Constructing an Alternative Reality: Aspects of the work of Stanley Spencer

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FINE ARTS,
FACULTY OF ARTS
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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January 1997

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I declare that this is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts (Fine Arts) in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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20 January 1997

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Through his depiction of the ordinary and the everyday, Stanley Spencer manages to convey an extraordinary vision. This research investigates his visionary intentions as expressed through narrative pictorial devices. The construction of an 'Alternative Reality' in painting relates to the desire to absorb the spectator into an imaginary world of the artist's devising, based largely on his culture-specific environment. Through the use of a naturalistic style, Spencer is able to mirror as well as deviate from a straightforward copy of events to arrive at a visual expression of his idiosyncratic views. I will examine how his belief in the redemptive power of art underlies his transfusion of ordinary situations with his unorthodox religious views. The views of W.J.T. Mitchell and James Elkins on the radical possibilities of narrative in painting are considered in relation to Spencer's method of constructing images and his process of materializing his unified vision. I relate my own work to the above concerns.

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Introduction

"Just as a book will absorb you into a world so I hope my paintings do
so. They are parts of this idea I have...of life and what is to me
significant in it...When I read a book I want...to be held in the
atmosphere of it because then you...live in it and there is no jump
between you and the affairs of the book. This same absorption is
possible in pictures and is a legitimate and proper thing for a painter
to aim at...and expect the spectator to enter into. I wish people would
read my pictures". [1]

The visual idiom of Stanley Spencer's work offers a rich opportunity to examine the visionary
intentions as manifested through a metacode of narrative. Spencer expresses his intention to
allow the spectator of his work to be absorbed into an alternative, imaginary world where human
experience can be fashioned in a translatable and communicable form. The construction of an
'alternative reality' in a painting relates to such a narrative impulse as it arises between a personal
experience of the world and an effort to describe that experience through visual language. For the
purpose of this dissertation, the term 'Alternative Reality' is thus used to refer to a hypothetical
construct which the artist devises as metaphor for a very personal vision.

A compelling naturalism is the visionary artist's means of presenting directly to the viewer an
immediate vision as it is the sense of immanence that wishes to be defined. A naturalistic style is
thus used as a means of making the vision vivid and immediate to the onlooker. The close
observation and depiction of naturalistic detail is a means to a personal vision and expression of
personal philosophies beyond the sight of mere appearance. Roland Barthes has pointed out how
the narrative impulse "ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events

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[1] Stanley Spencer as quoted by Bell, 1992, p. 52

recounted"[2]. How this occurs and what kind of meaning is substituted in Spencer's work will be examined within the milieu in which he specifically chose to work. The 'Cookhamisation'[3] of his imagery bespeaks the obsessive and stubbornly idiosyncratic course which he took in pursuing his vision at the height of the modernist advance in Europe. Regarded as having achieved "peculiar eminence" as a "naive visionary"[4], commentators on Spencer's work have generally neglected his oeuvre, and as Hyman notes, "Spencer has been marginalised partly because his best work seems indifferent to the crisis of language that has dominated twentieth century art".[5]

A recent resurfacing of interest in Spencer is exemplified in a proliferation of texts on the artist. Some of the more substantial and thorough examinations of Spencer's oeuvre include Keith Bell's "Stanley Spencer, the complete catalogue of the works" (1992) and Kenneth Pople's "Stanley Spencer, a biography" (1991). While I found many texts on Spencer to be anecdotal, Pople's close reading of Spencer's total output, including his numerous writings, provided a valuable source. Bell's encompassing catalogue of Spencer's work enabled me to gain a valuable overview of his work.

In Chapter 1 I consider Spencer's position within the context of the modernist advance in British painting, highlighting his particular visionary approach. His desire to find an affirmative revelation in even the most mundane aspects of life and the realisation of this pursuit in a constancy of vision is discussed insofar as it constitutes his particular construction of an alternative reality. I briefly consider Spencer as a precursor to a particular style of visionary painting which maintains a culture specific outlook in a constant vision, following which, a definition of the term Alternative Reality is put forward.

Following the modernist emphasis on media specificity, the argument that painting should not be temporal because time is not proper to its essential nature, has been countered by W.J.T. Mitchell

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[2] Barthes ,R. 1988 The wisdom of art Calligram Ed. by Bryson, N. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, p.79
[3] referring to his portrayal of his subject matter in the idiosyncratic style typical of his presentation of Cookham, where he was born and which he idolised.
[4] Arnason, 1977, p. 539
[5] Hyman, 1991, p. 31

(1986). I briefly examine his line of argument in legitimising the expression of discourse and narrative through painting. The radical possibilities of a narrative impulse in painting are illustrated in a text by James Elkins (1991) on "The Impossibility of Stories: The Anti-narrative and Non-narrative Impulse in Modern Painting". His argument is useful in considering Spencer's position within a narrative tradition of painting.

In Chapter 2, I examine how Spencer addresses the Renaissance tradition of religious painting in order to analyse his use of and deviation from such conventions. Spencer's views on spirituality and religion are discussed as being instrumental in such deviation. His unorthodox views on sexuality are also mentioned as they inflect on his religious outlook which complicated the reading of his images. The role of allegory in his attempt to translate his philosophies through images is briefly considered. Some devices used in visionary religious art of the Renaissance are examined alongside selected examples of Spencer's religious subjects in order to identify his personal motivations in his depiction of religious themes.

Chapter 3 looks at the traditional narrative mode of continuous narration as an attempt at suggesting a temporal dimension in painting. Spencer's unusually long, horizontal format in selected examples is examined inasmuch as it corresponds to such ordering of space and related conventions of inscenated narrative. His Shipbuilding series represents one of his major achievements in its fusion of the documentary with the mystical. These paintings clearly exemplify his close identification with the people and places he painted and the sense of belonging he identifies in them. His method of constructing an image and his process of materialising his unified vision is explored.

In Chapter 4 the underlying theme of resurrection throughout Spencer's oeuvre is discussed insofar as it establishes an interdependency between artworks. The redemptive function of the theme of resurrection as portrayed by Spencer finds its strongest expression in his paintings on war-related events. "The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus' Daughter" (1947) is examined as an example where the narrative device of a 'frame within a frame' implies various levels of reality. Distortion as a marker of emotional involvement is discussed in specific examples.

In Chapter 5 I attempt to outline my own approach to the construction of an alternative reality and consider some aspects corresponding to Spencer's visionary constructions. In my depiction of a personal vision I also present everyday situations that reflect on conventional views of religion. My particular approach to narrative is outlined in specific examples.

Chapter 1

Spencer's Peculiar Vision

An indigenous fascination with reflecting life and society characterises the art of Britain even beyond the modernist urge to purify art of everything except its essential form. Thus we find complementary to the bias towards abstraction during the formative years of modern art, a strong desire to reflect the habits, thoughts and dreams of society, which Gore (1986) links to the empiricist strain in British philosophy[6]. The brutal onslaught of the First World War also ensured that many artists moved away from their former interest in near-abstraction and began to explore more representational alternatives.

Although undeniably individualistic in his approach, the young Spencer also displayed an interest in the formal concerns of his peers and in the revitalisation of the British visual idiom through the example of the continental influences of Cezanne and the Cubists. However, while drawn towards the structural severity of the abstractionists, Spencer, like William Roberts, Edward Burra and others remained free from formalist orthodoxy. Spencer's passionate need to make his life and fantasies into art overrode any theoretical interest he might have developed in pictorial language. He was very conscious and protective of his creative vision and insisted on the individuality of his work, while taking any suggestion of influences as a direct threat to the purity of that vision, and in later years he denied that he had been influenced by any form of contemporary art at all[7]. He was, however, well aware of developments in the contemporary arts in London, and expressed great appreciation for the work of Duncan Grant and Jacob Epstein. Differing greatly with modernist theories on the role of subject matter in painting, which he believed to be essential to the expressive nature of his work, he found the modernist emphasis on the formal aspects of the artwork limiting and felt that "abstract art looks like the product of exams. Very contrived and within the rules."[8]

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[6] Gore, 1986, p. 9
[7] This claim is of course highly debatable. Its importance lies not in its validity though, but in the light it sheds on Spencer's views on the individuality of his work.
[8] Stanley Spencer as quoted by Bell, p. 26

Spencer has been referred to as the very British successor to Blake and the Pre -Raphaelites: "In one aspect of his work...unself-consciously adopting the primitive eye of the child, in another...the Slade draughtsman whose virtuosity equals the old masters".[9] Pre-Raphaeliteism was still regarded as a continuing tradition in English painting as some of its late followers lived well into the new century. In Spencer's work the Pre-Raphaelite influence formed a natural continuation from his interest in illustration and the English landscape. This influence impacted most notably on his obsessive treatment of narrative detail. Bell indicates such traces in the types of landscapes Spencer depicts in specific paintings as well as the format he chooses for his compositions. "Technically it has been described as Pre-Raphaelitism out of Cubism: there is all the minutely faithful detail of flowers and so on of a Holman-Hunt but the drawing and design are cubist enough to make Holman-Hunt faint".[10]

Spencer's home-grown Pre-Raphaelite interest is also reflected in his identification with early Italian Renaissance painting such as the work of Giotto and Fra Angelico amongst others. As a student at the Slade he was briefly involved with a loosely associated group known as the Neo-Primitives, which appeared to be moving towards a revival of the Pre-Raphaelite movement through a return to its sources in Italy. Pople points out a similarity in approach in Spencer and these early Renaissance artists in his ability to metamorphose intense spiritual feeling into associations that are given expression in direct and lucid images. His images are simple to the point of naïveté, and the self-imposed limitation of visual range and expression is disciplined by the logic, not of reason, but of sensibility. Like the early Renaissance masters, the innocence of his early work was programmed for altarpieces and frescoed chapels.[11]

The Neo-Primitives included several of Spencer's prominent contemporaries like Gertler, Nevinson, and Wadsworth and was symptomatic of the general trend at the time, cultivated and encouraged by Roger Fry. Fry and his circle looked towards the continent to revitalise English art

[9] Gore, 1986, p. 10
[10] Times of India, 29 March 1929 quoted by Bell, 1992, p. 58
[11] Pople, 1991, p. 513. On pp. 194 and 255 quotes Spencer expressing his intention (in his correspondences regarding the Sandham memorial Chapel at Burghclere), to learn fresco. He abondoned the idea, however, and the paintings were executed in oil on canvas.

by way of the primitive elements which captured the French and German interest at the time. For the rather conservative English taste the Italian primitives seemed a little more palatable than the predominantly non-European artefacts that inspired the continental artists. Most factions of the English avant-garde were, however, unified in their appreciation of the importance of primitive art and its place in the modern movement.

The period after WW1 was a time of temporary exhaustion and uncertainty when many of Spencer's contemporaries found solace in re-examining their relationship with tradition. These artists, amongst them William Roberts, Paul Nash and Wyndham Lewis, had served in the trenches and were impelled by their experiences towards a descriptive realism. So many artists were driven to consider the fate of man and his environment that, although the tendency was still towards Modernism, it moved away from abstraction. This development was in keeping with what was happening on the continent. WW1 saw the first major breakdown of the modernist idiom. The energy of Cubism and Futurism had been spent and its most prominent figures, Picasso, Derain, Carra and Severini called for a return to the traditional values of high art.[12] Although Spencer had never embarked on the modernist adventure, Hyman (1991) indicates a change in his work to a 'fallen state', to which Spencer himself referred as the loss of his innocent vision connected to his forced removal from Cookham during WW1. Although the war had a consuming influence on Spencer's childlike innocence, the visible impact on his art was subtle; unlike the anguish visible in war commissions executed by his contemporaries, his paintings of war themes never dealt directly with the horrors of violence and death. He preferred to present the redeeming qualities of simple, domestic actions of the soldiers, as portrayed in the Sandham memorial chapel. Although he did see some action against the Bulgarians in Macedonia in 1917, it was his service as medical orderly at Beaufort War Hospital from June 1915 to August 1916 that profoundly influenced his war paintings. The tedium of his daily duties was suddenly and miraculously relieved by his exposure, via a Roman Catholic friend, Desmond Chute, to the writings of St. Augustine. "St. Augustine says about God 'fetching and carrying'. I am always thinking of those words. It makes me want to do

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[12] Buchloh, in his article 'Figures of authority, ciphers of regression: Notes on the return of representation in European art',(Frascina, F.(ed) 1992 **Art in Modern Culture; an anthology of critical texts** Harper and Collins, New York) connects this tendency to the rise of authoritarian political systems in Germany,Italy and Russia.

pictures. The bas-reliefs in the Giotto Campanile give me the same feeling".[13] This notion had a decisive influence on his reverence for simple labour and his interest in the ordinary which resulted in his transformation, through painting, of the everyday occurrence into action of spiritual significance. "...Suddenly I began to see and catch hold of little particles of this life in the scrubbing of a floor or the making of a bed, and so, gradually, everything began to reveal to me...until at last I felt I could reveal the whole progress of my soul by stating clearly these impressions of my surroundings...so at last things became sacred to me by association."[14] This characteristic finds its clearest expression in his empathy towards the workers depicted in his Second World War paintings of the Port Glasgow Shipyards.(discussed in Chapter 3).

