

UNEASY READING

RESISTANCE & REVELATION
in
WILLEM BOSHOFF'S
"VERSKANSTE OPENBARING"

Alice Edy - EdyAli001



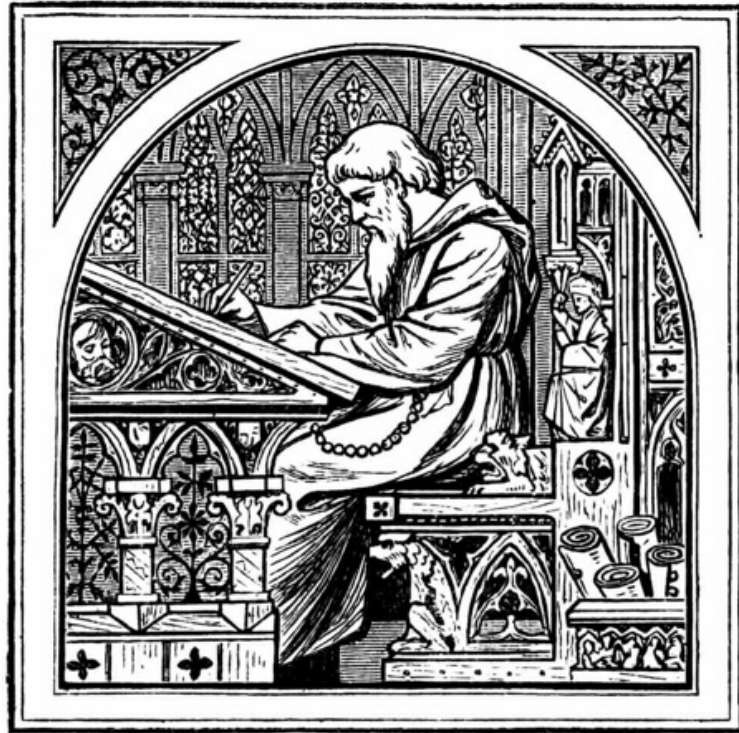
*A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
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Faculty of Humanities

MMXV - MMXVI

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*“The duty of a writer
- the revolutionary duty, if you like -
is simply to write well.”*

GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ

STUDENT DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree.

It is my own work.

Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

SIGNATURE

Alice Edy

DATE

SUPERVISOR'S APPROVAL OF SUBMISSION OF DISSERTATION FOR EXAMINATION

*I confirm that I have seen the final version of Alice Edy's dissertation
and that it is submitted for examination with my approval.*

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"Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy"

REVELATION 1:3

[The page contains a dense, illegible block of text, likely a scan of a document with very small font or significant noise.]

Willem Boshoff - "Verskanste Openbaring" - KYKAFRIKAANS (1978-1980).

ALICE EDY



INTRODUCTION: UNEASY READING

This project hopes to use an illegible page to read the act of reading. *

The focus of this paper is “Verskanste Openbaring” (translated into English as “Entrenched Revelation” or “Obscured Revelation”), a concrete poem produced from 1976 to 1980 by South African conceptual artist Willem Boshoff — part of a larger anthology of experimental poetry entitled *KYKAFRIKAANS* (1980). The book is A4 in format and consists of 90 “poems,” all created on a Hermes 3000 typewriter. Only 1000 copies of *KYKAFRIKAANS* were ever printed, published by Uitgewry Pannevis, a short-lived independent publishing house based in Johannesburg.¹ The original manuscript was bought in 1996 by Marvin Sackner, and it is now preserved in the Sackner Archives of Concrete and Visual Poetry, in Miami, Florida.²

The “poem” (for lack of a better descriptor) which this paper takes as its subject, “Verskanste Openbaring”, is a verbatim re-typing of the Book of Revelation from the New Testament of the Bible. Boshoff’s plagiarism differs from the original, however, in that the book has been printed *on top of itself* (the artist continually re-inserted the same page back into the typewriter, until he had transcribed the full 22 Chapters). Text is thus inscribed onto text, and the page moves towards obscurity rather than the promised unveiling. Boshoff juxtaposes, and superimposes, prophecies of enlightenment against realities of darkness and confusion. We are left with an unintelligible palimpsest: the entire Book of Revelation inhabits a single sheet of paper, but, though the content of the full book is “present,” it is also completely illegible.

While I refer to the work as a single page, I must add that, technically, the piece exists in two parts: two near-identical blocks of unintelligible text that face one another from across pages 82 and 83 of *KYKAFRIKAANS*. The two pages appear exactly alike, except that the second is slightly lighter. The “double” exists because behind the page of “Verskanste Openbaring,” Boshoff had affixed a layer of

1 - Uitgewry Pannevis was started and run by Marcus de Jong, the owner of a small book shop in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. Boshoff, Willem. Personal Interviews, July - October 2015.

2 - All *but one* of the original poems, which was lost.

carbon paper and *another* page. So, as the artist reproduced the text, the document reproduced itself.³ The results are the two versions of “Verskanste Openbaring” – the original copy, and the copy of the copy. For the purposes of this paper, I refer to the piece as a single page, as this is how it has subsequently been exhibited as a screen-print, and how the artist himself refers to the piece.

*

“Verskanste Openbaring” is a text that is immediately resistant to conventional strategies of interpretation. As a piece of language, it resists reading — as an artwork, it resists classification. Produced on a standard office typewriter, it is at once machine-produced, yet it is also strangely artisanal. Though the text superficially resembles concrete poetry, and it is generally classed as such, upon closer inspection it seems that “Verskanste Openbaring” does not fit neatly into *any* cannon. What, then, is one to make of such a text? What do we *do* with it?

In the absence of other options, we can perhaps start by attempting to read this resistance. This thesis, therefore, begins by pondering the extent to which “Verskanste Openbaring”’s resistant nature can be taken as an invitation to respond; might we might read *the act of resistance itself*? If, as Leon De Kock reflects, “print culture and its transfiguration of the messy business of speech and writing are indeed a kind of pacification,”⁴ Boshoff’s (re)figuration of the printed word back into a “messy business” can be understood as a kind of *provocation*. The piece agitates our habitual modes of engaging with text, provoking the viewer into new modes of readership — and it is the recognition and investigation of this provocation that constitutes the both foundation and guiding light of this project.

3 - Interestingly, I have not found this duplicate copy mentioned anywhere else, including Boshoff’s own notes. For the artist, the second page is not considered “essential” to the work. Boshoff, personal interview, July 2015.

4 - De Kock, Leon. “Metonymies of Lead,” *Print, Text and Book Cultures in South Africa*, Van Der Vlies, Andrew (ed.). Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012 (51).

Situating “Verskanste Openbaring” within the historical context of late-apartheid South Africa, and within the frameworks of concrete poetry, book history and conceptual writing (but not rigidly imposing these frameworks), this paper seeks to respond to “Verskanste Openbaring”’s different modes of resistance — performative, political and poetic. As such, the work itself will be used as a tool with which to think, rather than viewed as a patient in need of diagnosis. Over the course of the following chapters, I will be unpacking the text in different directions; exploring both the page’s surface, as well as the hidden book within. What could a consideration of each text offer the reader? And might we read them together?

Steering this project are the conversations that I have been fortunate enough to have had with the artist over the course of the past year. I was not expecting so much as a response to the email I sent last June, “Dear Mr. Boshoff, my name is Alice...”, let alone the generosity — in time and ideas — that the artist has shared with me since then. During these interviews, Boshoff has described how he is often surprised by the unexpected readings generated by viewers in response to his pieces — indeed, he believes that it is a work’s propensity to be read in many directions that ultimately determines its success. When engaging with these works, it is vital that both parties recognise their shared creative responsibility. My hope, in the following pages, is that I keep my side of the bargain.

Even if such a thing were possible (which it isn’t), the intention of this project is *not* to produce a stable, or prescriptive, reading of “Verskanste Openbaring.” Rather, I hope to use this thesis as a space wherein the generative possibilities presented by this single, illegible page might be explored. With this in mind, I put the following caveat in place: this paper does not pretend to prove, or be proof of, anything (other than, perhaps, a certain dogged obsessiveness on the parts of both writer and reader). What I hope to share here is an assemblage of ideas; a compendium of (some) of the possibilities of engaging with this strange and wonderful text.

In making a case for why this document should exist at all, I refer back to the work itself. I have undertaken the writing of this thesis (nearly a hundred pages discussing a single, illegible, one) as a kind of “academic performance”, a conceptual gesture inspired by Boshoff’s own playfulness. My methodology reflects Boshoff’s: if the author is critiquing the act of *writing*, as part of a system of greater philosophical enquiry, then I undertake the reciprocal task of self-consciously engaging with the act of *reading*. I hope to put my own process into dialogue with Boshoff’s, generating a conversation rather than an “answer.” The content that follows is not presented as findings, so much as residue; evidence of a particular kind of conceptual endeavour.

*

While previous readings of *KYKAFRIKAANS* have considered the anthology as a whole, I hope to intervene in existing research by focusing in detail on an single “poem.” The texts, individually, tend not to receive the same degree of critical attention per capita as Boshoff’s other artworks — no doubt due to their format. A book, especially an anthology, materially signals to the reader that each page is a piece of a larger body of meaning; materially and epistemologically. Before going any further, then, it is necessary to account briefly for why I have chosen to focus on this particular page.

All of the poems in *KYKAFRIKAANS* investigate the linguistic and the material aspects of language — “Verskanste Openbaring,” however, is the only piece that also works with *narrative*. As such, within the anthology, “Verskanste Openbaring” is uniquely “literary.” This additional dimension comes by way of its title; the only legible lexemes in the piece. Boshoff uses the title to create an analog hyper-link that connects “Verskanste Openbaring” back to the original Book of Revelation, thereby unveiling to the reader the presence of a secret secondary text, hidden amidst the ink. As such, this poem is distinct in the collection in that it allows us to reflect on language, not just at the level of signs and lexemes, but also at the level of *story*. This feature of narrative opens up richer possibilities of critique; here, the task

of reading can be approached on dual levels — the linguistic process of decoding visual signs, *as well as* the literary performance of interpreting a larger body of content.

*

TEXT / TEXTURE / TEXTILE

It is perhaps unsurprising that an etymological investigation offers a productive insight into Boshoff’s abiding fascination with the materiality, and materialisation, of language. As the artist explains, the word “text” derives from the Latin *texere*, which means “to weave”, and *text-* (meaning “woven”) and *textile* share the same root. “Text,” “texture” and “textile” are not words that merely share a superficial resemblance, they are, in fact, related by blood. Boshoff works with *text* in the original sense of the word; in the weaving of *KYKAFRIKAANS*, Boshoff’s loom is the typewriter — and in the case of our focus here, the design is Revelation. Visually, “Verskanste Openbaring”’s rectangle of illegible letters is evocative of a textual tapestry. Conceptually, the piece is simultaneously *text*, *texture*, and *textile*; a fabric woven of ink and language.

As language becomes material, our mode of readerly engagement shifts from the literary to the aesthetic;⁵ these “textured surfaces [...] demand to be read with all the senses.”⁶ The more we *see*, it seems, the less we *read*. Describing this process as the “disqualification” of the word by the image, Ivan Vladislavić argues that “the more a text becomes texture, the less it qualifies as a verbal message.”⁷ As the letters become shapes, it is the same ink which materialises the text that ultimately inhibits our ability to read the words. In this sense, Boshoff creates textiles that are unravelling even as they are being woven; not only at the same *moment*, but *in the same act*...

5 - It is significant to note that over the course of this paper I refer the original meaning of “aesthetic”, described by Cazeaux as the “lived, felt experience, of knowledge as it is obtained through the senses.” Cazeaux, 2000, (xv). Cited by Clarkson, Carrol. “Justice and the Art of Transition,” *Drawing the Line*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. (n/ pag).

6 - Vladislavić, Ivan. *Willem Boshoff*. Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing (28).

7 - Ibid (26).

David Paton refers to the “poems” of *KYKAFRIKAANS* as “imagistic texts”; as writing-objects that have “slip[ped] their conventional moorings.”⁸ Remarking upon these “imagistic texts,” Paton also notes that though they “willingly reveal the formal and material processes through which [they] move,” these works simultaneously “attempt to cut the viewer off from [their] meanings.”⁹ By creating texts that oscillate between language and image, Boshoff is able to conceal meaning in plain sight. In these pieces of “visual literature,” Vladislavić observes that there is “a paradoxical tension at work,” where “reading is both invited and rejected.”¹⁰ The works’ act of simultaneously offering, whilst also denying — “reject[ing] and recover[ing]” — readerly access is described by Vladislavić as a kind of “double gesture”¹¹ — a notion that has fundamentally informed the following pages.

*

THE DOUBLE GESTURE

Seemingly demanding to be contemplated as *both* language *and* image, “Verskanste Openbaring” sets up the conditions for an on-going struggle between the operations of reading and seeing — a constant movement “from verbal to visual and back again;”¹² instigating a “continual interplay between looking and reading.”¹³ Paton’s idea of “interplay” is powerful as it suggests that this is a text that is always “in motion” — and therefore, perhaps, intimates that it requires a dynamic kind of reading. Here, textual interpretation can be understood as a process of constant negotiation as the viewer is forced to continually change mental register, from reading to seeing. Both paradigms reveal

certain meanings, whilst simultaneously occluding others.

Tensions between seeing, reading, and understanding, are foregrounded by the “Kykverwysings”¹⁴ (or “Looking Instructions”) at the back of *KYKAFRIKAANS*. Here, Boshoff offers cryptic hints as how to approach the onerous task of “looking” at each poem. As with the anthology’s title, Boshoff suggests that these are poems to be *looked at*, rather than *read* (these are not “Leesverwysings”, or “Reading Instructions”). Ostensibly explanations for the poems, these Kykverwysings are really Alice-in-Wonderland-esque riddles that confound more than they clarify: “PS 42”¹⁵ tells us to “Bake a cake and eat the recipe,” “Chevron”¹⁶ is “to be read in the midst of busy traffic,” and we must look at “Peetprent”¹⁷ “Oor my dooie ligaam” (over Boshoff’s dead body). The Kykverwysings both acknowledge and amplify their poems’ deliberate plot to bewilder the reader: “Probleem”¹⁸ comes with the instruction to “Lees met die hande in die hare” (“Read whilst tearing your hair out”) — more a taunt than a clue. Further to this befuddlement, there are times when our possibilities of understanding are outright negated — demonstrated in the case of “Oudelingpilletjies,”¹⁹ where we are instructed, simply, not to read the poem at all (“Moenie lees nie”). In the case of “Verskanste Openbaring” we are made to understand, paradoxically, that the piece is *not* to be understood (Lees “[m]et alles wat *nie verstaan kan word nie*”). This instruction gestures toward the first word in the poem’s title — “verskanste” — by reinforcing the “obscured” or “entrenched” nature of the content, even while this directly undermines the revelatory promises of the original text.

In requiring the reader to continually recalibrate their focus,

8 - Paton, David. “The Imagistic Text in Jonathan Safran Foer,” *de arte* no. 81, 2010 (11).

9 - Paton, David. “Boshoff & The Book,” *South African Artists’ Books and Book Objects since 1960*. Johannesburg: Unpublished MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2000 (1).

10 - Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* (26-28).

11 - Ibid (46).

12 - Ibid (28).

13 - Paton, “Boshoff & The Book” (2).

14 - Boshoff, Willem. *KYKAFRIKAANS*. Johannesburg: Uitgewery Pannevis, 1980 (94-95).

15 - Ibid (12).

16 - Ibid (34).

17 - Ibid (93).

18 - Ibid (70).

19 - Ibid (76).

“Verskanste Openbaring,” I would suggest, operates as a semantic stereogram. Not only visually, but operationally, the text evokes the “Magic Eye® 3-D posters,” popular in the early 1990s. A stereogram, when viewed “normally,” appears to be nothing more than an abstract, somewhat psychedelic, pattern on the surface of the paper. But, with a strategic shift of focus, the viewer sees a three-dimensional image emerging from *within* the page. Similarly, “Verskanste Openbaring” can be examined at the level of the surface, where the work presents us with a monochromatic texture woven of language and ink. Alternatively, we can shift our focus, and recalibrate our readerly “lens” to look *through the surface* into the narrative world within (that is, the world of Revelation). In approaching “Verskanste Openbaring” as a semantic stereogram, we accept the existence of these dual layers of meaning, and also that they are, somehow, both separate and inseparable.

By recognising the text’s oscillation between language and image as its own site of meaning, I hope to put the verbal and the visual readings into conversation. Rather than trying to locate or defend a single “stable” locus of textual meaning, in the case of “Verskanste Openbaring,” it seems more productive to contemplate the “double gesture” as significant in itself. Reading “Verskanste Openbaring” as a text-always-in-motion, we must ask what a consideration of the illegible surface might say to the Biblical text within... and conversely: how The Book of Revelation may be able to respond.

*

AIM

Responding to “[t]he scripto-visual element[s] of the book format [which] encourage *both a reading and viewing* of [the] page,”²⁰ this thesis hopes to critically engage with both the conceptual and material qualities of the printed word, via a cross-disciplinary “close-reading” of this text. In his double gesture, Boshoff seems to be provoking us to consider more fluid,

nuanced, and interdisciplinary strategies of reading; perhaps even

challenging us to throw open the parameters of the current literary debate and to find a language for an inclusive, cross-generational conversation that draws on the intellectual textures of a younger generation and a changing world order.²¹

Importantly, this paper is not a critique of any one mode of criticism – but rather, a questioning of the automatic deployment of *any* rigid hermeneutic scheme in response to *every* textual encounter.

*

CHAPTER OUTLINE

My argument is structured in response to the double gesture — the text’s demand to be encountered both materially and linguistically. The first half of this project takes as its focus an investigation of the materiality of the piece, while the final two chapters explore the literary dimension of the work. I will conclude by considering what, if anything, these readings may have to offer each other, and the reader.

I begin, in chapter one, by introducing and contextualising the work. I briefly introduce the artist, and consider his oeuvre in general. Following this, I provide a detailed description of *KYKAFRIKAANS*, and consider the how the piece operates as an “artist’s book”. I go on to discuss the theories of book history and conceptual writing, and consider what an engagement with these fields of scholarship might offer a contemporary reading of this “poem.” Finally, I will focus on the piece itself — “Verskanste Openbaring.”

Chapter two explores Boshoff’s choice of medium: Afrikaans. I discuss the instability of Afrikaans as a sign whose fortunes have changed dramatically since its inception. I discuss the Afrikaans language’s embroilments with Apartheid policy, and

20 - Paton, David. "Body, light, interaction, sound: A critical reading of a recent installation of Willem Boshoff's *KYKAFRIKAANS*," *Image & Text* no. 14, 2008 (121).

21 - Nuttall, Sarah. "The Rise of the Surface," *Print, Text and Book Cultures in South Africa*, Van der Vlies, Andrew (ed.). Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012 (418).

the “language issue” as it related to the Soweto Uprisings of 1976. In discussing the entanglements between this language and apartheid doctrine, it is important to also acknowledge the many counter-voices that expressed their resistance in Afrikaans. Afrikaans has been a lingua franca of the Cape for over two centuries, and as such has a complicated relationship with its speakers that cannot simply be reduced to the unidimensional descriptor: “language of the oppressor.” Having explored the South African context in which Boshoff was working, I make a case for reading “Verskanste Openbaring” as an example of “Resistance Art,” or “resistant writing.” To do so, I will consider the political context in which the piece was produced. I will reflect on what it means to resist — not explicitly, but fundamentally — and ask what it means for a piece of language to refuse to be read. Finally, I hope to show that Boshoff’s textual experiments carry implications not only formal, but also political.

In the third chapter I leave the surface of the page, and delve into the content of the words, towards a symptomatic reading of the text. Here, I examine the book hidden within “Verskanste Openbaring” — Revelation. Following Fredric Jameson’s instruction to “Always Historicise!”²² I look at the context in which Revelation was first produced. I will then consider some of the strategies of interpretation that this book has been subject to since it was written, nearly two millennia ago. I go on to discuss “Apocalypse” as a self-consciously imposed literary genre. Finally, I discuss how Revelation might be read politically, and, how this might support “Verskanste Openbaring”’s gesture of resistance.

Chapter four follows the contextual, socio-political reading of the previous chapter with a close-reading of Revelation. This textual analysis focuses on how the notion of the written word operates in the prophesy. This is explored by tracking the tropes of the scroll, book, and the writing-act through the narrative. I will contemplate the operations of the written word, as described within the story of Revelation,

with the material operations of the actual text-object itself.

By performing these different readings, I am curious to explore the extent to which an investigation of “Verskanste Openbaring” might contribute to our reading of Revelation — and vice versa. Where do the texts support one another, enabling richer readings of both, and where is the content at odds with the form? This paper concludes by braiding together the aforementioned strands of enquiry, in a contemplation of the act of reading.

*

THE CONTINUED/RENEWED RELEVANCE READING OF *KYKAFRIKAANS*

Although *KYKAFRIKAANS* was created nearly forty years ago, the question of the double gesture has found new relevance in the contemporary moment. The issues at the heart of “Verskanste Openbaring” have been taken up in fascinating ways by contemporary scholarship, particularly in the fields of book history and conceptual writing (more on these later). These emergent theoretical debates are able to facilitate possibilities of reading that simply weren’t part of the critical context in which the work was originally produced and received.

Perhaps most importantly — writing from within an academic institution, in South Africa, in 2016 — is responding to Nuttall’s argument that a shift “from a linguistically constructed notion of subjectivity [towards] a media specific analysis”²³ in recent modes of inter-disciplinary criticism represents a destabilisation of existing Western hegemonies of scholarship, instead embodying a fresher and more inclusive mode of engaging with cultural production. Reflecting on the relevance of such an approach, in a contemporary South African context, Nuttall goes on to suggest that

it may be useful for politically charged debates in the South to revisit their reliance on critical discourses of

22 - Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell University, 1982.

23 - Price, Leah. Cited in Nuttall, "Rise of the Surface" (414).

depth...as the only available orders of the "resistant" or "subversive." African literary and cultural theory could renew itself in the present by opening itself again to *all the potentials made available by text* – and global theory.²⁴

Inspired by the possibilities of Nuttall's proposition, as well as "the potentials made available by [this] text," this paper draws on global theories and local context, in the hopes of taking an old poem some place new.

Finally, contemplating notions of obsolescence, it seems poignant to re-read *KYKAFRIKAANS* in the current moment when, for the first time since the invention of the typewriter in the mid nineteenth century, physical keyboards are themselves passing into history. Even after Word Processors replaced their mechanical predecessors, the typewriter's cultural legacy persisted in the form of the keyboard. The QWERTY layout, still the de facto arrangement of (English language) keyboards,²⁵ is based on the mechanics of the typewriter. Originally, it was the physical operations of the typewriter that dictated the arrangement of the keys: letters that occurred together frequently in language needed to be separated, so as to prevent their levers from getting enmeshed.

In our contemporary moment, even though there are no more moving parts to entangle, the QWERTY keyboard endures — although, increasingly, the typewriter's interface manifests as an image, rather than an object; the act of typing has come to entail touching *visual representations* of the typewriter's keys. In this sense, the machine may have culturally "died" in the late seventies, as Boshoff predicted, but the ghost of the typewriter can still be seen, glowing from beneath the smooth screens of tablets and smartphones.

The "death of the typewriter" — which *KYKAFRIKAANS* laments — might be more nuanced than Boshoff initially allowed; not a contained moment, but rather, a condition of on-going negotiation between the old and the new. Moreover, as planned obsolescence²⁶ becomes a standard characteristic of today's technology — and contemporary experience — I would argue that engaging with Boshoff's eulogy to the typewriter is as, if not more, relevant than it was at the time of its writing. Re-reading *KYKAFRIKAANS* in this new state of perpetual ending, we are perhaps afforded new understandings of both the poems and our own times.

*

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: READING FROM, AND WITH, THE SURFACE

This project does not deploy a single theoretical approach, but rather, combines relevant perspectives offered by theories including book history and conceptual writing, combined with other concepts, such as Jameson's notion of the Political Unconscious. Nuttall's notions of "reading the surface" serve as the point of departure. While this is not exclusively a surface-reading, Nuttall proposes a flexible strategy of reading that encompasses many critical tools - an approach that seems suited to this piece.

Although "Verskanste Openbaring" is closed to a conventional literary reading, in material terms it is always "open" — thereby drawing our attention towards a consideration of the surface. Interrogating notions of the (conceptual) surface, Nuttall asks: "What can surface be or do if it is not just a cover?"²⁷ Critiquing conventional modes of literary criticism which

24 - Nuttall, "Rise of the Surface" (418).

25 - Last year, the KALQ keyboard was launched by computer science researchers at the Max Planck Institute, Germany. This new layout is designed to suit our new modes of typing — that is, with our thumbs. As such, perhaps my typing this thesis on a laptop keyboard is also, to borrow Vladislavić's phrase, "a whimsical memorial to a dead technology." Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* (26).

26 - "Planned obsolescence", or "programmed obsolescence", refers to a strategy of design (typically in the technology and software industries) that incorporates built-in features that deliberately limit the lifespan of the product. The motivation behind this tactic is the generation of future sales, especially in saturated markets. Bulow, Jeremy. "An Economic Theory of Planned Obsolescence", in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1986 (729). Retrieved Nov 4, 2015.

27 - Nuttall, "Rise of the Surface" (411).

focus solely on the “deeper,” or hidden, significance of the words, Nuttall espouses a critical engagement with the surface as its own rich site of meaning, recognising that it constitutes a “*fundamentally generative* force capable of producing effects of its own.”²⁸ Here, we must also look at what is immediately visible, “and not just [what meaning lies] behind *the veil of a text*.”²⁹ That the printed page is described as a “veil of text” is striking here, as the term might be re-purposed to aptly describe “Verskanste Openbaring.” By fostering a recognition of the paper’s surface, I hope to show that “Verskanste Openbaring” operates in the face of a literary tradition that tends towards the symptomatic, and instead solicits a

serious discussion of the notion of the surface... in addition to all the ways we have learnt to think about depth and read[ing].³⁰

*

THE BOOK AS OBJECT

Deliberately offending the conventional literary demands of legibility, linearity and coherence, *KYKAFRIKAANS* is an example of an “artist’s book” — a term defined by David Paton as:

a book whose formal, structural and aesthetic conceits have been interrogated and manipulated by the artists in order to draw attention to the object’s *bookness*...³¹

Here, writing is a self-reflective act; deliberately calling attention to itself. But, more than this, the book as a form, and the author’s act of producing such a form, become self-critical. Through the “exploit[ation of] technical and graphic conceits,” Paton explains that book artists are able to foreground “the conventions by which, through constant exposure, a book normally neutralises or effaces its identity.”³²

28 - Ibid (409-410).

29 - Ibid (410).

30 - Ibid (418).

31 - Paton, “The Imagistic Text...” (20). My italics.

32 - Ibid (12).

Indeed, it is by virtue of their ubiquity, notes Johanna Drucker, that books have become invisible to their readers; to the extent that “[o]ne can [...] forget about a book even in the course of reading it.”³³ This is a familiarity that does not breed contempt so much as indifference.

