Writing in light: Giving silences their say in Janette Turner Hospital's "The Last Magician"

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Writing in light: Giving silences their say in Janette Turner Hospital’s

*The last magician*

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June 3, 2010
Abstract

*The last magician* (1992) by Janette Turner Hospital tells the story of Lucy, the novel’s narrator, who is trying to piece together the mystery disappearance and possible murder of three people. Gabriel, Lucy’s boyfriend, and Charlie Chang, a photographer, have gone missing while searching for Cat, Charlie’s childhood friend. The story shifts between present time Sydney and a tragedy that took place a generation earlier in rural Queensland, involving the death of Cat’s younger brother, Willy.

The novel draws on conventions of the mystery genre, so that readers desire to know what has happened to several missing characters, even as the self-conscious narrator directs attention to another mystery involving her quest to compose her narrative. This thesis explores how the narrator illustrates and attempts to overcome the gap between her lived experience, with all its uncertainties and ambiguities, and its artistic or literary depiction. I argue that the narrator uses a complex, multi-layered narrative structure to destabilise meaning as well as to suggest an order that is not immediately perceptible.

My approach involves establishing the relationship between narrative form and meaning. I refer to studies of metafiction, to critical discourse on Turner Hospital, and to narrative theories in order to explore themes that emerge through the analysis of form. In particular, this study identifies a parallel, silent world that symbolises both an unheard, marginalised class of people and a space beyond language and articulation. Both worlds are depicted in Charlie’s photographs, examined here as hypodiegetic narratives that test the limitations of the literary, first-level narrative, and elaborate on the theme of artistic expression.

Although my aim is mainly to examine Turner Hospital’s approach to telling her story, I also consider accusations made against the novel’s moral stance. Some critics find that
the novel’s postmodern tendency to leave many questions unresolved results in its upholding existing and oppressive power structures. I conclude that the narrator’s quest to communicate the unspeakable, and her attempt to wrestle with storytelling conventions can also be interpreted as acts of emancipation; they challenge narrative and generic traditions and controlling systems of power.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Ffion Murphy for her immensely valuable advice and support. To my family, thank you for your patience and love.
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Introduction

When first reading *The last magician* (1992) by Janette Turner Hospital, I experienced the sensation of being pulled forward by the need to know what happened to the characters whose disappearance begins the story, at the same time as I was powerfully aware that other forces, photographs, paintings, intertextual references, and the storyteller herself were guiding me towards a mystery concerning the novel’s self-conscious narrator and her quest to compose her narrative. Propelled by this dual mystery, my thesis explores how the narrator illustrates and attempts to overcome the gap between “being and saying” (Genette, 1982, p. 93), which I call ‘silences’, and how she parallels these artistic silences with the silencing of the marginalised characters in the novel.

Janette Turner Hospital was born in Brisbane in 1942, to a working class, fundamentalist Pentecostal family (Samuels, 2006, p. 154). She has received critical acclaim through the publication of eight novels and four short story collections (University of Queensland), and won the 2003 Patrick White Award for lifetime literary achievement (Franklin V, 2007, p. 391). *The last magician*, was listed by *Publishers’ Weekly* as one of the 12 best novels published in 1992 in the USA and was a *New York Times* ‘Notable Book of the Year’ (The official Janette Turner Hospital web site, 2007).

*The last magician*’s publication is consistent with a movement in Australian literature brought about by developments in new media and international publishing, away from nationalist writing and towards a greater diversity (Nile, 2002, p. 12). McLaren (1989) identifies Turner Hospital as part of a small group of Australian writers who had, by the end of the 1980s, set a new direction for a writing which is “at once national and cosmopolitan, individual and political” (p. 247). This “new diversity” (Gelder & Salzman, 1989, p. 1) was concerned with “a gap in the records of history” (p. 137), and with notions of truth and the construction of self (McLaren, 1989, p. 247).
The last magician is narrated by Lucy, a Queensland private school girl turned prostitute turned documentary film-maker. With memories of “the manic growth we call rainforest” (p. 3), she describes herself as “a tourist...an explorer” (p. 37) at Sydney’s quarry, an imaginary underworld that is “the rubbish heap...the last stop on the line” (p. 37). The layered narrative shifts between descriptions of the quarry and events that happened a generation earlier in Queensland involving five children: Charlie Chang, the son of Chinese-born Australians, who will grow up to be an acclaimed photographer and ‘the last magician’; Catherine, who will become Lucy’s partner in film-making; Robinson Gray, who will become a judge and father Lucy’s boyfriend, Gabriel; and Cat, a wild child to whom the others gravitate for “the frightening mystery of the exercise of her power” (p. 193). The horrific accidental death of Cat’s beloved and “potty” (p. 189) brother, Willy, and Cat’s subsequent institutionalisation shatter the group of children, and continue to haunt them as adults. An attempt, more than thirty years later, by Charlie and Gabriel to locate Cat, who has become an enigmatic figure within Sydney’s underground streets, ends in their disappearance and likely death. Lucy tries to piece together the story and to find out what happened to Charlie, Gabriel, and Cat.

The last magician covers a breadth of themes, and has drawn various and well-merited interpretations from critics. Some explore the novel’s depiction of urban Australia (Callahan, 2001; Clark, 2008), focusing on the quarry as a metaphor for “the epidemiology of harm” (Turner Hospital, 1992, p. 311) affecting an underclass of a marginalised population. Others deliberate on the novel’s discourse of female power, particularly as it is manifested in the protagonists, Lucy and Cat (Davies, 2000; Lovell, 2002; Temby, 1995). Yet other studies explore the themes of ethnicity and national identity in Australian society, illustrated in the novel through the character of Charlie Chang (Callahan, 2001; Lovell, 2005). Turner Hospital confirms that, in the novel, "various establishment systems-- the law, the academic world, the literary world--are put on trial and found severely wanting" (Missy, 1992, ¶ 2).

Turner Hospital has also said that the novel expresses her frustrations at feeling silenced as an intellectual woman in Australia (Missy, 1992, ¶ 8), and the theme of silencing has been picked up by a number of her critics. I argue here that, alongside the social or
political silencing that is depicted in *The last magician*, the novel's narrative layers and the metafictional mode of narration engage with another form of silence; that of "the gap between being and saying" (Genette, 1982, p. 93), or the inescapable discrepancy between the narrator's mental space and its artistic depiction within "the prison house of language" (Jameson, cited by Scholes, 1980, p. 205). I further suggest here that the two concerns of social injustice and artistic self-expression are intertwined through the parallel tales of the murder-mystery and of the narrator's self-reflexivity.

A number of studies of Janette Turner Hospital's work are concerned with the representation of creativity and the writing process in her novels, and I hope to add to this body of work by my focus on the role of the self-conscious narrator in *The last magician*. Callahan notes that Turner Hospital's principal theme is "how to read reality, followed closely by how to record one's reading" (2009, p. 10). The task of recording reality in Turner Hospital's work is often given to artist-protagonists; a musician and a botanical painter in *Orpheus lost* (2007), a writer in *Due preparation for the plague* (2003), a painter in *Borderlines* (1985), and a photographer in *The last magician*, to name a few. Each, in some way, participates in what Ommundsen sees as the foregrounding of the acts of artistic production (1990, p. 178). Callahan recognises Turner Hospital's concerns with the limitations of language (2009, p. 12), and writes of the significant and recurring use she makes of photographs in her body of work (p. 11). Greiner's critique of *Oyster* is similarly useful in pointing out that Turner Hospital's interest is not so much in "the politics of alternative realities but the poetics of alternative realities...the nature of narrative itself" (2007b, p. 382), a claim supported by my reading of *The last magician*. Sue Lovell, in her analysis of the novel, finds that "Hospital refuses...to allow the narrative to perform a singularly representational function. She confuses the boundary between art and life" (2005, p. 146).

Most critics have noted the novel's simultaneous discourse on the nature of art and writing, and on the relationship between life and its literary and artistic depiction. The novel deploys a self-conscious narrator who discusses the process of narrating at the same time as she advances the plot. Being "concerned with the process of fiction-writing itself" (Ommundsen, 1990, p. 171), *The last magician* is metafictional since it
foregrounds a literary storyteller, Lucy, and also deploys an analogous photographic storyteller, Charlie. The fiction/metafiction parallel results in what Callahan defines as the novel’s dual mystery; that is, the “surface mystery” (2009, p. 178), which deals with the children’s tragedy and the whereabouts of Cat, and the “slippery nature of recounting” (p. 179), or the mystery surrounding the process of narrating (p. 176). Turner Hospital is noted for “her fascination with the hidden and the subterranean – both literally and figuratively” (Samuels, 2006, p. 156), and my thesis demonstrates how the layering-effect of the metafictional form and of the photographic narrative allows for a depiction of both the literal and figurative mysteries. This duality provoked my interest as I set out to explore how Turner Hospital, through her narrator, exposes the conventions and limitations of traditional narrative forms and the relationship between referential and self-conscious elements, in an attempt to illuminate the gap between an experience and its literary depiction.

Callahan (2009, pp. 178-179) notes that some critics struggle to reconcile Turner Hospital’s incorporation of postmodern elements in The last magician, such as a self-conscious narrator who leaves her mysteries unresolved, with her novel’s evident commitment to social justice. Temby, for example, argues that the novelist’s use of postmodern devices, particularly her application of the metafictional, self-reflexive narrative, “subvert the possibility of its providing a comprehensive or effective critique of oppressive power structures” (1995, p. 47). Others argue that the novel has a strong ethical commitment, and its “moral dimension is constructed within the matrix of postmodernism’s uncertainties, the proliferation of truths, of selves, of meanings that we can no longer ignore and certainly cannot always reconcile” (Lovell, 2002, p. 62).

While this study is not primarily concerned with exploring ethical or moral elements within the novel, my analysis of the novel’s destabilisation of voice and language does consider whether or not The last magician offers a satisfying moral position for its marginalised subjects. My approach to analysing the novel’s narration is perhaps most similar to Lovell’s, as I view the narrator’s self-consciousness as an attempt to challenge conventional storytelling, and the novel’s lack of resolution as a reflection of certain realities that cannot be overcome; that is, that life is often fragmented and unresolved,
and that a depiction that recognises this, is a ‘truer’ version of reality than one that suggests otherwise. My study also notes the narrator’s emphasis on the potency of what is not heard or seen, and her artistic and moral duty to decode and transcribe those often-intangible experiences in her “notes from the underground” (p. 22). So, even as Turner Hospital refuses to resolve matters in a way that unequivocally rewards good and punishes evil, the silences do wrestle their way out through a storyteller who refuses to write “a literature that is unassertive, limpid, economical and lean” (p. 285), and strives to give a voice to those who are censored for being “ugly and vulgar and absolutely non-literary, and ideologically...unsound” (p. 285).