In an essay on Stanley Spencer , Carol Weight (1988) writes:

> "the innovator of an art movement need not necessarily have a great artistic personality; it is the idea which takes possession, not the man...but if a man is to succeed as a reactionary artist, as Stanley Spencer undoubtedly was (and I do not mean that in a derogatory way), then he must do so by the sheer force and originality of his personality".[15]

The idea of personality, of a unique vision, is central to much of the figurative art which has emerged in Britain and elsewhere during the 1980s and 1990s. Depicting the apparently ordinary in a rhetoric or peculiar vision characterises the work of many narrative painters who prefer to paint not directly from life or the mirror, but from memory and the imagination in order to express personal experiences and emotions more directly through theatrical images and stories. In presenting Spencer as a precursor in constructing an alternative reality through a constancy of vision which contributes to the realisation of a personal world-view, I will briefly consider other visual artists who typify this metaphorical take on reality in their respective constructions of an alternative reality. Paula Rego, a British painter of Portuguese origin bases her images firmly within Portuguese culture and refers to experiences from her childhood and adolescence. Despite

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[13] Spencer as quoted by Pople, p. 113. Pople indicates that it is a paraphrase of a passage from St. Augustines *Confessions:* "ever busy yet ever at rest, gathering yet never needing, bearing, filling, guarding, creating, nourishing, perfecting"

[14] Spencer correspondence,1923, as quoted by Cork, 1994, p. 296

[15] Weight, C. Painters at the Royal College of Art, Ed Huxley, P. Phaidon Christies Ltd. and the Royal College of Art.

having lived in Great Britain for the past 25 years, she depicts very specific features in her figures and landscapes that reflect her Portuguese origin. Similarly, Fernando Botero's use of excessive fatness in his depiction of figures can be regarded as a metaphor for the Latin American sense of the fabulous. Despite leaving Colombia at 18, his approach has remained constant, even in his repainting of Italian Renaissance masterpieces. Both artists have developed their own personal vocabularies which are permeated with culture-specific references and continue the visionary quality which is so typically English in the case of Stanley Spencer. Spencer's strong sense of place in his idolisation of his hometown of Cookham and the role of Cookham villagers (i.e. specifically English folk) has a definite stamp on all his work. Even images painted outside Great Britain, such as "Souvenir of Switzerland" (1933-34) are populated by Cookhamites and bear little reference to the actual sites. Spencer's alternative reality consists of a recreated Cookham. Although his obsession with the village is often somewhat exaggerated[16] in texts on him, Cookham has always remained a comfortable metaphor for 'Englishness' in his art. His representation of the village, though not accurate in a mimetic sense, is remarkably close in feeling to the actual village as it still is today. While the settings he depicts are fairly straightforward views of places in Cookham, the perspectives have been distorted and figures are often placed strangely in and at the edges of the canvas.

Arnheim[17] notes the complexities surrounding the term 'reality' by pointing out that what the natural sciences call real, belongs to the transcendental realm; a world beyond the reach of our senses. Bryson[18], in defining realism, points out that it lies in the coincidence between a representation and that which a particular society proposes and assumes as its reality; a reality involving the complex formation of codes of behaviour, law, psychology, social manners, dress, gesture, posture - all those practical norms which govern the stance of human beings toward their particular historical environment. I will use what Arnheim calls the 'phenomenal' world, the world of perceptual experience, combined with Bryson's brief description above as perimeters for the term 'reality' and in attempting to define the term 'Alternative Reality' as used in this document. 'Reality' is thus

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[16] his obsession was not with Cookham itself so much as with 'that Cookham feeling' which refers back to his safe, secure, happy childhood.
[17] Arnheim, 1992, p. 27
[18] Bryson, 1983, p. 13

understood as the world of perceptual experience determined by those practical norms which govern the stance of human beings toward their particular historical environment. I use the term 'Alternative Reality' to refer to a situation which appears very similar. An alternative solution (alternative reality) to a question (the attempt at creating the perfect copy) implies a solution of satisfactory similarity to the first or ideal solution (the perfect copy). Alternative reality thus refers to a hypothetical reality similar to the 'model' reality, probably to a large extent based on the 'model' reality, but adhering to slightly different rules. The artist, as creator of this alternative reality, dictates these rules. It is important to note that Alternative Reality is a hypothetical concept and not meant to imply anything in the nature of an 'alternative universe'. Alternative reality only exists in illusionistic form and as a fabrication of the artist. It thus serves as a means of representing a very personal vision via illusionistic devices traditionally associated with the Western concept of realism. The viewer is presented with a convincing image of the human situation but depicted from a culture-specific viewpoint. The idea of an alternative reality is thus closely linked to the concept of style, since every artist recreates the world according to how he sees it, freeing it from " the nameless weight which held it back and kept it equivocal"[19]. What sets the recreated world of an artist like Spencer apart is the extent to which it differs from general perception while appearing to attempt to correspond to it. Style is the means of re-creating the world according to the values of the one who discovers it. The way this discovered world is imaged is both a way of making it visible and communicating the values found and/or expressed in it. In presenting an alternative reality the artist takes on the role of narrator in the process of refiguring his physical reality. "Whenever a piece of news is conveyed,...there is a mediator - the voice of the narrator is audible. The mediacy of the narrator...constitutes a sort of analogue to our experience of reality in general".[20] An alternative reality needs to be based closely on observed fact since it is constructed to express ideas or visions of the artist, pertaining to his own physical situation. "The narrator is the one who evaluates, who is sensitively aware, who observes...We do not apprehend the world in itself, but rather as it has passed through the medium of an observing mind".[21]

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[19] Merleau-Ponty, M. As quoted in **The Merleau-Ponty Reader**, Northwestern University Press, Evanston. 1992 p.93
[20] Stanzel, 1984, p. 4
[21] Käte Friedemann as quoted by Stanzel, 1984, p. 4

As such the construction of an alternative reality is ideologically motivated. The issues which the artist addresses concern very personal views and values and by addressing them he hopes to bring about enlightenment, acceptance and change in the viewer and thus he takes on a role not .... o that of a local prophet. By departing from mimetic and illusionistic principles in varying degrees, the artist ensures that the viewer realises that he is observing an image of the artist's vision. It is on this count that Spencer often faced public criticism; because he was also known to paint closely observed naturalistic portraits and landscapes, his audience often misread the distortions in his visionary paintings as lack of skill. It is my intention to examine in later chapters how Spencer inserts meaning, pertaining to his personal vision, into both descriptive and traditional narratives[22].

Spencer, as quoted in the introduction, expresses two intentions which lie at the core of his visionary work: Firstly for his paintings to absorb the spectator into a world of its own, and secondly to relate to the viewer his own idiosyncratic philosophies through his artwork. Basing his analyses on Spencer's own writings, Pople has demonstrated convincingly the extent to which Spencer's personal philosophies are contained in and communicated through his work. Apart from personal correspondences with family, friends and patrons, Spencer wrote extensive notes on his work and philosophies. By the end of his life, his writings totalled millions of words, written on anything from thick notebooks to old envelopes and stored in several trunks into which he would dip to re-read, re-annotate, re-paginate. He seldom kept letters, but would draft replies which would often remain unposted because, having sorted out his thoughts in them he found them of more value to himself than to the intended recipient. In Spencer's writings ideas flow like a stream of consciousness, offering little by way of immediate illumination regarding his paintings. Pople identifies a manner of code in them, born "from the impossibility all artists face, in whatever medium, of finding in the words or images or symbols they are given to use that universality their imagination perceives".[23] He pleads for a holistic approach to Spencer's art since "an artistic interpretation which ignores Spencer's material existence will remain truncated. Yet a biography which blinds itself to the revelation in his paintings of the facts of his existence can only perpetuate

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[22] With descriptive narratives I refer to those paintings illustrating an event rather than an existing 'traditional' narrative
[23] Pople, 1992, p. xiv

the superficiality which saw him - and sometimes sees him still - as whimsical or innocent or unworldly or even as blasphemer or pornographer....His art, perceived through sympathetic understanding of his life, can reveal a transcendent outlook, an intriguing and majestic vision of life...which most may joyously recognise as having eternal and universal import".[24]

The modernist project consisting of the progressive elimination of the influence of one medium upon another and the gradual reduction of each to its 'essential' properties and possibilities, as formulated by Clement Greenberg, insisted on the aesthetic 'extinction of personality'. It sought to evacuate language, literature, narrative and textuality from the field of visual art[25], thereby erasing discourse and speech to attain 'purity' and opticality, expressing what Rosalind Krauss calls a "will to silence".[26] In an essay on Lessing's attempt to ground t   .neric boundaries of the arts, Mitchell proposes a new way of conceiving of the space-time problem in the arts. The whole notion of the 'spatial' and 'temporal' arts, he believes, is misconceived insofar as it is employed to sustain an essential differentiation of or within the arts. He argues that the tendency of artists to breach the supposed boundaries between temporal and spatial arts is "not a marginal or exceptional practice, but a fundamental impulse in both the theory and practice of the arts, one which is not confined to any particular genre or period. Indeed, so central is this impulse that it finds expression even in the writings of theorists like Kant and Lessing who established the tradition of denying it"[27].

Mitchell proposes the space-time problem as a dialectical struggle in which the opposed terms take on different ideological roles and relationships at different moments in history. He points out that in the visual arts, the medium consists of forms displayed in space: these forms represent bodies and their relationships in space. The perception of both medium and message is instantaneous, taking no appreciable time. On the other hand, reading occurs in time; "the signs which are read are uttered or inscribed in a temporal sequence, and the events represented or

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[24] Ibid, p. xv
[25] see Greenberg's 1940 Towards a newer Laocoön, reprinted in the Collected essays and criticism, ed by J. O' Brian, 1986. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, pp 23 - 37.
[26] Krauss, 1985, p. 8
[27] Mitchell, 1986, p. 98

narrated occur in time. Violations of these rules when, for example. a painting must be scanned in some temporal interval or when a painting represents temporal events, scenes from a narrative, or even a sequence of images that suggest movement are frequently explained away as not being the primary business of painting. "The very fact that temporality must be inferred in a painting suggests that it cannot be directly represented by the medium in the way that spatial objects can".[28] He continues by pointing out that painting expresses temporal action indirectly, by means of bodies, i.e. "painting presents bodies indirectly, through pictorial signs, but it does so less indirectly than its presentation of actions. The representation of bodies is easy or 'convenient' for painting. The representation of actions is not impossible, just more difficult or inconvenient". Thus, "if it is only a matter of degree of effort that holds poetry and painting in their proper domains, then it is clear that this distinction cannot be the basis for any rigorous differentiation of kind".[29]

He thus proposes that "works of art, like all other objects of human experience are structured in space-time, and that the interesting problem is to comprehend a particular spatial-temporal construction, not to label it as temporal or spatial. A poem is not literally temporal and figuratively spatial: it is literally a spatial-temporal construction. The terms space and time only become figurative or improper when they are abstracted from one another as independent, antithetical essences that define the nature of an object. The use of these terms is, strictly speaking, a concealed synecdoche, a reduction of the whole to a part".[30] There is thus no need to say that the genres should not be mixed if they could not be mixed. Painting can abandon its proper sphere for allegory and become like writing. 'Foreign' concerns such as religion - as expression of 'significance' through 'symbolic representations' - which are proper to temporal forms like discourse or narrative are all too possible in painting.

Mitchell sees the anxious, iconophobic search for 'living images' most literally and concretely in the work of William Blake, "who was that strangest of creatures, a Puritan painter, an iconoclastic maker of icons. Blake...saw clearly the sexual and political foundations of the abstractions that define the battle lines between artistic genres. As a religious painter his problem was to come to

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[28] Ibid, p.100
[29] Ibid, p.102
[30] Ibid, p.103

an understanding of images that would allow for a sense of sacred sublimity and power without creating a new set of idols".[31]   Robinson links Spencer to Blake on the grounds of their experience of the spiritual, which he ascribes, to some extent at least, to the result of the circumstances of geographical isolation combined with intellectual expansion. These circumstances led Blake to, not unlike Spencer, attempt to "build a new Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land." Another level at which he connects with Blake is in his search for a broader and more tolerant form of Christianity. With his approach to the theme of the resurrection he unites Blake's opposing images of tombstones and flowers, and he could not have chosen terms closer to Blake's assertion that "the religions of all nations are derived from each nation's different perception of the Poetic Genius, which is everywhere called the Spirit of Prophecy".[32]

Following on Mitchell's argument for a 'legitimacy' of the literal impulse in painting, I would like to consider some comments made by James Elkins in his article "On the Impossibility of Stories: The Anti-narrative and Non-narrative Impulse in Modern Painting" in order to set the field for a discussion of Spencer's position within a narrative tradition of painting. Elkins proposes that "modern narrative is in the last stages of self-erasure: that modern artists have turned against some of the indispensable roots of pictorial narrative and that they have done so in a way at least as radical as the narratological experiments that have been made in fiction and drama". Although he does not propose an end of narrative, he calls for "a special poetics to enable us to do a better job of understanding the smothered narratives that persist in ostensibly non-narrative paintings".[33] Elkins proceeds by examining some truncations in narrative as found in the work of e.g. Beckmann and Balthus where the viewer's attempt to search for chronological narrative is soon frustrated as he is thrown into an alternative mode of reading, one which can be described as meditative or associative. At such a point the viewer brings his own personal associations to the work, and in a way, becomes the creator or co-conspirator of the story, as he brings the narrative about by his aimless thought. This leads away from the painting into reverie. "In terms of the mechanics of narrative, the experience of looking at the painting is an experience of decaying possibilities. First it becomes apparent that there is no original text, and therefore no conventional story: then we

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[31] Ibid, p.115
[32] William Blake as quoted by Robinson, 1990, p.72
[33] Elkins, J., 1991, p.364

realise that we cannot deduce an order of telling; and finally that we cannot continue a deductive search at all. None of these steps inform any other: that is, the initial slight unease we felt at giving up the idea of an order of occurrence is not illuminated by the successive defeats. Nothing solves anything else, doors are slammed and not reopened. Beckmann's narratives are like this, and that may be why they continue to hold our interest. They are anti-narrative, they tell stories about the impossibility of telling stories, they confirm us in our scepticism of naïve history".[34]

Although Spencer's narratives often deviate from their traditional sources by way of his inclusion of personal references, his narratives based on biblical texts do function on one level in the domain of the traditional narrative. It is possible to read the traditional narrative without regarding the 'second story', which functions on an allegorical level. As such the image possesses directness, unity and chronology, the three basic tenets Elkins identifies in depictions of traditional narrative. Read on this level, the picture tells one story, each scene means one thing, there is one text, one message, the story runs in one order, it all hangs together. Elkins states that not all narratives are ordered as chronologies and names chronology as our first recourse when presented with a work we identify as a narrative. Chronology is difficult to fix in a painting as the artist cannot hold the spectator to one order of reading. He can only suggest a direction. This already opens the way for associative reading. Spencer's descriptive narratives, i.e. those not based on an existing narrative text but depicting rather images pertaining to an event or an idea function in such a meditative way. The image contains suggestions of narrative but the storyline is absent, leaving the viewer to construct his own narrative out of the suggestive clues scattered through the image. In "Swan Upping" (1915-19), for example, the depiction of the annual clipping of the wings of the swans on the Thames is presented as an almost incidental event amongst the other everyday occurrences such as the repairing of a boat, figures crossing a bridge, and women setting out for a boat trip. By giving equal significance to each of these figures a link between them is suggested, though not explained.