Working against the domestication of the written word, the book artist’s project is an act of defamiliarization:³⁴ taking the everyday, and presenting it to us anew. Typically, books contain information, whilst downplaying their own objecthood. Artists books, however, “perform a theoretical operation” whereby they “call attention to [their] own processes of enunciation.”³⁵ The resultant text-objects strategically reveal, indeed, foreground, their own mechanisms of communication and expose the behind-the-scenes operations of the book, such as graphic design, typesetting, or print production. As such, the artist’s book is an embodied prose; a text that inhabits — and engages with — both material and space. Readerly preconceptions regarding the literary text; what to expect and how to approach it, are played-off against this “new” imagistic form.

*

DIALOGISM

The theoretical foundation of this paper follows Paton’s assertion that Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of “dialogism” can be productively applied to artist’s books, so that they may be “read,” or interpreted, as visual texts.³⁶ Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, Bakhtin presents “dialogism” as the notion that *what*

33 - Drucker, Johanna. “The Century of Artists’ Books,” 1995 (161–162), in Paton, “The Imagistic Text...” (12).

34 - Shklovsky, Viktor. “Art as Technique,” or “Art as Device,” *Theory of Prose*, Sher, Benjamin (trans.), Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990. (Originally, Moscow, 1917).

35 - Drucker in Paton, “The Imagistic Text...” (12).

36 - Paton, David “Towards a Theoretical Underpinning of the Book Arts: Applying Bakhtin’s dialogism and heteroglossia to selected examples of the artist’s book.” *Literator* 33(1), Art. #353, 2012 (2). <<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/lit.v33i1.353>> Accessed 30 June 2015.

is said (or thought, written, performed, and so on), exists in continual conversation with *what has been said* and *what will be said*.³⁷ As such,

[a]ll language and the ideas which languages contain and communicate are dynamic, relational and engaged in a process of endless redescrptions of the world.³⁸

Dialogism, understood here as an “endless process,” sees meaning-making as an endeavour that can never reach a final “ending”; a text is never complete or stable, but rather, it is constantly building upon itself. The act of reading is therefore not confined to text alone; instead “the fixity of boundaries between the ‘literary’ and the ‘extra-literary’ discourse is precisely what [dialogism] questions.”³⁹

A dialogic approach “refuses to be systematic,” and instead moves “on and across multiple disciplines,” rendering the lens of dialogism, for Paton, the ideal conceptual tool for exploring the artist’s book. “Verskanste Openbaring” is an example of “a dynamic visual language,”⁴⁰ constituting an example of what Bakhtin labels “intentional hybridisation”⁴¹ — as, here, the voices of (at least) three different “authors” (Willem Boshoff, John of Patmos, and God) vie for articulation *within the same words*.

In *Dialogism. Bakhtin and his World* (2002), literary scholar Michael Holquist asserts that dialogism implies an “extra-literary” language, where texts

depend not only on the activity of the author, but also on the place they hold in the social and historical forces at work when the text is produced and when it is consumed.⁴²

This argument supports that of Jameson, who, in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), writes that the political context within which any literary production occurs is fundamentally, and unavoidably, constitutive of the text’s meaning. Jameson asserts that, irrespective of whether the author consciously realises it or not, all texts produced in a certain socio-political climate will necessarily embody an unconscious “master narrative.” The interpretation of a text must, therefore, take into account the political milieu in which it was produced — not merely as an interesting aside, but as its primary focus.⁴³ To this end Jameson proposes a mode of “symptomatic” reading which, akin to a Freudian-model of psychoanalysis, delves “beneath the surface” of the text so as if to explore the “unconscious” meanings hidden below.

Further to the inevitable influence of the context upon an author, Jameson goes on to argue that our strategies of interpretation (in other words, how we read a text) are likewise symptomatic of our cultural context. Such conceptual “lenses” should therefore also be interrogated in terms of their own milieus (which is to say, again, *historicised*): “[M]aster narratives have inscribed themselves in the texts *as well as in our thinking about them*,”⁴⁴ and as a result, the reading of every text should entail a mapping of “the path of the object *and* the path of the subject.”⁴⁵ Jameson proposes thinking about texts and their contexts in dialogue — or “dialectical” terms, which

can be characterized as historical reflexivity, that is, as the study of an object...which also involves the study of the concepts and categories (themselves historical) that we necessarily bring to the object.⁴⁶

In other words, the act of interpreting a text requires not only the reading of the

37 - Bakhtin, Mikhail. “Discourse in the Novel”, *The Dialogic Imagination*. 1975, trans. 1981, (269).

38 - Paton, “Towards a Theoretical Underpinning of the Book Arts (2).

39 - Ibid (2).

40 - Ibid (3).

41 - Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” (262).

42 - Holquist, M. *Dialogism. Bakhtin and his World*. London: Routledge, 2002 (590, 60-91). Cited in Paton, “Towards a Theoretical Underpinning...” (5).

43 - Historicisation is the self-proclaimed “moral” of Jameson’s project; indeed, *The Political Unconscious* famously opens with the imperative: “Always historicise!”. Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell University, 1982 (xi).

44 - Jameson, *Political Unconscious* (34). My italics.

45 - Ibid (ix).

46 - Ibid (109).

words themselves, but also a reading of the reading.

Jameson stresses the importance of recognising that every text reaches us as “always-already-read” — each iteration “remade” by its reader, and filtered through innumerable interpretations and “inherited interpretive traditions.” With this in mind, the need to “foreground the interpretive categories or codes through which we read and receive the text in question”⁴⁷ is crucial, as the act of unselfconscious interpretation would essentially become just another “rewriting,” or “recoding” of the text.⁴⁸ This notion of the “always-already-read” text becomes particularly interesting when considered in terms of Boshoff’s act of plagiarism. In retyping part of the Bible, the words that constitute “Verskanste Openbaring” are not only “already-read,” but also, “already-written.”

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BOOK HISTORY

“[B]ehind the clean lines and geometric symmetry of the material book, and anterior to its apparently tranquil presentation of civilly expressed perspectives, there often lies a tumultuous making and breaking. This is certainly the case in South Africa.”
- Leon De Kock

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The imperative to “move beyond the sharp image/text distinction we have relied on for so long”⁴⁹ strongly resonates with the critical concerns of book historians. While critical consideration of the book has traditionally focused on the literary component contained within the covers, the enquiries of book historians encompass *the entire book* – not only the content, but also *the object*. “Book history differs from most scholarly disciplines,” observes Leah Price, “in that its object of study is also its means of transmission — the message is

also the medium.”⁵⁰ Price acknowledges this endeavour to be a complex, and potentially contradictory one — “even (or especially) for scholars who, by definition, spend their lives surrounded by books.”⁵¹ Andrew van der Vlies elaborates on the questions central to the field, asking:

How has each instance of publication changed the text and affected the meaning? Also: how has this text – with or without variation – been rendered a different work by virtue of textual variations, but also through changing format, typography, and different co- or paratexts: those “fringes” or margins of text, images, or other apparatus (cover, blurbs, dedications, glossaries and so on)...⁵²

There is much to be uncovered when one pays attention to the materiality of the book, as well as the actions that surround the text, suggests Isabel Hofmeyr.⁵³ As such, in addition to considerations of language and narrative, the focus of the book historian also extends to encompass the cultural, political, and economic conditions that have surrounded, and constituted, the book-object’s *own story*.

Price observes that books operate on many levels (both *inter-* and *intra-*personally), and critiques the scholarly tendency to engage with only the literary aspect of a text, noting that:

Bought, sold, exchanged, transported, displayed, defaced, stored, ignored, collected, neglected, dispersed, discarded — the transactions that enlist books stretch far beyond the literary or even the linguistic.⁵⁴

Within this extensive catalogue of

50 - Price, Leah. *How To Do Things With Books in Victorian Britain*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012 (102).

51 - Ibid (61).

52 - Van der Vlies, "Print, Text and Book Cultures..." (7).

53 - Hofmeyr, Isabel. *The Portable Bunyan*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004 (25).

54 - Price, *How To Do Things With Books...*(57). My italics.

47 - Ibid (ix).

48 - Ibid (17).

49 - Nuttall, "Rise of the Surface" (408).

adjectives, there is one that is conspicuously absent: *read*. Here, Price problematises the literary-centric critical tendency to value the book's content over its material implications, referring to this paradigm as an "overinvest[ment] in reading,"⁵⁵ and arguing that this bias operates at the expense of all the other operations that are enacted on, or by, the book. While not negating the literary, it is important to recognise that reading constitutes just one of a multitude of modes of engaging with a text-object. The basis of book history studies, then, is the investigation these other potential "transactions" (in relation to, rather than overlooking, the content).

Suggesting "that all [...] aspects of books/pages/literary works require our interpretation, even (or especially) those that look most contingent," Price puts forward that the interpretive work of the reader should be "marked by the double interest in the materiality of the book and the opacity of the sign."⁵⁶ Price's proposal of a "double interest" might offer us a useful strategy with which to approach to the problem of Vladislavić's "double gesture." In fact, I would argue that taking a "double interest" in "Verskanste Openbaring" is the only way to read the piece at all. Through this critical lens, the contradictions inherent to this work are not understood as dead-ends, but rather, opportunities. The text's ever-oscillating "gestures" (offering/denying, opening/closing, revealing/concealing) necessitate a mode of reading that is intellectually supple – a kind of epistemological elasticity; theories that can bend without breaking.

The growing momentum in the field of book history "imitates aspects of the visual or pictorial turn in culture"⁵⁷ — a "turn" that Nuttall believes to stem from our contemporary relationship to technology. Indeed, as we inhabit a cultural moment where the majority of our days are spent looking at screens, questions of "the surface" (and, of what lies beneath) are of increasing valence; and "[t]he growing imbrication

of page and screen only makes this set of critical cross-currents more suggestive."⁵⁸ The relationship between technology and language is one of the key concerns of a contemporary field of experimental poetry and criticism known as "conceptual writing" — Kenneth Goldsmith, one of the movement's champions, describes the internet as the "new [digital] environment of textual abundance,"⁵⁹ and locates this emergent terrain of digital linguistics at the heart of the conceptual writing project.

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CONCEPTUAL WRITING: MOVING INFORMATION

*"Contemporary writing requires the expertise of a secretary crossed with the attitude of a pirate: replicating, organizing, mirroring, archiving, and reprinting, along with a more clandestine proclivity for bootlegging, plundering, hoarding, and file sharing."*⁶⁰
— Kenneth Goldsmith

*

Though Boshoff produced *KYKAFRIKAANS* manually, in a pre-internet, pre-digital world, I believe that "Verskanste Openbaring" (in fact, *KYKAFRIKAANS* as a whole), might be productively — if anachronously — read as a work of conceptual writing. The key premise underpinning conceptual writing is that the artist (or writer) does not need to be the progenitor of language, but instead, can be understood as the person who has found new ways of creating meaning from *existent information*. For Goldsmith, creativity does not lie in the act of generating original configurations of language (as traditional literary criticism would have it), but rather, creativity is manifested in how one navigates and curates existent text; in "how [we] manage it, how [we] parse it, how [we] organize and distribute it."⁶¹ In other words, language is the substrate upon which a concept acts, and

58 - Ibid (414).

59 - Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Uncreative Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011 (loc. 513).

60 - Ibid (loc. 4154).

61 - Ibid (loc. 102).

55 - Ibid (73).

56 - Price, Leah (14). Cited by Nuttall, "Rise of the Surface" (414).

57 - Nuttall, "Rise of the Surface" (410).

it is read accordingly — rather than in terms of its linguistic content. Goldsmith draws heavily on the work of poetry scholar and critic Marjorie Perloff, who has described this practice as “unoriginal genius.”⁶² For the conceptual writers, the author — as the generator of language — is redundant; instead, the author — as the originator of ideas — must step forward. In the place of the obsolete notion of “creative writing,” Goldsmith proposes something altogether more radical: “*uncreative* writing.”⁶³

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THE ART OF PLAGIARISM

Viewing “Verskanste Openbaring” through the lens of conceptual writing allows us to “read” the processes surrounding the text-object critically: that is to say, we are well-positioned to interpret the gesture of *plagiarism*. Arguing that, even when appropriating somebody else’s words, “the suppression of self-expression is impossible,” Goldsmith describes the act of (self-conscious) plagiarism as inherently, and unavoidably, creative. He writes:

Even when we do something as seemingly “uncreative” as retyping a few pages, we express ourselves in a variety of ways. The act of *choosing and reframing* tells us as much about ourselves as our stor[ies] [do]. It’s just that we’ve never been taught to value such choices.⁶⁴

Perloff, likewise, makes a case for the emotive implications of what might appear to be the cold, methodical act of copying text. Referring to the process of re-using existent language not as “plagiarism” but as “moving information,” Perloff alludes to both the physical act of moving text, whilst also suggesting that one might be *emotionally moved* by such acts.⁶⁵ Writing becomes a conceptual performance whereby

62 - Ibid (loc 104).

63 - Goldsmith’s *Uncreative Writing* has become the unofficial manifesto for the movement.

64 - Ibid (loc 246).

65 - Ibid (loc 104).

one is “able to physically get inside a text.”⁶⁶ While recognising the affective potential of these texts, it is significant also to note that they remain somewhat volatile; as “this writing delivers emotion obliquely and unpredictably, with sentiments expressed as a result of the writing process rather than by authorial intention.”⁶⁷ As such, while it may be the author whose concept initiates the work, ultimately it is ensuing inter-relationship of writing-act to text-object that will determine what the work is able to communicate.

Perhaps unexpectedly, this mode of self-aware plagiarism can also be seen as having political relevance. These textual “performances” are not just abstracted, overly-intellectualised thought-experiments; they are unstable texts that are inevitably shot-through with profound socio-political implications. Indeed, “the noninterventionist reproduction of texts” can, by harnessing and exploiting “the inherent and inherited politics of the borrowed words” be used to “shed light on political issues in a more profound and illuminating way than [...] conventional critique.”⁶⁸ Here, again, issues of performance are brought to the fore; in the absence of any linguistic variance, the act of textual instantiation becomes the only remaining site where discrepancies between original and copy can be compared, measured and interpreted.

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FROM UNCREATIVE WRITING TO CREATIVE UNWRITING

The political implications of *KYKAFRIKAANS* cannot be fully apprehended without first recognising the instrumental role that the document played as a tool of the oppressive regime. Apartheid’s neurotic systems of enforced segregation were characterised by an obsession with paperwork. Forms and files determined the lived experience of South Africans – how people were classified would dictate every aspect of their lives, from the

66 - Ibid (loc. 151).

67 - Ibid (loc. 158).

68 - Ibid (loc.1429).

public to the deeply intimate. Government perpetuated a chronic state of anxiety that relentlessly demanded records to prove records, ad infinitum. In documents, those in power found the means, terms and defense of their project.

Recognising the constitutive relationship of violence and legislation in the apartheid context, it would seem that the unsanctioned act of forcibly removing words from their contexts cannot *not* be understood as a confrontation of sorts. Arguably, when oppression operates both physically and administratively, the archive becomes as much a site for protest as the street. Boshoff's act of plagiarism and manipulation of Biblical text defies the sanctity of the document; disrupts the stability of the "authorised version"; and undermines the notion of the "closed case." In appropriating and re-purposing such a monolithic text, Boshoff seems to be *unwriting* discourse; using words to interrogate and critique the very systems that produced them. While the document is usually generated in order to officiate a single version of the truth, "Verskanste Openbaring" does just the opposite. In de-authorising the master-narrative, and generating many possible readings that move outwards from the page, in different directions, simultaneously, it operates as the anti-document.

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THE DOCUMENT AS AN AESTHETIC ACT

Reading "Verskanste Openbaring" as a text shot-through with political implications, it becomes relevant to consider the work in terms of what Jacques Rancière describes as an "aesthetic act." In *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2006), Rancière defines "aesthetic acts" as

configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity.⁶⁹

69 - Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Rockhill, Gabriel (trans.), London: Continuum, 2004 (9). Understood as "configurations of experience", aesthetic acts are thus not limited to conventional media, but can include cultural moments: political speeches, historical events, the passing/revoking of laws.

Though, as we have noted, "Verskanste Openbaring" resembles the common office document in its format, the piece can be seen to operate aesthetically (that is, via a range of our senses: not only as language, but also as image, and sound) — as such constituting a "configuration of experience"... but what of engendering "new modes of sense perception" in the viewer? I believe that "Verskanste Openbaring" achieves this by way of the double gesture; forcing the reader to encounter a *literary* text on *sensory* terms.

Crucially though, for Rancière, simply undermining existing norms does not, in itself, constitute an "aesthetic act." In order to qualify as such, an "act" must also engender within the witness a new "way of being" in society, a "novel form of political subjectivity"; "reset[ting] social perceptions of what counts and what matters, especially in relation to questions of social justice."⁷⁰ I would argue that "Verskanste Openbaring" achieves this final, and most complex, manoeuvre by doubly-defamiliarising the text: both the document and the book. The act of undermining the document, one of the principal mechanisms within the Apartheid machine, served to attack the larger political system. Furthermore, in subverting the conventions of the literary text, Boshoff provokes the reader into questioning, challenging, and finally, adapting their conditioned modes of viewership.

Over the course of this paper, by weaving together readings of the surface and the symptomatic, the aesthetic and the literary, I hope to respond to "Verskanste Openbaring"'s provocation: to read guided by curiosity rather than convention.

70 - Clarkson, *Drawing the Line* (2).



I

THE ARTIST & THE WORK

Willem Hendrik Adriaan Boshoff was born in Vanderbijlpark in 1951, when Gauteng was still the Transvaal. Since his first public exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (1981), Boshoff has been recognised as one of South Africa's preeminent conceptual artists. Over the course of his career, Boshoff's work has consistently been defined by his interest, even obsession, with language as material; with the *substance* of words. Investigating the potentialities of text as an unstable site of meaning(s), Boshoff reveals the entangled relationships between language, religious-political dogma and systems of power.⁷¹ Typically, Boshoff's work takes the form of sculptures or mixed-media installations (made from organic materials — such as wood, stone, or sand — and, less frequently, paper or found objects). However, whilst Boshoff's media may vary, his works almost always incorporate text.

Critical reception of Boshoff's work has changed markedly over the four

decades of his career. His initial works, such as *KYKAFRIKAANS*, were not met with negativity so much as indifference, while Boshoff's recent work for the 2015 Venice Biennale sparked global controversy. For most of the time between, however, Boshoff has been regarded as one of South Africa's most respected conceptual practitioners.⁷² His work continues to contribute significantly to current South African contemporary art conversations, featuring in the high-school art syllabus, as well as

72 - Boshoff's work is included in many prestigious South African collections, including those of the Johannesburg Art Gallery; IZIKO SA National Gallery (Cape Town); Durban Art Gallery; Pretoria Art Museum; King George VI Gallery (Port Elizabeth); the Constitutional Court of South Africa; Unisa Art Gallery; University of Johannesburg; University of the Witwatersrand; Reserve Bank of South Africa; Jack Ginsberg Collection of Book Arts (Johannesburg); Pierre Lombart Collection of Contemporary South African Art; David Krut Collection of Fine Art (Johannesburg). Internationally, Boshoff has pieces in collections including the Sackner Archives of Concrete and Visual Poetry (Miami); Roger Loder Collection of International Art (London); ARTSENSE (Birmingham); Sammlung der Städtische Galerie (Göppingen, Germany); and the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen (Rotterdam).

71 - Siebrits describes Boshoff's fascination with the "forms of words" and the "shape of language." Siebrits, Warren. *Willem Boshoff: word forms and language shapes, 1975-2007*. Exhibition Catalogue. Johannesburg: Standard Bank Gallery, 2007(7).

university Fine Art curricula.⁷³ In between making and exhibiting artwork, Boshoff also delivers talks on his creative process at various galleries, festivals and institutions.⁷⁴ Further to local acclaim, Boshoff has exhibited extensively abroad.⁷⁵

In May 2015, Boshoff was exhibited as part of the “What Remains is Tomorrow” exhibition, in the South African Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale — sparking global controversy. The piece on show, *PROUD TO BE A RACIST IN SOUTH AFRICA*, is a 120cm square aluminium panel listing 24 complaints under the provocative header: “I AM PROUD TO BE A RACIST IN SOUTH AFRICA IF IT MEANS THAT...” The piece, perhaps most aptly described by Sean O’Toole as chronicle of “gatvol-ness,”⁷⁶ was originally part of Boshoff’s *SWAT* exhibition at the Goodman gallery in Johannesburg in 2011, where it was generally passed-over, subsequently fading into relative obscurity. The piece was selected for the recent Biennial by curators Jeremy Rose and Christopher Till, who put the exhibition together “last-minute” after significant administrative delays.⁷⁷

Far from being discouraged by the overwhelmingly negative feedback that the work has elicited, however, Boshoff comments that these scathing responses constitute an integral part of the piece. In response to the deluge of criticism incited

by the work, Boshoff has released a book chronicling the online reactions to the work. The book re-publishes hundreds of online threads, forums and comment-boards that attack the artist for being a (non-ironic) racist. It is only now, states Boshoff, in the wake of this global critique, that the work is finally complete.⁷⁸ Boshoff’s response echoes that of the dadaist Marcel Duchamp, who, upon the accidental breakage of one of his sculptures in transit, declared that the damage was the final element in the composition.

Regardless of one’s opinion of the work, *PROUD TO BE A RACIST...* has undeniably reinvigorated conversations around freedom of speech and expression — but tracking this debate falls outside of the scope of this paper. There are, however, two points that are relevant to our discussion going forward. The first is the recognition that, whether one views it as productive or not, this work undeniably functions as a *provocation*; a recurring mode of working which can be seen to underpin Boshoff’s entire career. The second is to note that where *PROUD TO BE A RACIST...* is decidedly *unlike* Boshoff’s other output is in its “obviousness.” Reviewing his oeuvre in general, Boshoff displays a pronounced penchant for obfuscation and puzzles, testing our capacity to make sense of his works. While language may ostensibly be a tool of elucidation, Boshoff prefers to use words to confound and challenge the viewer. As such, the overt, metaphorless political criticisms of *PROUD TO BE A RACIST...* operate as a foil to the intrinsic, complex, and elegant resistance that is embodied and enacted by his other works, such as *KYKAFRIKAANS* — and “Verskanste Openbaring” in particular.

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73 - Currently, an unofficial artist-in-residence at the University of the Free State for a few weeks annually. Boshoff spends time with the art students, discussing ideas and going on spontaneous field-trips.

74 - Guest-lecturing at institutions that include the Universities of Illinois, Southern Illinois, Chicago, and Iowa City (1996), as well as the White Box Gallery in New York (2000), the International Language Congress (2003), and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington (2005). Siebrits, *word forms...* (116).

75 - Exhibiting at international exhibitions across America and Europe, as well as at prestigious international art events including the 1st Johannesburg Biennale (1995), the 23rd Sao Paulo Biennale (1996), the 49th Venice Biennale (2001) and the 56th Venice Biennale (2015).

76 - O’Toole, Sean. “Proud to be Labelled Racist...” Sept 2011. <<http://www.mahala.co.za/art/proud-to-be-labelled-racist/>> Accessed 7 November 2015.

77 - Boshoff, personal interview, July 2015.

78 - Ibid.

THE COLLECTOR

Boshoff's home stands testament to the man's fascination with words; the structure itself is hidden behind floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. In Boshoff's study, a full wall is dedicated to exclusively dictionaries; a mini-library containing hundreds of variants, meticulously ordered, covering every niche lexicographical subset imaginable... from ancient languages, obscure dialects and slang; to specialised medical, scientific and botanical terminology; to the ritualised words of religion, alchemy and the occult. From these texts (and many besides) Boshoff has spent the course of his career compiling his own dictionaries. His iterations include; the *Dictionary of Manias and Phobias*, *Dictionary of Morphology*, *Dictionary of -ologies and -isms*, *Dictionary of Beasts and Demons*, *Dictionary of Winds*, *Dictionary of Obscure Financial Terms*, *Dictionary of Places Mother Might Not Approve Of*, *Dictionary of Unmentionabilia*, *Dictionary of Red Names*... In conversation with Warren Siebrits, Boshoff explains that he "see[s] the writing of dictionaries almost as [his] second occupation – second to the making of art."⁷⁹ However, distinguishing between the two practices is almost impossible, as many of Boshoff's dictionaries have directly informed his art-making.⁸⁰ And while it is not uncommon for Boshoff's lexical lists to eventually manifest themselves as some kind of art installation, there remain many, *many* more dictionaries-in-progress that exist only as Word documents on his computer, for Boshoff's personal reference.

The artist's fascination with dictionaries operates at the intersection between his love for lexicography and his obsession with collecting. In fact, that Boshoff is an avid collector is evidenced in his all aspects of his life, from his home, to his computer, and of course, in

79 - Boshoff, Willem. Interview(s) with Warren Siebrits, Feb-June 2007, in Siebrits, *word forms and language shapes* (84).

80 - Examples of Boshoff's "dictionary-art" include: *DICTIONARY OF COLOUR* (1977), *DICTIONARY OF PERPLEXING ENGLISH* (1989-1999), the botanical inventory that became *GARDEN OF WORDS* (1997-2006), *THE OH NO! DICTIONARY* (2001), and a dictionary of bizarre rhetorical terms entitled *BEYOND THE EPIGLOTTIS* (2000).

his artworks (which are in many ways sculptural "catalogues" of like-artefacts or information). To visit the artist's home in Kensington, Johannesburg, is to discover a museum of curiosities; beautifully crafted chests (made by the artist or his father) house collections of thimbles, scissors, walking sticks, sheep shears, meteor fragments, bones, traditional divination objects, broken shards of ceramic plates (6 drawers, colour-coded), maritime navigation tools, bobbins, antique medical equipment... ad, it seems, infinitum. Each drawer is kept in perfect order, and is catalogued in Boshoff's head.

Boshoff curates these collections based on another of his self-imposed rules; that a druid may not own ornaments. Following this stipulation, each of the literally thousands of objects has, or had, some kind of function. The artist's digital space is curated in a similar way. Boshoff's Apple Mac is an archive of artwork, avant-garde music, and botanical photography. There are over 20 000 of the artist's own botanical photographs, organised in folders under their Latin names, stored on this machine (with corresponding co-ordinates in his head). This collector's impulse can be seen to operate at the very core of *KYKAFRIKAANS*, for, as Vladislavić notes, the pieces are less "poems" than "vocabularies" — "set[s] of terms that belong together or have been made to coexist, lists rather than lyrics, brief dictionaries."⁸¹ It is through the act of collecting words, then, that Boshoff transforms language from the abstract, or semantic, to the material — a "collection" is, after all, an assemblage of *things*.

Following on from his dictionary work, Boshoff can be seen to collect *words* in the form of information or names. *GARDEN OF WORDS I & II* (2006) is a collection of 20 000 names of extinct plants, each of which Boshoff has memorised. *OSTRAKON* (2003) is comprised of 534 names painted onto ceramic tiles that evoke the ancient Greek system of voting. Each shard records the identities of the men in power (presidents, prime-ministers, cabinet ministers and governors) in South Africa from 1900-1994. Themes of politics and

81 - Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* (28).



(detail) FLAG I, 2003



(detail) GARDEN OF WORDS



(detail) GALA INDEX, 1988



(detail) OSTRAKON, 2003



(detail) ANNULOID, 1994

memory (and how each is preserved or perverted by language) are likewise the subjects of *32 000 DARLING LITTLE NUISANCES* (2003). Affixed to the ceiling, above five august oil portraits of British royalty, are 1400 names representing the children who died in one of the concentration camps set up by the British during the South African War (1899-1902). It is poignant that the individual names are unreadable, lost amidst the crowd.⁸² Similarly, *FAR FAR AWAY* (2004) features a series of maps over-printed with the names of 1400 children that died in the Bethulie Camp during the same period. In attempting to preserve and catalog these identifications, whether of the victims or perpetrators, these works function as “filing cabinet[s] for names.”⁸³ Boshoff preserves memory in text, and in turn, preserves the text in his artworks.