The novel, like other metafictional literature, conveys within it an “exploration of itself as text” (Giorgio, 1990, p. 104). In doing so, it picks up the challenges which started in the novels of the early twentieth century “to be a questioning, a disturbance, a contestation of the notion of narrative” (Genette, 1982, p. 127). Not quite ready to let go of narrative conventions and cultural “pseudo-logic”, literature was concerned with “deviating”, or “skidding” the story (Barthes, 1989, p. 175). In light of these observations, my thesis explores the ways in which The last magician, through its self-conscious narrative mode, overtly questions, disturbs, and contests the notion of telling a story, and I examine how and to what end Turner Hospital draws attention to the unstable process of producing a narrated version of a reality which, paradoxically, often eludes articulation.

To assist in my enquiry, I draw on studies of narrative systems and theories of the metafictional novel. A number of theorists offer methods for the systematic identification and classification of the principles of narration. Genette’s meticulous investigation of narrative elements such as order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice (1980) brings together the structural study of form and the interpretive evaluation of figure (Barthes, 1989, p. 172). This approach guides this study which focuses on both how literature tells a story and how it exposes the problems of the narrative act (Genette, 1982, p. 127). Both Rimmon-Kenan (1983) and Mieke Bal (2000, 2001, 2004) interpret and add to Genette’s narrative classifications, and their work is similarly useful to my discussion of narrative voice and levels of subordination. The work of Booth on voice, the ‘implied author’,
telling and showing, and on authorial commentary (1961) has been useful in helping me define my terms.

The earlier narrative theory mentioned above is used here primarily as a means to categorise voice and narrative levels, and I am aware of its "overly geometric schematisation of texts" (Gibson, 1996, p. 5). Later narrative theory explores the presentation of both story (or content), and discourse (or expression) (Herrnstein Smith, 2004, p. 95), hence, my exploration is informed by studies that analyse the metafictional form and its possible meaning or ideologies. Waugh's concept of "framing" (1984, p. 31), for example, helps my identification and positioning of the various narrative layers in the novel and assists my discussion of how the text's structure enables its meaning (Waugh, 1984, p. 148).

Some critics, like Scholes, see metafiction's experimental narrative form as a tool for effecting radical social changes, arguing that the challenge to traditional narrative structures is "a necessary prelude to any improvement in the human situation" (1980, p. 212). This view is useful to measure against the way the novel depicts the exclusion of, and tries to represent, those people who, like Cat, are unable to operate within institutional linguistic systems. This 'radicalism' of narrative form may account for some critics' concerns that, as noted by Hutcheon (1980, p. 2) and Waugh (1984, p. 7), the reaction against realism marks the end of the novelistic form. Hutcheon maintains that modern metafictional novels are concerned not so much with reflecting a sense of chaos and instability of meaning, but with presenting "a certain curiosity about art's ability to produce 'real' order" (1980, p. 19). In my exploration of The last magician's metafictional narrative structure, and of the role of Charlie's photographs as hypodiegetic narratives, I mostly follow Hutcheon's approach as I explore the narrator's use of art as a means for producing order by reflecting on reality. At the same time, I also find that the novel's representation of social justice themes, when coupled with its narrative form, suggests a "commitment" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 323) to an ideology and to the possibility of change and emancipation which is aligned with Scholes's views.
My study focuses primarily on The last magician's metafictional elements as they relate to artistic expression. While I remain mindful of the novel's significant examination of social injustice, urbanisation, and gender and race relations, my treatment of these discourses is restricted to the ways in which these themes intersect with the subject of the thesis. For example, the text's linking of language to oppressive institutional powers is discussed in relation to Cat's experiences at school and with the justice system. Here, my focus is on the narrator's desire to express her own ambiguities and to represent those who, like Cat, are forced underground. Similarly, I explore Charlie's function as a photographer/narrator to illustrate the way that the photographic ekphrasis is used to parallel and supplement Lucy's storytelling. Consequently, this thesis does not engage with an examination of Charlie's ethnicity or with questions of Australian identity and 'the other'.

This thesis comprises three chapters: Chapter 1, Voices; Chapter 2, Silence; and Chapter 3, Pictures. Chapter 1 discusses the voices of the narrator, who is the fictional person who writes or tells the story (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, pp. 3-4). Chapter 2 tracks the narrator's attempt to move beyond conventional depictions of reality in order to tune into the silences, disappearances, absences, and unanswerable questions that surround her. Chapter 3 examines the narration of Charlie's photographic art, suggesting the narration of the art is analogous to the narration of the story at the same time as it provides opportunities to overcome the limitations of the verbal narrative.

In Chapter 1, I seek to identify the person who tells the story. However, working out "who speaks?" (Genette, 1980, p. 186) proves to be more complex than it first appears, as two narrators, one first and one third person, tell the story from a character's point of view (Lucy's), even as they challenge conventional assumptions about identity by questioning their (her) participation in the story and relation to events. The difficulty is further enhanced by the intrusion of an 'author', which complicates the relationship between a 'real-life' storyteller, in this case Janette Turner Hospital, and the fictional narrator, Lucy.
Chapter 2 examines the ways in which the novel problematises language, particularly through the story of Cat. Cat’s refusal or inability to conform is shown by her problematic behaviour and her way of communicating. Once language fails to represent her, she becomes mute by her own choice, and begins a pattern of escapes and disappearances. I explore how Cat’s story intersects with the narrator’s experience, and how the text parallels Cat’s muteness and the mystery of her disappearance with the narrator’s attempt to find a way to reflect her own struggle with words and unanswered questions.

The theme of silence and unresolved mysteries is also discussed in terms of the novel’s representation of order/chaos and fixed/uncertain meaning. I examine how Lucy seeks to order and pattern her reality by composing her story in a way that incorporates both the silent suffering she witnesses in the quarry, and the struggle to articulate her experience as a storyteller. As a good-girl/prostitute and a protagonist/narrator, Lucy has access to parallel worlds in both the story and the metafictional elements of the novel, and her function, like that of Charlie and of the real artists referred to in the text including Botticelli, Salgado, Munch, Dante, is to interpret the sensory experiences of the world, “the tap-tap-tapping of the quarry’s tunnels beneath mahogany sideboards” (p. 285), into a visual or literary narrative.

Charlie’s photographs are the subject of Chapter 3, which explores the photographs as a set of mini, hypodiegetic (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p. 93) ‘visual’ narratives that reflect the ‘literary’ narrative. The photographs test the limitations of Lucy’s first-level narrative, and elaborate on the theme of artistic expression. They also extend the novel’s discourse on the relationship between technique and content, the role of the critic, and the notion of truth in art. The photographs also depict the silent “traces of sensory data” that contribute to our interpretation of reality in a way that is not purely linguistic (Scholes, 1980, p. 208). This chapter finds that, in the novel, art and literature are rendered most meaningful when they reflect on, but not replicate, the actual world, and they are most credible, paradoxically, when this reflection is an explicitly subjective and self-conscious one.
This study concludes that *The last magician’s* intricate narrative structure reflects the complexities of the narrator’s mental space. In her quest to find an authentic mode of expression, the narrator subverts the notion that art must represent, or “attempt to create a replica of actuality” (Scholes & Kellogg, 1967, p. 372) and opts for a more “illustrative” and “symbolic” (p. 373) approach. The effect created is that of a dream-like collage made of memories, photographs, and intertextual references which, rather than portray an absence of order and meaning, reflect a desire for an order that is not immediately perceptible, and a reality that is not easily conceptualised. The narrator’s quest to decipher the silences and the “intricate web” (Turner Hospital, 1992, p. 94) of meaning subsists in the act of telling, which suggests that a possibility of resolution is “indeterminate in a suggestively closed sort of way” (p. 330).
Chapter 1 - Voices

Genette asks “who speaks?” (1980, p. 186). This is an important question with a complex answer for a narrator whose shifting voice reflects her ambivalence towards her own narrated identity. In this chapter, I apply narratological principles to identify the narrator’s voice and the way in which the narration is constructed. These principles allow me to classify and situate each narrating voice within the novel’s “narrative levels” (Genette, 1980, p. 227), or the novel’s hierarchical storytelling structure, which includes the narration of photographs that is the subject of Chapter 3. I examine shifts in voice, in level of participation, and in narrative sequence and discuss how such “shapeshifting” (Turner Hospital, 1992, p. 40) technique, coupled with the foregrounding of the narrative process, “undercut the sense of a singular, unified self” (Clark, 2008, p. 109) to engage with notions of truth and subjectivity in storytelling.

In The last magician, the narrator attempts both to unravel and piece together fragments of the “surface mystery” (Callahan, 2009, p. 178). At the same time, she unsettles the very notion of such unity by exposing the precariousness of narrating. Lucy’s constant interjections, commentary, and shifts in voice result in a narrative method that, through highlighting its fictionality (Lovell, 2005), is self-critical of its character/narrator, its subject matter, and its medium. To supplement the more systemic approach to narrative analysis, I have consulted here some studies of the metafictional novel which assist this exploration of the self-conscious, shifting narrator. These studies help to analyse the novel’s formal metafictional properties (Hutcheon, 1980) and engage with possible interpretive approaches derived from this form of writing (Waugh, 1984).

Before I begin my exploration of the narrator’s identity, I need to clarify my terms. First, the ‘narrator’ is defined as the fictive voice who reports the action and who is always distinct from the author, regardless of the mode of narration (Genette, 1980, p. 213). The terms ‘diegesis’ and ‘story’ are used interchangeably (Genette, 1980, p. 27; Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p. 91) to mean “the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the
text and reconstructed in their chronological order” (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p. 3). The term ‘narrative’ is used to discuss “discourse or narrative text itself” (Genette, 1980).

There are, I argue, three entities, or three narrating voices, who tell the story in *The last magician*, and the unclear boundaries between these entities reflect the novel’s discourse on the complexity of identity and subjectivity in fiction. There are two explicit voices, both closely linked to the protagonist, Lucy. One is the first person narrator ‘I’, who is a commenting, self-conscious narrator (Booth, 1961, p. 155) in that she narrates the story and discusses the process of writing simultaneously. The other is a third person narrator, a metadiegetic creation of the first person narrator. Although this third person narrator is omniscient, one who mostly assumes Lucy’s point of view, and is clearly a voice deployed by the first person narrator, the relationship between the two narrators and with the protagonist, Lucy, is complicated in that the mode of narration constantly links the narrators and characters to, and disassociates them from, one another. The third, more implicit, entity is an ‘author’ voice that, as I will demonstrate, is neither the real author nor an “implied author” (Booth, 1961, p. 71). It is important to state that, for the benefit of my particular exploration, some elements in the narrative communication situation, such as the real author, the narratee, and the real reader (Chatman, cited in Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p. 86), will not be discussed at length, as my focus is limited to the narrators and the method of narration.

