic impulses, and artists have given these feelings free rein". If it is the human mind that gives form to the abyss of hell, and the abyss per se is unfathomable, then it becomes the task of the imagination to conceive of that which is beyond its own limitations. Therefore the depiction of the abyss, either as hell or in another form, can be interpreted as a depiction of the artist's negotiation of their own ignorance. In instances where the abyss is depicted as violent or ghastly, these may be communicating the presumption that the experience of indeterminacy is also ghastly. Van Scott (1998, p. i) asserts that "belief in a hell is universal". For me, this indicates that indeterminacy is universally displeasing.

The abyss of hell represents a place of displeasure and suffering when it is interpreted in the following ways. Many interpretations of hell describe it as an “abode of the dead; the place of departed spirits; the infernal regions”, as well as a place of “darkness’ discomfort”, and “discord” (Brown, 1993b, pp. 1214-5). This paper has already presented descriptions of an abyss as “the primal chaos; the bowels of the earth; the infernal pit” (Brown, 1993b, p. 11). Consequently, it is evident that a number of similarities can be drawn between the abyss and hell. These similarities, including notions of chaos, darkness, and underworld, have encouraged the conflation of the two concepts. Pippin (1999, p. 68) confirms that, whilst the abyss plays a part in “some early Christian apocalypses” it appears that “the abyss is not Sheol, Gehenna, or hell, [suggesting that] the post-biblical tradition begins to merge these metaphors into an underworld place of eternal punishment”.

A tendency to combine the notions of abyss and hell is evident in the following example. A Dictionary of the Bible (Hastings, n.d.), speaking of hell as Hades, explains that this “abode of departed spirits was conceived of as a great cavern or pit under the earth, in which the shades lived” (Hastings, n.d., p. 324). Elsewhere in the Dictionary of the Bible (Hastings, n.d., p. 6) it is asserted that an abyss is “intended primarily as a place of punishment for the angels, and giants, and accordingly for sinners the home of various enemies of God”.

Morgan and Morgan provide an example of the way in which the concepts of an abyss and of hell tend to be uttered in the same breath. In this example there can be detected the potential for the definitions attributed either to hell or the abyss to be treated as interchangeable. Morgan and Morgan (1996, p. 65) appear resolved in their consideration that “[n]o one rendition of the landscape of hell can be relied on since it is a rare occasion indeed that a soul

has been able to descend into the abyss, let alone return unscathed and willing to lend a description". It is this consideration that stands as a reminder of the problem of determining the indeterminable, of depicting either hell or an abyss. Their consideration seems mindful of the fact that such concepts as hell and abyss often refer to places beyond the limits of the determining faculties of the individual, i.e. beyond the senses. It is this shared location of hell and the abyss that seems to promote the commingling of their attributes. It can be noted that there is no resolution to the problem of rendering hell or the abyss and so it is in this respect that they are equally problematic.

It is worth noting that Hastings' definition of abyss makes no mention of the relationship between the concept of an abyss and water. Reference to an abyss is not even used in the context of the waters of the firmament. The only possible aquatic remnant, in this definition, exists in reference to a lake. However, in this instance, no more than a 'lake of fire' is suggested. In their reference to "the fire and brimstone of the Abyss", Morgan and Morgan (1996, p. 31) touch upon an interpretation that contrasts the notion of an icy abyss, demonstrating how the notions of hell and the abyss have been merged. It seems that, by the time of the New Testament, the landscape of the abyss had been completely refurbished. Despite its initial association with water, the abyss is mentioned only in reference to hell in the New Testament, in Apocalypse (Hastings, n.d., p. 6). In summarising the abyss, the Catholic Encyclopedia (Knight, 2003) attributes to it the following meanings:

1. primeval waters; 2. the waters beneath the earth; 3. the upper seas and rivers; 4. the abode of the dead, limbo; 5. the abode of the evil spirits, hell. The last two meanings are the only ones found in the New Testament.

Having raised an association between the abyss and water, I made the point that the features of the abyss have been inspired by events in nature. This environmental influence has also been applied to the notion of hell. The following information supports the likelihood that observations of landfills played a part in the construction of the notion of hell:

The Hebrew *Sheol* was translated in the Septuagint as 'Hades', the name for the underworld in Greek mythology and is still considered to be distinct from "Hell" by Eastern Orthodox Christians. The New Testament uses this word, but it also uses the word 'Gehenna', from the valley of Ge-Hinnom, a valley near Jerusalem used as a landfill. Hebrew landfills were very unsanitary and unpleasant when compared to modern landfills; these places were filled with rotting garbage and the Hebrews would periodically burn them down. However by that point they were generally so large that they would burn for weeks or even months. In other words they were fiery mountains of garbage. The Christian teaching was that the damned would be burnt in the valley just as the garbage was. (Wikipedia, 2005)

A number of similarities can be identified between the tale of Tiamat and the creation story of Genesis. For example, the primordial waters of Genesis are reminiscent of the ocean Goddess Tiamat. Also, the peace and quiet that the chaos of the murderous Gods preceded is similar to the seventh day of creation, the day of rest and both tales end in the creation of the universe and mankind. The New Catholic Encyclopedia acknowledges that the Biblical tradition "borrowed" the idea of a "primeval watery abyss ... from Mesopotamian mythology and transformed it to meet the demands of the Israelite faith", adding that this transformation was "radical reducing [the abyss] to the status of a purely natural element, offering no resistance whatever to God's creative activity" (Whalen, 1967, p. 61). Wilcoxon (1968, p. 129) raises the point that creation faith was something "Israelites deliberately avoided or minimized ... Early Israelite tradition, with its Sinai covenant,

emphasized freedom and responsibility, the challenges presented by historical experience rather than cosmic order". Pippin (1999, p. 69) confirms that the Biblical image of the abyss is not characterized by water alone; "a large variety of sea monsters and serpents reside in the watery chaos. The basis for this view of the dangerous depths of the abyss is found in Psalm 42:7: 'Deep calls to deep of the thunder of your cataracts'". This appropriation and subsequent re-interpretation of the abyss makes clear that the abyss is not conclusive, that its interpretation is subject to the cultural contexts within which it is interpreted.

The Catholic Encyclopedia (Knight, 2003) provides the following interpretation of hell:

The term *hell* is cognate to "hole" (cavern) and "hollow". It is a substantive formed from the Anglo-Saxon *helan* or *behelian*, "to hide". This verb has the same primitive as the Latin *occulere* and *celare* and the Greek *kalyptein*. Thus by derivation hell denotes a dark and hidden place.

Though, recalling McRay, Van Scott (1998, p. 68) states that "Christian mystics dwelt on the 'creation out of nothing' aspect of the abyss; one descends into the abyss to experience the pure essence of God", the abyss of hell remains in opposition to heaven. It is generally accepted that hell is located "deep down below ground. In the mid-nineteenth century it was still being argued that hell is at the centre of the earth and is the source of the fiery eruptions of volcanoes" (Cavendish, 1977, p. 113). The word 'hell' is actually derived from the Old English 'hel' which means 'underworld' (Brown, 1993b, p. 1214). Van Scott (1998, p. 258) refers to the underworld Sheol when she states that "depictions of the underworld as a crowded, cavernous chasm have derived from pits used as mass graves during this time [700 B.C.]". According to many religious beliefs regarding the afterlife,

hell, an “abode of the dead” and the “place of departed spirits”, is also described as a region of “darkness”, of “chaos” and “suffering” (Brown, 1993b, pp. 1214-15).

In as much as an abyss is described as a “bottomless chasm”, “the infernal pit”, and an “unfathomable cavity” (Brown, 1993b, p. 11), a relationship between these interpretations of the abyss and such places as hell and Sheol can be considered. In relation to this relationship Van Scott (1998) says that:

The oldest known myths of the underworld are Sumerian with records dating back as far as 2000 B.C. [and that the] Babylonian hell ... known as Aralu, the ‘LAND OF NO RETURN’ is a hot, dusty desert realm at the base of a huge mountain [within which] the damned are heaped in a mass grave and forced to eat dirt. (p. 23)

Already reminiscent of the abyss because of its allusion to a void space or cavity, and darkness, the term hell is equivalent to the Greek *Hades*, denoting an “underworld” as well as being “the name for the god of the dead” (Brown, 1993b, p. 1171). Furthermore, hell is equivalent to ‘Sheol’, “[t]he Hebrew abode of the dead ... conceived as a subterranean region clothed in thick darkness, return from which is impossible” (Brown, 1993a, p. 2822).

Here, a connection between hell and the abyss can be detected with the Black Sea flood in mind, as discussed in the previous section. An ‘abode of the dead’ appears to be exactly what the Black Sea Basin became at the end of the last ice age as it filled with water, washing away agrarian villages and drowning thousands of people. Also reminiscent of the likely emotional memories of the Black Sea flood is the conception of hell as a place of “wailing and weeping” (Cavendish, 1977, p. 113). There are not only physical but “psychological horrors of hell [which] culminate in the pain of loss, the

realization of forever being cut off from God in a state of utter hopelessness and despair" (Cavendish, 1977, p. 120).

Though this 'pain of loss' focuses on God, this same sense of loss and separation can be applied to the Black Sea flood scenario. In this context, the "pain of loss" can also be applied to an interpretation of the abyss and this supports the attribution of notions of chaos, torment, deprivation of presence, darkness, despair, death, to both hell and the abyss. With the strength of these connections, other attributes usually associated directly with the concept of hell, become attached to the concept of the abyss also. The following characterisations of hell, in the context of a Biblical assimilation of the abyss with hell, may be used to contribute to an understanding of the characterisations of the abyss.

Referring partly to the attribute of darkness, the concept of an abyss and the concept of hell are both depicted as realms of darkness, and chaos by which they evade their full comprehension. Speaking of hell, Latella (2001) informs us as to the implications of darkness in the following:

Utter darkness tells us, without any need for explanations, that this is a place where we can easily lose ourselves, since there are no familiar guidelines or landmarks to follow. Darkness also denotes the absence of light ... Light is synonymous with knowledge, illumination, insight. All these are missing where there is darkness. (pp. 22-3)

In making reference to the notion of 'knowledge', of which darkness is absent in this context, Latella is making reference to the Christian God's knowledge. The association between darkness and unawareness, thus between unawareness and hell, is a religious construction. Because the abyss is also depicted as a place of darkness it, too, is associated with unawareness. They

are both denied the presence of God, or at least represent the possibility of some kind of existence without God, and so the abyss and hell offer a sense of indeterminacy whilst they are demonised. An association between darkness and ignorance can also be detected in the German language. The German word for white is 'weiß' (Calderwood-Schnorr et al., 1996, p. 262). This same word 'weiß' also means 'to know' (Calderwood-Schnorr et al., 1996, p. 266). This association between the colour white and the possession of knowledge, as it has been identified in the German language, implies an association between darkness and ignorance. I believe that, in as much as German and English are both Germanic languages, this observation informs the current discussion.

Hell is believed in Christianity and Judaism to be the place to which "Jesus ... condemns the wicked to 'eternal punishment' in 'the eternal fire'" (Cavendish, 1977, pp. 104-5). In addition, hell is depicted as a place that is "devoid of good" (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. 31). Hell is a place "opposite paradise", Cavendish (1977, p. 103) explains, "where the air is dark and where sinners are tortured by angels in dark robes [where] those who turned their backs on righteousness are sunk in a lake of flaming mire". Therefore, it is arguable that the belief in Hell functions "as a deterrent. Without fear of hell people would do whatever they liked and society would collapse in anarchy and crime" (Cavendish, 1977, p. 106). Condemned to torture, the souls of the dead remain in what can be compared to a prison. With infinite punishment before them, there is no hope for a return to a place within the bounds of prescribed social norms. Whilst beyond these, Hell is a notion that is constructed in relation to social norms. It is in this way that Hell can be understood as a conceptual prison that is maintained, and in this way contained within, a particular cultural context. Foucault (cited in Fiske,

1983, p. 136) “sees a prison as a metonym for society because both are agencies of control”.

The chaos of an abyss may also be interpreted as anarchy. This is possible when depictions of hell are read as predictions regarding a Godless and unregulated society. Describing a place beyond the light of God, and beyond the limits of order and discipline, a depiction of Hell offers a culturally constructed warning about the presumed monstrosity of this possibility. Not only might the seemingly endless punishment of hell be taken as a deterrent for potential sinners but also as a message to the law-abiders who, in this imagined future, might find no recourse for any criminal acts committed against them. For me, images of hell communicate the conviction that the place beyond the security of cultural familiarity is likely to be bad, for everybody.

Cavendish (1977, p. 116) explains that “[t]he human imagination has inflicted almost every conceivable variety of excruciating torture on the wicked in hell: as a fitting retribution, as a deterrent, and sometimes with an unmistakable relish in the contemplation of pain”. This understanding succeeds in alluding to the notion of hell as a blank canvas upon which the imagination may flourish. However, Cavendish (1977) notes:

It did not necessarily follow that [individuals perceived as sinners] must be physically tortured after death, but they must at least suffer the ‘pain of loss’. The meaning of ‘hell’ for many modern Christians is this agony of exclusion from the divine presence. (p. 104)

I refer to some depictions of hell that illustrate the definitions I have identified. They show a variety of ways that the abyss of hell has been given form by visual artists in pre-modern times.

In order to confirm that, unlike heaven, hell is not a 'nice place to be' it is often filled with demons and monsters. Hughes (1968, p. 155) notes that "[for] Baudelaire, Hell is where you find new shapes, which may be terrifying". Hughes (1968, p. 156) speaks of paintings that depict a hellish landscape noting that "Hell is chaos; and the difficulty of painting it resides in the problem of finding a form for chaos the chaos of the Pit Without depriving Hell of its terrible and negative formlessness".

Chaos is inherently unstable and so it seems unlikely that it can be described through reference to a fixed form. In other words, chaos could only be inadequately conceived because it is constantly open to flux; not a form but an ongoing process of formation. Cavendish (1977, p. 108) informs my discussion of this issue by suggesting that "Hell is not fully conceivable, in the end, because it is chaos". He continues, with reference to *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, a painting by Brueghel (1562), that "Hell is the realm of the chaotic, the unnatural, the deformed and perverted. Michael and the good angels are driving the devil angels into the abyss. As they fall they turn into pullulating monsters" (1977, p. 122).

The Fall of the Rebel Angels seems to employ representational elements of both the abyss and the notion of hell. It exemplifies a hellish chaos and seems less concerned with expressing hell's darkness than it is with provoking indeterminacy in the viewer. In as much as the rebel angels are being driven into the abyss, the notion that darkness is nearing is implied.

Unfamiliar creatures are included among the contorted figures. This is a battle between good and evil, as if it were a vicious negotiation of the limits of each, of that space where both may collide. This image can be understood as a metaphor for a conflict between cultural conventions and whatever modes of

behaviour that might threaten or offend such conventions. Like the abyss of creation, the abyss of hell is also conceived as chaotic. The seemingly chaotic environment depicted in the artwork stands in contrast to what might be referred to as the orderliness of polite society and, therefore, poses as somewhat of a threat to individuals who might be tempted to transgress any ethical boundaries previously established by religious authorities.

An amalgamation of notions of hell and the abyss is also evident in the work of Dante Alighieri. Morgan and Morgan (1996) state that “no one artist has done more to make the fires of the *Inferno* frighteningly real than the thirteenth-century Italian writer Dante Alighieri” (p. 78). Van Scott (1998, p. 91) agrees with this interpretation in her claim that Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, a trilogy of which *The Inferno* is a part, is the “most extensive and imaginative fictional description of the afterlife ever written”. Morgan and Morgan (1996) continue, suggesting that Dante’s depiction of hell “reads with such authority that it became the standard map of the Abyss” (p. 78).

In Morgan and Morgan’s (1996) outline of the nine circles of hell, as rendered by Dante, they refer to the first circle of Hell as the “lip above the chasm of pain” and they refer to the second circle of Hell as a “region [that] is pitch black ... [where] [s]ouls who were ruled by desire on earth are buffeted mercilessly by the unceasing gusts” (p. 79). Abbadon is described as “the angel of the bottomless pit ... is often depicted with or confused with ... Apollyon, who holds the keys to the Abyss” (pp. 84-5). It is also perceived that, as hell, the abyss has its own members of staff. Baal, “the patron devil of idleness ... [is] [t]he second chief of staff of the Abyss” (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. 87).

In the *Encyclopedia of Hell*, Van Scott (1998, p. 92) provides a diagram detailing the circles of hell that make up “the underworld according to Dante’s *Inferno*”.¹³ Far from conveying the chaos of hell, this diagram is clearly organised into sections labelled ‘circles’, with the space between the seventh and eighth circles having been specifically named ‘abyss’. In contrast to the notion that the abyss is infinite and unfathomable, the diagram proposes the exact position of the abyss in the broader list of categories.

Despite the seemingly limited contextualisation of the abyss that this diagram offers, the use of the term abyss is used for the characterisation of a number of regions of Dante’s *Inferno*. For example, Van Scott (1998), having discussed the arrival of Virgil and Dante in the “outer realm of the underworld called LIMBO” (p. 92), goes on to suggest the following: “Next, the pair comes to ‘Hell Proper’, the true beginning of the dark abyss” (p. 93). In addition, Van Scott (1998) states that “[t]his ninth circle is reserved for betrayers, the worst sinners in Dante’s scenario. They are eternally damned to the icy abyss for forsaking the trust of those who loved them” (p. 94).

Van Scott (1998, p. 91) says that Dante composed [*The Inferno*] ... during the early 1300’s while living in exile from his beloved hometown of Florence, Italy”. Brock (2005) explains the political circumstances surrounding Dante’s cultural life:

Boniface prevails in 1300, Dante’s cohort falls out of favour and Dante is himself accused of misdeeds. Dante cannot win against the pope’s backers. In 1302, banished from his beloved Florence, Dante begins a life as “a fugitive poet and beggar”, Fazzion says. He spends the rest of his life roaming the courts of Italy, never to return to Florence.

¹³ Though Dante’s full name is Dante Alighieri, it seems common practice to refer to him by his first name. In keeping with the literature, I have adopted this convention.

The abyss in Dante's *Inferno* reads as a reflection of his own personal hell, his restless and impoverished exile far beyond the familiarity and comfort afforded to him by Florence. His involvement in politics, at a time when "Florence was such a tangle of public and private passions", states Fazzion (cited in Brock, 2005), saw him in a position where he was believed to have gone against societal norms. His living hell resulted. Canto IV (cited in Latella, 2001, p. 50) echoes this predicament: "All I can tell you is, I found myself on the edge of the deep and woeful pit that echoes with the moans of endless grief".

In their role as cultural metaphors for that which is beyond adequate human determination, the abyss of hell and the abyss of creation both offer the impression of infinity. However, the focus in each is slightly different. Both the abyss of creation and the abyss of hell are described as unfathomably dark. These interpretations lend themselves to either abyss possessing spatial infinity. Both seem to be bottomless and so are suggestive of infinite space. Hughes (1968, p. 35) confirms that hell "is infinite in extension, because after death there is nothing but the corridor of eternity Nobody can imaginatively grasp the ideas of eternity and infinity". Hell offers an additional sense of infinity as a result of its conception as a place of torment and torture. Here, hell functions as an effective deterrent by promising the sinner an "eternity of punishment" (Hughes, 1968, p. 35). The abyss of hell is invested with a sense of infinite time.

The abyss reaches out for infinity, whereas hell lasts for infinity. The blurring of these two interpretations can be aided by their verbalisation. This blurring of concepts is also subject to the problems of visually representing the unfathomable. It might prove difficult to determine whether an individual claiming that there is 'a dark realm beneath the ground that goes on forever'

would be speaking of the infinite vastness of an abyss or of the eternal time consumption of hell, thus demonstrating how volatile the line between abyss and hell can become through the interpretation and communication of these notions.

By having been conceived as residing in a similar place, if not the same place, the characteristics of the abyss and hell remain open to the possibility of being treated interchangeably. However Pippin suggests that, although hell is regarded as a place of punishment, the abyss cannot be placed at all. Pippin (1999) notes, in reference to the “textual map” of the abyss, that:

The dot on the map is itself part of the rupture and is the site of an impossible location. The abyss is a place of difference – different from any other place. The abyss is a place that is totally “Other.” To locate oneself at/in the pit means to be in a place that is no place, no ground, no bottom, no context. (p. 65)¹⁴

Consequently it may be suggested that both the abyss and hell appear threatening, not because they actually contain monsters and villains, but because they symbolise a place where those who ‘undermine’ foundation reside. In other words, in the context of the Bible, and texts alike, it may be suggested that the abyss and hell are presented as threatening in as much as they represent a threat to religious determination. Cavendish (1977, p. 120)

¹⁴ The ‘Other’, as referred to during this discussion, is conceivable as ‘other than’. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as a “different or separate thing (to something previously specified)” (Brown, 1993a, p. 2032). In Lacanian terms, there are two ways of articulating the term other. In the following information, compiled by the University of Texas (“Definitions of Othering”), it is acknowledged that: “Lacan’s use of the term involves distinction between the ‘Other’ and the ‘other’ ... the [small o] other designates the other who resembles the self, which the child discovers when it looks in the mirror [and the ‘anticipation of mastery’ promised by this mirror-other] will become the basis of the ego The [capital O] Other has been called the *grande-autre* by Lacan, the great Other, in whose gaze the subject gains identity.”

identifies the Christian tradition as having placed hell beyond the reach of the “presence of God [where instead there] is the presence of Satan”.

Satan, also referred to as Lucifer, is considered to be the ruler of hell. As punishment for offending God, Satan was cast headfirst into hell to burn “for all time” (Morgan & Morgan, 1996, p. 31). Satan is often referred to as the “Prince of Darkness” in order to reflect his expulsion from the light of God (Brown, 1993b, p. 594). Satan’s sentence aims to send a clear message to sinners. Consequently, the idea of hell appears to function as a tool of social control. It has been noted that “[f]rom the point of view of charismatic Christianity, Satan’s treasures are those souls he has stolen, by sorcery and other sins, from God” (King, 1991, p. 135). Delville’s painting *Les Tresors De Satan* [The Treasures of Satan] (1895) is an examples of a painting that illustrates a distinctly hellish interpretation of the abyss. It is worth noting that the abyss in this work is presented as neither pitch black or unfathomable. Instead, it is a colourful and carefully executed depiction. This is important because the notion of a bottomless abyss lends itself to the assumption that it is pitch black and yet here is an image that contradicts this. It reinforces the unfixed cultural conception of this metaphor.

The literature suggests that the abyss is dark, because it resides beyond the light of God. The problem of representing the abyss continues to surface in the contrasting claim that that God resides in the abyss. The claim to which I refer is evident in the following sermon extract. Throughout this extract a variety of presumed characteristics of the abyss are conflated with the notion of God. The issue of imagination is touched upon, and it implicates the abyss as a justification for the relinquishing of self-consequence rather than as a metaphor that can be invested in active self-construction. Not only does this contradict the self-reflexivity invested in Action Research but it also seems to

overlook the cultural constructedness of the abyss. Radical doubt is not at play in this passage, but rather a radical and arguably erroneous presumption that the unknown can be determined in any adequate manner.

Neville (2005) says:

Theology provides ways to conceive the eternal and immense God as creating time and space and teaches the limitation of our symbols. But then we need to move on to live with the great symbols of the faith, God as Creator, Redeemer, Wild Spirit. We need to so live into these symbols so that we can see how this great creating God is present in the blast of the Big Bang, in the evolution of human life, in the glories of fall mornings and the horrors of earthquakes and typhoons. Then we need also to live into those even deeper symbols that break the best work of our imagination and push us out on the other side into God's infinite depth. We need to love God names as the Abyss of Nothingness, God the Primal Fire of Creation, God the Deep River on whom we must launch ourselves to get home. The mystics know the mortal force of these deepest symbols. They pull us from our moorings and tumble us into God so that our mortal lives are of no consequence. The Awesome, Beautiful, Terrible, Lovely, Beloved Depths of God call us to meet the Almighty Creator face to face. Since God's face is infinite, we die to any significance in the finite identity of our own face. We give ourselves without remainder to our Beloved.

I have raised the point that if eternity is infinite, if the abyss is seemingly unfathomable, it cannot be adequately comprehended by the individual. With this in mind, the sermon extract seems to propose Theology as a way of entertaining that inadequacy. It implicates itself in the death of indeterminacy, and therefore also in the death of inquiry. All the while, the central role of the imagination as a means of negotiating cultural assumptions about the unknown is disclosed. In keeping with the premise that the individual can only be ignorant of the unknown, the assumption that God is in the abyss implies that God resides in human ignorance.

This sermon extract makes use of the notion of God as a means to resolving uncertainty as to “the blast of the Big Bang, in the evolution of human life, in the glories of fall mornings and the horrors of earthquakes and typhoons”. By interpreting God as the abyss, an answer is found for everything. McAdams (1997) asserts:

Multiplicity ... poses a direct challenge to identity, for the difficulty we experience in forging selves that are unified and purposeful typically goes up as we face a greater number and variety of life possibilities and greater uncertainty about what integrated me should in fact look like. (p. 61)

With McAdams’ comments in mind, it is my understanding that the notion of God risks the progress of self-growth by offering a ‘one size fits all’ approach to problem solving. If “the risks of self-growth involve going into the unknown, into an unfamiliar land where the language is different and customs are different” (Wegscheider-Cruse, cited in Giddens, 1991, p. 78), then such a thorough determination of the unknown leaves little or no room for growth other than that permitted in view of “the limitation[s] of [Biblical] symbols”. It attempts to put an end to many questions with just one answer, i.e. God, thus averting the challenge of indeterminacy that I believe the abyss continuously encourages. It seems that, in accommodating this aversion, the individual may continue to wear the face of cultural passivity and critical disengagement.¹⁵ Perhaps this denotes a fear of the implications of self-growth, discomfort in the problem of hell that is conjured up by the thought of deviating from prescribed societal norms. But these associations are contingent within their cultural context. They are

¹⁵ For me, religious sentiment cannot be culturally reflexive. This is because reflexivity, in a late modern age, must acknowledge the constructedness of cultural metaphors as well as the premise of radical doubt. The notion of an absolute cultural construction would, in this sense, seem oxymoronic.

understood in the late modern age, as cultural constructions and so these associations are deemed by contemporary culture to be unnecessary.

Also in the sermon, the term 'Abyss of Nothingness' is suggested as a name for God and yet Rorty (1989) points to a direct correlation between death and nothingness:

"Death" and "nothingness" are equally resounding, equally empty terms. To say one fears either is as clumsy as Epicurus's attempt to say why one should not fear them. Epicurus said, "When I am, death is not, and when death is, I am not"; thus exchanging one vacuity for another. For the word "I" is as hollow as the word "death". (p. 23)

An association between the abyss and nothingness can be located in the philosophy of Nishida. He (1958, p. 30) says that nothingness is that in which "the abyss between the thinking subject and the thought object [between the self and the Other] disappears ... this last in which every being has its 'place' Here the soul in its greatest depth, is a clear mirror of eternity". In any case, read in Rorty's terms, the word 'God' can be referred to as another equally empty term, and to say 'God-fearing' is to entertain a certain degree of clumsiness.

A Comment Regarding My Negotiation of this Theory in the Context of My Creative Practice

Although there are risks in the unknown, I do not support their demonisation. This means that my creative practice does not replicate monstrous depictions of the abyss.¹⁶ The belief that the abyss is hellish implies

¹⁶ Having established the historical cultural contexts of the abyss I am aware that, while I find it fascinating, "[t]he abyss is not popular" (Natoli, 1998, p. 17). If the peering into the abyss means peering into the individual, as Nietzsche suggested, my support for the

that the unknown and the unfamiliar are also hellish, that they are monstrous. This makes it critical for me to negotiate my creative practice in a way that clarifies my position for, if a belief in hell is universal, it is this assumption that I may find myself continuing to confront.

It is by association that a demonisation of the abyss also bestialises indeterminacy. In the conflation of the abyss with hell I detect a fear of getting too close to a revision of the question of self and an ideological monument to the fear of self-growth. Founded in the assumption that difference is wicked, depictions of hell communicate to me the monstrosity of this interpretation. I believe that to adopt this attitude would be to threaten my potential for self-reflexive growth, by deterring me from the sensations of indeterminacy that are inevitable over the course of visual or theoretical inquiry and by denying me the tools to engage in self-reflexive research.

The Gendered Abyss

I have discussed the way that depictions of hell speculate on the realm of sinners to encourage social control. One of the reasons that I believe their message has been successfully communicated across cultural boundaries and across an extended period of time is that they appeal to everyday knowledge.

instability of the abyss could be interpreted as a threat to some of the assumptions that I have criticised. Having identified a variety of convictions that attempt to give form to the abyss, I am aware that my critical approach to this subject matter might seem undesirable to some. Given that "belief in a hell is universal" (Van Scott, 1998, p. i) and also that Christianity has 2.1 billion adherents world wide (Adherents.com, 2005), it is possible that the situation could arise in which my constructive criticism encourages the interpretation that I am, in some way, evil. I have raised the point that if the abyss is indeterminable then all that can be adequately projected into it is the ignorance of the individual. With this premise in mind, I would argue that such an interpretation may be taken as evidence of this. My interest lies in contributing to cultural knowledge, rather than in "passively accepting a never-changing diet of unchallenging, prefabricated and predictable popular cultural products" (Inglis, 2005, p. 80).

This knowledge might include human anatomical and reproductive knowledge, for example, that is distorted to create the disfiguration of wrong doers and evil creatures. These elements assist the process of identification.

The self-reflective function of the abyss is evident in a way that encompasses both creation mythologies and interpretations of hell. Recalling Tiamat, Absu, Enki, Ymir, and Satan, the notion of a gendered abyss has been implied up to this point. However, I shall now address this notion in more direct terms, making particular reference to compositions that illustrate the abyss as feminine. This decision is in line with Pippin's (1999) assertion that:

Chaos represents Otherness ... and chaos like the abyss in the Apocalypse is a female concept The otherness of the abyss ... represents the ultimate threat, the ultimate dangerous female. The abyss is the ruptured female, the ruptured hymen, no longer virgin, nor virgin mother, but the place of the vaginal birth of the universe what is also present in this line of thinking is what the abyss is not, or what it *lacks*, which is the phallus The abyss remains a gendered space, a female space. (pp. 72-5)

Though the Sumerian word for water "also means 'semen'" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p. 139), the Goddess Tiamat suggests a belief in a feminine salt water abyss. That this interpretation still exists in a contemporary cultural context is confirmed by Cirlot's (2001, p. 242) claim that "[t]he ocean is ... a symbol of woman or the mother". If the mother of the universe is a watery chaos, and if that chaos was all that existed leading up to a universal birth, "two questions arise: Who is the father? And how did the mother come to conceive?" (Cirlot, 2001, p. 242).

For me, these questions allude to an immaculate conception and, in doing so, draw attention to another mythological appropriation on the part of the

Judaeo-Christian tradition, ie. the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception. What it also does is show how knowledge about human creation, such as the act of childbirth, can be drawn upon for the construction of an interpretation about the event of universal birth. In this sense, the idea of chaotic flood waters can be likened to an expectant woman's waters breaking, a moment when all chaos could break loose for those in her path. Such an image recalls the Black Sea Deluge, where the waters breached the Bosphorus Strait and flooded the Euxine basin.

A self-referential logic that is evident behind the gendering of the abyss of original chaos is illustrated in the *Cosmic Egg from Liever Scivias* (Rupertsberg Codex), (von Bingen, 12th Century). The *Cosmic Egg* is a representation of the seed of the universe. It has been placed within the centre of an ovular form that can be likened to the vagina. This interpretation can be reinforced through two observations. Not only may the feathers around the rim of this form be interpreted as a direct reference to pubic hair but the star at the top of the composition can be interpreted as a representation of the clitoris.

The notion of a universal mother, such as Tiamat, can be read as the notion of a universal mouth. "'Mouth' comes from the same root as 'mother' -- Anglo-Saxon *muth*, also related to the Egyptian Goddess Mut" (B. Walker, 1983, p. 1035). This shift in perspective is illustrated in *De mond van de hel* [The mouth of Hell] (Artist Unknown, ca. 1150 AD) in that the composition also has the appearance of female genitalia, though in a different way to the *Cosmic Egg*. In contrast to a soft appearance the vagina here has been given teeth, lending itself directly to the image of a consuming mouth. Pippin (1999) suggests:

Approaching the mouth of the abyss is dangerous Does this mouth have lips? Could this be the poison kiss – the kiss of death? Or are these 'lips' the vulva? Does the mouth

devour? Does this mouth have teeth – the vagina dentata, the agent of castration? (p. 71)¹⁷

Previously interpretable as a fertile space brimming with creative potential, the opening now seems to be the entrance of an abode of dead and dying souls, the mouth of hell. When comparing *De mond van de hel* and the *Cosmic Egg* it can be seen that, where the void in the *Cosmic Egg* is bracketed by feathers, the void in *De mond van de hel* is guarded by two monsters.¹⁸ With their jaws wide open, they seem to be devouring the souls of the doomed. At the place where the noses of the monsters in *De mond van de hel* meet, a shape is formed that is similar to the clitoris-like shape in the *Cosmic Egg*. Similarly themed to *De mond van de hel*, *Hell mouth* and *De Hellepoort* reinforce a gendered abyss. In the first instance *Hell mouth*, as figured in the Roxburghe Ballads, depicts “a gaping mouth of the Devil represents a sphere of a different and more terrifying kind. An enthusiastic Devil welcomes King, Bishop, and merchant alike to the flames” (University of Victoria, 2003). *De Hellepoort* is an illustration of hell from the *Book of Hours of Catherine of Cleves* (Artist unknown, ca. 1440).

Vulvas have *labiae*, ‘lips,’ and many men have believed that behind the lips lie teeth. Christian authorities of the Middle Ages taught that certain witches, with the help of the moon and magic spells, could grow fangs in their vaginas. They likened women's genitals to the ‘yawning’ mouth of hell, though this was hardly original; the underworld gate had always been the yoni of Mother Hel. It has always ‘yawned’

¹⁷ Further discussing the notion of the vagina dentata, Becker (1973, p. 223) cites Freud as having said, “‘Probably no male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of female genitals.’ However, Walker (1983, p. 1034) points out that Freud “had the reason wrong. The real reason for this ‘terrifying shock’ is a mouth-symbolism, now recognized universally in myth and fantasy: ‘It is well-known in psychiatry that both males and females fantasize as a mouth the female's entranceway to the vagina’. The more patriarchal the society, the more fear seems to be aroused by the fantasy”.

¹⁸ I have presented this image at a 90 degrees anti-clockwise rotation to the original state to facilitate comparison.

-- from Middle English *yonen*, another derivative of 'yoni.'
(B. Walker, 1983, p. 1035-6)

A gendering of the abyss of hell is reinforced by the Judaeo-Christian tradition though more explicitly framed as a sexualised space. The Bible states, in Jude 7 (King James Version), that hell is a place where sinners are sent for "giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire". In relating fornication to hell, his claim supports an association between the gates of hell and the female genitalia. It is worth noting that the idea that going after strange flesh is sinful suggests that this version of the abyss is both xenophobic and misogynistic. It expresses a Judaeo-Christian patriarchal perspective by drawing direct correlations between the notions of sex and sin and between notions of sin and foreign skin. Fear of a vaginal abyss of hell becomes implicated in a fear of the unknown and of the unfamiliar, not only in a demonisation of women.

A Comment Regarding My Negotiation of this Theory in the Context of My Creative Practice

The research has brought about my heightened self-reflexive awareness of these gendered dimensions and problematic masculinist tropes. However, while it is necessary to acknowledge these, this theory does not lead me to make direct reference to the female genitals in my personal visual communication of the abyss. Rather than speculate on the determination of gender I am interested in the sensation of indeterminacy. So long as indeterminacy is uncertainty, the determination that the abyss is either male or female falls directly into the problem of representation and my approach to the abyss is one that attempts to avoid such outcomes.

Summary

I have addressed the point that interpretations of the abyss offer suggestions about human origin or destiny, that they are part of an attempt to frame the individual within the vastness of the universe. I have shown how this process of existential framing is, characteristically, concerned with notions of self-creative and self-destructive potential. The literature indicates that the process of interpreting the abyss entails the focussing of pre-established and existential cultural determinations into an ideological construction. Having discussed the point that the individual arrives at their own limitations with their own set of idiosyncratic assumptions, I have also explained that these limits are a result of the individual's cultural assumptions. It is in this way that the abyss, as a metaphor for the unknown and as that which is beyond these limits, is inevitably self-reflective. The way in which the abyss is given form, therefore, can be taken as a kind of cultural reversal. This may seem more immediately the case in depictions of hell though even original chaos attempts to describe a place before cultural space.

By questioning the stability of interpretations of the abyss it has become evident that negotiations with the abyss, with the unknown, are negotiations of indeterminacy that draws on cultural knowledge. It is in this way that representations of the abyss reflect cultural assumptions about the unknown, the unfamiliar and the sensation of indeterminacy in everyday thinking. They are invested in the ongoing process of cultural and ideological identification, giving form to the limits of cultural knowledge.

I am able to draw on this information as I refer to the abyss during the development of my creative practice and I have begun to demonstrate this reflexive negotiation at various stages in this chapter. My interpretation of the literature leads me to believe that my current creative practice is in

negotiation with issues of existential self-knowledge and that, by documenting my creative inquiry, my artworks also document the limitations of this inquiry. It seems inevitable that the way that I articulate the abyss is telling of my own attitudes to the unknown, the unfamiliar, and to the sensation of indeterminacy in everyday thinking. For this reason, it is important for me to subject my own cultural assumptions, regarding these notions, to ongoing and critical scrutiny and to reflect this scrutiny in my creative practice. I believe that it is only by opening these assumptions up to the flux of critical revision that I may identify and challenge my own culturally constructed ignorance.

Chapter 2

The Pervasiveness of Indeterminacy in Everyday Thinking

Introduction

In this chapter I demonstrate my understanding that indeterminacy is a pervasive feature of everyday thinking in the late modern age in Western Australia. Through this, I support my proposition that the cultural role of the abyss is also pervasive. My discussion of the issue of indeterminacy supports my decision to draw on the contextualisation and review of the literature for analysis of the role of the abyss as a visual metaphor in contemporary visual culture. It also supports my decision to use the abyss as a visual metaphor in my practice.