The collector’s-impulse can also be seen informing Boshoff’s (less common) textless works. In *PRISON HACKS* (2003) Boshoff has “collected” time. Part of the Constitutional Court Collection, the piece features eight panels of black granite, each engraved with thousands of lines. These marks, six vertical lines crossed by a seventh (to count a week), evoke the scores carved into cell walls by inmates. The work records the number of days the political prisoners convicted at the Rivonia trial (1964) spent in detention.⁸⁴ At other times, Boshoff assembles geographic artefacts: *GALA INDEX* (1991) is a case of soil samples gathered from all over South Africa, and *ANNULOID* (1993-1994) is a wooden treen holding twigs and stones collected from sacred sites across the United Kingdom. On the other side of the material spectrum,

BLACK CHRISTMAS (2002) and *FLAG I & II* (2003) are constructed from thousands of cheap plastic toys — collections of capitalist detritus.

While the aforementioned examples differ markedly in their substance, in each we see the hand of the collector. A pattern emerges: we see Boshoff’s creative modus-operandi is to gather and curate like-objects, and then to (re)present them in such a way that their new material conditions enable the contents to speak back to their original contexts, and beyond. Turning our attention to the start of Boshoff’s career, we might trace this practice back to a strange anthology of experimental conceptual poetry. Here, the artist collected words and letters, and rearranged them according to his own curatorial systems, rather than existing linguistic rules. In the following section I will take a closer look at this book, contemplating how Boshoff uses the page as a site where language is physically disassembled - and then methodically reconfigured - to produce texts that operate unpredictably, as both pictures and poems.

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82 - Of the victims, only the Afrikaans children’s names were registered in the official documentation; and Boshoff is forced to use the African words for “child” and “baby” to represent the thousands of black children who died in the camps, but whose names were never recorded. Boshoff, personal interviews, July-Oct 2015.

83 - Siebrits, *word forms...* (92-96).

84 - The work records the sentences of Nelson Mandela (9 377 days), Walter Sisulu (9 269 days), and Ahmed Kathrada (9 269 days), Raymond Mhlaba (9 269 days), Elias Motsoaledi (9 269 days), Andrew Mlangeni (9 269 days), Govan Mbeki (8 548 days), and Dennis Goldberg (8 030 days). Siebrits, *word forms* (88).

KYKAFRIKAANS

"On one hand, [*KYKAFRIKAANS*] seems to disqualify and obliterate, to smash the monolithic fantasy of language and its lyrical tradition into so many splinters. On the other, it celebrates amid the ruins, showing just what wonders can be reassembled from the fragments. It is both an attack on convention and a celebration of invention."⁸⁵

— Ivan Vladislavić

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KYKAFRIKAANS was produced at the time when the typewriter was being supplanted by the personal computer. Boshoff describes the piece as an "ode to the typewriter"⁸⁶ – a simultaneous celebration and commemoration of the tool, performed at the moment of its obsolescence. As the computer was making word processing dramatically faster and easier, Boshoff's decision to work manually carries profound significance: as Vladislavić observes, "making typographical work the hard way [...] would soon become a statement in itself."⁸⁷ Acknowledging the "analog-ness" of Boshoff's process is crucial to reading the poems, and the sense of manual effort invested in each page constitutes an important part of what each piece is able to articulate.

Conceptually, *KYKAFRIKAANS* displays certain preoccupations that have continued unfolding over Boshoff's career: the politics of language, and the materiality of the word. Unlike the large scale, sculptural works (usually hewn of rougher, more natural materials like wood, metal, stone or sand) that have come to define Boshoff's artistic output, *KYKAFRIKAANS* is modest in its materiality. Made with what are essentially re-purposed office-supplies, the low-budget, DIY aesthetic and unimposing scale of *KYKAFRIKAANS* separates it markedly from the work which it precedes.

KYKAFRIKAANS is now recognised not only as a seminal piece in Boshoff's

individual career, but also as a significant cultural artefact. Some forty years after it was first released, this text has attained cult status as one of the first examples of South African (and specifically Afrikaans) concrete poetry. Boshoff, however, never earned any money from the sales of his book. In fact, when it was released *KYKAFRIKAANS* sold so poorly that the publisher took to sending copies out as free gifts to regular clients.⁸⁸ For the first decade after its release, critical reception of *KYKAFRIKAANS* ranged from indifference to outright disdain. "At the time," comments Boshoff, "the book was not well received because it was widely misunderstood."⁸⁹ Boshoff recalls that "[u]ntil the beginning of the 1990s, *KYKAFRIKAANS* was denied a place in the literary and art circles of South Africa." Unable to comfortably classify this text as either "art" or "literature," people did not know what to make of Boshoff's book. He was "working in a tradition that [was] hardly visible in South Africa," writes Vladislavić, "a neglect which the appearance of [*KYKAFRIKAANS* did] little to change."⁹⁰

The "tradition" to which *KYKAFRIKAANS* is most commonly ascribed is concrete poetry. Though the concrete poetry movement gained significant international momentum from the 1950s to the 1970s, in South Africa there was very few people working actively in this field. *Wurm*, an avant-garde literary journal published in Cape Town from 1966 to 1970, featured some experimental concrete poems — but Boshoff hadn't come into contact with this publication and thus was not affected by *Wurm*.⁹¹ Vladislavić notes that poets such as Essop Patel and Fhazel Johannesburg had also created a few experimental "visual" poems during this

88 - The situation was further exacerbated as, shortly after *KYKAFRIKAANS* was released, Boshoff's publisher fled the country in the wake of controversy surrounding another of his projects. Dan Roodt's *Sunny Skies and Chevrolet*, also published by Pannevis (Marcus de Jong), was tried and found to be "blasphemous" by the state. Boshoff, Willem. Siebrits Interview, *word forms* (17).

85 - Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* (46).

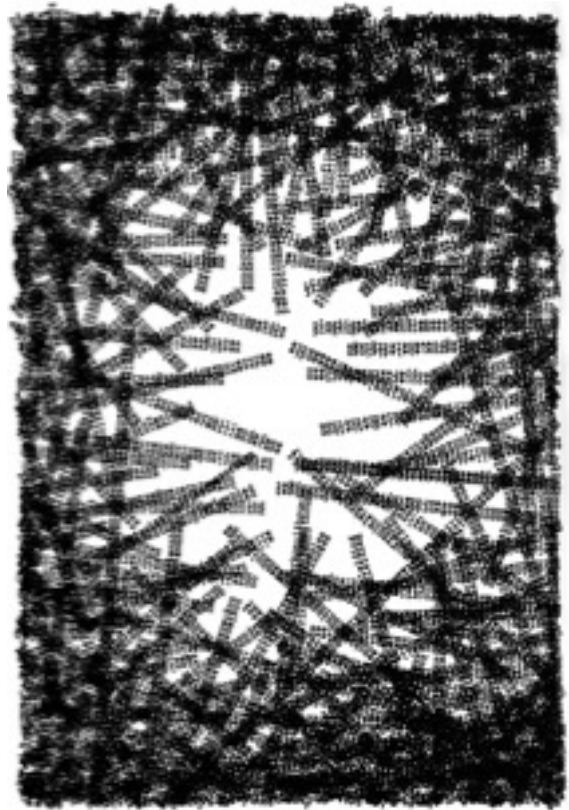
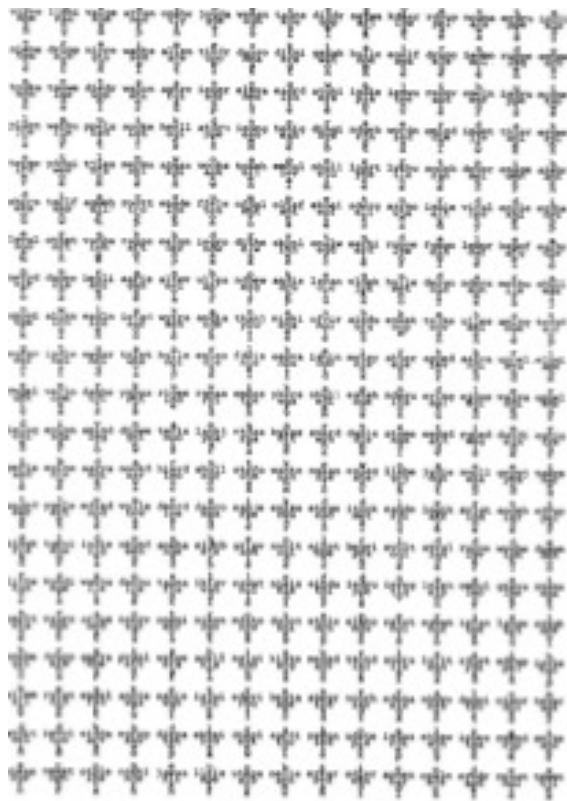
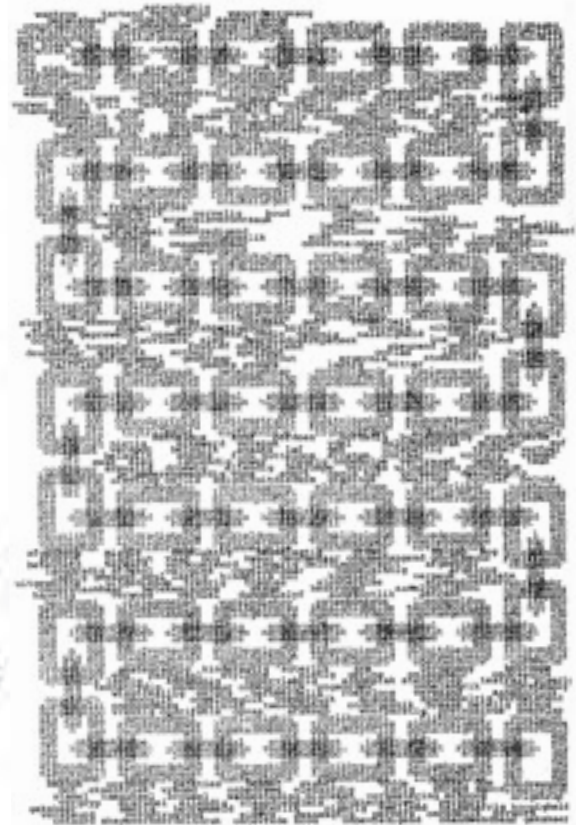
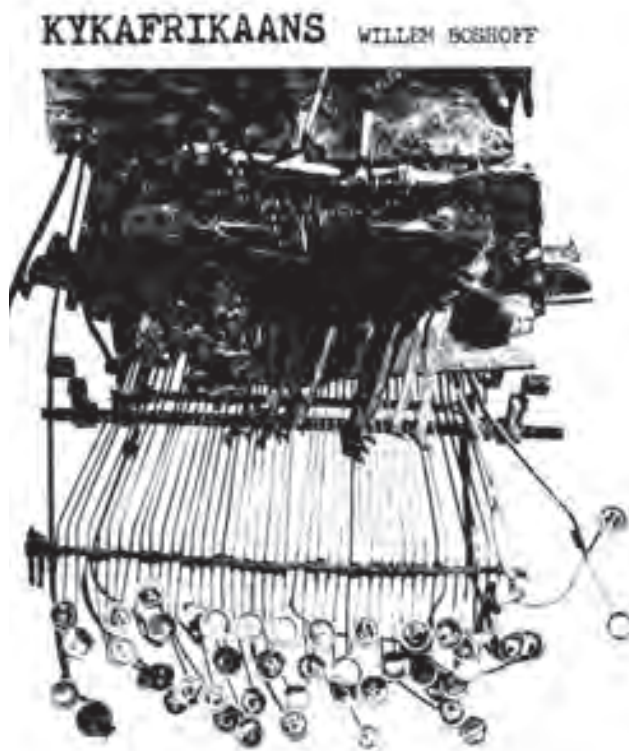
86 - Boshoff, personal interviews, July-Oct 2015.

87 - Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* (26).

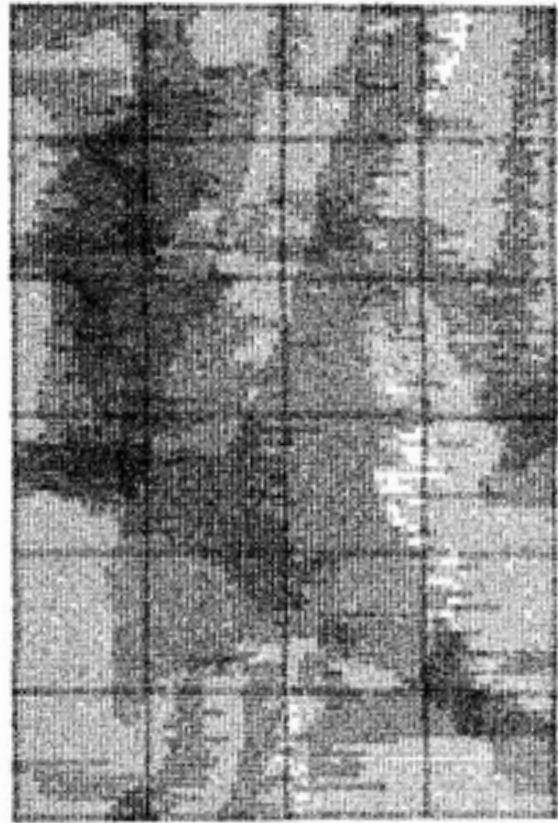
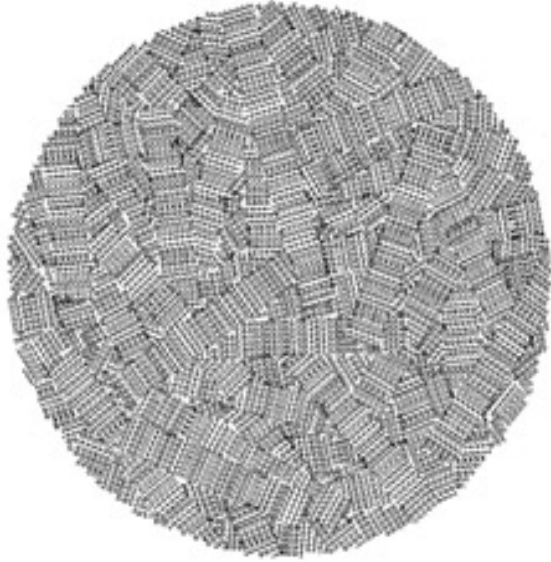
89 - Ibid (17; 40).

90 - Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* (26).

91 - Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* (22).



Willem Boshoff - KYKAFRIKAANS: Cover, Swak Skakels, Woordboord, Duistere Bedoelings



Willem Boshoff - KYKAFRIKAANS: Bolstrooi, Verdwaalkaart, Skrifskerwe, Klat & Min of Meer (opp. page)

period, featured in publications such as *Staffrider* and *Donga*. However, for the most part, concrete poetry was uncharted conceptual territory in South Africa. In fact, Wopko Jensma is arguably the only other notable “concrete poet” working contemporaneously with Boshoff.⁹² While Jensma was influenced by the international concrete poetry movement,⁹³ the character of his output remains primarily lyrical. Jensma toys with form, but his poems operate most powerfully at a semantic level. Boshoff, by contrast, is predominantly interested in exploring the aesthetic implications of language (the lyrical dimension of the poems in *KYKAFRIKAANS* are experienced as secondary to the overall visual impact).

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BOOK TO GALLERY

On two occasions subsequent to the release of *KYKAFRIKAANS*, select poems have been re-printed in larger “fine art” formats. In 1980 a limited edition of eight silk-screen prints were produced (in runs of ten or fewer of each poem). And again, in 2003, twelve more poems were published by Sanlam in a portfolio (in an edition of twenty).⁹⁴ This manoeuvre reiterates the thematic concerns of the poems themselves; confronting the role of materiality in the production of meaning. The act of (re) presenting existent text in a different space, though an ostensibly apolitical, is shown to fundamentally change what the text is able to communicate to its reader.

Presenting the poems in the gallery space dramatically affects how the reader engages with them; we become a *viewer*. When the poems inhabit the pages of a

92 - Jensma published three anthologies of poetry in the 1970s; *Sing for our Execution* (1973), *Where White is the Colour/Where Black is the Number* (1974), *I Must Show you my Clippings* (1977).

93 - Jensma’s “gomringer variaties” in *I Must Show you my Clippings* directly references Eugen Gomringer, the “founder” of the concrete poetry movement.

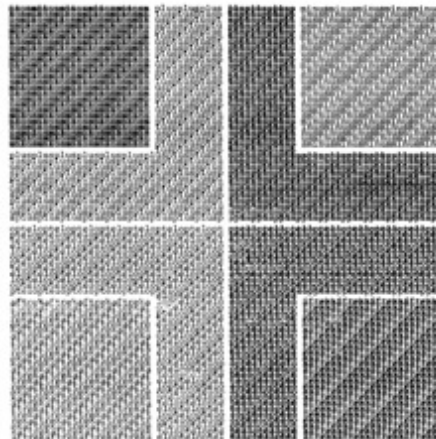
94 - The Sanlam Folio included “Verskanste Openbaring,” amongst others. Boshoff collaborated with Jonathan Comerford of Hardground Printmakers in Cape Town.

book, we are able to flip past each text, pausing at leisure to examine the works that pique our interest. The order of the pages inadvertently sets up a kind of narrative: the bound book-form necessitates that each piece physically and temporally occurs either “before” or “after” another, a condition that our prior experience with the conventions of the book has taught us to interpret relationally and linearly. Upon encountering *KYKAFRIKAANS* in book-form, we (the diligent readers), automatically begin drawing connections, however spurious, between the pieces, and projecting an illusory framework of continuity onto the poems.

Approaching the screen-prints, however, is a more embodied and aesthetic experience, as “[i]solated on the gallery wall, with a frame around it, the work asserts itself more strongly as a visual object.”⁹⁵ As the words migrate from page to wall, so our strategy of interpretation moves from *reading* to *seeing*. The materiality of the screen-print — its scale, the texture and quality of both ink and paper, and overall aesthetic — along with its cultural context, signal to the viewer that they are viewing “art.”

The material conditions of the poems, from book to gallery, present the viewer with different set of possibilities of understanding; concerns that resonate within “Verskanste Openbaring”, itself a text generated by “moving language” across medium.

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95 - Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* (26).

ON POSSIBLE GENEALOGIES

KYKAFRIKAANS both invokes and undermines the conventions of concrete poetry — the genre to which it is most often ascribed. In the following section I will briefly review how *KYKAFRIKAANS* fits into the genre of concrete poetry, as well as how it subverts this category. I will move on to a contemplation of some of the other major artistic movements that constitute *KYKAFRIKAANS*'s conceptual genealogy. By exploring the varied and sometimes contradictory influences that inform Boshoff's text, I hope to show that *KYKAFRIKAANS* resists stable generic classification.

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For concrete poets, "the physical material from which the poem or text is made" is understood to be as significant as the linguistic content,⁹⁶ and the text is designed to make an *aesthetic* impression on the viewer. Mary Ellen Solt writes that the text is "intended to be seen like a painting"⁹⁷ — a phrase that echoes Boshoff's own description of his approach to the poems as "similar to the mode in which many artists address a canvas or a drawing."⁹⁸

Boshoff's experimentation within this creative idiom operates as a poetic inversion of the genre's inception — somewhere between parody and homage. In mourning the "death of the typewriter", Boshoff seems to share the anxieties of Guillaume Apollinaire, considered one of the forerunners of concrete poetry. When Apollinaire pioneered this mode, he did so in order to express his own misgivings about notions of so-called "progress" — at the moment which might be characterised as "the *birth* of the typewriter." Lamenting the death of penmanship in the face of this new technology, Apollinaire published *Calligrammes* (1918); an anthology of images "drawn" in text. In a letter to fellow French writer Andre Billy, Apollinaire describes his project as follows:

The Calligrammes are an idealisation of free verse poetry and typographical precision *in an era when typography is reaching a brilliant end to its career*, at the dawn of the new means of reproduction that are the cinema and the phonograph.⁹⁹

Grappling, likewise, with notions of obsolescence, Boshoff's project echoes Apollinaire's — albeit from the other side of the twentieth century. Both artists use text as a metaphor for context. Anxieties surrounding changing social register are described *with* words, rather than *within* words — which is to say, using language aesthetically instead of, or in addition to, linguistically. By the 1950s, the concrete poetry movement had gained traction in Europe. Significantly, what appeared to be purely formal typographic experiments were, in fact, politically informed. In the wake of the second World War, the concretists sought an encompassing mode of expression to unite people; "a universal or at least international poetry, a kind of poetic Esperanto."¹⁰⁰

One of the key figures in the movement was Bolivian-born, Switzerland-based Eugen Gomringer, who argued that "languages [were] on the road to formal simplification, abbreviated, restricted forms of language [were] emerging."¹⁰¹ Furthermore, these new models of communication espoused a repackaging of content into forms that acknowledged *the packaging as part of the content*. Noting Gomringer's "preoccupation with the reduction of language," Solt observes that "the concrete poet is concerned with establishing his linguistic materials in *a new relationship to space*."¹⁰² In other words, text is recognised as an aesthetic experience; "an *object* to be *perceived* rather than read."¹⁰³

99 - Apollinaire, Guillaume. *Calligrammes*. Preface by Michel Butor, Éditions Gallimard, 1995.

100 - Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* (22).

101 - A statement that, at 108 characters, is appropriately tweetable.

102 - Solt, *Concrete Poetry*... Introduction (n/p). My italics.

103 - *Ibid* (n/p).

96 - Solt, Mary Ellen. *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. Indiana University Press, 1968: Introduction (n. pag).

97 - Solt, *Concrete Poetry*: Introduction (n/p).

98 - Boshoff, Willem. Siebrits Interview, (40).



Guillaume Apollinaire - *Reconnais-Toi (Remember)*, 1915

In upending of the traditional linguistic operations of a written text, Solt goes on to write that concrete poetry demands much of “what used to be called the reader.” No longer able to passively imbibe the text, the reader “must now perceive the poem as an object and participate in the poet’s act of creating it.”¹⁰⁴ This notion of viewer participation is crucial to Boshoff’s project. During the period in which he produced *KYKAFRIKAANS*, Boshoff was deeply influenced by the writings of Marshall McLuhan, particularly, as Boshoff states: “the concept that... if works are low in definition and not easy to decipher, they become highly participational.”¹⁰⁵ To these ends, Boshoff deliberately obscures certain aspects of his texts as a tactic whereby higher levels of viewer engagement might be roused. In so doing, Boshoff subverts the conventions of concrete poetry, where, typically, the visual and linguistic dimensions of a poem *support* one another (a poem about a horse is written in the shape of a horse, and so on). Boshoff, however, complicates this convention by deliberately presenting

104 - Ibid (n/p).

105 - Boshoff, Siebrits interview, *word forms...* (56).

form and content at odds with each other. “Verskanste Openbaring” is a prime example of this contradiction.

Moving away from a single generic designation, Boshoff’s unprecedented use of the typewriter, might also be seen to echo the typographic experiments of Fillippo Tommaso Marinetti, one of the founders of Futurism. In his 1913 treatise entitled “Typographic Revolution” (published contemporaneously to Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes*), Marinetti called for “a typographic revolution directed against the idiotic and nauseating concepts of the outdated and conventional book.” Rejecting the “typographic harmony of the page” in favour of the “flux and movement of style”¹⁰⁶ Marinetti created *Zang Tumb Tumb*¹⁰⁷— a concrete poem (or “sound poem”) in the form of a 228 page book. The poem describes Marinetti’s experience of the Battle of Adrianople¹⁰⁸ by manipulating typography in support of the semantic and phonetic dimensions of the words. The author experiments with the aesthetic potentials of typography by “describing” sounds *visually* — for example, loud noises are written in large bold text and jarring sounds are typeset at sharp angles, and so on. *Zang Tumb Tumb* was mass-produced on commercial printing presses; unsigned and unnumbered. The overall aesthetic of the text is deliberately industrial — as a Futurist, Marinetti was embracing new technology and rejecting what he saw as obsolete notions of craftsmanship. Boshoff pushes this contradiction to its extreme, by using his typewriter to create images that are, at once, machine-produced *and* artisanal.

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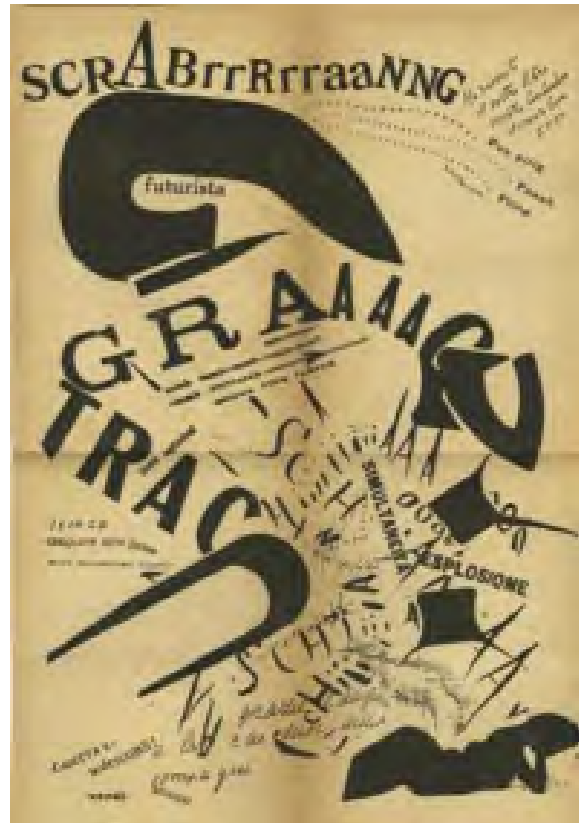
106 - Marinetti, Filippo. “Typographic Revolution,” 1913. Cited in Drucker, Johanna. *The Visible Word*, University of Chicago Press, 1997.

107 - Also known as *Zang Tumb Tuuum*.

108 - The Battle of Adrianople (1912-1913) was part of the First Balkan War. The area is now Edirne, Turkey.



Filippo Marinetti - Zang Tumb Tumb, 1914



(detail) Zang Tumb Tumb



(detail) Filippo Marinetti - Après la Marne, Joffre visita le front en auto
(After the Marne, Joffre Visited the Front by Car), 1915



Isidore Isou - Hypergraphie Polylogue, 1964 (print edition 1988)



Isidore Isou - Untitled from Journal, 1950



Isidore Isou - Amos, 1953

KYKAFRIKAANS also notably incorporates threads of another First World War artistic movement, Dadaism. The destabilisation of established generic conventions, which lies at the core of the Dadaist project, is likewise fundamental to *KYKAFRIKAANS*. Boshoff's poems evince a pronounced Dadaist sensibility, in that pieces that are ostensibly playful, even absurd, but also carry deeper and more urgent political undertones. As Vladislavić observes, the poems are presented as "optelgoed,"¹⁰⁹ or "found objects" — very much in the Dadaist tradition. It was Duchamp who coined the term "readymade," shifting the locus of creativity from the art-object to the creator's act of presenting it as such. Working with existent text, Boshoff invokes the Dadaist notion of the readymade — yet also subverts it, by using manual labour to "create" a "readymade." As such, "Verskanste Openbaring" simultaneously pays homage to, whilst also undermining, Western conceptualist discourse.