To begin with, the identity of the first and third person narrators must be explored, whilst keeping in mind that the novel deliberately problematises this identification (Lovell, 2005). Since the first person narrator is shown at a diegetic level above the third person narrator, and makes regular comments on her own, third person meta-narrative, I believe it is useful to employ the equation: first person narrator=third person narrator=Lucy, and in the historical space in which people get ‘officially’ and physically identified, this equation is solid and indisputable. In the following example, this relationship is clearly established when the initial switch between first person and third person narrators takes place. The first person narrator concludes her prologue-like introduction with “…here it comes, here comes the first day I met Charlie…” (p. 26), handing over to her third person voice, who begins Chapter 3 with “Lucy leans back, propped on her elbows” (p. 27). So
far, the pattern is clear and unambiguous. Lucy tells her own story by (at times) deploying a third person narrator.

But this sense of order is maintained only as a basis from which to depart precisely to disturb such order. So, whilst on the most perceptible level, the equation first person=third person=Lucy holds true throughout the novel, “the ‘I’ of narration is problematised” (Temby, 1995, p. 51). The novel destabilises the concept of identity by constantly questioning the narrator’s relation to the various incarnations of her character and her degree of belonging to the story, opening the potential for a more fluid, transient identity. With the revelation that Lucy’s birth-name is Lucia, it should ordinarily be true that I=Lucy=Lucia. But the text disrupts this order with narrative commentary such as “I watch Charlie and Lucy, who is only myself in the most tenuous and convoluted way, and who was, in any case, acting the part of Lucy” (p. 33), and “She was Lucia then...She is still Lucia” (p. 41). Further into the story, the narrator makes this ambiguity even more explicit, with “Lucia taking off her neat school uniform and putting on Lucy, Lucy seeping by degrees into me, but who am I?” (p. 132). Names and costumes, schoolgirl and prostitute, Lucy, Lucia, first person and third person – all intentionally blend into each other to expose the unstable connection we have to our historical or biological identity. Hence, as Lucy asks, “Where, in the grab bag of costumes and masks does the self hide out?” (p. 61).

Such obstruction of a clearly-defined narrator/character relationship is also evident in the way in which the narrator represents time, history, and the characters’ sense of belonging in the story. The narrative is circular (Samuels, 2006, p. 159), rather than linear in its movement in time, and constantly shifts between various locations in Queensland, Sydney, and London. These frequent ‘analepses’, or flashbacks to a past event, and ‘prolepses’, or switches to a point in the future (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p. 46), subvert the realist concept of sequence and chronology in narrative in order to “[make] constant returns to the past to rework its legacy” (Bergmann, 1996, p. 364). For example, page 258 tells the story of Charlie’s children’s photographs in New York. The narrative then shifts to the years immediately following Willy’s death (pp. 259-260), makes a swift shift to a quote from Catherine, in “another time, another place” (p. 263), and then returns to
Charlie in New York (p. 263), only to cut abruptly to “once upon a time, said a bloke in the pub at Charlie’s Inferno” (p. 264). Significantly, the following chapter beings with “There is no order, no sequence” (p. 268), and this sense of disorientation “is necessary so that the reader may also feel as lost as the narrator” (Callahan, 2009, p. 177) because, as Lucy asks, “where do interlocking circles begin?” (p. 79).

From its very beginning, the text metaphorises the narrator’s attitude to time, and illustrates Lucy’s overwhelming sense of bewilderment and confusion as she manoeuvres through the maze of her experiences: “In the middle of the journey, I came to myself in a dark wood, where the straight way was lost. No...In the middle of darkness, I came to the black fact that there was no straight way” (p. 3). She returns to this dark wood again, at the beginning of the final chapter (p. 353) to add to this circular effect, where the past keeps visiting the present, and the dark wood exists in a space that is not confined to a specific history or geography. This time, “the straight way was wholly lost and gone” (p. 353), and there are only circular motions. The narrator asks: “is this happening now or was it a long time ago? I have difficulty with that question...I find that the past lies in wait, just ahead” (p. 118), and Charlie answers “you need a particular blinkered angle of vision...to sustain belief in linear time” (p. 118). In this novel, “the doors to synchronous time and parallel space are everywhere” (p. 149), and solutions, if they exist, do not emerge from traditional modes of categorising past/present/future, I/Lucy/Lucia, or author/narrator/character. One must remove the blinkers and look beyond the straight way in order to find answers.

As the narrator refuses to stay on the straight path of linear recounting, she also questions her position within her own and other people’s stories. The narrator, existing in past, present and future, also rejects the division between witness and participant with which narrators are often classified. Narrative theories generally rely on sectioning narrators into “narrator a character in the story” and “narrator not a character in the story” (Genette, 1980, p. 186), and this is, of course, a necessary step in the analysis of narrative. While the first person narrator is a participant in the story, she does, in an apparent familiarity with such rhetoric, question this model as she struggles to fully belong to, or be excluded from, one narrating position or the other. She feels as much a
stranger in the story of her own past, as she is a part of events that took place before she was born. She hints, early: “And what does it have to do with me? Nothing, really. Or so I used to believe” (p. 73), and as she approaches the end of the story, she is certain that other people are “stuck with us, just as we are with them, and they’ll never quite get us out from under their skin” (p. 356). She understands that this sense of common narrative she shares with the others is necessary for piecing together a puzzle in which she features within various times, places, and other people’s stories.

Returning now to the narrator’s question “Who am I?” (p. 132), the novel provides a glimpse to another possibility; that in a metafictional fashion in which a text seems to “theorise itself” (Ommundsen, 1990, p. 172), Turner Hospital introduces a third, more elusive narrating persona in an ‘author’ voice who is familiar with literary and critical theory and with the process of writing. When the identity of the narrator is complicated by her relation to the various phases of her self, the relationship between an author and a narrator may be, we are led to conclude, similarly ambiguous. So, when Lucy asks “who am I?” (p. 132), the readers’ sense of a fixed narrator identity is now sufficiently shaken to allow for the possibility of an author’s voice echoing that same question.

Here, I need to distinguish between what is commonly referred to as the “implied author” or the author’s “official scribe” (Booth, 1961, p. 71), and what I identify here as the ‘author’ entity. This ‘author’ is by no means the real author, Janette Turner Hospital, because, of course, Turner Hospital is not directly communicating with the reader as herself and, at any rate, the question of whether it is her or not is inconsequential for this thesis. It is also different from the implied author since, contrary to Chatman’s definition (cited in Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p. 87), it is a vocal, participating, and opinionated voice. It is, then, an authorial presence, an ‘every author’, whose purpose is primarily to draw attention to the fact that there is an author, somewhere, who is different from the narrators, and who, at the same time, struggles with the narrator’s problems of depiction, subjectivity, and identity. This ‘author’ exists by virtue of the uncertainty about who is telling the story, skilfully planted in the minds of readers by the first two narrators.
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 the text; or

iii. contain any defamatory material.

Signed:

Niva Kaspi
The ‘author’ writes: “There is a woman who pauses in her writing, puzzled; a woman without a name, who lives below the text, a misinterpreter, a mischief-maker perhaps, a faulty retrieval system which sometimes presumes to call herself an ‘I’” (p. 132). This passage echoes with more than a hint of an ‘author’ whom I must stop short of calling Janette Turner Hospital. Significantly, the other two narrating voices are never depicted in the act of writing. They do not discuss the physical activity of recording the story, be it sitting at a desk, holding pen to paper, or typing. There is no mention of a book, chapters, pages, or any other physical manifestations of the products of writing beyond the metaphorical, intertextual reference to “notes from the underground” (p. 22). Lucy is a storyteller who works with words, but the text never depicts her as a writer. This “woman who pauses in her writing...who sometimes presumes to call herself an ‘I’” (p. 132), is one diegetic level superior to the first person narrator, and throughout the novel, this ‘author’ entity, as though playing a game of peek-a-boo with the reader and with the other two narrators, subverts the authority of the actual narrators to demonstrate her awareness of the theory of her craft, and to obscure the division between author/narrator, and fact/fiction.

Some critics of the modernist period, such as Henry James, instruct that when fiction, as much as possible, allows us to “see life without rearrangement... we feel that we are touching the truth” (cited in Booth, 1961, p. 22). Madox Ford similarly asserts that good modern literature must “take the reader, immerse him in an Affair so completely that he [is] unconscious either of the fact that he [is] reading or of the identity of the author” (cited in Booth, 1961, p. 30). Turner Hospital’s ‘author’, a deliberate violator of this rule, enters the debate by implying that such invisibility of authorial presence is impossible, since the author, whether she likes it or not, is captured in the text. “It’s not my story, though it’s odd, is it not, and interesting and revealing, the way the teller inserts herself into the tale, even when she’s trying to avoid it” (p. 78), says the ‘author’, once again achieving a multiplicity of meaning by blurring the boundaries between writer and narrator, siding with Booth, that “the author’s judgement is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it” (Booth, 1961, p. 20).
Narratologists have commented that excessive focus on the narrating ‘person’ is “overworked” (Booth, 1961, p. 150), unnecessary, and that essentially little critical emphasis should be placed on whether a story is told in the first or the third person, since this “[stresses] variation in the element of the narrative situation that is in fact invariant...the presence...of the ‘person’ of the narrator” (Genette, 1980, pp. 243-244).

So far in my discussion, both first and third person narrators demonstrate a similar attitude towards identity, while at the same time are clearly linked to the character Lucy. But while the choice of person in itself may not be significant, the moments of shift between first and third person, and the different roles they are assigned, in The last magician, are worth exploring since they represent an attempt to free the narrator from the limiting detachment of omniscience, help emphasise the constructed nature of the narrative, and question the notion of a narrated, reliable ‘truth’.

The first person narrator begins the novel and then, in Chapter 3, hands the role of telling the story to the third person narrator, flashing back to her first meeting with Charlie (page 27). A certain pattern is established, whereby the third person narrator tries to move the story forward, while the first person narrator makes regular interruptions in order to expand on an idea, reveal some additional information, and elaborate on the process of narrating. The third person always recounts the past, and the first person shifts between the past and the metafictional storytelling time, in the ‘present’.