Indeterminacy is a feeling of being “uncertain”, “doubtful” or “inconclusive” or, alternatively, can be understood as the sensation of “having more than one variable and an unlimited number of solutions” (Krebs, 1995, p. 429). However, an individual need not look to external reference points for a sense of this term. An individual who does not know what indeterminacy is might begin to resolve this uncertainty by asking the question, “What is indeterminacy?” By asking this question, the individual expresses their own uncertainty about indeterminacy, and not any body else’s. In this way, indeterminacy can be interpreted as a self-referential sensation.

The notion that “reality is thoroughly shaped by culture” suggests that assumptions about the abyss are constructed by cultivated selves (Berger and Luckmann, cited in Inglis, 2005, p. 9). Giddens (1991, p. 2) says that

“[t]he self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences ... individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications” and so assumptions about the abyss also have the potential to feed back into interpretations of self.

The constructedness of cultural metaphors means that my discussion about paradigms of the abyss is inherently self-referential but also that it may refer in particular to the self-directed indeterminacy of the individual. By showing that indeterminacy is a pervasive feature of the ongoing negotiation of self-identity, I am able to address the extent to which representations of the abyss may lend themselves to the cultural construction of the individual. I can then proceed to address the way that cultural interpretations of the unknown, the unfamiliar, and the sensation of indeterminacy, shape cultural knowledge and, in turn, either promote or hinder the negotiation of the intellectual challenge of self-growth. Critical discourse on the self is part of a broader cultural discourse, one where descriptions of selves, their customs and their habits, become the focus of research. In Kondo's (1986) words:

ethnographies, even of a reflexive kind, are products of contexts in which the observer ... is a visible outsider [They] depict the Other as ineffably alien, as separate, distinct beings. The best we can do ... is to engage in a reasoned dialogue with the Other, thereby achieving a 'fusion of horizons'. (pp. 74-5)

What is called for, as a means to the development of cultural knowledge, is a reasoned dialogue with the abyss. My discussion of indeterminacy moves into my interpretation of the ongoing cultural construction of the individual as the shaping of a void. Recalling “Heidegger's beautiful parable of the jug”, Bhabha (in Bhabha & Tazzi, 1998, p. 19) helps me clarify this interpretation. This is made possible when the jug is read as a metonym for the individual

and the potter is read as a metonym for the individual's cultural context. Bhabha (1998) asks:

What does the potter make when he shapes the jug? The potter forms the sides and bottom of the jug in clay to provide the means for it to stand, to be vertical; to make the jug a holding vessel, however, he has to shape the void. (p, 19)

My interpretation of the individual is applied to discussion of my migration experience. Through this approach to an interrelationship between the notions of self, indeterminacy and the abyss, I can demonstrate the self-reflexive function of this research and also prepare for the cultural case studies that follow this chapter.

Indeterminacy and the Project of the Self

[A]t least since Hobbes the problem of indeterminacy has troubled many social theorists, most of whom have attempted to dodge it. Often, the greater part of wisdom is finally to recognize its pervasiveness and to deal with it by grounding our theories in it. (Hardin, 2003)

Though my theorising about the role of the abyss in the individual's negotiation of cultural and self-directed knowledge is grounded in the notion of indeterminacy, I am hesitant in joining Hardin in referring to indeterminacy as a problem. I have made the point that interpretations of the abyss reflect particular cultural attitudes toward the unknown and the unfamiliar and it follows that interpretations of indeterminacy do as well. For me, this conception of indeterminacy promotes the understanding that indeterminacy is an obstacle in daily life that should be resolved, once and for all, and it also mobilises the interpretation of the abyss as a negative space.

The notion of knowledge is associated with notions of learning, enlightenment, wisdom, expertise and significance, and so maybe the prospect of indeterminacy threatens the individual with a reminder of their insignificance, of the prospect of an inadequate understanding of the world, of an incomplete self-interpretation. However, Giddens (1991, p. 37) says that “knowledge as a whole ‘lacks foundations’” and, by implication, questions the grounds for self-knowledge and asserts the need for the reflexive negotiation of self. In a late modern age, “the ‘situation of indeterminacy’ is not just an intellectual challenge. It is also ... an existential imperative” (Clines, 1998, p. 127). I agree with Hardin, however, through the belief that indeterminacy provides a foundation for the construction of cultural knowledge in general and self-interpretations in particular.

If knowledge has no foundations, and Rorty (1989, p. 9) is justified in his suggestion that “intellectual and moral progress [becomes] a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than an understanding of how things really are”, what cultural reference points may be used to organise self-interpretation? For me, this metaphor lends itself to the instability of self-knowledge and to the pervasiveness of indeterminacy in everyday thinking. Cristin (1998, p. 49) recounts Heidegger when he asserts that “[w]e speak of the abyss when, having been separated from a basis of support and having lost a point of support, we go looking for one on which to rest our feet”. It is for this reason that I am prioritising the abyss over any other metaphor in my discussion of the individual.

Not only are metaphors culturally constructed, but selves are as well. McRobbie (2003) refers to Giddens’ comment that “individuals must now ‘be’ their own structures”. Giddens (1991, p. 52) says that the “identity of the

self is not something that is just given ... but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual". Giddens (1991, p. 14) also puts forward the point that self-identity "forms a *trajectory* across the different institutional settings of modernity over the *durée* of what used to be called the 'life cycle', a term which applies much more accurately to non-modern contexts than to modern ones". Gergen (1991, p. 71) agrees that "[u]nder postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world that anything goes that can be negotiated". It is in these terms that the self is prevented from being a static or resolved phenomenon. Instead, remaining in constant flux and continually open to revision, the project of the self continues to be unresolved and unstable.

Giddens (1991, p. 71) makes mentions of Rainwater's emphasis that "[e]ach moment of life ... is a 'new moment', at which the individual can ask, 'what do I want for myself?'". Giddens (1991) supports the notion that indeterminacy is central in everyday thinking, suggesting:

What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity – and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour. (p. 70)

These questions raised by Giddens can be understood as expressions of self-directed indeterminacy that relate to matters of human experience and existence. They are existential questions that "concern the basic parameters of human life, and are 'answered' by everyone who 'goes on' in the contexts of social activity" (Giddens, 1991, p. 55). The individual can use questions such as these as a guide for informing "[t]he reflexive project of the self ... [that]

consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives” (Giddens, 1991, p. 5). The reflexive project of the self requires critical self-awareness over time and reference can be made to Yalom (1991) for the understanding that the self-aware moment:

is the time when one stands before the abyss and decides how to face the pitiless existential facts of life: death, isolation, groundlessness, and meaninglessness. Of course there are no solutions. One has a choice only of certain stances. (p. 260)

The construction of self-identity develops from the ongoing negotiation of a self-directed inquiry that is motivated by self-directed indeterminacy. These considerations support the project of the self as one that is embedded in the moment. It is an ongoing process throughout which the individual continually reinterprets their sense of self with each new experience.

[C]ulture ... leaves us partially open, underdetermined, malleable and unfixed. Even after culture and biology have jointly shaped our mode of being-in-the-world, indeterminacy remains. In this gap of indeterminacy lives individual freedom of choice. After culture and biology have done their work, the indefiniteness of our forms of world- and self-relationship must be rendered definite by voluntary decisions. (M. A. Schwartz & Wiggins, 1999)

Zizek (1997, p. 81) confirms that “desire is an infinite metonymy, it slides from one object to another No positive object can ever fill out its constitutive lack [the] ontological status [of the subject] is that of a void”. The desire for a coherent self-interpretation lends itself to the fluidity of this goal, changing and evolving and in doing so causing the goal to change and evolve. It is in this way that the construction of self-identity remains ongoing. If no positive object can ever fill lack then maybe it is in this way that the individual can peer into the abyss, identifying with the void in an attempt to

invest a sense of resolution in the project of the self. In addition, Nietzsche (cited in Kaufmann, 1954) says that:

Man [sic] is a rope, tied between beast and overman – a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end. (pp. 126-7)

Nietzsche's assertion can be interpreted as a comment on the instability of the individual. An awareness of the danger of the individual appeals to the precariousness of self-identification. If the individual is constantly evolving in light of new experiences, self-revision can serve to negate the current self as much as it can serve to affirm it. Giddens (1991, p. 36) suggests that "[t]o answer even the simplest everyday query, or respond to the most cursory remark, demands the bracketing of a potentially almost infinite range of possibilities open to the individual" that the individual is free to choose from. Indeterminacy can result from an inability to decide which possibility is to be pursued, an inability to choose one option over a multitude of alternative options. McAdams (1997) asserts:

Multiplicity ... poses a direct challenge to identity, for the difficulty we experience in forging selves that are unified and purposeful typically goes up as we face a greater number and variety of life possibilities and greater uncertainty about what integrated me should in fact look like. (p. 61)

Multiplicity and indeterminacy supports the self as that which remains undecidable. Not only can the individual living in a late modern age realise their self-creative potential but also their self-destructive potential. Collins and Mayblin (2000, p. 19) note that "[u]ndecidables are threatening. They

poison the comforting sense that we inhabit a world governed by decidable categories". As Bramann (2005) suggests:

Many people fear complex indeterminacy, and the related necessity of having to make nuanced decisions [often taking] refuge in some ready-made cultural shell that provides them with convenient guidelines, "identities", and a feeling of security in a world that would otherwise appear to be a mass of "humming and buzzing confusion".

A fear of the challenges inherent in the project of the self may be understood as a fear of indeterminacy, of the abyss itself. For, as Yalom (1991, p. 8) says, "[i]t is here, in the idea of self-construction, where anxiety dwells: we are creatures who desire structure, and we are frightened by a concept of freedom which implies that beneath us there is nothing, sheer groundlessness". Recalling Heidegger, Cristin's (1998, p. 49) suggests that "[w]e speak of the abyss when, having been separated from a basis of support and having lost a point of support, we go looking for one on which to rest our feet". In doing so, Cristin seems to frame the project of the self as a reason to entertain a concern for the abyss, for the meanings that have been historically invested in it.

Self-construction and self growth present as processes whereby the individual reaches out into unknown space, space in which they may realise self-creative or self-destructive potential. Wegscheider-Cruse thinks of self-growth in terms of risk. Wegscheider-Cruse (cited in Giddens, 1991, p. 78) suggests that "the risks of self-growth involve going into the unknown, into an unfamiliar land where the language is different and customs are different and you have to learn your way around". Self-growth involves the individual coming face to face with that which is beyond their daily limitations, that which is unknown to them. Self-growth, then, requires the

individual to stare into their ignorance, to peer into their unknown as a means to extending the process of self-identification. The issue of “identity is central in the eyes of postmodern philosophy Derrida reminds us that this is also a psychology of the abyss” (Froehlich, 1997). My migration experience is one in which I ventured into the unknown and had to learn my way around. I discuss this experience at a later point in this paper to demonstrate the way that the abyss has informed my interpretation of this stage in my self-growth.

The following two quotes inform a discussion of the notion of potential space, interpreting it in relation to the development of the infant. However, I believe it would be erroneous to assume that this process is reserved for the infant. In as much as the project of the self is ongoing, infancy can simply be understood as the stage during which the life-long project of the self is initiated.

Giddens (1991, p. 38) refers to what “Winnicott calls the ‘potential space ... which relates, yet distances, infant and prime caretaker. Potential space is created as the means whereby the infant makes the move from omnipotence to a grasp of the reality principle”. The abyss can be interpreted as a potential space, just as it has been in creation mythology. In terms of this myth, the abyss symbolises the place from which something or nothing could become manifest. In these terms alone it is a useful metaphor for the construction of the self-identity of the individual.

I refer back to Giddens (1991), and his suggestion that the infant acts:

to open out potential space in a way that generates basic trust Creativity, which means the capability to act or think innovatively in relation to pre-established modes of

activity, is closely tied to basic trust. Trust itself, by its very nature, is in a certain sense creative, because it entails a commitment that is a 'leap into the unknown', a hostage to fortune which implies a preparedness to embrace novel experiences to face the possibility of loss. (pp. 40-1)

Referring directly to the process by which the self-identity of the individual is constructed, Hall (1997) says:

Identities are, as it were, the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always 'knowing' ... that they are representations, that representation is always constructed across a 'lack', across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate – identical – to the subject processes which are invested in them. (p. 6)

Hall's assertion suggests that the individual constructs self-understanding by reaching out towards the Other, to that which is separate from the individual, in order to represent it. In as much as these positions can only be representations, they can be interpreted as inadequate, inconclusive. It is in this way that they are 'lacking'. The gap between the individual and the Other cannot be adequately traversed, because the individual cannot be what he or she is not. This gap, and lack, lends itself to the unfathomable.

Kellner (1992, p. 142) says that "modernity ... increases Other-directedness". For me, this translates to an increase in 'abyss-directedness' in as much as the "abyss is a place that is totally 'Other'" (Pippin, 1999, p. 65). "The [capital O] Other has been called the *grande-autre* by Lacan, the great Other, in whose gaze the subject gains identity" ("Definitions of Othering"). Pippin (1999, p. 73) makes the point that "[t]he abyss also receives this gaze". In terms of the project of the self, an interpretation of self may be achieved through repeatedly reaching towards the abyss, by continually trying to get a grip on self-directed indeterminacy.

A link exists between the abyss and Hall's assertion regarding the construction of self-identity, for which I draw on an interpretation of the abyss as "any unfathomable cavity or void space" (Brown, 1993b, p. 11). The abyss can be referred to here as an unfathomable gap or, alternatively, an unfathomable lack. It is in this respect that the construction of self-identity can be acknowledged as a process whereby the individual reaches across an abyss. Here, the abyss seems to function as cultural reference point for the evolving self-understanding of the individual. The abyss represents a groundless stage for the project of the self that is, in turn, negotiated by the self.

The abyss functions as a key reference point for self-identification, as well as space across which the individual engages in self-construction. These observations allude to the abyss as being two things though I question this duplicity. So long as the individual reaches towards the Other, and across an unfathomable lack, the Other (an abyss) can only be inadequately grasped. This being the case, it seems that all that can be adequately grasped by the individual during self-identification is the unfathomable lack between their self and the Other. I would argue that, if all that is separate from the individual is 'other than' he or she, reaching 'across' lack is the same as reaching 'into' lack. The process of reaching towards an abyss, across an abyss, can be interpreted as a process of reaching into an abyss. If the self-identity of the individual can only be constructed through an ongoing series of inadequate grasps, then it is precisely this inadequacy that can be acknowledged as an adequate means to self-identification. In turn, reaching into an abyss seems to be an adequate means to self-identification.

Lack, interpreted here as an abyss, can be articulated as the grounds for the construction of the self-identity of the individual but raises a critical

question. It is a presumed lack of self-resolution that calls for a continuation of self construction. If the grounds for self-identification are abyssal, and an abyss can be understood as a groundless ground, the grounds for the project of the self seem paradoxical. The project of the self, therefore, becomes interpretable as “a phenomenon that exhibits some contradiction or conflict with preconceived notions of what is reasonable or possible” (Brown, 1993a, p. 2093).

McAdams’ (1997, p. 62) assertion that “[t]he self develops over time” indicates to me that notions of self are constructed as part of a future discourse. Giddens (1991, p. 72) supports this point of view, saying that the development of the self may be considered “[s]elf-therapy ... [because it] presumes what Rainwater calls a ‘dialogue with time’ – a process of self-questioning about how the individual handles the time of her lifespan”. In light of “the radical unknowability of the future”, what seems to be under continuous negotiation is a dialogue with indeterminacy and the abyss (Canning, in Taylor & Winkler, 2001, p. 189).

A conception of the future ensures that indeterminacy continues as a pervasive feature of daily life. Peering into this immeasurable abyss, into a groundlessness that drops infinitely away at the edge of every moment, the individual opens themselves up to the possibility of vertigo, a “sensation of whirling motion, tending to result in [the individual’s] loss of balance and sometimes of consciousness; giddiness, dizziness [a] disordered state of mind of things” (Brown, 1993a, p. 3569).

Giddens (1991, p. 3) suggests that “[u]nder the conditions of modernity, the future is continually drawn into the present by means of the reflexive organization of knowledge environments”. This means that, under

conditions of modernity, what is being drawn into the present and reflexively organised in the processes of self-identification is a vehicle for the sensation of self-indeterminacy.

Although time is perceived as linear, the progress of time is evident all around the individual. It can be identified as a car drives down the street or as leaves appear to move in the breeze and so the future can seem to approach the individual from all directions, an indeterminable that surrounds the individual, always nearing but always a step ahead. Each moment is an opportunity to confront an abyss of the future and to acknowledge that the only thing that we can be sure it holds is our own death. Self-determination presents as a dialogue that draws from cultural assumptions regarding death. Giddens (1991) raises Rainwater's point that death:

typically provokes one of two attitudes. Either death is associated with fear, as in the case where individuals spend much of their present time worrying about their own death or that of loved ones; or death is regarded as unknowable, and therefore a subject to be avoided as far as possible. (pp. 73-4)

On this issue, Rainwater (1989, p. 56) suggests that "[p]eople who fear the future attempt to 'secure' themselves – with money, property, health insurance, personal relationships, marriage contracts". It is a situation that echoes interpretations of the abyss in their attempts to domesticate the unknown, to make familiar and therefore make more controllable the unknown. Yet, as in the case of the abyss, determinations of the future are inherently overdeterminations. "No one knows whether death may not turn out to be the greatest of blessings for a human being; and yet people fear it as

if they knew for certain that it is the greatest of evils” (Socrates, cited in Rainwater, 1989, p. 194).

Hall (1997, p. 3) raises the point that “identification is ... a process of articulation, a suturing, an overdetermination not a subsumption”. Lindlof and Grubb-Swetnam (1996, p. 181) say that “the self becomes a method, in which the researcher’s confrontation with insecurity not only is not avoided but is pursued”. The individual responds to existential conditions in their own way, guided by their past experiences and by the knowledge base that has developed as a result of these. Each individual’s negotiation of indeterminacy, then, is a personal one and so it is up to the individual to decide for themselves how to reflexively negotiate this sensation in everyday thinking, to decide what value is to be invested in its negotiation. I think that this process of making an active choice about the role that indeterminacy can be described with Saussure’s ‘sheet of paper’ metaphor. Explaining this metaphor, Saussure (cited in Collins & Mayblin, 2000) says:

If the sheet is cut into different shapes, one shape can be identified by its difference from the other shapes. That shape takes on an identity in relation to the others – it takes on a certain ‘value’. (p. 67)

For me, this indicates that my creative practice functions as a track record of my negotiation with indeterminacy, a track record of the way that I have put my indeterminacy to work, so to speak. I say ‘put to work’ so that I may express my active participation in my cultural experience. I believe that identity can become evident as its own value, therefore becoming valuable to itself, by emerging from a void in the page. However, I would argue that this creative process requires an individual who is culturally equipped to execute

the drawing, so that the shape can be identified and so that it is not mistaken as a sudden slip of the hand.

Interpreting the Individual as a Cultivated Void

What does the potter make when he shapes the jug? The potter forms the sides and bottom of the jug in clay to provide the means for it to stand, to be vertical; to make the jug a holding vessel, however, he has to shape the void. (Bhabha, in Bhabha & Tazzi, 1998, p. 19)

With Bhabha's interpretation in mind, I would like to begin by responding to Marder's comments. Citing Derrida and Thévenin (1998), Marder (2005, n.p.) suggests that "the jug is nothing to be filled or fulfilled it is already full of itself in itself and beside itself. Full to the point of indifferent, unenjoyable pleasure. Full without measure, 'at the bottom without bottom' of an abyss".

Firstly, I would agree that my interpretation of the construction of the self-identity of the individual as the shape of the void constitutes a gesture of self-concern. I am addressing the use of the abyss as a culturally constructed visual metaphor in everyday thinking and so this research demands attention to the individual. Also, if I am to appeal to the self-reflexive nature of this research and if I am to produce a discourse that contributes in any way to cultural knowledge, then it is necessary for me to demonstrate self-awareness. Secondly, the understanding that the self is without measure presents as a symptom of radical doubt and self-reflexivity, of the ongoing nature of the project of the self. This is one reason why cultural interpretations of the abyss remain useful as reference points for self-interpretation, because both the abyss and the self are subject to the indeterminacy of the individual. Thirdly, I do not believe that an interpretation of the self as a cultivated void constitutes an act of

indifference. Indifference can be described as “showing no concern or interest” (Krebs, 1995, p. 430). The concern and interest that I have demonstrated in this paper, for notions of the self and for the role that the abyss plays in reflexive negotiations of indeterminacy, elucidates the inappropriateness of such an interpretation.

I have located a variety of reference points to support my association of the notion of the individual with the abyss. The first of these exists in Dwyer’s comments. Dwyer (1979, p. 205) says:

If anthropology is to embrace [the] relationship between subject and Other (or between ‘Self’ and ‘Other’) it must, as it pursues the Other, also become able to pursue the Self The very possibility of dealing squarely with the Other is tied to the capacity to put the Self at stake.

Hawes (1995) seems to agree when she says that “an autobiography is essentially a process of writing the self as other, and to do this, one must other the self the path of constructing one’s identity is not always an easy one”. Autobiography can be thought of as a life-narrative that the individual may develop each day. If “[t]he abyss is a place that is totally ‘Other’” then this program of autobiography seems to be a form of abyss writing, arising from a necessary self-identification with the abyss (Pippin, 1999, p. 65). Keeping in mind that self-writing entails “the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries” (Hall, 1997, p. 3), the cultural meaning that is invested in interpretations of the abyss inform the parameters of self-interpretation.

Investing in the abyss becomes a way to invest in the individual when “[t]he ordeal of the void ... is a necessary precondition to gaining mastery over nothingness and the self” (Celant, 1998, p. xxxv). For me, the project of the self persists as a seemingly abyssal negotiation and I maintain the importance

of this being a negotiation that is reflexive. My negotiation of the abyss in this research is a necessary precondition to discussing issues of identity in a way that is self-reflexive. Giddens (in du Gay, Evans, & Redman, 2000, p. 252) says that “[t]he self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible We are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves”.

Where Giddens (cited in McRobbie, 2003) also believes that “individuals must now ‘be’ their own structures” I make the claim that this construction is contingent on representations of the abyss. If indeterminacy is a doorway to the abyss, because of the meaning that has been invested in this metaphor and if self-understanding results from the reflexive negotiation of indeterminacy, then self-identification becomes contingent on the abyss, on its interpretation. In this respect, the individual emerges from the abyss, drawing a sense of self out from uncertainty and indeterminacy. But not forgetting that the abyss is a culturally constructed, it is always the individual who provides the grounds for this metaphor and it is in this way that the abyss seems to be self-emerging.

Because I am mindful that an attempt to determine the abyss is inherently problematic, my identification of the individual as a void certainly does not presume a call to the individual to:

Climb to the verge of your life’s struggles and throw yourself into the Abyss of the Divine Mystery. Plunge into God’s Holy Fire and let that raw creativity burn away the features of your finite face so that you can meet the Infinite face to face. (Neville, 2005)

I believe that to appeal to the abyss in this way would be to contradict the approach that I have negotiated in this paper. The claim that God resides in the abyss overlooks the problem of determining the indeterminable. My

discussion of the abyss of hell demonstrated that the Christian tradition places it beyond the reach of the “presence of God [where instead there] is the presence of Satan” (Cavendish, 1977, p. 120). The contradiction highlighted here confirms the significance of this issue. In these terms, not only can the unknown abyss be conceived of as a place where ignorance is realised but also as a place where ignorance is exercised, where the strength of ignorance is demonstrated.

Wegscheider-Cruse’s (cited in Giddens, 1991, p. 78) suggestion that “the risks of self-growth involve going into the unknown” indicates to me that to throw the self into a pre-determined abyss puts the project of the self at stake, and in this way presenting as a risk ‘to’ self-growth. I agree that to consider the abyss is to be mindful of one’s own ignorance and I am mindful of Nietzsche’s comments regarding the self-reflection of the abyss. For this reason, throwing the self into the abyss presents as an ongoing opportunity to throw the self into life’s struggles rather than a means to turning away from them. For me, by claiming that the abyss is a place of God offering respite from everyday thinking, the ‘self as subject’ approach to the abyss detailed by Neville’s comments is ‘self suicidal’. If the abyss is the unknown then it is a place where ignorance dwells and so to think about the abyss can certainly be interpreted as a dwelling on ignorance. However the motivation for such a pre-occupation can be varied. I treat research into the abyss as an opportunity to engage in a necessarily active and ongoing negotiation of knowledge rather than as an opportunity to entertain myself with masochistic sentimentalism. I choose to peer into the abyss to see who I am, not to deny my self-awareness.

This sentiment of self-denial in the face of the abyss is evident in metaphysical sentiments elsewhere. For example, Žižek (2002, p. 86) says that “[t]he aim of Zen meditation is ... a total voiding of the Self, the acceptance

that there is no Self, no 'inner truth' to be discovered", adding that the "basic Zen message [is that] liberation lies in losing one's Self, in immediately uniting with the primordial Void". Kapoor (in Celant, 1998, p. xxx) appeals to this notion in his claim that the "[v]oid is really a state within There is nothing so black as the black within. No blackness is as black as that". For me, a reflexive negotiation of the abyss offers a culturally constructed self-method for the attainment of a sense of authentic self. I believe that the project of the self entails losing the self but that finding the self is also a vital part of this two-sided reflexive equation. Just because there is not inner truth does not mean that there is no self. I believe all this means is that self-identification is characterised by a lack of stable inner truth, encouraged by late modern ideological conditions, that it is precisely this interpretation that mobilises the self-growth of the individual.

For me it is a problem that self-loss is so closely linked to the notion of self-less. Collins and Mayblin (2000) make mention of the phrase "The king is dead, long live the king!" when raising the point that:

To be an addition means to be added to something already complete ... yet it cannot be complete if it needs an addition. The king is complete and has an addition; needing an addition, the king is not yet whole. The supplement extends by repeating He opposes what he himself repeats. He opposes himself. (p. 35)

My interpretation of the individual as a cultivated void presumes that self loss is a means to self-growth. I consider this stance to pose a threat to what can be termed the monotony of non-reflexive self-interpretation. The self is dead, long life the self!

The Role of the Abyss in a Reflexive Interpretation of My Migration Experience

The notion that the abyss functions as an appropriate metaphor in the articulation of self-directed indeterminacy has been established with particular attention being paid to the role of indeterminacy in the project of self-identification. Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram, and Tincknel (2004, p. 52) state that “reflexivity *informs our readers* of our partialities, so that *they* can make any necessary corrections”. For this reason I believe that it is important for me, in this research into the role of the abyss in cultural daily life, to discuss the way that interpretations of the abyss have functioned as cultural reference points for my reflexive interpretation of my life-narrative. I demonstrate how my use of the abyss to organise an interpretation of my migration experience has informed my self-identification as a shape of the void.

Acknowledging Rainwater’s (1989, p. 189) emphasis on the importance of developing a “dialog with time”, an articulation of my migration experience engages in this as a means to self-interpretation. The metaphor of the abyss plays a significant role in my “relationship with time” as a vehicle for developing my self-identity (Rainwater, 1989, p. 189). Self-identity is informed by cultural context and so my use of the abyss draws on contemporary Western interpretations of this notion. This metaphor is useful because my migration experience presents as a ‘journey of, and through, indeterminacy’. The process of migration was a dialogue with time firstly because the process of migration unfolded over a period of time. Secondly, it has taken time for me to reach the point where I could organise my interpretation of this experience through reference to a cultural metaphor. When I migrated I was too young to even know what a metaphor was and so the interpretation I offer here is necessarily a retrospective one.

McAdams (1997, p. 46) says that “an individual’s favourite metaphors and symbols are reflective of what his or her identity is all about”. Although I have organised an interpretation of my migration experience in terms of the abyss, I acknowledge that the role of this metaphor is not confined to the parameters of my migration experience, that my use of the abyss is only one of many possibilities. However, in as much as my migration experience provided the impetus for my self-identification as migrant, I believe that this migration experience has continued to play a critical role in my everyday thinking and in my ongoing self-identification. In this way, the abyss also continues to play a critical role in these processes and, in turn, has become a valuable notion in the development of my creative practice.

In the previous chapter I raised a connection that has been interpreted between interpretations of the abyss and the search for a sense of self-authenticity. However, I discuss how the abyss has informed my own sense of self-authenticity in the conclusion. This is because, living in a contemporary cultural context, there are also contemporary representations of the abyss that I need to examine before I use the abyss in this way. A discussion about my migration across an abyss lays the grounds that contextualise my approach to the search for self-authenticity. It does this by showing my willingness to use cultural metaphors in my negotiation of personal meaning.

Migration across an Abyss

The notion of lack has been articulated as a gap and as an abyss that provides a groundless ground for self-interpretation, across which the individual reaches for the construction of self-identity. I believe that my journey of migration is a physical manifestation of this theoretical process, a physical construction across lack that was motivated by my parents’ perception of an

ideological lack. Their determination as to what a future in England could offer them, and their determination to achieve a higher standard of living, can be identified as their desire for another possibility.

In a way the risks of self-growth involve going into the unknown, into an unfamiliar land where the language is different and customs are different and you have to learn your way around If we reject deliberate risk-taking for self-growth, we will inevitably remain trapped in our situation. Or we end up taking a risk unprepared. Either way, we have placed limits on our personal growth, have cut ourselves off from action in the service of high self-worth. (Wegscheider-Cruse, cited in 1991, p. 78)

Acting on the decision to emigrate, and having completed the required preparations, my family arrived at Heathrow. We boarded an aeroplane, we travelled for a day and a night, and then we landed in Perth. However straight forward the physical process of migration seems, the construction of a reflexively organised interpretation of this experience is more involved.

It is my understanding that my migration journey represented the physical transgression of cultural boundaries through a separation from one shore and the arrival on another. This was a journey across a gap, a journey of groundlessness. It is in this way that I understand the process of migration to be a construction across lack. Drawing on the previous interpretation of lack as an abyss, I have developed the understanding that this construction is a journey across an abyss. I wish to discuss this experience, reading it in terms of the concept of the abyss and in relation to aspects of self-identity theory.

My parents' decision to leave England was their agreed resolution to issues of self-directed indeterminacy. By 1981, the questions "Who are we, and what do we want for ourselves?" had led to my parents' decision to leave

Devon, England, and relocate our family in Perth, Western Australia. This decision was motivated by their observation of a gradual decline in standards of living in England. At this time, Australia seemed to offer them the potential for something positive to happen in their future. It seemed that to stay where we were offered the potential for nothing to happen. The, albeit stereotypical, portrayal of Australia as a 'lucky country' promised, as it continues to promise, the provision of a broadening of life opportunities for the individual. At a time when they were responsible for three children under the age of seven, my parents found this notion to be very appealing. It is my parents' negotiation of indeterminacy that would lead to my own experience of indeterminacy.

From the moment that I learned of the impending migration, I experienced sensations of indeterminacy. At this early stage, I remember my parents showing me a book on Australian native flora and fauna and it was in this book that I first saw pictures of kangaroos and koalas. Looking at these seemingly strange animals living in a seemingly strange land, the idea of migrating to Australia was one of leaping into the unknown and the unfamiliar. My first impression of Australia was cultivated through exposure to a number of stereotypical representations, images of kangaroos and emus and the like. A sense of the unknown framed my first grasp upon the idea of emigration. I believe this to have been the first time that I had an impression of the future as an indeterminable quantity, an unknown that was perpetually in front of me. This introduction to Australia was the beginning of my migrant journey. It was from this point that the self that I was to become was a self that seemed to inhabit this indeterminable future, a place of indeterminacy. I recognised that I was soon to be moving into the unknown. In reflecting on this 'movement', and having observed the abyss

as a representative of the indeterminable, I am now able to articulate this journey as a journey into an abyss, into the future.

This impression of moving into an abyss was tied up in the sensation of the nearing of the future. A part of everyday thinking, this awareness of the future has enabled me to retain the impression that daily life presents as a movement into an abyss. This impression has supported my understanding that the process of constructing assertions as to the shape or nature of the future is inherently problematic. Giddens' (1991, p. 3) suggestion that "[u]nder the conditions of modernity, the future is continually drawn into the present by means of the reflexive organization of knowledge environments" is worth recalling here. Being only six years old, I had a very limited knowledge base and certainly did not possess an understanding of my environment and so mine was a negotiation of indeterminacy. I was travelling towards an environment of which I had no first hand knowledge.

Interpreting the future as an abyss, every individual can be perceived to be moving towards this inevitability. So long as time continues, the individual can also be perceived to be moved by this inevitability. How this understanding is made manifest would lie with the individual.

Although I was not aware of the notions of self and the construction of self-identity, questions as to whom I would become once I arrived in Australia, promoted an impression of the migration experience as one that was characterised by sensations of uncertainty and irresolution. In turn, ponderings about my migrant self were also founded by these sensations. It is with these impressions that I could start thinking about my potential self-identity though my potential, also residing in the future, could only be framed by indeterminacy. Imagined images of my future self were shaped

from this starting point of indeterminacy as if they were sculpted from it. Interpreting the future as an abyss enables the understanding of this self-imagining as a shaping of an abyss, an over-determination of my future-self.

Intensifying this future-self-directed indeterminacy was the physical act of migrating. At no point could I adequately determine what was ahead of me, this inevitability is inherent in the individual's experience of the moment. It is in this way that the journey from Heathrow to Perth was one throughout which the sensation of indeterminacy was prominent. My indeterminacy was no longer confined to not knowing what would happen to me when I got home from a friends house, for example. This was likely the extent of my concerns as a six year old. Instead, my indeterminacy was motivated by questions as to what could happen to me at any moment. Where would the plane need to fly in order for me to get home, now? What would home be? Who would become my friend? Whose friend would I become? Who would I become?

Questions such as these express sensations of self-directed indeterminacy that attributed to the process of migration a pervasive sense of uncertainty. The ground upon which I had been born and had lived was no longer beneath me. It no longer seemed to be my most immediate foundation. I believe that, in as much as it was my first flight, my awareness of the lack of ground was shadowed by the indeterminacy that I could feel. I also believe that I was aware of this shift from an awareness of a physical ground to an awareness of an abstract ground. It could follow, then, that an abstract ground could be located in my mind as opposed to being located outside of me. No matter how uncertain I was of my future in Australia, it was within the context of that indeterminable place that I was destined to evolve. My self-interpretation would evolve from my self-directed indeterminacy. In as

much as it is unfathomable, an interpretation of the future as an abyss has been addressed. In terms of my migrant experience, the individual that I would become could be perceived to exist in that abyss. It is in this way that I have interpreted my self-growth as the shaping of the void.

Continuing with a focus on the notion of ground, three further interpretations of the concept of an abyss have informed the current articulation of my migration experience. In as much as the abyss can be characterised as a groundless ground each of these interpretations informs the way that the notion of indeterminacy, with regard to the organisation of a sense of place, can be addressed.

The first of my interpretations draws upon Pippin's (1999, p. 65) suggestion that "[t]he abyss is a place that is no place, no ground, no bottom, no context". Pippin offers an interpretation that the abyss denotes the exhaustion of place. Nishida (1958, p. 30) echoes this interpretation, articulating the abyss in terms of nothingness, by saying that nothingness "does not have its place in anything else", that it is a "last" place. At the commencement of my journey of migration, having left one country in order to journey to another, I began to occupy a place after ground and a place that I could not identify, and towards a place of which I was only indeterminacy. Australia represented a future place with which my indeterminacy was primarily concerned.

The second of my interpretations draws upon the identification of the abyss as an Original Chaos, such as can be located in Judaeo-Christian mythology and the creation story of Genesis. In this story (*The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments*, n.d., p. 5) it is suggested that "in the beginning" there was a chaotic abyss out of which life was created. In this story, the

abyss is interpreted as something before place and before ground. With this understanding of the concept of an abyss, it is recognised as a realm that anticipates the realisation of life potential. Such anticipation could be compared to my own for when, whilst emigrating, I looked forward to a new life in the lucky country where I could make something or nothing of myself.

The third of my interpretations draws upon the notion that existence, itself, is an abyss that founds the individual. Cristin (1998, p. 47) recounts Heidegger's suggestion that "Being 'is' the *Ab-grund* [the German translation of the word abyss, meaning 'groundless ground'] inasmuch as Being and *Grund* are the same. For Being 'is' to found ... and only for this reason Being has no other *Grund*". What this suggests is that the individual is founded essentially by his or her existence; that the sole purpose of existence is to provide a foundation and yet existence remains, itself, without foundation. This outlines Heidegger's suggestion that 'Being' itself is abyssal.

This notion of existence as abyssal informs my interpretation of my migration experience in the following way. During the migration journey I experienced indeterminacy and a sensation of groundlessness. For a period of time, having left England and yet having not yet arrived in Australia, I occupied a place between these two grounds. I have interpreted the space that I traversed during this time as a liminal space, a place that is neither here nor there. Because I was not a migrant before I left England, and because I was one by the time I arrived in Australia, I have come to refer to this liminal space as the place where my self-identification as migrant was constructed. A groundless and liminal space can, in this way, be understood as the grounds for the migrant aspect of my self-identification that has continuing relevance. The abyss can be observed, in this way, to be useful in the articulation of

experiences of indeterminacy that do not involve the process of migration in as much as each individual 'exists'.

The in-between and liminal space that I journeyed through can be interpreted as a stage over which my self-identification as migrant was constructed. Interpreting the abyss as a metaphorical and theoretical stage for my experience, it may be said that an abyss has grounded, and continues to ground, this chapter of my life-narrative. In turn, I have come to identify a liminal and seemingly abyssal space as a prominent metaphor for my self-understanding.

Summary

I have used this chapter as a bridge between the role of the abyss in historical cultural contexts and the role of the abyss in contemporary cultural contexts. My discussion of the pervasiveness of indeterminacy in the late modern age has mobilised my interpretation of the construction of the self-identity of the individual as the shaping of a void. I use the next chapter to present a series of contemporary cultural case studies that demonstrate the use of the abyss as a visual metaphor in contemporary culture. The information contained within the following studies establishes the broader cultural parameters within which my own daily life and my creative practice are positioned.