Boshoff has also noted the influence of the Lettrist movement on *KYKAFRIKAANS*.¹¹⁰ Themselves heavily inspired by Dadaism and Surrealism, the Lettrists were a group of avant-garde artists, writers and poets working in Paris in the mid 1940s. As their moniker suggests, the Lettrists were primarily concerned with letters (specifically letterforms, or "glyphs") and exploring the relationship between the written word, sound and meaning.¹¹¹ The Lettrists developed "hypergraphics;" images that synthesised written language with non-linguistic signs. The semantic and the graphic were merged into a cross-disciplinary visual language that, they argued, could communicate more powerfully than each of the elements alone. Isidore Isou, the movement's founder,

109 - Vladislavić describes the poems as "ornate and presentable artefacts have been produced from the melded scraps of language, form maxims, clichés, headlines, verses of scripture, throwaway lines." Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff*. (78).

110 - "At face value the poems have been approached in a *lettrist* way" — Boshoff, Willem. Cited in Siebrits, *word forms* (40).

111 - Although in subsequent years Lettrist themes have expanded to encompass a far broader range of categories including film, politics, architecture, physics, chemistry, mathematics, and psychiatry.

described these hypergraphics (also referred to as "metagraphics" or "post-writing") as "encompassing all the means of ideographic, lexical and phonetic notation" so as to "supplement the means of expression based on sound by adding a specifically plastic dimension."¹¹² Isou's notion of the "plastic dimension" of signs is critical to Boshoff's project, acknowledging as it does the objecthood of words. Also key is Isou's description of the images as *augmenting* written language — rather than *replacing* it. Boundaries between discourses are broken down, and text-as-image and image-as-text are viewed as parts of the same system of communication: marks on a page.

Rich and varied conceptual genealogy notwithstanding,¹¹³ Boshoff attributes a (maybe even *the*) major influence behind *KYKAFRIKAANS* to something far more quotidian: the crossword puzzle.¹¹⁴ Boshoff's fascination with language and riddles is evidenced in his penchant for crosswords, which he describes as providing "an important conceptual contribution to [his] work" — in general, and towards the genesis of *KYKAFRIKAANS* in particular.¹¹⁵ Boshoff explains that crosswords taught him "the basics of negotiating the labyrinths of

112 - Isou, Isidore. *Les Champs de Force de la Peinture Lettriste*. Paris: Avant-Garde, 1964. Excerpt from Seaman, David W. (ed. and trans.). "Selections from the Manifestos of Isidore Isou." <<http://www.thing.net/~grist/lnd/lettrist/isou.htm>> Accessed Dec 2015.

113 - The list goes on...in their monochromatic colour palette and strong graphic aesthetic, Boshoff's poems also allude to 1960s Optical-Art movement...

114 - According to Gomringer, the poem becomes "an object containing thought but made concrete through play-activity," and here we begin to see a direct connection made between language and puzzles. Through this invocation of the game, Gomringer reminds us that meaning is not inherent to the sign, but negotiated, relational and contingent on the participants. Gomringer, Eugen. "From Line to Constellation," Weaver, Mike (trans.), 1954. Cited in Solt, *Concrete Poetry... Introduction* (n/p).

115 Other works where this influence is starkly evident include the now-lost *BLOKKIESRAAISEL* (1975–1980), and *NEGOTIATING THE ENGLISH LABYRINTH* (2002–2003), which were both constructed from hundreds of crosswords that Boshoff has completed. Boshoff, Willem. Siebrits interview, *word forms...* (15).

language and meaning.”¹¹⁶ It is of significance that the artist uses the metaphor of a “labyrinth” to describe his relationship with language — thereby locating his processes of semantic meaning-making in *real space*.

Boshoff first began solving word-puzzles as a means of improving his English in the late seventies.¹¹⁷ This pastime soon precipitated further explorations into the structures of language. Boshoff began experimenting with acromonogrammatic verses (a form of writing where the last letter of a word becomes the first letter of the subsequent one), and acrostic verses (where sentences are arranged in such a way that another word or phrase is created on a vertical axis — often, though not necessarily, from the first letters of each phrase).¹¹⁸ Boshoff also became intrigued with the form of the “boustrophedon,” or “back and forth writing.”¹¹⁹ Inspired by these word-games, Boshoff’s first visual poems were not self-consciously “artworks,” but rather, exercises in manipulating language within self-imposed constraints. What began as formal linguistic experiments eventually developed into the optolinguistic disruptions of *KYKAFRIKAANS*.

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CRAFT AND CONCEPTUALISM

The poems, in their complexity and ingenuity, exhibit a high degree of craftsmanship. There is an artisanal quality to the works that seems to contradict the fact that the marks have been made using a machine. Boshoff’s process is one that is unmistakably both time — and labour — intensive. Contemplating Boshoff’s work, Colin Richards observes that it is the arduousness of this labour “which perversely

conditions the ‘aesthetic’ dimension of a usually anti-aesthetic or simply anaesthetic conceptualism.”¹²⁰ Here, Richards identifies that it is the viewer’s ability to look at the art-object and intuit Boshoff’s painstaking, meticulous methods of construction (combined with our attendant recognition of the effects of this performance on his physical body) that creates the pleasing visual quality that defines so much of Boshoff’s output.

Richards goes on to argue that, while “Western” conceptual art prioritises the idea over the objecthood of a piece, “African Conceptualism”¹²¹ (as broad and problematic as such a term is) tends to acknowledge a more complex and co-imbricated relationship between the “thought” and the “thing”. For Richards,

[local conceptualism] remains deeply involved in a dialectic of concept and craft (labour), of “readymade” and “handmade,” of a world in which the labile triad of hand, heart and head remain integrated, vital and viable.¹²²

This observation certainly *does not* claim to encompass every instance of conceptual production in this (invented) domain. Still, Richards writes that “history is history, and [he] does sense that there may be a strong claim for the distinctiveness of conceptualism...in “African” art on...these grounds.”¹²³ This local acknowledgement of the co-constitutive relationship of “thought and thing” is set up in contrast to European and American conceptualisms, which categorically reject the import of the art-object itself; instead “consider[ing] originality as an intellectually driven gesture, not something hand-wrought.”¹²⁴

For Boshoff, notions of craft and concept are inseparable. A defining feature of his output is his abiding concern for craftsmanship — irrespective of medium,

116 - Ibid (14).

117 - During his tenure at Parktown Boys’, Boshoff would spend breaks between classes in the staffroom engrossed in newspaper crosswords. Boshoff, personal interview, July 2015.

118 - Ibid.

119 - A form of writing developed in medieval times, *boustrophedon* translates from ancient Greek as “ox-turning”, as the back-and-forth path of the text mimics the ploughing of a field — the eye reads left to right on one line, then right to left on the next, and so on. Ibid.

120 - Richards, Colin. “The Thought is the Thing,” *Art South Africa*, 1(2), 2002 (39).

121 - Ibid (38).

122 - Ibid (38).

123 - Ibid (38).

124 - Ibid (35).

every piece in his oeuvre is, without exception, expertly fashioned and finished. While his granite works are outsourced, Boshoff carves all of his wooden pieces himself. The artist learned his woodwork skills and deep respect for artistry from his father, a master carpenter, who a young Boshoff would help with odd-jobs in the afternoons after school.¹²⁵ The artist's skilled workmanship is evidenced in his numerous wooden sculptures, including *TAFELBOEK* (1976–1979) and *KASBOEK* (1981), pieces contemptuous with *KYKAFRIKAANS*.¹²⁶ These highly-complex “book-objects”, a table and a cabinet respectively, are each crafted of thousands of shards of wooden off-cuts. As the “BOEK” in their titles suggests, both sculptures are hinged and unfold like human-sized books. While their exterior surfaces are smooth, upon opening, their jagged and hostile interiors are revealed. Rather than meek objects we are able to hold in a hand and navigate at will, these books become physically threatening. The act of scaling-up the book also serves to scale-down the reader, inverting traditional reader-text hierarchies. Most notably for our purposes here, while these sculptures are unlike *KYKAFRIKAANS* in both medium and scale, *TAFELBOEK* and *KASBOEK* nonetheless broach similar concerns; in re-imagining what it means *to be a book*, Boshoff also challenges our existing understandings of what it means *to be a reader*.

Further to being intellectual or linguistic experiments, it is also politically significant that Boshoff uses craftsmanship to direct the reader's attention to the “constructedness” of the typed page. The author's presence is imprinted, along with the ink, onto the paper. By foregrounding his own processes of production, Boshoff alludes to how the text is man-made and

125 - It seems that this legacy of craftsmanship has continued; when I arrived at his Kensington home for our first interview, Boshoff was in his carpentry workshop, carving a piece for his *BLIND ALPHABET* series (“Pudding Stone”), working with his own son, Martin.

126 - Other wooden pieces include *SKATKISSIE* (1976); *STOKKIESKLUIS* (1977-1979); *STOKKIESDRAAI* (1980); *370 DAY PROJECT* (1982-1983); *HOT CROSS BOWL I & II* (1985-1997); *ANNULOID* (1993-1994); *BLIND ALPHABET* (1990-ongoing); *PILLARS OF JUSTICE* (1997); and *CITY-BOOK* (2006).

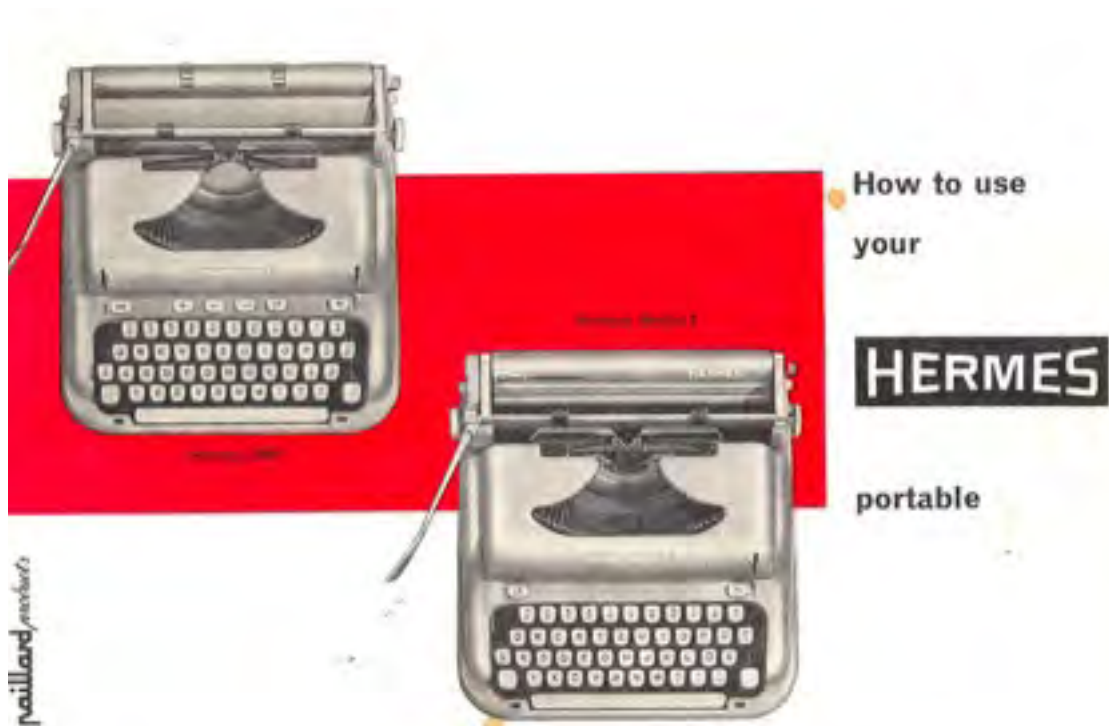
thus inevitably subject to the bias, fallibility and manipulation of its progenitor. The act of undermining the reliability of the printed word and critiquing the authority of the document carries significant political import given Boshoff's context. Recognising that *KYKAFRIKAANS* was produced at a moment when the South African government's use of “legal” paperwork was fundamental to the operations of apartheid, we see that Boshoff's mode is, necessarily, shot through with socio-political implications.

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Willem Boshoff - *TAFELBOEK*, 1975

ALICE EDY



Cover of the Hermes 3000 Instruction manual, circa 1964



Willem Boshoff - DOOD VAN DIE TIKMASJIEN / DEATH OF THE TYPEWRITER, 1978

THE TYPEWRITER: PERFORMING TEXT

Boshoff's choice of a typewriter as his "drawing" tool is a strategic and deeply significant one; indeed, what better instrument to explore and challenge the possibilities of language-as-material than one that is used to materialise language? Before we even encounter the poems, the image of a decommissioned typewriter dominating *KYKAFRIKAANS*'s cover suggests that the machine is the book's protagonist. Notably, the cover photograph of the typewriter is the only image in *KYKAFRIKAANS* that was not actually created by a typewriter — and as such, the facts of its inclusion and foregrounding need addressing. Boshoff deliberately uses this image to affect our first impression of the text, even though this wasn't the typewriter on which he created the poems. Rather, this rusty contraption is one of two defunct typewriters that the artist found on a rubbish dump, at around the time he was working on *KYKAFRIKAANS*.¹²⁷ The use of this specific image on the book's cover engenders considerations of time and decay in relation to the language inside. The typewriter is not shown as a powerful instrument; it is in ruins. This produces a sense of ambivalence surrounding the poems themselves, which might be interpreted either as the products or the causes of this wreckage; perhaps both. The image of the broken-down apparatus, read alongside the texts, implies that words have somehow *physically* acted upon the object. This idea works against the conventional notions of printing, where the words are at the mercy of the machine. Boshoff suggests that language might be powerful enough to have broken the mechanisms of its own production — a concern at the heart of the entire *KYKAFRIKAANS* project. Or, conversely, if we are to take language as the product of this rusty apparatus, Boshoff suggests that it is likewise in a state of decay.

To create his poems, Boshoff used a "Hermes 3000" typewriter. That the name

127 - The photographs went on to become another of Boshoff's works; *DEATH OF THE TYPEWRITER* (1978). The works are conceptually part of the same conversation; so interrelated are the pieces that *KYKAFRIKAANS* was nearly called *DOOD VAN DIE TIKMASJIEN*.

of the model refers to the messenger of the gods in ancient Greek mythology¹²⁸ is a detail that would doubtless have appealed to Boshoff's fascination with Classical history, languages and myth.¹²⁹ The invocation of Hermes speaks to the role of the scribe — the person performing the act of making language material. To what extent, one wonders, are the terms of textual production able to comment upon the relationships between those in power and their messengers? This line of enquiry that becomes particularly poignant later, as we contemplate "Verskanste Openbaring," where Boshoff retypes Biblical text; literally conveying the words of *God*. In conversation with Siebrits, Boshoff explores this neologistic symbolism further, noting that Hermes also gave his name to the "science of interpretation, hermeneutics, which incorporates how we interpret the world, how we view events, texts and issues..."¹³⁰ Thus, Hermes — both myth and machine — refers to the production, circulation, and reception of texts.

Unlike more conventional "literary" poetry, each piece in *KYKAFRIKAANS* was approached on both linguistic and aesthetic terms. Commenting on his process, Boshoff describes his typewriter as a mechanical paintbrush: "an instrument for processing text" that functions "in much the same manner as brush or pencil [would] in

128 - Colette Camelin describes Hermes as "he who imagines words." According to legend, Hermes is "a mediator between gods and man... making [the divine] understandable to human intelligence." He is, necessarily, "a lucid master of language." Camelin also notes that "[t]he attributes of the god Hermes derive from shamanism" — a detail that becomes particularly relevant when noting that Boshoff describes himself as a druid. Further to the role of communication, here we see a mystical quality associated with the written word and the task of transforming language from the abstract to the concrete. Camelin, Colette. "Hermes and Aphrodite is Saint-John Perse's *Winds and Seamaarks*," *Hermes and Aphrodite Encounters*, Summa Publications, 2004 (77).

129 - Examples of mythological, or ancient Greco-Roman themes in his oeuvre include *NEGOTIATING THE ENGLISH LABYRINTH* (2003), *PSEPHOS* (1994-1995), *OSTRAKON* (2003), *PI* (2009) and *PENELOPE'S DISTAFF* (2009).

130 - Boshoff, Siebrits interview, *word forms...* (54).

painting or drawing.”¹³¹ The machine is defamiliarised; displaced from its habitual social function, the typewriter becomes a mark-making tool. The unexpectedness of the images that emerge from the ink contradicts the formal “document” aesthetic of each poem. The poems embody a tension between creativity and bureaucracy; the personal and the institutional. Boshoff’s experiments with the expressive, generative possibilities of the typewriter undermine the usual officialising operations of the document. Rather than working to certify a single, unambiguous, *contained* version of the truth, here are texts that deliberately open themselves to multiple readings.

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The act of typing makes language both visible and tangible; it transforms “thought” to “thing.” The poems become text-objects that describe their moment of concretisation, simultaneously recording and exposing the processes whereby they were created. The text is able to “graphically preserve”¹³² its own processes of becoming because, as Katherine Hales observes, each mark on the page stands in for a physical, authorial action at a direct 1:1 ratio:

Typewriter keys are directly proportionate to the script they produce. One keystroke yields one letter, and striking the key harder produces a darker letter. The system lends itself to a signification model that links signifier to signified in direct correspondence, for there is a one-on-one relation between the key and the letter it produces. Moreover, the signifier itself is spatially discreet, durably inscribed, and flat.¹³³

The final document, bearing the “indexical ‘scars’ of its making,”¹³⁴ can be understood as evidence of the authorial performance.

Hale’s description of typed letters as “scars” alludes to the violence of printing process. The operations of a typewriter are premised on physical force; the words are, literally, hammered into the page.¹³⁵ The typewriting process necessarily imbues the resultant text with a corporeality that is experienced by the reader more viscerally than, say, a smooth page from a laser-jet printer. There is a violence implicit to the author’s act of physically embedding the words *into* the paper, alluding to the operations of discourse itself — official documents are able to physically assert themselves into space. In other words, by foregrounding the text’s terms of production, Boshoff is able to let the mechanical operations of the machine describe the socio-political operations of the document. While the Afrikaans “*verskanste*” speaks to the visual concerns of the piece (translated directly as “obscured” or “hidden”), the English translation, “*Entrenched Revelation*,” carries more palpable, even spatial, implications (to be “buried” or “enshrined” *within* something). Via the type-act, Boshoff therefore creates not only a document to be read, but a landscape to be navigated.

There is also an important auditory dimension to the authorial performance. Writing on a typewriter produces a distinctive sound component, a characteristic “clacking.” As such, the performance of typing produces a soundtrack to Boshoff’s writing, foreshadowing how the performance of reading instantiates an inner sound-experience for the viewer.

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131 - Ibid (40).

132 - Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* (26).

133 - Hales, Katherine. “How We Became Posthuman” (26). Cited in Paton, “Body, light, interaction, sound...” (117).

134 - Ibid (117).

135 - Each key is connected to a *type hammer* that has the *slug* at its end — the slug refers to the metal piece of type, or single cast letter, that physically imprints on the page. Just before the slug makes contact with the page, a thin inked ribbon intercepts and is “sandwiched” between the metal and paper. It is the force of the slug hitting into the page, through the ribbon, that deposits the ink onto (and into) the surface of the paper.

THE TEXT AS SOUNDSCAPE

Boshoff describes *KYKAFRIKAANS* as “a collection of visual and sound poems,”¹³⁶ characterising the texts as “optophonetic,” a term Boshoff coined to evoke their simultaneously aesthetic and aural characteristics. This description evokes the concretist notion of the “verbivocovisual” — referring to the “multidimensionality” of a poem that is “visual, musical, and verbal at once.”¹³⁷

The optophonetic dimension of the poems is brought to fore in the beginning of the book, in the foreword which proclaims: “*One can hear with one’s eyes, but cannot see with one’s ears.*”¹³⁸ By way of this characteristically enigmatic clue, Boshoff refers to the instinctive impulse of the viewer to try “spell out” and interpret the words. The “phonetic” element of the work is created by the viewer, either via articulation, or the internal “reading-voice” that is automatically activated as soon as we encounter text. Thus, rather than specifically literal noise, “[t]he sound component [of *KYKAFRIKAANS*] has to be imagined in the process of looking.”¹³⁹

The aesthetic therefore informs the aural, and design elements such as “[f]ormat, composition and rendering”¹⁴⁰ constitute a kind of sheet-music that directs how the poems are “performed” (whether internally or aloud). Here, reading becomes a synesthetic act. Layers of letters are experienced as noise; what is *seen* becomes *sound*. Colour relates to volume, and darker areas where text is superimposed (notably in “Verskanste Openbaring”) feel “louder”, as though many voices are speaking simultaneously. White space, conversely, is experienced as emptiness: silence. Rhythm is also represented visually, exemplified in works such as “Tikreen,” “SSS,” “Chevron,”

and “Diagonale,”¹⁴¹ where the consistent repetition of typographic elements evokes a beat.

Exploring the optophoneticity of *KYKAFRIKAANS*, Boshoff has staged various live, informal performances of selected poems in workshops, during gallery visits, and at arts festivals.¹⁴² Finally, in 2006, Boshoff began the process of having nearly a third of the poems professionally recorded.¹⁴³ “Verskanste Openbaring” was performed by having four people read out different parts of Revelation — simultaneously. The layering of the voices drowns out meaning; we are left only with noise. Much like the visual work, the listener can identify stray elements of language within the tumult, but the form denies conceptual access the content.

In 2007 a collection of these recordings were presented at the Faculty of Art Design and Architecture (FADÁ) at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), as well as constituting part of Boshoff’s “*ÉPAT*” exhibition at Michael Stevenson Contemporary in Cape Town. For these representations of *KYKAFRIKAANS*, scanned pages of the original text were projected onto large screens, accompanied by their respective “soundtracks.” Paton describes these soundscapes as having a “new aural relationship with the original scripto-visual work.”¹⁴⁴ While a detailed consideration of these new iterations is not the focus here, it is germane to note Paton’s observation that, while there are many self-evident differences between the soundscapes and the original anthology, “the critical element of reading and sound generation” that is foregrounded by the recent exhibition is an essential aspect of *both* incarnations of *KYKAFRIKAANS*.

Acknowledging the importance of sound in *KYKAFRIKAANS*, it was interesting to discover that the E. Paillard &

136 - Boshoff, Willem. *ÉPAT*. Exhibition Catalogue, 25 October - 24 November, Cape Town: Michael Stevenson, 2007 (54).

137 - Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (loc. 1006).

138 - “Jy kan met oë hoor, maar nie met ore kyk nie.” Boshoff, Willem. *KYKAFRIKAANS*. Johannesburg: Uitgewry Pannevis, 1980.

139 - Boshoff, Siebrits interview, *word forms...* (78).

140 - Boshoff, *ÉPAT* (54).

141 - Boshoff, *KYKAFRIKAANS* (49, 28, 34, and 8).

142 - Ibid (54).

143 - Recorded at Wounded Buffalo studios, Johannesburg. Voices: Jane Rademeyer, Marcel van Heerden, Lochner de Kock, Hermien de Vos, and Boshoff.

144 - Paton, “Body, light, interaction, sound...” (116).

Co. (the Swiss company that built Boshoff's Hermes 3000 typewriter), were originally makers of music-boxes, gramophones, and later, radios. Although unaware of this at the time, the artist was composing his optophonetic poetry on a machine that was itself descended from a nearly two-century-long genealogy of musical instruments.¹⁴⁵

Tracking, and intercepting, the journey of the word from noise to language to sign (and back again), has become one of the central themes of Boshoff's career. The artist describes how he has "always been fascinated by sounds as the basis of phonetic language, and by their relationship with the corresponding visual structure."¹⁴⁶ A decade later, in our most recent interview, Boshoff reiterates these concerns with regard to one of his current projects; a series of "bi-lingual sound-dictionaries."¹⁴⁷ These pieces are essentially collections of homonyms, heteronyms and homophones that translate differently across English and Afrikaans. Indeed, Boshoff remains intrigued by the processes whereby language shifts shapes.

Having considered *KYKAFRIKAANS* as a whole, I will now move on to a more detailed examination of the piece which this paper takes as its focus — "Verskanste Openbaring."

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"VERSKANSTE OPENBARING": HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

At first glance, "Verskanste Openbaring" evokes the static on a television screen, dense computer coding (or, perhaps, a glitch in the matrix), more than it resembles any "human language." Occasionally, individual letters remain perceptible amidst the thicket of ink, and

145 - Keller, Julia. "What's so special about a Hermes 3000?", *The Chicago Tribune Online*. January 20, 2006, and lapidarius.com/music-box [Both accessed 22 July 2015].

146 - Boshoff, Siebrits interview, *word forms...* (24).

147 - My awkward description, not his. Just a Word document at the time of our interview, this piece intended for Boshoff's "Reap the Whirlwind" exhibition at the SMAC gallery in Cape Town (12 December 2015- 6 February 2016).

every so often, three spaces align to create small white chinks in the text(ure). For the most part, though, the page is a rectangle of hybrid signs — a letter writ in an alien alphabet.

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From the surface of "Verskanste Openbaring," we are able to view the entire story of Revelation at once; the page becomes a kind of open book. This interplay between depth and surface is also interrogated in another of Boshoff's early works, *BANGBOEK* (1977-1981). Produced at around the same time as *KYKAFRIKAANS*, "The Book that is Afraid," or "The Book of Fear," takes the shape of large white Masonite panels, covered with minuscule handwritten code. Like "Verskanste Openbaring," this "book" is physically open but conceptually closed; articulating its resistance in terms of what it *doesn't* say. The piece is a diary, written in a secret language the artist developed in preparation for anticipated jail-time (due to his objections to the military, the artist planned to refuse conscription).¹⁴⁸ In its resolute refusal to yield meaning, *BANGBOEK* stands testament to this moment of anxiety and resistance.

In the case of "Verskanste Openbaring," we encounter the *linear* narrative of Revelation *flattened* into a single instant. In this regard it may be productive to consider "Verskanste Openbaring" in conversation with Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto's (1978 - ongoing) series of photographs; "Theatres." In this series, Sugimoto takes black-and-white photographs of cinemas, mounting his camera to face the screen and leaving the shutter open for the duration of the film. In the resultant images, the screen becomes an empty white rectangle, while the surrounding theatre glows softly in the reflected light of the projection. In a similar way to how Boshoff shows us the entire Book of Revelation at once, Sugimoto presents the full film in a single moment. Both artists compress linear

148 - Boshoff discovered later that, unbeknownst to him, he had already completed his legally required amount of military service, and so his preparations were never put into action. Boshoff, personal interview, 2015.

time onto the flat surface. The final pieces are, unconsciously, almost perfect visual inversions of one another; Sugimoto's white landscapes versus Boshoff's black portraits.