In The last magician the shifts to the interrupting, almost involuntary outbursts, as if the third person narrator is “unexpectedly abandoning the role of narrator” (Genette, 1980, p. 246), add to the text’s presentation of story as transient and shifting, rather than fixed in time and place. These interjections are often bracketed and reflect, retrospectively, on the past. For example, when the third person narrator recounts Lucy’s meeting with her customer, Sonny Blue, who is judge Robinson Gray, the narrative forward flashes to the first person narrator who reflects: “(Even from this distance, I told Catherine, knowing what I now know, I would maintain that his pain was intense, and it was real. Yes, Catherine said. But the question is, what was the nature of the pain?)” (p. 290). The story is presented not as a fixed and determined event in history, by a unified, fixed voice, but
as an ever-evolving, circular process of recounting and reflecting, posing questions and testing possibilities (Lovell, 2005).

Waugh suggests that such vocal presence of a metafictional narrator can be read as an act of Platonic moral truthfulness (Waugh, 1984, p. 89), or a noble disclosure of the story’s fictionality. But, if fiction is the antithesis of truth, a solid, knowable truth must exist somewhere outside literature or, paradoxically, closer to the space where the metafictional narrator is located. For Lucy, the ‘truth’, if it exists at all, is the voice that is enabled by the literary plurality of voices and identities. Her self-disclosed indeterminacy is an ethical artistic representation of her role as a witness to the bewildering and nightmarish events that surround her (Callahan, 2009, p. 196). In the following passage, for example, the third person narrator tells of Lucy’s meeting with Gabriel. The narrative is then interrupted by the first person narrator, who confesses to the reader: “Of course, I haven’t been fully honest. I haven’t told you everything” (p. 144), and continues with: “I will admit that there have been careful skirtings of certain revealing moments. For instance, the following exchange, a few days after Gabriel materialized behind the row of taps in the pub” (p. 145). This concludes the interruption, and the third person narrator resumes the tale. By doing this, the narrator is drawing attention to the constitutive nature of the narrative (Lovell, 2005, p. 141) to, paradoxically, enhance her narrative’s credibility.

The first/third person relations in the novel, therefore, suggest the “I” narrator is favoured over the omniscient third person, which may reveal some of the ideology embedded in this technique. In establishing “subordination relations” (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p. 91) between the two voices, it is clear, through the various examples presented here so far, that the first person narrator stands at a higher hierarchical level to the third person narrator. This “I” narrator, be it Lucy or an ‘author’, is fluid and transient, and her narrating comments reveal a critical, doubting, and undecided attitude towards her self-constructed, ‘detached’ third person narrative. This tension, between the two narrating voices, who are one character, questions the virtue of detachment, and challenges the possibility of a truly reliable narrator. The first person narrator’s superiority, evident in
her more authoritative diegetic position, is that of the individual, authentic, and ambivalent voice over the determined, impersonal, historical narrative.

I have explored so far how the novel’s mode of narration deliberately subverts realist tradition of a reliable narrator with a fixed voice, a clear identity, and a chronological depiction of time. But it is also necessary to show the pauses in the book where Turner Hospital, with the musicality she so much aspires to in her writing (Rossmanith, 2008, p. 58), orchestrates a distinct change of tone by setting aside all the interrupting voices that foreground the narrative act, for the purpose of highlighting the narrated story in a more unified, linear and ordered way. This is particularly noticeable in Book II (pp. 159-248), which unravels the events that have led to Cat’s disappearance. Book II tells of the school-days’ friendships of young Charlie, Robby, Cat and Catherine, of the dangerous railway-line game leading to Willy’s death, and the subsequent trial which results in the acquittal of Robby and his friends, who continue their campaign of aggression by molesting Charlie and Cat. The narrator begins this story by introducing Charlie’s parents and the sort of worries that occupy their minds: “Will the new supermarket on Enoggera Road ruin our business? Will Charlie come top in his exam? Will he win a scholarship to Brisbane Boys’ Grammar School?” (p. 184). Then, as though letting the narrative answer these questions which, of course, have already been answered long before storytelling time, the narrator ceases her self-conscious commentary and allows the third person narration to tell the story. Although she occasionally returns in her first person form, these pauses are relatively brief and do not disrupt the pace of the story, which is maintained with its suspenseful lead-up to the inevitable, but still devastating, conclusion.

Book II is favoured by some critics (cited in Callahan, 2009, p. 185), perhaps because its “memorable” depiction of the Queensland school children (Lever, 2009, p. 55) foregrounds the referential story over the self-reflexive, metafictional properties of the novel. It seems to me that the power of Book II relates to the way the narrator steps aside, so that her voice is softly pulsating in the background, instead of overtly directing the course of action. Unlike some other parts of the novel, the story of the Queensland children is not constantly “undermine[d]... with a reminder to the reader of its quasi-
referential status” (Waugh, 1984, p. 95), so the reader’s immersion in Book II is an intended effect that both contrasts with, and is enabled by, the bustle of narration that characterises preceding parts of the novel. The result is that disbelief is temporarily suspended as the distance between reader and story is reduced to highlight a point of fixed certainty in the narrative. The horrific death of a child, it seems to say, stands independent of its representation, beyond any discussion about narrativity or artistic expression. It flows through to Cat’s self-inflicted muteness to signify an event that is beyond its own description; beyond words. It is followed, significantly, by the “loudest and most chilling scream in the world” (p. 251); the silent scream of Edvard Munch’s painting.
Chapter 2 - Silence

The epigraph, by Chuang Tzu, to Book III reads: “Where can I find one who has forgotten words? That is the one I would like to talk to” (p. 249). The paradox of this passage represents the essence of Lucy’s dilemma; that is, how to capture a pure, pre-linguistic experience, and what language can she use to recount this experience? The narrator seeks to overcome linguistic limitations, not only because “language deceives” (132), but also because she wishes “to give silences their say” (132). The previous chapter explored how the narrator alternates her narrating voices and uses a circular representation of time so that the reader can experience her sense of confusion (Callahan, 2009), where the past intrudes on the present, and her story is tangled up with the stories of others. In this chapter, I continue to examine how Lucy challenges the constraints of realism by identifying a parallel, silent world that symbolises both an unheard, “socially damned” (Lovell, 2005, p. 131) class of people within Sydney’s imaginary underground world, and by crafting a language for her “personal Richter scale” (Turner Hospital, 1992, p. 359), or her intuitive and sensory experiences. I will explore how these silences are depicted in the “surface mystery” (Callahan, 2009, p. 178) of Cat, as well as in Lucy’s self-conscious narrative and how, through the latter, the novel portrays artists and narrators as agents who communicate or voice the ambiguities that emerge from the silent world.

The novel’s evocation of postmodern ambiguities, or ‘silences’, has stimulated critical debate (Callahan, 2009; Clark, 2008; Lovell, 2002; Temby, 1995), and some critics are concerned that those who are oppressed in the novel are ultimately disempowered by the inconclusiveness of the story (Temby, 1995). In order to explore such ambiguities I examine Temby’s study of the novel’s representation of chaos (1995) as well as Scholes’s discussion of a reality which precedes artificial linguistic order (1980, p. 206). I suggest that Lucy’s attempt to create language as an “authentic experience” (Scholes, 1979, p. 9), offers the possibility of a compelling voice within a narrative space that challenges restrictive narrative traditions while at the same time, as noted by McLaren, maintains a commitment to certain values (1989, p. 248).
Missy notes that “the theme of being silenced, of being without a voice, is especially powerful in [The last magician]” (1992, p. 80), and Cat’s story begins this discussion, since Cat represents silences as an absence of both a literal and a metaphorical voice. In young Cat’s world, words best serve authoritative institutions such as schools and courthouses, and exclude those people who are unable, or unwilling, to operate within those institutions’ linguistic conventions. The language of those institutions represents a “naturalised reality which legitimises exclusion and refuses recognition, relegating difference to an underground experience” (Lovell, 2002, p. 61). Cat stands for those on the margins, who, like the quarry’s unheard residents, exist outside the linguistic conventions that typify power and success. From the outset, Cat is defined by her failure, or refusal, to adhere to norms, both linguistic and otherwise. The epigraph to Book II, “Cat”, reads: “No animal is so opposed to restraint as a cat” (p. 159), and in her first conversation with Charlie, Cat describes herself and what will turn out to be the pattern of her life: “I nick off. They catch me sometimes, but” (p. 188). Her linguistic mischief mirrors her reckless behaviour:

When she was made to read aloud from the Grade 5 reader, which she was made to do every day, her halting mumble and long pauses and mispronounced words were painful to hear. Hopeless, Miss Oswell said. Cat clowned about her hopelessness. Cat would, in her ignorant way, sometimes substitute shocking and forbidden words for others which bore only a slight resemblance (p. 224).

Charlie, who wonders about the source of Cat’s rebelliousness, asks “which one came first?... Cat’s not caring? Or her knowledge that for people like herself there was no point whatsoever in caring?” (p. 223). By choice, or otherwise, Cat’s language and behaviour repel those on the other end of the social scale who think “thank God she isn’t us” (p. 333).

Cat, who is silent for most of the novel, knows that many experiences are beyond language and articulation. Her brother Willy, for example, has a vocabulary of just five words, “What’s the time, Mr Wolf?” (p. 190), that he chants over and over again. He is, regardless, the single most meaningful person in her life. Willy has a non-linguistic, sensory impact on those around him, and he is described in the novel as an ephemeral, almost supernatural creature that magically and silently draws people’s affection: “There is something about Willy that makes one want to cuddle him. He is quite unnaturally
beautiful. His skin is translucent, his hair is wheaten blond, his eyes are the watery green of rainforest pools” (p. 190). Willy has a “soft and silken cheek” that “tastes delicious” (p. 193). Lucy says that “the fact of love” is perhaps the only things we know for sure (p. 385) and, for Cat, Willy is this certainty of love of which, to borrow from Lao Tzu, “speaking in words is like trying to sound the middle of the ocean with a six-foot pole” (p. 387).

As her name suggests, Cat is defined by the animal-like movements, actions, and physicality as she climbs trees (p. 188), runs “off through the long grass like a rabbit” (p. 189), with darting eyes like a magpie (p. 171) her hands like claws, and she’s hissing (p. 244). Her physicality is evident in her dangerous childhood games, her escapes, her dancing, her self-mutilation, and her sexuality. If language contradicts reality (Scholes, 1979, p. 9), cat embodies this opposition since her language is the carnal, ‘real’ language of the body: “Though she was under a curse of silence, it was rumoured that her tongue could speak the whole of the Kama Sutra and every item in the Kinsey Report” (p. 284). Her writings are the scars inscribed into her skin, some by her own hands; “you do it when you need to scream but you can’t” (p. 284), explains another “self-slasher” (p. 284). Cat cannot be held captive, and her slippery escapes draw in those who, like Charlie and Catherine, continue to talk with her, in their heads and “not in words” (p. 272), as they seek to decode her silence.