For me, the research so far confirms that it is fitting to use the abyss as vehicle for a discourse on indeterminacy in my creative practice and my interpretation of the individual as a cultivated void sets a pace for this aspect of my personal cultural production. Because my practice is engaged in ongoing inquiry, in creative questioning, indeterminacy is also a pervasive feature of this process, therefore demanding that the abyss, remain central to it. I also believe that the research highlights the inevitability of self-reference

in my discussion of the implications of indeterminacy and the abyss in everyday thinking. For me, this is especially going to be the case if I am to use reflexive research as a vehicle for communicating a clearly identifiable and appropriately informed cultural message.

Chapter 3

Contemporary Cultural Case Studies

Interpreting the Abyss in Nature

Previously I have located a variety of interpretations of the abyss in historical cultural texts. I have raised the point that these visual metaphors offer culturally constructed interpretations of the unknown, the unfamiliar, and sensations of indeterminacy in daily life. My discussion of the pervasiveness of indeterminacy in the late modern age supports the premise that the function of the metaphor of the abyss extends beyond the realm of historical contexts, i.e. that it continues to play a role in the processes of everyday thinking that the individual experiences in contemporary cultural contexts. In this respect, a discussion of contemporary representations of the abyss illustrates the way that interpretations of the unknown, the unfamiliar, and sensations of indeterminacy are constructed in contemporary Western cultural life.

This chapter comprises of a series of cultural case studies, each demonstrating how some experiences of the contemporary world have drawn upon the meanings invested in the abyss. The case studies can be used to inform my creative practice because it does not exist within a vacuum but, rather, it exists as part of a broader field of cultural activity. In order to communicate my interpretations of the abyss in a clear and informative way, and in order to contextualise my creative practice, it is necessary for me to demonstrate an understanding of my chosen theoretical concerns within the cultural sphere in which they are being expressed. It is in this way that my appeal to the model of the reflexive self is made explicit. The process of reflexive interpretation, as an activity of Action Research, can

be identified in the way that I conduct these studies and in the way that I use them to inform the inner workings of my creative practice.

It seems that by constructing interpretations of the abyss, and by identifying the abyss as a metaphor for the unknown, historical cultures also construct a means to self-identifying as knowledgeable. Maybe this self-identification is supported by the claim also that ignorance exists beyond the societal norms of that culture? What better way to construct the assumption that the ignorance and darkness and monstrosity of the abyss are separate from a particular culture, than by supporting the opinion that the abyss is “totally ‘Other’” (Pippin, 1999, p. 65) from that culture?

But the late modern age is one of self-reflexivity and radical doubt. In contemporary culture it seems too late to maintain a sense of cultural finitude and so the situation exists where “modernity ... increases Other-directedness” (Kellner, 1992, p. 142). The following case studies ask, “How is the abyss negotiated in contemporary culture? What attitudes are expressed towards the abyss now?” My contemporary cultural case studies demonstrate that, even more than four thousand years after the Sumerians, the abyss is still used for the interpretation of natural environments, it is still an active cultural reference point for creative interpretations of the world and for creative interpretations of the self within it.

For me, Kellner’s comment indicates an increase in the need for a discussion regarding the role of the abyss in everyday thinking. I think that this role is concerning where a predominance of negative representations of the abyss in contemporary cultural texts is evident. This is because, by demonising and bestialising the abyss, negative representations of this notion also demonise the unknown, the unfamiliar and even experience of indeterminacy itself. So

long as “the risks of self-growth involve going into the unknown”, a constructed fear of the unknown may hinder the development of cultural selves (Wegscheider-Cruse, cited in Giddens, 1991, p. 78). This is one of the main concerns that I raise in response to representations of the abyss in contemporary mass media contexts. In relation to this, I am concerned with how the presentation of the abyss as a source of entertainment plays into this development.

This first series of cultural case studies show a mass media, mass consumer culture, and everyday consumer employment of the abyss. In the second set of cultural case studies I refer to the contemporary creative practices of Anish Kapoor and James Thiérree in order to show an elite and privileged employment the abyss. It is in this way that the two series of studies can be distinguished.

The first case study comprises of a series of discussions that refer to aspects of the natural world, identifying the role of ‘guide’ that interpretations of the abyss have played in the individual’s navigation and interpretation of these environments. The indeterminacy of the individual can be expressed by the question ‘how am I to interpret my experience of the world?’ as well as ‘how may I interpret spaces such as those that exist outside the parameters of my everyday experience?’

In a letter written to Charles Kingsley on September 23rd 1860, Thomas Huxley wrote: “Follow humbly wherever and to whatever abyss Nature leads, or you shall learn nothing” (September 23rd, 1860). This quote is interesting in that it raises an association between the abyss and the natural environment, in this way implying that an inquiry into nature can somehow inform an individual’s understanding of the abyss. Though this consideration is the

primary focus of this discussion, the constructedness of the abyss as a visual metaphor shows examples of the abyss in nature to be examples of culture in nature. This simply reaffirms that the abyss is a culturally constructed metaphor. The interpretations of nature that I refer to are cultural interpretations of nature that are organised in relation to paradigms of the abyss.

The case studies in this chapter are organised into two groups. The first of these addresses the role of the abyss in the interpretation of aquatic natural environments. The second addresses the role of the abyss in the interpretation of non-aquatic natural environments. However, the distinction between these two categories is more specific than this. What is provided by the first category is an examination of interpretations of the abyss that have been constructed by individuals who are situated within the space of a seemingly abyssal context. In other words, the interpretations to which I refer can be understood as negotiations that have been constructed inside the abyss. In the second instance the interpretations of non-aquatic natural environments as abyssal, to which I refer, have been negotiated from what seems to the edge of an abyss.

In as much as the individual in a late modern age may access a variety of representations of the abyss, to organise the following discussions in accordance with the paradigm to which they predominantly referred seemed problematic. For example, due to the way that examples of abyssal Fauna have been described as 'vampires' and 'monsters', a discussion of the watery abyss which refers primarily to the abyssal plains cannot avoid also discussing the abyss of hell. Because the individual experiences indeterminacy in the natural world, and because indeterminacy is a

pervasive feature of human nature, it seemed appropriate that I organise the discussion in terms of the abyss in the natural world.

With this in mind, the discussions are organised in the following way. I first refer to the interpretation of the abyss as a vast watery mass, such as that which features in the aforementioned creation mythologies. The first discussion addresses the way that the abyss has been used in the identification and interpretation of aquatic natural environments. In addition, it demonstrates the way that an aquatic natural environment, having already been identified as an abyss, is subsequently navigated and articulated.

Oceanography's attention to the abyssal plains of the deep-sea, as well as alternative underwater explorations, are instances in which the notion of a watery abyss is used as a cultural reference point. Having provided an outline of the oceanographic abyss, in order to establish the scientific base of this notion, I refer to a 2002 BBC production entitled *The Abyss*. This presentation stands as an example of the way that the watery abyss has been packaged for a contemporary mass audience and I highlight a number of issues, such as the commodification of the abyss, that arise from it.¹⁹

The second discussion addresses the way that the abyss has been used in the identification and interpretation of non-aquatic environments. For example, the interpretation of the abyss as hellish ensures that it is often conceived in a

¹⁹ For more examples, see *The Abyss* (Cameron, 1989), the documentary film *Titanic: Ghosts of the Abyss* (in IMAX 3D) (Cameron, 2003), and *Creatures from the Abyss* (Cerchi, 1993), an Italian science fiction film that Hedges (2006) facetiously speculates was "made for approximately thirty two cents".

rather 'negative light'.²⁰ This treatment can also be identified as a feature of cultural texts such as contemporary films and musical works.

Throughout these discussions I identify any instances in which signs of the abyss, as located in the natural world, contain features that contradict certain cultural assumptions placed on them as a reflection of abyssal paradigms. For example, although the appearances of some Anglerfish living on the abyssal plains may be resemble depictions of ferocious beasts, Anglerfish are relatively harmless and pose as a threat only to smaller fish.

Cultural texts that reflect paradigms of the abyss in some way are also cultural products. In as much as interpretations of the abyss are distributed the form of a film or book or song, on a t-shirt, compact disc, or computer game, these are examples of the way that the abyss has been commodified, of the way that the allure of the unknown and unfathomable is packaged for ease of mass consumption. These include diving equipment such as breathing apparatus and watches, as well as a constructed leisure playground called the Magic Waters Waterpark in which there exists an abyss water slide complex. My attention to these and related examples shows the role of the abyss in contemporary commodity culture.

Following this series of discussions are two case studies addressing the way that the abyss has been featured in contemporary creative practice. Studied in terms of the abyss, are selected artworks by the sculptor Anish Kapoor and the production entitled *La Veillée des Abysses* by James Thiérée. Identifying the role of the abyss in their work complements the previous discussions in that, together, they provide a thorough contextualisation of

²⁰ This pun draws on interpretations of both the abyss and hell as being dark, black, and negative spaces.

my negotiation of this concept, not only in everyday thinking but more specifically in terms of my own creative practice. To start, I provide a brief outline of what an abyssal plain is. Following on from this, I identify signs of negotiation in order to discuss the contemporary role of the abyss in the interpretation of aquatic natural environments.

The Role of the Abyss in the Contemporary Interpretation of Aquatic Natural Environments: The Abyssal Plains

It used to be thought that the world was flat. That beyond the horizon lurked a bottomless void, measureless to humans. As our ships got better and our navigators more confident, vessels that disappeared over one horizon began returning triumphant from the other. (R. Smith, 1997)

The contextualisation of historical cultural texts pertaining to the abyss has shown that the abyss and the notion of origin have been articulated together as a vast aquatic and chaotic mass. This interpretation has existed since Babylonian creation mythology documented the story of Tiamat and Absu. However, the notion of a watery abyss is also of ongoing scientific interest to the field of oceanography. The abyssal plain, as well as abyssal flora and fauna are research areas that, by their very title, are examples of an ongoing cultural association between the abyss and water. I shall now discuss these, respectively, to show how the abyss continues to be used as a cultural reference point for the organisation of interpretations of aquatic natural environments.

The ocean floor is structured into mid-ocean ridges and abyssal plains. The system of ridges divides the ocean into a series of distinct deep regions known as basins. The central parts of the basins have been filled by sediment for many millions of years, and the accumulated sediment layer covers all topographic relief, making the interior of the basins the

flattest parts of the earth's surface. These regions are called the abyssal plain. (Tomczak, 1999, p. 1)

Batson (2003, p. 28) states that the “abyssal plain is, for all intents and purposes, completely flat – a vast realm that covers 40 percent of the world’s sea floor”. He continues to note that sea floor channels look “on a chart like large underwater riverbeds. These long gashes in the seabed snake their way offshore for many hundreds of kilometres before disappearing into the abyss” (Batson, 2003, p. 28). They seem to disappear at the point where the limits of light are reached because they are not strong enough to penetrate the depths of this abyss.

Batson (2003, p. 49) asserts that “[most] of the living space on earth has never been bathed in light. There are submerged mountains ... whose summits have remained in darkness throughout their entire history”. The abyssal plains remain vast and predominantly unknown realms, with access to them enjoyed only by a relatively limited number of individuals. If the abyssal plains are to remain unseen for billions of years, knowledge of them shall remain beyond the limits of the determining faculties of many individuals for some time to come. Batson’s (2003, p. 49) comment that “[t]he great abyssal plains sprawling across much of the globe have never seen a glimmer of sunlight and until the expanding sun boils the oceans away into space in several billion years time, they never will. As a result, the interpretation of these aquatic natural environments as unfathomable and indeterminable abysses is reinforced.²¹

²¹ Abyssal plains exist all over the world. Geoscience Australia’s (2002) documentation of Naturaliste Plateau physiography shows that there is an abyss located off the coast of Perth, north of this ocean area.

Batson's observations are reminiscent of the ideas that have been presented regarding the snakelike appearance of a river such as the Nile against the landscape. In addition to the knowledge that the deep-seas are natural environments, the presence of mountains in the ocean's depths also reinforces their interpretation as underworlds, abyssal landscapes. However, it is the depth of the water and the vast and impenetrable darkness of the water that constitutes the underwater abyss. The abyss can be understood as an unfathomable void, emptiness. Yet, throughout the abyssal plains, water constitutes that void. There is not so much a lack or gap but, instead, a complete saturation, an abundance which also renders the abyss uninhabitable for the human being, without the direct assistance of technological mechanisms. Water fills the space and, although leads it into darkness, ensures the absence of nothingness. It ensures a lack of lack, and, like the self-identifying individual's inherent grasp of lack, seems to lead to an intensification of lack. The depths of the ocean, due to their saturation by their characteristic density of water, retain a sense of the abyssal. Similar to the case of the Black Sea Deluge, a sense of the abyssal is contingent not on absence and nothingness, but on the absolute presence of the elemental, a profound confrontation with the natural world.

The abyss, as reflected in Batson's words, is characterised by darkness, due to the inability for light to adequately penetrate the depths. In the context of Oceanography, the terms abyssal, abyssopelagic, and abyssobenthic, refer to "the deepest parts of the ocean, except for the great Pacific trenches" (Ellis, 1996, p. 146). Batson (2003) makes mention of the qualities of light, pertaining to the ocean, in a way that reinforces an association between the watery abyss and conceptions of hell, certainly in terms of hell being characterised as an abode of the spirits:

[T]he deep ocean is black, pitch black. Sunlight penetrates only the very uppermost layers of the water column: the bright blue veneer of the epipelagic zone; and the twilight blue realm below it, the mesopelagic zone Red light is the first to be absorbed, reaching only below the upper few metres [of the ocean water] before it is all but gone. As a result, the faces of passengers descending in an unlit submersible take on a grisly hue as the red tones are strained out. Everyone turns a revolting zombie-like shade of green. (pp. 49-50)

An Abyss on the Television: The Theatre of Indeterminacy

Genesis imposed the vision of the ‘great abyss’, a place of unfathomable mysteries, an uncharted liquid mass, the image of the infinite and the unimaginable over which the Spirit of God moved at the dawn of Creation. This quivering expanse, which symbolized, and actually was, the unknowable, was frightful in itself. There is no sea in the Garden of Eden (Corbin, 1994, pp. 1-2)

Previously, I articulated my interpretation of the construction of the individual as a shaping of the void and, in doing so, framed the notion of a sensation of the abyss as a sense, an impression, of the individual. Building upon this interpretation in the following case study, I have chosen to focus on an episode in the BBC’s Natural World series entitled *The Abyss* (Fisher, Brownlee, Farkas, Blackman, & Cooper, 2002).

The “classic” ethos of the activity of science includes the qualities of being “impersonal and objective”, where the researcher “maintains a distance from what they are studying and ... remain cold and rational” (Sjøberg, 2000). I make this acknowledgement as a preface to my discussion because I make some observations that draw attention to devices that are characteristic of natural science documentaries as a televisual format. For example, in my

discussion of *The Abyss*, I refer to Humble's use of a yellow finned Tuna to bait creatures that inhabit the abyssal plain that she is exploring. The staging of events in the name of entertainment is not a device that is limited to this program. However, in clarifying my acknowledgement of this, I make the point that they are nevertheless a part of the playing out of interpretations of the abyss in popular contemporary culture. Nevertheless, the specificities (and ideologies) of the natural science documentary as a genre contribute to the overall conception of the abyss that is being portrayed. Roy (2005) says:

The danger of today's genre of wildlife programs is that they falsely reassure audiences with an appearance of plenty, while an entire generation is created with a confrontational view of nature based on human dominance over animals. Victims of the tyranny of formula, popular programs would have us believe the animal kingdom is locked in an eternal, ferocious feeding frenzy. An endless stream of ultimate, ruthless, fanged and fearsome killers on the dangerous battlefields of nature! Really it is us who are feasting on what little remains with a self-imposed entitlement to capture, wrestle, wrangle, throttle, eat, prod, harass, dominate and manipulate our animal subjects at will.

By addressing the way that the abyss is represented in this production, I am able to demonstrate how the notion of a sensation of the abyss can also be interpreted as a sensationalisation of the abyss. To sensationalise something can mean to "restrict a concept to what is given in sensation" (Brown, 1993a, p. 2775). I have used this definition when discussing the way that a sense of the abyss can be understood as a sensation of the individual, both in terms of it being a means to achieving a sense of the notion individual and in terms of the abyss, a sense of indeterminacy, being something that the individual can experience throughout everyday thinking.

To sensationalise something can also mean to use or exploit something “to stimulate public interest” (Brown, 1993a, p. 2775). This implies a motivated exaggeration of a particular point of interest. Referring to *The Abyss*, the abyss can be identified as one that has been subjected to such a treatment. In as much as depictions of the abyss rely on the imagination it can be said that they may be, in some way, making ‘something out of nothing’. This notion of the creation, a construction, of an abyss can be viewed as a literal reflection in as much as the abyss is described as a place of nothingness. The shaping of an interpretation of the abyss, then, can present as a process of shaping nothing into something. Conceiving of beasts in the abyss, such as are featured in its characterisation as a hell for example, become the features of an inevitable fabrication.

By constructing the abyss in a particular way, broadcasting bodies can custom design any meaning that they see fit to be read into the representation they provide. It is through this power of control that particular attitudes to the unknown and to the unfamiliar, and to the experience of indeterminacy in general, can be prescribed and disseminated by means of the abyss with the intent of achieving a desired cultural outcome. The narratives of the abyss, invested in mass media productions, may be thought of as offering ideological frameworks for the reflexive negotiation of indeterminacy in everyday thinking, and it is in this way that I am approaching the examples in this chapter.

It is in keeping with these considerations regarding the mass media direction of reflexivity and the sensationalisation of the abyss that I am approaching *The Abyss*. Throughout the following discussion I treat this programme as my primary focus, though I also refer to other cultural texts that complement my discussion. The abyss, represented by the ocean’s depths, can be identified as

the main character, the central reference point in this programme and the focus of a spectacle. "The abyss is not popular, but it fascinates" (Natoli, 1998, p. 17). I also discuss the way that an analysis of this programme can inform an understanding of the way that the individual, as void, is shaped. The programme's negotiation of the indeterminacy of the viewer, through use of the abyss, is a part of this discussion.

The abyss functions as an ideological reference point for the discourse contained in this programme, as a means to making sense of the visuality, or lack thereof, that is provided for the viewer. The abyss, in this context, is interpreted predominantly in terms of a number of creation mythologies because it is a vast watery mass. However, other paradigmatic representations of the abyss are referred to at various stages in the programme.

The programme *The Abyss* has been constructed from footage taken during deep-sea explorations at three alternative dive sites around America. Each body of footage provides interpretations and negotiations of the watery abyss from within. It is a British programme, using British media figures, that has been made primarily for a British audience. It is presented mainly by Peter Snow, who is stationed in Monterey Bay just off the West Coast of California, in the Pacific Ocean. Snow's commentary, recorded on a research ship called the *Western Flyer*, exists as the primary dialogue. He can be observed as the representative of the three divers and, in this way, representative of culture's technologically facilitated descent into the depths of nature, presumably beyond the bounds of culture. It would seem that the following interpretation emphasises the culture nature dichotomy as a characteristic of the programme *The Abyss*.

Snow's commentary of the abyss draws on assumptions pertaining to the unknown and the unfamiliar, and to the sensation of indeterminacy. His commentary is delivered in a way that is appealing to the viewing audience. Speakers UK supply motivational speakers and after dinner speakers and they also provide profiles on each individual that they represent. They (Speakers UK, 2005) describe Peter Snow "a genuine house hold name. Probably most famously known for his Swingometer during elections and for his sand pit during the Gulf War Peter really brings to life topics that most would consider boring". Snow spent eighteen years presenting *Newsnight* and moved on to *Tomorrow's World* in 1997. "His quick wit and enthusiasm makes him an ideal choice for many events, dinners and other special occasions" (Speakers UK, 2005). Snow's career as a news reader enables him to be used as a courier of worldly facts. His career history enables him to explore the abyss on behalf of the British viewing public. Snow's familiar face becomes an important element when packaging this programme, by providing a sense of security for the public as they descend, by proxy, into the depths of the unfamiliar. Snow reports the journey back to the public in a manner that they can understand and believe and, therefore, remains a useful tool in the re-affirmation of a particular cultural interpretation of the abyss. However, by appealing to pre-established western cultural paradigms of the abyss, Snow also draws attention to the limits of an area of cultural knowledge. Of course, that knowledge to which I am referring is an understanding of the unknown.

The ability to take dull stories and turn them into exciting presentations has been a necessary feature of his skills base and there are certainly opportunities to put this skill into action throughout *The Abyss*. Peter Snow's long history as a news presenter keeps his performance well within the bounds of credibility and attributes an air of the conceivable and of the

imaginable to his commentary on the depths of the abyss, a notion associated with the unimaginable and that which remains beyond conceivability.

This programme is also narrated by Kate Humble, who is stationed by the Cayman Wall in the heart of the Caribbean, and by Alastair Fothergill, who is stationed by the mid-Atlantic Ridge. Humble has presented a variety of science and wildlife programmes including *Tomorrow's World* and Fothergill is a BBC producer.²² Together, with Snow, these three individuals provide the programme with a series of underwater reference points, each focussing on a descent into the depths of the ocean.

During the first minutes of *The Abyss*, Snow offers the viewer an idea of the Bay of Monterey's underwater landscape. He notes that "there is something unique about this place" and notes that it has "an extraordinary under sea canyon, deeper than the Grand Canyon". Snow uses this famous feature of the American landscape, a popular tourist destination, as a means to inform the viewer as to the scale of this particular under water landscape, one that is

²² Though there is no available information to suggest that surnames Humble and Fothergill are clues to a self-aware and hidden message in the television broadcast *The Abyss*, I find that their meanings prove quite an interesting coincidence. For example, the word *humble* means "of modest dimensions, pretensions etc." (Brown, 1993b, p. 1277). One of the fascinating things about the deep-sea abyss is its vastness. The abyss, implying seeming infinity in any case, has no modest dimensions. Maybe, in comparison, cultural boundaries which are invested in Humble throughout her descent can be interpreted as modest. It is possible that the word *modesty* can be appropriately used when describing how confined knowledge seems to be in the face of the unknown, in the midst of indeterminacy. After all, Humble needs to draw upon her pretensions to make sense of the abyss and to communicate her interpretations in a way that appeal to the home viewer. In addition, with regard to the surname *Fothergill*, the base meaning for the word *fother* is "'stretch out', as in FATHOM" (Brown, 1993b, p. 1013). In this sense, the notion of fathoming the abyss is entirely relevant in a discussion that questions the sufficiency with which this can be done in an "unfathomable cavity or void space" (Brown, 1993a, p. 11). The word *gill* means "a measure of liquid or (in Britain) dry capacity, containing a quarter of a pint: in Britain (more fully *imperial gill*)" (Brown, 1993b, p. 1089). The abyssal plains exist under a significantly vast measure of liquid, though this quantity is much more than a quarter of a pint. It is interesting that both parts of this surname, as well as Humble, allude to the inherent precariousness with which cultures negotiate the abyss.

not inhabitable by human beings. Working to further inform the viewers understanding of this geographical context, he draws on the viewer's knowledge of their own geographical context. Snow states that this canyon "begins just off shore and, within a few miles, reaches depths of well over a mile. If we were in Britain, to find waters this deep we'd have to be hundreds of miles out into the heart of the Atlantic". This comparison helps to separate the British viewer from whatever abyss is to be featured in the programme.

If the abyss represents the most unknown part of nature, an active distancing of the viewer from a site of the abyss can be a reminder to the individual that they are well within, and maybe also safely within, the bounds of culture. In this way, I believe that it is not only a reminder but also a form of reassurance in the knowledge that the unknown is a long way away. This act of Othering the abyss alienates the notion of the unknown and, in this way, also alienates the notion of indeterminacy. If this act of distancing the individual from the abyss is addressed as a means to identifying a way that indeterminacy is negotiated, then it can be suggested that this act stands as less of a negotiation of the limits and more as a means to their affirmation.

Similar to an artist such as Delville, who drew from his imagination in order to construct a picture of the indecipherable, to compose a visual determination of the indeterminable abyss as hell, the programme *The Abyss* may be interpreted as an illustration of the limitations of the individual. How can the exploratory process, in as much as it is a process of extending the boundaries of understanding, be negotiated without the disclosure of these boundaries? It seems that a programme that presents the abyss in some way also presents, even subtly, an utterance of them. The exploratory process can be perceived as one in which the accommodation of reflexivity is critical. Having

motivated my criticism of the programme to which I am paying attention, I have carried these considerations throughout this discussion.

This show is a cultural construction, one that has been organised and edited and arrived as an electronic package for home viewers. In a domestic context, the individual experiences a mediated journey into the abyss. They can explore the 'unknown' by proxy, going where no one else has gone and where, likely, most people will never have the ability to venture. They are offered the opportunity to perceive themselves as being a part of an event in which the limits of the human understanding of the natural world is being negotiated, whilst remembering that they are separated from the abyss and from the threats that the unknown might present. What is beyond those very limits or, at least, what symbolises that which is beyond those limits? It is by using familiar cultural reference points that this program interprets whatever exists beyond these limits. It is in this way that an interpretation of the abyss can be understood as a reflection, not so much of the abyss, but of the paradigms and of the limitations of the culture which constructs that interpretation. This function of the abyss has continued from historical cultural contexts into the late modern age.

This program presents a particular ideological construction of the abyss that has been taken from one cultural context and imported into another on the other side of the world. The import(ation) of an idea about the abyss, of a sensation of the abyss, is significant in that it functions in both contexts. When discussing the notion of hell I made reference to Van Scott's (1998, intro., p. 1) understanding that "belief in a hell is universal". The incorporation of Snow and company's observations, of fauna that conjure images of this abyss, can be regarded as a useful marketing strategy, ensuring mass appeal.

By viewing a programme such as *The Abyss*, the viewer observes a series of navigations through what arguably are the most extreme of natural environments. The limits of the individual's understanding of the abyssal environment are constructed in line with the information that is being transmitted to them via the television set or the internet. The show begins with an allusion to the action that is yet to be seen, and it uses the abyss to organise and contextualise this information. The abyss is then used as a cultural reference point throughout the program, during which time the information contained in it goes some way to resolving the viewer's indeterminacy as to what lives down in the depths of the abyss, to resolving the curiosity that has been aroused in the viewer. The individual can perceive themselves to be gaining a sense of the abyss, however mediated and second hand this sensation is, without having to move from the site of the television set. The limits of this mediated experience are pre-determined. By the time the viewer receives the broadcast, its parameters have already been set. The individual's understanding of the abyss is shaped by the information provided in this context, in a limited space and time. The program is finite and so any contribution to the information it contains must be located outside of the boundaries it possesses.

Snow is stationed on the *Western Flyer* and comments on the deep-sea footage sent back from an unmanned submersible. Humble and Fothergill, each descending in their submersible, respond to the deep-sea environment. They communicate eye witness accounts of whatever is occurring outside their highly reinforced portholes, as well as offering any other information that they perceive may be of relevance.

These three identified abyssal environments provide veritable, and perceivably unfathomable, three dimensional aquatic stages. Contained

within the parameters of these stages, are the descents of a group of individuals. These individuals appear as the 'cast of the show' and it is they who, throughout the duration of the programme, can be observed 'acting out' their roles as deep-sea explorers. The abyssal stages, in which these actors are at work, are idiosyncratically pitch black and it is their task to navigate these depths in search of anything that is down there to be seen. In order to make sense of the aquatic abyss, and because the success of each dive cannot be ensured, the processes of exploration require reflexive negotiation.

The scenes of exploration of which this programme is comprised trace the journeys of each active explorer. Like the individual who acts out a developing project of the self in direct negotiation with sensations of indeterminacy, each explorer acts out their negotiation of a project of the abyss. These actors navigate their respective abyssal stage in an attempt to observe and interpret this stage. In making such an attempt they participate in, and contribute to, the broadcast of what can be understood as a theatre of indeterminacy. In each case, the progress of the explorers can stand as an ongoing metaphor for the way that indeterminacy resulting from new and unfamiliar experiences is negotiated. It is in this sense that the act of exploration, as it is observed by the viewer, can be understood as the unfolding of a paradigm applicable to everyday thinking. Even though the exploration of the depths of the ocean are beyond the limits of common everyday experience, at least with the state of modern technology, that this programme has been constructed for popular viewing suggests that it offers lessons for everyday experience.

The impression that the three dives have occurred simultaneously is reinforced by an editing process which has woven the contributions of the

explorers into a unified narrative. Drawing from the information that I have presented regarding the paradigmatic representations of the abyss and the issues involved in their articulation, sections of dialogue from the programme *The Abyss* act as reference points for my discussion.

I shall now refer to the initial monologue of the programme *The Abyss*.²³ Provided by Snow, this introductory passage supports my interpretation that the aquatic abyss takes on the role of a celebrity, at the centre of the viewer's attention and framed by proclamations of excitement and immediacy. He opens the programme with the announcement that it is a "broadcasting first". He continues to explain that the crew's day has been spent "watching dives in three submarines". Snow says that volcanic activity under the Atlantic has been observed, as well as deep-sea sharks in the Caribbean and deep-sea creatures in the Bay of Monterey. He concludes this introduction by stating that some of the creatures have "hardly ever seen before" and by informing the viewer that "now is your chance to catch up with some of the action that we've seen today from the abyss".

What function does this programme serve by referring directly to the abyss, not least of all by assuming the role of namesake, rather than by carrying the title of *Underwater Dives*, for example? Is it simply a means to showing pictures of perceivably unusual looking creatures? For this end it could well have been enough for a production crew to construct a deep-sea programme from footage taken during a series of dives at different times. However, in his introductory commentary, Snow makes the point of stating that this

²³ Snow introduces the programme *The Abyss* with the following words: "Now, today has been a broadcasting first. Over the day we've been watching dives in three submarines, looking at volcanic activity under the Atlantic, deep-sea sharks under the Caribbean, and here, out in the Bay of Monterey, we've been watching deep sea creatures, some of them hardly ever seen before. And now is your chance to catch up with some of the action that we've seen today from the abyss."

particular programme is “a broadcasting first”. The viewer, in this particular instance myself, is provided with this information even when watching the British programme on Australian television the year after the event. In fact, because this information has been built into the construction of the programme, it functions as an ongoing reminder for any viewer who watches it at any time in the future. It was in observing this that I began to develop the understanding that using the abyss to facilitate a desire to inform the viewer of deep-sea environments was not its only function on the production agenda.

In the introduction to *The Abyss*, Snow has offered a series of allusions as to the kind of information that the viewer can expect from the footage that is presented in this programme. He uses the introduction as an opportunity to contextualise the programme as the documentation of a three part process of exploration, an example of a broader and ongoing body of research into deep-sea habitats. By addressing the viewer directly, and by asserting ‘your chance’, Snow implies audience participation. I would argue, though, that the reality of this involvement is somewhat tenuous due to obvious discrepancies in time and space between the viewer and the oceanic sites of action. In any case, Snow’s introduction makes an appeal to the curiosity of the viewer. He refers to the importance of the moment, the ‘now’, and urges their attention to the narrative at hand. Berlyne (cited in Edelman, 1997) believes “curiosity is a motivational prerequisite for exploratory behaviour [noting that] Exploration refers to all activities concerned with gathering information about the environment”. Berlyne (cited in Edelman, 1997) says that this raises:

the conflict and question of whether exploratory behaviour should be defined in terms of the movements that an animal or human performs while exploring or in terms of the goal

or purpose of the behaviour observed. A clear distinction between these two may not always be possible.

This information draws attention to the question of what motivates exploratory behaviour. The viewer may experience a sense of curiosity towards the programme because they have been told that something has been happening without being informed of the full scope of detail. In this sense, the sense of curiosity instilled in the viewer can be interpreted as a result of the conditional sequestration of information. The viewer is denied of particular details and promised, indirectly, that these details will be made available only if the individual takes the time to witness the duration of the programme.

Shadowy in appearance, floating digital graphics bring to the opening sequence a sense of the dynamism between the limited scope of mechanical technological advances and the seemingly unlimited vastness of the organic depths of the abyss. Snow extends his commentary by referring to a submersible *Tiburon*. During the time that the *Tiburon* is being navigated through the deep-sea Snow, accompanied by Bruce Robison and Mike de Gruy, remain seated in a room full of monitors to which the footage captured by the *Tiburon* is transmitted. Snow notes that the *Tiburon* is “one of the most advanced unmanned subs in the world. It’s covered in cameras and it’s going to be our eyes on the alien world below us”.

The notion of the alien alludes to that which is other than the familiar. It is something “belonging to another” (Brown, 1993b, p. 51). Snow’s dialogue presents the viewer with the understanding that the abyssal is alien. This interpretation of the Other contextualises it as something that is “out of harmony [and] out of character” (Brown, 1993b, p. 51). It becomes

evident, throughout this discussion, that giving abyssal fauna such names as Vampire Squid from Hell, and Ogrefish, lends itself to a demonisation of the Other; a demonising of the abyss in as much as the limitations of the individual ensure that they are, for the most part, alienated from this kind of environment.

Not only an alienation of the abyss, but also the function of this contextualisation as a means to supporting the cultural agenda of a television broadcast, can be identified in the 50's style black and white science fiction film *Planet der Kannibalen* (Planet of the Cannibals). This German language film, set in Hamburg in the year 2020, is about a ratings war between two television empires, Alphaplus and Eurolux (Blumenberg, 2001). One of the main characters, Emma Trost (played by Minh-Khai Phan-Thi), is a member of Alphaplus' team and in charge of Trend Management. It is her job to "analyse the latest socio-cultural trends and deduce popular program concepts" (Blumenberg, 2001). She is called to the home of Professor Best (played by Peter Fitz) where she is told that there is irrefutable proof that aliens exist and that three of them live in Germany, passing for human. It becomes her task to locate the aliens so that they can be used in an extreme game show and in order to win the war.

A discussion between the two characters, with both standing out the front of the Professor's residence and staring off into the night, starts with Professor Best's question to Emma (Blumenberg, 2001). "What do you see?" "Nothing. Darkness. Blackness", she replies. "They're out there somewhere and we'll present them", says Professor Best. "Them?", Emma asks. The Professor replies, "Extraterrestrial beings, aliens, messengers of another universe, live and exclusive at Alphaplus".

This dialogue reinforces an association between notions of darkness and nothingness, illustrating the way that an inability to see anything can lead to the erroneous belief that nothing is there. But this dialogue also reinforces the 'alienation' of those who, disguised as everyday individuals, are perceived to reside in this darkness, unseen within the abyss. Within the context of *Planet der Kannibalen*, the 'aliens in the darkness' are sought because they are perceived to be a means of securing Alphaplus' defeat over Eurolux.

It is worth noting that, during the conversation between these two Alphaplus associates, a statue of Liberty is visible in the background between them, illuminated in the night air. This detail can be interpreted as being suggestive of a television, or popularity, war between the US (Alphaplus) and the European Union (Eurolux). As I viewed this scene, I found it to be a strong reminder of the way that Snow and the other presenters in the program *The Abyss* seem to have approached the deep-seas around the United States as opportunities to enjoy ratings success, through their 'transmission' to the viewing public of footage of 'alien creatures', aliens 'on show'. It seems logical to suggest that if the underwater abyss was not expected to be a ratings success, if it were not in some way entertaining, there would have been no point investing in the program's concept to begin with.

Throughout the duration of the deep-sea descents, and so long as they are navigating an unfamiliar habitat and one in which they could not live, it can be understood that the explorers are the aliens that, by identifying the depths as an alien world, they make themselves the Other. In as much as the human being acts upon a desire to determine the depths, *The Abyss* functioning as an example of this desire, and not the other way around, maybe it is the individual that is the monster. What is conceivably more out of harmony, the gaping mouth of an Anglerfish or the sight of a human being meandering

around in pitch darkness in an environment with a pressure fifty times that experienced on the surface of the ocean.

It seems fair to say that *The Abyss* is as much about culture as it is about nature, as much about demonstrating industrial culture's technological capacity to fathom the abyss, as it is about the depths themselves. The submersible known as *Tiburón* plays a role in this demonstration. Giddens (1991, pp. 136-7) discusses how "human intervention in the natural world has been so profound, and so encompassing, that today we can speak of the 'end of nature'". He (1991, p. 137) cites McKibben's point that "socialised nature" is partly characterised by its failure to offer any of the "consolations" of old nature such as "the retreat from the human world, a sense of permanence, or even of eternity".

The efforts of the divers, in *The Abyss*, demonstrate their attempts to socialise the abyss, to fathom its seeming endlessness knowing full well that it must have an end that human kind can achieve. The abyss, historically, alludes to eternity and infinity. By theoretically positioning the end of the abyss at a point beyond determination, knowing well enough that this natural environment must be contained and so must have a material end, the significance of any ground gained in the abyss is heightened. The sensation of the abyss is capitalised upon as is industrial culture's sense of mastery. However it is in this way that, despite all the expensive technology that supports each deep-sea descent, I understand the determination of industrial culture to fathom the abyss to be the documentation of its imposition upon the abyss.

Nature provides the stage though it is the programme *The Abyss*, a cultural construction, which dictates the way that the viewer should observe and

interpret a series of aquatic natural environments. The answers to the viewer's questions as to how the abyss is to be interpreted have been pre-determined and catered for through the dialogue that is offered during the programme. How might I interpret the place where a watery abyss has been identified? The viewer who asks such a question does not need to sense indeterminacy for too long, nor do they need to venture further than the television set for their negotiation of this sensation.

Each of the three explorers articulates their feelings with regard to the forthcoming descent. Referring to the ocean in Monterey Bay, Snow provides a preliminary answer to the abyss in his suggestion that "there is something unique about this place". He continues by saying that "[i]t has an extraordinary under sea canyon, deeper than the Grand Canyon, that begins just off-shore and, within a few miles reaches depths of well over a mile". I take this opportunity to point out that the word 'extraordinary' is used on numerous occasions throughout this programme. The word is repeatedly used to express something that is "[o]ut of the usual or regular course of order [or the] kind of thing usually met with" (Brown, 1993b, p. 897). Through repeated use of this word, connoting the exceptional and the unseen or unexpected, it becomes almost a rhetorical anchor for communicating impressions of the abyss and each time, also, exposing a limit of language.