Might these acts of physically reconfiguring time be read as critiquing notions of progress? To this point, I draw upon Michael Titlestad's invocation of John Gray, who has argued that myths of progressive temporality inscribe a teleological, and theological, paradigm onto time — a notion inherited from the Enlightenment as it suggests that all of civilisation is moving, inevitably, "forwards" towards a final (singular) destination of either salvation or damnation.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, in *(Post)Apartheid Conditions: Psychoanalysis and Social Formation*, David Hook argues that the epistemological position that time marches forwards, in one direction, is "unethical" as it neglects to acknowledge that our memories, traumas and imaginations not only shape, but invade, our present tense. In other words, linear conceptions of time ignore the reflexive and haphazard experience of time that is more true of our lived experience. "[E]veryday South African experience," writes Hook, "is characterised by historical dissonance, by the continuous juxtaposition of forward and backward-looking temporalities"¹⁵⁰ — a juxtaposition that is physically enacted on the page of "Verskanste Openbaring." In this way, Boshoff challenges the teleological model of the Apocalypse; recasting the archetypal script for "The End" according to a different, non-linear, temporal schema. In re-presenting the entire narrative simultaneously, rather than sequentially, the work can be seen to enact Hook's "folded" conception of time,¹⁵¹ physically performing the "irreducible and constant interpenetration of past, present and

future."¹⁵² By capturing and compressing time onto the flat page, both "Verskanste Openbaring" and "Theatres" work to record the processes of their production, even as they document the trajectory of their own loss of coherence. As such, the viewer attempting to salvage the pieces' contents inevitably finds themselves "compelled to relive the moment of [their] disappearance."¹⁵³

Both artists create palimpsests where meaning is lost in the medium; for Sugimoto, the continual addition of more and more light obscures the picture, while in "Verskanste Openbaring," the layering of ink ultimately culminates in darkness. Indeed, notions of lightness and darkness are seen to operate in both aesthetic and epistemic terms. By continuing to add text atop of text, Boshoff destabilises the established balance between positive and negative space on the page. In its absence, the white space around the letters is shown to be as vital to communicating meaning as the "positive" letterform, and "[l]anguage as a system of differences collapses" when the words no longer have the support of the substance around them.¹⁵⁴ Generally, a reader would not pay much deliberate attention to the non-letter. As typography journalist Mike Parker notes, however, the design of an alphabet is, in equal parts, concerned with both the letters *and* the environment that encompasses them. Acknowledging the substance and structure of this surrounding space, Parker stresses the importance of paying attention to "the *interrelationship* of the negative shape [with]...the inked surface."¹⁵⁵ The sign is understood as a form inhabiting "a *powerful matrix of surrounding space*," as opposed to being just "a letter bent [into] shape."¹⁵⁶ Boshoff breaches this "matrix" by superimposing text onto/into itself, thereby causing the letters to lose their individual form and dissolve into a mire of ink.

149 - Titlestad, Michael. "Future Tense: The Problem of South African Apocalyptic Fiction," *English Studies in Africa*, 58:1, 2015 (38-39).

150 - Hook, David. *(Post)Apartheid Conditions: Psychoanalysis and Social Formation*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2014. Cited in Titlestad, "Future Tense" (38-39).

151 - Hook proposes that we replace our linear notions of time with the recognition of a "folding of times, whereby the past can be radicalised and the future reinvisaged, altered from its recapitulation of what was" (204). Cited in Titlestad, "Future Tense" (39).

152 - Titlestad, "Future Tense" (39).

153 - Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* (26).

154 - Ibid (28).

155 - Parker, Mike. Interviewed in the 2007 cult-typographic documentary *Helvetica*. Dir. Hustwit, Gary. Plexifilm, 2007. [Film]. My italics.

156 - Parker, Mike in *Helvetica*, 2007.



Haroshi Sugimoto - Theatres: Canton Palace, Ohio, 1980



Haroshi Sugimoto - Theatres: United Artists Playhouse, New York, 1978

TYPOGRAPHY

In drawing the reader's attention back to the surface of the page, and towards the materiality of the printed word, Boshoff directly challenges one of the core tenets of typography: that text should be the unobtrusive bearer of semantic meaning. In 1930, journalist, critic and typography lecturer Beatrice Ward delivered a speech entitled "Printing Should be Invisible" to the British Typographers' Guild, arguing that typography should be a "Crystal Goblet." "Good typography," according to Warde, should be read *but not seen*.¹⁵⁷ However, Warde's argument leaves unaddressed the fact that to be a "goblet" means *not to be* a cup (or a mug, chalice, or flask). It also does not take into account that to be made of crystal implies something very different than being made of, say, glass, tin, or polystyrene. While Warde's modernist line on type-design defined the commercial publishing industry for most of the twentieth century, contemporary graphic designers more readily acknowledge the relationship between the container and its contents.

Tobias Frere-Jones, world-renowned typographer and, until 2013, one half of the prestigious New York font foundry Hoefler & Frere-Jones,¹⁵⁸ acknowledges the supportive, even mutually-constitutive, relationship between linguistic content and typographic form, arguing that

even if [the reader is] not consciously aware of the typeface they're reading, they [will] certainly be affected by it.

Using the analogy of performance, Frere-Jones suggests that "a designer choosing typefaces is essentially a casting director."¹⁵⁹ While a miscast actor will not prevent the viewer from following the plot, they will influence how the audience experiences the performance. Frere-Jones' metaphor

becomes increasingly apt if we recall the importance of the sound and embodiment in reading *KYKAFRIKAANS* - after all, in these poems the words are not *like* performers; they *are* performers.

While the project of the typographer is conventionally the alignment of the form and function, Boshoff is more interested in exploiting and disrupting the space between the two. Here, language and typography are not working together. Instead, Boshoff deliberately sets up an antagonistic relationship between words and their meanings: it is as though there is not enough space within the physical unit of the lexeme to support both claims to truth, and each must perpetually vie for its turf.

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157 - Warde, Beatrice. *The Crystal Goblet: Sixteen Essays on Typography*, Jacob, H. ed., London: Sylvan Press, 1955.

158 - H&F-J were the creators of over 700 fonts, including "Gotham" - Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaign font.

159 - Frere-Jones, Tobias. Interviewed in *Helvetica*, 2007.

THIS IS
A PRINTING OFFICE



CROSSROADS OF CIVILIZATION

REFUGE OF ALL THE ARTS
AGAINST THE RAVAGES OF TIME

ARMOURY OF FEARLESS TRUTH
AGAINST WHISPERING RUMOUR

INCESSANT TRUMPET OF TRADE

FROM THIS PLACE **WORDS** MAY FLY ABROAD

NOT TO PERISH ON WAVES OF SOUND

NOT TO VARY WITH THE WRITER'S HAND

BUT FIXED IN TIME HAVING BEEN VERIFIED IN PROOF

FRIEND YOU STAND ON SACRED GROUND

THIS IS A PRINTING OFFICE

*Beatrice Warde - "This is a Printing Office" broadside, 1932
...like Boshoff, Warde suggests that the act of printing is a sacred one.*

READING “THE END”

“The old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.”

— Antonio Gramsci

Cited by Nadine Gordimer in the epigraph of July’s People

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Having considered the page as an image, let us shift conceptual gears, and consider this text in more literary terms. It is crucial, when contemplating “Verskanste Opening” as a (strange) kind of book, to do so with the attendant recognition that it emerges alongside strand of contemporaneous apocalyptic literature, or dystopic fiction, that flourished in South Africa during the “interregnum.” Whilst un-selfcritical exercises in periodisation can potentially be as problematic as they are useful, for the purposes of this discussion I provide a definition of this context as follows: the term *interregnum* refers to a limbo-like condition between regimes or rulers — the word originates from the Latin lexemes “inter-” (between) and “regnum” (reign). In a South African context, the interregnum specifically describes the state of political uncertainty that developed in the mid to late 1980s, and reached its zenith from 1990 to 1994 (following Nelson Mandela’s release from Robbin Island and preceding his inauguration). Amidst the escalating political unrest of the late 1970s and 1980s it became increasingly evident to the South African populace that apartheid system was in its death-throws — and the nation wondered, with a mixture of hope and trepidation, what would follow...

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**NO MAN’S LAND:
THE INTERREGNUM & THE APOCALYPSE**

The interregnum, then, marks a moment where all previous understandings of hierarchy are undermined, and yet no alternative is clear — much less certain. This is a period of suspended time; “a place of shifting ground.”¹⁶⁰ Within this void,

160 - Gordimer, Nadine. “Living in the Interregnum,” *New York Review of Books*, 1983 (Part 5). <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1983/01/20/living-in-the-interregnum/>>

culture performs what Nadine Gordimer describes as the “demonic dance” of a society “whirling, stamping, [and] swaying with the force of revolutionary change.”¹⁶¹ Characterised by the unstable vying of opposing forces, this is a time of endings/ beginnings, coloniser/colonised, damnation/ salvation... and, fundamentally: known/ unknown. It is not in spite of these tensions, writes Gordimer, that art (and indeed life) should operate — but rather, she asserts that “[i]t is *from this internal friction* that energy somehow must be struck.”¹⁶² Inhabiting such a moment, where notions of endings (and unknowable beginnings) are at the fore, it seems unsurprising that some literature might take a turn for the apocalyptic — if not overtly then implicitly.

Almost always, it has been white South African writers who have employed this mode of dystopic fiction. As Christopher Thurman notes in his article “Apocalypse Whenever: Catastrophe, Privilege and Indifference (or, Whiteness and the End Times):”

White identity in South Africa has long been associated with apocalyptic fear — fear, not of environmental collapse or of devastating global warfare, not of catastrophic industrial accident or a disastrous epidemic, but of a violent revolution to the racial inequality on which the country has been built.¹⁶³

Moreover, as Titlestad expounds:

The impulse to prophesy is intrinsic to South African colonial, apartheid, transitional and post apartheid literature (which is generally an anxious literature...)¹⁶⁴

Indeed, Apocalypticism as a literary mode has an established history in South Africa, with earlier examples including Alan Paton’s

161 - Ibid (Part 1).

162 - Ibid (Part 3).

163 - Thurman, Christopher. “Apocalypse Whenever: Catastrophe, Privilege and Indifference (or, Whiteness and the End of Times),” *English Studies in Africa*, 58:1, 2015 (64).

164 - Titlestad, “Future Tense” (32).



Unknown Artist - *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Revelation 6:1-17*

Cry, the Beloved Country (1948), Arthur Keppel-Jones's *When Smuts Goes* (1947), Gary Alligan's *Verwoerd - The End: A Look Back from the Future* (1961), and Anthony Delius's *The Day Natal Took Off* (1963). Here, authors adopted the structure of religious allegories to describe the end of *the times*, rather than the end of *time*, arguably, "insinuat[ing] a theological logic" into "projects that conceive[d] of themselves as secular."¹⁶⁵

While this literary mode did not originate in the interregnum, this socio-political moment produced some of the most paradigmatic examples of South African apocalyptic texts, such as Karel Schoeman's *Na die Geliefde Land* (1972) (trans: *Promised Land*), J.M Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and (perhaps most famously) *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), and Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981). It is noteworthy that these novels were all written more or less

contemporaneously to *KYKAFRIKAANS*. Below I will give a brief overview of *July's People*, so as to give a sense of how the apocalyptic was explored and self-consciously critiqued in the novelistic form.

In *July's People*, Gordimer evokes a futuristic South Africa in the aftermath of a violent revolution in which the black population have overthrown the white minority. July, the (black) "houseboy" of the (white) Smales family, takes his previous employers back to his rural homestead to protect them from "[t]hose people from Soweto."¹⁶⁶ Gordimer presents us with a new reality; one in which privilege is relocated from coloniser to colonised (indeed, the Smales' physical movement from urban "civilisation" to rural village bitterly parodies the colonial endeavour). Offering the reader this vision of the future, *July's People* is a literary prophecy of sorts ("apocalyptic" to white readers, at least) — echoing Boshoff's own project (though Gordimer's mode of literary realism

165 - Here, Titlestad draws on the work of Stephen O'Leary (1994), Slavoj Žižek (2011), Pascal Bruckner (2013), and John Gray (2004, 2007, 2008). "Future Tense" (30).

166 - Gordimer, Nadine. *July's People*. New York: Penguin, 1982 (119).

operates as a foil to Boshoff's experimental abstraction). Gordimer's is a prophesy that does not imagine a vision of the future so much as it presents a self-conscious, self-ironising, invocation of the prophetic mode in order to critique white suburban paranoia, and question the limitations of white liberalism. In presenting a fictional account of what Michael Green terms a "future history," the novel is able to "comment upon the past and present by projecting the implications of past and present forward in time."¹⁶⁷

Post-interregnum, apocalypticism in South African literary production continues to intrigue writers and academics alike — as is evidenced by the University of the Witwatersrand's hosting of the "End Times: Catastrophism and its Limits" colloquium, in July 2015. One of the philosophical concerns central to this event was an interrogation of "this country's long obsession with the possibility of state failure."¹⁶⁸ This "long obsession" has persisted well into the contemporary moment, with recent examples of apocalyptic literature including Eben Venter's *Horrelpoot* (2006, trans: *Trencherman*, 2008), P.J. Haasbroek's *Oemkontoe van die Nasie* (Umkhonto of the Nation, 2001), Koos Kombuis's *Raka: die Roman* (Raka: the Novel, 2005), and Jaco Botha's *Miskruier* (Dung Beetle, 2005)¹⁶⁹ — each displaying, in their own ways, "an imagination of disaster that haunts so much post-apartheid fiction."¹⁷⁰

Whilst "Verskanste Openbaring" shares notions of "the End" with examples of apocalyptic literature, its subversive modes of communication suggest a more complex critique of this trope. Boshoff presents this teleological notion of the future in the *now*; consequently, the linear narrative is both entirely present and also completely obliterated. The prophesy is invoked and destroyed in the same act.

Over the course of this chapter I have explored the extent to which "Verskanste Openbaring" operates as a sensory experience; as both image and text. As such, it can be both "looked at" and "read." *Looking* at the page, we discover that the material conditions of the piece speak back to the author's performance - whilst also regulating the reader's own possibilities of engagement. *Reading* the page requires one to recognise that Boshoff's invocation of the Apocalyptic trope (in South Africa, in that moment) is not without a certain literary precedent. Indeed, Boshoff's revelation can be understood as weaving together many diverse cross-disciplinary conversations and genealogies - spanning the arts to literature. In the following chapter I will continue this line of enquiry by contemplating the cultural context within which Boshoff was working, and what this might reveal about his choice of medium.

167 - Green, Michael (235-287). Cited in Titlestad, "Future Tense" (31).

168 - Ibid (3).

169 - Viljoen, Louise (659-660).

170 - Twidle, Hedley. Cited in Thurman, Christopher (65).



Fear of the Darkness: an etching and woodcut illustrating the sun turning black and the stars falling from the sky upon the opening of the sixth seal in Revelation 6:12, circa. 1500



II

AFRIKAANS AS AN AESTHETIC MEDIUM

Following Boshoff's claim to be using the typewriter as a "paintbrush,"¹⁷¹ we must consider his "paint:" Afrikaans. In the late 1970s, Afrikaans was seen by the majority of the population as "the language of the oppressor," as Carrol Clarkson notes in her essay "Justice and the Art of Transition," in South Africa, issues of language "have been at the core of some of the most brutal staging of apartheid's institutional force"¹⁷² — as such, Boshoff was painting with a volatile medium.

What I hope to show in this chapter is that, further to the semantic creolisations, adaptations, and hybridisations that occur naturally as a language develops, language *as an idea* is not a stable site of meaning. Just as words change in what they connote, so *the cultural implications of an entire language* can likewise shift over time. Over the course of its relatively short lifespan the Afrikaans language has been cast as both runt and bully; first the dialect of the slave, later the language of the oppressor - designations that fall short of recognising

the complexities and contradictions that have always shaped *die taal*. In the following chapter I explore the inclusive, yet fraught, socio-political space occupied by Afrikaans.

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LOOK: AFRIKAANS!

The title of Boshoff's anthology demands that we "look" both *with* and *at* "Afrikaans." In Boshoff's hands, the typewriter becomes an artistic tool, a "paintbrush," and by extension, the language deposited onto the surface of the page becomes a kind of "paint." It is taken for granted in the field of the plastic arts that the medium is an intrinsic part of the message. So, before considering what the words of "Verskanste Openbaring" say as semantic signs, it is instructive to consider how Boshoff deploys the Afrikaans Language as an aesthetic medium. On a meta-textual level, what does *the language* say? What might it *mean* (socially, culturally, and politically) to paint in *Afrikaans*?

Over the course of this chapter, I will explore the extent to which a language can become a "sign" that is seen to represent an entire set of ideologies. Language is

171 - Boshoff, personal interviews, July-Oct 2015.

172 - Clarkson, *Drawing the Line* (69).

usually understood as a collection of signs, but here the sign under scrutiny is the language itself. In order to get a richer sense of this sign, the Afrikaans language warrants historicisation. The objective here is not an exhaustive history lesson, nor an amateur attempt at philology. Rather, my hope is to broadly track the changes in notions of “Afrikaansness” over time. In so doing, I hope to explore what was at stake when Boshoff chose this specific medium for his text-experiments.

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AFRIKAANS AND THE ARTIST

Boshoff is a first-language Afrikaans speaker who, while working at a moment of Afrikaner political supremacy, was vocally *against* the apartheid government. In 1971, during his second year at college, Boshoff was called to serve in the military – a cause he abhorred, and denounced publicly as “morally indefensible.”¹⁷³ Throughout his career Boshoff has critiqued the dehumanising effects of military violence, stating that soldiers who obey orders without question do so at the cost of their own integrity and humanity. “I do not find such behaviour enlightening,” comments Boshoff, “and have spoken out against it all my life.”¹⁷⁴ However, voicing anti-government sentiment in the late 1970s in South Africa was a punishable offence, and Boshoff “got [himself] in a lot of trouble with the military authorities.”¹⁷⁵

At the time, Boshoff’s agenda was primarily moral, informed by his religious beliefs, rather than exclusively political — although in the high-apartheid climate the boundary between the two was becoming increasingly imperceptible.¹⁷⁶ As an outspoken pacifist, Boshoff was vilified by other white Afrikaners for his anti-military stance. “In the Afrikaans community,” Boshoff recalls, “I was hated for not wanting to serve in the army... I was ostracized by my family, my church, my community and

my peers...”¹⁷⁷ Boshoff’s position was a precarious one, for while it was, of course, possible to be an Afrikaner who rejected apartheid; it is also simultaneously true that the Afrikaans language was incontrovertibly embroiled in the operations of apartheid ideology. In this sense, while Boshoff might not have individually supported the government, he was also inescapably implicated.

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A SHIFTING SIGN

The Afrikaans language has a complex and ambiguous relation to South African cultural hegemonies. Contrary to its more recent associations, Afrikaans was not always synonymous with power and dominant ideology. Indeed, just the opposite was true for the first two centuries that the language was spoken. In the following section I track the dramatic changes in cultural status that have marked the language’s approximately 350-year existence. In doing so I hope to draw attention to the fact that, as a sign, Boshoff’s medium is a markedly unstable one.

The accounts of the origin of Afrikaans are varied and contested. Some theorists argue that Afrikaans is a “semi-creole” or “creoloid” language that developed *before* the slave trade began in the Cape, as the result of the Khoisan adapting Dutch and English trade jargons in the mid 1600s. Other theorists, however, argue that Afrikaans was born in the mouths of the Cape slaves in the 1700s, as an interpretation of traditional Dutch, augmented with mixed elements of Malayo-Portuguese dialects, and only later adopted by the Cape slaves who needed a lingua franca. What *is* agreed upon is that Afrikaans was the result of Dutch and various other languages blending and hybridizing across nations, races and classes; “a shared cultural creation.”¹⁷⁸ But, the terms of this “sharing” were by no means equal. The language evolved from the collective

173 - Boshoff, Siebrits interview, *word forms...* (13).

174 - Ibid (25).

175 - Ibid (13).

176 - Ibid (15).

177 - Ibid (15-16).

178 - Giliomee, Hermann. *The Rise and Possible Demise of Afrikaans as a Public Language*. Rhondebosch: PRAESA - Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa, University of Cape Town, 2003 (4).

necessity for communication in the colony; a tongue fashioned and re-fashioned by on-going processes of cultural conquest and compromise.

At the time of its inception, Afrikaans occupied a precarious social position: for slaves it was a symptom of their subjugation, while for those in power it was deemed uncivilised.¹⁷⁹ The overwhelming lack of social acceptance indicated that the language was unlikely to survive. By the end of the 1800s, Afrikaans was rapidly losing its cultural foothold, and

[o]bservers believed that within a generation Afrikaans would no longer be spoken in the cities and only by the poorly educated classes in the rural areas.¹⁸⁰

In 1912, responding to the predicted demise of Afrikaans, an attorney-turned-journalist Cornelius Jacob Langenhoven wrote to a Cape newspaper, declaring that: "If Dutch is our language we must speak it; if Afrikaans is our language we must *write* it."¹⁸¹ It is significant here that the preservation and continuation of the language is associated with its *written* usage, emphasising the importance of the cultural moment when a language shifts from solely verbal usage to manifesting itself *physically* on the page.

If we are to credit the survival of the Afrikaans language to its move from the verbal to the material, it is interesting to note that Afrikaans was first put into print in the mid nineteenth century by the Cape Muslim community (a fact that

belies the white-supremacist associations that would later come to characterise the language). The first ever printed Afrikaans texts were typeset in Arabic-Afrikaans, and therefore would be completely illegible to the contemporary Afrikaans reader.¹⁸² As such, they form part of the *ajami* writing tradition, an Arabic term used to describe "foreign" languages that are written in Arabic script.¹⁸³ Saarah Jappie writes that Arabic-Afrikaans script was initially based on *jarwi* (or Arabic-Malay) scripts,¹⁸⁴ reflecting Afrikaans's supplanting of Malay as the primary language of the Cape Muslim community in the mid-1800s. Jappie writes elsewhere that this Arabic-Afrikaans script was "a uniquely Cape Town phenomenon," emerging around 1840, and reaching its zenith around 1910. Arabic-Afrikaans printing preceded the printing in Afrikaans in the Roman script, "using presses as far afield as Istanbul and Cairo in order to have their books produced."¹⁸⁵ However, from the 1920s onwards, the script began to die out, as Muslims increasingly became part of the national schooling system that used the Roman alphabet. Today, writes Jappie, "these documents are windows into overlooked, subaltern people, places, and practices of Cape Town's history."¹⁸⁶

Twenty years after the first Afrikaans-Arabic printed texts had emerged, white Christian Afrikaans-speakers began to recognise a similar need

179 - The general sentiment of the time is perhaps best expressed by the *Cape Argus* newspaper which, in 1857, described Afrikaans as a "miserable, bastard jargon," going on to declare that it is "not worthy of the name of language at all." *Cape Argus*, 19 September 1857. As cited by Giliomee, *Rise and Possible Demise...* (5).

180 - J.H.H. de Waal, *Die Lewe van D.C. de Waal*, Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1928, (307); J.C. Steyn, *'n Tuiste in eie taal*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1981, (169-72). Cited in Giliomee, *Rise and Possible Demise...* (5).

181 - J.C. Kannemeyer, Langenhoven. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1995, (268). Langenhoven, *Versamelde Werke*, vol. 16, (274). Cited in Giliomee, *Rise and Possible Demise...* (10).

182 - These first Afrikaans texts were be used in Islamic schools for general education and religious instruction. Davids, Achmat, "The Afrikaans of the Cape Muslims from 1815 to 1915: A Socio-Linguistic Study," Master's dissertation, University of Natal, 1991, (80-81).

183 - Arabic-Afrikaans is categorised as part of the "African *ajami*" writing culture. Other languages, including Yoruba, Hausa, Spanish, Swahili, Vietnamese and Polish, have also developed *ajar* writing systems. Jappie, Saarah. *From Madrasah to Museum: A Biography of the Islamic Manuscripts of Cape Town*. Master's dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2011 (12-13).

184 - Ibid (14).

185 - Jappie, Sarah. "The Arabic-Afrikaans Traditions of the Cape," *Muzmin*, June 2015 issue of Chimurenga. <<http://chimurengachronic.co.za/writing-the-city-in-a-different-script/>> Accessed 17 Jan 2016.

186 - Ibid.

within their own communities. By this time, Afrikaans had evolved into its own distinct language and the Dutch Bible was increasingly unintelligible to the Cape Afrikaans speakers. In 1984, Dutch immigrant Arnold Pannevis¹⁸⁷ wrote a letter presenting a case for translation of the Bible to the British and Foreign Bible Society – a suggestion immediately met with rejection. Underwriting this refusal was the reasoning that educated (white) Afrikaans speakers could likely speak at least *some* Dutch, and therefore the translation would primarily serve the non-white community. As such, issues of Biblical translation had less to do with religion than with politics.¹⁸⁸

While *speaking* the language was tolerated for practical reasons, this was also because a speech-act left behind no trace. Printing in Afrikaans, however, would be to create hard evidence against the writer's character (tellingly, “[m]ost educated Afrikaners used English in the letters and diaries they wrote”).¹⁸⁹ There is a sense that act of writing, in transforming language from the intangible into the material, might imbue the *taal* with a legitimacy that would have threatened existing hegemonies. To turn Afrikaans into something “real in the world” would be to sanction the language — or worse — empower the speakers. Unable to read the Dutch texts themselves, coloured and black Christians were necessarily dependent on a white “mediator” in order to engage with the scriptures; God's words always reached them through a white filter. Eventually the Bible was permitted to exist in Afrikaans, but the first full translation was only published in 1933 – some 60 years after the first Islamic translations.

By foregrounding the materialisation of language, “Verskanste Openbaring” both evokes and critiques the moment of Afrikaans's literary inauguration. The illegibility of this page might be made to speak, albeit obliquely, to the first ever

printed Afrikaans; Arabic signs. This script was unreadable to Christian Afrikaners, appearing to them only as ink on a page; manifesting as image not language. Read in conversation with the Afrikaans Bible's history, Boshoff's act of re-typing of Biblical text re-enacts the “consecration” of the language. In this sense, by reprinting the once-forbidden text, Boshoff becomes a kind of one-man printing-press of ambivalent allegiance.

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Arabic-Afrikaans in a student's notebook, 1860 (from Achmat Davids' "The Afrikaans of the Cape Muslims," 2012)

187 - Coincidentally, Pannevis was also the name the publisher of *KYKAFRIKAANS*.

188 - The British and Foreign Bible Society, in refusing Pannevis's request to translate the Bible, were unconsciously parodying their own history. In England, the Bible was initially only published in Latin Vulgate, and eventually translated into English in the seventh century.

189 - Giliomee, *Rise and Possible Demise...* (6).



Arabic-Afrikaans pamphlet on how to vote, 1872

THE APARTHEID BIBLE

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.”
- Romans (13:1-2)

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There were many processes that enabled apartheid, and religion was by no means the only agent that driving this ideology. Moreover, one cannot talk of “The Church” as if it were a homogeneous institution, with a single and unified agenda. It is not, however, within the remit of this paper to delve into the complex embroilments of apartheid church and state. Instead, what I hope to illustrate over the following pages is that there were certainly moments where religious and government policy were collaborators. I will briefly explore the state’s use of the Bible in legitimising their political project. I do so in order to draw a connection between Boshoff’s page and state documents and policies - thereby suggesting that we might read his invocation of scripture in political terms.