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[34] Ibid, p.360

Ferguson (1988) uses the term 'tableau-narrative' to refer to narratives which have turned away from the Aristotelian plot towards what may be termed the epiphany[35]. The moment portrayed in these modern narratives is generally ambiguous, without implied sequence, character conflict or resolution, "just a moment seen and preserved for us by the artistic eye". Ferguson likens this moment to an epiphany in a Christian sense for its ability to illuminate previous and future experience.[36] Spencer's numerous depictions of the theme of resurrection, in particular, underscore this notion of 'epiphany' as will become clear in a discussion of such images in the following chapters.

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[35] Joyce defines epiphany as "a sudden spiritual manifestation".
[36] Ferguson, S. 1988, p 187.

Chapter 2

Narrative and allegory in Spencer's work

In this chapter I will examine how Spencer addresses the primarily visionary Renaissance tradition of religious picture making in some of his religious paintings in order to analyse his use of and deviation from such conventions. His religious paintings function more specifically within the realm of convention and may therefore illustrate more clearly his intentions in deviating from such conventions and will be useful in my discussions of his larger descriptive narrative series in Chapter 3. I will begin by examining Spencer's concept of the spiritual to determine his point of departure in approaching religious subjects as well as considering the role of allegory in his attempt to translate his philosophies in his paintings.

As Barolsky points out, religious art from the Italian Renaissance period "renders exalted, idealised images of the heavenly realm and inspires to induce in the beholder the worshipful devoted contemplation of divine things".[37] Although Spencer can be seen to be working within a traditional biblical genre of religious painting, he constantly searches for the sacred in the world around him, delighting in finding that "in church feeling"[38] outside in the world and attempts to create a spiritual awareness through exalting the terrestrial. For Spencer the spiritual is in the everyday, even the mundane and the discarded. "He was always interested in the minutiae of life, investing the commonplace with a magical significance, seeing angelic qualities in dirt and rubbish"[39], as is clearly seen in "The Dustbin" of 1956 (Fig. 1, p. 18) Clements (1985) describes his view as richly imaginative, but rarely from on high; "most often he stayed close to the ground, pecking, pawing, scratching, sniffing."[40] Spencer even likened his own thoughts and ideas to "a row of dustbins, but one can find interesting and very nice things in dustbins and incinerators...I honestly think that looking for treasure on dust heaps where there is not too unpleasant a smell is a distinctly

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[37] Barolsky, 1995, p. 174
[38] Spencer uses various self-coined terms like this, quoted extensively by various authors when writing on his personal views. Since the terms are usually self-explanatory, and the exact source difficult to pin down, they will not be footnoted from now on.
[39] Clements, 1985, p. 17
[40] Ibid, p. 15

entertaining and elevating passtime...I was almost sure to find something that really satisfied my highest thoughts".[41] This fascination with the tactile, mundane detail of his immediate surroundings impacted on Spencer's style. He has been recorded saying that he found it very important to paint what is in the extreme foreground. He wanted to start the picture with what he can reach down and touch: "I have always wanted everything within my reach, where I can lay my hand on them." This foreground had to appear solid and real as it functioned as a taking-off point for the eye over everything else in view. He treated detail with the same meticulous attention in the visionary work as in his highly accomplished observed paintings, intending his metaphysical world to appear as solid and real. The detail of earth and grass in the foreground of the "Cookham Resurrection" (1924-26) and the "Christ preaching at Cookham Regatta"(1956-59) paintings, amongst others, indicate Spencer's desire for these pictures and subsequently his vision to be experienced by the viewer as honest and true a recording as are his observed paintings.

Fig. 1: The Dustbin, 1956, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 50.8 cm.

A perpetual theme in Spencer's writings on his art is that of a sacrifice to the spiritual sources of his art, destining his work to be a mediator between God and Man: This 'sacrifice' pertains to

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[41] Spencer as quoted from the Tate archiver ` , rhe Edwardians and After, The Royal Academy 1900 - 1950 Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 1988

Spencer's role as visionary, or local prophet, whose art constitutes the vision or religion that he preaches. Spencer was in the service of his art: he used his art to explain himself to himself. In a compilation of thoughts on religion by a number of artists, entitled *'Sermons by Artists'* [42], Spencer's contribution took as text 1 John 4:8 :"He that loveth not knoweth not God: for God is love". He took this to be the central principle to his art and life, argueing that Western culture has compartmentalised love. Because love has been secularised we find ourselves ascribing values to our feelings, and introducing divisive codifications of conduct which confuse and contaminate the instinctive nature of love. He stresses that love is not secular, but *the* condition of spiritual experience as an identity. According to Spencer, the things that constitute the world each possess an identity independent of us. We cannot know that identity, but can only construct a version of it through our sense-impressions. The object in question assumes a what he terms 'thing-plus-us' identity. Spencer's definition of love - 'giving and receiving' - is not understood in terms of simple acts of intention, but as a transference of identity. "Only when each partner has the capacity to act as the object of the other's transferred identities can love prevail. That the power existed and worked between participants was to him a miracle. It must motivate all creativity, physical and spiritual. It is the meaning of existence. God is love."[43] The fact that he did not exclude the sexual aspect of love from his perception of God confused his audience. Spencer perceived sex as a religious experience: a dichotomy which presented no paradox in the honesty of his nudes. The central position he sought throughout his career, from which to explain his vision of life, was to be informed increasingly by his strong views on sexuality. Collis (1962) states that by 1937 Spencer viewed sex as an all-important human expression as he believed sacred and profane love to be identical. Through sex both peace on earth and knowledge of God could be attained. Although this view corresponds to some extent to some eastern religions[44], he arrived at this doctrine from his own cogitations which were stimulated by his sexual experiences with his two wives during the twenties and thirties.

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[42] 1934, The Golden Cockerel Press, as referred to by Pople, 1991, p. 346
[43] Pople, 1991 pp. 345-346
[44] Collis mentions hinduism, and it is known that Spencer had a great appreciation for indian temple sculptures with their erotic bearing.

As already mentioned, Spencer often used familiar New Testament narratives, tales traditional and familiar to the society he lived in, as metaphor for related, ulterior content. Already early in his career religious subjects such as the 1912 "Nativity", "Zacharias and Elisabeth" of 1913-14 and "The Centurion's Servant" of 1914 (Fig. 2, p. 21) are set in very specific locations in Cookham which have a personal meaning for the artist. "The Centurion's Servant" for example is set in the servant's attic at Fernley, the house in which Spencer grew up. The servant's quarters were out of bounds to the children, and therefore steeped in mystery. The mystery deepens with Spencer's account of how he listened from the nursery below to a servant conversing through the wall with another servant in the adjoining house, imagining her to be talking to an angel. Such examples of Spencer's fusion of secular and religious imagery are abundant, and his fascination with presenting apocalyptic subjects in familiar settings reflects his strong belief in the redemptive power of art[45] and an attitude to religion which is eccentrically personal. Spencer's religious training was strict but unorthodox, divided as it was between the Anglicanism of his father and the Wesiyan Methodism of his mother. Exposure to the Scriptures through his father's habit of daily Bible readings infused his childhood with religious imagery which he 'married' to places in Cookham, to be rediscovered and used in his visionary paintings throughout his adult life. He considered his overtly re _.ious pictures, especially the Resurrections as his worthiest creations. In his series of resurrection paintings (1945 - 1950), the dead rise as if waking from sleep, yawning, tidying, greeting each other in flowery, striped and chequered frocks. Similarly in "Angels of the Apocalypse" (1949) (Fig. 3, p. 21) the avenging angels of revelations are pictured as motherly matrons in pretty dresses hovering over the English countryside, pouring pestilence from vials. Pople[46] points out that Spenc. ' intention was never to mock or satirise the Biblical source, but to transform the theme to be in keeping with his concept of the Creator-God: He therefore depicts the angels not as avengers, but as creators, their rounded bodies suggesting pregnancy. Spencer referred to them as not pouring poison onto wrongdoers but assisting in fertilising the earth by distributing seed. The vials carried by the angels are in fact bed bottles Spencer remembered from his service in Beauford hospital in WW1 and are another subtle reference to his belief in the spiritual nature of the sexual: the bed bottles,

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[45] "Redemption to Stanley was the miraculous means by which he attained,through his pictures, a place where all was 'holy, personal and at peace'; in other words, to his feelings of 'home'. Pople, 1991, p. 65.
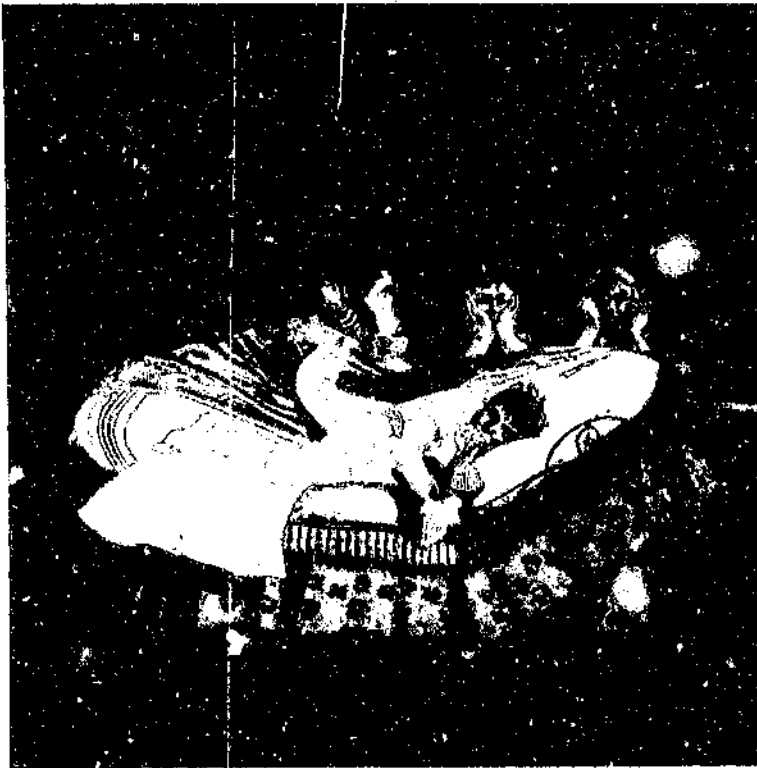[46] Pople, 1991, p. 468

Fig. 2. The Centurion's Servant, 1914, oil on canvas, 114.5 x 114.5 cm.

Fig. 3. Angels of the Apocalypse, 1949, oil on canvas, 70 x 88.9 cm.

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Fig. 3. Angels of the Apocalypse, 1949, oil on canvas, 70 x 88.9 cm.

apart from their conventional use, were presumably also used by patients to relieve some sexual tension.

Because of the discrepancy between Spencer's personal religious views and those upheld by the society he lived in, conflict was inevitable. Reaction to his religious and sexual views resulted in a period of isolation from his wives, friends and society in general during the thirties. The circulation of his 'erotic'[47] paintings eroded the public and critical acclaim won through the Burgclere Chapel and "The Cookham Resurrection" (1924-1926). His financial situation was catastrophic, due in part to the depression, but mostly to his courtship and disastrous marriage to Patricia Preece. His unorthodox views on the alliance between sexuality and spirituality, fuelled by his unsatisfactory relationship with Preece[48], became more noticeable in his work. Spencer's notion of a heaven composed of complete and all-embracing love was carried to a bizarre extreme in "Sunflower and Dog Worship" (1937) (Fig. 4) in which his belief that sexuality embraces all is extended to including plants and animals. Spencer pointed out the division in this painting: inside the wall are those who have achieved grace by the acceptance of his doctrine, and outside are those who have yet to be converted[49], in itself a reflection of the theme of the last judgement and resurrection. His attempt to unite sex and religion is most explicitly achieved in the series "The Beatitudes of Love" (1937-1938). Besides being repulsed by the unattractive appearance of the depicted couples, Spencer's audience could not digest his idiosyncratic views on religion at the time.

Fig. 4. Sunflower and Dog Worship, oil on canvas, 69.8 x 105.4 cm.