The initial presentations offered by Kate Humble and Alastair Fothergill, in the programme *The Abyss*, seem to anticipate the individual's precariousness in the watery abyss. What I mean by this is that their navigation of the abyss, and the commentary they provide, can be interpreted as demonstrative of an imposition upon the creatures of the abyss and, in this way, upon the abyss itself. Just as artists who depicted the abyss were forced to draw on their

powers of imagination in order to determine the indeterminable, so too do the interpretations and observations of these explorers seem to be shaped by their cultural context. I refer to an example of each of these two presenters respectively.

At the surface Humble expresses her indeterminacy by saying “I have no idea how deep it is down there and, more importantly, I have no idea of what lives down there ... probably more people have been to space than they have been to the depths of the ocean”.²⁴ This statement can be thought to echo the establishing shot in a sitcom, an initial point of insight that serves to contextualise the events that are to follow. Therefore, the sensation of indeterminacy takes on the role of the establishing shot. While waiting to descend into the abyss, Fothergill also takes the opportunity to articulate his feelings. He explains “At the moment I’m feeling a wonderful mixture of complete excitement and total terror ... It’s totally dark. It’s very, very cold down there”.

Fothergill tells the viewer that, in view of his descent into an abyss, his imagination is running wild. He is also suggestive of the impact of his exploration, sharing his understanding that “[t]here’s absolutely no light whatsoever down there from the surface and we’re illuminating it, and I have to say that if there’s any wildlife down there they’re going to get one hell of a shock”. With these comments, Fothergill presupposes a negotiation with the abyss that is guided by historical paradigms.

²⁴ This sense of journeying into the unknown was addressed by Jean-Michel Cousteau when he said, “The people who were putting up millions of dollars were asking my father, ‘So, Captain, what do you expect to find?’ and his answer to those people who were about to make major commitments was, ‘If I knew, I wouldn’t go’” (2004, p. 108).

It is important to note that these impressions, while useful techniques in setting the stage for an experience of *The Abyss*, are not particular to this program. Keener-Chavis and Coble (2005/06) say that outer space and the oceans depths:

have historically and inextricably been linked with “exploration” and “discovery” since the beginning of humankind [by] [a]stronomers and sailors – explorers driven by the human spirit of discovery and a fundamental “need to know”. (p. 1)

Beasts of the Abyss?

I decided to give this part of my discussion this particular title because it appeals to the abyss as hellish, perceivably a place of darkness in which monsters and demons await the souls of sinners. It is a title that may evoke images of perceivably disfigured and gnarling beasts, potentially the stuff of nightmares.

The ocean depths are home to a phantasmagoria of bizarre creatures, ranging from the footballfish to the ‘vampire squid from hell’. Living in the dark at crushing depths, the animals below are rarely seen by human beings. (Tyson, 2000)

However, my decision was motivated by a desire to criticise this perception rather than support it. I question the extent to which inhabitants of the abyssal plains are actually beasts. For me, such an assumption recalls the image of an elephant recoiling at the sight of a mouse. The perceived threat does not need to be comparatively large in size but can simply feed into the notion of the unknown, arousing a sensation of indeterminacy in the individual by possessing, at first at least, a frightening unfamiliarity. The Angler fish is one of the creatures that play into this fear despite the fact that,

in documented cases, “[t]he length of the fish body is about 5 inches [approximately 12.5cm]” (Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife).

Although this fish has been identified, contemporary culture has not yet been able to determine its species or family. I find myself recalling questions of origin and relation when reading information that attempts to classify this creature of the abyss. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (2001) refer to both the Genus/species and Order/family of the Anglerfish as yet “to be determined”. Both these categories are points of cultural indeterminacy. The fish remains in the category of ‘undecidable’ which, according to Collins and Mayblin (2000, p. 19), comprises of things that “are threatening. [Undecidables] poison the comforting sense that we inhabit a world governed by decidable categories”.

According to Derrida (1987, p. 89) the abyss is a place “where beauty takes us by surprise. It announces it, but is not beautiful in itself. It gives rise to the beautiful”. Employing the interpretation of the self-referential nature of the abyss, what might the conception of monstrosity or beauty in the abyss disclose about the construction of the individual? In this discussion, I identify and discuss instances in which this type of interpretation can be applied as a means to addressing these questions and, in this way, as a means to continuing to demonstrate an understanding of the function of the abyss in contemporary culture.

“Ever wonder what life would be like if a new form of sea life began to appear in locales all over the earth?” (Pate et al., 2005b). So long as the “abyssal plain ... covers 40 percent of the world’s sea floor” (Batson, 2003, p. 28), and keeping in mind the Perth Abyssal Plain that lies north of the Naturaliste Plateau, this possibility remains distinctly local. In this case, with

what means might a Western Australian cultural negotiation of such a possibility be prefigured? I address this question by discussing a mass media text and the cultural message that I believe it communicates.

The abyss as a place of monsters, established through a disfiguration of the Other, is a central feature of *Surface* (Pate et al., 2005a), a U.S. drama series recently aired on Australian television that centres on the appearance of mysterious sea creature in the deep ocean. “‘Surface’ is entertainment for all ages in the tradition of ‘E.T.’ and ‘Close Encounters,’. It will have action, suspense, thrills and heart as we track the fantastic into the familiar” (Pate et al., 2005b). By sensationalising the abyss, drawing upon paradigms of this notion, this series presents itself as a path from the darkness and discomfort of indeterminacy into the light and comfort of the familiar. From the outset, sets up its ability to bring a sense of resolution to the abyss and seems to imply that this resolution can be achieved through the sensationalisation of this notion. I shall now address some scenes from this programme to complement my discussion of *The Abyss*.

The character Laura Daughtery, played by Lake Bell, is an oceanographer who is based at the Monterey Oceanographic Institute, bordering the exact same area of ocean within which Snow is stationed throughout the programme *The Abyss*. At one point in the first episode Daughtery is in a submersible, exploring the deep-sea. She reaches a zone where there appears to be no bottom of the ocean. Within the context of the show, her impression is confirmed by the response of the depth sounder that records a rapidly increasing depth and then just goes off the chart. Daughtery soon becomes extremely frightened when something seems to be coming up from the depths. It is a large monster that, on first glance, seems to me to be a cross between a crocodile and a human.

This example is a direct reference to the abyss as a place where monsters live. It also supports a hybridised interpretation of the abyss in that a watery mass, recalling various creation mythologies, is inhabited by a creature that is frightening and monstrous, a beast of hell perhaps. This creature is an unknown quantity. Its species, at this point, is as indeterminable as is its familial origin, just like the Angler fish. In *Surface* the authorities, including government scientist Dr. Aleksander Cirko and Pentagon official Davis Lee, are keeping the existence of this creature a secret from the public. For instance, no-one really knows why they are not permitted to enter the local beach that, by Episode Two, is under military guard. They contain the beach and, in doing so, support the symbolic function of the beach as a boundary between a determined culture and an indeterminable nature. In *Surface*, the control of the authorities begins with culture but extends into the depths of nature, beyond the beach.

It seems in this case, as is the case throughout programmes in the vein of the X-Files and the like, that the resolution to public indeterminacy as to what is going on is conceived to lie in the hands of government officials. *Surface* also plays into this assumption by presenting insight into the abyss as that which is being sequestered from the public gaze, in turn suggesting that difference, granted extreme difference, is likely to cause a mass panic.

Through the use of fictitious characters, this programme supports the assumption that figures of authority hold the keys to knowledge of the abyss and, in this way, reinforce an understanding of the individual as one who is subjected to it. In as much as the abyss functions as a metaphor for the unknown, this dynamic between authority and the public gives validation to mass ignorance. For centuries religious institutions have upheld assumptions about the shape of the abyss, using paradigms of Original Chaos and hell as

a means to social control. Their function has been to reinforce cultural norms by shaping everyday thinking about the unknown beyond them. *Surface* depicts similar power relationships by playing out a struggle between the knower and their desire, somewhat paradoxically, to contain that which they are learning of (the abyss) in a manner that keeps this information away from the unwittingly unaware. It presents a disruption of assumptions regarding an 'unknown' unknown.

Though what about the right to know? This issue is also raised in *Surface* in Episode Two. During a visit to the Monterey Oceanographic Institute, Daughtery learns that she is no longer allowed to conduct her deep-sea research. An official military letter confirms this recent development. She (Pate et al., 2005a) argues with a colleague who supports his compliance to military demands by stating, among other things, "I'm a citizen ..." and Daughtery replies "So am I, and I have a right to my own work and a right to my own research and a right to know what's down there. In this scene Daughtery asserts her desire to fathom the indeterminable, to gaze into the abyss and yet this desire is being obstructed by the governing bodies. To be ignorant of your ignorance is one thing, at least this is a form of unawareness in which the parameters of your understanding are left undisturbed, but to suspect that something is being kept from you, something that lies beyond these boundaries, promotes a sense of indeterminacy with its very own abyss. It is fitting, then, that Daughtery is experiencing this problem of indeterminacy in direct relation to a part of the ocean known as the abyss. She asserts her right to experience the abyss, for her understanding to be shaped by it.

In *Surface*, when knowledge of creatures from the abyss is learned, an understanding is provided that refers straight back to the abyss and to the

paradigms that depict it. For example, during Episode Two, the young male character known as Miles has found an unusual looking egg out of which soon hatches what appears to be a baby version of the larger deep-sea monster. After some time has passed the baby monster starts to look unwell. Though is this image of a baby monster not an oxymoron, one that can be placed in the category of 'undecidable' due to it being infantile and in this way presumably harmless, too young maybe to realise its own monstrous potential, and in this way teasing the viewer with the hope that it may evade this fate. Here I recount Collins and Mayblin's (2000, p. 19) suggestion that "[u]ndecidables are threatening. They poison the comforting sense that we inhabit a world governed by decidable categories".

It lies in a bath tub with its webbed hand holding its stomach and looking back at Miles with a seemingly pained and sorrowful expression, as Miles thinks hard as to what the problem might be. The answer comes to him the morning after a party at his home. Miles' (Pate et al., 2005a) friend mentions that the party was "live as Hell!" to which Miles exclaims "That's it! Live as Hell!" He immediately returns to the place where he is hiding the baby monster and remedies its discomfort by feeding it a live fish. But the problem has not been resolved by a single meal, for the creature is still within the boundaries of nature. It is still an unknown quantity, and whose monster is he feeding anyway? Nietzsche's (1911, p. 97) thought on the reflective qualities of the abyss is worth raising here in full. "He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee". Himmelfarb (1994, p. 25) identifies the self-referential nature of Nietzsche's warning about the abyss, saying that "[w]hen Nietzsche looked into the abyss, he saw not only real beasts but the beast in himself".

The image of an infant creature being nurtured by an adolescent male in *Surface* symbolises the potential for this kind of cultivation of the individual, and possibly alludes to a conflict between culture and nature in the process of self-construction. In Nietzsche's case, this process eventuated in his descent "into the depths of insanity" (Himmelfarb, 1994, p. 26). The case of Miles is somewhat different though. He is in his formative years, a period of time across which he will reach from the position of the boy, to the Other position, that of the adult male. These years present as an in-between space throughout which Miles can address the questions, "Who am I, and what do I want for myself?"

In *Surface* the creature emerged from an egg of the abyss, an egg of creation that has given birth to a creature of hell, just as the abyss of creation also appears in the Judaeo-Christian tradition as an abyss of destruction. Miles has adopted this piece of the abyss, a shape of the indeterminable with which he can play out his own sense of indeterminacy, and he is evidently occupied by his concern for its well being. He can be observed feeding this indeterminable, nurturing it, because he wants to make it better and yet it will only be a matter of time before the solution becomes metabolised and before Miles has to face the realisation that the maintenance of indeterminacy is an ongoing project.

On the surface this scene can be appreciated for the way it has attempted to make something obvious seem quite surprising, the remedy for discomfort that food inevitably is. But beneath this veneer can be detected a direct reference to the interpretation of the abyss as a place of hell and, in this way, a confirmation that hell is where the monsters live. Again, as I discussed in *An Abyss on the Television; the Theatre of Indeterminacy*, this scene reinforces an association between monsters and the abyss and, in turn, an alienation of the

Other that continues to cast a negative light on the notion of the unknown. In addition, this scene also raises the notion of indeterminacy as that which the individual can continue to feed and that this process is informative. Curiosity and indeterminacy with regard to the behaviour of the creature of the abyss are pervasiveness in Miles' thinking because there is a gap between the boundaries of his culturally constructed understanding and knowledge of the abyss. In Miles' (Pate et al., 2005c) writing several expressions of this lack of awareness, that denote the early stages of his negotiation of sensations of indeterminacy, are predominant:

I wish I could have seen the fish get eaten. I mean what happened in that tank? Was it a gnarly attack? Or did he take them in one bite? Did he swallow them whole? Or take them down half-a-fish by half-a-fish. It would have been awesome to watch.

The existence of cultural boundaries, whether in the form of military personnel or simply in the form of a fence or sign, that aim to keep the individual at a distance from a part of nature that has been interpreted as an abyss, is something that I continue to identify throughout these discussions. In the case of *Surface*, the authority figures that possess knowledge of the abyss and yet keep it from the public are the government bodies and military personnel. The programme *The Abyss* also has an authority figure that provides limited information of the abyss and which uses this to mediate an understanding of the ocean depths. In this case that person is Peter Snow, who has authority when it comes to information from being a news icon, benefits from the assumption that knowledge is power.

Considering the dialogue contained within *Surface* as well as the commentary provided by the three deep-sea explorers in the programme *The Abyss*, the potential of the watery abyss to bring about novel experiences is evident.

Both programmes feed a demand for novel experience, and what promises more novelty than that which cannot be entirely fathomed, which will therefore always offer something new? What is more novel than the abyss?

Allusions to the unpredictability of the abyss reinforce the impression that what the viewer is witnessing, and is about to witness, remains on the cutting edge of deep-sea discovery. Throughout the duration of the programme, each new moment is one in which anything could happen. In each new moment the individual can ask, "What is happening now? How am I to interpret this occurrence? What might happen next?" An impression that the future is an abyss, as I have proposed previous to this chapter, is reinforced here. These questions, these expressions of indeterminacy, are appropriate for the ongoing negotiation of the project of the self, in the construction of self-identity. But they can also be understood as playing a role in the construction of a sense of suspense and anticipation, one that is representative of the experiences of the presenters as they negotiate an interpretation of the abyss.

But in what form might the unexpected come? What, through the depths of the abyssal landscape and to the attention of the individual, might the future bring? The answer to this question may lie in our interpretations of the creatures that live down there. The depths of the ocean have been named abyss, and the inhabitants of such regions are named in accordance with the meanings associated with this concept. Corbin (1994, p. 13) refers to historical notions of the sea, noting that "discovering the abyss ... [became] a compulsory stage in a voyage experienced as an initiatory rite [V]isitors laughed at how slight the danger actually was, while at the same time relishing their memories of child-like fright". Corbin also notes that, historically:

To attempt to fathom the mysteries of the ocean bordered on sacrilege, like an attempt to penetrate the impenetrable nature of God Consequently, the ocean inspired a deep sense of repulsion marine species, hidden in the mysterious darkness of the deep, could not be named by man. (p. 2)

In *The Abyss*, one of Snow's companions detects a Humboldt Squid on a monitor and offers some information about it. Robison comments that "these things are giant. They're two, three sometimes four feet long". The length of the squid on the monitor is not identified. The viewer is simply told of a possibility of the squid's length which could, in this instance, be as little as two feet and only sometimes could such a squid grow up to four feet. This allusion to length, and the insistence that a four foot squid should be considered a giant, contributes to a sensationalising of the identified animal, making it seem bigger than it possibly actually is. This aspect of an abyssal environment is subject to the embellishment of the interpreter. It can not be determined what the cameras will capture in their lenses during the dive and so it is the presenters' task to make the most of what is seen in view of the possibility that it will make it through the final edit.

On the experience of navigating the abyssal plains, Lawrence (2002) remarks:

the ocean floor was as flat and boring as the plains of West Texas are to a long-haul trucker. The depth measurements changed little for indeterminably long periods of time, leaving the scientist on watch little to do but mark down times on the recording strip in military style. (p. 163)

With the monitor still focussed on a squid moving slowly about in the water, it does not seem that there is much else to say about what is being observed. In what seems to be an attempt to liven up the commentary, de Gruy asks Robison a leading question. "You told me of a time when ink completely

surrounded the Tiburon and you had no vision whatsoever out of any cameras. Is that right?" Bruce replies: "It's like we floated into a black cloud. We couldn't see anything. The ink really works. It's very effective. It's shielding the squid from sight". With this recollection, the viewer is referred to an unseen moment, one that is itself remembered for its privation of visibility, its lack of vision. The viewer is asked to imagine nothing as a means to understanding something, that being a particular moment in the past in the watery abyss. The presenters communicate a point in time in which they have experienced a sensation of indeterminacy in the abyss. Credit for the arousal of this sensation goes to the Squid who relies partly on the ability to create visual indeterminacy for their survival.

I have discussed previously the notion that, in as much as the abyss cannot be adequately determined, and leading to the impression that it is chaotic for example, the individual is forced to draw from their mental bank of memories, ideas, and imagery, in order to make sense of the abyss. This instance, in which Snow and his colleagues have perceived visual stimulus in the abyss to be lacking, has resulted in Snow's decision to draw from their memories of deep-sea exploration. This contributes to, and enriches, a sense of the character of the abyss within the context of their present moment. In short, nothing could be seen in the abyss, and so external points of reference were utilised. The viewer, in this respect, could stare into the darkness, and imagine the events that are being articulated to them, the ink, the loss of vision, the sense of indeterminacy.

Because the abyss represents the indeterminable it cannot be adequately determined, but this also means that it cannot be predicted. It is in this way that it offers the potential for "something or for nothing to happen" (Lyotard, in Benjamin, 1989, p. 198). This notion is supported by Snow's question to

Robison: “How possible is it to discover something quite new?” Robison replies that it “happens frequently, far more often than you might expect”. He suggests that the “deeper we go the more frequently we find new animals and the deep sea is so poorly explored, we know so little about it, that almost every dive brings us something new”.

There are a variety of creatures that inhabit the watery depths of the abyssal plains. One of these is a kind of Anglerfish the known as *Melanocetus Johnsoni*. An image of this fish (Tyson, 2000) shows it to be a bulbous and fiery orange creature, with small blind eyes. Its jaw is somewhat reminiscent of decaying flesh and gapes open to expose a dark oral cavity. With this presentation, I could refer to such deep-sea examples as the *Melanocetus Johnsoni* as creatures that ‘lurk’ in the watery depths of the abyssal plains. However, I would argue this value judgement unnecessarily reinforces a dramatised interpretation of abyssal fauna as those who “move stealthily ... esp. for evil purposes” (Krebs, 1995, p. 506).

[T]he anglerfish *Melanocetus johnsoni* not only looks like a basketball, it looks like it could swallow one. Perhaps impressed by its rounded aspect, the scientist describing this ball of a fish even gave it a generic name that means ‘black whale’. Yet appearances can be deceiving. For all its ferocious aspect, the ‘common black-devil’, as this species is known, reaches a maximum length of five inches. (Tyson, 2000)

The following conversation from *The Abyss* about abyssal fauna is telling. Snow asks Robison, “What’s the most exciting thing you’ve ever captured like that?” “I think, without question,” [replies Robison] “the most exciting animal that we’ve ever captured is Vampyroteuthis [*Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, literally meaning ‘vampire squid from hell’]”.

An anecdote about a Vampire Squid is offered by de Gruy who is sitting beside Snow and Robison in the control room of the *Western Flyer*.²⁵ He says that it is about a foot long and that it is “absolutely magic”. Remembering a past experience of observing a Vampire Squid in front of cameras, du Gruy recalls how his associates brought the squid up and put it in a tank where “suddenly it started performing”. At this point in the programme Snow can be heard laughing in the background, apparently also amused by the thought of taking a deep-sea creature out of its natural environment enjoying it for its presence as an aesthetically pleasing spectacle. In addition, du Gruy mentions that all they had to do was give it “a little light” and give it “an opportunity and look at what this thing does”. The viewer is by now being shown the footage that du Gruy is referring to and can see how the black and red Vampire Squid continues to spin inside out and exposing the “wild” ‘cirri’ [fleshy spines] that exist on the underside of its body. However, this is not a show that the Vampire Squid puts on. It is a defence mechanism that it employs in an attempt to ward off possible threats. The squid was probably frightened. It was removed from its natural environment, put in a tank in front of film cameras and, inevitably, in front of lights, and it was simply trying to protect itself. Yet this goes unmentioned and, instead, the viewer is encouraged to overlook this also for the sake of entertainment.

Here, the abyss is quite literally placed on show, as it were, as a source of entertainment and of novel experiences. Here, the spectacle of the strange is

²⁵ Snow asks, “What’s the most exciting thing you’ve ever captured like that?” “I think, without, question,” [replies Robison] “the most exciting animal that we’ve ever captured is Vampyroteuthis.” De Gruy elaborates in the following way: “This thing is about a foot long, maybe slightly less, absolute magic. They brought this up, put it into a tank, and suddenly it started performing. [Snow can be heard laughing in the background] We just gave it a little light, gave it an opportunity and look at what this thing does. It just goes on and on, spinning inside out, exposing these wild ‘cirri’ [fleshy spines] underneath. It just kept going and going.”

entertaining, maybe in the same way that a circus might display the world's smallest man or a bearded lady. The publicly broadcast treatment of Vampire Squid is a prime example of the abyss becoming more a means to human entertainment than a place of scientific inquiry and provides grounds for Berylne's (cited in Edelman, 1997) concern that "[a] clear distinction between these two may not always be possible".

The experience of exploring the ocean at depths of up to 2.3 kilometres relies on the submersible technology available. The pressure at those depths is in excess of fifty times that experienced on the surface and so the abyss is necessarily negotiated in an industrialised and technological context. Part of the allure of the abyss is that it seems infinitely dark, but the explorers each need to illuminate their path in order to be able to make any kind of visual determinations. It is in this way that an explorer could never adequately achieve a sense of what it is like to experience the abyss for what it is. Only its creatures have adapted in such a way that they can safely inhabit the watery abyss. The experiences of the explorers sitting in the submersibles, not to mention the experiences of Snow and his associates who continue to view the monitors stationed at the surface of their location, are contingent on industrial mechanisms not natural ones.

Once well into the depths of the Caribbean, having descended down the side of the Cayman Wall, Humble makes the announcement that a depth of "300 metres" has been reached and she starts to inform the viewer of her intentions.²⁶ Humble says that Gary, who is in the submersible also, and her have brought a "65 pound yellow finned tuna" with them down into the

²⁶ Humble says: "We're at a thousand feet now, 300 metres. What we've done is bring a 65 pound yellow finned tuna with us and what Gary's doing is he's laid it on the floor and, um, we're going to back away from it, settle, down and, um, we hopefully will be able to attract in all these fantastic deep sea beasties and we will get a prime view from where we are."

abyss. They have done this so that they can lay it on the ocean floor and use it at bait for the abyssal fauna that may be nearby. Humble does not claim to know exactly what the tuna will attract though does disclose some presumptions when saying that “we hopefully will be able to attract in all these fantastic deep sea beasties and we will get a prime view from where we are”. Here, the abyss is once again put on show, raising Kilborn’s (2006) point that the “various kinds of dramatic interaction between representatives of ‘homo sapiens’ and members of the animal kingdom” have emerged over the last few years to accommodate “contemporary television’s requirement for action sequences and dramatic confrontations”. He (2006) adds that while “traditional wildlife film making has quite often resorted to the staging of events, the demands of contemporary television have meant that some form of dramatic enactment is now almost *de rigeur*”.²⁷

Time passes and little seems to be happening in the abyss. Humble comments on the fact that she is not receiving the underwater ‘show’ that she had hoped she would witness which, in as much as *The Abyss* is a television programme, means that the viewer is possibly also waiting in vain. This eventuality causes Humble some degree of annoyance.²⁸ She says that “[r]eally frustratingly we think we just spotted a shark right on the edge of our lights”. The shark has detected the scent of the tuna but this “isn’t good

²⁷ The French idiom *de rigeur* (spelled ‘*de rigueur*’ in *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*) suggests that something is “[r]equired by custom or etiquette” (Brown, 1993b, p. 641). This means that, in as much as “television increasingly dictates the terms for representing wildlife” (Kilburn, 2006), the style of representation to which the abyss befits a particular position with regard to what is considered fashionable in the context of the natural science genre.

²⁸ Humble expresses some degree of annoyance and she takes the time to re-assess her strategy, saying: “Really frustratingly we think we just spotted a shark right on the edge of our lights and he’s obviously got a whiff of this tuna. But, of course, a whiff isn’t good enough for us. We want it to come in and get a great big bite of it. Um, so what Gary thinks is that these bright lights are putting him off coming in. So what we’re gonna do is turn all the lights off, sit here in the dark and, obviously, as we see something come in we’ll slam our lights on and see if we can get any pictures.”

enough” for Humble and her co-explorer. She hasn’t dragged a dead fish into the abyss just to see something sniff it. Humble wants the shark “to come in and get a great big bite of it”. She takes the time to re-assess her strategy. It is clear, similar to the case of the Vampire Squid, that the light emitted by the submersible is preventing the shark from getting too close. Humble announces that the revised plan is to “turn all the lights off, sit here in the dark and, obviously, as we see something come in we’ll slam our lights on and see if we can get any pictures”. The level of technology that has been developed to make such a dive possible seems to be far more sophisticated than the actions of the individuals it is benefiting.

One of the main things that, to use Humble’s word, seems ‘obvious’ to me when taking note of her commentary, is an apparent lack of sensitivity to the abyssal flora and, again, an apparent bias towards entertainment value. This television broadcast potentially presents an opportunity for public understanding to be developed about the abyssal environment and yet one of its key presenters is down at 300 metres getting frustrated because the animals are not acting in the way that she wants them to act. This demonstrates the problem with making determinations in the abyss, in relation to the abyss. So long as the abyss is, by its very nature, beyond adequate determination, it can be expected that discrepancies will continue to arise between what is pre-determined and what actually occurs in the moment.

The frustration expressed by Humble can be interpreted as a feature of her negotiation of indeterminacy, of her determination to catch a glimpse of the unknown and to prove to the viewer that the unknown comes in the form of a monster, an alien. That fact that she has declared her frustration suggests that Humble has previously considered what might happen in the abyss, and

suggests that she carries with her an agenda. Her ongoing negotiation of indeterminacy can be identified in her decision to revise her plan. In addition, it can be noted that this cycle of “plan, action, observe, reflect, revised plan, action, observe, reflect” is a feature of Action Research (MacIsaac, 1995, cited in O'Brien, 1998). It is in this way that Humble demonstrates a reflexive approach to her negotiation of the abyss. Even though she finds it frustrating, Humble is forced to adapt to the conditions of the abyss. She does not change her goal, only the means to achieving it and her goal is still to get great photos and her means is now reminiscent of a child playing peek-a-boo.

All of a sudden Humble can be heard shouting to the operator of the submersible that she has spotted a shark.²⁹ Humble can be heard commanding him to put the lights on. However, the moment the lights are put on the shark disappears out of sight. Humble considers the possibility that the lights are causing a problem and communicates a revised plan of action. The submersible has red lights mounted on it and these cannot be seen by the deep-sea creatures. Humble notes that this is the “great thing about” them. She adds that they are “gonna make some clever adjustments to our camera”. This way, if there are any deep-sea creatures in the vicinity, “we’ll fool them and will see what else comes in”.

Again, I raise the association between darkness and ignorance, and also the association between light and intellectual enlightenment that a discussion of

²⁹ All of a sudden, in the program, Humble can be heard shouting to the operator of the submersible. She says: “Shark! Shark! Put your lights on! Lights on! ... I think the big problem was that the minute we put those lights on it was gone ... So we’re gonna leave red lights on outside the sub and the great thing about deep sea creatures is that they can’t see red light, so to all intents and purposes to them it’s gonna be dark and we’re gonna make some clever adjustments to our camera, which means that it will be able to work in low light, and we’ll fool them and will see what else comes in.”

the abyss entails, discussing how these are reinforced by Humble's comments. The assumption that the abyss is a place of ignorance is reflected in its depiction as an infinite darkness. Yet, because the abyss represents the indeterminable, it may be suggested that this darkness reflects only the ignorance of the individual, and the potential extent of their indeterminacy. Shaped by the imagination, representations of the abyss are products of human subjectivity and by being so they expose the limitations of the determining faculties of the individual. To overcome this appearance of ignorance and in order to overcome the discomfort of indeterminacy, explorers of the abyss work towards the collection of empirical evidence, the determination of facts. Humble has disclosed her use of the camera for such this end, for the task of achieving a picture of a realm that refers to strongly to the indeterminable.

Pultz (1995, p. 8) says that "photography stands as a metonym for the industrialisation that defines the modern era. Photography is also a metonym for the enlightenment". Humble's comments frame Western technology as a symbol of intelligence and they, by contrast, frame the deep-sea creatures as unintelligent. Humble hopes to enlighten the deep-sea abyss with an industrial product, with light, and not with any light but with one that is red and invisible to the deep-sea 'beasties'. It is by using light that Humble hopes to get the pictures she has been waiting for.

Humble's attempt to fathom an abyss is a powerful metaphor for that of industrial culture to socialise and, in this way, conquer the natural environment. Foucault (cited in Pultz, 1995, p. 9) understood the camera as being an instrument of control suggesting that "photography was one of the means of establishing and maintaining power that photography controls us, with the images produced through it becoming additional means of

control". Whereas depictions of Hell could be used as a means for social control through the threat of eternity of punishment, the invention of the camera has enabled an individual such as Humble to go down into the abyss and see what it 'really' looks like. The conception of beasts in the abyss work to validate previously held notions of the character of the abyss as well as attributing a sense of authority to the negotiation of the abyssal plains.

In as much as she is being filmed, Humble's illumination of the aquatic abyss shows the viewer her current environmental context whilst demonstrating her separation from it. Humble demonstrates an attempt to gradually dismantle the human ignorance that is pervasive in this mostly uncharted environment and at the same time, trying to keep the creatures in ignorance of her presence by pretending that she is not there. The light that her submersible emits can only penetrate a few metres into the darkness of the abyss. The line that it creates around her as it fades creates the appearance that the abyss is framing her, in the moment between the past in her memory and the indeterminable future. Humble has seemingly limited light but the darkness of the abyss is close by, only a short way away and in every direction.

The abyss surrounding Humble stands as a symbol of the misplacement of the individual in a natural environment of this kind, a symbol of misplacement in two ways. Beyond the limits of culture and well into the depths of nature, Humble is possibly in the 'wrong' place, a place of beasts. Maybe she is also a little lost, unable to really see where she is going and so relying on the gadgetry that guides her. She is certainly indeterminate of what lies ahead of her. This symbol can be used to communicate a clear comment on the disparity between culture and nature where the abyss is the

cultural reference point, representing an indeterminable natural world, that facilitates the possibly unwitting role of *The Abyss* as a cultural lesson.

By watching the programme, the viewer is implicated in this process, in their own alienation from the depths of the natural environment. Safely contained within the limits of their lounge room, another industrial product, the natural world is reinforced at that place in which their indeterminacy reigns supreme. By being indeterminate of the fluidity of the depths of the natural world, and by seeking information about these depths in a programme such as *The Abyss*, the individual silently announces themselves as a product of industrial culture. *The Abyss* presents this culture as one that conceives of threat in fluidity, of ignorance in depth and which aims to combat these assumptions with mechanical submersibles, and artificial and superficially penetrating light.

Humble not does seem to be critically engaging in the indeterminacy she experiences in not knowing what will happen in the oceans' depths. Instead, she is playing games in the abyss and it is this level of engagement that is being transmitted into the lounge rooms of the viewing public. Her actions in the context of *The Abyss* are a veritable cultural lesson but one that teaches the public that the individual is no longer subject to the indeterminable. In as much as the abyss symbolises the indeterminable, this programme is a publicly broadcast model on how to negotiate indeterminacy. It does not include any direct or indirect reference to the notion of transgressing cultural boundaries other than those that are reassessed in the wake of technological advancement. Instead, Humble's actions support the assumption that the indeterminable is somehow subject to the individual. They support the assumption that the power of industry, in a sense, bulldozes human limitations and yet in as much as deep-sea exploration relies on it, industry

only illuminates them. A reliance on industry continues to symbolise the distance, a gap, a lack, or even an abyss, between the individual and the natural environment.

The issue of the individual negotiating the abyss, by drawing on the assumptions and cultural information that they bring with them, can be explored in Fothergill's commentary. I shall now refer to his journey in the abyss where, at one point, the light from his submersible falls across a deep sea creature. At this point in time Fothergill seems more fascinated by the artificial effects that this product of industrial technology has created in the abyss, than he is by the actual creature itself. In this instance the abyss becomes a site for the confirmation of Fothergill's own aesthetic concerns, saying how "lovely" it is and pointing out that it is "such an elegant fish". Once it has been successfully frightened off, Fothergill simply turns his attention to the next creature that comes along. His seeming pre-occupation with the technical aspects of his exploration reduces the deep-sea life to an almost secondary position. The following section of Fothergill's dialogue supports my impression.

That, that is really nice. That's a Chimaera [Chimaera monstrosa], a Rabbit Fish. Beautiful deep-sea fish. That is lovely. You can see its shadow. There's a perfect shadow on the sand beneath it. It's lit up by the light here. Such an elegant fish, wonderful. Just manoeuvring here, you can just see its shadow just down there on the sand, it's lovely. There it goes, there it goes. It's obviously been frightened by the sub. That is very nice ... Oh look! There's a fish!

He refers to this fish by its common name which stands in contrast to its scientific name. At this point a distinct discrepancy can be identified because on the one hand there is the common name of *Rabbit Fish*. This name alludes to those cuddly and fluffy rabbits that some people might keep as pets in

their back gardens and even to the notion of an Easter Bunny, the rabbit that brings children chocolate eggs. On the other hand there is the scientific name *Chimaera monstrosa* which alludes to a hideous beast. The word *Chimaera* (the same as *Chimera*) means “a fire breathing monster with a lion’s head, a goat’s body, and a serpent’s tail [as found in Greek mythology]. A grotesque monster represented in painting etc.” (Brown, 1993b, p. 387). This fish is clearly not a rabbit, nor does it appear to have any of the physical characteristics of a lion, a goat, or a serpent.

Again, Fothergill demonstrates the way that he has to draw upon the resource of imagery and interpretations that has been filtered through to him in his Western cultural context, in order to organise his own interpretation of another abyssal creature. The Discovery Channel website (Discovery Communications Inc., 2005) state that “the benthic cephalopod *Grimpoteuthis* [Dumbo Squid] is equipped with large fins (which may resemble mammalian ears) to help it swim”. Fothergill provides to a different description:

That is a Dumbo Octopus. That is extraordinary. Dumbo, of course, get their name because they have these extraordinary flaps of skin that make them look like the Disney elephant character. There he goes ... swimming off now. There goes that Dumbo.

I believe that the interpretation of the squid offered by Fothergill suggests a poverty of the imagination. Dumbo is an icon of Western capitalist and consumerist culture, and it is also the term for a stupid person. That it has become the means to interpreting a deep-sea creature, in which the Disney character is framed as the original object, illustrates the way that culture imposes itself upon nature and also the way that the individual’s understanding of the natural world is shaped by paradigms of consumerist iconography. What can be detected in these examples is the socialisation of

nature where the abyss is “clawed back into cultural centrality once business makes a bid to colonize ... [its] meaning” (Fiske, 1983, p. 139). It also attempts to invest a sense of childlike innocence and gullibility, a sense of the primitive and unsophisticated, in this inhabitant of the abyss. In turn, the abyss is once again framed in contrast to the self-assumed superiority of a contemporary industrial age.

Fothergill takes some time to observe hydrothermal vents that fill the water with acidic hydrogen sulphide rich gas which normally is poisonous to all life forms. He also takes the opportunity draw a parallel between the abyssal landscape and the abyss as a feature of creation.³⁰ He mentions that “[o]ne of the most remarkable things of all about these vents is the conditions we’ve found here, the horrific conditions that we’ve found here”. Fothergill speculates on whether the “enormous pressure, the total absence of light, and high temperatures may just be exactly the same conditions that prevailed when life on earth first began”. In providing these comments, Fothergill demonstrates a continuing attempt to inform a cultural understanding of human origin that has been a feature of everyday thinking since the time of the Sumerians.

The closing comments, provided by Snow, and the accompanying footage, are designed to affect a sense of textual closure.³¹ There is a scene in which a

³⁰ Fothergill says: “One of the most remarkable things of all about these vents is conditions we’ve found here, the horrific conditions that we’ve found here. The enormous pressure, the total absence of light, and high temperatures may just be exactly the same conditions that prevailed when life on earth first began. And some scientists even speculate that the first building blocks of life were not found in the primordial soup of shallow lakes near the surface, but were first constructed right down here at the bottom of the ocean. It seems that we may be looking at the very birth of life on earth right from here, in the very depth of the abyss.”

³¹ Snow’s closing comments suggest that “Far from the abyss being life-less, as many people thought ... until quite recently, it’s actually teeming with life. The largest piece of habitable

submersible can be seen moving slowly past an underwater rock formation. The camera position is lower than that of the submersible and so emphasises a sense of technological height in the abyss. The moving water distorts the viewers' impression of the lights of the submersible, as they disappear quite suddenly into the darkness of the water. The dialogue, that commences at this point, informs the viewer how research into the abyss has led to a drastic shift in human understanding of it, that although "many people thought" the abyss was life-less they have recently discovered that "it's actually teeming with life". It also informs the viewer that the abyss is still an unknown realm, that "we've only explored one percent of it". These comments are accompanied by a series of images of different deep-sea creatures. The closing credits are run over the top of footage that has been taken from the sky, perhaps a plane or a helicopter. The camera is fixed on the Western Flyer still stationed in the Atlantic, but circles this vessel in a continuous clockwise movement.

The camera angles used in the closing footage, as well as the dialogue, reassure the viewer that even if the abyss is not fathomed today it is expected to be fathomed at some point in the future. This optimistic outlook, alongside the presumption that the abyss is seemingly endless, claims that this endlessness is not only open to revision but that it will at some stage be overcome. The program ends on a note of determination and self-assurance, of expectation rather than simply hope.