When Cat is put on the stand at the inquest into Willy’s death, she is forced to use language to explain something she is incapable of articulating; that is, the intricate mix of love, jealousy, tyranny, race, gender, and social class that has culminated in Willy’s death. Cat has an intuitive, non-verbal understanding of what happened, but in a courtroom still echoing with her father’s obscenities, her words, all broken and awkward, do not move the judge who is socially aligned with, and sympathetic towards the well-spoken Robinson Gray (p. 241). When she is first addressed by the judge, Cat remains silent, and is reproached: “Young lady...Your attitude to authority is very revealing” (p. 241). The judge then proceeds to diagnose that a “long train of family negligence leads to this sad place” (p. 241), and when Cat’s father protests in “words not often heard in the presence of juridical gowns and wigs” (p. 241) and is ordered out, Cat decides,
surprisingly, to present her version. “I got somethin’ to say before ya cart me Dad off” (p. 241), she announces to the court, clearly situating herself outside the linguistic class of Robinson and the judge. Her words fail to make an impression, and when she concludes by pointing at Robbie and explains with piercing accuracy that “he wanted to see if he could make me cry” (p. 242), the judge ignores her statement and continues to remove her father from the court (p. 242). The last words Cat ever speaks are her address to the inquest, for after that she has “finished with words” (p. 244). She fails to negotiate the linguistic conventions of an institution of justice that has patently failed to disperse justice. Shortly after that trial, she disappears from the lives of her childhood friends. Since no one truly speak or listens to her, the girl who was brought up on “speak when you’re spoken to” (p. 227), remains silent.

Metafictional narrators seek to both expose and subvert the traditional novel’s representation of reality, a representation which they see as supportive of existing and oppressive power structures (Waugh, 1984, p. 11). Here, Cat’s silent absence intersects with the narrator, Lucy, who “wants to give silences their say” (p. 132), and this is consistent with Turner Hospital’s tendency to place two women on “opposite sides of the same coin” (Samuels, 2006, p. 156). Lucy desires to find a voice to express the soundless suffering of Serra Pelada, of the quarry dwellers, and of Cat, and to restore justice to those oppressed people as she breaks down traditional linguistic structures that do not fulfil this function. But Lucy’s desire to voice the silences extends beyond the theme of social injustice that affects Cat and the people in the quarry. Davies notes that Turner Hospital “makes the power of words visible, and the struggle with them and against them is also made visible” (2000, p. 195). As a storyteller-artist, Lucy “dreams of writing without language” (p. 132), or of finding a way to narrate the silent gap “between being and saying” (Genette, 1982, p. 93). For Lucy, silences “thick with story” (p.94) are everywhere. They are the “flotsam and random event we find ourselves floundering in” (p. 299), and they are narrative’s loose ends, when “there is not one single thing we know for sure” (p. 385). They are loaded with the knowledge that “in any actual linguistic performance, there is always much that must escape any transcription into systems of writing” (Gibson, 1996, p. 146). Her preoccupation with this theme allows Turner Hospital to engage with questions concerning the nature of language: “Do we, by our
processes of signification, give a spurious order to chaos, creating selves and worlds both bounded by language? Is there an order always already in place before we seek to shape it?" (Scholes, 1980, p. 206). Does Lucy’s (like anyone’s) narrative force a shape for what is, essentially, random and patternless? And is there a world that exists outside “the prison house of language” (Jameson, cited in Scholes, 1980, p. 205)? If so, how can the storyteller, who works with words, ever escape this linguistic imprisonment?

To address these questions, I first draw on a study by Temby (1995), who considers the representation of chaos theory in The last magician. I’ve discussed previously how the shifting voice and non-linear order work to illustrate Lucy’s sense of disorientation and bewilderment. At times, this technique can create the illusion that the reader is witnessing a set of random or chaotic events, with no clear sense of temporality, causality or resolution. Like some other postmodern fiction of its time that engages with a sense of “uncertainty borrowed from twentieth-century physics” (Gelder & Salzman, 1989, p. 73) The last magician exploits this theme. But chaos, in The last magician, is not necessarily the antithesis to order, and is viewed by Temby as being “linked to new conceptualisations of order as being present within, or arising from, complex systems” (1995, p. 54). This view is mirrored by Callahan, who finds that the apparent disorder in the novel is made up of “a system of intricate connections that conceal a hidden meaning” (2009, pp. 182-183). Lucy is indeed certain that “an intricate web exists” (p. 94), and she asks:

If turbulence, freeway collisions, and downswings in the market can all be shown to obey strange cluster compulsions, how can I discount an abstruse mathematical curve which might pluck four people out of Brisbane, scatter them, and pull them together again years later in Sydney? (p. 78)

Discerning this web’s pattern is, in a sense, her narrative’s challenge, because this pattern is not immediately apparent and because it cannot be easily conceptualised.

Arguably, then, the pattern’s indeterminacy, like Cat’s silence, is loaded with meaning and demands an attention that goes beyond ordinary or casual exploration, and a narrative mode that can enable such exploration. It necessitates that we look beyond what is immediately perceptible, probe deeper than our tangible surroundings, and let go of restrictive narrative traditions so that we can see, in photographic terms, “what is
excluded from the frame... what would have happened if the photographer had focused a few feet further to the left" (Turner Hospital, 1992, pp. 253-254). Many events in this story take place beyond the parameters of normal consciousness and beyond conventional measures. For example, Lucy tells us that to get to Cedar Creek Falls “you must leave your car and enter the dark wood and keep going until the straight way is lost” (p. 5). “Cat was invisible” (p. 229), so to tune in to her absence, you must let go of well-established paths and look beyond conventional narrative structures.

The narrator suggests that there is a reality which precedes or is unbounded by language. “I have to concede that from before the very first once-upon-a-time, there has always been another world” (p. 21), she says, as she seeks “to ‘give silences their say’ in a way that does not depend on...a ‘language’ that ‘deceives’” (Lovell, 2005, p. 145). One way to achieve this is to resort to the silent arena of visual art. “The loudest and most chilling scream in the world is the silent one in Edvard Munch’s painting” (p. 251), says Lucy, following what is one of the most harrowing moments in the book, that of the Wilston boys’ brutal assault on Charlie and Cat (pp. 245-248). “It is composed of every scream the viewer has ever heard, every fear he has ever felt, every nightmare that has ever jacknifed him out of sodden sheets...It is deafening” (p. 251). The power of The scream is that it transcends words, time, space, and identity, to depict the endless range of suffering imaginable by an observer.

But Lucy’s reference to The Scream is significant not only as a way of breaking free of language. It also illuminates a more intricate pattern of meaning that can be discerned in the novel:

Only the geometric grid of the bridge suggests, by its parallel railings, that there are in fact two side-by-side worlds in The Scream. There is the world that is only the scream, and the world where the scream means nothing and is not even heard. They occupy the same space, but one world fits inside the other like a hand inside a glove. (p. 251)

Within the context of the metafictional novel, this description alerts the reader to the significance of the various diegetic levels which also occupy the same space, and to the “frames” and “frame-breaking” which the metafictional novel plays with to draw attention to its own constructedness (Waugh, 1984, p. 28). The scream’s description
exemplifies the various parallel worlds that co-exist in the novel; the underground quarry and its aboveground Sydney, the “upstairs and downstairs” bordello/restaurant of Charlie’s Place (p. 35) and, of course, the story and the embedded tale of its own production. Such a scream, for all its intensity, can be missed by the inattentive or unaware bystander, just as a painting on a gallery wall can be overlooked by a pre-occupied visitor, or a meta-narrative might remain concealed within the broader frame of a murder-mystery.

Lucy, as Lucia, a top student at “one of Brisbane’s best private high schools for girls” (p. 41), first learns of, and is initiated into, the “the parallel worlds” (p. 41) on “that day when the air parted” (p. 41), when she witnesses a mad woman at Brunswick Street railway station:

The woman appears to be in late middle age and is raggedly dressed, dirty...She is making a spectacle of herself. She is standing with straddled legs, holding up her dirty cotton skirts in a bunch at her waist, and pointing to the black fuzz between her legs. Under the skirts, she wears nothing. The skin of her thighs and belly is slack and wrinkled and grotesque. It is as though she has a large bearded prune between her legs. The woman is howling like a dingo. (p. 43)

For the narrator, the literal exposure of the private world of a woman’s body provides a metaphor for a carnal, primordial underworld. The connection between a woman’s body and a parallel, non-linguistic world was already explored in my discussion of Cat’s physicality. This link can also be read with reference to Scholes’s concept of the “traces of sensory data” (1980, p. 208) on which people base their interpretation of reality, and which the novel seeks to convey. Turner Hospital has referred to her own “sensory memories” of the landscape of her childhood (Greiner, 2007a, p. 336), and she has been noted for using an “image of the body as instrument for speaking the landscape without words” (Davies, 2000, p. 190). In this instance, the bodily image can be read as a metaphoric representation of the narrative arena, or landscape. The woman’s lifting of her dress to reveal her raw physicality parallels the narrator’s exposure of the layered fabric in search of a sensory vocabulary that has not yet been covered by conventional costumes. In this sensory space that the protagonists inhabit, names are smelled in blood (Turner Hospital, 1992, p. 89), “the body...instinctively recognises turbulence” (p. 91), and absence clings to people “like a second skin” (p. 93). Interestingly, when the mad
woman finally starts talking, shrieking "bloodly fuckers bloody fuckers bloody fuckers", the spell is broken for Lucia (p. 44).

Lucia's experience at the station awakens the mystery of her own biography and identity. A "genuine foundling, left in a home for unwed mothers" (p. 40), she hears her inner voice, taunting: "That could be your mother. How would you know?" (p. 43). From this moment on, Lucy realises the unstable surface on which her life rests, and "that you could cross a line, that you could fall through a hairline crack and cartwheel giddily down and round and down in slow motion, like moondust in space" (p. 41). Within the linguistic "prison house" of storytelling, this marks Lucy's "rebirth as a self-conscious narrator" (Lovell, 2002, p. 51); she is transformed from Lucia to Lucy, from gifted student to prostitute to film-maker, and from a mere participant in a story, to a narrator/creator with access to two worlds. "As for me, I go back and forth, above and under. I cross borders. That world, this world, they coexist all the time and I move between them" (p. 21). Having "developed antennae" (p. 18), she begins "decoding the rumbles of subway trains, noting and cataloguing screams, classifying the way a knife cuts" (p. 18). Lucy states her desire "to mail my own notes from the underground" (p. 22), and becomes "an agent for the exposure of the terrors of the (un)seen world" (Clark, 2008, p. 112). Her narrative represents people who, like Cat and Old Fury, are concealed from those who, in the privileged "other world" (Turner Hospital, 1992, p. 21), "move through rooms that are full of music...pour fine wine into crystal...[and] light candles on mahogany sideboards" (p. 21).