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[47] "The adoration of old men", "Adoration of Girls", " a Village in Heaven", all of 1937.
[48] See the discussion of "Christ delivered to the people" later in this chapter, in which the Spencer -Preece relationship also played a significant role.
[49] Bell, 1992, p. 452

The conflict of authorities is an essential ingredient of allegorical art. One ideal will be pitted against another, its opposite: which accounts for the various functions of the mode. "Both (the) satirical criticism and the apocalyptical escape into an infinite space and time tend toward high human goals. In both cases allegory is serving major social and spiritual needs"[50].

Gillie (1972) describes allegory as a way of presenting thought and experience through images, by means of which abstract, spiritual or mysterious ideas may be made immediate. Spencer's leaning towards allegory ties in with his affinity for early Renaissance painters, and his aforementioned appreciation for the architectural destination of medieval and early Renaissance painting. The medieval function of allegory as a means of identifying correspondences between the physical and spiritual worlds is echoed in Spencer's work. Because of the personal nature of his work, the allegory is often not easily understood. Jencks refers to traditional allegory as "the narrative description of one subject under the guise of another which is similar".[51] As such it is used to make abstract concepts more easily understandable. Postmodern allegory he describes as "the implicit suggestion of a contemporary story under the guise of a historical narrative".[52] Unlike conventional allegory, which consists of an analogy between two identifiable stories, this implicit allegory only has one plot, the historical narrative. The contemporary story is missing, allowing various unspecified readings of the work. The quality and expressive power of the work is not in question, even if its public meaning is. Spencer's religious paintings often seem to function in this way, where a private subtext can be identified beneath the immediately recognisable narrative.

Allegory has stylistic implications. "The price of a lack of mimetic naturalness is what the allegorist ...must pay in order to force his reader into an analytic frame of mind". Comparing what allegorical painting actualises and what allegorical literature leaves to the imagination to 'see', Fletcher concludes that visual clarity is not given in allegorical imagery. "It does not coincide with what we experience in daily life...it is discontinuous, lavish of fragmentary detail. Whether the...imagery is controlled or uncontrolled, its so-called 'illustrative' character is more than merely "tacked on" to a moral discussion. Allegorical imagery must be illustrative, because its discontinuous nature does

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[50] Fletcher, 1964, p. 113
[51] Jencks, 1987, p. 101
[52] ibid.

not allow a normal sense world to be created".[53] Since expectations are more fixed in portrayals of religious themes, Spencer's paintings often strike the viewer as humorous because of the incongruity between the theme and the manner in which it is portrayed.[54] In Spencer's 'The Last Supper' of 1920 (Fig. 5, p. 25) the portrayal of the theme inevitably calls to mind Leonardo's famous rendition, but Spencer's version challenges the conventional treatment in the absurd placement of the disciples' feet. The grotesquely enlarged feet are staggered centrally to form a strong line leading from the bottom of the painting to the figure of Christ, becoming the focal point of the image and hinting, according to Pople[55], at Christ's own feet to be nailed to the cross. It also focuses attention on another important aspect of the narrative on the Last Supper Christ's washing of the feet of his disciples.[56] Spencer thus not only portrays the moment of the breaking of the bread, but includes and foregrounds another episode with this visually prominent reference, thereby foregrounding his own particular interpretation of the subject.[57] In its expressionist exaggeration Spencer's version of "The Last Supper" is not idealised as Leonardo's. The austere setting in an industrial-looking, shed-like loft, is in keeping with Spencer's focus on the relevance of the everyday and serves as a contemporary equivalent for the upper room in a simple Jerusalem dwelling as described in the Scriptures. A far cry from Leonardo's spacious, well-proportioned Renaissance building, the setting is a loft in a Cookham malthouse, one of many Cookham venues which held a religious fascination for Spencer. As a child he was not allowed into the malthouse, and from his nursery window saw the cowls rising from its roof like 'great white moths'. When at last he was allowed inside, he was astonished at the vastness of the malting-floor and the ritual of spreading the barley on it. Large, enclosed spaces with diffused light held a fascination for Spencer which Pople traces back to his childhood experiences of spaces such as the nursery, the Methodist chapel and Cookham church[58]. He associated the quality of light and

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[53] Fletcher, 1964, p. 113

[54] Schopenhauer states incongruity as the basis of humour:
    a." To be amused is to perceive, think or imagine something incongruous, and this involves applying a concept to something with which it is not fully congruent."
    b."...Incongruous subsumption under a concept amounts to viewing one or more objects as different in some way from the standard instances falling under the concept".

[55] 1991, p. 196

[56] John 13;1 - 17

[57] Such focus on multiple episodes within a narrative prefigures Spencer's development of his large narrative paintings later in his career in which we find an episodic deployment reminiscent of early Renaissance narratives.
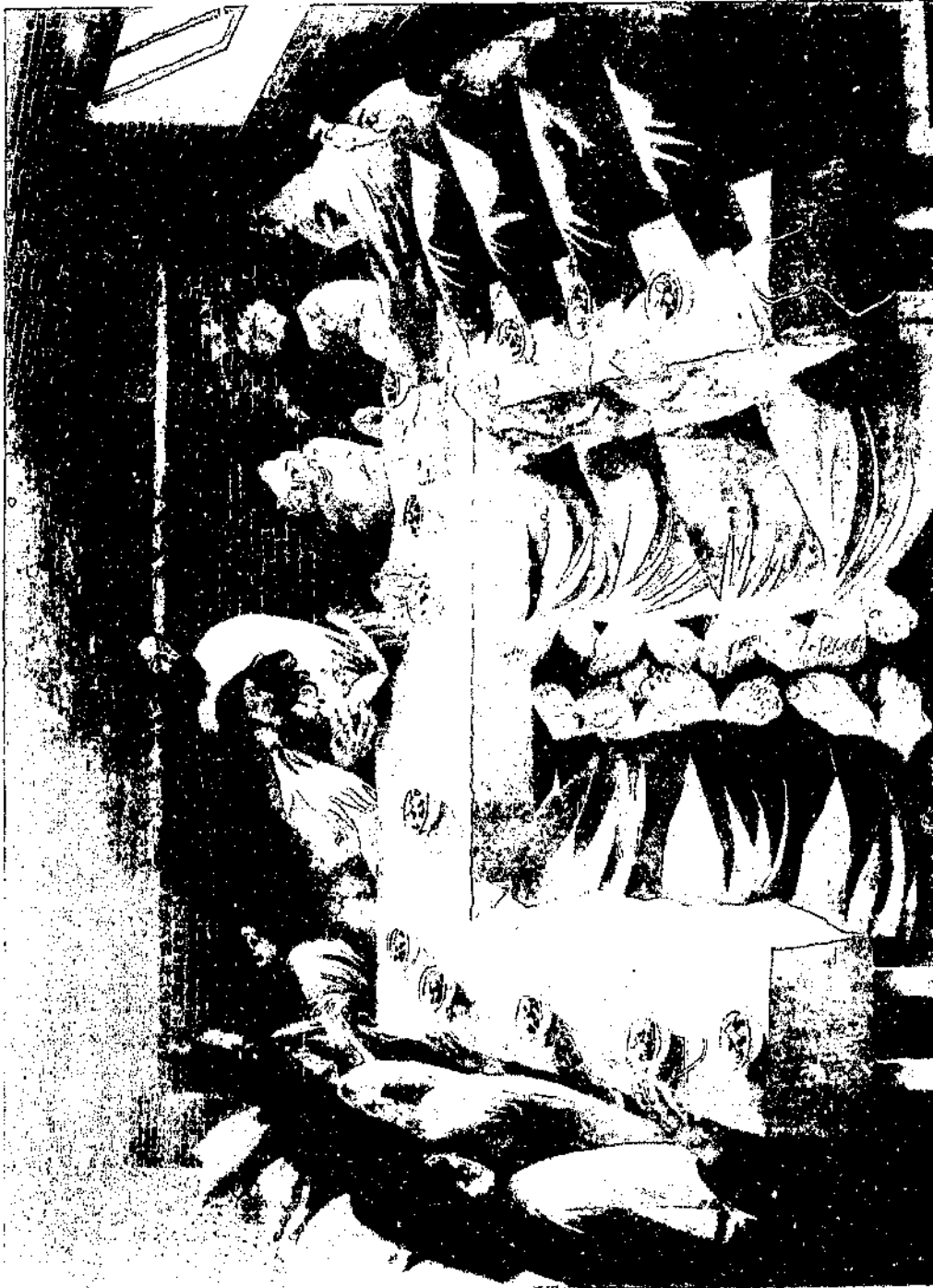
[58] Pople, 1991, p. 196

Fig. 5. The Last Supper, 1920, oil on canvas, 91.5 x 122 cm.

the echoing of the space with 'holiness', an association he here invokes her by including the small, high window on the right. The walls are painted brick by brick enhancing, Spencer's portrayal of Christ and his disciples as ordinary worker types, unlike Leonardo's Renaissance gentlemen in their colourful, lavishly draped robes. Spencer's colours are muted suggesting humbleness and poverty. The disciples are attentive to what is happening, at right tensely gripping the table, in a repetitive gesture echoing the placement of the feet. The room has an almost claustrophobic atmosphere in its close stacking of figures, tipping up of perspective and exaggerated repetition which has the effect of contracting and expanding the space like a concertina. The disciples are cramped at the very narrow trestle tables which frame their feet like an image within an image, accentuating it's significance within the simple narrative.

The climactic moment in the heightened drama of Leonardo's version of the Last Supper is absent from Spencer's portrayal of the subject. Whereas Leonardo depicts Jesus as having just announced that one of his disciples would betray him, giving rise to emotions of shock and disbelief and thereby animating the composition by means of the disciples' gestures, Spencer depicts Christ enacting a symbolic Jewish ritual, asking his disciples to support the symbolic appropriation to himself of the venerated doctrine of their forefathers. They are transfixed by the sombre moment. The element of agitated action in Leonardo's rendition evokes a sense of sequential unfolding of events within the narrative, whereas Spencer's depiction presents the scene by focussing on symbolic significance in a more meditative spirit of reverie.

Another painting for which Spencer had to endure severe criticism because of his deviation from traditional renditions of the subject is that of "St. Francis and the Birds" (1935) (Fig. 6, p. 28). The painting was rejected by the hanging comittee of the Royal Academy when submitted for the summer exhibition in 1935 on the grounds that "they did not think these works of advantage to your reputation or the influence of the Academy"[59]. Spencer regarded the whole affair as a personal insult and promptly resigned from the Royal Academy. Press reaction to the painting was mainly hostile, describing it as a caricature passing the bounds of good taste and in some cases even

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[59] Corespondence from W.R. Lamb, R.A. Secretary to Spencer, as quoted by Collis, 1962, p 115

criticising the painting's distorted forms as blasphemous.[60] Examining his depiction of St. Francis alongside a traditional Renaissance rendering of the subject may throw up some of the reasons for the strong reaction to this work. A traditional visionary painting of "St. Francis in Glory" by Sassetta (Fig. 7, p. 28) depicts the saint with his arms extended outward in imitation of the crucifixion, imitating Christ in the image, as he did in life. Although in a technical sense his foot rests on a figure of vice, Francis, in effect, rises above the ground like the Christ of a transfiguration. He appears within a radiant seraphic aureole, inflamed with love, blessed, experiencing the sweetness of spiritual inspiration. Not only does he appear in glory above the earth, but he gazes upward, his mind journeying forth toward heaven in the very elevation of mind. As St. Francis, receiving the wounds of Jesus, imitated his Lord, so the worshipper would have been induced by Sassetta's image to imitate Francis - to contemplate heavenly perfection in such a way as to leave every corporeal sentiment behind. The worshipper, in contemplation of Francis's rapture would have been enraptured, absorbed in God. While Spencer also depicts St. Francis in the cruciform position, his eye gazing towards heaven, the saint is depicted with his back turned to the viewer and as an old man in a dressing gown and odd, bulbous slippers, seemingly waving his arms about in a backyard, observed by birds, ducks and chickens. The oddly shaped head, bloated body and inverted hands create an impression of carricature. The figure of St. Francis is, in fact, modelled on Spencer's father who, in his dotage, roamed Cookham in his dressing gown, and is actually depicted on his way to the pantry to get food for the ducks and chickens. The few reviewers who did take Spencer's depiction seriously, described his St. Francis as being "more like Giotto's stout friar than are the sentimentalised figures of non-catholic fancy."[61] The critic from *The Guardian* described him as being "far nearer to mother earth and the kindly human mysticism of St. Francis than any dignified lay figure striking the appropriate rhetorical gesture could be".[62] Pople expresses the spiritual implications of "St. Francis and the Birds" as related to Spencer's concept of the spiritual nature of sexuality, in this case extending the notion of the sexual to its outcome; conception. "To Stanley, fecundity remained the manifestation of religion in thought and feeling as

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[60] Bell, 1992, p. 433 - 434
[61] D. Spencer. MacColl, in Nineteenth Century and after, June 1935, as quoted by Bell, 1992, p127
[62] Bell, 1992, p.136

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Fig. 6. St. Francis and the Birds, 1935, oil on canvas, 71 x 61 cm.

in the body"[63] Spencer gives the saint the swollen shape of pregnancy to express his "union with nature and the romantic wildness of it"[64].

Spencer does not depict St. Francis as a daft old man, but a daft old man as St. Francis. As the saint left corporeal sentiments behind to be absorbed in God, so "an old man has come into his inheritance and entered another world...His will is the inevitable will of God. It is not in his power or gift to betray the destiny to which God has called him." Spencer the artist, "striving towards ultimate vision", close identifies with St. Francis, longing to be an instrument of creation, an acolyte to God.[65] In Sassetta's traditional rendering the artist attempts to elevate the spectator spiritually towards fullfillment in God. Spencer, characteristically, finds God in the domestic, the everyday, and therefore never aims for the elevation of the viewer, but rather the revelation of his vision of the spiritual through its depiction in terms which, to him revealed this spirituality.