It is important to note the juxtaposition created between the illuminated and industrially reinforced steel of the submersibles and the naturally reinforced organic forms that inhabit the ocean's abyssal plains. The submersibles throw

space on the planet actually is under the sea but we've only explored one percent of it. There's much more to do."

vast amounts of light into the darkness with the preconception that this is an adequate means to experiencing the abyss. I would argue that what can be referred to both literally and figuratively as the 'highlights' of the programme I have addressed, can also be considered 'lowlights'. The unfathomable darkness associated with the abyss, and its subsequent interpretation as a hell, have resulted in the abyss being depicted in a 'negative light'. So long as "[c]ulture means control over nature" (Huizinger, 1936), it is my belief that the watery abyss is a means to the expression of industrial culture's might over the natural world, a means to which the construction and broadcast of self-applauding proof of this might can be directed into the homes of the viewing public.

It is my understanding that *The Abyss* uses the abyss as a means to a self-applauding end. The explorers claimed not to know what they would see in the depths, though my discussion of Humble indicates that at least one explorer entered the depths with very specific expectations. The high cost of developing submersible technology in light of a presumed lack of knowledge, shows that it may not really have mattered what might be seen in the depths anyway. Something or nothing could have been witnessed. The presenters descended in their submersible vehicles, but the real vehicle was the abyss itself. It is my belief that the abyss functioned as a vehicle for demonstrating that nature is at the mercy of industrial culture, and for asserting the notion that industrialisation can continue to take the world's privileged minority forward into the unknown, upon the forefront of knowledge.

Statistics, for the year when *The Abyss* was broadcast, state that there were 1,416,338,245 television sets globally, one each for approximately 22% of the global population (Nation Master, 2003). Even today, only 14.9 percent of the

global population use the World Wide Web (Internet World Stats, 2005). Snow asserts that “this is a broadcasting first”. Not only could it be viewed in a television programme format, but the programme was produced in such a way that individuals could get online and see the footage from the abyss as it was received by means of “live” and “as live” transmissions, as stated on the project’s website (DT, 2003).

The potential to discuss in any critical manner the way that technology is being used to explore environments that refer to the unknown is great, in the abyss, and yet it is entertainment value that receives particular emphasis. Where an explorer such as Humble could have been self-reflexively commenting on her position in a mechanical submersible in an organic abyss, herself and the other explorers missed such opportunities to produce a critical and worthwhile programme. In this instance the “TV has colonized the meaning [of the abyss], has tamed the untamed continent and civilized it” (Fiske, 1983, p. 141). Consequently, what has been produced is a negotiation of the abyss based on the desire for novelty which functions for the reaffirmation of cultural boundaries.

For this reason I would argue that Humble’s dragging of a 65 pound dead yellow fish over the floor of an abyssal plain sums up that which this programme brings to the abyss, in stark contrast to the cultural reinforcement it takes away. The image of a tuna, out of context and functioning as a piece of bait in its death, can be taken as a metaphor for the narrative which this show presents.

The Role of the Abyss in the Contemporary Interpretation of Non-Aquatic Natural Environments

Programmes such as *The Abyss*, as well as being products that refer directly to the notion of a watery abyss, present the individual with an organised interpretation of an aquatic natural environment and, in the case of the water slide, an organised fabrication of an aquatic environment. The point that the abyss also functions as a marketing tool in these instances has been raised. The metaphor of the abyss can also be referred to for the purpose of shaping the individual's experience and interpretation of non-aquatic natural environments. I support this observation by discussing photographs that make reference to the abyss including Aharanot's (2003) *Abyss Ahead!*, an image taken at the Nahal Poleg Nature Reserve in Tel Aviv, Israel. I refer to Schwartz's (2004) photograph of a mist filled gully, taken from the Muir Beach Overlook, located in Muir Woods National Park just north of San Francisco, and also to *Muir01*, an image by Butler (2005) taken at this same location on a separate occasion. I commence this discussion with reference to the photograph taken at the Nahal Poleg Nature Reserve. This photograph offers the viewer a sign of the metaphorical abyss and it is with this perspective that I address it.³²

The program *The Abyss* can be interpreted as an example of the way that the abyss functions as a tool for social control in historical cultural contexts, in particular in reference to a watery abyss. The sign of the abyss in Tel Aviv stands as another example of this ongoing function of the abyss, in this case through reference to an abyss of pain and (maybe indirectly, cultural) punishment.

³² I am aware that the potential exists for this image to be discussed in terms of the current conflict in the Middle East, especially when the idea of peering into the abyss tends to be used in relation to this conflict. However, the internal structures of this paper are such that it is not necessary for me to explore this potential in the immediate discussion.

It is worth acknowledging Wissler's (cited in P. Smith, 2001, p. 3) definition of culture as the "mode of life followed by the community or the tribe" and also J. Lewis' (2002, p. 13) understanding that culture "is constructed by humans in order to communicate and create community". By promoting human preservation, the abyss signified by the sign at the Nahal Poleg Nature Reserve lends itself to a desire for cultural preservation.

During my discussion of the abyssal plains and their inhabitants I made reference to their description, in the programme *The Abyss*, as alien. This interpretation implied that abyssal environments are "out of harmony" and "out of character" but also that they are, in this way, "belonging to another ... place, context, or world" (Brown, 1993b, p. 51). If this understanding is applied to the photograph at the Nature Reserve, the abyss is reinforced as being separate from culture and yet, as has been acknowledged, the abyss is inevitably a product of culture.

In the former instance a sign of the abyss was characterised by the individual's inability to determine (paradigmatic representations are sought as a means to bringing some sense of resolution to the 'problem' of indeterminacy). In this instance it can be understood that the sign pre-empts the question of how the environment is to be interpreted. The site itself does not need not be witnessed for an interpretation of it to be organised, the sign provides enough information for such a process to commence. This needs to be so for it to work effectively as a deterrent, for example. The sign needs to inform the individual enough so that they feel no need to venture into the site itself and, potential, fall prey to the danger that the sign suggests.

Observing this image I am able to imagine an individual visiting the Nature Reserve at Nahal Poleg in Tel Aviv, Israel, strolling along a path it. The

surrounding shrubbery may be moving with the breeze. The grass has grown high in the fields and in parts along the edge of the path, but also around the base of an object that stands in contrast to the natural environment. That object is a sign attached to a rusting metal pole that, telling from the condition it is in, has been there for some time. The sign is faded but its details are still visible, black exclamation marks warning passers-by of danger. It is the jagged line representing the cliff face and the tumbling stick diagram that prefigures the text. In English and Arabic it reads: DANGER! ABYSS AHEAD!

Warning of an abyss ahead, the sign at Tel Aviv refers to a feature in the local natural environment that has been culturally interpreted as an abyss. A person walking through the Nahal Poleg Nature Reserve does not necessarily need to go to the edge of the cliff to understand the message that the abyss is something to be feared. There are a number of fears that can be noted here in relation to the abyss and the sign at Tel Aviv. These include apeirophobia - the fear of infinity, kenophobia - the fear of voids or empty spaces, bathophobia - the fear of depth, hypsiphobia - the fear of height, necrophobia - the fear of death and, in particular, xenophobia - a fear of the unknown.

“[T]he fear of death is indeed the pretence of wisdom, and not real wisdom, being a pretence of knowing the unknown; and no one knows whether death, which men [sic] in their fear apprehend to be the greatest evil, may not be the greatest good” (Edman, 1956, p. 74).

My assertion that the unfathomability of the abyss undermines its representation can be extended to include the sign in Tel Aviv, for it is highly unlikely that the base of the cliff is at an unfathomable distance away from its

peak even though the graphic on the sign does not specify the location of the ground beyond the depicted edge. It is in this way that the task of working through the abyss falls within the parameters of a task of working through the sensation of indeterminacy itself. The sign, adequately, recalls a particular pre-established paradigm of the abyss in order to invest a sense of authority in its warning. It employs a particular understanding about what the abyss means to the individual.

The sign warns the individual passing by that to get too close to the abyss means to put the self in the position of potential harm, even potential death. It implies that with standing on the edge of an abyss comes the risk of losing one's footing and plummeting into the depths of the unknown. The person included in the graphic is non-specific and this perhaps enables the individual to entertain the thought of their future self falling in an abyss, in the event that they do not take heed of the warning provided. Drawing a correlation between the abyss and the threat of danger does not frame the abyss as a place of creative potential, in the way that the notion of Original Chaos frames it. By presenting the abyss as a threat to the individual and maybe, in this respect, by threatening the individual with the abyss, the sign at Tel Aviv supports an interpretation of the abyss as a place of human pain, a place of death and despair, hell. It is an example of how the concept of abyss has been deliberately constructed as a negative space for very practical reasons that include warning the individual against potential death. On the other hand, chaos (as in the Old Testament) is much more ambivalent.

The interpretation of the abyss as a place in which there is "the threat of death lurking around every corner", such as that invested in the sign at Tel Aviv, has already been located in a variety of contemporary culture texts (Van Scott, 1998, i). The programmes *The Abyss* and *Surface* demonstrate this.

There are a number of ways in which this sign of an abyss informs the individual about the space beyond it. It is for this reason the individual does not need to have witnessed the space first hand to achieve an interpretation such as that which I have provided. In turn, this discussion does not require a photograph of the actual abyss to critically analyse the way that this sign employs the abyss. In as much as it stands as a warning, it is my belief that the sign works precisely towards ensuring that instances of a first hand account of the abyss ahead are kept at a minimum, as opposed to being a sign that leads people to their deaths.

In the case of the sign at the Nahal Poleg Nature Reserve, the abyss is identified essentially as a place of depth. Though, rather than be a depth that provides a vast space of growth and a space in which there is much room to grow, just like the primordial abyss featured in various creation mythologies, this sign refers to a depth that poses a potential threat to the wellbeing of the individual. The notion of depth portrayed in this image is one in which there is potential only for serious bodily harm, and even death. This interpretation is communicated through the sign's depiction of an individual falling towards an unspecified, an omitted, ground beneath them.

Because paradigmatic representations of the abyss are commonly found in mythological and religious texts, the sign can be read as a single image morality tale or a parable. It stands as if to announce to the individual that, 'just as in ancient times, to ignore culture's direction and venture past it's limits into nature, would be to fall into an abyss, in the depths where punishment awaits'.

The word 'reserve' can be taken to mean "a place or thing in which something is preserved or stored" (Brown, 1993a, p. 2559). In this case it can

be suggested that not only does a nature reserve preserve the form of the local natural environment, it also preserves a particular cultural interpretation of nature. In this case, such an interpretation is guided through reference to a preserved cultural interpretation of the abyss.

The sign at the Nahal Poleg Nature Reserve is an ongoing and site specific reference to the abyss. This act of reference fulfils the function of the sign as a point of mediation between the cultivated individual and the natural world by being stationed between the individual and the void in the landscape to which it refers. The sign is an industrial product that has been erected within a nature reserve and in this way continues to communicate a pre-organised cultural interpretation of the natural environment ahead. The sign attempts to mediate the individual's interpretation of their experience by communicating the importance of not venturing too far into this part of nature. It predicts future experience by offering only one likely outcome for the individual who decides to venture beyond the sign and into the abyss.

Nature, here, is framed as a threat to the well-being, or ultimately the existence, of the individual. The sign frames the abyss as that which is in opposition to culture, in as much as it is a cultural product that provides a warning about the threat of the abyss. Culture, by allocating a site for a nature reserve and by erecting a warning sign, positions itself in line with the sentiment of preservation. The abyss, in as much as it could possibly bring about the demise of the individual, is interpreted as a destructive force. However, it is culture that has perceived the threat in the first place and, subsequently, has used the sign to advertise this perception to the public, thereby constructing its own opposition. Perhaps this situation can be compared to one in which a priest might present to a congregation a detailed sermon about what constitutes sin only to hear the confessions, at a later

date, from individuals who had gone home from the sermon with their minds filled with sinful thoughts.

It is my understanding that the sign at Tel Aviv reinforces the notion that getting too close to the abyss could well 'end in tears' (to say the least), that nature can be enjoyed so long as the individual does not go beyond the limits that culture has prescribed. To fall into the abyss could be the result of ignorance, of either an unawareness of the warning the sign displays or an inability to recognise the potential risk it proposes. The sign declares that there exists a void in nature, a gap, and it is 'over there'. The sign's warning can only be of use so long as the individual does not breach the edge of the abyss. Up to this point the individual is safe, and the value of the sign is preserved. Beyond the edge of the abyss the sign, standing here as a metaphor for the society's regulation of human experience, can be of no further assistance. It can be suggested that, in this sense, the warning that the sign communicates is not only a warning of the perils of the perceived abyss, but also of the perils of deviating from culture's advice.

The abyss ahead is identified as something to be feared, perhaps, but encourages the individual's decision to keep to the path of least resistance. By steering the individual away from the limits, it communicates the notion that culture's mastery over nature is limited and that the safety of the individual can be ensured so long as the guidelines of the sign, of culture, are adhered to. Beyond the sign of culture, in this sense, lies the abyss and, the possibility of venturing into the abyss is a possibility in which the punishment of the individual is anticipated.

Characterised as a place of death, of both physical and psychological torture, hell symbolises that which is beyond social norms. In as much as some

people believe that sinners will go to hell when they die, sinners being those people who engage in carnal activities and actions perceived as animal like, the abyss of hell symbolises the place of the animal. Images of hounds of hell and other creatures of the night assist in perpetuating this understanding. The notion of a nature reserve can be taken, in this respect, as an allusion to the normalisation of human behaviour. The nature reserve, then, expresses a desire to contain nature, to engage in the preservation of the natural environment as a means to maintaining culture's presumption of control over it but, in this way, to maintain a degree of control over the way that the individual explores human nature. The notion of venturing too far into human nature, maybe by transgressing culturally constructed behavioural expectations, can allude to the nature beyond these limits as something which is dangerous.

If there was an image of the abyss to which the sign at the Nahal Poleg Nature Reserve refers, maybe it would be similar in appearance to the gully beneath the Muir Beach Overlook. Taken by Schwartz (2004) this photograph is not accompanied by an elaboration of the individual's impressions of this non-aquatic environment. However, Schwartz entitling of this photograph as *Abyss* enables me to read it in terms of the paradigms of the abyss that I have outlined, raising her understanding that she was standing at the edge of an abyss, for example. I draw on the research to discuss the interpretation of this gully as an abyss.

Just as the various paradigmatic representations of the abyss I have previously discussed share some common features, so do the environments that the abyss has been used to interpret share some common features. For example, there are mountain ranges not only on the surface of the earth but also in the depths of the ocean. This observation is supported by Snow who,

in the initial moments of *The Abyss*, makes his own comparison between the under water canyon in Monterey Bay and the Grand Canyon.

Schwartz's photograph occupies a midway point between the two groupings, aquatic abyss and non-aquatic abyss. The natural environment that is shown in the image comprises of the cliffs that are visible on the left and right sides of the composition. However steep they are, the space between the cliffs can be interpreted as a gap between two grounds or foundations. The cliffs extend steeply downwards, they drop away but the viewer cannot see how far they extend. The presence of the mist reduces all visibility of whatever is beyond it. It is in this way that the image creates the impression of groundlessness, and alludes to a place within the natural environment where foundation has collapsed. This component of the composition functions in a similar way to the absence of ground in the graphic on the sign in Tel Aviv. The inability to perceive the location of the ground results in the eye being unable to fix upon one point in the distance.

The point that I would like to make is that the inability to determine the location of the base of the cliffs, creating the impression of infinite space, has been caused by the presence of the mist. As the mist disappears the full spatial extent of the gap is revealed, disclosing the location of the ground. The mist seems to have greatly motivated the photographer's interpretation of this image as depicting an abyss. In this image the place of the void is a place of mist and yet the mist is made up of water particles. The gully is the gap which contains the water particles and in turn gives them their shape. However, this water is the primary vehicle for an interpretation of this environment as an abyss, it is the void itself. Based on this observation I would argue that it is possible to approach Schwartz's photograph as an

example of the way that the abyss has been used to interpret an aquatic natural environment, even if it is only temporarily so.

Upon my request, Schwartz provided me with details as to the location at which the photograph was taken. With this information, I was able to locate another photograph of the same region, showing what is visible when there is no mist. Taken by Butler (2005), the photograph *Muir01* seems to provide support for my questioning as to the appropriateness of classifying Schwartz's photograph as an allusion to a non-aquatic abyss. It does this by showing that beneath the mist is an ocean. Although it is worth keeping this detail in mind, I have continued to classify this as a non-aquatic environment because of the geographical context of the individual. Unlike the deep-sea explorers, Schwartz and Butler did not take their respective photographs from within an abyss, surrounded by it. They stood at a distance from the waters depths, some way above the surface in fact, and behind the barrier that denotes culture's limit before nature. Behind a culturally constructed barrier, urging them to stay away from nature, they stood on dry ground but looked past the ground and into the water ahead.

Presumably safe at the edge of an abyss, the individual could observe a place of containment without running the risk of becoming contained by that place (the cliffs curve around a void filled up with water, in the manner of an auditorium. The water moves back and forth against the frame but the abyss is nevertheless contained). Also, although there no sign to warn the individual of the abyss ahead, they can feel safe behind cultural limit signified by the fence. The fence is a culturally constructed confirmation of this containment by identifying a stable and safe place to stand. It is in this way that, represented by each passing individual that visits this part of the national park (a tourist destination), culture continues to move along the

edge of an abyss. The fence's installation at the top of the slope, at the edge of the path, is enough to ensure that the individual remains within the cultural boundary that frames them and that, in turn, frames their interpretation of this natural environment as a potential threat, where a fear associated with the abyss, translates to a fear of the absence of limitations, of a place where limits dissolve into nothingness. Herein lies a paradox, for the notion of limitlessness is attributed to what is inevitably, in this natural environment, a limited space. At least, by remaining behind the cultural border, it can be suggested that the individual is kept at a safe distance from that paradox and, in this way, safe from a problematic abyss, safe from any of its idiosyncratic complications.

The Abyss as Commodity

Spivak (in Derrida, 1976, p. lxxvii) understands that "[t]he fall into the abyss ... inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom". The allure of diving into the seemingly unknown depths of the ocean has become a lucrative commodity with some companies going so far as to manufacture diving equipment sporting the name 'Abyss' and another, the Magic Waters Waterpark in Illinois, constructing an abyss themed slide complex.

The examples to which I refer in this section show how the idea of the Abyss has become a vehicle for fun and for leisure, how it has become a valuable commodity. The consumer arena plays with the idea of an Abyss, valuing it for its novelty rather than for its use as a historical cultural reference point for existential self-directed inquiry such as that which I have raised previously. Bramann (2005) says:

One of the most popular escape routes from our modern reality has become the false historicity of theme parks. Adding to this commercial television and other means of distraction, it is probably not an exaggeration to say that half of people's waking hours are spent in some sort of escapist make-believe world. This lack of substance in the sensibility of popular culture extends to more serious aspects of life.

I have chosen to refer to two devices that enable the individual to determine the parameters of their navigation of the abyss and which can, in this sense, be thought of as reminders of the limits of the individual in the face of the abyss and within the bowels of the deep. They are a piece of diving gear (breathing apparatus) that has the label "ABYSS" stamped on it (Igamotors.com, 2006) and the 'Abyss 1000 Professional Automatic Diving Watch' (Chase-Durer, 2006). When in the watery abyss the individual needs to be constantly mindful of respiration and of the duration of time that they spend peering into it. These cultural products are designed to facilitate the diver in his or her underwater exploration but they also illustrate the use of paradigmatic representations of the abyss in contemporary commodity culture.

What is provided for the diver by the equipment, from the moment they purchase it to the last time it is used, is a cultural reference point for their activities. The breathing apparatus that has been named after the abyss is black and, when in use, the word abyss sits in front of the mouth of the individual. Respiration is necessary for the continuation of the human life, and throughout this process the abyss is right before the individual. The breathing apparatus bears the title abyss and sustains life in the individual. The function of the diving watch is to trace the passage of time, whether this is experienced in the ocean depths or not.

The invention of the European watch happened in the 1500's "as the industrial age took form, and the need for an accurate measurement of daily time became necessary" (Arlecchino, 2006). "The wearing of a prestigious brand confers certain attributes on its owner" such as competitiveness, discipline, and success (Royale, 2006). Having a watch which makes reference to the abyss conjures up notions of mastery over the environment and, certainly in the terms that I have been raising in the previous discussions, a sense of self-mastery. The abyss is found here to be subjected to an aspect of industrial discipline, implying that culture is in charge. The word abyss is positioned near to the centre of the time piece, encircled by the passage of time, as if contained in the finitude of measurement. The abyss also bears a number, i.e. 'Abyss 1000'. This number indicates that the watch is waterproof to a depth of 1000ft (304.8m).³³ However, the number 1000 also carries its own symbolism that has associations with the metaphorical abyss. For example, McGee (1997) says that the abyss "is where Satan will be locked up for the 1000 years of Christ's reign on earth". Although framed as a form of punishment, this incarceration is a form of discipline. The watch design plays into a variety of cultural assumptions associated with the abyss.³⁴

The water pressure at the depth of the abyssal plains is far greater than that which a regular diver can sustain. It is precisely for this reason that presenters like Humble and Fothergill use highly specialised submersibles to explore the abyss. But the diver can at least carry with them, throughout the

³³ Note that Humble is at 300m when she stops to use the Tuna as bait (see footnote number 26, located on page 170).

³⁴ There are two relationships that can be followed for further information. The first is in the notion of dying a thousand deaths. Epictetus (c.A.D. 50 – c.A.D. 138) is attributed as having said "Whatsoever place or post Thou assignest me, *sooner will I die a thousand deaths*, as Socrates said, *than desert it*" (Bartleby.com, 2005). Also, there was the old Chinese method of torture called "Ling chi", more commonly known as a death by a thousand cuts, where "[t]he cuts are small, but in the end the person dies" (Wallerstein, 2005). Both these avenues of possible interest have connotations of discipline and cultural dominance.

duration of their sustainable diving activities, these references to the abyss. In other words, the diver may not be able to dive into the far depths of the abyss, but the thought of the abyss may never the less sink into the subconscious of the individual, if only in the back of their mind as they proceed to explore whatever it is that they may come across.

The abyss is reduced to a single word on the breathing apparatus and also on the face of the watch. However, these examples further demonstrate my point about how the abyss plays into cultural discipline and the assumption that it is fathomable, if not today.

Another diving related reference to the abyss is its use in the name for the Abyss Dive Shop, a business which offers diving products as well as a training facility in the Mayan Riviera, Mexico, for cenote diving (Abyss Dive Center & Training Facility, 2002). Cenotes have become popular tourist destinations. Located in the Yucatan, they are deep “natural underground reservoir[s] of water” upon which the ancient Mayan tribes relied (Brown, 1993b, p. 360).

As there are no rivers in the Yucatán, water has always been collected from cenotes (from the Maya word *dzonot*): natural sinkholes formed by the collapse of part of the limestone layer. The water is often deep underground; in Bolonchon, for example, the Indians had to build a gigantic ladder so they could climb down to it. (Baudez & Picasso, 1992, p. 57)

Though Morgan and Morgan (1996, p. 65) assert that “it is a rare occasion indeed that a soul has been able to descend into the Abyss, let alone return unscathed and willing to lend a description”, I shall continue with a discussion on the commodification of the abyss by briefly paying attention to

some interpretations of cenotes. These interpretations have been articulated by individuals who, during their travel, have paid to visit the cenotes. The following description of the interior appearance of a cenote illustrates the way that features of its interpretation allude to the abyss.

East of the major Chichén Itzá ruins is a dark underground world the Mayans called Cenoté. They are deep water filled sinkholes formed by water percolating through the soft limestone above A visit to one is a spine chilling experience Once your eyes get used to the light level a bizarre world takes shape It's like an eerie underground forest A beautiful blue green pool of unknown depth stretches out before you There is a darker side to this and other Cenoté, however. In the wells around Chichén Itzá have been found scores of skeletons. Mayan petroglyphs depict human sacrifices at these sites. What lies under this Cenoté is not known, no one has ever been able to reach its depths. (MysteriousPlaces.com, 2005)

The impressions of “a dark underground world”, a “bizarre world” of “unknown depth”, of whatever “unknown” remains beneath, that exist in this passage are descriptive devices that appeal to the abyss as an unfathomable watery depth as well as an abode of the dead or an underworld. These descriptions contribute to the construction of a particular understanding of a cenote, giving it an air of mystery, a sense of connection to ancient times, the promise of the potential to witness the unseen. They articulate the individual’s sensation of indeterminacy in that they express an inability to adequately determination the magnitude of the void. In this sense, people enjoying a swim in the entrance to a cenote can be thought to be frolicking at the edge, or in the mouth, of an abyss.

The following description is another individual’s personal account of their impression of a cenote. In this example, the individual has organised their

interpretation of the cenote through direct reference to the idea of the abyss. In this interpretation the individual has noted their visual and spatial indeterminacy and has made it clear what the cenote appears like. Simpson (2005) recounts:

I swam out into the middle of the water and dove down. Opening my eyes into its unfathomable depths (it is fresh water), I saw nothing but a very bright, royal blue color. Impossible to gauge distance away from the *cenote's* edge, it was exactly like being in a room without any light: that sense of disorientation; of being in an abyss.

Direct correlations can be drawn between this impression and the way that the depths of an ocean, such as the Atlantic, have been described. Of his experiences exploring the sea caves in the depths of the Atlantic, Berry (2005, p. 43) says that the "salt water filling these caves was 'air clear'. When it was not momentarily illuminated by our intense HID underwater lighting systems it became a void of unfathomable blackness ... stretching out in every direction".

Commodification of the notion of the watery Abyss has seen it taken out of a natural aquatic context and into a suburban non-aquatic context. Television broadcast that focus on the deep-sea do this to some extent, but another example of the migration of the abyss exists at the Magic Waters Waterpark in Rockford Illinois. A webpage invitation to experience the latest addition to this park asks the individual:

Are you ready for the NEW ABYSS! slide complex?
You'll start five stories high above the park ... your heart races ... you look down the slide into total darkness ... then you're off twisting and turning, begging for daylight, until **SPLASH! You've survived the ABYSS!** (Magic Waters Waterpark, 2005)

The water slide seems to illustrate what Inglis (2005, p. 71) understands as the “highly ironic cultural situation characteristic of ‘late modernity’”. He (2005, p. 70) says that a “general sense of irony as to the fabricated nature of presentations of ‘authenticity’ and ‘reality’ can be seen in the advertising that the broad mass of the population are exposed to on a daily basis”. The slide may well be read as a mildly sarcastic reference to the abyss by means of the false threat to which it alludes. The promotion of the slide complex reinforces the abyss as a place of slippery descent, as a place of water and darkness, a potentially terrifying but thrilling experience to be engaged in. “If you dare!” - an empty warning that the text asserts.

Is there any doubt that the individual will survive the abyss water slide complex, a survival which appears to achieve confirmation in the event of a “Splash”? Of course, at some point in time the water slide ends. It is reasonable to assume that construction of the slide would not be allowed to proceed if the final structure posed any real risk to the public. The abyss, in this commodified sense, has been socialised so as to present only the suggestion of a threat. At no point during their descent is the slide participant likely to come face to face with a Warty Angler or a Vampire Squid from Hell! The people who use the abyss themed water slide complex can know that what the individual will slide into is not an unfathomable and groundless void, aware that the extent of the threat is as shallow as the paddle pool out into which the sliders spill. Each individual can safely assume that they will be able to shout and shriek all the way down to the end, secure in the understanding that they will not have to confront any real monsters or danger at all.

Although the slide stands as an inadequate representation of the abyss, the fact that it is a fun park suggests that it is not meant to be taken seriously

anyway. With the self-reflective potential of the abyss is recalled, it can be suggested that by making fun of the abyss, the self becomes an object of humour. Though the water slide is not an unfathomable aquatic vastness, it is not lacking of ground (the moulded form of the slide contains the individual at each and every measured twist and turn). The creators of the water slide may be aware of this discrepancy between the abyss and the slide complex that has been named after it, and they may also be aware that the public is aware of it. So long as the slide continues to hold entertainment value and bring in income for the waterpark, the thought of the abyss functions as a means to a financially optimistic end and not as a means to the endlessness that might be more appropriately expected of it. In as much as the promotional information for the slide complex tells the individual precisely what to expect from the water slide, it does not allow room for indeterminacy in this abyss. Unlike the abyss that carries with it the potential for “something or for nothing to happen”, the promotion for the slide pre-determines the nature of the experience that lies ahead of the individual (Lyotard, in Benjamin, 1989, p. 198). An experience of the abyss, as it is presented by the Magic Waters Waterpark, has been prescribed and pre-packaged for a mass market.

The interaction with an abyss water slide remains a luxury with which spare time can be filled, a means to passing the conceivably unproductive time that exists as a gap between periods of industrial discipline, thus reinforcing the assumption that the abyss maintains a certain valuelessness and triviality. The abyss, in this way, facilitates the bridging of a gap, a reach across this lack, this space characterised by the seeming absence of productivity. Of course, the more people that come to the park to spend their unproductive time interacting with the abyss slide complex, the more productive its construction proves for those who collect the parks entrance fees and the like.

Like the television programmes that I have noted, Magic Waters seems to support the understanding that the abyss is something which the individual may visit for a time before retreating back into the monotony of daily life, implying that the individual has a choice as to when they confront the abyss. It has been my aim throughout this paper to implicate the abyss as a primary facilitator of productivity in everyday thinking. I work to realise this aim through the decisions I make in my creative practice though I am aware that the abyss can be played out in various other parts of everyday thinking as well. Indeterminacy is something that each individual confronts as a part of their human condition. In turn, the abyss is invested in this condition. This immediacy means that the abyss cannot be approached, as if the individual were intending to walk to its edge, because this would suggest that there was first a point where the individual was at a distance from it. I would argue that such distance is theoretically improbable, not because the individual cannot get close to it but, rather, because the individual can only be close to it, whether this is acknowledged or not.

The abyss water slide complex is an example of the way that the notion of the aquatic abyss has been used in contemporary creative practice, albeit a practice that seeks primarily to make money. The slide is a cultural product that has originated in the mind of one, or more than one, individual. It has been designed and constructed, with each stage retaining the abyss as its cultural reference point.

The indeterminacy of the abyss ensures that it, too, “undermines the certainty of knowledge” (Giddens, 1991, p. 21). Therefore its interpretation, like the project of the self, is also suited to reflexive negotiation. It is in this way that the abyss may be interpreted as a puzzle to be solved but one which has

innumerable outcomes, and this means that representations of the abyss can continue to both reflect and mould understanding about this notion.

The examples of the contemporary use of the abyss, that I have presented, seem to provide fabricated contexts within which the individual can negotiate the abyss in some manner. The abyss that the individual negotiates at this point is a cultural commodity. It has been packaged and delivered in a particular way and so the individuals' negotiation is a mediated one. In each package of meaning that a representation of the abyss embodies, the individual can find a particular behavioural and theoretical framework for navigating the idea of the abyss where it arises. Each such example can be approached as providing a glimpse of a power relationship between "the freedom to create new social practices ... [and the] unhinged, unrestricted redetermination of humanity by commodity capitalism and its technoscientific power knowledge" (Canning, in Taylor & Winquist, 2001, p. 189).

Summary

The narratives of the abyss that I have addressed have been constructed predominantly for the purpose of entertaining the individual, though it is clear from the sign at Tel Aviv that entertainment is not the only purpose they have. In each case, however, what is present is an understanding of the abyss through which a narrative of the abyss can be traced. Adorno and Horkheimer's assertion regarding the gap between thought and entertainment can be recalled when culturally reading programmes such as *The Abyss*, *Surface* and the like. However, keeping these examples in mind, I also agree with Giddens' (1991, p. 199) suggestion that while "soap operas, and other forms of media entertainment too, are escapes perhaps more important is the very narrative form they offer, suggesting models for the

construction of narratives of the self". The narrative of both programmes I have referred to here show the individual venturing into a space beyond the limits of everyday experience and seeking out unfamiliar creatures. Both demonstrate a cultural tendency to make determinations about the abyss, to use the abyss to reflect interpretations of cultural selves. In other words, if the individual reaches towards the Other for self-identity, then the desire to interpret the abyss becomes implicated in a desire for self-understanding and, in this way, discloses a temporal self-dissatisfaction.

Both sensationalise this to varying degrees. The webpage advertising the abyss water slide complex also offers a narrative whereby the individual is encouraged to make light of the abyss, to make small work of unfathomable depths. This can be seen either as a resignation of the seemingly endless inadequacy with which the abyss is determined and also presents the attitude that the abyss is a game. Maybe the fact that this metaphor is a self-reflective cultural construction means that to play with the abyss is to play with the self, to make light of cultural ignorance and of human limitations.

Approaches to the abyss can function as guides for the individual's negotiation of indeterminacy, for the interpretation of experiences that are not usually encountered in daily life. It is in this way that the cultural information contained within the narrative of programmes such as *The Abyss* and *Surface*, by continuing to shape the void, also go some way to shaping the self-interpretation of the individual living in the late modern age.

Then, what role might representations of the abyss play in the self-identification of the individual if, like the project of the self, interpretations of the abyss are founded in indeterminacy? In other words (in terms of the Other), how might negative assumptions about the abyss inform the way

that the individual negotiates sensations of self-directed indeterminacy throughout their own self-construction, where the self stands as the most immediate and critical object of uncertainty? If the unknown is presented as something to be feared, as that which is “devoid of good” and thus demonised, does this not imply that the project of the self is in some way a cause for grave concern (Morgan and Morgan 31)? Because the questions, “What to do? How to act? Who to be? ... are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity”, I believe that it is possible for negative representations of the abyss to encourage xenophobia in varying degrees of severity (Giddens, 1991, p. 70). Programmes such as *The Abyss* and *Surface* focus the viewer’s attention on the unfamiliar landscape of the abyssal plains that reside in nature, that are assumed to lie beyond the visible and beyond the sandy shores of cultural contexts. These unfamiliar regions are constructed as the homes of the seemingly prehistoric and of the bestial, of the uncivilised. But is it cultural imperialism that may be detected in the failure to acknowledge that the individual is also the Other and therefore inevitably a stranger to the unfamiliar, in the failure to acknowledge that the individual is the Other’s Other?

In addition to sensationalising and commodifying the abyss, of making entertainment of the uncivilised and conceivably pre-domesticated natural world, these programmes can be thought to perpetuate a negative perception of uncertainty and of the unknown in general. Because confronting the unknown also means negotiating the sensations of indeterminacy that it evokes in the individual, a negative perception of the unknown transfers to a negative perception of indeterminacy, thus reinforcing the assumption that an encounter with either of these is undesirable in, and not conducive beyond the realm of entertainment to, the contemporary Western world. If negotiations with the abyss are rendered entertainment, then with what

degree of seriousness might mass culture be prompted to negotiate the project of the self? With what critical thinking might self-reflexivity be anticipated?

If the abyss is conceived as a place where individuals have the potential to become monsters, where the self may turn from good to bad by moving out of the light and into the darkness (by challenging the monotony of self-affirmation in favour of the construction of new knowledge), then what is at stake is the project of the self. In certain contexts, the abyss has been reduced to the level of uncritical entertainment. It is also being used as a tool to teach mass culture to retreat from indeterminacy and from the unfamiliar in everyday life. In both these instances as well, I believe that the project of the self is at stake.

It may be in this way that a demonisation of indeterminacy, through negative constructions of the abyss, may promote cases of eisoptrophobia - a fear of seeing oneself in a mirror, or even autophobia - an irrational fear of oneself. Though what I have paid considerable attention to in this chapter is the use of the abyss as a visual metaphor in mass cultural production. In the next chapter I discuss some aspects of contemporary creative practice where the abyss is also being used as a visual metaphor. With this, I am continuing to address how this metaphor plays out in different contexts, to identify the differences between the processes by which it is negotiated as well as to show how similar concerns are raised during these. In contrast to the mass-cultural perspectives that I have addressed in the examples so far, the following discussions address negotiations with the abyss that exist beyond the mass-cultural sphere.

Chapter 4

The Abyss in Contemporary Creative Practice

Introduction

Supported by the previous discussions, it is my understanding that there exists a high incidence of representations of the abyss as a place of hell, as an abode of monsters for example, in contemporary western culture. I have interpreted these instances as negative representations of the abyss in that they seem to promote a demonisation of the unknown and, in turn, a perceivably unproductive fear of indeterminacy. It is in this respect that these instances encourage xenophobia and an aversion to the unfamiliar.

An association remains between darkness and ignorance and I need only refer to the use of the image of a light bulb as a symbol of the 'idea' to gather, by reduction, that such an association persists. However, it seems to me that an understanding of the abyss that frames it as a negative space and that ignores its appropriateness as a metaphor for self-creative potential and self-illumination, itself, may continue to be the product of ignorance.

I have already signposted the deep-sea documentary *The Abyss* as well as the U.S. television series *Surface* as prime examples of such negative representation. These instances, and others like them, help perpetuate the understanding that the abyss is a negative space and it is my belief that they outweigh representations of the abyss as a positive and productive metaphor, a metaphor for creative potential and for constructive self-reflection. It is not my intention to dismiss hellish representations of the abyss. Instead, it is my aim to reinvigorate an awareness of the positive role that the abyss can assume in everyday thinking, especially in terms of its

function as a cultural reference point for the organisation of sensations of indeterminacy and, in turn, in the construction of the self-identity of the individual.

My creative practice reflects this interpretation of the abyss. It is for this reason that I present two cases studies. Each one focuses on a contemporary creative practitioner whose work is informed by a theoretical framework that is similar, but not necessarily equal, to my own. I refer to selected artworks by Anish Kapoor and also to the James Thiérree production *La Veillée des Abysses*.

These two studies are not intended to pose as equivalencies in terms of each other. They are only two examples of a number of possibilities that are available but they have been chosen for the way that they implicate the abyss in self-constructive and creative processes. It is inevitable that differences between the two practices discussed, and between them and my own, will become evident. For example, Kapoor (Hayward Gallery, 1998, p. 8) suggests that though his void works attempt to deal with “the loss of self [this loss] cannot be theatrical”. Thiérree’s *La Veillée des Abysses* stands in contrast to this approach by presenting a theatrical rendition of the abyss and of the strangeness of everyday. On the other hand, both Kapoor and Thiérree share the understanding that the void is an in-between space, a space of creative becoming, and both claim that they have nothing particular to say, that they don’t have any particular message to give anyone.