Lovell points to the novel's proposition that "art can deliver justice" (2005, p. 124), and Albertazzi (cited in Greiner, 2007b, p. 382) finds this form of justice in Turner Hospital's depiction of the "victory of mute women who will never find a voice, but who will tell their stories anyway with their silent screams". This is supported in my exploration of the way in which the metafictional form of the narrative in The last magician exposes the "words, words, words" of the establishment as being "in inverse ration to Cat's silence" (p. 335). Moreover, the two-levelled narrative mode allows the protagonists, Cat and Lucy, to be both subjects and to "become speaking subjects" (Davies, 2000, p. 179) and this suggests a possibility of self-expression for the silenced Cat and for the artist-storyteller, Lucy. "Nothing was resolved, but what ever is?" asks
the narrator (p. 328). So, like Samuels, I find that, while the novel takes on some postmodern features, its lack of resolution is not a statement in support of a “relative morality” (Samuels, 2006, p. 160), but comes to illuminate the plight of those who are the victims of ongoing injustice and silencing.

I have focused on the way Munch’s *The scream* acts as a metaphor to the unheard suffering of people like Cat, but Munch is only one of many artists and storytellers on which the text draws to represent this parallel world. Charlie, whose pub is “situated...in the first circle of the quarry”, is “look[ing] both ways” (p. 87) literally and figuratively, and like Salgado’s depiction of a Brazilian gold mine (p. 52), Dante’s *Inferno* (p. 65), Botticelli’s drawings of the *Inferno* (p. 52), and Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the underground* (p. 22), his art decodes and conveys this unspoken world and his art provides a way of glimpsing into those hells and allowing “silences their say” (p. 132). In the next chapter, I will examine how art, and photography in particular, reflects and remedies the gaps between the narrator’s and characters’ experiences and their artistic or literary depiction.
Chapter 3 - Pictures

Art is revealed as a form of wizardly tool at the hands of both the narrator, Lucy, and the photographer, Charlie, who is “the last magician” (p. 259). Ekphrasis, which is described by Hillis Miller as a “verbal description of an artwork, real or imagined” (2008, p. 66), is used extensively in The last magician to visualise and shape the parallel worlds of the quarry and of Lucy’s self-conscious narrative, and it does so in a number of ways which will be discussed here. First, the narrator is allowed the distance necessary to critique art and literature (Lovell, 2005) by adding the photographic layer to her narrative of the story. Also, she can describe the performative role of narrated pictures (Hillis Miller, 2008), as she narrates her reactions to the pictures. In addition, visual, symbolic art permits, more easily than literature, an approach that is purely formal (Scholes & Kellogg, 1967, p. 373), so the narrator can expose the link between form and content, and visually conceptualise in the photographs the form of her literary narrative. Moreover, photography, with its perceived association to an unmediated first-order message (Barthes, 1977, p. 18), or to reality, brings a new dimension to the tension between fact and fiction that expands on the literary exploration of this theme. Finally, the narrative of a visual medium achieves a sensory concentration that has been exploited by ekphrasis writers (Stewart, 2009, p. 495) such as Turner Hospital, who seek to represent a non-linguistic space by including descriptions of pictures in their writing. Underpinning all these elements is the notion that art and literature accumulate meaning through the perpetual and symbolic reflection, re-presentation, and re-ordering of the artist’s personal experience of the world.

I need to clarify that, since the novel does not include any actual photographs, photographs only exist as the text which describes them. Nevertheless, in this analysis, I assume the photographs have a “sensuous otherness” (Stewart, 2009, p. 496) which, when combined with their status as narratives within narratives, separates them from other elements in the text. Many of the visual descriptions in the book depict an existing artwork or, alternatively, a detailed textual sketching of Charlie’s fictional ones, and while interpretations may still vary from reader to reader, the scope for such variation is
narrowed down by the meticulous details in the text. In this respect, my study is also informed by Bal, who asserts that "the language of narrative can produce vision" (2001, p. 193), and who also identifies visual 'snapshots' within written texts and, conversely, examines the narrativity and narrators of paintings (Bal, 2001).

First, the narrated photographs need to be situated within the hierarchal structure of the novel to enable an examination of the narrator's critical distance. In her discussion of narrative levels and subordination relations, Rimmon-Kenan identifies the hypodiegetic narrative level when a story, existing below another level of narration, is told by one of the characters (1983, pp. 91-92). The hypodiegetic narratives have a number of functions: They might move the story forward, explain some elements of the story, and/or act as an analogy to elements within the greater narrative level (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p. 92). Charlie's photographs perform all three functions. Keeping in mind that the third person narrator is already subordinate to the first person narrator, Charlie's art is both hypo-hypodiegetic, when it is narrated by the third person narrator, and hypo-hypo-hypodiegetic, being the product of Charlie's artistic narration. Many of Charlie's photographs feature other photographs, such as the one in which a man with a magnifying glass studies the photograph of a man who is studying an X-ray image (p. 113). This creates a dizzying sensation of endless layers of observer/observed, subject/object, and narrator/narrated.

Such application of the photographic narrative level is consistent with Bal's concept of the gaze, whereby "artist, story, narrator, and character all line up together; or like the successive lenses in an optical instrument through which a single light line passes" (Bryson, 2001, p. 14). In chapter 1, I have discussed how the narrator exposes and comments on the narrating process. But despite her freedom to move through different periods and locations, and to change her narrating voice, the narrator's self-analysis is limited by her proximity to the narrated subject, Lucy, or, in Bryson's terms, she is restricted to seeing through, rather than seeing (2001, p. 13). The additional lenses
afforded by the increased degree of remoteness (Booth, 1961, p. 155) between narrator and subject, create a "critical distance necessary for author, narrator and reader in the analysis of the themes of the novel" (Lovell, 2005, p. 134). Fig 1 below illustrates the various filters that create the distance between reader and artwork in the novel.

![Fig. 1 The observation order diagram](image)

The illustration above outlines the order of interpretation, from reader to the artwork (photograph), listing all possible narrating agents that exist between the two points. I have deliberately chosen to diverge from strictly narratological models such as Chatman's (cited in Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p. 86) and Bal's (2004, p. 274), which place the reader and the author at opposite ends of the process. For the purpose of this study, the focus is on the varying degrees of separation between the reader/observer and the object/artwork. This diagram is helpful when trying to identify who is narrating or observing, and what filters are used between reader and object.

The narrator often captures Charlie in the act of photographing, and his art is depicted in a way that, much like Lucy's narrative, draws attention to its constructed nature (Lovell, 2005). Lucy, now a narrator-observer, is situated outside the creative act at the same time as she is implicitly reflected in that process. She describes how Charlie "considers lighting and shutter speed" (p. 35), applies "fisheye lens, shallow depth-of-field" (p. 37), and how his camera "distances itself" (p. 65), and "moves slowly" (p. 67). These
observations are analogous to her own techniques of switching between first and third person, and using constant flashbacks and forward flashes. She accuses Charlie of having “deliberately superimposed on Botticelli a picture torn from the Sydney Morning Herald” (p. 72), even as she weaves Dante (p. 70), Munch (p. 251), and historical court documents (p. 336) into her narrative. She also transcribes Charlie’s staging instructions to his subject: “What I’m after is a sense of those fishnet stockings as snare” (p. 27), and similarly leads her reader through her own elaborate web of metaphors. Lucy’s exposé of Charlie’s technique emphasises the fictionality of what is represented and, more importantly, draws attention to the link between the mode of representation and the possible meaning of the represented subject.

Like Lucy, Charlie, who “did not think in words, exactly” (p. 93), and “wrote in light” (p. 101), attempts to order and make sense of his haunting memories and unanswered questions by composing his work in a way that overcomes the limitations of realist depiction methods. For Charlie, art must be illustrative, or symbolic, rather than representational, or mimetic, so it must reflect on the world as he sees it, but not mirror it. He says that he keeps taking photographs “to see what he had seen” (p. 253), but in light of his particular technique, his words cannot be taken literally. What he seeks is a reflection of an inner, non-material state which defies realist modes of documentation because it disrupts traditional notions of chronology, space, and objectivity. His work, in other words, is a statement in defence of fictionality as a mode of truth; a truth that exists as much in the method or process as it does in the end product:

He arranged and composed, but he did not believe that these arrangements lied, or that they refashioned the truth. All photographs lie and they all tell their own particular truth, he said, the truth of their own lie. (p. 253)

Exposing his method is the role of the narrator, Lucy, who is afforded this privilege by her superior diegetic status.

Moreover, Charlie’s method, his “technical wizardry, a bit of cutting and splicing, the normal cinematic black magic” (p. 75), triggers the cathartic moment that begins the story. Lucy is in London, watching Charlie’s Inferno, one of Charlie’s short films, when she is shocked to see herself on the screen, pictured holding Cat’s pendant at Cedar Creek Falls, a place she last visited before meeting Charlie (p. 74). “I felt afraid, I felt that all
my bearings had gone haywire” (p. 76), she explains, because Charlie’s film shows her not only “how readily and unavoidably the past intrudes on the present” (Clark, 2008, p. 119), but also how unavoidably implicated she is in the lives and stories of others. “Lucy, meet Lucy” (p. 74), says the third person narrator, to which Lucy adds “I could see myself falling, a cloudiness swimming across my eyes” (p. 74), before passing out. Later that day, she buys a one-way ticket to Sydney (p. 6), to “settle things” (p. 7), and the story begins. Charlie’s film reflects back to Lucy a disturbing “conjunction of things that don’t belong together” (p. 358) which she recognises at once to be an accurate depiction of her state of mind and a fabrication which is historically inaccurate and physically impossible.

The “black-magic” (p. 75) of Charlie’s art is derived from the special status photographs have as a mode of expression that is directly linked to its denoted message (Barthes, 1977, p. 18), and which is therefore considered more reliable and closer to ‘the truth’. Photographs, like autobiographies, while perceived as more truthful than fiction and painting, are nevertheless “obviously artificial representations of lives” (Dow Adams, 1994, p. 466). Dow Adams explains that:

"Despite decades of discussion about such developing techniques as burning in, collage, montage, cropping, enlarging, dodging, hand coloring, retouching, solarizing, plus lenses, filters, papers, chemicals, camera position, focus and depth of field, not to mention the universal reaction of disbelief at seeing one's self in a photograph...an inherent belief about the photograph's direct connection to the actual persists.(1994, pp. 465-466)"

Charlie’s photographs and films are clearly of the genre that includes any number of such manipulations and compositions. But while the photographs do not set out to represent an image of the actual, the sheer force of the medium’s close association with ‘real life’ tricks the observer, Lucy, into believing what she is seeing.