Spencer's desire for the expression and acceptance of his atypical views led him to develop increasingly elaborate narrative schemes to function as a 'temple of me', vast structures to encompass his vision. I will examine three different narrative approaches Spencer used to communicate this vision, namely the so-called 'pregnant moment', the continuous narrative, and the narrative series.

> "The temporal limits of painting could be overcome by isolating a moment in the action that revealed all that had led up to it and all that would follow. This is the so-called pregnant moment and is obviously associated with historical and iconographic art, since it usually cannot function with full effect unless we already know the story captured in the moment of the painting."[66]

The story will be vividly told, trusting the title and the knowledge of the viewer to fill in the gaps. The artist gives the viewer a few easily recognisable types supplied with a few broad self-explanatory gestures. Pople refers to a 'freeze-frame', comparing Spencer's picture to a crucial

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[63] Pople, 1991 p. 322
[64] Spencer, as quoted by Pople, 1991, p. 322
[65] Ibid
[66] Steiner, 1982, p. 40

freeze-frame in a movie strip, capturing an instant of tension between a 'before situation' and an 'after-situation'. "Each painting...exactly pinpoints the moment when we become aware that a change is about to happen...or is happening...or has happened. Its effect is a catharsis, a purging, the moment in drama when the confusion of reality is suddenly dissolved into spiritual comprehension. At that moment the preceding is clarified and linked to the now inevitable"[67]. Although Spencer's religious paintings are fairly easily read as based on familiar texts, a substantial amount of these also contain personal information related to the depicted theme. Knowledge of this private text is not necessary for the immediate reading of the work as a religious painting, but is essential in the reading of the work as part of Spencer's oeuvre and key to his personal philosophy.

Bell groups "Christ delivered to the People" (1950) (Fig. 8, p. 31) with "The Daughters of Jerusalem", painted the following year, and "The Crucifixion"(1958) (Fig. 10, p. 38) based on the element of violence present, something seldom observed in Spencer's work, even when the theme deals with wartime experiences as in the Sandham memorial paintings in the Burghclere chapel. Pople calls the painting "an outburst of anger and despair"[68]. Apparently a response to of Sir Alfred Munnings' attempt at having Spencer prosecuted for obscenity, the fury and pain are palpable. Munnings, former president of the Royal academy and ardent anti-Modernist, found in Spencer an easy target through which to air his grievances. He handed photographs of some sketches which Spencer had never intended for public circulation to the police[69].

The choice of this subject at this moment of crisis in his life seems to underscore the artist's need to express his disaffection with his situation. The subtext (Spencer's personal content) would not have been recognisable to the average viewer at the time[70] and the narrative would have read as

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[67] Pople, 1991, p. 65
[68] Ibid, p. 471
[69] It is not clear how these drawings came in his possession. Pople, 1991, (p470 - 471) suggests that they were given to Anton Zwemmer, a dealer, by Patricia without Spencer's permission. The possibility also exists that Patricia circulated them in order to harass Spencer as he was initiating divorce proceedings.
[70] Pople indicates in his introduction that Spencer's notes on his life and work are expressed with an intensity he would normally have kept from the public gaze, suggesting that information on his life was not that freely available to his audience, possibly contributing to him being often misunderstood.

Fig. 8. Christ delivered to the People, 1950. Oil on Canvas. 67 x 147 cm

follows: as indicated by the title, Christ has just been delivered to the people. The spectator knows that this occurrence was preceded by a chain of events regarding the preachings of Jesus which culminated in His arrest, torture, trial, and subsequent sentence to be crucified. The alleged crime committed against the people was that His views regarding religion did not correspond to the known set ways. Judgement has just been passed, and the viewer will recognise the judge, Pontius Pilate, ceremoniously washing his hands to absolve himself of the injustice of the course of events. The viewer recognises the cowardly action taken by the disciples in their desertion of their revered master. In the centre Jesus and the two thieves are being led away to be crucified. The viewer may recognise the woman in the bottom right-hand corner as Mary but will surely be puzzled by the harsh features and scornful expression. They may also take her to be just another member of the vindictive crowd. On a literal level the work is thus easily read and comprehended. On an all ⌣ ᵈ level the narrative is expanded to include a wealth of other information from the artist's life which is made to parallel Christ's life.

Bell refers to "Christ delivered to the People" as unremittingly harsh both emotionally and visually. The painting, like its two companion pieces, is concerned with the individual's persecution at the hands of the mob. Spencer closely identifies with the suffering of Christ, a tendency Pople already identifies in early work like "Christ carrying the Cross" (1920) and "Christ's entry into Jerusalem" (1921)[71]. Pople reads the first work as a depiction of the five Spencer sons leaving for war, and the figure of Mary in the foreground as Spencer's mother mourning their departure[72]. Similarly in " Christ's entry into Jerusalem" Spencer depicts his own return to Cookham finding the attitude of the villagers very different from before the war. This identification with Christ is more consciously explored in the "Christ in the Wilderness" (1938) series, for which he made preparatory drawings during a period of extreme isolation. Pople observes that while Spencer often had companions whilst engaged in his mental and artistic explorations[73], on his loneliest trials he could only take a Doppelgänger, as Dante took Virgil. This he found in the biblical Christ. He did not imagine himself to be Christ in any overheated manner, nor did he accept Christ in evangelical terms.

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[71] Spencer's use of Christ as subject matter, especially Christ crucified, indicates emotional crises in his life
[72] Ibid, pp. 88-89
[73] Gwen Raverat, Desmond Chute, Henry Lamb, Jas Wood etc. all at different stages of his artistic development.

Christ served as his 'hand-holder'[74] until the discovery of his Beatrice-figure, which he found in his first wife, Hilda, towards the end of her life, and she remained that, idealised in his mind, until the end of his life.

"Christ delivered to the People" is set in a cobbled courtyard, the stones of which are referred to by Bell as 'billiard-ball-shaped', creating an almost physical sense of discomfort.[75] On the left-hand side, towards the back, a gnome-like Pontius Pilate is drying his hands, having just washed them of responsibility. Christ, who is placed in the centre of the painting, is being pushed and pulled by the riotous mob to the right of the picture. The figure pulling at far right has been identified as Munnings.[76] He has a document in his hand which supposedly represents the inscription to be put over Christ's head, but which could also represent the legal action Munnings is bringing against Spencer. In the background, Jesus' disciples, including the figure of Hilda, are turning their backs on Him, fleeing towards the left. In the bottom right-hand corner Patricia is quite viciously portrayed. She is glaring at Christ, a clawlike hand outstretched towards him. She is cloaked, her back turned to the lightsource resulting in a sinister play of light and shadow across her face, giving it a somewhat scull-like appearance.

Spencer's use of light, casting dramatic shadows on bodies and faces plays a major role in expressing meaning in the work. "I think of light as being the holy presence, the substance of God, so that everything is in and part of that substance".[77] Spencer reveals the crime, committed in this episode from the life of Christ, to God, present as this blinding, 'all revealing' light. His use of the 'pregnant moment' as narrative mode is significant in this accusing image; as if surprised in their clandestine activities by the photographer's flashlight, all the figures, but Christ and the two thieves, are caught committing the unspeakable act of condemning an innocent man.

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[74] A Spencerian term, quoted by Pople, referring to a companion in his mental explorations, who listened, adored and praised.

[75] It is interesting to note in passion iconography that the road to Calvary has traditionally been depicted as rocky, littered with thorns and other obstacles. Such depictions is said to have been based on Old Testament passages prefiguring the suffering of Christ. See Arrow, 1979

[76] Pople, 1991, p.471

[77] Spencer, quoted by Pople, p.246

Pople embarks on quite a lyrical appraisal of the spiritual significance of light in "The Cookham Resurrection" (1926) (Fig.8, p.35) calling it a "hymn to light".[78] He proceeds by referring to it as a Miltonic light, a light dispelling chaos, a Dantean light, Pentecostal tongues of flame and the Holy Ghost arriving from the east. Whatever the case may be, Spencer very consciously utilises the play of light in most of his visionary paintings. Apart from the spiritual significance, it forms part of Spencer's stylistic approach: The falling of light and cast shadow adheres to, and forms part of the principles of perspective and is one of the elements of perspective that Spencer utilises to obtain a measure of credibility in his imaginary, constructed world. Since all things in the physical world cast shadows, things must cast shadows in the painted world in order to look 'real'. Pople makes special mention of the shadow cast by the figure of Spencer in the bottom right-hand corner of "The Cookham Resurrection " and singles out the figure out as the only 'real' figure in the painting since it is the only one casting a shadow, th other figures being shades of Stanley's memories. Apart from spotting a few other figures possessing shadows, I tend to disagree with this notion on the grounds that Spencer consistently portrays figures quite solidly and with some effort to convince the viewer that they are real, even when imaginary, allegorical or invisible, as in "The Angels of the Apocalypse" (1949) or "Sarah Tubb and the Heavenly Visitors" (1933). Pople's reading gives too little consideration to Spencer's stated intent of creating a 'heavenly' world which will as a whole be metaphorical. Although Spencer, in some instances, seems to be using early Renaissance methods of indirect narration[79], it is never to set a dream or vision apart from 'reality' in the depiction. The fantasy or visionary aspect is always integrated with the main depicted action. Dissecting Spencer's work into units of allegorical significance questions the completeness of his visionary world. Spencer's application of light in this resurrection has, apart from its spiritual implications, a lot to do with creating atmosphere by determining a time of occurrence. The bright light from the east, coupled with the reddish glow of the sky in the left upper corner indicates early morning.

Newton criticises Spencer's use of colour as rarely being an integral part of the picture's meaning. "Colour only interests him as an attribute of the object...Therefore he tends to use colour

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[78] Pople, 1991, p. 246
[79] The narrative device in which framed images appear within the picture to denote a different 'level of reality', such as reported speech or dream images.

Fig. 9. The Cookham Resurrection, 1924 -26, oil on canvas, 274 x 549 cm.

Fig. 9. The Cookham Resurrection, 1924 -26, oil on canvas, 274 x 549 cm.

descriptively rather than emotionally. Usually his colour is either meaningless or else merely decorative or heraldic as in the bold patterning of 'Cows at Cookham'. I doubt even, whether Spencer visualises his pictures in colour from the outset".[80]. Newton seems to suggest that Spencer uses colour without an awareness of what it may mean in the context of the subject matter when he refers to the apparent lack of symbolic value in Spencer's application of colour. The use of colour in this work, as in many others, is not coincidental as Newton suggests, but an integral part of both the design and the literal meaning of the work. Spencer uses a limited palette in order to emphasise the anger contained in the work: The scene is bathed in a harsh white, scrutinising light, exposing the crime being committed and describing the perpetrators in a relentless manner. "Christ delivered to the People" is executed almost in monochrome: the buildings, cobblestones and the robes of Jesus and his disciples are painted in gradations of grey and white. The colours of the clothing of the mob are so bleached by the harsh light as to appear almost colourless, save for touches of red in the clothing of some figures - the children on the right, the figure grabbing Christ by the shoulder and the jacket of the policeman - balancing with the red tiles on the porch where Pilate is sitting both compositionally and conceptually. Pilate is symbolically cleansing himself of the act of judging Jesus, but the colour of the tiles, repeated in the red lines on the towel he is drying his hands on are too suggestive of blood to be coincidental. The use of red in the clothing of the mob associates them with Pilate conceptually while on a compositional level creating unity in the picture. The use of blue on the sleeve of the Patricia figure in the bottom right-hand corner is, in my opinion, not coincidental either, but a reference to the symbolical use of the colour in art history as an attribute to Mary, symbolizing spirituality.

A few oddities regarding the costume of the figures need to be discussed. The first is Pilate's odd headgear which Pople describes as resembling an inverted lightfitting with pendant glass globes. As Spencer did not write much by way of explaining this particular work, this detail can only be speculated about. Pople does mention the use of three linked lights in some Renaissance paintings to signify the Holy Trinity and adds that if used here with such a reference, it serves as visual sarcasm to emphasise Spencer's anger. Such visual sarcasm can also be found in Spencer's treatment of Patricia's costume. Her grey-green cloak is decorated with fleur-de-lis, a

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[80] Newton, 1947, p. 12

heraldic motif derived from the lily, and like the lily a symbol of purity often associated in art history with the virgin Mary as is the blue in the dress she is wearing, visible only in the sleeve protruding from the cloak. Neither purity nor spirituality are attributes he would have bestowed on Patricia at this stage, and although Spencer himself never commented on this[81], he certainly had both the knowledge and the temperament to deliver such subtle but biting criticism.

The other figures in the painting are dressed in an odd mixture of period and modern costume. Jesus and his disciples are dressed in white robes while the members of the crowd are dressed in a mixture of styles ranging from briefs and jumpers for the village boys to a kind of Turkish tunic[82] for the policemen. Although Spencer depicted biblical episodes playing out in Cookham, he clung to an established 'conservative' image of Jesus, his disciples and other figures of spiritual significance like saints, wise men and heavenly visitors as white-robed, often bearded dignitaries.[83] This habit may be out of reverence, or merely to aid recognition; to set the significant characters[84] in his religiously inspired paintings apart from the crowds of other figures in which they could easily get lost otherwise.