The emergence of Christian-nationalist thought, from the 1930s to the mid century, would play a significant role in shaping the internal logic of segregationist, and racist, ideology. The development of Afrikaner nationalism was in large part a cultural response to the trauma of the South African War (1899-1902), compounded by the First and Second World Wars, and further exacerbated by the economic depression of the early 1930s. The migration of African workers into cities was perceived as a threat to the white Afrikaner labour force, which was comprised mostly of poor white farmers, displaced by the country’s rapid industrialisation. “It was under these circumstances,” as Saul Dubow writes, “that apartheid came to be formulated with particular urgency.”¹⁹⁰

190 - Dubow, Saul. “Afrikaner Nationalism, Apartheid, and the Conceptualisation of ‘Race.’” University of the Witwatersrand: African Studies Seminar Paper, 1991 (3; 7).

Exploring the role that the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) played in the legitimisation of apartheid, Elizabeth Corrado writes that the

development of apartheid theology provided a pervasive legitimising ideology within which the implementation of apartheid planning flourished.¹⁹¹

However, whilst recognising that religious doctrine was often embroiled in the justifications of apartheid, Dubow urges us to avoid reductionist arguments that oversimplify and over-state the interrelationship of these ideological forces; suggesting, instead, that scripture

acted as a self-referential discourse, a coded vocabulary of imperatives and shibboleths and which could be, and were, constantly reinterpreted in the lights of political realities.¹⁹²

The mythology of the (white) Afrikaner Nation as somehow “divinely ordained” was, at least in part, reliant on strategic interpretations of Biblical text. A romanticised Calvinist version of history, retold via the Bible, enabled a heroic mythologisation of white Afrikaners as God’s “chosen people.”¹⁹³ In weaving together localised history and religious fable, white Afrikaners found a sense of nationalist pride in self-identifying as “*die volk*.” While biology and politics would later also be invoked in support of this idea, scripture can be seen to have played a significant role in establishing and defending this mythology.

W.J. van der Merwe was the first to provide a religious basis for apartheid based on Biblical “proof,” in 1942.¹⁹⁴ Two years later, the prestigious Afrikaans apartheid

191 - Corrado, Elizabeth. “The Godliness of Apartheid Planning: The legitimising role of the Dutch Reformed Church.” University of Illinois, 2013 (6).

192 - Dubow, “Afrikaner Nationalism...” (9).

193 - Loubser, J.A. *The Apartheid Bible* (53-54). Cited in Dubow, “Afrikaner Nationalism...” (11).

194 - Published in the theological journal *Op die Horison*. Loubser, *Apartheid Bible* (53-54). Cited in Dubow, “Afrikaner Nationalism...” (10).

theologian and poet J.D. Du Toit (Toitus) presented a speech entitled “The Religious Basis of our Race Policy,” where he blended exegesis with narratives of Afrikaner history as a means of supporting notions of racial segregation.¹⁹⁵ To make his arguments, Toitus drew heavily on Biblical allegory, particularly the story of Babel in Genesis 11. This parable, in which God creates different languages in order to divide the humans on Earth, was presented by Toitus as irrefutable evidence of God’s desire for cultural segregation.¹⁹⁶

To corroborate the story of Babel, other Biblical texts were invoked by Toitus (and later the NGK) - amongst these, Revelation.¹⁹⁷ Passages of the book that mention different cultures were presented as proof of a holy plan for apartheid. Examples in Revelation include verse (5:9), where “[the lamb’s] blood [...] purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation,” verse (7:9) wherein “every nation, tribe, people and language” gather around the lamb’s throne, and verse (14:6), when an angel is sent “to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people.”

Another key figure in the creation and propagation of apartheid theology was Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch theologian and politician. Kuyper cast God as “the Great Divider” - or “*Hammabdil*” - invoking texts such as the Cantic of Moses (Deuteronomy, 32:8), which describes God as having “separated the sons of Adam.”¹⁹⁸ Here, the act of creation is seen as fundamentally premised on, even synonymous with, notions of separation; dividing heaven from earth, man from woman, black from white.¹⁹⁹ Framing apartheid as a divine imperative, racial integration was cast as sacrilege — soon to become treason.

As the National Party ascended to power in the mid twentieth century, the formal NGK newspaper declared that “apartheid [could] rightfully be called a church policy.”²⁰⁰ Religious mythology infiltrated political policy, and finally, physical space. Legislation was written to protect the purity of the “chosen people,”²⁰¹ regulating public spaces by way of the



Cornelius Anthoniszoon - The Fall of the Tower of Babel, etching, circa 1530

195 - This speech was delivered at the *volkskongres* on racial purity attended by around 200 churches, held in Bloemfontein in 1944. Dubow, "Afrikaner Nationalism..." (8; 10).

196 - Lalloo, Kiran. "The Church and State in Apartheid South Africa." *Contemporary Politics* 4 (1), 1998, (39-56). Cited in Corrado, "Godliness of Apartheid Planning" (10)

197 - Loubser, J.A. "Apartheid theology: A 'contextual theology' gone wrong?" *Journal of Church and State*, 38 (2), 1996 (321-338), cited in Corrado, "Godliness of Apartheid Planning" (10).

198 - Ibid (14).

199 - It was "[i]n pluriformity," Kuyper argued, that "the console of God [would be] realised." *Inspan*, December 1944, (7-11). Cited by Dubow, "Afrikaner Nationalism" (10-11).

200 - Lalloo, Kiran (43). Ibid (21).

201 - Cornevin, Marianne. *Apartheid Power and Historical Falsification*. Paris: Unesco, 1980. Ibid (24).



Crispijn de Passe the Elder - Destruction of the Tower of Babel, etching, 1612

Group Areas Act (1950), and private spaces, via the Immorality Act (1927, updated in 1957) and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949).

There were, importantly, also dissident voices within the church that rejected the theological arguments for apartheid, including those of Ben Marais, Ben Keet in the 1940s (although neither fully rejected the notion of racial segregation, just the theological defense of it).²⁰² Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, these theological readings were vehemently rejected by many more voices, almost them: Beyers Naudé and the Christian Institute of South Africa, the Kairos Theologians, and Episcopalian Archbishop Desmond Tutu.²⁰³

In re-casting political manoeuvres as religious duties, government suggested that the motives behind such policies were unquestionable.²⁰⁴ These epistemic entanglements are played out across the surface of “Verskanste Openbaring.” The rectangle of fused letters physically enacts how the notions of language, religious doctrine, and political ideology are embedded onto, and into one another. The words have melded into one body — and each key-stroke entrenches the dogma deeper into itself. As a result of Boshoff’s authorial performance, we see notions of language, church and state become both physically and conceptually inseparable.

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202 - Dubow, “Afrikaner Nationalism...” (15-16).

203 - Nichols, Joel A. and McCarty III, James W. “When the State is Evil”, *St. John’s Law Review*, vol.85 (2), article 9, 2014 (610).

204 - For example, supporting the creation of “homelands”, the Minister of Bantu Administration, M.D.C. De Wet Nel proclaimed “that God has given a divine task and calling to every people (*volk*) in the world, which dare not be denied or destroyed by anyone [...] It is a divine task which has to be implemented and fulfilled systematically.” Kuperus, Tracy. *State, Civil Society and Apartheid in South Africa*, 1999 (95). *Ibid* (24).

THE “LANGUAGE OF THE OPPRESSOR”

By the time Boshoff began work on *KYKAFRIKAANS*, “Afrikaners accounted for 80 percent of the senior staff in government departments.”²⁰⁵ Thus, the signifier “Afrikaans” would come to evoke both language and state — almost interchangeably. Jakes Gerwel, a black professor of Afrikaans at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and anti-apartheid activist (later to become the Director-General of the Presidency during Nelson Mandela’s term in office), noted that

Afrikaans [had] become the defining characteristic [of the state] which the greatest part of the population [knew], particularly, by its image of arrogance and cruelty.²⁰⁶

Gerwel went on to invoke Alan Paton’s assertion that “only a fool or a philologist” could discuss Afrikaans and ignore the language’s inescapable nationalist overtones.²⁰⁷

In 1955, recognising that education was a potent political tool, as H. F. Verwoerd²⁰⁸ (the then-Minister of Native Affairs) proclaimed:

When I have control of Native Education I will transform it so that the Native will be taught from childhood to realise that equality with

Europeans is not for them...What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd.²⁰⁹

Here, the political impetuses underwriting educational policies are vividly, and chillingly, articulated. The use of language as an ideological tool is later evidenced in a secret policy document of the Afrikaner Broederbond²¹⁰ from September 1968. Here, the “Broeders” were called upon to enforce Afrikaans on black South Africans.²¹¹ Schools in particular were recognised as “strategic sites where Afrikaner hegemony could be implanted by using Afrikaans as a medium of instruction.”²¹² Soon this project was to leave the shady pages of Broederbond circulars and take its place in the official documents of apartheid policy. By the 1970s, to be young and black in South Africa was to be a prisoner of Bantu Education; an ideological tool designed to produce poorly-educated, subservient citizens of apartheid.

In rendering the viewer unable to read or decode it — a kind of illiteracy — “Verskanste Openbaring” might be understood as a dark parody of Verwoerd’s notion of information that “[one] cannot use.” Boshoff’s pedagogical performance of rewriting a master-text could refer both to the process of learning (a pupil diligently rewriting words to learn spelling), as well as the conditions of punishment (repetitive hours of writing lines in detention). In either case, by regressing the reader back to a pre-literate identity, the work reminds us that literacy is not innate but learned — and thus bears broader socio-political implications. The work reminds us of

205 - *Beeld*, 17 June 1976. Cited in Giliomee, *Rise and Possible Demise...* (16).

206 - Gerwel, G.J. “Afrikaner, Afrikaans, Afrika”, address to Afrikaanse Skrywersgilde, 20 May 1976. Cited in Giliomee, *Rise and Possible Demise...* (16).

207 - While Boshoff does not ignore the political connotations of working in Afrikaans (indeed, these implications are arguably at the heart of his project) he *does* leave it to the viewer to interrogate this choice of medium. To some extent, then, perhaps, the artist is both fool and philologist - although maybe not quite as Paton intended... His fascination, even obsession, with language and linguistics certainly rival those of the philologist - but as for being a fool, *KYKAFRIKAANS* is demonstrably the work of a man both intelligent and self-critical. *However* (to perform a Boshoff-esque slight of tongue), one might also argue that in his playful-yet-scathing critique of power, the artist becomes a kind of court jester; a fool after all, but an important one.

208 - Verwoerd was speaking in 1955, a year after the government passed the “Bantu Education Act.”

209 - “Youth and the National Liberation Struggle 1894 - 1994.” <<http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/youth-and-national-liberation-struggle-1894-1994>> Accessed 9 July 2015.

210 - The “secret” society of supremacist Afrikaners founded in 1914. All members were white, male, and Calvinist.

211 - In an article entitled “Afrikaans as a Second language for the Bantu.” I. Wilkins and H. Strydom, *The Super-Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikanerbond*, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1978. Cited in Ndlovu, Sifiso Mxolisi. “The Soweto Uprising,” *The Road to Democracy in South Africa Volume 2 [1970-1980]*. Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2006 (324).

212 - Ndlovu, “The Soweto Uprising” (317).

Foucault's assertion that

Education may well be...the instrument whereby every individual, in a society like our own, can gain access to any kind of discourse.²¹³

Here, education is understood to play an active role in the creation and maintenance of certain kinds of subjects and subjectivities.

In conspicuously withholding information from the viewer, the poem seems to suggest a need to interrogate systems that govern the "distribution [of education], [and] what it permits and in what it prevents."²¹⁴ Foucault writes:

Every educational system is a *political means* of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and powers it carries with it...What is an educational system, after all, if not a ritualisation of the word; if not a qualification of some fixing of roles for speakers; if not the constitution of a (diffuse) doctrinal group; if not a distribution and an appropriation of a discourse, with all its learning and its powers?²¹⁵

A mark only becomes a "sign" if the reader can identify it as such — and writing, therefore, necessarily "calls readers at circumscribed socio-political sites."²¹⁶ Carrol Clarkson observes that who is able to read — or *not read* — a text "has momentous socio-political implications."²¹⁷ Recognising the co-imbrication of language and politics, "[i]t is unsurprising," writes Clarkson, "that questions about language recur as a central preoccupation in the work of several South African artists and writers."²¹⁸

213 - Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Swyer, Rupert (trans.), New York: Pantheon Books, 1972 (215+).

214 - Foucault, *Discourse on Language...* (215).

215 - Ibid (215+). My italics.

216 - Clarkson, Carrol. *Drawing the Line*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013 (70).

217 - Ibid (70).

218 - Ibid (69).

Exposing and exploiting the entanglements of language, education and power have been central to Boshoff's practice — in "Verskanste Openbaring" and beyond. Recognising that the flow of knowledge, in the form of education, "follows the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict,"²¹⁹ Boshoff has made a career of using words as weapons. His oeuvre is marked by an enduring fascination with the Janus-faced nature of language; how it operates as an apparatus of both inclusion and exclusion, a sign of either kinship or otherness. The artist describes how he became acutely aware of the diversionary capacity of language upon his appointment as lecturer at the Johannesburg College of Art (now the University of Johannesburg), in the mid-1980s.²²⁰ Boshoff's Afrikaans accent and dialect were subjects of derision amidst his English speaking colleagues, who would go out of their way to use complex vocabularies. Instead of engendering conversation and connection, language was implemented as a means whereby Boshoff was denied membership to the academic community. Attack being the best form of defence, Boshoff resolved to turn the academics' "weapon" back on them.

To this end Boshoff created the *Dictionary of Perplexing English* in 1984. As a means of fighting back against the English hegemony in the university system, Boshoff began appropriating the language that was being used against him — discovering and inventing obscure English words to use as ammunition against the other lecturers. A page at a time, Boshoff read the English dictionary, collecting long and confusing words. Unlike a conventional dictionary, the *Dictionary of Perplexing English* destabilises meaning; words become tools of disconnection and alienation. We also see, again, how Boshoff uses the notion of "play" to enact more complex and difficult political concerns.²²¹ Today, the *Dictionary of Perplexing English* lists nearly 18 000 words, and it remains a work-in-progress.

219 - Ibid.

220 - Boshoff, personal interview, July-Oct 2015.

221 - Vladislavić describes this as a "prank with a serious purpose, aimed at outwitting and upstaging these self-satisfied, self-appointed authorities." Ibid (48).

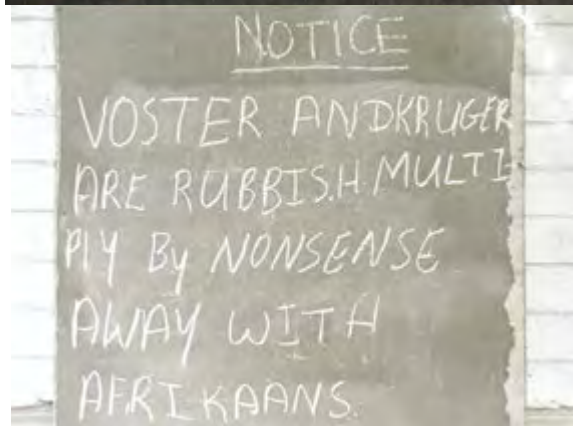


JUNE 16, 1976:
LANGUAGE, LEARNING & IDEOLOGY

"We are fed the crumbs of ignorance with Afrikaans as a poisonous spoon"
- Sign carried by a student at the Soweto Uprising²²²

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The morning of June 16th 1976 saw an estimated 15 000 to 20 000 students, mostly black teenagers, assemble at Orlando West High School and begin marching through the streets of Soweto in response to the Education Department's introduction of a law that would enforce Afrikaans as a primary medium of instruction in township schools. At the time, the students were learning in English rather than their first languages, but it was Afrikaans's ideological link to the apartheid system that made this new policy especially repugnant to the black students.²²³ Fierce anti-Afrikaans sentiment could be clearly read off hand-painted signs that proclaimed: "If we must do Afrikaans, Vorster must do Zulu!" and "To hell with Afrikaans!"²²⁴ Within a matter of hours, the police force had blocked the march and demanded that the crowds dissipate. When the students refused to disband, the police reacted with extreme and immediate brutality. While the pupils threw stones, police responded with dogs, tear gas, and gunfire. The violence with which the marchers were met intensified over the course of the day, and by that afternoon conflict had broken out across the township. Protesters, no longer only students, rallied with the rage and urgency of people long oppressed. Eventually the military was called in, and the Soweto was barricaded, but riots and fighting continued into the night.



Posters from the "I Saw a Nightmare" Archive.
Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, Source: SAB K345

222 - Pohlandt-McCormick, Helena. "Afrikaans," *I Saw a Nightmare...* Ch 5, Sect. 2, 2000. <<http://www.gutenberg-e.org/pohlandt-mccormick/PM.c5p1.html>> Accessed 9 July 2015.

223 - Moreover, "[n]ot only was Afrikaans perceived as the language of the oppressor, but few black teachers or students were fluent in the language. This made teaching and learning not only distasteful, but all but impossible." Gish, Steven. *Desmond Tutu: A Biography*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004 (63).

224 - Ibid (63).

The official report issued at the time stated that 176 marchers were killed in the uprisings of June 16th — mostly young, black students. The real number is certainly higher, and many more were wounded — that day, and in the protests that reverberated across the country over the next 16 months. From 1976 to 1978 an estimated 800 people would die in protests related to the Soweto uprising, “represent[ing] the worst racial unrest in South Africa since the advent of apartheid in 1948.”²²⁵

The extent to which Afrikaans had become a metonymic socio-political sign becomes increasingly clear if we look at the events preceding the uprisings. During the first school term of 1976, students had protested by boycotting exams and burning Afrikaans books and test papers. By May 17th, less than a month before the uprising, groups of students had started missing classes in protest. Indeed, the warning signs were plain to those who cared to read them. Helen Suzman, Desmond Tutu, Percy Qoboza, amongst others, tried to forewarn the government that anti-Afrikaans (equating, by then, to anti-Apartheid) sentiment was rapidly reaching critical mass in the townships — but their cautions went unheeded.

To simplify the events of June 16 down to the issue of language alone is to irresponsibly ignore the multitude of other factors that were operating South Africa in the 1970s, and to reiterate the apartheid line on the matter.²²⁶ At the time, the government needed to draw attention away from the much larger political tensions that were reaching a critical breaking point, and language served as a useful distraction. As such, the protests could be posited as

aesthetic conflicts rather than ideological ones; clashes of personal taste rather than political dissent. But, even though it was not the only cause, the Afrikaans Medium bill became the catalyst for the uprisings — alluding to the deeply embedded connections between language, identity and ideology.

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Students marching on June 16, 1976



"We Do Not Want Afrikaans"
Photograph by Mike Mzileni, Baileys Archives

225 - Ibid (64).

226 - Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu lists various factors contributing to the Soweto Uprising, to include: "structural changes in the economy and society[...]the emergence of youth subcultures in Soweto's secondary schools in the 1970s [...] the transformative role of Black Consciousness and its associated organisations [...] the role of the various liberation movements [...] *the ideological role of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction at selected schools* [...] educational, epistemological and pedagogical factors that fostered resistance through the 'autonomous' actions of parents and students. Ndlovu, "The Soweto Uprising" (317). My italics.

Offering an important counter-narrative to the “language of the oppressor” optic is Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* (2009), a book wherein the author, a black South African, fondly reminisces about his childhood under apartheid. In so doing, Dlamini presents an uncommon, unexpected, and difficult perspective on black identity during the apartheid moment. It would be intellectually lazy — indeed, deeply unethical — to read this text as an apology for, or endorsement, of apartheid policy. Rather, Dlamini offers a richer representation of the complexity and contradictions of being a black South African living under Verwoerd’s regime.²²⁷

Most germane to the discussion at hand is Dlamini’s assertion is that Afrikaans, in spite of its oppressive affiliations, “was (and is) the language of black nostalgia.”²²⁸ Within many black communities there developed an Afrikaans cultural grammar unique to locals; *this* Afrikaans was at home in the townships, not the Union Buildings. Colloquial Afrikaans phrases were integrated into of the riffs of jazz, and later, kwaito, songs. Adults would speak in Afrikaans to prevent the “laaities” (kids) from hearing. Phrases like “Ag shame” or “Ag tog!” expressed tender affection, sympathy, or annoyance. Indeed, Dlamini suggests that many of these slang phrases — “*Waar was jy?*” (Where were you?)²²⁹ — would have been foreign to white Afrikaners; linguistically accessible, yes, but not culturally.

It is precisely the ambivalence of Afrikaans as a sign, that, for Dlamini, makes the language perversely suited for grappling

with our past and present; it is the one in which “our *hüzün* is expressed.”²³⁰ Taking this into account, we must remain suspicious of historical accounts that fixate on June 1976 as the single, definitive, reference point for understanding the relationship between black South Africans and Afrikaans. In truth, this relationship was a far more messy, unstable, and fraught one.

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OTHER AFRIKAANSES

The once-intimate relationship between the Afrikaner nationalist state and the Afrikaans literary guard, symbiotic at the beginning of the twentieth century, became increasingly strained from the 1960s onwards. Hein Willemsse cites the uprisings of 1976, combined with the incarceration of Breyten Breytenbach for terrorism that same year, as major factors in initiating an escalating disillusionment in the apartheid system amongst younger Afrikaans writers, artists and activists.²³¹ Even today, 1976 is often cited as a watershed cultural moment in the periodisation South African literary production.²³²

While Louise Viljoen acknowledges that such exercises in periodisation are flawed “homogenising constructs,”²³³ it is nonetheless telling that the wave of resistance that erupted in Soweto is recognised as having profoundly affected South African literary production — especially regarding Afrikaans writing. Post-1976, Viljoen notes that the “ensuing stigmatisation of Afrikaans deeply affected

227 - Instead of resorting to the usual archetypes (describing the township as an abject place, inhabited by pitiable people), Dlamini recounts how daily life in the “locations” was filled with all the richness of human experience; the joys and heartbreaks; the parties, art, and music. Offering a more nuanced perspective, the narrative challenges reductive apartheid binaries, thereby humanising the subjects living under the regime (habitually portrayed as the agency-less victims of oppression).

228 - McKaiser, Eusebius. “Remembering Apartheid with Fondness,” 2009. <<http://www.politicsweb.co.za/news-and-analysis/remembering-apartheid-with-fondness>> Accessed 18 Jan 2016.

229 - A reminiscence, by way of a rhetorical question. Dlamini, Jacob. *Native Nostalgia*. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2009.

230 - Here, the author draws upon Orhan Pamuk’s notion of *hüzün* - a word used to describe the “profound feeling of melancholy” that Pamuk felt about Istanbul. *Ibid*.

231 - Willemsse, Hein. “Afrikaans Literature (1948-1976),” *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*. Attwell, David and Attridge, Derek (eds.). Cambridge University Press, 2012 (607-608).

232 - Along with the dates of the Sharpeville Massacre, 1960, and the interregnum from the late 1980s to 1994. Loffin, “Periodisation in South African literatures,” (2-3). Cited in Viljoen, Louise. “Afrikaans literature after 1976,” *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*. Attwell, David and Attridge, Derek (eds.). Cambridge University Press, 2012 (638).

233 - *Ibid* (662).

Afrikaans literature and led Afrikaans authors to comment on the compromised status of the language in which they wrote.²³⁴ Thus, powerfully affected by their political milieu, as well as contemporaneous postmodern and post-structuralist thought, many Afrikaans writers began producing texts that

question[ed] master narratives, emphasise[d] the textual nature of reality, reflect[ed] on their own status as language constructs, merge[d] fact with fiction, highlight[ed] intertextuality, reinstate[d] the formerly marginalised, [sought] out connections with mad culture and [rewrote] history with a focus on the way it is lived by ordinary people.²³⁵

This resulted in the development of “a localised and politically engaged version of postmodernism.”²³⁶

The second half of the twentieth century saw political resistance as a dominant theme in the work of Afrikaans authors across the colour spectrum. It is significant that during the late-apartheid years coloured Afrikaans writers chose to define themselves as “black” authors, thereby immediately politicising their project. Indeed, Willemse argues that the very fact that black Afrikaans writers produced texts (at all) from conditions of exclusion inevitably constitutes, in itself, an act of resistance against the dominant discourse.²³⁷ Black poets, beginning with S.V. Petersen and Peter Abrams; continuing to Adam Small, P. J. Philander and Arthur Fula in the 1960s; and extending over the 1970s and 1980s to include Peter Snyders, Marius Titus, Clinton V. du Plessis, Wille Adams, Jan Wiltshire, Patrick J. Petersen and Vernon February, all worked to explore what an alternative (and subalternative) form of Afrikaans poetry might say²³⁸ — using their mother tongue to scrutinise the larger socio-

political machinery within which it was a mechanism.

Numerous white Afrikaans writers also provided counter-voices to the nationalist discourse. Authors like André Brink, Etienne Leroux, Elsa Joubert, John Miles; along with poets such as Breyten Breytenbach, Fanie Olivier, George Weideman, Wopko Jensma, Julian de Wette, Ernst van Heerden; and playwrights including Reza de Wet, Hennie Aucamp, Pieter Fourie, Pieter-Dirk Uys, Deon Opperman (amongst others) all produced texts that, in different ways, challenged the Afrikaner Nationalist hegemony.²³⁹ It is not within the scope of this paper to review the individual contributions of these writers, black or white — rather, I draw on the above examples so as to illustrate that the Afrikaans language, as a signifier, is not synonymous with any ideological system. In addition to its undeniable entanglements with apartheid, there were also many other voices that spoke out, in the same language, against the system.

Writing both inside and against the Afrikaans literary tradition, these authors, poets, and playwrights dethrone the apartheid myths of racial purity — instead, retelling the story of the Afrikaans language as one that plays out across the racial spectrum; a narrative of creolisation and diversity. The political potency of such acts of re-writing, indeed *un-writing*, apartheid orthodoxy is demonstrated by the fact that from the 1960s onwards, pieces of resistant Afrikaans literature were deemed by the apartheid government to be “acts of treason.”²⁴⁰

Boshoff’s medium is a volatile one; Afrikaans cannot be read as a stable, single, signifier. In “The Black Afrikaans Writer,” Willemse argues that counter to simplified line that it was “the language of the oppressor,” really “Afrikaans is *at once* the language of the conqueror *and* the language of the oppressed.”²⁴¹ H.P. Van Coller writes that there is no single “story

234 - Ibid (638).

235 - Ibid (640).

236 - Ibid (640).

237 - Willemse, Hein. *Aan die Ander Kant*, (198). Ibid (674).

238 - Ibid (674).

239 - Ibid (638-662).

240 - Willemse, “Afrikaans Literature...” (629).

241 - Willemse, Hein. “The Black Afrikaans Writer: A Continuing Dichotomy,” *TriQuarterly* 69, Spring 1987 (239). My italics.

of Afrikaans” — suggesting that there are as many “Afrikaanses” as there are Afrikaans speakers. For Van Coller, then, what is most important is the recognition of the plural, diverse nature of Afrikaansness; not to try to define “the *beginning*” of Afrikaans literature (and by extension culture), but rather, to acknowledge the multitude of “*beginnings*.”²⁴²

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RESISTANT WRITING

At the core of “Verskanste Openbaring”'s resistance is its illegibility; its resolute refusal to be read. Yet, in the absence of legible language, the work demands that we read this act of textual defiance. What are we to make of a book's act of resisting the reader? In this regard, the condition of illegibility becomes a text in itself — and what initially seems to hinder the reader's progress might, ultimately, facilitate the possibilities of new readings.