Naturally, the photographs’ status as evidence of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ is not plainly accepted by the narrator, nor by Turner Hospital, who is noted for her interest with the problematic nature of ‘truth’ (Samuels, 2006, p. 158), and who exploits the medium for discussing the relationship between art and reality (Lovell, 2005). Once again, the mode of Charlie’s art is essential to its interpretation, since it provides a visual illustration of the tension between “representational” and “illustrative” art (Scholes & Kellogg, 1967, p.
that parallels Lucy’s reflective and self-reflexive narrative. Charlie’s work also
illustrates the notion that while “between the city and quarry, the division is absolute”
(Turner Hospital, 1992, p. 99), the boundaries between what is real and what is symbolic
are fluid, and observers/readers must use their own judgement when interpreting an
image or text. In Charlie’s experience, people regularly identify themselves in
photographs of strangers, just as, Hillis Miller notes, people may not recognise their own
face in a portrait (2008, p. s68). In the same way, Lucy sometimes disconnects herself
from Lucia, and at other times confesses to seeing things through Charlie’s eyes (p. 94).
Lucy is shocked by a truth in Charlie’s film that is independent of history and non-
mimetic; she recognises herself where she shouldn’t, and while she knows she is being
tricked, she can’t help experiencing the full impact of being confronted with a resonating,
if symbolic, truth. The power of the image is in the tension created between the medium’s
inherent reliability and the film’s generic fictionality.

Furthermore, the medium’s special relationship with ‘the truth’ illustrates the novel’s
paralleling of public history with realism and personal story with postmodernism, and I
use the word ‘postmodernism’ here because it is the label attached to Charlie’s (p. 63),
and to Janette Turner Hospital’s work (Samuels, 2006, p. 154). In the following example,
two photographs depicting the same subject work together to illustrate this tension in the
text. In one, a young Robinson Gray contrives to enter history by being photographed
with his family for a newspaper article about Brisbane’s last tram (p. 163). The event is
staged, down to the pre-informed photographer and to Robinson’s pompous and well-
rehearsed quote: “The present crosses the Great Divide and descends into
history” (p. 167). The photograph, supposedly depicting the happy family at a historical moment,
proves doubly inauthentic when Robinson’s words carry with them a sad prophecy for
young Gabriel, and this moment of joy will soon turn into a distant memory with the
ensuing break-up of the family (p. 163).

Another photograph, this one by Charlie, is titled The three judges, and includes a picture
of Rouault’s 1936 oil painting pasted over the pocket of a private-school blazer (p. 269).
Rouault was known for his distrust of the justice system, and has said of this painting that
it “betrayed the anguish which I feel at the sight of a human being who has to pass
judgement on other men” (Tate Modern, 2010). For readers who are unfamiliar with the artist, Lucy’s description sets the tone: “The judges have fleshy red faces and bull necks and little pig eyes” (p. 269). Both the newspaper and Charlie’s photographs portray Robinson Gray in his role as a man of justice. However, the narrator, like other metafictional narrators, clearly presents a strong case against the “fictionality of the plots of history” (Waugh, 1984, p. 50) in the newspaper photograph, and in favour of Charlie’s, her own and, perhaps, Turner Hospital’s symbolic art as a more authentic alternative than the one destined to enter public records.

To further destabilise the boundaries between fiction and history, the two can often exist side-by-side within the same photograph, much in the same way as geographical Sydney exists above the fictional quarry and the meta-narrative occupies the same space in the text as the murder-mystery. In the following example, Turner Hospital confuses the distinction between history and fiction and, by that, suggests that the two can point inevitably to the same physical space. When Charlie works on a series of children’s photographs in New York (p. 257), he is unaware, or has “a need not to know” (p. 259), that those same children were the subject of sexual abuse by his new-found musician friend (p. 258). When that same friend visits Charlie’s exhibition, he immediately recognises the children in the photographs, wrongly assumes he has been found out, and commits suicide (p. 258). The images of the young children produce vastly different responses. For Charlie, “fascinated by the paradox of angelic faces and sheer jungle behaviour”, they reflect his own memories of childhood cruelty (p. 257). For the musician, it is a “line-up” (p. 259) of his victims. Nevertheless, for both men, and for the police, these photographs conceal within them some concrete evidence or truth, which is grounded by the denoted image, and which emerges, through each observer, in the form of a personal narrative. Charlie gets his nickname “the last magician” (p. 259) from a police officer who works on the case, partly for his ability to turn art into history, or fiction into fact.

At the same time as Turner Hospital’s narrator draws the reader’s attention to the role of technique and genre in both the photographic and the literary mediums, she also rejects dogmatic and suppressive intellectual criticism and desires to free the interpretive act
from the confines of limiting, overworked rhetoric. Turner Hospital makes clear her sentiments towards some aspects of academia who, as her ‘author’ accuses, “look after culture and host conferences and play safe games of subversion in the literary journals” (p. 86). Turner Hospital has expressed her dislike of certain academic mindsets, referring, for example, to Melbourne’s “unwarranted smugness in university circles and in literary circles” (McKay, 2004, p. 4). In the novel, the poor doctoral candidate from Film Studies who introduces Charlie as one of the “five postmodern film-makers whose work we are privileged to experience this festival” (p. 63), is cut short by the narrator, who summarises his speech with “blah blah blah” (p. 63). The critics who celebrate Charlie’s “authentically foreign light” (p. 62) and coin the term “the Chang eye” (p. 62), have Charlie sneering with “Bull’s eye!” (p. 62). Similarly, Robinson’s wife, art critic Roslyn Gray, whose “cheekbones and causes are immaculate” (p. 117), is narrated in a mocking tone that is undoubtedly more Turner Hospital’s ‘author’ than Lucy’s: “‘Irigaray’, she will murmur over the soup. ‘As Foucault says,’ she will remind. She has a particular intimacy with things French” (p. 117). Roslyn’s assertion, over asparagus in hollandaise, that “violence in fiction...should illuminate. It should not simply horrify” (p. 334), echoes charges that have been levelled at Turner Hospital, that she writes “too...disturbingly about violence” (cited in Davies, 2000, p. 196). Turner Hospital’s narrator retaliates with “Have her terrified vogue fingers found illumination yet? Or are they still scrabbling...unenlightened, in mud and in her own shit?” (p. 334).

Nevertheless, while institutionalised critical theory and theorists are treated with a degree of distrust, critical enquiry is certainly encouraged by the novel’s focus on artistic activity and interrogation. Such analysis, though, must be intuitive and personal, and observers, like readers, are “encouraged to make their own judgements and meanings where old Knowledges have been challenged and undermined” (Lovell, 2005, p. 146). The Salgado photograph of the Serra Pelada Gold Mine (Salgado, 1986) was one of Turner Hospital’s inspirations in writing this novel (Lovell, 2005, p. 133; Missy, 1992; Samuels, 2006). Hanging on Charlie’s wall (p. 52), it is an honourable guest amongst Charlie’s collection of introspective portraits, collages, and the landscapes of his childhood. However, as a photo-journalistic piece depicting Brazilian mine workers, by a Marxist-influenced photographer (James, 2001), it belongs, or so it first seems, to the world outside the
narrator’s artistic discourse concerning the art/life dichotomy, and outside the symbolic world of Charlie’s art. Revisiting Callahan’s concept of the dual mystery in the novel (2009), the Salgado photograph is a portrait of the surface, non-metafictional mystery, which concerns the marginalisation of the quarry dwellers.

When Lucy first sees the photograph, which she describes as “a shocking window into hell” (p. 51), she asks, “Is it the quarry?” (p. 51). Charlie is excited by her question; they are both seeing Sydney’s underworld. Charlie’s answer is an interesting one: “Salgado claims it’s a gold mine in Brazil” (p. 52). Charlie appears to be doubting the specified geographic location of the picture, but what he is saying is that the work of art transcends its original intention into the world of the observer’s interpretive experience. The personal sense of terror evoked by the image of the Brazilian mine is so great for Lucy and Charlie that they no longer see the photograph’s ‘real’ or denoted message, demonstrating how “all of us see what we expect - what we want - to see” (p. 71), and illustrating, also, how Turner Hospital attempts to “stretch and change what seem to be established meanings” (Scoff, cited in Lovell, 2002, p. 52). Salgado, Charlie seems to say, can claim what he likes, but the power of the art is greater than any artist’s intentions, even within the context of a documentary work.

To further destabilise the meaning of the artwork, the Salgado photograph, in turns out, is not what it appears to be. Like much of Charlie’s work, the Salgado is a photograph of a photograph, and its creator’s true identity is indeterminate. Consistent with the pattern of ambiguity among author, ‘author’, narrator and character, Charlie destabilises the identity of the Serra Pelada artist when he reveals: “I bought a print and re-photographed it and blew it up. Adds to the graininess, but that’s appropriate” (p. 51). This raises the question, who is the creator of this photograph, Salgado, or the magician-manipulator, Charlie? And, can any narrative be entirely attributed to an original creator, or is narrative a dialogue, a discourse on narrative, a replica or version of past narratives, with a multitude of voices, past and present, and a collage of influences and experiences? “As soon as a fact is narrated...the voice loses its origin”, says Barthes (1977, p. 143), and Charlie’s adaptation of the Salgado shows how artistic narratives are personalised by the narrator, observer, listener, and reader. The reader is reminded that narrative in art and literature is
an ongoing discourse with other narratives, and this perpetual reflection accumulates meaning so that “you can read infinity in a grainy snapshot” (Turner Hospital, 1992, p. 253).

While the image, in The last magician, may float in a world of possible interpretation, it is nevertheless grounded in some immediate and often non-verbal connection with the subject, and the narrator’s ekphrasis helps to depict this immediacy as a triumph of the visual over the verbal image. Photography and narrative “become the means by which characters and readers alike make sense of the silences and ‘blind spots’” (Lovell, 2005, p. 134), but in the following passage, the narrator shows her frustration with the ‘noise’ of her own medium, the verbal narrative. The ‘author’ narrator reflects on her own linguistic handicap after describing, at length, Robinson Gray’s particular smile (pp. 112-113):

> People like myself could write lengthy commentaries on smiles like the judge’s smile, but then people like myself can’t be bothered. What would be the point? People like Charlie, however, will save photographs of a man with just such a smile...People like Charlie can show you a black-and-white photograph of a smile like the judge’s smile and make you shiver. (p. 113)

This smile, that is so palpable in Charlie’s work, exists in a silent or sensory space that the narrator desires, but can never fully capture. Like Cat’s silence, the photographs are rich with non-verbal data that requires an imaginary approach to decoding. In the following passage, Lucy’s physical contact with the photographs as objects is used to illustrate both her yearning for her absent friends, and her non-linguistic connection with Charlie’s art and its subjects:

> It’s as though Charlie’s photographs retain the lost essence of their maker and their subjects and the essence comes off on my hands. Like an ointment. Of course I know that’s ludicrous...But that’s how it feels. I spend hours every day just sitting on the floor in Sheba’s room, fondling the past. (p. 354)

Lucy connects to both form and content in the photographs, and the “lost essence” which is “like an ointment” (p. 354) turns an emotion into a tangible substance that wordlessly clings to her body and soothes her pain.
Finally, I have explored in this chapter how the photographs' hypodiegetic narrative level adds an important dimension to the novel in that it allows the narrator to step outside her own narrative level and comment on the visual medium in a way that reflects back onto her own narrative. As an observer who transcribes the photographs, Lucy is freed from her self-reflexive role which is, paradoxically, analogised by the photographs. She assumes the role of an observer/critic, which enables her to theorise on the artistic and generic themes generated by both the literary and the photographic narratives. The pseudo-visuality of the pictures enriches and expands her literary vocabulary as she attempts to depict non-linguistic, silent sensations.