The issue of narrative is also something that Kapoor and Thiérree claim to have little concern for. Be that as it may, some of their works arguably lend themselves to an interpretation of the abyss as that which cannot be contained in a limited time and space. They encourage a disparity between

the abyss and the notion of narrative, between the notion of an indeterminable extent and the identification of a beginning, middle, and an end.

In the following discussions I explain how these practitioners succeed in communicating an idea of the abyss as that which is an unavoidable feature of the human condition. In addition, I discuss the way that they sexualise the abyss. This establishes a counterpoint to my own creative practice and theoretical concerns because I am interested in the role of the abyss in articulating indeterminacy.

The Abyss in the Artwork of Anish Kapoor

The act of an artist consists in opening the rigid surface (of the world) upon that abyssal void that constitutes its substrata rather than its essence. The vertigo is provoked by the opening of the crust that covers the void inside. Like wonder, vertigo has always belonged to art. (Bhabha, in Bhabha & Tazzi, 1998, p. 104)

Kapoor is an artist, born in Bombay, who now lives and works in London. He identifies his practice as having developed in line with “three real moments of insight ... One of them was finding I could make objects of pigment” (cited in Burnett, 2005, p. 113). The second was the discovery of the “non-object” where substance was “emptied out and replaced by colour itself” and the third was the “mirrored object – ‘another kind of non-object,’ he explains. ‘It takes in all that is around it and exists as a less than fully present object’” (Burnett, 2005, p. 113).

My attention is limited to Kapoor’s more recent void sculptures, specifically those of the late nineties, and I refer to others only as a way of clarifying the

content of the main discussion. I have chosen to concentrate on examples from this period of Kapoor's creative practice because I believe they refer more directly to the abyss than other works that he has developed.

Kapoor says that his works of the late nineties "have been an attempt to deal with the fear of oblivion ... of the loss of self". This is demonstrated in earlier works such as *I*, in reference to which Celant (1998, p. xxix) suggests that Kapoor "reclaims the body as a vehicle of the unknown".

A more recent work that addresses the notion of self-loss is entitled *Turning the World Inside Out*, 1995 (dimensions; 148 x 184 x 188 cm). This artwork is made from cast aluminium that has been highly polished. The viewer is able to peer into the convex exterior and, as Celant (1998, p. xxxvii) claims, be confronted "with an identity like a mirror". But the step into the void, here, is not a process of moving into a place of darkness, into darkness itself. Instead, it is one of a "leap ... into light" (Celant, 1998, p. xxxvii). This representation of the void stands in stark contrast to images of the unknown, and even of hell, as a place of darkness. It expresses the notion that the abyss need not be black and, in doing so, questions the way that the unknown is represented. An association between the unknown and darkness, and therefore between darkness and ignorance, has been returned to again and again in representations of the unknown and the abyss. However, here Kapoor presents the viewer with an expression of the void as both a place of illumination and one of animation. The reflective silvery surface of the orbic artwork reflects a panorama of the space around it. The shape of the form can be distinguished by what can be seen as a reflection. The reflected space becomes animated as the viewer moves around the sculpture.

"Space is as complex [as time]", says Kapoor (cited in "Descent into Limbo", 2002, p. 92). *Turning the World Inside Out* echoes the world around it, capturing the world in its surface only to return the gaze in the form of a reversed and distorted image. This artwork speaks of substance, but it is not a solid form. The interior of the artwork remains out of the sight of the viewer and of the rest of the world, the interior is kept as a secret and impenetrable space. What remains unseen is the containment of the void, an absent space that contrasts the absolute presence of the reflective surface. Kapoor (cited in "Descent into Limbo", 2002, p. 92) says that he attempts to make this interior space seem "bigger than the object that contains it". In this way Kapoor invigorates a dialogue between notions of interior and exterior of which the notion of the void is a necessary element. It is as if to claim that what lies behind that which is reflected, the self perhaps, is an abyss. Here, the interior is the indeterminable space, a volume and quantity of uncertainty and one which recalls my discussion about the individual as a shape of the void.

For Celant (1998, pp. xxxviii-ix), Kapoor's *Turning the World Inside Out II* articulates "the eternal indeterminacy of the appearance of the unknown and the obscure It is an abyss of light and energy sunk into the floor, emerging ... and sucking in everything". I suggest that *Turning the World Inside Out* can also be approached in these terms, even though it is not a floor piece, in so far as it nevertheless threatens to suck in the viewer, to draw them into the void. But where might the viewer be taken if, in fact, the attempts of the work were successful? To which unknown place is it suggested that the void might lead the individual? For Kapoor (cited in Celant, 1998, p. xxxv) losing the self in the void involves the idea of being "consumed ... in the womb". Referring to Kapoor, Ellias (2004, p. 13) points

out that *Turning the World Inside Out* can be identified as “a conduit to a womb where ‘the imagination has the possibility of escape’”.

What is the purpose of drawing the viewer into the womb and, in doing so, what understanding of the individual is mobilised by an experience of a feminised abyss? This question can be answered through a discussion of Kapoor’s void sculptures. “I seem to be making the same shape each time with a different purpose” says Kapoor (cited in Ellias, 2004, p. 13). Characteristic examples of these works include *Untitled, 1994-5*, *Cloak, 1997*, and *Untitled, 1997*.³⁵ Burnett (2005) describes the series, of which these works are a part, as:

large structures of various materials, including stone, that were hollowed out and filled with pigment, creating seemingly fathomless voids The concave cavities in each create a powerful illusion of infinite depth. Although viewers will try to convince themselves that the hole is shallow, their eyes perceive an endless void. (pp. 112-3)

In this paper I have raised the notion that the abyss, in as much as it is interpreted as unfathomable, cannot be adequately represented. Badovinac (1994, n.p.) says that Kapoor describes “the unknown; the inexpressible and the non-depictable ... with voids ... illusory spaces with no form and no inner distinctions”. The question of the adequacy of representation is something that is critical in Kapoor’s practice. He tackles this in his treatment of materials, appealing to the illusion of space, the impression of infinity created by highly polished surfaces and receding hollows.

³⁵ *Untitled, 1994-5* (Kilkenny limestone, 202.5cm by 140cm by 125cm), *Cloak, 1997* (Felt and pigment, 86.5cm by 335cm by 274cm), and *Untitled, 1997* (Granite, two elements, 220cm by 180cm by 42cm each).

In reference to *Untitled 1997*, the concave contour carved into a block of granite gives the void a shape. However, the surface of this curved area of stone has been polished in such a way that the interior darkness seems to extend beyond the confines of the material, alluding to the infinite.

For Kapoor (cited in Ellias, 2004, p. 9), the void holds infinite possibilities and he has “always thought of it more and more as a transitional space. An in-between space [w]here everything is possible and nothing has actually happened. It’s a space of becoming”. This space of creative potential, the void, “can refer to the cosmos [as if to the notion of original chaos] or to the human body In the sense that a void may perhaps be apprehended by the senses” (Lisson Gallery, 1993, n.p.). This attention to the notion of sensation, of experiencing a feeling of the void, of the abyss, permits the viewer to sexualise it. Each void has been gouged out of the stone, an emptying out of the material that implies the construction of the immaterial, of emptiness itself. By scooping away a section of the hard crust Kapoor inflicts a wound upon the physical. It is past the perimeter of the hole that the viewer may peer, as if “it is through the gaping lips of that wound that the void is visible, enticing and seductive in its pitilessness, promising peace and offering the incomparable gift of pleasure” (Tazzi, 1989, n.p.).

This interpretation of the edge of the void as a wound, in Kapoor’s practice, has surfaced on numerous occasions. Kapoor expresses this notion in his printed series entitled *Wounds and Absent Objects*, (1998), as well as in *Blackness from Her Womb*, (2001). The latter series is prefaced by the following prose:

Valley of red
Wounded walls of tranquillity

Crows are calling
Blackness from her Womb

This prose can be read in terms of the way that it expresses an association between darkness and femininity. Cirlot (2001, p. 71) says that due to “its black colour, the crow is associated with the idea of beginning (as expressed in such symbols as the maternal night, primigenial darkness, the fertilizing earth) [and] is a symbol for creative ...power”.³⁶ This information complements my reading of Kapoor’s creative practice because it shows his acknowledgement of creation as the aftermath of chaos. The prose indicates that the valley is red but also tranquil. The walls seem to belong to the valley, wounded and bleeding. The crow is heard amid a vision of darkness. It is the call of a “messenger [of] cosmic significance” (Cirlot, 2001, p. 71). This feminisation echoes the Babylonian creation myth wherein it is said that Tiamat’s carcass was used to create the universe, with her blood being used to create the oceans (Kramer, 1961, pp. 120-1). The valley of red is filled with blood, a sea of tranquillity. Cirlot (2001, p. 281) confirms that the “waters of the oceans are ... seen not only as the source of life but also as its goal. ‘To return to the sea’ is ‘to return to the mother’, that is, to die”.

What message does the ‘crow call’ communicate in the context of Kapoor’s prose? Maybe it is trying to tell us that creation is not only the beginning but also the end of something and, in doing so, reinforcing the notion that the progressive realisation of creative potential is implicated in the scourge, or even death, of the feminine. This interpretation draws the abyss into a circle by implying that the abyss of hell precedes the abyss of creative potential. In

³⁶ In *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Brown, 1993a, p. 2354), the word primigenial is defined as “belonging to the earliest stage of existence of anything; original, primitive, primary”.

other words, the birth of the cosmos is presented as that which has emerged from the feminised mouth of a punishing hell.

In the case of *Untitled 1997*, and recalling the association between the mouth of hell and the female genitals, Kapoor reinforces a sexualisation of the abyss. This particular framing reflects Pippin's (1999, pp. 72-3) claim that the abyss "represents the ultimate threat, the ultimate dangerous female. The abyss is the ruptured female, the ruptured hymen, no longer virgin, nor virgin mother". Pippin's claim informs my reading of Kapoor's voids. He (cited in Hayward Gallery, 1998, p. 8) says that these are sculptural "attempt[s] to deal with the fear of oblivion To be conscious of oblivion, of the loss of self, of fear. This cannot be theatrical. It needs to be real fear".

The notion of losing the self in the void, in the endlessness of possibility perhaps, does not present as a theatrical event here but, rather, as a sexual one. A sensation of the abyss, in this respect, is implicated as an experience of intercourse. If the abyss is totally Other, as Pippin (1999, p. 65) suggests, then that which falls into the void is presumably Other than it. That which is Other than a seemingly limitless female is a seemingly limited male. By developing a discourse that articulates the abyss as a womb, Kapoor continues to reaffirm the abyss as a masculine cultural construction. It seems to equate an experience the abyss, a theoretical dialogue with emptiness and lack, an inter(dis)course with the feminine.

The representation of the abyss as hell supports a sexualisation of the abyss. For Christians, hell is a place where sinners are sent for "giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire" (Jude 7). What can be identified here is a Judaeo-Christian patriarchal perspective. It is in line with this

perspective that depictions of the gates of hell take on an appearance reminiscent of the female genitalia and sex becomes framed as that act which leads directly to the abyss.

A sexualisation of the abyss can also be identified in another example of contemporary cultural production, in *The Stratosphere Girl* (Oberg, 2004). In this film Angela, an eighteen year old European girl, flies to Tokyo to work as a hostess. One of her female room-mates also works as a hostess but provides some additional services for her clients. One of these services she calls “staring into infinity”. So as to show Angela what she means by this, the room-mate sits on the edge of the dining table with her legs parted and lifts her skirt to expose her genitals. These actions indicate that, by paying a fee, a client would be able to ‘stare into infinity’ by sitting in front of the service providers exposed vagina and staring at it for an agreed period of time. The construction of this direct association between the female genitals and the abyss, by way of the notion of infinity, does two things. It reinforces the abyss as a place of pleasure but it also reinforces that such pleasure can be purchased. This commodification of the abyss exists, in the context of this film at least, for the entertainment of men. There is some similarity between the image of a viewer staring into the void of Kapoor’s sculptures and the individual who engages in the kind of ‘stare’ I have just identified.

These considerations can be used to illuminate the sexually oriented implications of Celant’s (1998, p. xxi) suggestion that “Kapoor’s desire is to enter the thing itself”. In line with the gender implications invested in Kapoor’s treatment of the abyss, what his void sculptures communicate is the notion of an unfathomable void, not an unfathomable phallus. The feminisation of the abyss that Kapoor maintains seems to expose a presumption of inadequacy on the part of the male. If notions of the void are

applicable to notions of the female genitals, the inadequacy with which the unfathomable abyss can be fathomed implies the following. It implies that “it is through the gaping lips of that wound that” the male may confront the physical realisation that the void cannot be filled (Tazzi, 1989, n.p.).

Marder (2005, n.p.) speaks of the void when noting that “the jug is nothing to be filled or fulfilled it is already full of itself in itself and beside itself. Full to the point of indifferent, unenjoyable pleasure. Full without measure, ‘at the bottom without bottom’ of an abyss”. As opposed to the promise of “peace and ... the incomparable gift of pleasure” the void feeds into masculine sexual inadequacy and the promise of a confrontation with their own lack (Tazzi, 1989, n.p.). If I am to persist with the line of thinking that Pippin (1999, p. 74) discusses the abyss is “what it *lacks*, which is the phallus” then what the masculine counterpart seems to lack is ‘lack’ itself. For me, this presents not as an erosion of lack but as an intensification of lack.

The dialogue generated between exterior and interior, specifically in terms of the exterior being drawn into the interior, implies an ordeal of self-identification. Celant (1998, p. xxxv) confirms that the “ordeal of the void, of limbo, is a necessary precondition to gaining mastery over nothingness and the self”. Kapoor (cited in Celant, 1998, p. xxxv) also says that the “idea of being somehow consumed ... in the womb is a vision of darkness”. The ordeal, then, presents as the ordeal of such a vision wherein “only the imagination has the possibility of escape” (cited in Celant, 1998, p. xxxv). The imagination is interpreted as the only tool with which the individual’s submission to the void can find resolution, i.e. through a determination of the shape of the abyss. The idea that the infinite is on the other side of the finite is an understanding that Kapoor has maintained throughout the progress of his work. The ordeal of the void, utilising the existing masculine

construction of the abyss, can be interpreted as the male's task of overcoming his own finitude, through a mastery of the womb, through an expression of control over the woman, through his depiction of the abyss. Again, the idea that the unfathomable cannot be fathomable can be used as a guide for the prediction that this ordeal will never be adequately overcome. While Kapoor attempts to approach "a sensibility of infinity ... he never attains his ultimate goal" (Celant, 1998, p. xl). Maybe it is in this way that "Kapoor's sculptures afford a lived experience of the void" (Kuspit, 2004).

The Abyss in James Thiérree's 'La Veillée des Abysses'

Focusing on *La Veillée des Abysses*, this second case study continues my discussion of the use of the abyss in contemporary creative practice. This second study complements the first by further expressing my support for an increased emphasis on an awareness of the abyss as a positive metaphor. In keeping with this support, it also joins the first case study in providing me with an opportunity to outline the theoretical framework within which my own creative practice is positioned.

Directed by James Thiérree, *La Veillée des Abysses* was presented as a part of the Perth International Arts Festival and was performed at the Regal Theatre in Subiaco from Saturday 11th to Sunday 19th February, 2006. I cannot be sure that I would have attended this performance if it had not been for my concentration on the abyss over the last few years. In this sense, and in keeping with the Action Research model of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, my decision buy a ticket and attend *La Veillée des Abysses* was worth reflexively articulating. Having developed a familiarity with the subject matter, acknowledging that the indeterminable abyss cannot be adequately determined, I was at least able to attend the performance with an understanding of the function of the abyss as vehicle for expressions of

indeterminacy. This I consider to be in opposition to the possibility of my being baffled by a non-conservative narrative structure, maybe by not having an understanding as to why I was being baffled and, because of this, having to find a solace in the immediate entertainment value. In such a case, I may have thought of the performance more as a circus than anything else, for example. As a result of the research that I have conducted, I felt able to attend the performance with a sense of authority about the subject matter itself and also with the confidence in my ability to identify its position within a broader theoretical framework. This is an important part of the interpretative process if the individual is to access much of the cultural information that leads to the visual language that the performance articulates.

Having seen the performance, *La Veillée des Abysses* arguably does not follow suit with the examples identified in the previous chapter that demonstrate a strong tendency towards demonising the unknown.³⁷ Rather, *La Veillée des Abysses* employs the abyss as a reference point for a comment on the wonder of the strange in every day life, as opposed to using it to facilitate a lesson on the dangers of indeterminacy or as a vehicle aimed at the demonisation of the unfamiliar, for example. Throughout *La Veillée des Abysses*, reference to the abyss facilitated the expression of a perceived limitless of creative potential and as a metaphor for the articulation of self-reflection. I argue that *La Veillée des Abysses* appeals to an allure of the abyss, presenting a negotiation of the abyss as a favourable and enlightening experience – as an

³⁷ I attended the second night of this performance, already with the intention of using it as a focus for a contemporary creative practice case study. My initial interest lay in determining the way that the abyss was negotiated by the various elements of the show such as dialogue, costume, and set design. For example, before I saw the performance I did not know what role the abyss would play in it. My main concern was that *La Veillée des Abysses* would simply be another opportunity to propagate a fear of the unknown, by somehow presenting the abyss in a variety of hideous manifestations. I have detailed these concerns in chapter 2.

experience of self-growth and of growth in the individual's interpretation of everyday objects and experiences. I also argue that, while there are claims that the performance contains no narrative thread or message, both a narrative thread and a message that can be applied to the everyday thinking of the individual are present.

The titles of creative products are often the first point of contact that the viewing public has with them, like the title of a book that always stands ahead of the content. The title functions as a framing device for the content of the work. With this in mind, I begin discussing the interpretation of the abyss that is communicated by the title *La Veillée des Abysses*. The Abyss is featured in the production's title and is arguably the one part of the title in which the English speaking audience might detect the most distinguishable meaning. It may be assumed that the title's reference to the abyss is at least in some way a marketing tool designed to attract the crowds, but to suggest that this is the only reason would be unreasonable.

There have been a variety of translations of the title *La Veillée des Abysses* circulating in reviews and the like. These include "The bright Abyss" (Bevis, 2006, p. 11) and even Thiérrée's own tentative translation "'tales of the deep'? 'night watch of the deep'? literally untranslatable ... could also be, 'laveil leedesab bysse s' ... if you prefer ... but let us not get tangled up with words, the show will do that quite naturally!" (in The UWA Perth International Arts Festival, 2006b, p. 1). In any case, it appears that 'la veillée' is Bulgarian for 'the vigil' in which case *La Veillée des Abysses* can be read 'the vigil of the abyss'.

La Veillée des Abysses was billed as a "mesmerising fusion of nouveau cirque, dance and theatre" (The UWA Perth International Arts Festival, 2006a). In

another example of the way that the Abyss has been framed for a public audience can be found in Dan Hatch's locally written article advertisement for the performance. Hatch (2006, p. 26) describes *La Veillée des Abysses* as "the ultimate performing arts experience". However, it seems that this is more likely an attempt to pitch the performance to a ticket buying public, rather than a confirmation that the performance is unsurpassed. Nevertheless, this claim contributes to an interpretation of the abyss by drawing a line between the abyss and the idea of ultimate art and so this positioning of *La Veillée des Abysses* begs the question as to what the abyss has to do with the realisation of ultimate art, as to how it might be seen or not be seen to live up to this kind of presumption.

Hatch (2006, p. 26) paraphrases Thiérrée's assertion that "the performance was not tied by a narrative thread, but was simply an experience". It is also worth considering, in this case, whether either a reference to the abyss or even to the presumed absence of narrative thread legitimizes his framing of *La Veillée des Abysses*. Is it precisely an absence of narrative thread, this lack and void, which somehow catapults it to the height of creative expression and thereby maintaining a misunderstanding that creative practice is a metonym for aimless and perceivably inconsequential self-expression? Is Hatch (2006, p. 26), by entitling his brief discussion of *La Veillée des Abysses*, as "Say What? – Ultimate art experience, but no narrative thread or message", suggesting that the best art is art that the viewer doesn't have to think about? Is ultimate art ignorant?

I found this matter of narrative interesting especially in light of the ideas regarding the abyss and narrative that I raised in previous discussions, specifically those relating to the use of the Abyss for the interpretation of natural environments. There, I argued that representations of the abyss offer

narratives that may in turn inform the individual's negotiation of indeterminacy and of the unfamiliar. I wondered what might possibly be informed by a production that claims to possess no narrative thread, whether this is a strategy designed to disorient the viewer and, in turn, encourage the individual's independent negotiation of indeterminacy. Then, *La Veillée des Abysses* may be approached with the suggestion that it is a lesson on the potential for life-narrative.

In order to tackle this issue I refer to Thiérrée's explanation: "I never go into a narrative because it reduces my range and I feel limited ... It is also my talent, I prefer to think of it as a journey. Before you tell a story you have to figure out what you want to say and I'm never sure what I want to say" (cited in Hatch, 2006, p. 26). Taking this information on board it can seem that Thiérrée's art does not come from a place of thoughtlessness but, more accurately, from his negotiation of the sensation of indeterminacy. The role of the abyss in *La Veillée des Abysses* can begin to be thought of as an appropriate cultural reference point for the articulation of sensations of indeterminacy.

However much Thiérrée claims that *La Veillée des Abysses* does not possess an identifiable narrative thread I would continue to argue that it does. Whatever degree of appeal it is that resides in the prospect of being entertained by a performance that, on the surface, asks little of the viewer, I interpret this claim as a strategy designed to invigorate the viewer's imagination. This device presents an opportunity to attach an air of unpredictability to the performance in a way that it is truly entertaining. Maybe this is what it takes to be ultimate art, an artform that teases open the door of all possibility except for that of critical consideration. However the declaration that the performance has no narrative thread is not necessarily a guarantee that it doesn't, it only confirms that there is a reason for declaring so, a theoretical

strategy perhaps. The presumption of an absence of narrative thread may be what is needed to coerce an audience into a position whereby they become receptive to the meaning invested in the production. If entertainment and “pleasure always means not to think about anything”, maybe the façade of pure entertainment is precisely what Thiérrée’s needs to position the viewer in a way that makes any thought possible (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979, p. 144). He anticipates that the characters “world will vanish ... but not without a joyous fight!!” though he does not fail to offer reassurance by saying “do not worry, ladies and gentlemen, for it is still entertainment we are talking about!!” (The UWA Perth International Arts Festival, 2006a). In other words, a serious side to the performance is insinuated but the viewer is still given permission to let their mind wander from thought to thought with no real idea of where it is all going, possibly so that the potential for new thoughts and the potential for new insights can be given life.

If *La Veillée des Abysses* is to be taken as a journey through Thiérrée’s uncertainty as to what he wants to say, if it is to be taken as a journey through this indeterminacy, this is the narrative thread that unifies the performance. It becomes understandable as a tale of indeterminacy with each fragment providing a veritable glimpse at certain steps throughout the negotiation of this sensation. Arguably, this narrative thread is tantamount to a life-narrative, in that indeterminacy is a pervasive feature of everyday thinking and it is through the sewing together of each instance of this that our own perception of the world can be constructed. In these terms, it seems Thiérrée cannot avoid exposing *La Veillée des Abysses* as a narrative of the abyss and one that, in as much as indeterminacy is a pervasive feature of everyday thinking, may have something to offer everyone.

Thiérree's inspiration for *La Veillée des Abysses* is said to have come from "*La Vie des Abeilles* (*The Life of the Bee*) [italics added], a book by Belgian writer and beekeeper Maurice Maeterlinck that compared the behaviour of bees and humans" (Bevis, 2006, p. 11). Thiérree explains that his appreciation for this book lay in the way that Maeterlinck "looked ... at the dances they make – the total mystery of it and yet the total structure. As Shakespeare said, it was the stuff that dreams are made on" (cited in Bevis, 2006, p. 11).

The notion of the dream can be identified as a key theme throughout *La Veillée des Abysses*. The opening scene is marked by the eruption of a fierce storm. Five figures seem to be battling against a billowing mass of white cloth, each taking their turn to near the source of the gale only to succumb to the elemental force and are either thrown back or rolled away into the opacity of the waves. Only a few moments later the storm is gone and the stage falls into silence, and darkness.

The figures are next seen sitting together around a wooden table where a conversion is, quite literally, being conducted. One figure assumes the body language of a conductor, there is no coherent dialogue being used, only the rhymes and rhythms of the voices as they crescendo and decrescendo, uniting and dividing, all seemingly in response to the direction of the conductor hands as if each individual were an instrument in an orchestra. The audience bears witness to an indeterminate language, though maybe it is the language of indeterminacy that can be heard, as if it were a sound in the abyss – a sound of the abyss. The sense of humour communicated by this comedic scene pervades *La Veillée des Abysses* and it is also a sign of the way that the events to follow attempt to defamiliarise the familiarity of everyday occurrences. This device, as a theatrical and literary convention, can be traced back to Brecht's 'alienation effect' (*Verfremdungseffekt*). According to

Lackey (n.d.), Brecht “did not want the audience to reach a motive or look for reasons as to why the play is as it is. Instead he wanted the audience to concentrate on the struggle between the characters”. However, while Lackey (n.d.) states that Brecht’s technique served as a reminder to the audience that what was being seen did “not directly reflect the real world”, I argue that Thiérree used this as an opportunity to re-examine everyday life. This approach to defamiliarisation echoes Inglis’s viewpoint. On the issue of defamiliarisation, Inglis (2005) questions:

How might we go about examining the ways in which cultural forces, together with social factors, influence, shape and structure our everyday activities? A key aspect of both sociological and anthropological responses to this question is to emphasize that one must take what is routine and very familiar to one, and try to defamiliarize oneself with it, making it seem strange and peculiar, rather than ordinary and banal. (p. 11)

Continuing to address the notion of defamiliarisation Inglis (2005, p. 11) paraphrases Giddens, suggesting that “the individual needs a certain sense of psychological security, to the effect that the world around him or her is relatively predictable and understandable and is not just totally chaotic”. A process by which an attempt is made to defamiliarise the familiar, then, is a process through which the individual can “come to see the oddities and peculiarities of our life-world to see our own life-world, which we generally never realise is anything other than ‘natural’, as not ‘natural at all’” (Inglis, 2005, p. 12). Defamiliarisation stands as a process of destabilising the individual’s certainties and expectations, a process whereby the unfamiliar is sought after as a means to achieving different ways of seeing the same things (as in the case of the conducted conversation, for example) and as means to investing new meaning in objects and occurrences.

Bevis notes how in “a surreal domestic tableaux, Thiérrée and his fellow actors wrestle with chairs and runaway tables, are swamped by a carnivorous sofa and duel with iron gates” (Bevis, 2006, p. 11). Skene-Wenzel (May 2004) also notes the “table which turns into a cartwheel, ... [and] a big castle gate to keep away creatures of the night and various other entrapments”.

I refer back to Cavendish’s (1977, p. 111) suggestion that “[w]herever else hell may be, it is in the human mind”. As with alternative representations of the abyss, its depiction as hell can be understood as a product of the imagination. The potential to give form to the Abyss is not overlooked in *La Veillée des Abysses*. Each segment of this performance seems to recall the play of childlike imaginings. On stage, what appears to be a limbless bodice is being used as a bony skull, lit candles on candle sticks become horns of fire above this garment-skull (a ghostly skull that could be worn by any individual, perhaps), and the already present ornate gates now seem to be those at the entrance to hell. Scenes such as this recur throughout, for the “[t]ransforming [of] everyday objects into chaotic creatures is a strong theme” (Bevis, 2006, p. 11).

A comparison can be made between Thiérrée’s attempts to demonstrate that the unfamiliar resides behind the facades of all that is taken for granted in cultural life, and Kapoor’s belief that “the infinite is the other side of the finite” (Celant, 1998, p. xxviii). In both cases the viewer is presented with the understanding that the abyss is all around them, lurking in the shadows of knowledge and waiting for that time when the expectations and certainties of the individual start to disintegrate, appearing on the scene at that time when the individual is certain only of their uncertainty. Thiérrée takes the opportunity to lead the viewer into a sensation of domestic indeterminacy,

into a place where the presumptions of the everyday are challenged by his critical imagination and interest in social inquiry. It is in these terms that Thiérrée's production suggests, as I do in this thesis, that it is important in everyday thinking to acknowledge the proximity of the abyss, to embrace it as a means to challenging our limitations. If paradigms mark the limits of thinking, and paradigms of the abyss characterise cultural interpretations of the unknown, then self-growth emerges from investing the self in the abyss. For me, Thiérrée seems to support this belief.

The belief that the abyss is self-reflective informs my interpretation of this production. Thiérrée makes it clear that "the journey cannot be rushed, and every step of the way will question our characters' willingness to keep the fire burning" (The UWA Perth International Arts Festival, 2006a). I agree with the understanding that, using the performers as vehicles for his message, "Thiérrée wants to give audiences the chance to see reflections of themselves and recognise their own potential" (Bevis, 2006, p. 11).

The abyss has provided the primary cultural reference point for an expression of this desire. This reference to self-reflection encompasses the act of remembering, the presence of memory. In the mind of the individual may lie memories of past friends or loved ones or maybe they are memories of childhood dreams, of childhood games. Skene-Wenzel (May 2004.), writing about *La Veillée des Abysses*, asks the reader whether they "[r]emember the magic of an attic filled with old furniture and books, the smell of dust and the air of lives gone by? A world that offers endless possibilities for play and transformation?" According to Skene-Wenzel (May 2004.), "James Thiérrée invites us to join his". At this point I refer back to Giddens' (1991) description of the infant's act of:

open[ing] out potential space in a way that generates basic trust Creativity, which means the capability to act or think innovatively in relation to pre-established modes of activity, is closely tied to basic trust. Trust itself, by its very nature, is in a certain sense creative, because it entails a commitment that is a 'leap into the unknown'. (pp. 40-1)

Through what presents almost as a series of games of make-believe, Thiérrée may well be asking the audience to join him in a process of generating trust, in ourselves, in our ability to make something of the unknown, to make something out of nothing maybe. It seems that Thiérrée asks the audience to remember a time when trust was placed in the surrealism of dreams. While clearly optimistic about the power of the dream in its seeming limitlessness, it is in this respect that Thiérrée cannot avoid some pessimism in the presumption that trust in dreams and in the imagination have dissipated. Why else might he perceive there to be grounds for their (re-)invigoration? This double edged interpretation is reflected in Thiérrée's claim that "memories are coming to the surface ... an optimistic shipwreck" (The UWA Perth International Arts Festival, 2006a). Maybe a small part of the appeal of *La Veillée des Abysses* relies on this bitter-sweet optimism being a point of view shared by the audience. Maybe it is a sentiment shared by Skene-Wenzel's and one that prompts her query as to whether we can "[r]emember the magic" (May 2004). I would argue that *La Veillée des Abysses* presents a narrative of the abyss, a framework for the negotiation of sensations of indeterminacy. If this lesson could speak, then maybe it would ask the individual to trust their indeterminacy and to use this trust to empower the abyss inside of them.

In any case a dreamlike atmosphere, one that can be associated with the notion of memory, remains throughout the *La Veillée des Abysses*. It is identifiable in the presumed absence of an identifiable narrative thread and

in the way that things seem to appear and disappear as if by magic. In one particular instance Niklas Ek stands by himself with his arms positioned out in front of his body to form a circle, as if he were holding a loved one. But here they hold nothing, only defining an empty space within them. He looks longingly into the space, the void, in a way that makes it seem as though his arms have been filled by his memory. It is as if he could to see someone right there in front of him. Perhaps this person he sees is a woman, a now absent loved one? He continues to look into the void and into a part of himself, a reflection of his past in which the experience of holding her still existed, an experience that the viewer does not share. But then something changes in this scene. However, where elsewhere in the performance it would seem as though “[m]ythical creatures evolve[d] out of nowhere”, in this instance a woman appears and fills the void (Arratoon, 2005). Raphaëlle Boitel approaches and moves up out from behind him, bringing her body up into the space between his arms so that he can now be seen holding her in front of him.

With this development the viewer now sees what was previously unseen, that which is normally hidden in the mind of this man, an invisible memory perhaps now reflected in the void. The viewer is made privy to the memory and, thus, has somehow become a witness of this intimacy, an intimacy that continues as the two figures begin to dance their way across the stage - through this memory. The woman appeared in the void between the man’s arms and at this moment I recall Kapoor’s interpretation of “the void as the zero point of creation”, an interpretation that is reminiscent of the paradigmatic representation of the abyss as an original chaos. Thiérrée, like Kapoor and I, can be identified as framing the Abyss as an arena within which creative potential is intensified, or at least as that arena where meditations on the notion of creativity and creative potential may find focus.

Thiérree makes the claim that “it is still entertainment we are talking about!!” (The UWA Perth International Arts Festival, 2006a). However, over four thousands years of cultural meaning that has been invested in the abyss cannot be denied. There are gender implications that warrant discussion here. What is quite telling about the interpretation of the abyss, in this scene, is the way that it is feminised. The void manifests in the form of a woman.

This implication of the gender of the abyss is reminiscent of connection between the original chaos and creation of the universe and the womb as a place of creation. Here I refer back to Pippin’s (1999, pp. 72-5) suggestion that “the abyss ... represents the ultimate threat, the ultimate dangerous female but [also] the place of the vaginal birth of the universe The abyss remains a gendered space, a female space”. It should be recognised that the power over this feminised void has been assumed by the male party. He looks into the void and only has to dream of her, or remember her, and she appears before him, as if on demand. All he has to do is want her and she promptly arrives, assuming a passive posture. Whereas before he looked down into the void and deep into the abyss now he looks down on the woman, the other. He can be seen holding her in her place so that he can continue to stare at this shape of the void which he holds in his grasp as if to demonstrate how he can contain it, how he has control over the abyss.

The construction of the abyss as a feminine space is inevitably open to influence from other interpretations of the abyss. Because hellish depictions of the abyss represent it as a place of hideous beasts, a feminised abyss cannot avoid the hue of hellish representations in their implication of the woman as monster. This, by deduction, confirms hell as a patriarchal construction of the abyss. In Babylonian mythology the carcass of the great chaotic primeval ocean maternal goddess Tiamat was used to create the

universe, her blood being used to create the oceans (Kramer, 1961, pp. 120-1). This early story illustrates a feminised and creative abyss but here in *La Veillée des Abysses* it is suggested that the woman has been created, she has been made manifest by none other than the already present male party. Patriarchy, thus, is presented as having taken over the role of creator, preceding the presence of the woman. This is an understanding that is reflected in the Christian depiction of God as a man and in depictions of his male messenger, Jesus. As shown in chapter 2, the influence of Christianity led to the abyss of creation fading away in favour of an abyss of destruction, Hell. The abyss becomes a masculine space with the female genitals interpreted as the entrance to this place where punishment awaits those who enter.

By making immediate and continuous reference to the abyss, Thiérree's *La Veillée des Abysses* cannot avoid a reading that draws from the various meanings that have been invested in this notion. However many romantic sentiments may be read into the dynamic between the man and the woman in this scene, these are undermined when an understanding of the abyss is drawn upon. In this latter case, the scene in which the woman 'appears' in the void can be read as the depiction of man dominating beast.

Is this vision a memory or a fantasy? Is the void that he holds a void of the past or one of the future? Maybe the viewer has not witnessed the manifestation of a memory but rather the unfolding of a hope of possibility – an over-determination played out and projected into the abyss of time that persists ahead. Has the viewer witnessed an expression of the realisation of potential in this surreal sequence of events? Did it happen before, or has it just begun? Is the viewer witnessing the beginning, or the end? Just as likely it is neither a beginning nor an end but rather a midway point somewhere

else in the subconscious between dream and memory. In respect to this, I am certain only of the evidence of this uncertainty, an indeterminacy in which the viewer has at once found themselves to be implicated.

I refer to Gauguin's (cited in Gamboni, 2002, p. 86) understanding that "[n]ature has mysterious infinities, a power of imagination ... she manifests herself through a continual variousness in what she produces. The artist himself [sic] is one of her means". Thiérrée's production expresses the performative nature of this creative potential. It expresses a temporal unfolding of this potential recalling "the temporal unfolding of self-identity" through which the self-creative and even self-destructive potential of the individual is realised in daily life (Giddens, 1991, p. 14). With this theoretical approach, a connection can be drawn by means of Thiérrée's embracing of the abyss as a vehicle for the manifestation of creative potential, through to the notion of self-creative potential and the "almost infinite range of possibilities open to the individual" (Giddens, 1991, p. 36). In these terms it is possible to think of Thiérrée as an artist who is engaged in an expression of the abyss in human nature.

Having signposted the abyss as a cultural reference point for the negotiation of self-reflection, what seems to be an over abundance of narrative threads in *La Veillée des Abysses* can be understood as a reflection of the multiplicity of possibility and potential possessed by the individual. It is Thiérrée's understanding that "[t]heater is more about humankind looking at humankind and exploring situations that we put ourselves in – to ask questions and try to answer them" (cited in Bevis, 2006, p. 11). Therefore, the theatre can be interpreted as a stage where questions of the self are played out, where the resolution of these questions is attempted regardless of whether or not such resolution is adequately achieved or not. Recalling my

previous presentation of the project of the self as an idiosyncratically unresolvable project, it is possible to further develop this interpretation of the theatrical stage by referring to it as an arena within which such irresolution is played out. In this respect the stage becomes a critical feature of a theatre of indeterminacy. Alexander (1999) says that “[i]ndeterminacy is not nihilistic If the world were entirely determined, there would be no opportunity for change or growth. Indeterminacy is actually what enables complexity to develop over time”. In as much as it is a metaphor for the indeterminable, it follows that the most suitable cultural reference point for this understanding of the theatre is the metaphor of the abyss.

Throughout the duration of *La Veillée des Abysses*, Thiérrée implicates the audience in a performative negotiation with the abyss. In this way, the viewer is faced with a defamiliarised reflection of their everyday experience (as they were sitting in a hall of image warping mirrors), and in turn becomes the potential owner of the fragments of narrative thread that Thiérrée has on offer. It is my understanding that while Thiérrée performs for the viewer a composition that has been constructed from his glimpses into his own, these ways of seeing are intended to appeal to the human condition, to the shape of the void in other people’s lives.