Working in South African art-world of the 1970s and 1980s, many artists felt compelled to create work that explicitly expressed their political resistance by documenting injustice, decrying the violences of apartheid government, and calling for change. Reflecting this, the Tate's “Glossary of Artistic Terms” describes “resistance art” as:

A form of art that emerged in South Africa in the mid-1970s after the Soweto uprising that focused on resisting apartheid and celebrating African strength and unity.²⁴³

With this in mind, Boshoff's experiments with an old typewriter were (unsurprisingly) not perceived as particularly “resistant.” Tellingly, Boshoff's name does not feature in Sue Williamson's seminal book, *Resistance Art in South Africa*, which “became the standard point of reference for that vital

period of South African art.”²⁴⁴ Indeed, the urgency of the context seemed to call for art that was immediately conceptually accessible, figurative, emotive — and most importantly, unambiguous.

Contemporaneous South African literary output seemed to follow a similar logic, and resistance was often expressed through the genre of social realism. As David Attwell notes of literature at the time, “life under apartheid seem[ed] to demand a realistic documentation of oppression.”²⁴⁵ Resistance movements of the 1970s, including that of Black Consciousness, tended to cast artists and writers as “cultural workers,” whose output should be easily accessible to the masses, support notions of national unity, and should document the lives and struggles of the oppressed.²⁴⁶

Critiquing such modes of leftist cultural orthodoxy, Gordimer describes this mode of literal, somewhat formulaic, dissent as an “old shell [that has been] inhabited many times by the anger of others.”²⁴⁷ Sharing this view, Njabulo Ndebele writes that modes of strictly “documentary” writing result in “an art of anticipated surfaces rather than one of processes” where

little transformation in reader consciousness is to be expected since the only reader faculty engaged is the faculty of recognition. Recognition does not necessarily lead to transformation: it simply confirms.²⁴⁸

Ndebele suggests an unexpected remedy — arguing that texts might exert a more powerful capacity to shift the audiences' mindsets if they are not restricted to

242 - van Coller, H. P. “The Beginnings of Afrikaans Literature,” *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*. Attwell, David and Attridge, Derek (eds.). Cambridge University Press, 2012 (383; 407).

243 - Tate Online, “Glossary of Art Terms.” <<http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/t/resistance-art>> Accessed 24 Oct 2015.

244 - Williamson, Sue. “Preface to the Reissue,” *Resistance Art in South Africa*, Cape Town: David Phillip, 1989 - reissued 2004 (6).

245 - Attwell, David. *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Cape Town: David Phillip, 1993 (11).

246 - Ibid (16).

247 - Gordimer, “Living...” (Part 4).

248 - Ndebele, Njabulo S. “Turkish Tales,” *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary*. Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1991 (45).

describing the “spectacle” of oppression,²⁴⁹ but rather, work to engender within the reader a “rediscovery of the ordinary” (and what could be more “ordinary” than a book?).

Responding to the arguments above, I would argue that Boshoff’s illegible page can be understood as both a manifestation and a subversion of the resistance art genre. Referring back to the Tate’s definition of the movement, the piece might be said to “resist apartheid”...but not, as the definition suggests, by “celebrating African strength and unity.” Rather, following Ndebele, it is an art of processes — of unanticipated surfaces. Boshoff undermines the mechanisms of apartheid: language, discourse, and the document. While, typically, resistance artworks proclaim their politics unambiguously, “Verskanste Openbaring” makes no such declarations; it does not display the hallmarks of resistance art or writing; the “kit of emotive phrases, [the] unwritten index of subjects, [the] typology.”²⁵⁰ Instead, the page performs its resistance. Referring to *KYKAFRIKAANS* in general, Vladislavić notes that although the book was not initially understood as particularly resistant, the text is “more challenging than the simpler gestures of resistance [...] because it is more radical, in the sense of being fundamentally resistant.”²⁵¹ As the product of markedly resistant processes, “Verskanste Openbaring” is itself defined by *the act of resisting*.

Viewing “Verskanste Openbaring” through the optic of resistance art, or resistant writing, engenders a whole new set of questions: we must ask ourselves, what one is to make of a non-realist text in the context of political turmoil? Of what possible use is such a text? (Does it even need to be “useful?”). An in-depth consideration of these questions is beyond the scope of this paper, but what is most relevant here the recognition that Boshoff’s linguistic and formal experimentation constitute acts of *defiance* — moreover, these are acts that we can read politically.

249 - Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (152).

250 - Gordimer, “Living...” (Part 4).

251 - Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* (46).

CONCLUSION

Conceptions of language and the regime were so deeply embroiled that, when the uprisings of the students in Soweto erupted in 1976, the students’ gesture was a metonymous one: attacking the system by rejecting its language. Importantly, the marches signified a far deeper political unrest; but it is nonetheless significant that it was ultimately the issue of language that ignited the protests and triggered what would come to mark a definitive turning-point in the course of the struggle, and indeed, in South Africa’s history.²⁵²

Recognising that notions of the Afrikaans language in the 1970s are undeniably and profoundly politicised, I am not arguing that Boshoff’s work was a direct, or even conscious, response to the Soweto uprisings (or any other specific event). However, drawing on Jameson’s ideas of the political unconscious,²⁵³ I think it crucial to consider the broader political context in conversation with “Verskanste Openbaring.” Boshoff (writing as a white Afrikaner, however anti-government) was inevitably implicated, and as such, his choice to work with — and against — this linguistic medium, in this context, must be read a deeply political act. Boshoff proposes that if language is used to write doctrines, then language might be mobilised to rewrite, and *unwrite*, dogma.

With each stroke on his Hermes 3000, this artist dismantled his own language: using letters to break words. The language of the oppressor was deployed to decommission itself. These documents undermined other documents, self-consciously and deliberately opening themselves to multiple readings. Signs were shown to be contingent, duplicitous and untrustworthy. *KYKAFRIKAANS* agitates the relationship between language and ideology — exposing the contingencies and contradictions of each, and importantly, their inextricable entanglements.

252 - After June 16th, something in the national consciousness had irrevocably altered. The governmental brutality had inadvertently galvanised the liberation movement, locally and abroad.

253 - Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 1981.

ALICE EDY



III

REVELATIONS & RESISTANCE

Having contemplated notions of the text's surface and materiality over the previous chapters, I will now move on to a more "literary" reading of "Verskanste Openbaring." Following Nuttall's assertion that "[s]ome of the richest readings we inherit from the anti-apartheid era have relied on... *kinds of formations of symptomatic reading*,"²⁵⁴ I hope to integrate these various modes of interpretation. In the following chapter, I shift my focus from the surface of the page to what lies beneath: The Book of Revelation.²⁵⁵

"[F]ar from being a fantasy of what will never be," David Barr, a prominent scholar of contemporary Apocalypse studies, argues that "the Apocalypse represents a reality that already existed."²⁵⁶ Following Barr, and drawing again on Jameson, in this chapter I will undertake a symptomatic

reading of Revelation, approaching the text as a "literary invention that has to be read (and interpreted) rhetorically," considering it in terms of

the historicity of its forms and content, the historical moment of its emergence of its linguistic possibilities, the situation-specific function of its aesthetic.²⁵⁷

What might a richer understanding of the ancient context of Revelation's production and reception be able to add to an interpretation of Boshoff's text? And why might an ex-preacher-turning-atheist artist working in late-apartheid South Africa invoke this strange and preternatural Biblical text — nearly two millennia after it was written? In the following chapter I am curious to "unveil" the text-within-the-text.

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ON REVELATION(S)

The Book of Revelation is the last book in the New Testament of the Christian

254 - Nuttall, "Rise of the Surface" (415). My italics.

255 - Revelation is also sometimes referred to as "The Apocalypse of John," or just the "Apocalypse" - and I use the titles here interchangeably.

256 - Barr, David L (ed). "Introduction," *The Reality of the Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*. Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2006.

257 - Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (9).

Bible.²⁵⁸ It was also chronologically the last book to be included in the Biblical canon, added in 419 CE. The author is a prophet identified only as “John.” We know very little about John other than that he is a Christian — he introduces himself as the reader’s “brother and companion” (1:9) — and that he writes from the island of Patmos (a small island off the West coast of Turkey, and the site of a Roman penal colony at the time).

Revelation takes its title from its first word; “apokalypsis” (ἀποκάλυψις) which is constructed from the lexemes “apo-” meaning “away from,” and “kalyptos,” which is a covering of sorts, such as a shroud, veil or cowl.²⁵⁹ Contrary, then, to the associations of modern readers (who tend to understand “apocalypse” to mean the cataclysmic events at the end of the world), the term is in fact synonymous with “revelation,” describing an “uncovering,” “unveiling,” or “revealing”. The title refers to the nature of the text itself, as John presents his narrative as a prophesy of the future, unveiled to him by divine messengers.

For readers unacquainted with the book, or those unfamiliar with the Judeo-Christian tradition, I offer here a very brief description, so as to contextualise the conversation that follows.

The first three chapters of Revelation comprise of letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (now Turkey). John addresses the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea

(2:1-3:22). In these letters, John writes that he “knows of their deeds” or “afflictions” (1:2-2:25), and calls for each to amend their ways and repent in order to receive pardon from God. Although John does not explain his selection of cities, Steven Friesen suggests that perhaps what is most significant about John’s address are not the names but the number — seven. Seven is a recurrent number throughout Revelation, symbolic of the notion of “wholeness,” “perfection” or “divine order.”²⁶⁰ Thus, in addressing seven churches, Friesen argues that John meant for his message to be received by *all* the churches in the region. Following this argument, I will consider the *general* political context of the region at the time, rather than focusing just on these specific cities.

The letters are followed by visions of the future, from chapters 4 to 22 (the end of the Book). The main body of the text chronicles the prophet’s visions of the various punishments of the unworthy, followed by a final battle between heaven and earth (or “good” and “evil”), the destruction of the world, and ultimately, the reinstatement of “a new heaven and a new earth” (21:1).

The imagery of Revelation is strange, spectacular and exceedingly violent. Unsettling characters include a whore drunk on human blood (17:5); a dragon whose tail knocks the stars out of heaven (12:4); and horse-like locusts with human heads (9:7). The narrative depicts destruction and suffering on a cosmic scale, featuring, inter alia, over seven plagues (13-15:8); the divine massacre of billions of human beings (everyone on earth, except for 144 000 people) (20:8); and a deluge of blood that flows from “the winepress of divine wrath” as high as horses’ bridles (14:20). Overall, the book is characterised by themes of punishment, suffering, persecution — and, most crucially, the notion of “the end” of the current political and spiritual order, whatever that might represent, and the arrival of a new age.

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258 - A note on the Biblical quotations: The edition of the Bible I use here is the “New International Version” or NIV, first published in 1973 by the New York Bible Society, now Biblica. I use a contemporary English translation of the Bible so as to enable this discussion to focus on the key concerns of the text without getting weighed down in inaccessible, outdated language. Moreover, the well-known King James Version, translated from 1604-1611, was produced by 47 men (all British), while over 100 scholars of differing nationalities and genders worked on the NIV (including a South African). The manuscript base used for the NIV translations of Revelation were the original Koine Greek texts. Barker, Kenneth L. *The NIV The Making of a Contemporary Translation*. International Bible Society, 1991 (54).

259 - Jamal, Ashraf. Essay in *Art In South Africa*. Williamson, Sue, and Ashraf Jamal (eds.), Cape Town: David Philip, 1996.

260 - Friesen, Steven J. *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001 (136).



Albrecht Dürer - The Revelation of St John, 12: The Sea Monster and the Beast with the Lamb's Horn, Woodcut Series, 1497-1498

JOHN'S WORLD

Exactly when Revelation was written remains contested, but the earliest manuscripts situate the text some time in the late first century — during the Roman empire's reign over Mediterranean and western Asian region.²⁶¹ At the time, Christianity was a relatively new religion (Jesus only having died 30 to 60 years earlier) and the Roman authorities had no tolerance for what they saw as a neo-Jewish cult. Christians were a minority in Roman society, with little formal organisation and no political power. Most damningly, the core spiritual tenets of this new sect directly opposed “the cult of the emperor” — the widely-held Roman belief that the emperor was one of the gods. As the Christians claimed that there was only one god (residing in heaven, not Rome), their theology undermined imperial authority. As such, being a Christian was a crime punishable by execution.²⁶² Nero was reportedly fond of having Christians crucified, or dressed in animal carcasses and ripped apart by dogs, or set on fire to be used as human torches at night.²⁶³ And, twenty years later, Christians living under the rule of Domitian were not much safer:

...great numbers of [Christians] distinguished by birth and attainments were executed without a fair trial, and countless other eminent men were for no reason at all banished from the country and their property confiscated.²⁶⁴

261 - The majority of scholars think John wrote the book during the rule of the Roman emperor Domitian (circa 90CE), while others argue that it was earlier, during the reign of Nero (around 65CE). Barr, David L. “Reading Revelation Today,” *Reading the Book of Revelation: A Resource for Students*. Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2003 (1).

262 - Special pardons could be granted for Roman citizens. Thompson, Leonard L. “Ordinary Lives: John and His First Readers,” *Reading Revelation*. Barr, David L. (ed.), Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2003 (33).

263 - Tacitus (Ann. 15.44). Ibid (35).

264 - Eusebius (Hist. Eccl. 3.17–18). Ibid (29–30).

Christians inhabited a civil *non-space*, with no guarantees of either of a peaceful life or a gruesome death (but the very immediate potential of both). Roman policy towards Christianity was brutal in its ambiguity, and the social position of the John and his community was a precarious and contingent one. As Thompson notes, “[a]nyone could be charged with being a Christian at any time, and the authorities executed those charged and found guilty.”²⁶⁵ As such, the institutionalised persecution of the Christians during the first century operated on dual levels; unpredictable incidents of savage physical violence underwritten by a daily sense of pervading anxiety.

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READING REVELATION

Boshoff does not teleport Revelation straight out of the first century — rather, the artist uses as his material an ancient text that bears two millennia-worth of cultural baggage. It is therefore necessary to not only historicise Revelation itself, but also, to provide a brief overview of its subsequent interpretations. In this section I will mention some of the predominant ways in which the Apocalypse of John has been read historically. In outlining some (of the many) interpretations of Revelation, I hope, firstly, to give a sense of this text's inordinately generative nature, and secondly, to foreground the relationship between strategies of interpretation and the political agendas that inform them.

Readings of Revelation, notes Barr, can generally be characterised as either material or mystic. The former mode takes the events described in the book to be predictions of actual events that will transpire in the “real world,” while the latter construes these phenomena as “spiritual realities” or metaphor.²⁶⁶ For the first century after Revelation was written, the material reading was the most prominent. Early Christians read Revelation in light of

265 - Ibid (43).

266 - Barr, “Reading Revelation Today” (2).

the trend of *parousiamania*,²⁶⁷ when Jesus's return was considered imminent.

However, as time worn on with no sign of the horsemen, this literal reading became increasingly tenuous, and attempts were made to account for this delay. A corollary interpretation developed, asserting that book was not as "a blueprint for the future but an image of the end times."²⁶⁸ According to this reading, the scenes of Revelation described *the same moment in time*, from different perspectives. The incidents of the book were "superimposed" onto each other, so that instead of forming a single linear narrative they constituted contemptuous scenes; multiple facets of a single moment.²⁶⁹ It is striking that, however unconsciously, Boshoff's production of "Verskanste Openbaring" performs a similar operation; obliterating the possibility of temporal linearity, and instead, presenting all of the events of Revelation at once.

By the fourth century, a metaphoric approach to Revelation had become most prominent. This reading saw Revelation as a metaphor for "the struggle between good and evil in the world," rather than a literal prediction. Barr argues that another reason for this paradigm-shift was the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity. For the first time, Christianity was affiliated with the dominant regime, and thus less inclined to vilify wealth and power.

From the fifth century until the turn of the first millennium, the Church combined both material and spiritual interpretations. In other words, while many of the events described in the book were understood in metaphorical terms, the over-

arching storyline was still mapped onto the real world, and into real time. Many believed that the "end" would occur at the turn of the first millennium. However, when the deadline for Armageddon came and went — again — this reading also declined. However, circa 1200, Joachim of Flora resurrected this metaphoric version, modifying the dates to account for the text's unfulfilled promise.²⁷⁰ Right up until the nineteenth century, Barr writes that variations of this "predictive" interpretive strategy constituted the prevailing mode of reading Revelation.

While the "End is Nigh" paradigm still persists amongst minor religious cults, the "utter failure of all such predictive views has turned most academic interpreters in other directions,"²⁷¹ and contemporary readings of Revelation are focused on developing a historical, rather than theological, understanding of the text. Stephen Moore notes that the plethora of contemporary readings of Revelation span, and intersect with, a wide variety of other discourses, including literature, gender studies, eco-criticism,²⁷² popular culture studies, feminism, masculinism, and queer studies.²⁷³ Responding to the formal resistance we have already encountered in Boshoff's iteration of this text, this chapter takes as its focus the notion of political resistance in (the original) Revelation — explored via a liberationist, postcolonial and empire-critical reading.

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267 - "Parousiamania" is the obsession with the second coming of Christ, and the resultant end of the world - a term Boshoff taught me this term in one of our interviews. In fact, it was in part the study of parousiamania that lead Boshoff to abandon his Christian beliefs in his early twenties, after having worked for over a year as a minister. The artist began studying how various "false prophets" have manipulated scripture in order to exploit others, and as a result Boshoff became, and remains, deeply disillusioned with organized religion.

268 - Ibid (2).

269 - Ibid (2).

270 - Joachim argued that the *days* in Revelation actually referred to *years*, and that the age of the Son was therefore only due to end in 1260 CE. In Joachim's readings, rather than looking back to John's context, the symbols were anachronistically projected forward, across both history and geography, so that "the various heads of the beast were identified with specific rulers." Ibid (3).

271 - Ibid (3-4).

272 - Ecological readings contemplate the destruction of "the first heaven and earth" to make space for "the new heaven and new earth" (Rev 21:1).

273 - Revelation contains the most sex-acts and sex-images of any book in the New Testament. Moore, Stephen D. "What Is, What Was, and What May Yet Be," *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex, Gender, Empire and Ecology*. Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2014 (5-7).



Unknown Artist - *The Woman and the Beast*, undated etching

trauma; “provid[ing] a feeling of detachment and thus greater control.”²⁷⁶

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REVELATION AS PROTEST LITERATURE

Apocalypse scholars have observed a powerful relationship between Revelation and disenfranchised communities, notes Jean-Pierre Ruiz.²⁷⁷ With this in mind, what might Revelation be able to say when it is read through the lens of liberationist hermeneutics, a paradigm Ruiz describes as “the decision to read the Bible *with* and on the side of the oppressed and marginalized?”²⁷⁸

In the following section I will be investigating what a liberationist and postcolonial optic are able to offer the reader of Revelation, and to consider how the Apocalypse might be understood as a form of political protest literature. Following this, I will consider how Revelation has been invoked to critique the apartheid moment in South Africa. Finally, I will consider the

relationship between “liberationist” and “postcolonial” readings of the text, where they share concerns and where they differ.

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“Revelation arises in a time of persecution,” writes Chilean priest Pablo Richard, as it “transmits a spirituality of resistance and offers guidance for organising an alternative world.”²⁷⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, also writing on the prominence of the Apocalypse in the “canon-within-the-canon of liberationist hermeneutics,” argues that:

[s]ince Revelation depicts the exploitation of the poor and the concentration of wealth in the hands of the powerful, the injustices perpetrated by the colonialist state... [the oppressed] can read it as speaking to their own situation of poverty and oppression.²⁸⁰

John uses the text as a weapon with which to attack imperial power and assert a counter-narrative for the Christian minority. Not possessing the same kinds

276 - Yarbro Collins, Adela. *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1984 (160-161).

277 - Ruiz, "A Postcolonial Exploration of Revelation 13" (120).

278 - Ibid.

279 - Richard, Pablo. *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation*. New York: Orbis Books, 1995 (3). Ibid (120).

280 - Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, 1991 (11). Ibid (120).

of material resources that the Roman state had at its disposal (and having only a small following and no political power), John needed to utilise more accessible means. As such, the book becomes a site wherein "John reveals a deviant knowledge" that contrasts "the public knowledge embodied in the empire."²⁸¹ This "deviant knowledge" constituted a new epistemological site where the imperial cult could be critiqued. Ruiz observes that the "intensity of John's ideological combat has much to do with the fact that it was fought against overwhelming odds *at such close range*,"²⁸² and this notion of resisting a system from *within* evokes Boshoff's own situation.

Revelation can be read as a "minority counter discourse"²⁸³ in that, by rewriting their oppression as an essential part of a grander narrative, John imbued the Christian's suffering with a profound sense of significance. Instead of being cast as the victims, John uses prophesy to show us that the oppressed will be the victors in the long-game. Moreover, the author, through the act of writing, is able to claim a kind of conceptual ownership of the master narrative of history. Instead of being the objects of imperial violence, John restores the subjecthood of the persecuted Christians. With this in mind, might it be possible to draw parallels between the political climates of John and Boshoff — or is this too far a stretch?

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THE APOCALYPSE FROM A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

To respond this question, I call on Allan Boesak's 1987 work, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective*. Boesak, as a black pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church and a prominent figure in the anti-apartheid movement, was deeply engaged in both the political and theological aspects of resistance. Boesak's book becomes the common ground where

John's text and Boshoff's context are brought together and (indirectly) put into dialogue.

In *Comfort and Protest*, Boesak directly relates John's struggle to that of black South Africans suffering under the apartheid regime. The significance of Boshoff's invocation of Revelation, at this particular moment, is encapsulated by Boesak, who argues for the importance of reading Revelation during the apartheid era:

...not so much because we are intrigued by the symbolic language and the mysteries that abound in this book, nor because it is supposed to give us perfect forecasts of the hereafter — *but because we see with some astonishment how truly, how authentically, that John, in describing his own time, is describing the times in which we live.*²⁸⁴

Characterising Revelation as "underground letters to a persecuted church,"²⁸⁵ Boesak (like John) uses Revelation to give hope to his congregation who are suffering under an oppressive regime. Boesak dedicates his book to

all those who, true to their faith, have struggled and fought with us; gone to jail and shared pain and bread with us. They are seeing the power of the beast. They shall see the victory of the Lamb.²⁸⁶

We see here how the apartheid moment is described by Boesak in Biblical terms: the beast that once represented the Roman empire, and Babylon before her, now stands for the apartheid state. Boesak takes the Bible, trusted tool of the colonists, and re-reads it from the perspective of the oppressed.

Importantly, not only does Boesak suggest a different paradigm for reading the Bible, he evinces a mode of interpretation that actively excludes the oppressor. Boesak cites the position of oppressed South

281 - Thompson, Leonard L. *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990 (193).

282 - Ruiz, "A Postcolonial Exploration of Revelation" (128). My italics.

283 - A term I borrow from Ruiz, Jean-Pierre (130).

284 - Boesak, Allan A. *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987 (29). My italics.

285 - Ibid (15-39).

286 - Ibid (15-39).

Africans as fundamental to a meaningful understanding of Revelation, writing that

*it is the struggling and suffering and hoping together with God's oppressed people that open new perspectives for the proclamation of the Word of God as found in the Apocalypse.*²⁸⁷

This optic simultaneously opens up new possibilities of understanding Revelation, while, in the same gesture, blocking access to the text for those in power. "The clue to understanding the Apocalypse as protest literature," writes Boesak, "lies in Revelation 1:9: 'I John, your brother, who shares with you...the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance [of suffering].'"²⁸⁸ Here Boesak makes clear that sharing in the personal experience of persecution is critical to a meaningful reading of the Apocalypse, and that

[t]hose who do not know this suffering through oppression, who do not struggle together...and who do not feel in their own bodies the meaning of oppression and the freedom and joy of fighting against it, shall have grave difficulty understanding this letter from Patmos.²⁸⁹

There is much at stake in this assertion. In addition to appropriating and rewriting elements of dominant discourse, Boesak goes further. He is not merely re-purposing a tool of the oppressor, he is taking it away altogether — and claiming rightful ownership. Simply put, if you do *not* share in John's suffering, you are *not* his brother, and this book is *not for you*. Boesak's approach to Revelation openly acknowledges the influence that the reader's context has on their apprehension of the text — indeed, it foregrounds the impact of context on possibilities of understanding.

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POST-COLONIAL READINGS OF REVELATION

While liberationist readings, such as Boesak's, attack the empire of Ancient Rome, they fall short of acknowledging the colonial entanglements of the Bible itself. Therefore, even as I draw on Boesak's work in order to link Boshoff and John's texts, it is important to recognise that for Boesak, the liberationist values espoused by Revelation are premised on an acceptance of Biblical doctrine. While the identity of "the beast" has mutated across contexts, for Boesak, salvation is still granted on the Lamb's terms.

A post-colonial reading of Revelation encompasses the liberationist argument, whilst also critiquing its reliance on colonial discourse. Unlike purely liberationist readings (such as *Comfort and Protest*), postcolonial criticism is more uneasy about adopting the Bible's words uncritically. In this regard, "postcolonial criticism provides an important corrective" to readings of Revelation that have ignored the book's complicated embroilments with empire-building.²⁹⁰ Ruiz urges us to remember that the Bible has on many other occasions been used to defend and champion colonialist values — "the very same book" has been used as the "charter for colonizers who read in its pages the mandate to build the new Jerusalem."²⁹¹

While recognising that Revelation can be interpreted as an example of protest literature, it remains important to note that this critical lens is just one of many interpretive optics that might be applied to this rich and symbolic text. Yet, reading John's words via Boshoff's ink, the resistances of each seem to amplify one another. Both authors write against the empire, from within the empire — and the resultant text(s) are a sites of conflict and complexity.

290 - Ibid (134).

291 - This is evidenced in a letter written by Christopher Columbus in 1500, in which he describes North America as the "new earth" of Revelation (21:1). Spotorno, *G.B, Memorials of Columbus*. London, 1820 (224), as cited by Burke, Donald. *New England New Jerusalem*. Detroit: Wayne State University. Dissertation for Doctorate in Philosophy, 2006 (517). Ibid (134).

287 - Ibid (38). My italics.

288 - Ibid (38).

289 - Ibid (38).



IV

AUTHOR(ITY): THE WORD IN REVELATION

*He who was seated on the throne said...
"Write this down, for these words are
trustworthy and true." – Rev. 21:5*

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In this chapter I will discuss how the notion of the “Word” features in Revelation (in the form of language, written documents and doctrine). I do so in order set up a dialogue between the text-within-the-text (Revelation) and the text itself (“Verskanste Openbaring”). While we may encounter shared political concerns underwriting both versions of the book, it is significant to note that the authors utilise the tool of the written word very differently. Boshoff uses the materiality of his text to agitate and expose the embroilment of language and ideology, while John’s attack of the dominant political powers is dependent on the supposed legitimacy of his text. In the following section I will investigate how John uses his writing both to validate itself (as prophecy) and himself (as prophet). I am particularly interested in exploring how text can be seen to operate within the narrative world of Revelation as a locus of power, and a means of regulating citizens. Finally, I will consider how John attempts to protect his text from being reinterpreted by future prophets and audiences.