What sets this work, together with its two 'companion pieces', apart from virtually all Spencer's other work is the fact that only in these works does he attack the society he lived in, and the intolerance it produced. The idolisation of 'Cookham' is absent, the humour is biting and cynical, the love which permeates all his other visionary work is disturbingly absent. In its companion pieces "The Crucifixion" (1958) (fig. 10, p. 38) and "The Daughters of Jerusalem"(1951) Spencer similarly addresses issues that he finds disturbing in society. The surprising element of violence is again present, and in a lecture to the students of the Brewer's school at Aldenham (which commissioned "The Crucifixion") Spencer lashed out at society for still nailing Christ to the cross. Golgotha is depicted as the mounds of earth dug from Cookham High Street for the laying of

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[81] Pople stipulates that very little written commentary by the artist on this work exists.

[82] according to Pople the military policemen from Spencer's wartime experience

[83] See works like 'The Sabbath breakers'(1952), 'Christ in Cookham' (1952), 'Sarah Tubb and the heavenly visitors' (1933), 'Villagers and Saints' (1933) a/o.

[84] significant in terms of the theme indicated by the title. These figures are not always the most significant in the picture as far as composition or emphasis is concerned. In 'Christ preaching at Cookham regatta'(1959) or the 'Cookham resurrection'(1926) Christ is depicted rather small and inconspicuous.

drainage pipes. This was apparently a mammoth undertaking which disfigured the village with trenches of up to fifteen feet deep. representing to Spencer a rupture of all that signified 'home'. Mary Magdalen, lying prostrate at Jesus' feet was in later years identified by villagers as a foreign evacuee who was unpopular in the village at the time. The villagers looking on from the left-hand side are members of a family that was vilified as Irish Catholic and abstemious with alcohol, particularly by some Freemasons, one of whom is shown nailing Christ to the cross.[85] Christ is depicted from the back, the viewer looking over his shoulder at the scene. This point of view deviates from conventional frontal imagery of the crucifiction in its emphasis on the maliciousness of the people who demanded and performed his execution.[86] Apart from its immediate social criticism, the 1958 crucifixion expresses, in Pople's view, Spencer's anger at a lifetime of being misinterpreted and misunderstood. Pople identifies a single aim in Spencer's life and art " ...to search through the happenings of his existence to find an order in their apparent contingency. Like Christ he knew that in the end he would be betrayed by his dedication,...be crucified by the incomprehension of others".[87]

Fig. 10. The Crucifiction, 1958, oil on canvas, 216 x 216 cm.

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[85] Pople,1991, p.490 - 495
[86] This depiction corresponds to his crucifiction of 1934, which was based on a landscape with a scarecrow "Scarecrow, Cookham" painted in the same year. In his other crucifictions (1956, 1921) he uses the conventional frontal view.
[87] Pople, 1991, p.494.

Chapter 3

Continuous narration: Shipbuilding on the Clyde

The long horizontal format traditionally associated with depictions of vast panoramic views of landscapes, is used by Spencer most notably in his wall panels comprising the series on shipbuilding on the river Clyde in Scotland done as war commission during World War 2. Spencer's approach to the theme is unusual both in format and its personal focus, considering that the project was an official commission aimed at recording w- time activities for posterity. Driven by financial difficulties, Spencer requested his dealer, Dudley Tooth to find him " a war job, some sort of official art employment". Tooth secured a commission for Spencer via Kenneth Clark who was chairman of the committee on the Official War Artists' scheme[68]. Other artists involved in the depiction of shipbuilding at the time, like Muirhead Bone and Henry Rushbury, either made visual comparisons to the construction of cathedrals in their renditions of the subject or glorified the scale and power of the war machine. In "Dazzle-ships in the dry-dock at Liverpool" (1919) (Fig. 11, p. 40) Edward Wadsworth celebrates both the visual and physical power of the mammoth industrial object while returning to a more representational mode. The bold patterning on the ship, serving as camouflage against U-boats, lends itself to the tense formal dynamism which Vorticism had enabled him to develop. The four men depicted painting the vast bulk of the vessel, provide a sense of scale, as well as showing the insignificance of humanity against the gigantic war machine of their own construction. Spencer, on the other hand, chooses to reduce the imposing scale of a ship under construction and focuses, not surprisingly, on the people involved in its construction. He foregrounds the dedicated labour of the workers rather than the machinery and ship architecture. The scheme can be compared to his World War I memorial, the Sandham Memorial Chapel, for its celebration of humanity in inhumane circumstances.

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[68] "...these eventful days will certainly bring out the best in him and I am sure he will prove amenable to work with as he is terribly in debt all around." Tooth - Clark correspondence as quoted by Patrizio and Little, 1994, not paginated.
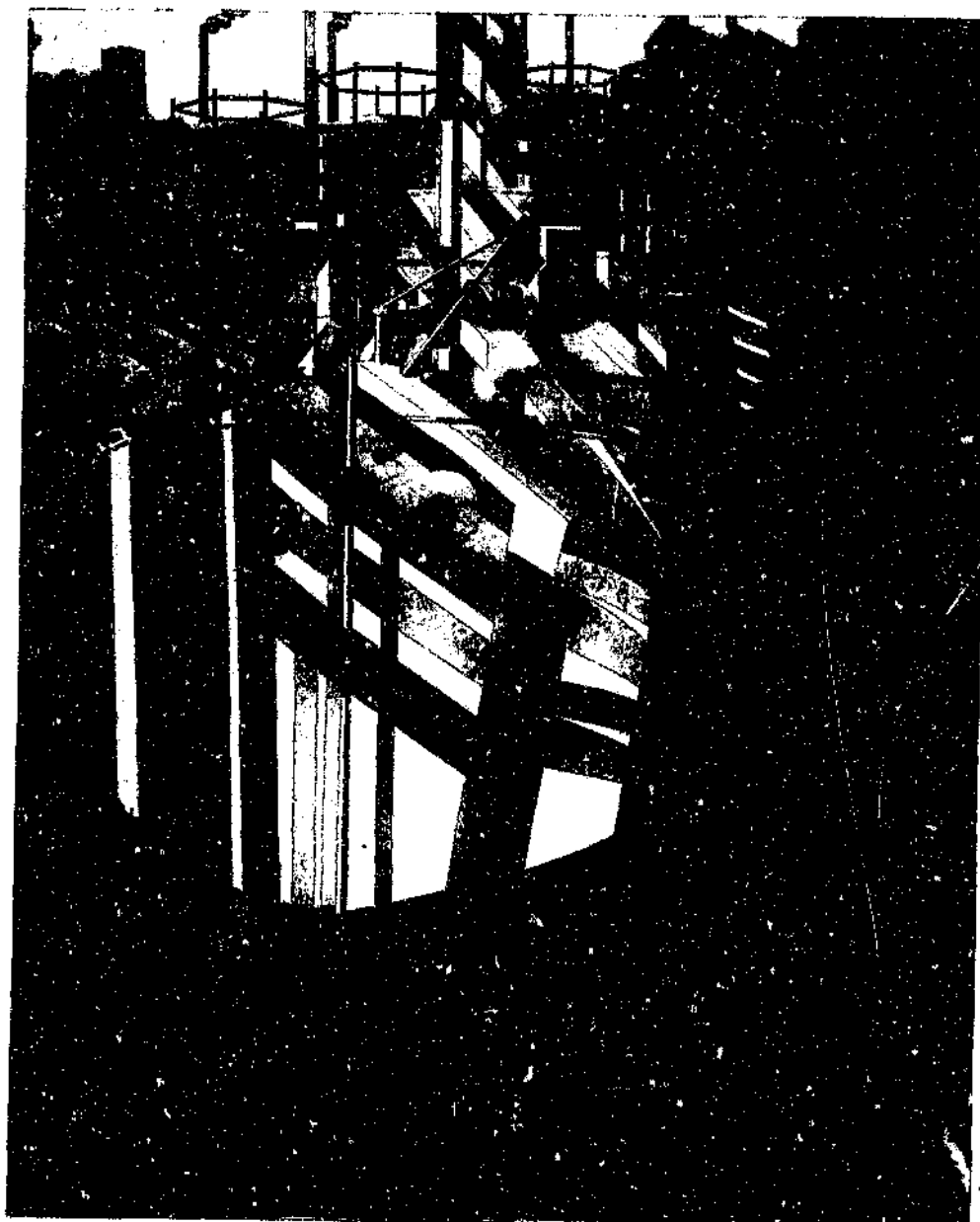
Fig. 11. *Edward Wadsworth*: Dazzle-ships in dry-dock at Liverpool, 1919, 304.8 x 243.8 cm

Spencer worked on the commission from May 1940 to March 1946, completing eight of the envisioned thirteen paintings in oil on canvas, seven of which were of an unusually long narrow format. They provide an insight into the hard noisy work of the 'black squad'; all the workers that

dealt with the iron and steel, blacksmiths, platers, punchers, burners, riveters welders, plumbers, etc. The long horizontal format had previously been used in a.o. 'Love on the moor' (1937-55: 79,1 x 310,2 cm) (Fig. 12, p. 42) and "A Promenade of women" (1938, 45 x 229,8 cm) (Fig. 13, p. 42), where the repetitions of characters/figures in the same painting (mostly himself and Hilda) call to mind the Renaissance tradition of the continuous narrative. Although the Shipbuilding panels do not portray a narrative in the same sense as Renaissance inscenated[69] narratives, some similarities can be noted. I will discuss Spencer's apparent take on the traditional Renaissance use of continuous narrative. His visionary intentions were based on an appreciation of the Renaissance attitude to the production and experience of paintings[90] as he clearly used Renaissance narrative conventions to facilitate in the reading of his work. Two such conventions are the episodic deployment of a narrative within a single frame and the repeated appearance of the main character or characters within the same painting. While there is no definite fictional narrative or storyline in the shipbuilding paintings, we find such an episodic deployment in the long panoramic format which forces the viewer to follow the narrative horizontally, as if watching the steel being manipulated along a huge conveyor belt of canvas. The sombre, intricate weave of activities is localised under spotlight glares, flashes of fire and sparks from furnaces, braziers and welding torches. The apparent endlessness of the depicted action was criticised by John Rothenstein and Wyndham Lewis. Rothenstein felt that the paintings' might have been added to indefinitely without significant addition to their impressiveness."[91] Wyndham Lewis found Spencer "endlessly repetitive. One feels he could turn out a thousand figures as easily as a hundred, it would take him ten times as long that is all".[92] Patrizio and Little point out, however, how the choice of format helped to enhance Spencer's portrayal of the narrative. The shipyard was an environment without single focus; individual practices within a broad scene of communal effort. "I like the theme to be continuous and not absolutely cut off item by item as the continuous character helps to preserve the impression one gets in the shipyard itself as in wandering about

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[69] Narratives where several scenes, or an entire legend may be included in a single frame.
[90] He had a tendency to devise very ambitious schemes similar to renaissance chapels and altarpieces. The Burgclere chapel is the only one which was realised. Virtually the entire body of his visionary work was intended for his 'church-house' scheme, and the shipbuilding panels themselves were planned as a frieze of over seventy feet long.
[91] Rothenstein, 1956 and Spottiswoode p. 193 as Quoted by Patrizio and Little, 1994
[92] Lewis, P. W. Round the London Art Galleries The Listener, 18 May 1950,p 879. As quoted by Patrizio and Little.

Fig. 12, Love on the Moor, 1937-55, oil on canvas, 79.1 x 310.2 cm

Fig. 13, A Promenade of Women, 1938, oil on canvas, 45 x 229.8 cm

Fig. 12, Love on the Moor, 1937-55, oil on canvas, 79.1 x 310.2 cm

Fig. 13, A Promenade of Women, 1938, oil on canvas, 45 x 229.8 cm

among the varied happenings, the change between one kind of work and another seems imperceptible and these transitional parts or joinings are very important."[93]

Andrews (1994)[94] points out how Renaissance inscenated narratives often utilised the rendering of three-dimensional space to strengthen the narrative aspect of an image. Renaissance artists utilised illusionary space in attempting to dictate a reading order to the viewer, while at the same time using the two-dimensional design to reveal other aspects of the narrative: "episodes greatly separated from one another in space, and remote in time, come together on the surface of the image: they co-exist in the picture plane and establish formal connections which become an important means of enriching the narrative".[95] The discovery of one-point perspective offered new options with respect to narration: "The meaning could now be controlled or determined not only by the choice of scenes and characters (or by the style in which they are rendered), but also by their position in depth, by their placement in relation to one another, and the way they are linked together".[96] Following discourse on literary narratives, he states that double-time ordering, the drawing of a distinction between 'order of occurrence' and order of telling in a narrative, has come to be regarded as an essential condition of narrative itself, no matter what story or medium is involved Even with the help of various pictorial devices enabling the visual artist to suggest an order of reading/occurrence in the image, the viewer can never be held to it as the artwork itself is not temporal. In continuous narration, where a passage of time is suggested as more than one episode is depicted, the order of telling can also not be controlled, even if it relies on the Western convention of reading images from left to right, top to bottom.

In his paintings that present themselves as continuous narrative vistas Spencer rarely relies on existing literary narratives, as he does not need to establish a fixed order of reading within such a structure. The narrative mode he employs is a descriptive one where the order of reading is irrelevant. He does, however, seem to rely quite often on the viewer's habit to read the image from left to right. As can be seen in unfinished paintings such as "The Apotheosis of Hilda" (1959),

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[93] Spencer as quoted by Patrizio and Little, 1994
[94] Andrews, 1994, pp 84-94
[95] Ibid, p. 85
[96] Ibid, p. 84

and "Me and Hilda, Downshire hill" (1959), Spencer also worked from left to right - he started to paint in the upper left-hand corner and moved across the surface to the lower right. This may already have determined an order of reading from left to right in the mind of the artist.