Ongoing and complex reflections and observations, afforded by the array of artworks described in the novel, are essential parts of Lucy's and Charlie's quests for meaning, order, and a suitable form of expression. As Charlie says, "We know the answers to the burning questions but we are afraid of them, and so we need a screen. We need to project explanations and read them back" (pp. 15-16), and Lucy confirms that "the sequence is determined by the viewer, a magician of sorts, who must shuffle the crossed destinies and read the cards" (p. 268). Observers and readers will, invariably, see themselves in the various reflected images or narratives, since, as Lucy says, "meaning is in the eye of the beholder" (p. 268), but an essential certainty of values (McLaren, 1989, p. 248), emerges through the narrative's, and the photographs' interweaving of both the symbolic and the actual worlds.
Conclusion

And yet, though this narrative is private, though it has a reading audience of one, the traditional expectations still intrude because the very reason for telling stories (even to oneself) is to insist there is shape and meaning and direction in the messy flood that we find ourselves floundering in, the one that sweeps us up at birth and hurls us along, lumping us in with flotsam and random event, making a pattern as it goes. Yes, it must make a pattern. We want to insist on that. (Turner Hospital, 1992, p. 332)

My reading of The last magician’s self-conscious narration, multiple layers of narrative, shifting narrative voice, and ekphrasis of photographs shows a delicate, persistent link between the metafictional narration and the murder-mystery plot. Turner Hospital uses the symbiotic relationship between these aspects of the novel to deliberate on the relationship between fact and fiction, and reality and art, and to illuminate the presence of a silent world that exists below the surface of the actual world. On the metafictional level, “what is foregrounded is the writing of the text as the most fundamentally problematic aspect of that text” (Waugh, 1984, p. 22); on the murder-mystery level, what is exposed is the gulf between middle-class, above-ground Sydney and the underclass of an imaginary below-ground quarry.

As a gesture to the murder-mystery genre, and in an attempt to solve one mystery (while recognising the novel’s opposition to any such resolution), I will conclude this study by playing with a number of possible readings of the novel’s title. Various critics have noted Turner Hospital’s coded naming of her protagonists (Callahan, 2009; Lovell, 2005), and have ventured their own interpretations of the novel’s title. Reflecting on the last magician’s identity will allow me to sum up my own and some other critics’ approaches to analysing this intricate novel.

First, approaching the title from a historical, referential perspective that considers the surface murder-mystery, it can be proposed that the last magician is a photographer who gets his nickname from a New York policeman (p. 259) after his photographs lead police to a wanted paedophile. In this sense, the photographer is the crime-solver and the children’s photographs are clear portrait evidence of the crime victims. In such a reading,
reality is presented as something which is fixed and unambiguous, and the role of the photographer is to ‘magically’, if somewhat inadvertently, be there to capture this reality.

In such a reading, where the represented is to be favoured over the symbolic, *The last magician* is the story of a woman’s search for three missing people. The bones that are found on the first page of the novel (p. 3) are never conclusively identified, Charlie and Gabriel remain missing, Cat is silent to the end, the corrupt judge is at large, and the quarry is, in the words of a taxi driver, “crawling with cockroaches and criminals and druggies and wogs and whores and...spreading like a fucking cancer” (p. 365). The novel concludes “and we hang on to the lifeline of the silence that connects us” (p. 389). The story, taken without its self-conscious parallel companion, can frustrate a reader’s justified expectations of the murder-mystery genre; no killer, no weapon, no motive. This has bothered some critics, too, who are dissatisfied that the magician-photographer may have inadvertently solved a crime, but ultimately, justice has not been served (Temby, 1995) and “the social critique is sacrificed to the dark fatalism of the plot” (Green, n.d.). If, indeed, *The last magician*’s ethical stance is to be examined in terms of its plot resolution, or if the novel is to be read as a representational or mimetic depiction of an actual reality, such frustration is understandable.

While it would be impossible not to recognise the novel’s symbolic potency, in my study I do identify some referential, non-symbolic aspects of the novel’s plot or ‘surface mystery’. In Chapter 1, for example, I discuss the narration of Willy’s death and find that the narrator highlights some undeniable certainties by strategically reducing her self-conscious commentary in order to focus on telling the story. This technique achieves an emphasis on those events which are beyond any discourse on language or artistic expression. I have also discussed, in relation to the narrator’s quest to give a voice to Cat and the quarry people, how the novel maintains a commitment to certain values (McLaren, 1989, p. 248) and responsibilities (Samuels, 2006, p. 157), namely, an artistic moral duty to tell the story of those who cannot tell it, and to find a language that will enable such telling.
Also, I have shown how the medium of photography is used in the novel to illustrate the tenuous relationship between an objective, historical truth and its artistic representation. The assumed reliability of the photographic medium is ultimately subverted in the novel, particularly by juxtaposing official records against Charlie's symbolic photography. Nevertheless, traces of the denoted message or elements of a sensory, non-linguistic certainty are sustained, irrespective of the mode of narration or depiction.

The second proposition is that there is scope for the novel to be read primarily by examining its postmodernist self-reflexivity, with the story acting as a backdrop or pretext for the more significant subject of the process of its production. In such a reading, some may argue that the magician is a novel's author (Ommundsen, 1990) who, in this novel, is a kind of puppet-mistress, guiding the reader through a well-designed web of seemingly endless, but carefully chosen interpretive possibilities. Alternatively, since the reader is encouraged to make his or her own interpretive choices (Lovell, 2005), and if the author permits truly open interpretive possibilities, the last magician could be the reader.

By focusing on the self-conscious narrator, this thesis contributes to discourse on the metafictional properties of the novel, or, more generally, to the study of "the poetics of postmodernism" (Hutcheon, 1980, p. xi). By examining Lucy's narrative voices and diegetic levels, her commentary, and the additional narrating voice of an 'author', I have explored the relationship between the novel's form and its concerns with fiction as a mode of truth, language as an instrument of social inequality, and the process of artistic or literary expression. My study also recognises the emphasis Turner Hospital places on artistic and literary theory and criticism, especially by means of ekphrasis, which deliberate on the links among technique, genre, and meaning.

The third and final proposition I wish to present is my own approach to the analysis of the narrative which, like the novel itself, is to always remain mindful of both the plot and the self-conscious elements, valuing the analogous symbiotic relationship between the surface and the metafictional mysteries. I agree with Clark that "the non-linear, dual narrative technique of The last magician may be seen to operate, if figuratively, as a
multi-level archaeological dig aimed paradoxically at filling up the empty spaces created by the novel’s vanished characters” (2008, p. 107). I have argued that the narrator’s personal and artistic quest for an authentic voice is intertwined with the collective struggle of those who are silenced by oppressive power-structures, and that the novel must be read with consideration of both its story and its complex form.

Of the identity of the last magician, Turner Hospital says:

The last magician is the one who out-magics all the others, who's in possession of the truth, who removes all the illusions. He's a photographer who simply monitors, records and stirs things, which I think is a metaphor for the artist. (Missy, 1992)

When considering both the metafictional narrative and the narrative of the story, I suggest a slight variation to Turner Hospital’s definition, that the last magician is the narrator and, only by analogy, the artist. Both Lucy and Charlie monitor, record and stir things, but it is Lucy who ultimately decodes and makes the composition whole in a way that attempts to construct order and meaning for herself and for the reader. My study has examined how Lucy’s quest to narrate the range of her experiences may not be fully realised, particularly within a framework that views language as opposite to reality, or as an obstruction to authentic expression (Scholes, 1979, p. 9), but her self-reflexivity incorporates non-verbal elements into the narrative to reveal a work which is made complete precisely through its incorporating loose-ends; suggesting that ‘truth’ emerges as an evolving process, rather than something that is always fixed and capable of being discovered and articulated.

I conclude that the narrator makes her silences and the sufferings of the quarry heard (Albertazzi, cited in Greiner, 2007b, p. 382), and that, despite the ambiguities of the plot, the novel conveys a strong sense of “responsibility and duty” (Samuels, 2006, p. 157) for those who have access to the two worlds to illuminate the invisible “Mole People” (Turner Hospital, 1992, p. 95) who are exiled to the metaphorical and literal undergounds of our cities (Turner Hospital, cited in Samuels, 2006, p. 159). At the same time as Turner Hospital hints there is a certain order or design in the course of people’s lives, she proposes that life is filled with uncertainties and irresolution, and that “of course terrible things do happen” (Turner Hospital, 1992, p. 333). However, her
unresolved mysteries also remind the reader that loose-ends embrace the possibility of hope, and that, in Lucy’s words, “if anyone should presume to mock this hope, let him remember that it comes with a long pedigree. Let him remember how Dante found his way out of the wood” (p. 388).

Scholes and Kellogg assert that writers who work on “both sides of the gap”, the representational and the illustrative, “must be read between the two levels” (1967, pp. 377-378). I have argued here that Turner Hospital is such a writer, and that the novel’s analysis must consider the two elements since one nurtures and enriches the other. Through her skill in composing a gripping, suspenseful story while simultaneously loading her novels with a collage of subordinate narratives (further developed in recent novels such as Due preparation for the plague), her fiction is now categorised as “literary-thriller” (Gelder & Salzman, 2009, p. 172). In the literary thriller that is The last magician, “the missing-person motif” (Waugh, 1984, p. 58) becomes a metaphor for that which is absent and silenced, and while the missing persons are never found, the narrator observes that “absence is potent, unanswerable questions are the ones that engage us, [and] the silences are thick with stories” (p. 94).
References


University of Queensland. Dr Janette Turner Hospital. September 19, 2009, from