Supported by his fellow performers, Thiérrée puts his indeterminacy on show and the audience does not know how, next, he will express it. Maybe when the performers make strange sounds with their mouths and unusual gestures with their bodies, they act out a parody of the individual in everyday life who is forced to continually invent new ways to negotiate their self. As if to say, “This is how strange you also seem”.

The audience members sit together in the darkness, in this arena of Thiérrée imagination, this veritable abyss of possibility where the viewer is offered these pieces of fragments. It seems that it is these pieces and fragments that constitute the narrative thread in that each of them makes reference to Thiérrée. Each one can be understood, by making this continual reference, as working towards the construction of a biography and, in this way, a life-narrative.

This understanding is also conducive to Thiérrée's problem with the determination of beginning and end for there seem to be many of each, with the time frame within which the performance exists offering only the illusion of narrative. This fits in with the format of the performance, comprising of a series of seemingly unconnected insights. As a result, the performance gives the impression of consisting not of one story in particular but of a series of glimpses into what are possibly many stories not yet fully formed, not disfigured but rather in formation. What can be thought of as uniting these insights under a single narrative thread is the idea of potential, the childlike abundance of possibility unconstrained by any knowledge of the many limitations that are endured in the often contrasting rationality of the adult world. These fragments of stories are insights and they have the possibility to find themselves, they do not yet know what is to come, they may as yet not know themselves, like children finding their way through flexibility of the imagination that finds nourishment in their ignorance, in their unknowing.

Conducive to an organised interpretation of a life-narrative are the identification of a beginning, middle, and an end. These components anchor an understanding of daily personal experience within a broader time space continuum. Yet Thiérrée seems to be determined in his attempt to attack these points of reference. In the pamphlet for *La Veillée des Abysses* Thiérrée

poses his indeterminacy: “ah yes! I remember ... the end ... that feels like a beginning ... unless it is the opening scene that looks very much like an end ... hum ...”

Might an apparent lack of narrative thread be symptomatic of the abyss as it is of the dream sequence, where it may not yet resemble any identifiable thing, as if the viewer was suddenly privy to a fleeting glimpse of whatever it is? I believe that what *La Veillée des Abysses* possesses is not an absence of narrative thread but rather an over abundance of threads, as if it were a ball of twine for the audience to examine and even attempt to unravel or solve, a ball constructed out of many smaller pieces of thread and where the knots are offered as obstacles to overcome. For me, it is an over-narration that, in as much each component is merely a glimpse along the path of a journey, harks back to Hall's (1997, p. 3) point that “identification is ... a process of articulation, a suturing, an overdetermination not a subsumption”. In this instance it can be presumed that there exists an overdetermination of narrative threads, a saturation of narrative threads that has resulted in the appearance of a dislocation, and thus an absence of, a single cohesive narrative.

The closing scene and the opening scene are very similar. Skene-Wenzel (May 2004) notes how “[a]t its zenith the storm returns and the entire cast sails away to new adventures and distant lands”. The billowing storm which marked the commencement of the performance, as if to be some kind of original chaos, an abyss, arrives again at the very end, this time more reminiscent of another abyss, an apocalyptic disintegration of everything. Or maybe it is simply the original chaos of before, not that the chaos had left and has arrived again but that it is the individuals who had left and who have

now returned to this initial point on the circle, and who now anticipate another cycle of self-growth. The cast continue their journey into the abyss.

If an interpretation of the lack of narrative, this façade of discontinuity, is a reflection of the abyss as Thiérrée interprets it, then it may seem that his abyss is one of illusion, a place where the individual might come face to face with a trick or with tricks, where it is no longer advisable to believe what the eyes have seen but only what they might come to see, where actuality lies behind the wall of false appearances and within the darkness of the unseen. In these terms it would seem that the appeal of the abyss, for Thiérrée, is its false claim as to the absence of narrative, by presenting *La Veillée des Abysses* as that which it is not, an aimless, inconsequential, or accidental creative performance.

To the contrary, it is my understanding that Thiérrée's attempt seems to have been to disorient the audience not in order to mislead them but, perhaps, so that they may be forced to find their own way, so that they do not, in the end, become led. The individual is encouraged to negotiate their own sensation of indeterminacy. It seems also that he has attempted to express to the viewer an understanding that one abyss brackets their life journey. In other words, he seems to be suggesting that the abyss can seem to see to be in two places at once, at the beginning and at the end, and that this is possible because the abyss is all around - all around everything. Previously, in my discussion of the role of the abyss throughout the construction of self-identity, I raised Wegscheider-Cruse's (cited in Giddens, 1991, p. 78) suggestion that "the risks of self-growth involve going into the unknown, into an unfamiliar land where the language is different and customs are different and you have to learn your way around". If this is so then *La Veillée des Abysses*, with its domestic surrealism and everyday indeterminacy, can be

understood as Thiérrée's request that the individual dive into the unknown, to resist xenophobia so that they may find something of value in the abyss and embrace it and play with it, no matter how strange or unfamiliar it might first appear to be.

Summary

I have used these case studies to demonstrate the use of the abyss in contemporary creative practice outside of the sphere of mass commodity culture. Having observed that both Kapoor and Thiérrée offer interpretations of the abyss that make explicit reference to the individual and to everyday cultural life, I believe that these examples demonstrate a much more constructive negotiation of the abyss. While unable to avoid drawing from historical representations of the abyss, their negotiation of these paradigms seems somewhat less sensationalised, more conducive to notions about the unfamiliarity of self than to the strangeness of the Other. Thiérrée's performance in particular, by illuminating the surrealism of the domesticated space, draws attention to the Otherness of the self. Kapoor's void sculptures, though they can be read quite extensively in terms of the way that they affirm a historically embedded sexualisation of the abyss, do also serve explicitly to reflect an impression of the self back onto the individual by means of their often highly polished surfaces. Each study discusses how a contemporary creative practitioner positions the everyday thinking of the individual, and in this way the self-theory of the individual, within the theoretical framework of the abyss. The studies explain how each artist implicates the individual in the construction and perpetuation of this metaphor. For this reason, the case studies also become useful as a means to contextualising the way that I negotiate the abyss in my creative practice. In keeping with the self-reflexive nature of this research, a relationship between the theory and my creative practice has been illuminated where appropriate

throughout the chapters. The studies that I have presented, in particular, serve to prepare the way for a much more detailed discussion of my ongoing praxis.

Chapter 5

Praxis: Constructions across Lack

Introduction

Creativity involves the bridging of gaps through the fusing of disparate cultural configurations There must be ... a 'conjuncture of difference' or a process of change in existential conditions that calls for reorientation. In the present time of transcultural processes, global media diffusion, migration and increasing cultural plurality in urban centres ... islands of cultural creativity appear as multitudinous archipelagos in the world. (Liep, 2001, p. 12)

This chapter demonstrates how I have negotiated the information that my research has brought to my creative practice. I ask the questions, "How does my own creative practice, demonstrate an innovative and culturally self-reflexive negotiation of the abyss and indeterminacy?" I critically discuss selected examples of my own artwork as well as my solo exhibition *Constructions Across Lack*. With discussion I am able to demonstrate that visual cultural contexts provide appropriate forums for the communication of my research that I can, in turn, draw upon to inform my practice.

By appealing to the notion of praxis, I make the claim that my theoretical and my practical research are engaged in a continually evolving and mutual dialogue. Even though my artwork informs my research less than my research informs my artwork, a discussion of my creative practice complements this self-reflexive research project.

I have made the point that representations of the abyss stem from negotiations with self-directed indeterminacy and I remain mindful of the

problem of representation inherent in this subject matter. In light of this, my creative practice aims to direct the viewer not into a scene of hell or into a sexualised abyss but into the sensation of indeterminacy itself. By this I mean that I wish to encourage the individual to consider that the abyss is already in front of and around them in their indeterminacy, by remaining beyond the limits of their determination. I wish to suggest that the abyss is a pervasive feature of daily life and therefore a part of their self.

In line with my interpretation of historical and contemporary depictions of the abyss, I believe that it is appropriate for me to interpret my artworks as documents of indeterminacy. What I provide in this chapter are my personal positions on the artworks. However, I am aware of the potential for viewers to formulate alternative interpretations and that this potential has a place in the creative process.

Abyss, this way

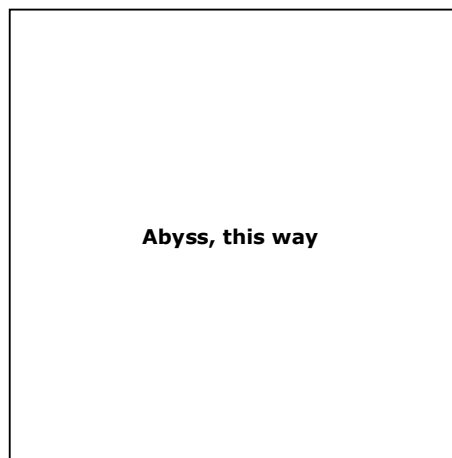


Figure 1. *Abyss, this way.*

Abyss, this way draws upon my observation that historical paradigms of the abyss offer cultural reference points for a discussion of self-directed

indeterminacy. This artwork can be compared Aharanot's (2003) *Abyss Ahead!* photograph of the sign of the metaphor of the abyss taken at the Nahal Poleg Nature Reserve in Tel Aviv, Israel (see discussion pp. 73-80). This photograph directs the attention of the individual to a feature of the natural world that poses as a threat to the mortality of the self, guiding them through it by raising the prospect of realising self-destructive potential. It implies that safety is maintained so long as the individual and the abyss remain at a distance from each other. In contrast, *Abyss, this way* aims to articulate my interpretation of the individual as a shape of the void and, in this way, raises the notion that the abyss is something that the individual cultivates within their self. While the notion of self-destructive potential is not forgotten, this artwork appeals to an association between the abyss and self-creative potential i.e. through the individual's ongoing cultural negotiation of sensations of indeterminacy.

Both the artwork and the photograph can be interpreted as a sign of the metaphorical abyss. In reference to the notion of the sign, Culler (1988) says:

The expression *framing the sign* has several advantages over *context*: it reminds us that framing is something we do; it hints of the frame-up ('falsifying evidence beforehand in order to make someone appear guilty'), a major use of context; and it eludes the incipient positivism of 'context' by alluding to the semiotic function of framing in art, where the frame is determining, setting off the object or event as art, and yet the frame itself may be nothing tangible, pure articulation. (p. ix)

Because this artwork was conceptualised as a sign of a metaphor, my original intention was to produce this work in keeping with sign making procedures and materials, giving it the appearance of a street or road sign, for example. This literal approach to the notion of signage would enable it to be

developed as a site specific and public artwork. The sign, *Abyss, this way*, supports Walker (n.d., p. 1) by appealing to “artistic reflexivity in the sense that it draws attention to the constructedness of art”. An acknowledgement of the constructedness of cultural metaphors is also made, using industrial materials to comment on the construction of the abyss within the context of industrialisation.

Essentially, this artwork is a two dimensional wall mounted piece, a square with each side being one metre in length. I decided to leave the majority of the surface white for the following reason. If abyss is beyond the faculties of determination, and darkness can be identified, a representation of the abyss as dark is also problematic. For this reason I believed it would be appropriate to retain the white appearance of the artwork, to play into the question of what an abyss is in the first place, to begin to encourage this discourse on the part of the viewer.

Viewing the artwork, the individual could expect to observe a reference to something that is separate from them. In as much as the abyss remains beyond an individual’s faculties of determination, a sign of an abyss can be thought of as a detour to the indeterminable and yet the sign seems to lack any directive information, it appears to be an aimless and uncertain sign of the abyss.

Initially it might seem that the viewer is confined to the limits of the sign. It is in this sense that the words *Abyss, this way* might be read as if it were ‘in this way’, by way of one’s confinement to the sign of an Abyss, that an Abyss may be considered. In this sense it is as if the viewer is asked to pass through the white façade of the surface by way of these words, in order to reach the darkness, behind, that defines them. Alternatively, in as much as this

artwork does not appear to offer the viewer any direction the words *Abyss, this way* might be read as if it were 'in this way', i.e. through the aimlessness of a lack of direction or through an experience of indeterminacy, that a sensation of an abyss may be approximated.

There is no arrow in this artwork that might point the viewer in the direction of a separate location where an abyss might be located. But this does not mean that I provide an affirmative answer to the question of whether "the abyss is the vanishing (or infinity) point on the canvas, with everything disappearing", as asked by Pippin (1999, p. 71). The potential for direction is maintained and so, on the one hand, the viewer is encouraged to interpret the abyss as that which exists all around them. In this sense it were as if the absence of an arrow created an impression of there being 360 invisible arrows, one for each degree and all pointing outwards beyond the limits of the canvas. The viewer is directed beyond the frame of the sign which, by being a sign, continues to lack the abyss.

If the sign contains no arrow then it can be interpreted by the viewer that the abyss is to be located somewhere in the direction towards which the sign faces. The sign faces the viewer and communicates to them that the abyss is this way. Maybe it can be suggested that if the sign could think and see that it would know where the sign is, that it could see where the abyss exists, and yet the sign faces the individual. A void announces itself to the viewer by way of this sign. The sign is read by the viewer and so there emerges a theoretical discourse in which only the individual and the sign of the metaphor are engaged. The sign attracts the gaze of the viewer only to turn that gaze back on them by way of the text: *Abyss, this way*. The sign stands as a detour to the individual where, by communicating the abyss, employs it as a vehicle for an interpretation of the individual as a shape of the void. *Abyss,*

this way articulates an interpretation of the interrelationship between the abyss and the everyday thinking of the individual that has been informed by my theoretical inquiry.

You could die tomorrow, you could die today



Figure 2. *You could die tomorrow, you could die today.*

This artwork is a comment on future indeterminacy, on what I have interpreted as an abyss of the future that the individual negotiates with each new moment. A material description of this artwork precedes a clarification of its relationship to my research project.

Initially, this work was to consist of two elongated panels, each approximately 40cm in height and 120cm in length, and each having text upon its surface. Each panel was to be of matt black appearance and each would have had text written upon it; i.e., the first panel would have read *You could die tomorrow* and the second panel would have read *You could die today*. These words were to have been written in graphite, upon the surface of each black rectangle. Graphite would have been used so that when viewed from front on the words would have vanished against the background. The clarity of these words would have been best observed when viewed from an angle,

shining each time that they caught the light. There was to be no additional images incorporated into this particular work.

This artwork makes reference to the notion of movement over time, that this movement occurs in response to a lack or gap that the future presents. I wanted to articulate a sense of separation through the passage of time though, because the passage of time is constant, I also wanted to articulate a sense of connection or unity across this gap. It is for this reason that the idea to present two panels was set aside in favour of the presentation of one larger panel. Creating an elongated panel, so that the entire work is 67cm in height and 250cm in length, I hoped to give it the appearance of a panoramic photograph.

Central to this work is a digital image taken in a harbour environment at night. Using a shutter speed of approximately thirty seconds I was able to achieve the blurring effect that is visible blurring and, in this way, documented the movement of the eye of the individual across space and over a particular period of time. This image has been constructed across the gap of the aperture, across that hole that framed my observation of darkness, as I looked beyond the shore and as I peered into the space that appears to me as the horizon.¹

¹ Previous to the inception of this project, much of the artwork that I had been producing was informed by the harbour environment. On many occasions, I would go to the harbour after dark. On some of these occasions I climbed under the jetty itself and spent time observing the compositions and the rigidity of the pylons and other structures that are juxtaposed against the fluidity of the water into which they reached. On other occasions I took long exposure slides incorporating the movement of the camera itself along the line of the horizon. A variety of lights appear in the distance. Those that are constant result in a line of colour across the developed slide. Those that are intermittent result in a string of dots or dashes across the developed slide. I was interested in the way that, by moving the camera during long exposures, I could use various industrial devices to veritably draw, using light as a medium, across the darkness of the night sky, to construct a journey of light across that distance and that gap. The image in *You Could Die Tomorrow. You Could Die Today* came out

The original idea utilised two black panels with text. On the left and the right of the image a development of this idea can be observed. In their current state, each panel has a slightly longitudinal rectangular appearance, though certainly not to the extent that the digital image is rectangular. In this instance it is the left and right sides of the rectangle that are the longest as opposed to the original idea in which the top and bottom sides were the longest. Each panel is black and retains one half of the phrase. The appropriate half of the phrase is written in red along the base of each shape. The two halves of the phrase appear to be separated by the image between them, a dark void that looks out to the horizon, to the limit, in the direction of the space beyond the horizon as if to try to catch an impossible glimpse of what might reside there. However, because it is impossible to see the invisible, maybe this becomes more so a gesture which suggests that the individual cannot see whatever is beyond the limit though can rest assured, at least, that 'it' is over 'there'.

I have raised the role of the abyss in an interpretation of my migration experience and noted that the journey could be understood as a theoretical and physical construction across a lack. The night harbour image documents my act of peering back into that lack, reflecting on the journey across it that brought me to this shore. This artwork reflects how this research project has informed my everyday thinking. It can be interpreted as an attempt to use the abyss as a means to organising and communicating a variety of feelings and ideas relative to my migration experience. With the migration drawing nearer, the last face I remember seeing was my Nan's as she waved us goodbye. Thinking about the abyss, and thinking about the role of indeterminacy in matters of self-identity, allowed me to entertain pre-existing anxiety about

of one of these sessions. I raise this to emphasise my willingness to reflect on work that I have made and to make more work that draws on my reflection.

whether or not I would see her again.² When my family left for Australia in 1981, she was already 72 years old and so my thoughts about her epitomised my discomfort regarding a seemingly unfathomable gap between myself and my English family. This artwork provided me with the opportunity to articulate my interpretation of the abyss in a self-reflexive way.

The artwork presents phrases that are presumably familiar to people in that they communicate an idea that is evident in everyday life. Contemporary consumer culture urges the individual to secure interest rates and buy insurance so that the threat of the future can be guarded against. The artwork presents these phrases to suggest that all determination regarding the future is an over-determination, as inadequate as depictions of the abyss. If uncertainty is uncomfortable then the future provokes discomfort. With this work I attempted to make the viewer uncomfortable by referring to the only part of the future of which the individual can be certain, the understanding that at some stage they will die. I hope for people to view these phrases and contemplate their own death, to engage in this irresolvable game of self-directed indeterminacy of the abyss that always remains in front of them.

By observing the phrases separately it can become evident that they each refer to the same things. One of those things to which they commonly refer is the possibility of the death of the individual. This much is obvious, but in doing so they also refer to the same moment in time. If I were to die tomorrow, I would eventually arrive at a moment tomorrow at which point I was greeted by death. If I were to die today I would also eventually arrive at

² I saw my Nan again during a research trip to England where I researched a number of artworks by Anish Kapoor. My own artwork entitled *Black Jar*, a piece that I also discuss in this chapter, can be understood as another step in an attempt to deal with the familial uncertainty and anxious sentimentality that I believe is the legacy of my migration experience.

the moment at which I was greeted by death. It is in this way that both phrases speak of the moment, one moment just like the one upon which the individual exists as they consider the artwork, considering the inevitability of their own demise, their decline, and their own bodily decay.

The order with which these phrases have been presented is an important element in the communication of the artwork. In keeping with the Western tradition of reading from left to right, the first statement to be read is, "You could die tomorrow". With this phrase the inevitability of the death of the individual can be introduced at somewhat of a distance. Reflecting on one's existence in the moment, the individual one could possibly find solace in the thought that their death exists in the future, in a 'tomorrow'. The fact that tomorrow never comes, at least, offers the consideration that death remains at a distance from the individual. Although any reassurance gained from this consideration could be founded in a rather limited conception of the passage of time, such could serve to allay a dis-ease experienced at the thought of one's own death. It could function as a way out of the consideration of one's own death at a time when such a consideration offers no more than dis-ease. In any case, the purpose of presenting this first phrase is to assist in the implication of a sense of distance between the individual and the inevitable death of the individual.

Secondly, the viewer arrives at the phrase, "You could die today". What this phrase does is foreclose on the sense of distance that was implied by the previous phrase. In as much as both phrases refer to the moment, it can be seen that this second phrase is the same as the first. It would have taken a short amount of time to read the first phrase and then get to the second phrase, but this passage of time can be artificially augmented through the consideration that it is now tomorrow; that a tomorrow arrived 'today'; that,

the 'tomorrow' during which the individual could die could suddenly become the 'today' during which the individual could die. In this order, then, these two phrases serve to imply a nearing of the death of the individual.

It is intended that these phrases imply a reaching across time, distance, or a lack, and towards death's inevitability. But as one phrase seems to reach across the image, across that void, to the other phrase it can be seen that one and the other are the same and that it was only a matter of time before this consideration became evident. This observation can be related to self-identity theory in as much as the construction of the self-identity of the individual appears as a construction across lack that occurs over time. We may see the relevance of the written word, here, when it is considered that identity remains firmly on the theoretical agenda.

By reading the two phrases the attention of the individual is theoretically drawn to the edge of an abyss. However, more to the point, the attention of the individual is drawn to their inevitable presence upon that edge, to entertain their indeterminacy as to what might become of "their own structures" (Giddens, cited in McRobbie, 2001). This remains the case whether we refer to the life of the individual twenty years into the future, or whether we refer to the life of the individual twenty seconds into the future.

I am satisfied with the inability to distinguish whether or not the phrases document the author's voice, whether or not they attribute themselves to the viewer, whether or not and the viewer are even intended to be different people. In other words, it is unclear whether these words are being directed to another individual by the absent author, or whether or not the viewer has become witness to the author's soliloquy.

A number of indeterminacies are raised in my articulation of this artwork and so it seems appropriate that the articulation that the work conducts is also indeterminate in some way. Therefore in as much as the work represents a drawing to the edge of an abyss of the future with and through indeterminacy, it also represents a drawing at the edge of an abyss of indeterminacy. This artwork is a construction across lack, both in terms of its appearance and its motivation. It reminds the viewer that they are at the edge of an abyss but, because the individual is confined to the moment, it also serves as a reminder to the individual that they cannot retreat from it.

Black Badge

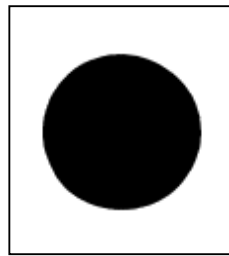


Figure 3. *Black Badge*.

The conceptual framework for *Black Badge* has been drawn from my discussions regarding self-identity and continues with the theme ‘constructions across lack’. By drawing on a parallel between the construction of self-identification and the symbolic function of the button badge, this discussion continues to demonstrate how this research project has informed my creative practice.

Building upon this parallel, an examination of *Black Badge* addresses, in particular, the role that lack plays in the shaping of the individual. I shall now provide a material description of the artwork *Black Badge* and follow this with an articulation of the theoretical groundwork that supports it.

This artwork is modelled on the standard button badge, similar to those that can be found on counters of shops or markets and varies in size from 20mm to approximately 50mm in diameter. The 25mm diameter design appears to be the most common variety and so it is this scale to which my artwork complies. It is not uncommon to see a button badge bearing a distinguishing device, or other design element, attached to a shirt, hat, or bag. However, Black Badge has nothing displayed upon its face.

Devoid of a portrait, name or slogan, the face of this badge is entirely black. It has no picture or portrait of an idol. But it does not miss the opportunity to construct an association of sorts between the individual and the Other towards which he or she reaches for self-identity. The act by which an individual pins a badge upon their person acts as a material sign of an individual's desire, not only to represent that Other which is identified by the badge, but also confirms the mobilisation of that desire (the 'pinning' of the badge presents as a physical confirmation of the theoretical process of 'attachment').

In as much as the abyss is "totally 'Other'" (Pippin, 1999, p. 65) it can be suggested that a black badge is the most appropriate badge to wear, not as a determination of Other, which the unfathomable abyss undermines, but an indication of the reflexivity and ongoing process itself. To wear a badge that depicts a face of a hero, as a way of identifying a desire to be like that hero for example, would be not only to attribute limitations to the notion of the Other but it would also be a reference to that which is less of an Other than the abyss. In other words, it would seem that to make reference to any Other other than the abyss, is a reference to a lesser Other and, therefore, employs a less effective means to self-identification. I believe that my wearing of a black badge would be self-reflexive not only because it attempts an association

between the self and the abyss, but also because it also demonstrates an explicit awareness of that very attempt, of the process of construction itself.

Black Badge makes reference to the void that informs the self-identity of the individual, but it does so as a way of referring to the self-identity of the individual. This process of 'detour and return', through which the idea or lack or the abyss appears central, is similar to that process evident in the artwork *Abyss, this way*. In each case the viewer can arrive at the understanding of an absence that is turns out to be, in fact, present.

Black Jar



Figure 4. *Black Jar*.

This piece was motivated by a memory relating to my migration experience. During the last few days before my family was due to depart London for Perth we stayed at the home of my Father's Mother in Exmouth, Devon. On the last day of our stay, as we were about to leave my Nan's home, she communicated to us that she had forgotten something and disappeared into

one of her rooms. Moments later she returned and in her hand was an empty jar with a brown lid. My parents and siblings all stood around wondering why Nan was concerned with an empty jar, especially when we were just about to leave for the other side of the world. At this point in time Nan took the lid off of the jar and, placing the glass rim around her mouth, breathed into it for a minute or so. Then, she quickly replaced the lid and tightened it. She gave the jar to my Father and spoke words to the effect that now she could always be near us all. The jar travelled with us to Australia and was kept in my parents' cupboard for several years until they eventually threw it out.

In April 2005 I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to conduct research in London that contributed largely to the development of this paper. During this time I was also fortunate enough to be able to visit my Nan who was to turn 96 years of age during my stay. Realising the value of any time I spent with her, and remembering the gesture she had made with the jar, I believed it was important to rectify its absence and make sure that a replacement jar would not be discarded.

I spent about five days with Nan and on the last day produced the empty jar that I had brought from Australia. I showed it to her and described both my memory of her gesture and my reasons for creating another one. I told her that we could think of it as a collaborative performance artwork. My memory of her gesture has probably been one of the most prominent that I have of her until this particular visit, and so I was quite surprised when she claimed to have no recollection of it at all. She reacted to my story by repeating the words, "Of all the strange things that I have done. Oh, haven't I done some strange things". Nan seemed convinced that her breath would not be enough and kept asking me, "Do you want me to put a flower or something in there

as well?" I assured her that her breath was enough, as it had been so many years before.

When choosing a jar to take to England I had considered that it might not be that easy, at age 96, for her to meet my request and so I had consciously selected a jar that was about half the size of the original. The only condition that I had put on my selection criteria was that the jar needed to have a black lid. My Nan's maiden name was Black and so I believed that a black lid symbolically acknowledged this.

Nan held the jar to her mouth and began to breathe into it. But the breath was more of a wheeze and I felt a little guilty for my anxiously sentimental but selfish request. I asked her to stop when she felt that she had filled the jar. When she indicated that this was so, I quickly tightened the lid on and wrapped the seal in sticky tape that I had placed in arms reach earlier. She sat there, for a few moments, holding the jar up in front of her and stared into it, examining the condensation on the inside of the glass. "It's definitely in there isn't it", she said with an expression of intrigue.

Today, I have the jar with me at my home in Australia. Reflecting upon this event I am disappointed that my anxiety about whether or not I would see my Nan alive again could be interpreted as having led me to turn her into some kind of specimen. This was certainly not my intention for, in defence of my actions, it was the sentimentality that I interpreted in her gesture that led me to repeat it, to do something she had done, to feel closer to her by means of this shared experience.

By taking an empty jar to England, with the intention of capturing my Nanna's breath, I was negotiating a theoretical and physical construction

across a lack. This lack can be interpreted as an absence of the original jar or as a gap between my Nan and I in time and in space, as if I were building a bridge across an abyss.

One of the points that was raised in the chapter that discussed the process of self-identification, referred to the temporal nature of identities. Identities, as representations across a lack and in this way can never do more than represent, could be regarded as inadequate. The question can be raised, in light of this consideration, whether or not I perceived my Black Jar 'construction' to be an adequate bridge between myself and my Nan. The very fact that the Black Jar was constructed as a way of replacing the original discarded jar deems its intention to 'represent' a sign of its inherent inadequacy.

Black Jar expressed my attempt to fill a void that I had conceived of between my Nan and myself. If the void is always full of itself then this was my opportunity to, through association with my Nan, realise a sense of that fullness, a sense of her. But maybe what the Black Jar does is demonstrate an inability to adequately bridge that gap, and maybe I am unable to do enough to resolve this. Instead of helping to invigorate a sense of connection, I believe the Black Jar has come to be much more a testament to this interpretation.

Speak to Me in Tongues: The Abyss in Modern Languages

The very question of how to negotiate the abyss through language has remained central to this paper. Not only has the abyss been the subject of spoken language in historical and contemporary cultural texts, denoted by a written language, but it has also been the subject of a specifically visual language, subject to visual culture. As a result, it seemed appropriate that I

develop an artwork that attempted to collaborate these means, to use this approach to raise the question of articulation that the abyss facilitates. Subjecting the abyss to critical analysis, I have been systematically working my way through the layers of meaning invested in this metaphor. *Speak to Me in Tongues* is a way for me to express the multiplicity of these layers.

The resulting artwork comprises of 41 sound files. A file is assigned to each language and each one has been turned into a loop. The different words are repeated on their own track over and over. Each sound file offers a different word but also a different human voice. An individual entering the installation space might at first hear the German word for abyss (abgrund) being repeated from one part of the installation and at the same time might also hear the Hungarian word for abyss (szakadék) being repeated in another part of the installation. With 41 sound files being played concurrently, what is created is a confusion of words, a confused articulation of the abyss. The looping and simultaneous playing of each sound file creates the overall effect of a seemingly unending and multiple articulation of the abyss.

The list of languages that I have used includes the translations and definitions of abyss and was retrieved from *The Rosetta Edition* of the *Webster's Online Dictionary* (Parker, 2005) (see Appendix C). Although there is at times more than one word to express the abyss, in *Speak to Me in Tongues* I only use the first of these. By playing many translations of abyss I also hoped to raise the idea of there being an over-investment of meaning in the abyss, an over-determination of the abyss, and to signpost the problem of representation.

If understanding is founded in language, Giddens' (1991, p. 37) suggestion that "knowledge as a whole 'lacks foundations'" implies that language is

abyssal. The different languages pronounce the word abyss and in doing so express a groundlessness of language. This installation would be assigned its own room so that the sounds of the words could fill the emptiness of the space with an at times perceivably chaotic, and at other times perceivably harmonious, abyssal chorus. 'Choir of the deep' could be a phrase used to describe this impression that these tracks offer. This choir would undergo some permutations as the repeated words moved in and through and out of each other. The words are different and so take slightly varying periods of time to articulate. Over the course of several pronunciations, the various sound files would undergo changes in their relationships to each other, altering the overall resonance. With this possibility I intended to make reference to the necessity of keeping the interpretation of the abyss open to ongoing revision, to allow its permutation as part of reflexive contemporary cultural practice.

The viewer does not need to be familiar with any of the languages represented in this other than their own. By taking note of the format of this work, the individual may assume that the other repeated words are translations of the one they recognise. The possible unfamiliarity with the other languages can bring a sense of uncertainty to the piece that is conducive to the abyss in the first place. In turn, the potential is open for this artwork to be exhibited in diverse cultural contexts with limited viewer exclusion.

The sound files fill the empty space and so it is left to them to articulate the space. In their own way, each track names the space abyss and they do this over and over again. They persist in their memory of the abyss, in their task to function as a reminder. Viewers may arrive and enter the installation, become surrounded by the memory. But this memory is of the abyss and so

takes the viewer back in time as if to the origin, and yet this origin is itself problematic so the individual becomes reminded of a problem, an existential question of origin. It is in this space that the viewer is asked to dwell on the abyss, to occupy their self-directed indeterminacy. Maybe it is also in this way that they are asked to entertain the sensation of the abyss, to entertain its significance, its import.

The Shape of the Void: The Individual Inhabiting Social Space

Having discussed a selection of my conceptual artworks, I now direct my attention to a series of digital images that I exhibited as part of a solo show, which opened on Friday the 3rd of February 2006, at Freerange Gallery. These images were exhibited alongside my *Distance* mixed media series, to be discussed later on in this chapter.

The exhibition was entitled *Constructions Across Lack* in reference to my discussion about the role of the abyss in the project of the self. I raised Hall's (1997, p. 6) claim that identities are "always constructed across a 'lack', across a division, ... and thus can never be adequate". Having captured the images while in England in April of 2005, I recognised that their location was a place from which I had been ideologically and physically separated through my migration experience. In as much as my journey to England was a theoretical and physical construction back across this gap, the title reflected a broader field of theoretical concern as well as my own personal application of the theory. With these digital images it was my aim to raise the question of the self. By raising the issue of self-identity in a contemporary visual context I was taking the opportunity to exercise my own indeterminacy, to express my support for the suspension of self-closure.

These images depict the individual in an everyday social space, for example taking a walk alongside the Brighton foreshore (see Figure 5). My decision to photograph individuals in social settings, as opposed to posed settings, was a conscious effort to comment on the everyday level at which indeterminacy, and the abyss, continue to be negotiated in these spaces. It was also an effort to avoid the risk of imbuing the images with impertinent meaning, which might distract the viewer from the meaning I had invested in them.



Figure 5. *The Shape of the Void, No. 1*, (2005), (see Appendix C for additional images).

To reflect my theoretical concerns the images were digitally manipulated so that one or more of the individuals in each became silhouetted. This enabled me to raise my interpretation of the individual as a cultivated void, to articulate my understanding of an association between the abyss and the self. The silhouetted individuals are invested with the potential to be anyone and, in this way, comment on the self-creative and self-destructive potential of all individuals. By prompting the question, "Who is the individual?", I encourage the viewer to ask of their self, "Who am I?" Unable to adequately

determine the identity of the voids, the viewer engages in the challenge of determining that upon which an identification of the individual can be founded. Concerned with a question of self, this foundation is one of self-directed indeterminacy. By asking who the individual in the image is, the viewer becomes aware of their own sensation of indeterminacy. With the images, I encourage the viewer not to identify the void but to identify with the void, to recognise their self-investment in the sensation of indeterminacy. This artwork is similar to *Abyss, this way*, in that it articulates the self-reflective function of the abyss to which I have been referring.

So long as the abyss continues to raise the question of origin, the void figures become implicated in the questioning of what it is that founds the self-identification of individual. If the process of constructing this foundation, as a means to resolving this question, is a cultural and ideological task then the foundation at which the individual arrives is also a cultural product. By identifying the limits of cultural knowledge the individual may learn of what is beyond them and so the answer to the question seems to reside in that outer realm, the abyss. To think about the abyss is to think about what is not known to us and so it is to this place that our questioning leads us. Our self-questioning, as well as the indeterminacy that mobilises this questioning, is culturally produced. These images are cultural products that comment on this aspect of cultural production, as are the others that I am discussing in this chapter.

In light of the notion that “individuals must now ‘be’ their own structures” (Giddens, cited in McRobbie, 2003), the viewer is invited to become drawn into the search for self-authenticity. The abyss has been described in historical cultural texts as an original chaos and I have made the point that this determination attempts to resolve the question of human origin.

The questions of self, in which the individual can become reflexively engaged, include a question of origin. If the reflexivity of the abyss leads it to constitute “a questioning of the concept of origin” (D. Walker, n.d., p. 1), then the authentic self may equate to a groundless self. If late modernity requests that knowledge be “in principle always open to revision and may have at some point to be abandoned” (Giddens, 1991, p. 3) then the abyss, as a guide to self knowledge, becomes available as a means to self-abandonment.

A Comment on an Image of the London Underground



Figure 6. *The Shape of the Void, No. 5*, (2005).

In line the rest of the digital series, *The Shape of the Void, Number 5* aims to raise questions of self and to encourage a discourse surrounding this question that draws upon the abyss. Nevertheless, I am aware that my discussion cannot ensure their fixed meaning in the broader cultural arena.

Fisher (1963, p. 140) says that “[w]e discover the meaning of a work: but we also invest it with one”, by which he means that cultural knowledge informs the way that art is read. It is inevitable that, even though I captured and digitally manipulated *The Shape of the Void, Number 5* (see Figure 6) previous to the July 7th bombings of the London Underground, this occurrence has influenced the way that my image of the Underground can be interpreted.¹

During my stay in London I spent a great deal of time travelling throughout the Underground and, with my research in mind, I often considered theoretical associations between the tunnels and the notion of an underworld. Unlike hell, the Underground is not necessarily an anti-social space or a place beyond cultural boundaries. Rather, it is a space that is integral to social activity in London that “carries more than 660,000 people every weekday” (BBC, 2006). However, I have found that the bombings inform a discussion about the abyss by exemplifying the realisation of self-destructive potential that turned the familiar Underground into a frightening underworld.

¹ I am mindful of Fish’s theory of interpretive communities. For Fish, an interpretive community is “not so much a group of individuals who shared a point of view, but a point of view or way of organizing experience that shared individuals in the sense that its assumed distinctions, categories of understanding, and stipulations of relevance and irrelevance were the content of consciousness of community members who were therefore no longer individuals, but, insofar as they were embedded in the community’s enterprise, community property. It followed that such community-constituted interpreters would, in their turn, constitute, more or less in agreement, the same text, although the sameness would not be attributable to the self-identity of the text, but to the communal nature of the interpretive act. Of course, if the same act were performed by members of another community - of some rival school of criticism informed by wholly different assumptions - the resulting text would be different” (cited in Underwood, 1997). I acknowledge that my discussion reflects certain cultural assumptions about the London Underground bombings and I believe that the cultural relationship that exists between Australia and England circumvents the severance of my communication across what geographical and historical boundaries there are.

The underworld of hell is interpreted as a “place of departed spirits”, of “chaos” and “suffering” (Brown, 1993b, pp. 1214-15). Maybe it is not necessary to point to the BBC’s (2005) suggestion of a “bomb blast hell [in which over] 50 people [were] killed and 700 injured” to agree that, in the aftermath of July 7th 2005, the London underground became interpretable as such a place.