Compositionally too, the panoramic works are often more easily read from left to right. In "Love on the Moor"(1937-55) the viewer's gaze is gradually led into the composition from the relatively empty left-hand side. Detail of figures and action gradually accumulates as the gaze wanders across to the right where it is caught up in the profusion of detail in the figure groups. Entering the image from the right would be more difficult as the viewer would immediately be confronted with an excess of information, hindering the movement to the left. Some works, such as "A Promenade of Women" (1938) (Fig. 13, p. 42) and "a Village in Heaven" (1938) where a procession of figures is depicted moving from one end of the picture to the other, are easily read from either side, as the compositions of figures in motion present a more even horizontal flow. Since there is no definite chronological narrative, apart from the procession of figures, the reading order is virtually irrelevant, as both left to right or right to left reading enables the viewer to grasp the significance of the moment. In "A Promenade of Women" a left to right reading allows the viewer to 'meet' the individual characters, as does the greeting friar at the extreme left of the image, whereas a right to left reading implies the departure of the figures through the door on the right. The figure of Hilda placing the door key under the mat acts as the counterpart to the friar on the left. The viewer's acquaintance with the individual characters as they move along seems to constitute the narrative.

In the shipbuilding panels the possible reading orders are varied. Most compositions function in the manner of an altarpiece, with a clear central area flanked by the sides leading into it. This division facilitates the establishment of a balanced composition along the long horizontal format. In "Riveters" (1941) (Fig. 14, p.45) for example, reading from both sides is possible as the eye is led, from either end towards the central section along the strong horizontal lines created by enormous pipes, as well as the directional movement of the riveters working on them. In "The Template" (1942) (Fig. 15, p.45) the eye is guided from the left by the waving shape of the template and the repeated lines of the ribs of the hull under construction towards a central scene of workmen
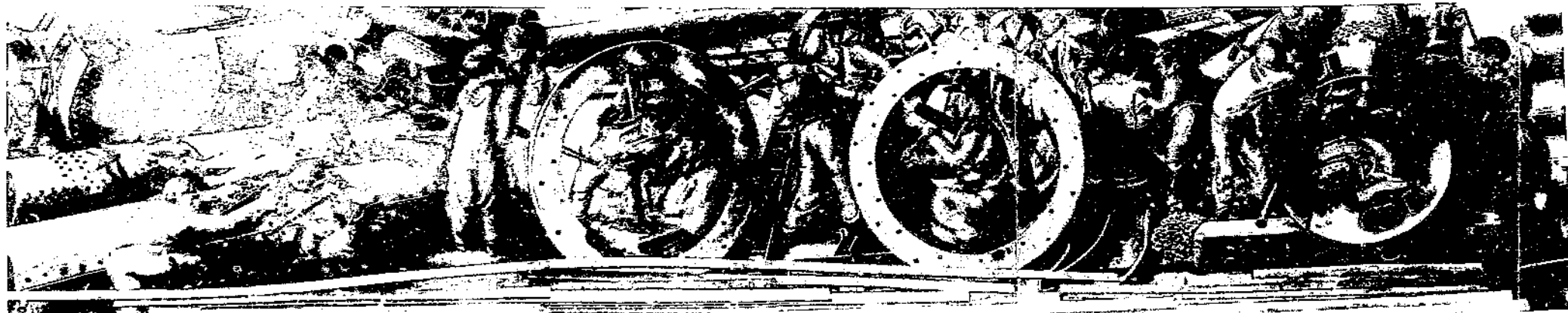
Fig. 14 Shipbuilding on the Clyde: Riveters. 1941. oil on canvas, 76.2 x 579.2 cm

Fig. 15 Shipbuilding on the Clyde: The Template, 1942, oil on canvas, 50.7 x 579 cm

Plate 6 Shipbuilding on the Clyde: Riveters, 1:
Imperial War Museum [ca

Plate 7 Shipbuilding on the Clyde: The Templates
Imperial War Museum

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as, 76.2 x 579.2 cm

canvas, 50.7 x 579 cm

painting bright red ventilation ducts. To the right of this, however, the scene becomes fragmented, causing the eye to jump from one isolated little scene to the next. Reading from the right hand side is therefore difficult in this image, owing to the lack of visual flow.

Because of the absence of a chronological storyline, the repetition of a main character or characters in various stages of unfolding narrative seems unnecessary. Spencer does, however, include himself twice in the panels, emphasising his participation as witness to the events of an historical moment of shipbuilding, and not merely as a witness to shipbuilding per se. The insertion of details obviously out of place in the shipyards further suggests a desire to imply a history beyond the depicted facts. The costumes, for example, in which he clothes the workers are not the appropriate dress for the dirty labour in which they are engaged.[97] He clothes them in jackets and tweeds, thereby referring back to their social, domestic lives outside of the communal effort of shipbuilding. Another such reference is seen in "The Template", where a mother and child are included in the scene. For reasons of safety, family and especially children were never allowed within the shipyards.

Spencer seemed unconcerned with the propagandistic possibilities of these paintings and definitely never claimed any political significance for any of his work. The possible ideological implication of these paintings as a socialist 'ode to the worker' was lost in the general feeling of patriotism in the war effort. Spencer's innocent reverence for the worker sabotaged his first attempt at industrial subjects in 1936, when he proposed a twenty-foot mural of 'Riveting' for the ballroom of the liner, the Queen Mary. He explained that his justification for this theme was that "out of the midst of this wealth and splendour should arise something so remote from the seas as to seem like a ghost from the past, namely the men building the ship".[98]. Spencer's very personal identification with the workers was misunderstood as a political stance, resulting in his idea being censored as too socialist (along with three panels by Duncan Grant) in the wake of a much

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[97] Patrizio and Little indicate that remarks on the costumes by members of the shipbuilding community have been recorded.
[98] Spencer, quoted by Bell, 1980, p. 150

publicised controversy which erupted in 1934 over Diego Rivera's mural in the Rockefeller Centre in New York.[99]

Spencer included himself in the paintings to achieve closer psychological union with the subject matter,[100] as he felt a sense of belonging within the communal working environment and considered to his time in the shipyards as a collaboration between artist and subject. Because most of the painting was done in England, the workers never saw themselves in paint, a situation Spencer tried to rectify with a couple of letters to the War Artists Advisory Committee requesting reproductions of the work to be sent to the shipyards, unfortunately to no avail. Despite the fact that the shipbuilders worked under orders, a ' structured work force of individuals who laboured together from shift to shift like an army of ants crawling in and out of the vast steel hulks of their own c' nstructing"[101], Spencer identified with and depicted the workmen as individuals. He found significance in everything that was done in the shipyards just as he found significance in the drudgery of sluicing in a hospital washroom during his service in WW1.

> "Not that I think that what I see them engaged on is what they are finally meant for, but that they are more like the angels in Paradise Lost who, though it was not their usual practice or occupation, had to hurl great pieces of rock at Satan's invading army. It is a strange, but I think true, thing, that where human activity is arranged and organised to some constructive end it will, through another avenue altogether, namely the spiritual framework of artistic desires, form another structure, a construction of designs and spiritual harmony. In art a parallel constructive order to that of the subject's utilitarian constructive purpose."

The necessity of 'belonging' is a constant presence in Spencer's work and life. He used this word to refer to the need he had felt since childhood to identify people with places, an aspiration that lies at the core of his idolisation of Cookham. He was amazed at the human ability to domesticate any environment. "A ledge on which their teapot stands was never meant for it, yet seems more meant for that than for its final purpose".[102] This domestic quality is very important to Spencer and

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[99] For a discussion on the rejection of Riviera's mural, see Hauptman, W. 1973 "The Suppression of Art in the McCarthy Decade" Artforum XII, no. 2, October 1973, pp. 48-52, and Robinson, 1990, p. 96

[100] 'Burners' (1940) and 'Welders' (1941)

[101] Robinson, 1991, p. 92

[102] Patrizio and Little, 1994, unpaginated

resulted in this commission to go beyond a strictly accurate recording of the visible world to enhance the human aspect of it, often at the cost of remaining faithful to the factual depiction of a place. "A place is incomplete without a person. A person is a place's fulfilment, as a place is a person's".[103] Robinson identifies this need for 'belonging' in Spencer's approach to composition in the shipbuilding panels. In the first three panels the overall vista is divided into individual parcels, each containing a single worker. In "Welders" for instance, Spencer cunningly divides the picture plane into 'boxes' until it almost resembles a comic strip. The welders are framed and separated by the lines of the geometrical structures they are welding. Each little scene · · ·led with its own light-source; the glow from the welding-rod. Similarly, in "Burners"(1940) (.g. 16) the workmen are contained within the outlines of the flat sheets of metal they are working on. Of "Burners" Spencer wrote: " ...I have treated the burners as a series of decorative figures because of the interesting variety of positions they naturally assume. Each man seems wedded or welded to the part of the ship he makes".[104] With their caps and goggles they look similar enough for the picture to be read as the same workman in different positions and from differ   ies as is common in continuous narratives; a visual report of the work of a single burn.. ... progress.

Fig. 16 Shipbuilding on the Clyde: Burners(left panel), 1940, oil on canvas, 50.8 x 203.2 cm

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[103] ibid.
[104] ibid.

In "Bending the Keel Plate" (1943) (Fig. 17, p. 50) Spencer moves back to reveal a bit more of the communal effort. The painting was originally titled "The Shoe Plate" and "one looks across an intervening space in which men are respectfully preparing a plate for the machine burner, and bolting a lighter section of frame to a heavier section, to where the shoe plate in its cradle is being beaten into shape."[105] Robinson draws an analogy with "The Last Judgement" (Fig. 18, p. 50) of Fra Angelico based on the format, central light source and marked division of left from right. Fra Angelico was a particular favourite of Spencer's and in particular the theme of resurrection which was never far from Spencer's mind throughout his artistic career. Collis reports Spencer wondering about a Last Judgement picture, often contemplated but never executed, in which, he explained, there would be no convictions or punishments as everybody was to be acquitted.[106]

Although the strongly elevated focal point is absent, as is the prominent central dividing line found in Fra Angelico's 'The Last Judgement', other features in Spencer's picture correspond closely to compositional details in Fra Angelico's work. Spencer's employment of deeper spatial recession in this image as opposed to the shallower space in the other panels, already suggests a different focus on the subject based on a different compositional structure. In the other panels the activities described by the titles are spread out across the canvas with the emphasis relying more on shape and pattern. The important activity is restricted to the foreground, as spatial depth is kept to a minimum. Where deeper recesses do occur as in "Welders", little effort is made to draw the viewer into the space. In "Bending the Keel Plate", however, the key activity takes place in the background, around the light source - the red-hot keel plate. Unlike the other panels, this is virtually the only light source, lending an unearthly glow to the proceedings. The way in which the light fans out through the space is indeed very similar to the fan-like composition in Fra Angelico's "Last Judgement". But whereas the central strip in Fra Angelico's work remains an empty field of open graves, Spencer's canvas is peopled with three groups of workers toiling on different parts of the keel plate in different stages of production. These three groups are placed parallel to the viewer, but at different points within the spatial recession. The shape of the receding 'graveyard' of

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[105] Spencer as quoted by Bell, 1980, p.187
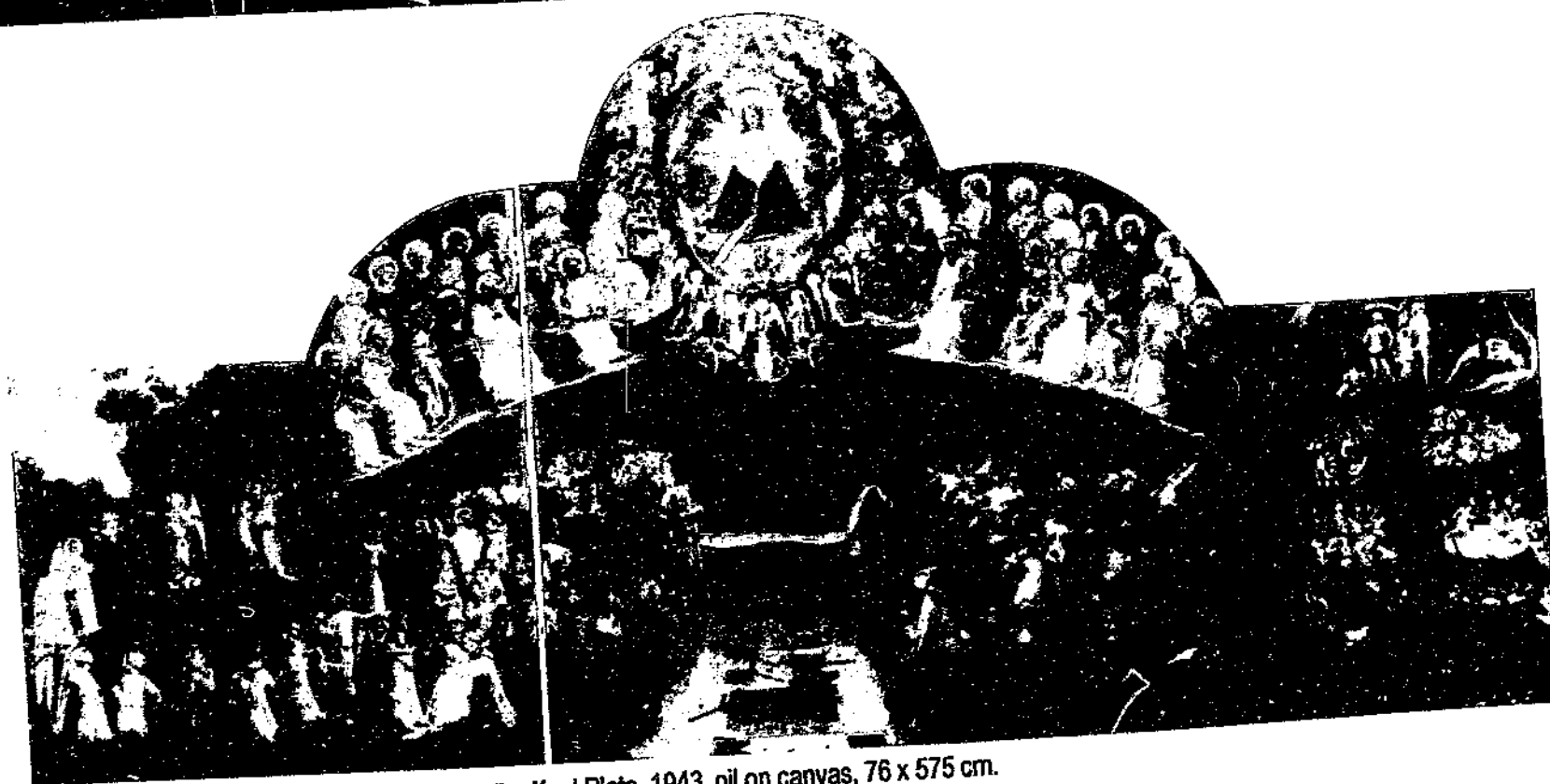[106] Collis, p.205

Fig. 17 Shipbuilding on the Clyde: Bending the Keel Plate, 1943, oil on canvas, 76 x 575 cm.