THE SCRIBE

I begin by considering the relationship between the scribe and the scroll. John announces himself as the narrator and prophet from the outset, and explains the circumstances of his divine appointment by describing a vision of God, who commands him to “[w]rite on a scroll what [he] see[s]” (1:11). The imperative to write is repeated again in chapter 19, when an angel instructs John to “[w]rite this down” (19:9). Each time this instruction is issued, John not only obeys and writes, but he also transcribes the command — reiterating his status the chosen messenger of Heaven, thereby reaffirming his claims to prophethood.

The imperative to write also serves to continually reinsert John back into his own story, and the messenger becomes a character in his own narrative. Inasmuch as John and Boshoff “share” a text, might we be able to read Boshoff’s self-insertion onto his own version similarly? Indeed, in his performance of typing and creating the text, Boshoff uses illegibility as a mechanism whereby we are reminded of his own authorial performance. Unable to immerse ourselves in the story, we cannot view “Verskanste Openbaring” without

an attendant consideration its maker. What John tells us *in* his words, Boshoff tells us *with* his words; that is, in terms of their material conditions. Just as John describes his visions, perhaps Boshoff's own experience might likewise be read from his page: a sense of deepening darkness, and the loss of coherence playing out over a landscape defined by doctrine.

The notions of "author" and "authority" are brought to the fore, as John measures the validity of texts in relation to their progenitors. John attacks competing discourses by undermining their *authors*: "false prophets" are condemned to be "thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur" (19:20). That the false prophet receives that same punishment as the beast (as opposed to meeting the same fate as the general population of human sinners)²⁹² suggests that *writing* evil is a higher crime than "regular" sinning — it is tantamount to *being* evil. This imbues the performance of making words material with a deep mystical significance. Conversely, this also implies that for a "true prophet," writing the word of God constitutes the holiest of acts.

While John goes to great pains to prove that his words are "trustworthy and true" (21:5), Boshoff founds his text on the idea of illegitimacy. The primary tenet of "Verskanste Openbaring" is that it is built from stolen words. Boshoff performs a deeply ambivalent form of authorship: asserting and abdicating authorial influence in the same gesture. As scribes, both John and Boshoff implicitly absolve themselves of their words. When we read Revelation from within "Verskanste Openbaring," this effect becomes compounded — we are made aware of two scribes, but perplexingly, no author.

Failing to locate an accountable author, we must perhaps turn our attention to the text-object itself...

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292 - Heathens in general are killed by the rider's sword, following which "all the birds gorge themselves on their flesh" (19:21).

THE SCROLL

An idea is rendered tangible through the act of writing, and the resultant scroll becomes a palpable marker of ideology. The motif of the scroll persists throughout Revelation: John's letters to the churches (2-3), the scroll with the seven seals (6:1-8:1), the book of life (20:12-15), and the sealed scroll of the seven thunders (10:1-7). On each occasion, these written documents are shown to be objects of power that play a key role in the control and regulation of subjects. The importance of the scroll is further evidenced in the structure of the narrative; the diegesis of Revelation is defined to a large extent by the various characters' interactions with different scrolls. Pivotal events in the narrative are shown to unfold around documents — and their relation to writing-acts or reading-acts.²⁹³

It is the written word that drives the narrative of Revelation, as the dramatic action of the story is triggered by the opening of a scroll. The scroll, which has "writing on both sides and [is] sealed with seven seals" (5:1), is in God's right hand. Eventually, the Lamb with "seven horns and seven eyes" (5:6) emerges as the only one worthy to "open the scroll [and] look inside" (5:4). Contrasting notions of revelation and restriction are brought to the fore, as distinction is drawn between those who can — and those who *cannot* — obtain certain information. The locus of power is represented here in terms of the ownership of a document (God holds the scroll) or as the ability to access the text (the Lamb). Boshoff pits these notions up against each other in his revelation by replicating this dilemma — offering us a piece of writing which we are not permitted to read. While "Verskanste Openbaring" is physically within our grasp, its illegibility renders it out of our conceptual reach. The ink itself closes the words from all eyes but their maker's. In performing its power, and refusing to share the contents of the page, "Verskanste Openbaring" both emulates and guards the scroll of the seven seals.

293 - Including: John's letters (1-3), the lamb "[w]ho is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll" (5:2), the censorship of documents: "no one [...] could open the scroll or even look inside it" (5:3), "[s]eal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down" (10:4); and official decree in the form of "[a] nother book [...] which is the book of life" (20:12).

Although the opening of this scroll initiates the action of the narrative, the contents of this manuscript are never revealed to the reader. Adela Yarbro Collins suggests that the scroll is likely a legal document of sorts, as its description matches contemporaneous “deeds, wills and certificates of debt.”²⁹⁴ Legal documents in the first century Roman empire took the form of a scroll that was sealed, with a brief description of the contents written on the outside — which accounts for the description of “writing on both sides” (5:1). “[T]he purpose of the sealing,” explains Yarbro Collins, “is to prevent falsification of the document. The seal makes a document legally valid.”²⁹⁵ Taking into account that the number seven refers to “completeness” or “perfection” in the Bible, a scroll sealed seven times would carry an all-encompassing authority. It is also significant that the scroll gains its power by refusing access to readers; the *seal* renders it valid.

We never discover the secrets of the seven-sealed scroll — but, what we can confirm is that (according to John) the end of the world is initiated by this document.²⁹⁶ And, once set in motion, the events of Armageddon are regulated by yet more administrative paperwork...

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THE BOOK OF LIFE

Elsewhere in Revelation, we see the written word become a regulatory tool that can either permit salvation or deny admittance into heaven. The deeds of every person’s life have been chronicled in the “Book of Life,” which is a recurring motif in Revelation, referred to six times over the course of the narrative (3:3; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12; 20:15; 21:27). Only those whose names are written in this document will

294 - Yarbro Collins, Adela. *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*. Harvard Theological Review, 1976 (22).

295 - Ibid (22).

296 - The act of the opening of the seven seals releases the four horsemen, reveals the martyrs at the foot of God’s throne, and starts an earthquake that tears the world apart. Finally, upon breaking the seventh seal, there is “silence is heaven for about half an hour” (8:1). Then, seven angels appear, playing trumpets that send disasters to the Earth.

be saved. We see how the text performs this task of regulation towards the end of the Revelation, once Satan is defeated and “a new heaven and a new earth” (21:1) are inaugurated. The dead assemble before God’s throne awaiting their final judgment, and their verdicts are based on textual testimony. The Book of Life is opened, and

[t]he dead [are] judged according to what they had done *as recorded in the books* (20:12).

In the penultimate chapter, angels proclaim: “Nothing impure will ever enter [the New Jerusalem] ...but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (21:27). The Book of Life enforces its assessment in spatial terms, eerily evocative of an otherworldly “passbook.”²⁹⁷

Just the Book of Life “proves” someone worthy, so does exclusion from this text certify unworthiness. The “inhabitants of the earth who worship the beast” are noted in terms of their absence: referred to as “all whose names *have not been written* in the book of life belonging to the Lamb” (13:8). Towards the end of Revelation we discover that

[i]f anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (20:15).

These are the highest possible eschatological stakes — being raptured up to heaven, or burning for eternity in the lake of fiery damnation — the final outcome of which rests on a page.

Elsewhere in the narrative, the word is seen to enact itself physically, and violently, on bodies. In chapter 19, after

297 - In 1970s South Africa, “passbooks” served a similar purpose: judging people, classifying them and then limiting their movements accordingly. First implemented in the Cape colony in 1797 and only abolished in 1986, the small pocket books were designed to divide people and control access to cities for black citizens. All “non-white” people working in urban areas were legally required to carry these passbooks “for life”; both in the sense of “always”, as well as “to keep them alive” — being caught by the police without a passbook resulted in immediate arrest and deportation. In both John and Boshoff’s worlds, a book logged the “value” of a person. And in both worlds, the “correct paperwork” determined who could access certain spaces.

Babylon is annihilated, a rider on a white horse appears from Heaven. The rider is “dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God” (19:12-14). He is later identified as “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (19:16). In the rider we find notions of ideology, power and violence amalgamated — an interrelationship that is performed when the Word leads Heaven’s armies into battle with the humans on earth (19:14). The violent propensity of the rider, “the Word,” is the major theme of this chapter, as the might of the Word is not demonstrated via communication, but rather, dominion. Moreover, John recounts that from the rider’s “mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations” (19:15). This imagery links notions of language and violence. Also significant here is that people slain by the “Word” are referred to as “nations” — that is, in terms of their collective *political* identity. This is a battle of ideologies then, rather than one fought against individuals.

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READING CENSORSHIP: WHAT THE SEVEN THUNDERS SAID

Censorship, and notions of withheld information come to the fore in chapter 10, when the “seven thunders” speak and, as John prepares to write, “a voice from Heaven say[s], ‘Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down’” (10:4). Ruiz comments on how this rhetorical strategy moves the attention of the audience from the “story” of the text, back to the author.²⁹⁸ In so doing, John rekindles an awareness in his readers of his own intermediary role as scribe and witness, and alludes to the power implicit in that position. This manoeuvre is mirrored in “Verskanste Openbaring”, where the physical form of the text alerts us to the presence of information, whilst simultaneously denying the reader access to this content. In both cases, our

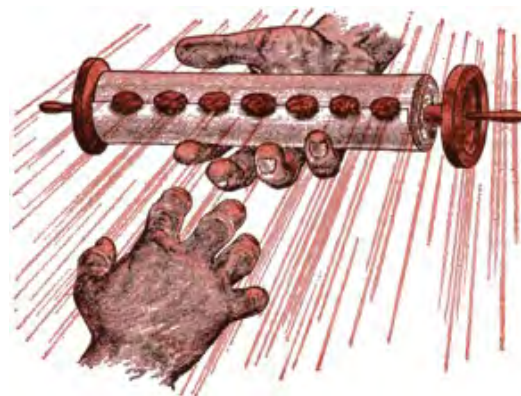
previous modes of readerly acquiescence are destabilized as we become increasingly cognisant of how the text is mediated and manipulated, before it reaches our eyes.

While John presents his narrative as “revelatory,” this claim is undermined by his (and later Boshoff’s) heavy use of symbols to “[hide] meaning within words.”²⁹⁹ The text is shown to be an untrustworthy bearer of meaning when a voice from heaven tells John to take a scroll from an angel and *eat it* (10:8). An angel explains that the scroll “will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey” (10:9-10). Here we see that the initial encounter with the scroll is subsequently contradicted by how it actually operates. This contradiction is arguably at play in the entire book of Revelation, a text that promises enlightenment, yet speaks in imagery that is heavily shrouded. As Boshoff states in an interview,

the book of Revelation is anything but revelatory [...] it is a book of controversy and strife [...] there is no lifting of the mists of ignorance. It is a conundrum, an unravellable ravelling.³⁰⁰

This paradox is embodied in Boshoff’s own rendition — a “veiled unveiling.”

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298 - Ruiz, "Hearing and Seeing But Not Saying: A Rhetoric of Authority in Revelation 10:4 and 2 Corinthians 12:4," *The Reality of the Apocalypse*. Barr, David L. (ed.), Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2006 (94).

299 - Paton, "Willem Boshoff and the Book" (14).

300 - Boshoff, Willem. Interview with Ashraf Jamal. Jamal, Williamson (eds.), *Art in South Africa*. (n.pag).

THE BOOK THAT PROTECTS ITSELF

As he transcribes John's prophesy, Boshoff demonstrates that even without changing a single word it is possible to completely alter a text. It was perhaps in recognition, and anticipation, of the contingencies textual meaning that John attempted to create a system whereby the book guards itself against subsequent scribes.

Revelation consecrates the acts of reading, listening, and believing in *itself*:

[b]lessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it (1:3).

Again, in the final verse, Jesus sends an angel to impart similar words to John, saying; "[b]lessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book" (22:7). In a sense, Boshoff is a "keeper" of the text, albeit an ambivalent one.

There are, however, severe penalties for defiling the book; a "security clause" is written into the final chapter of Revelation. The text doubles as a contract that prescribes how it must be approached by future readers — while others are permitted to *read* the text, they may not infringe upon the words in any way. Having just spent the better part of 22 chapters describing gruesome scenes of retribution, John draws on his existing material, and extends these threats to encompass the final crime of editing:

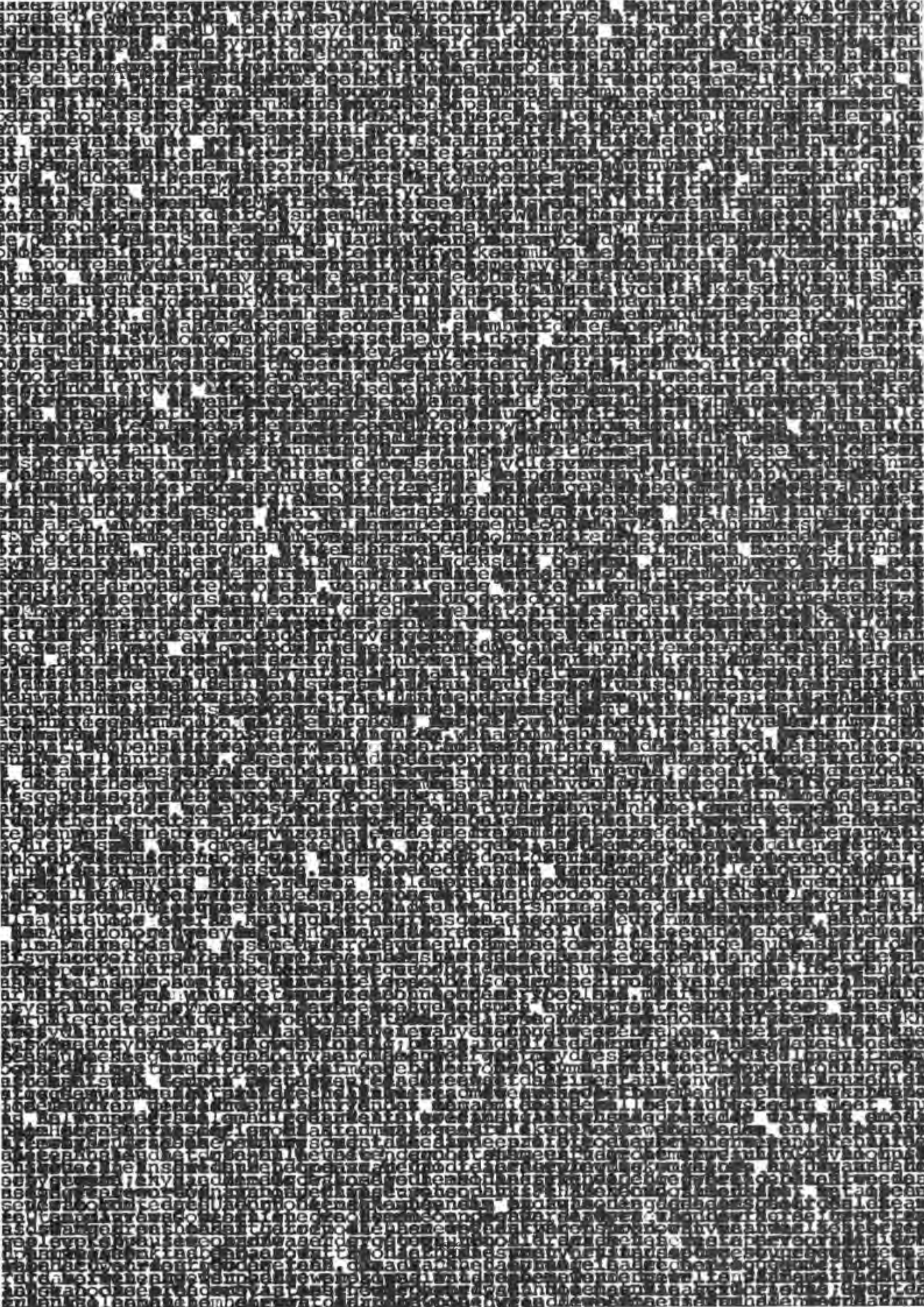
I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: *If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.* (22:18-19) My emphasis.

Interestingly, these lines mark the only two times in Revelation that John states directly that "God (himself) will [intervene]." While Armageddon is orchestrated via proxies (such as angels, elders, or the Lamb), it is in defence of *this document* that

God will take direct action. This suggests that the defilement of Revelation must constitute a sin of the highest possible order. John's warning charges the text with a kind of eschatological curse that is able to project from within the inner realms of the narrative into material world.



Boshoff has, in "Verskanste Openbaring," succeeded in committing *both* (but also *neither*) of the aforementioned crimes. In retyping the book verbatim, the artist has not, technically, "added" or "taken away from this book of prophecy"...yet, he has done both. Changing the presentation of the text has affected the contents, and as such, "Verskanste Openbaring" is able to use the words of Revelation to speak its own truths. In creating a new text that refuses to be read, Boshoff's revelation is able to critique its own South African apartheid context, and expose how notions of language, identity, politics and religion are all embedded within each other. Moreover, by rendering the text unreadable, Boshoff has destroyed the prophecy, "taken away" its capacity to communicate via conventional literary channels. In performing his creative plagiarism, the artist is obeying the letter of the law, and yet dismantling its coherence.



CONCLUSION

VEILED UNVEILINGS

I have spent a year reading a single page.

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The performance of writing this paper has been, in a sense, an inversion of Boshoff's performance of writing "Verskanste Openbaring." While the artist compressed a book onto a flat surface, I have taken that surface and re-expanded it again, into a different book. I have tried to extend this to encompass your performance of reading this text; presenting the project as a self-conscious gesture towards the artist's book. The exterior surface of this book-object evokes the poem described within; it is flat, textured, unreadable. Yet the book form itself has meaning; we know that we can open it, perhaps hinting that we might be able to approach "Verskanste Openbaring" in a similar manner. Inside the covers — and beneath the surface — there are stories to be discovered, contained in ink.

Recognising "Verskanste Openbaring"'s fundamentally resistant nature, this project set out to investigate Boshoff's "double gesture" — his simultaneous offering and withholding of meaning; the core premise of this piece, and,

indeed, of *KYKAFRIKAANS* as a whole. The illegibility of the language necessitated an engagement with the surface of the page. These considerations of materiality then called, in turn, for a consideration of the piece's performativity; Boshoff's performance of typing, as well as the reader's performance of interpretation. I have explored the extent to which the title and the text operate at odds to one another: the title asserting that the piece is a narrative (requiring a *reader*), while "imagistic" nature of the work demands a *viewer*. As such, the page can be understood as the site of a constant power-struggle between ink and narrative; "Verskanste Openbaring" is a text perpetually re-encoding itself, both across and below the line(s) of the surface.

Exploring notions of resistance further, I argued that "Verskanste Openbaring" might be productively understood as a form of resistance art, or "resistant writing," in that it can be read as critiquing the bureaucratic violence of apartheid. However, this piece simultaneously challenges this genre in that, rather than *bearing* a message of resistance, it *embodies* a message of resistance; in other words, it *performs* its resistance. In this sense, "Verskanste Openbaring" is able to

articulate its truths intrinsically — even viscerally — rather than allegorically.

Approaching the page-as-image, I investigated the medium with which it was “painted” — Afrikaans. I argued that an entire language can become a sign, moreover, one that we might read politically — but also, crucially, that this sign is an unstable one. I discussed the *taal*'s undeniable embroilments with apartheid ideology, whilst also noting that there are many counter-voices that can also be heard to speak in Afrikaans. In his 1985 poem “Taalstryd” (“Language Struggle”), Breyten Breytenbach personified Afrikaans as an old soldier: a “gray reservist of more than hundred years / with its fingers stiffly around the triggers.”³⁰¹ Breytenbach's image provides a striking counterpoint to Boshoff's dexterity; with his fingers nimbly on the keyboard, the artist turns the weapon of language back on itself. To describe the strategy of re-purposing existent language to critique its source text, I offered a reconfiguration of Kenneth Goldsmith's term “Uncreative Writing” — suggesting that this politicised act of plagiarism might constitute an act of “Creative Unwriting.”

Having considered the surface, I moved on to a symptomatic reading of the text-within-the-text; the Book of Revelation. Importantly, this reading was guided by the surface reading that preceded it, and accordingly, I looked for instances of resistance in Revelation. This book has been interpreted according to innumerable agendas over the past two millennia, and in reading the narrative politically, I did so conceding that this angle was just one of many possible interpretive strategies. The object was not to provide an unequivocal account of this text, but rather, to read the book in relation to the material conditions of the poem itself. Somewhat unexpectedly, my inquiry into the socio-political context of Revelation's production revealed that the original text shares unexpected parallels with Boshoff's — a connection that Allan Boesak has drawn before me (a decade after *KYKAFRIKAANS* was produced, and unbeknownst to Boshoff). Here I hope to

have shown that a high degree of political resistance is embedded into the fabric of each text, whilst also noting that this is manifested at different sites. In the original Revelation, it is the *inner*, symbolic world of the narrative where power is fought and overcome. For Boshoff, this plays out across the surface; in “Verskanste Openbaring” the materiality of the text is manipulated to reveal its own contingencies, thereby implicitly critiquing the system heavily reliant on the document as a tool of oppression.

Considering that Boshoff's and John's texts are linguistically identical, and both arguably underwritten by liberationist ideals — this kind of “double reading” also requires that careful attention be paid to how and when the texts are at odds. In both cases, the narrative operates behind a veil of sorts; for Boshoff, the shroud that obscures the text is literal — made of ink, while for John, the story is hidden behind language in another way — by the heavy usage of symbolism. In both cases, the reader is forced to adapt their strategies of interpretation. “Verskanste Openbaring” is so “closed” that the reader must attempt hybrid modes of reading. Revelation, on the other hand, is so “open,” so infinitely generative, that the reader must necessarily create conscious boundaries in order to make sense of the text — even going as far as creating the Apocalyptic literary genre, and, in the case of this thesis, adopting the lens of liberationist hermeneutics as a schema for meaning-making.

Finally, I once more changed my tactics of engagement, so as to perform a literary “close reading” of Revelation. This approach focused on the world within the story itself — specifically, the portrayal of textual materials and the act of writing within the narrative. I hope to have shown that Boshoff's performance gains further potency when we learn that the original piece of writing that he re-authors is, itself, a text that sanctifies the document. Looking through Boshoff's page, back towards John's, we see that not only do both scribes repress information, but indeed, they foreground this act of withholding. Here I argued that the authors' conspicuous regulation of knowledge serves to destabilise the relationship between reader and text, thereby engendering a more critical mode of readership.

301 - Breytenbach, Breyten. *Lewendood (Living Death)*, Emmarentia, 1985 (143-144). Cited in Viljoen, “The History of Afrikaans Literature...” (639).

Read together, these investigations demonstrate that the resistance, or rather, *resistances* of “Verskanste Openbaring” operate not as a veil, but as a generative force that sets up the conditions for new possibilities of viewership. In defamiliarising the book-object by condensing it onto a single page, and then defamiliarising the printed page by rendering it illegible, Boshoff initially seems to be “obscuring” Revelation. However, the adoption of a more flexible “inclusive” mode of reading, as proposed by Nuttall, reveals that what appeared at first to be a completely inaccessible text has presented us with a multitude of new opportunities for reading. In foregrounding the unstable and yet undeniable relationships between surface and content, image and language, texture and text, “Verskanste Openbaring” challenges conventional terms of textual engagement. To appropriate J.M. Coetzee’s words, I hope to have shown the extent to which Boshoff’s poem “rivals...the mythic status of history,” by establishing its “own authority” on its “own terms.” This work is one that

operates in terms of its own procedures and issues its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child’s schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress).³⁰²

I have tried to read this work, not as a “schoolmistress” seeking stable conclusions, but rather, as a collaborator; a co-performer.

*

According to a recent study, the average time since an adult in the developed world has written something down on paper, by hand (other than their own signature) is 41 days.³⁰³ And, excepting the odd shopping list or post-it reminder, a third of the population have not handwritten *anything* in over six months. Perhaps now more than ever, the performance of writing — the act whereby language becomes substance — warrants richer contemplation. Revisiting *KYKAFRIKAANS* in this contemporary moment, when the image of the word is becoming increasingly disembodied, I hope to have shown that the materiality of the page is able to offer us new possibilities of engaging with notions of surface and depth; language and image; illegibility and revelation; resistance and creation.

The piece, if we accept its challenge, may allow us to develop new sensitivities to reading texts — be they books or artworks; information or experience. In struggling to make sense of this page, the reader actively becomes a part of the performance of meaning-making; we are reminded of the impulse that started us on this whole project in the first place — not the project of reading Boshoff per se, but the project of reading itself.

302 - Coetzee, J.M. "The Novel Today," 1988 (2-3). Cited in Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee* (15), and Poyner, Jane (ed.). *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006 (84).

303 - These statistics come from an online survey of over 2000 adults in the United Kingdom, in 2012. In a separate study, one in three British adults described handwriting as “nice”— “but not something they would want to do every day.” Wrenn, Eddie. “Could we forget how to WRITE?” 2012. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2163175/Could-forget-WRITE-The-typical-adult-scribbled-hand-weeks.html#ixzz3xhry6vpt>> Accessed 18 Jan 2016.



*Willem Boshoff and "CAKE AFRIKAANS" - my thank you gift to him.
8 July 2015*

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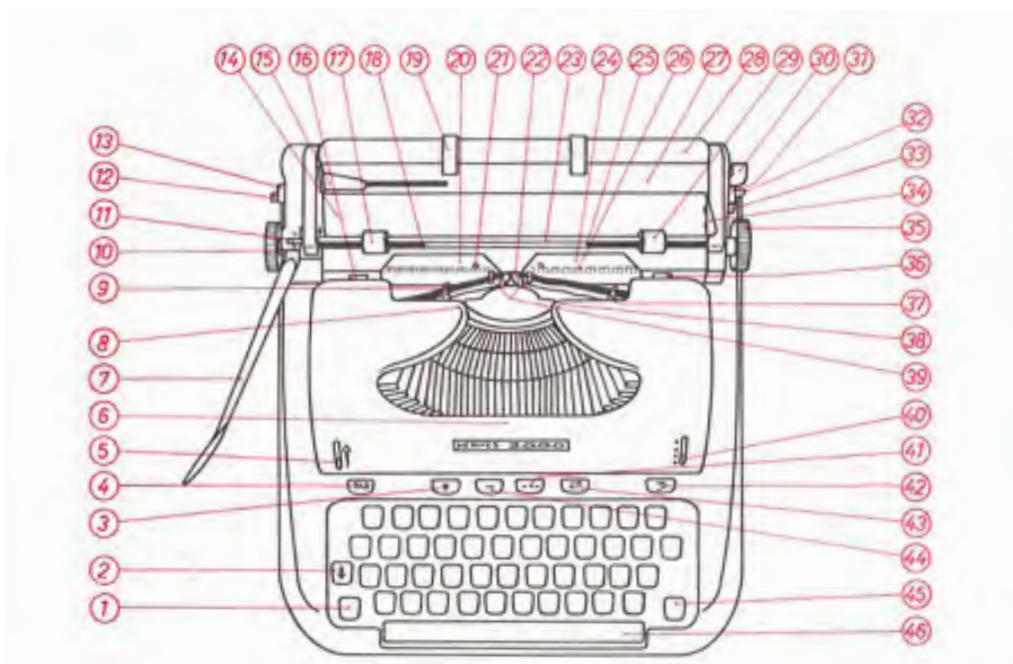
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Monk at Work in a Scriptorium, unknown artist, circa 15th century



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