I recall Morgan and Morgan’s (1996, p. 65) comment that “it is a rare occasion indeed that a soul has been able to descend into the abyss, let alone return unscathed and willing to lend a description”. In the minutes after each blast, confused and distraught people began to ascend from the entrances to the Underground as if these entrances were no longer station gateways but, rather, the gates to a dusty and burning hell from where the dead and the dying emerged. In this time, it was clear that many would not be returning to the surface unscathed and that those who were willing to lend a description would have an attentive audience.

Some of the questions arising out of the bombings have been resolved though others have not. I would argue that, for a long time to come, the Underground will continue to be the focus of a great deal of indeterminacy. The impact upon a cultural reading of my artwork, *The Shape of the Void, No. 5.*, rests in the interpretation of the individual. The voids inhabiting the underground tunnel in my image aimed to draw attention to the individual as a negotiator of both self-creative and self-destructive potential. In light of the bombings, the focus on the void in the Underground had made a significant shift to the latter. I was aware that, in voiding the individuals in the image, I had opened the way to suspicion of the shape, suspicion of the individual who had moved in front of my lens. The question of the individual remains but cultural information that can be used to negotiate this

question has changed. The void is not immediately identifiable and so is a potential threat. Threats in the Underground have proven to be increasingly deadly.

It may be that all the investigation into the bombings, all the attempts to 'know' can provide a focal point for an interpretation of my image. Who is the individual? This question is even more a critical one. When capturing this image I was able to ask some questions. What might have led the individual into the Underground? What might they have brought with them into this place? Would they bring it back again? But there are also questions that I am only able to ask in retrospect. The voids in the image are moving away from the lens. Where are they going? Of this I cannot be sure. Where they making steps towards an uncertain space? If so, would they find themselves in Paradise, in the abyss?

Another question that may be raised is, "How could the image be interpreted if the shapes of the black figures were different?" As it stands, the viewer can make out that there may be more than one adult, two males perhaps, with two other smaller people. If the shadowy figures were all child-sized and seemed to be a group of children running through the tunnel, for example, the image would not necessarily lend itself to a reading that took into account the bombing. If it did then the comment might have changed. I am aware that the possible reading of *The Shape of the Void, No. 5* has changed over time, but I also acknowledge that I did not stage the composition. If I had arrived in the underground a moment earlier or later than I actually did, there would have been different people walking through it and this image, as it stands, may never have been captured.

The Distance Series

As noted, *Constructions Across Lack* was also an opportunity to exhibit an associated series of artworks entitled *Distance*.¹ Where the digital images aim to raise questions of self-identity, the *Distance* series aims to raise question of place.² Who are you? What do you want for yourself? By raising these questions I asked the viewer to consider the question of the individual, the shape of the void.



Figure 7. *Distance No. 1*, mixed media on board, 14cm x 75cm, (2005).

I exhibited the void images on one side of the gallery and the mixed media works on the other side. This was done so that, upon entering the gallery space, the viewer could step into a space between the two lines of inquiry. In as much as the project of the self is open to constant revision and is therefore in flux, the articulation of self-identity can be interpreted as a cultural discourse that exists in an in-between space, a liminal and transitional space that can be articulated as a space of indeterminacy, such as an abyss. An articulation of self-identity, then, can be interpreted as a discourse that arises from questions of self and place. In this respect, the viewer could conceive

¹ Developed in the first half of 2005, this series varies in scale from 20cm in height and 28cm in length, to 14cm in height and 75cm in length. Each piece is 4cm in depth. They show my use of graphite and black oxide on board.

² I entered *Distance No. 1* (see Figure 7) into the 2005 City of Melville Art Awards, receiving a Highly Commended award in the Category of Mixed Media and I was also announced Winner for the Category of Work by City of Melville Resident. In addition to these prizes, the City of Melville purchased this artwork for their collection. Judges Simon Gilby, Kirsten Hudson, and Soula Veyradier, described it as a “[l]yrical depiction of place that displays a fine use of mixed media”.

themselves to be standing within a theoretical space between these questions. It was my aim to encourage a discourse that was explicitly founded in self-directed indeterminacy. The abyss was the cultural reference point that I offered the individual for the negotiation of this discourse.

In the digital images the viewers' eyes are directed through the social space by the signs and paths that exist within it. The individual moves around in their indeterminacy, once this way and once that way, to a destination that is not disclosed and that maybe does not even exist. They are denied the certainty of finitude, this luxury. The individual keeps going, self-directed in their decision making process. Where indeterminacy is about the individual, it can be suggested that the individual is within an abyss.

In contrast, the *Distance* series does not necessarily permit the viewer's gaze entry into the depicted space. It seems to contain an interior space that remains insufficiently determinable and so suggests that the viewer is on the edge of an abyss. Yet, the viewer stands beyond the social space, beyond the constructions across a gap that seems to be a black sea, an ocean the extent of which can not be identified. The black sea extends to the edges of the artwork, therefore implying that the sea extends from the picture to the viewer. It is in this way that the viewer can, once again, be interpreted as located within an abyss but in a geographical sense as opposed to the theoretical sense in which I have interpreted the digital images. The mixed media works raise the question of place by bringing a sense of uncertainty as to the location of the viewer. Though the sea could be resting above an abyssal plain, in which case it is this plain that becomes the viewers' foundation, the place from which they may view the rest of the artwork. Even if this is certain, an allusion to groundlessness remains.

Maybe the digital photographs provide clues as to this interior as if the mixed media works offered a meta-image of the social space shown in the digital images, in serial reference to *mise en abyme*, as if acting “as a kind of mirror image of the larger work[s]” (D. Walker, n.d., p. 1). Perhaps it is in this way that they help to contextualise, through their overview, the social spaces in the digital images but it is not my intention to offer any guarantee that this is the case. The clusters of drawn buildings resemble European coastal towns though they are not modelled on actual spaces. They are designed to draw attention to the constructedness of social space and, in as much as I use the digital images to implicate the individual in the everyday negotiation of this construction, they are aimed at drawing attention to the constructedness of the self. It is in this way that the two bodies of work demonstrate my participation in artistic reflexivity.

Constructions Across Lack offered a forum for self-reflexive discourse. The standing room was an empty space that I framed with existential indeterminacy, that contained meaning but that also waited to be invested with it. But the questions it raises are under continuous negotiation and so it would have been inappropriate for me to have claimed to offer the viewer any resolution to these. The project of the self is ongoing and so the gallery was necessarily a space for irresolution, for untied and open ends. Who are you? What do you want for yourself? It is always the responsibility of the individual to find their own way around these questions, questions constituting a maze that only the individual may navigate, in their own time and in their own place. Though, with this exhibition, I did not build a maze for the viewer, nor did I really lead them into one. Instead, I simply suggested to the viewer that they were already inside it, that they are already in negotiation with the limits and the spaces in between the limits of a theoretical maze that extends far beyond the gallery space, far beyond the

artworks that I presented within it, and far beyond the days that framed the exhibition. In reference to the metaphorical abyss, my exhibition raised notions pertinent to everyday thinking but it was only ever going to be contingent within these.

On the Communication and Reception of Issues Relating to the Abyss and Indeterminacy

In the exhibition *Constructions Across Lack* I displayed work that raised both questions of self and questions of place. I was prepared to draw on the theoretical concerns presented in this paper for my articulation of these questions. It was my intention that the viewer could enter the gallery space and use these works, and the abyss, as reference points for their own reflexive discourse regarding self and place which could be used to inform their own self-identity. This exhibition provided me with the opportunity to dedicate some time to these questions and enabled me to consider the following additional questions. “What can be observed with regard to this experience that can inform my understanding of the communication and reception of the abyss and indeterminacy in contemporary creative practice? In what way may these observations inform the development of my creative practice?” In this discussion, I address these questions and some of the issues that they raise.

Recalling Adorno and Horkheimer (1979, p. 144) suggestion that “pleasure always means not to think about anything” I held no illusions regarding the possibility that, by offering a context that referred to the abyss as a way of raising the issue of indeterminacy in everyday thinking, my exhibition may provoke displeasure in the viewer. In acknowledgement of the contemporary cultural case studies that I developed, I anticipated that my exhibition would stand in contrast to the assumption that the abyss and indeterminacy are not

notions limited to the contexts of fun parks and leisure activities. This assumption seems to be that which the Magic Waters Waterpark would like their customers to believe.

Adorno and Horkheimer (1979, p. 126) suggest that the culture industry “leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience, who is unable to respond within the structure”. By asking the viewing audience to engage in critical self-contemplation via the abyss, to look at the abyss as a means to peering into their self, I was aware that I was positioning my own cultural production in opposition to the culture industry. This was evident in my decision to exhibit my work in close proximity to Subiaco’s consumer centre.³ Pippin (1999, p. 65) says that the “abyss is a place that is totally ‘Other’” and, my choice of social context, went some way to ensuring that this would remain the case. However, in light of the fact that indeterminacy is such a pervasive feature of everyday thinking, I believed that it was worth sacrificing pleasure for critical self-interpretation.

Although I offered the abyss as a cultural reference point for the negotiation of indeterminacy in general and self-directed indeterminacy in particular, I made a point of leaving it to the viewer as to what form, this negotiation or self-interpretation might take. If the abyss is indeterminable, then I was well aware that it was not up to me to do anything more than make reference to the abyss, providing the viewer with a means to referring to their self and their personal everyday experience of which I, inevitably, had no sufficient knowledge.

³ Subiaco is an affluent inner city suburb. The City of Subiaco (2006) website proposes “Subiaco has it all - premier fashion outlets, a vast array of restaurants and cafes and many attractions including galleries, museums and theatres and two markets”.

Given the research focus with which I have been actively engaged, I have had numerous opportunities to recall Nietzsche's (1911, p. 97) point that to "gaze long into an abyss" is to peer into the individual. It may be that my reference to an association between everyday indeterminacy and the abyss in the invitation was enough to deter people from any further negotiation, possibly leading them to the assumption that to step into the gallery was tantamount to stepping into the abyss and into a situation where they might be asked to face it. Though I can not help thinking, if indeterminacy is a pervasive feature of daily life and if each moment is a step into the unknown, that the abyss was everywhere outside of the gallery walls and not simply confined to a limited space and continuing across a limited period of time? In other words, I considered the prospect that I was peering long into the abyss as I stood within the exhibition space and looked out of the front window and onto the busy street. This act of looking out from the interior space into social space can certainly be interpreted as a way of looking into me. This is because the individual is culturally constructed and, by looking outside, I was simply observing the cultural context which has framed my sense of space and also my identity. Given the manner with which I have approached my research focus, I believe that it would be a significant oversight for me to suggest that the exhibition was an opportunity for autonomous self-expression.

Through my exhibition, I also believe that I made reference to the abyss in a way that is not often visible to the general public. The case studies that I have provided raised the point that, although there are instances where positive representations of the abyss are offered, the demands of entertainment seemed to maintain a significant emphasis on negative representations. In light of Inglis' (2005, p. 11) comment that defamiliarising the familiar promotes a critical examination of "the ways in which cultural forces,

together with social factors, influence, shape and structure our everyday activities”, I hoped that my comparatively positive and promising representation of the abyss would go some way to defamiliarising it and, in turn, promote critical discourse surrounding this subject matter. When this discourse did not, for the most part, eventuate I found myself wondering where Giddens’ reflexive selves might be when they are needed.

I have drawn from the information contained within my previous discussions about indeterminacy and leisure in this paper for the understanding that what this suggestion highlighted was a culture of uncertainty avoidance, confirming only the discomfort of indeterminacy and an aversion to the unknown and the unfamiliar. I kept finding myself thinking about Bramann’s (2005) point that:

Many people fear complex indeterminacy, and the related necessity of having to make nuanced decisions. Not infrequently they opt to take refuge in some ready-made cultural shell that provides them with convenient guidelines, ‘identities’, and a feeling of security.

For me, this fear of indeterminacy, and perhaps of self-complexity itself, reflects an existential insecurity and I do not believe that attempts to avoid indeterminacy lead the individual to a more stable existence. It is my understanding that the evasion of indeterminacy and uncertainty systematically erodes and eventually removes the tools necessary for constructively negotiating these experiences which, in turn, reinforces the need for cultural shells such as those provided by the consumer market. Maybe the assumption that the abyss and indeterminacy can be avoided is what made my entertainment free exhibition a point of non-appeal where, instead, I hoped it would be the abyss that was entertained.

It may be that the mass media and popular culture are so effective in their support of a demonisation of the unknown (or simply an objectified exoticism), a sensationalisation of the unfamiliar, that indeterminacy is continuously being reinforced as that which is best negotiated through its avoidance. I recall Wegscheider-Cruse's (cited in Giddens, 1991, p. 78) suggestion that "the risks of self-growth involve going into the unknown". This being the case, it seems that the end result of hellish representations of the abyss, their use as a visual metaphor in contemporary Western culture for "a frightening or threatening situation", is not a mastery over indeterminacy but rather a mass inability to critically negotiate it (Krebs, 1995, p. 4). If this reputation of the abyss is to inevitably reflect an inadequate understanding of it, then it may be said that to evade indeterminacy through fear of the perceived risks involved is to make something out of nothing. This claim can be viewed in quite a literal way when the void and emptiness of the abyss is also referred to as nothingness. In this case, making something out of nothing is all that the individual can do with the abyss without confronting the discomfort of the indeterminacy into which a discourse regarding this notion directs them.

I have continued to articulate the abyss as a notion that is founded in indeterminacy, given form by the imagination, and I have also demonstrated how indeterminacy is a pervasive feature of everyday thinking by referring to texts that illustrate a culturally reflexive use of this notion. It is in this way that I have supported the interpretation of the abyss as an unavoidable part of the human condition. Therefore what struck me as ironic, given my present observations and as I stared out of the gallery window and into the street, was that the abyss and the unknown and indeterminacy was not just in the gallery space. These notions are not confined to the finitude of the

gallery context and so extended beyond the walls of my exhibition, into every public and domestic space inhabited by individuals.

For two weeks the gallery space became my abyss, the arena for my reflexive negotiation of self. On one wall I was faced with artworks that raised questions of self and on the other wall I was faced with artworks that raised questions of place. As I stood in the gallery space, I hoped to invigorate reflexive discourse. Though, appealing to self-reflexivity, it was also an important opportunity for me to formulate some observations as to the way I had chosen to communicate the abyss and indeterminacy.

Summary

This chapter has demonstrated the impact of my reflexive negotiation with this research project on my creative practice. The artworks that I have developed throughout this project have been opportunities for me to test my communication of the abyss and indeterminacy in visual cultural contexts. Concerns that I have identified upon reflection on these artworks have also been raised.

The abyss has become central to the paths of inquiry in which I have been engaged and it is possible that it will continue to be so. I believe it to be inseparable from my creative practice because I consider the sensation of indeterminacy to be that which mobilises my active participation in creative research. For me, the abyss continues to be an appropriate cultural metaphor for this sensation.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Discussion

I have presented my arguments and contextualised my creative practice with a predominantly academic tone because I wanted to be very clear about the way that my ideas fit within a broader cultural arena. In my discussions, I have raised the notions that individuals must be their own structures, that interpretations of the abyss can appeal to a sense of self-abandonment and indeterminacy, and that these interpretations can impact upon a search for a sense of self-authenticity.

As prefaced in my discussion regarding the role of the abyss in a reflexive interpretation of my migration experience, the theory has also impacted on my everyday thinking in a way that has resulted in my emotional negotiation of the abyss. For example, in conducting this project I have devoted my time and my creativity to a negotiation of the abyss and, in turn, have peered into it in the search for a sense of my own self-authenticity. I have converted the notions just recalled into the following questions. "Engaged in the task of interpreting my own structure, to what extent has my negotiation of the abyss led me to abandon my sense of self?" "Do I believe that self-abandonment is a necessary step in my search for a sense of self-authenticity?" "Do I believe that my authentic self is a groundless self?" "How do these compare to the pre-conditions for self-authenticity that are suggested by the abyss?" By responding to these questions, I am able to draw attention to the personal assumptions that have emerged as a result of this project.

Where a discourse on the abyss addresses the negotiation with self-directed indeterminacy, investing this metaphor in matters of self-authenticity implicates indeterminacy as a backdrop to the authentic self. This makes sense to me, in as much as I find myself peering into the abyss with this question. But, even so, the theory tells me that the depths are self-reflective and so I find myself consulting theory about the abyss for clues as to the pre-conditions for my own self-authenticity, wondering whether I will at some stage catch a glimpse of myself or whether the figure reflected back at me will seem decidedly unfamiliar.

My consultation is contextualised by the late modern age, allowing me to approach my sense of authenticity as a matter for reflexive construction. With this claim, I am suggesting that my sense of self-authenticity is unfixed and open to revision. The fact that interpretations of the abyss are open to question supports the same approach to authenticity. With this approach, I may consider that the pre-conditions for self-authenticity as suggested by the Black Sea deluge model of the abyss differ from those suggested by the Judaeo-Christian abyss of hell, for example. In turn, I may formulate a sense of my authentic self from one or from a variety of these.

If the abyss has the potential to disclose the pre-conditions for self-authenticity, then notions of original chaos indicate that authenticity is fixed in a particular time and space, in the singularity of a ubiquitous beginning. Yet, this beginning tells of an origin in chaos and in indeterminacy which, in doing so, frames authenticity as something that is unfixed and that cannot be tied down. The issue of authenticity has been carried through time as has the abyss. If authenticity is a matter of self-interpretation, rather than projecting the location of authenticity beyond the reach of the individual, it seems more realistic to think of authenticity as that which exists in some way in the

cultural act of addressing this issue. Maybe expressing the desire for a sense of self-authenticity is a small but important step towards achieving it. But also, so long as I continue to move through time, it might prove unrealistic to deny the subjection of my sense of self-authenticity to my physical and theoretical movement. If I did deny this, my migration experience could be interpreted as one that has defeated my search for self-authenticity, having mobilised a gradual de-familiarisation of my origin. But the theory tells me that this is not the case. In fact, the theory suggests to me that my migration experience has been of benefit to my search for my authentic self.

For me, notions of original chaos imply two things about self-authenticity. The first is that the authentic self is a chaotic self, a self in question perhaps. This would support my previous suggestion about the desire to engage in the search for the authentic self being a measure of indeterminacy. Secondly, the abyss of original chaos implicates authenticity in the disruption of place and, therefore, the disruption of origin. I recall *mise en abyme* and the potential for infinite regress when raising this interpretation.

Given my attention to the flux and instability of self-authenticity, it might seem ironic for the question of the authentic self to be traced back to a fixed cultural and physical origin. Because the Black Sea deluge presents as the origin of the abyss, it frames the Euxine basin as the well-spring for the search for self-authenticity. But the irony is lost once I recall that the deluge resulted in the disruption of place and of origin, in the chaos and indeterminacy of the cultural-self. Negotiating the deluge abyss meant either fleeing or dying, and I would question how much concern the dead have for matters of self-authenticity. I believe that the deluge associates the search for the authentic self, not with those who perished but with those who did not perish, those who migrated.

For me, the Black Sea deluge presents the abyss as a metaphor for the self moving into unknown lands, self-action and progress, and also fluidity. It illuminates these as the pre-conditions for the success of my authentic self. But while providing the grounds for my interpretation, this narrative also alludes to the necessity of self-groundlessness and self-abandonment. Of course, I am aware that the Black Sea deluge and my migration experience are two different events, but what the deluge offers is a narrative of migration which reflects my emotional interpretation of my experience. The Black Sea deluge appeals to me by involving the act of migration in the search for the authentic self. It gives my self-interpretation a historical context but one that makes sense given the cultural context within which I continue to live. In turn, the implications of the correlation that I have made extend into my negotiation of the present day.

My migration experience has a continuing role in my self-identification, and so the Black Sea model of self-interpretation sets a precedent for the way that I may negotiate other aspects of daily experience. The deluge suggests that a pre-condition for self-authenticity is a sense of self-loss, achieved by drifting away from the certainty of origin and towards something else – an unknown land. The watery chaos of the Black Sea deluge questions the stability of the abyss as my metaphorical and existential anchor, implying that I would be unsuccessful in an attempt to use the abyss to secure my self to a single location.

With this in mind when referring back to my own personal experience, it seems too simplistic to assume that migrating to Australia meant replacing one sense of place with another. Time continues to move forward, and so my presence in the moment means that I continue to experience a broadening of the gap between my English origin and my current sense of self. For me, the

idea that authenticity is embedded in time and space may also mean that authenticity remains embedded in the gap that continues to expand over time and space. Maybe authenticity is something that emerges in the broadening of self-loss that occurs across this abyss, and that it is sustained by an awareness of this loss.

The fact that the Euxine basin became the Black Sea, a place not inhabitable by human beings, reinforces the presumption that it is not possible to return to a place of authenticity, to a way of life that matches the original. In as much as the deluge transformed the basin into a land of no return, by making the basin non-reclaimable as a site for cultural life, there is support for the assumption that authenticity is dead, even that it resides in death. If this were so, would achieving self-authenticity mean my completion of a cycle, my travelling to the Black Sea and drowning myself in it? This question might seem flippant if it did not raise a critical issue. For, if the deluge mobilised the search for self-authenticity, what would it take to end this search? If achieving resolution means wasting life then I renounce my interest in matters of authenticity. I am not seeking an end to the self-stirring that accompanies what is probably going to be a life long search because I consider this sense of agitation to be the feeling that my self is growing. I have referred to the abyss as that of which a glimpse is caught in each moment of indeterminacy. For this reason, I believe that self-authenticity does not come from putting an end to indeterminacy. This would mean putting an end to the question of the self and, most likely, surrendering the opportunity for self-growth. It seems to me that self-authenticity emerges from the way in which indeterminacy is negotiated, from the sensation of the abyss.

I consider my migration to have been a step in favour of my search for, and my sense of, self-authenticity. It prompts my ongoing belief that my authentic self is a groundless self, that I must be my own self-supportive ground. My migration removed me from within the boundaries of a cultural context upon which my self-understanding was reliant. I believe that this has enabled me to take the emphasis away from a model of self-authenticity that is contingent, and therefore unnecessary, and place an emphasis on one that is seemingly necessary in its wake, a self-supportive model of the authentic self.

Within my family, I was brought up with the belief that I could do anything that I wanted, that I could be anything that I wanted. I have always been aware of a sense of personal potential with the understanding that the realisation of this is within my reach. But I am also aware of the sense of self-responsibility that this sentiment demands.

My appeal to a groundless self demands my innovative approach to self-creativity, the ability to be constructively self-reflexive in my negotiation of predictable and unforeseeable events. But I have taken it upon myself to demonstrate this by means of a creative practice. My artworks become my cultural 'self-reference' points. By this I mean that they become interpretable as existential anchors which demarcate my theoretical and practical evolution. If I am to think of my self as groundless, then it is important for me to signpost my self-theoretical movement, to construct a trail of creative interpretation in material form behind me so that I can identify a life-creative narrative and so other individuals can identify my points of view.

Building on associations between the abyss and authenticity, and between self and self-loss, my return to England last year marked the completion of a

circular path but one where what was once familiar now seemed strange. Where I experience processes of familiarisation in the routines invested in my daily life, my absence from England has resulted in something of a reversion of this process. It has been a veritable process of making strange. The interplay of expectations regarding what was or wasn't familiar, what should or shouldn't be familiar, was at the forefront of my daily experience.

If the project of the self is an ongoing negotiation of self-emergence, of finding out about the person that I am becoming, then this process is also a continual risking of my self as I know it. This may be in small daily increments but I believe the principle is the same. Going to England was a chance to lose myself to find myself, but a sense of loss was only intensified by my presence in a place that I used to know but now didn't. I was not quite a tourist due to my emotional investment in England.

These issues of the familiar and the unfamiliar were raised in my exhibition. The artworks implied that on the one hand I had an immediate physical relationship with one particular cultural context, and on the other hand I had an emotional but detached relationship with another cultural context. The digital images showed the individual, potentially me, navigating a social space but the mixed media works imply detachment from it. In my exhibition, like in my everyday thinking and during this trip, I continue to negotiate a space between these two notions. The sense of self that I continue to reflexively negotiate emerges from this in-between space, my place of self-negotiation, groundlessness between two grounds. This implies that committing the self to one place means to place a limitation on the search for self-authenticity. For this reason, it is important for me to recognise my space of self-negotiation as one that is unfixed, to have the opportunity to conduct this negotiation in other cities and other countries.

I acknowledge that I can achieve self-growth if I go into the unknown, but I am also aware that this means running the risk of losing my self first, the risk of being lost. For this reason, I do not believe that the abyss encourages me to foster self-absorption. In other words I argue that, in the context of peering into the self-reflective abyss, this project has not meant the fostering of narcissism. I am not simply engaged in a process of self-accumulation and affirmation but one in which I am willing to trade what I have for what might be next. In view of this, I do not believe that my ambition for self-growth, my desire to be something more than I already am, belies dissatisfaction with myself in the present.

If each moment is a chance to ask questions of the self, then it is possible for me to fill each moment with indeterminacy, to return over and over again to a default setting of uncertainty and self-criticism. In a paper about the often tacit assumptions that come with representing the unfathomable abyss it seems appropriate to point out that, if it is a metaphor for the unknown, then I still do not know it. But what I hope to have drawn attention to are some key positions on the spectrum of cultural meanings that have been invested in this metaphor across more than four millennia. In saying that, I do not claim to have matched the insight of the many authors dead and alive to which I have made reference, and who have also tackled this subject matter. However, I hope to have constructed and contextualised a personal trace of my engagement with the issues, sharing my application of this engagement through my creative practice.

By peering into the abyss I have demonstrated my mindfulness of the implications of the way that I go about negotiating the limits of my own knowledge, and the problems associated with taking the unknown for granted. But maybe it is by continuing to return to my sensation of

indeterminacy that I have also been able to make some sense of the abyss, and of the figure staring back at me from the darkness.

Appendix A

A List of Publication Titles Referring to the Abyss

Abercromby, D. (1669). *Scolding no scholarship in the abyss, or, Groundless grounds of the Protestant religion, as holden out by M. Menzeis in his brawlings against M. Dempster* [in Papismus Lucifugus]. Printed for the author.

Absolon, K. B. (1987). *The conquest of the caves and underground rivers of Czechoslovakia's Macocha Abyss: A historical and technical study of their exploration*. (1st ed.). Maryland: Kabel Publishing.

Abyss Second Series. (1971). Somerville, Mass.: [Publisher unknown].

Abyss Magazine. Lisboa, Portugal: [Publisher unknown]. Retrieved January 27, 2005, from <http://fade.to/AbyssMagazine>

Abyss Magazine. [Publisher location unknown]: [Publisher unknown]. Retrieved January 27, 2005, from <http://members.aol.com/ragnarok/abyss/>

ABYSS Jazz Magazine: The Depth of Jazz Language. (2004). Florida: Nandi Inc.

Agentura krátký. (1998). *Mapa jeskyní a propastí České republiky* [A map of caves and abysses in the Czech Republic]. Czech: Agentura krátký production.

Aguilera, J., & Fonteriz, R. (2003). *Avatar: A Look into the Abyss*. Timonium, MD: Diamond Comic Distributors.

Aitmatov, C. & Shakhanov, M. (1998). *The plaint of the hunter above the abyss: confession towards the end of the century*. Almaty: Atamura.

Albritton, C. (c1986). *The abyss of time: changing conceptions of the earth's antiquity after the sixteenth century*. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher.

Alleman, L. Y., Veron, A. J., Church, T. M., Flegal, A. R., & Hamelin, B. (1999). Invasion of the abyssal North Atlantic by modern anthropogenic lead. *Geophysical Research Letters*, 26(10), 1477-1480.

Alston, A. (1992). *Ultima Underworld Clue Book: Mysteries of the Abyss*. California: Origin Systems.

Alten, S. (2000). *La terreur des abysses*. Paris: Editions du Rocher.

Amos, G. L. (1997). *Resurgence from the Abyss*. New York: Vantage Press.

Anderson, J. A. (2004). *Circle Within the Abyss: Chumash Metaphysics*. California: Center for Indigenous Arts & Cultures.

Andreyev, L. (1924). *Abyss*. Waltham Saint Lawrence, Berkshire: Golden Cockerel Press.

Angelo, P. L. (1986). *Congress, the courts and the regulatory system: into the abyss and out again?*. Washington, D.C.: National Legal Center for the Public Interest.

Anon. (1991). MTS '91: An ocean cooperative from outer space to the abyss.
Sea Technology, 32(10), 77-79.

Ansell, E. C. T. [n.d.]. *From the Abyss to the Foreign Legion as told to Trelawney-Ansell*. London: Sampson Low & Co.

Appelfeld, A. (1993). *'imyon* [Abyss]. Yerushalayim: Keter.

Apter, A. (2001). No'ar 'al saf tehom: hit'abduyot ve-nisyonot ovdaniyim bekerev *bene no'ar* [Youth on the edge of the abyss: suicide & suicidal behavior in adolescence]. Tel-Aviv: Deyonon, Universitat Tel-Aviv.

Arbery, G. (Ed.). (c2003). *The tragic abyss*. Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications.

Arellano, M. G. (1988). *Out of the abyss: Life and spirit of Mother Maria Auxilia de la Cruz O.S.S.E.* Bensalem, PA: Oblate Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.

Arndt, D. (1998). *Ground and abyss: the question of Poiesis in Heidegger, Arendt, Foucault, and Stevens*. Doctoral dissertation (Ph. D., Comparative Literature), University of California, Irvine.

Aronson, A. (2005). *Looking Into The Abyss: Essays On Scenography*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Art, B. L. (1985). *The Mysterious abyss of existence: Groundwork for the life of the virtuous sage*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, United States.

Atkinson, K. (c1992). *Remapping tales of desire: writing across the abyss*. Santa Monica, California: Side Street Press.

Atkinson, K. (1997). *Remapping tales of desire: a journey across the abyss*, Karen Atkinson; Wall red yellow blue, Lauren Berkowitz. Woolloomooloo, NSW: Artspace Visual Art Centre.

Axler, J. (2005). *Outlanders: Evil Abyss*. Ontario, Canada: Gold Eagle.

Bail, J. (1974). After Brockman; a symposium. *Abyss*, 4(1-3).

Barber, W. (c1974). *Abyss: a collection of poems, 1973-1974*. South San Francisco, California: distributed by Farout Press.

Baronas, A. (1965). *Footbridges and Abysses*. New York: Manyland Books.

Bates, A. (Ed.). (2003). *Dark Romance Anthology: The Abyss*. Santa Monica, California: OpenCAD International Inc.

Batson, Peter, (2003). *Deep New Zealand: blue water, black abyss*. Christchurch, N.Z.: Canterbury University Press.

Beach, B. B. (c1968). *Vatican II: bridging the abyss*. Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

Bell, R. (c2004). *Sounding the abyss: readings between Cavell and Derrida*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Benedetto, W. R. (2005). *Sailing into the Abyss: A True Story of Extreme*

Heroism on the High Seas. New York: Citadel Press.

Beran, C. L. (1992). *Living over the abyss: Margaret Atwood's Life before man*.
Toronto: ECW Press.

Berman, S., et al. (2004). *Blood Sea: The Crimson Abyss*. Stone Mountain,
Georgia: White Wolf Publishing.

Bernard, O. C. (2004). *The Abyss Beside My Driveway*. Victoria, British
Columbia, Canada Trafford Publishing.

Bickford, T. J. (1995). *Marching into the abyss: the changing role of the People's
Liberation Army in Chinese Politics* (Ph.D. in Political Science). Berkeley,
Dec. 1995: University of California.

Bielasiak, J., & Simon, M. D. (c1984). *Polish politics: edge of the abyss*. New
York: Praeger.

Bradbury, R. (1988). *Ray Bradbury's To the Chicago abyss*. Chicago: Dramatic
Pub. Co.

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Appendix B

A List of Modern Translations of the English word 'abyss' used for the Artwork 'Speak to me in Tongues'

LANGUAGE	MODERN TRANSLATIONS
Afrikaans	afgrond (chasm, gulf, precipice), hel (hell).
Albanian	humnerë (chasm, gulf, precipice), hon (abysm, gully, precipice), greminë (bathos, deep, precipice), ferri (the pit).
Arabic	هـاـوـيـة (gulf), جـهـنـم (gehenna, hell, hellfire, inferno, limbo, perdition), لاـتـكـوـنـ فـي مـا قـبـل الخـلـيـقـة (before the creation).
Bulgarian	ад (grave, hell, inferno, pandemonium, tartarus), бeзднa (abysm, chasm, depths, gap, gulf, precipice, the deep), пъкъл (hell), пропаст (bathos, chasm, precipice), пропадам (collapse, fail, fall through, go, go to the dogs, go under, go wrong, lose).
Chinese	淵, 深渊 (Abyssal) [Traditional Chinese and Simplified Chinese, respectively].
Czech	propast (abysm, chasm, divide, gulf, yawn), hlubina (deep, depth).

Danish	afgrund (chasm, gulf, precipice, sheer).
Dutch	afgrond (chasm, gulf, jaws, maw, precipice, sheer).
Ecuadorian Quechua	jaca .
Esperanto	abismo (chasm), profundegaĵo (gulf, precipice).
Faeroese	avgrund (chasm, gulf, precipice), helviti (hell).
Farsi	مغاک (Cavern), غوطه ورساخت (Engulf, Overwhelm, Plunge, Submerge), ی پایانب (Eternal, Eternity, Incessant, Inconclusive, Unbound, Unending, Unfinished), یـار عمیق بس .
Finnish	syvyys (deep, depth), syvyinen (deep, depth), kuilu (chasm, cleft, gap, gorge, shaft, tower, trunk), horna (the bottomless pit).
French	abysse (abyssal region), abîme .
Frisian	djipste (chasm, depth, gulf, precipice), ôfgrûn (chasm, gulf, precipice).
German	Abgrund (abysm, chasm, fovea, gulf, precipice, sheer).
Greek	άβυσσος . [abussos]

Hebrew	מעמק (depth, profundity), מצולע (depth, pond), מצול (depth), תעום (chasm, depth, pit), שאול (borrowed, grave, hell, lent, loaned, lower world, pandemonium, underworld), אבעו (destruction, doom, hell, perdition, ruin).
Hungarian	szakadék (beetling height, chasm, cleft, cove, deep, dell, drop-off, escarpment, gap, gourd, gulch, gulf, pit, precipice, ravine, scarp).
Icelandic	hyldýpi (chasm, gulf, precipice), gjá (chasm, gulf, precipice).
Indonesian	jurang (chasm, gulch, ravine).
Italian	abisso (abysm, chasm, deep, depth, fovea, gulf, pit, precipice), burrone (Canyon, chasm, coulee, gorge, gulch, gulf, gully, precipice, ravine).
Japanese Kanji	淵 (deep pool, the depths), 深潭 深淵 (ravine), 奈落底
Japanese Katakana	なくのそち シアア (ancient Indian name for China, fuel, heart, wood and charcoal), シアア (deep, passion, profound, ravine, shrine gardens, unfathomable), ふち (allowance, arrangement, deep pool, edge, grouping, ignorance, incurability, ration, stipend, the depths).
Korean	심연 .

Manx	charvaal (chasm, divide, gulf).
Norwegian	avgrunn (gulf).
Papiamen	abismo (chasm, gulf, precipice), precipicio (chasm, gulf, precipice), fiernu (hell), fierno (hell).
Portuguese	abismo (abysm, chasm, deep, depths, gulf, pit, precipice, yawn), precipício (chasm, gulf, Linnet, precipice, sheer).
Romanian	adâncime (bottom, deep, deepness, depth, height, horizon, pregnancy, profound, profoundness, profundity, wisdom), abis (abysm, chasm, gulf, hell, precipice, ravine, the bottomless pit), prăpastie (abysm, chaos, chasm, depth, disaster, gulf, hollow, precipice, ravine, scar, steep), noian (cloud, mountain, ocean, stack), infern (hell, inferno, the bottomless pit, the shades, underworld), haos primar, gol (bald, bare, bare-bodied, barren, blank, blankness, desert, deserted, empty, gap, genuine, hollow, hollowness, inanity, leafless, naked, nakedly, nude, out at, shallow, stripped, uncovered, vacancy, vacuum, void, waste, windy), genune (deep).
Russian	бездна (abysm, chasm, deep, gulf, precipice), пучина (abysm, abysses, vortex).
Scottish	aigeann (the deep).

Serbo-Croatian	ambis , prvobitni haos (abysm), ponor (chasm, pit), pakao (hades, hell, inferno, perdition), jaz (chasm, gulf, hiatus, trough), bezdan (bottomless, chasm, deep, infinite, precipice, profound).
Spanish	abismo (abysm, chasm, cleft, coulee, couloir, crevice, deepness, gulf, hell, pit, precipice, Slough, steep), precipicio (chasm, cliff, drop, gulf, precipice), despeñadero (chasm, gulf, precipice).
Sranan	didibrikondre (hell).
Swedish	avgrund (chasm, gulf, hell, pit, precipice), svalg (chasm, fauces, pharynx, throat, yawn).
Turkish	uçurum (abysm, bluff, chasm, cliff, crag, gap, gulf, precipice, scarp, steep), derinlik (deep, deepness, depth, perspective, profoundness, profundity), boşluk (abysm, antrum, backlash, blank, blankness, cavity, chamber, chasm, clear, clearance, daylight, desideratum, emptiness, gap, gulf, hiatus, hole, hollow, hollowness, idleness, inanition, Lacuna, nothingness, nullity, separation, sinus, slack, slackness, space, vacancy, vacuity, vacuum, void, voidness).
Ukranian	безодня (abysm, chasm, deep, depth, precipice, profundity, yawn), пучина (abysm, gulf, profound), прірва (abysm, barathrum, gulf), первісний хаос .

Vietnamese	vực thẳm biển thẳm lòng trái đất, vực sâu, địa ngục (pandemonium).
Welsh	annwn (hell), agendor (gap, gulf), y dyfnder, mo+r-gerwyn (vortex, whirlpool).

Appendix C

Additional Images for Chapter 5, The Shape of the Void: The Individual Inhabiting Social Space



The Shape of the Void, No. 2, (2005).



The Shape of the Void, No. 3, (2005).



The Shape of the Void, No. 4, (2005).



The Shape of the Void, No. 6, (2005).

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