Fig. 18 Fra Angelico: The Last Judgement,

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: Bending the Keel Plate, 1943, oil on canvas, 76 x 575 cm.

Judgement,

Fra Angelico's painting is echoed in the perspective of the three sheets of metal which the workmen are labouring on and the floor of the workplace in this area which is well illuminated and uncluttered, emphasising a receding rectangular shape. The 'dogholes'[107] in the shipyard floor, while visually echoing the dots on the lids of Fra Angelico's graves, evoke the idea of an 'underworld'. Like the open graves, the dogholes hint at a cavernous space underneath the floor of the depicted scene.

Fra Angelico places groups of resurrected people on both sides of his rectangular graveyard; the good on the left, the bad on the right. Spencer follows suit compositionally[108] by placing two groups of workmen on either side of the centre. The groups echo Fra Angelico's figures in rhythm and in some cases even in posture of specific figures. At the far left of the Fra Angelico picture, a circle of angels are leading the good to heaven. Heaven is depicted as a walled city in the background, from which light is pouring through the gates onto two approaching saints. Spencer inserts four workmen manoeuvring a shaped sheet of steel on a pulley and chains into this circle. While the shape of this sheet is suggestive of the empty space within Fra Angelico's circle, even the tree behind the angels is suggested in Spencer's work by a pile of rocks and metal sheets. Fra Angelico's heaven becomes a brick wall with a window through which daylight pours in from the outside. On the right hand side of "The Last Judgement", Fra Angelico's hell is cut off from the rest of the composition by the strong vertical line of its rocky boundaries. This line is echoed in Spencer's composition by a vertical sheet of corrugated iron, cutting across the format from top to bottom, isolating a figure neatly arranging angle-irons. As the figures in Fra Angelico's hell are illuminated by the enveloping fires, this solitary man is illuminated by his own light source to the right of the picture.

Patrizio and Little as well as Bell indicate that Spencer experienced difficulties in realising a composition for this panel which he had started in 1940 and only completed three years later,

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[107] Holes in the steel-plate floor of the shipyard, into which iron pegs (or dogs) were inserted, were used to guide the shape of any sheet of metal to be shaped

[108] but not conceptually, as his conception of God does not include a wrathful and avenging nature. Of an early Resurrection painting Spencer is recorded to have said that the only difference between the resurrection of the Good and the Bad is that the Bad have a little more trouble getting out of their graves.

having almost given up on it in the process. Uncharacteristically he had tried to solve some of the formal problems on the canvas itself, whereas, as a rule, Spencer always made intricately detailed preliminary drawings which he then copied onto canvas by means of a grid system. Clements refers to him as a superlative draughtsman who, like the Italians of the early Renaissance who he so admired, preferred wrapping up most of the pictorial possibilities at an initial stage.[109] For him the drawing contained not only the idea, but the whole composition carried to a high degree of detail. The canvas remains the field on which to enrich the conception with colour at the appropriate scale. It would seem that in this instance Spencer had felt the th·   f the Last Judgement to be an appropriate compositional model for his depiction of metal workers engaged in a foundry environment with the glow of furnaces and dark recesses. T· : appropriateness of Fra Angelico's image as a model may have made it unnecessary for him to ~re-plan hi. composition for this image. Nowhere else does he seem to have translated so directly from an existing composition. One can only speculate as to his reasons for making this comparison, as it is very difficult to pinpoint his methods and ideas of composition and design. It is perhaps his intense preoccupation with the didactic meaning of his subject matter that allowed him to work with such extraordinary confidence in the 'rightness' of his pictorial conception.

Spencer's method gave rise to a lot of criticism, as his critics felt that the painting process became nothing more than a technical formality, resulting in a dull paint surface and chalky colours. This 'shortcoming' is less acute in his observed paintings as these were executed from life, and were therefore less planned. Wyndham Lewis, Spencer's contemporary and art critic for the 'Listener' expressed this criticism as follows: "Spencer, it is felt, is careless of paint. His painting is the negation of quality. It is quantitative...In his multi-figured composition the detail...is a convention poor in form, illustrational. The colour is drab...Were he to paint the figures in his compositions as carefully as his excellent Self-Portrait at Tooth's, all would be well."[110] Wyndham Lewis expresses the opinion, widely held according to Bell, that Spencer would have been a better artist if he had concentrated on working from life, and had paid more attention to his handling of paint. This criticism did not make much of an impression though. "It is noticeable that I am never preoccupied

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[109] Clements, 1985, p. 16
[110] Wyndham Lewis, P. The Listener: 18 May 1950, as quoted by Bell, 1992, p. 201

with how I paint but with the gradual development of my thought and affection towards life in general, and from that, what in me it emotionally inspires me to do".[111] His attitude is one of self-centred, but in a way innocent emotion; he talks about composition and space in his notes, but always with an equal air of innocence towards the abstract pictorial attributes. Unlike the modernists, obsessed by the formalities of shape, colour and space, Spencer devotes his energies to the expression of meaning. Thus his drawings are composed immediately, with an extraordinary confidence in their rightness.

An important fact of Spencer's style lies in the two distinctive modes of painting: Firstly the purely documentary statements of fact in which the physical eye alone has been consulted. These consist of technical accomplished but often unimaginative landscapes, still-lifes and portraits. The other mode comprises the imaginative works, the 'illustrations', in which the artist's mind's eye is almost all that matters. According to Newton the so-called physical eye ' in these called in merely to fill in gaps in the mental vision. These two approaches co-exist to different degrees in different paintings. Newton states that the blending between the physical and the mind's eye is what constitutes the style of any artist. The mind's eye entails the artist's fabrications - his conception of the world and the truths he contains in it. The physical eye presents the physical world and makes the artist's vision comprehensible, as it provides points of reference in 'reality'. Although not intended as such, the shipbuilding paintings present somewhat of a marriage between Spencer's observed and visionary paintings. Because of the intense research he had to do in the shipyards to retain an acceptable standard of factual detail in the work, figures and spaces are less distorted than in his 'compositions' which he painted from memory and imagination for most part. He seems to be less concerned with expressing his personal pre-occupations by having to focus more intensely on the depiction of specific detail in the shipyards. Thus he is more conscious of his handling of paint, and the work seems more accomplished on a technical level.

The Shipbuilding paintings presented a unique opportunity to interact much more closely with society, after he had painted his erotic paintings which represent his most explicitly personal expressions. The worker community of Port Glasgow broke a period of isolation Spencer

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[111] Spencer as quoted by Pople

experienced in the late thirties as a result of his marital escapades and dire financial situation. As a rule Spencer preferred isolation:" I am really interested only in myself, and interested to speak only of myself...I am a treasure island seeker, and the island is myself".[112] His temporary immersion in the worker community satisfied one of his personal fantasies connected to his appreciation of Giotto and the other 'primitive' Italians: his admiration for the artist as craftsman and member of the working class.

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[112] Spencer as quoted by Collis, 1962, p. 203

Chapter 4

Redemptive Vision

The narrative impulse in Spencer's oeuvre developed into an interdependency between artworks at a fairly early stage of his career. The roots of this phenomenon may lie in his reverence for the early Renaissance artists and the purpose for which their paintings were destined; as parts of a greater scheme often within an architectural setting. Spencer wrote in 1955 of the centrality of schemes and serial painting to his art. "Each succeeding painting seems to celebrate and illustrate the joy that followed the joy which the former painting illustrated".[113] Unquestionably one of his greatest achievements in grouping paintings into a unified vision is the Sandham memorial chapel at Burghclere (1925-29) which was to be followed by further explorations of grand themes. The concept of the resurrection and its implications for Spencer underlies most of his visionary work and finds its clearest expression in these grand schemes. Pople compares Spencer's fascination with the inferences inherent in the concept of resurrection to that of a musician developing a symphonic theme which also surfaces in unrelated subject matter. The role of the female in the sexual and the creative, the esoteric associations of bodily and spiritual emergence, the concept of happiness as those moments when a joyous redemption from the confusions, perplexities and miseries of the world is experienced, all imply the theme of resurrection. It seems that by painting the theme of resurrection , Spencer sought redemption. His two greatest schemes, the Burghclere chapel and the Shipbuilding paintings, were both prompted by war, and culminated in monumental scenes of resurrection. Of the former he said that "the Burghclere memorial ...redeemed my experience from what it was; namely something alien to me. By this means I recovered my lost self".[114]

While not in themselves scenes of resurrections, the two panels adjoining the "Resurrection of the soldiers" (1928) in the Burghclere chapel, "Dug-out or Stand-to" (1928) (Fig. 20, p. 56), and "Reveille" (1929) (Fig. 19, p. 56) depict scenes from war-time experiences that possess

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[113] Cappricio and Little, 1994, unpaginated.
[114] Spencer as quoted by Robinson, 1990, p. 45

Fig. 19 Dug-out or Stand-To, 1928, oil on canvas, 213.5 x 185.5 cm.

Fig. 20 Reveille, 1929, oil on canvas, 213.5 x 185.5 cm

elements of a resurrection. In "Reveille" a group of soldiers rise from their beds under shroud-like mosquito nets, charged with a renewal of energy which a fresh day can bring. In "Dug-out or Stand-to" the idea of a momentous awakening is expressed in the emergence of soldiers from tomb-like trenches with blanched faces, dazed in the unaccustomed glare of day. Spencer's hankering towards grand schemes of painting gathered new momentum with the Shipyard paintings. The fact that they were an official commission allowed Spencer to pursue an extensive visionary scheme without the burden of considering the marketability of the work as economical factors often deterred the completion of his other ambitious schemes[115].

Before quite completing the shipbuilding panels, Spencer started working on a series of resurrection paintings which thematically developed out of the WW2 commission. In the shipbuilding panels, Spencer had taken each worker's activity and shown its correlation to its ultimate purpose. He delighted in his temporary membership of a solid working-class community, and Port Glasgow became the second of his New Jerusalems.[116] His official commissions commemorated their heroic efforts at work, evidence of his identification with them, while anticipating his effort to transcend reality by means of a redemptive vision. His first proposed image for the wartime commission was that of a crucifix as a symbol of current human oppression. Although the concept was not acceptable within the terms of his employment as Official War Artist, he was bound by his own artistic agenda to consider the spiritual dimensions of his task. In the series of resurrection paintings in which he honours the inhabitants of Port Glasgow, we find a most powerful indictment of the Second World War; a series that celebrates the triumph of love over death and adversity.

The idea of the Port Glasgow resurrections developed in Spencer's mind into a scheme no less ambitious than the Sandham memorial chapel or the church-house project. The scheme developed from a number of projected paintings for the Shipbuilding series depicting the workers

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[115] His grandest scheme of all, which involved most of his paintings not otherwise engaged in schemes, his "Church house", in which Cookham was viewed in a metaphorical manner as a church building in which his paintings would be displayed, never took form as a unit because the individual works had to be sold off on completion to support himself and his dependants.
[116] Cookham is the first

at home and on their way to work. It developed into an independent idea upon Spencer's discovery of a graveyard on a hill in the centre of Port Glasgow which reminded him of a quotation from John Donne in which the resurrection of the dead is compared to a king climbing the hill of Zion. Originally planned as a single large stepped canvas, fifty feet long, showing Christ seated on the crown of the hill, angels hovering above, and below a fan-shaped array of graves with the resurrected making their way uphill to be judged, this plan proved to be too ambitious and was divided, at the advice of Dudley Tooth, into smaller units. Spencer worked on the series from 1945 to 1950, completing eigh 'n canvases, twelve of them designed as four independent triptychs. Robinson compares the Port Glasgow resurrections with Spencer's best-known treatment of the subject of resurrection in "The Cookham Resurrection" of 1925. Like the earlier painting, it offered him a pretext for self-assessment. In the Cookham Resurrection he paid respects to Cookham as the seat of his vision, while acknowledging a succession of debts of a personal and artistic kind: to the Carlines, the Slade and his own brand of neo-Primitivism. Bell contrasts the earlier and later paintings, pointing out that anatomical proportions are more distorted, gestures more exaggerated and the composition more frenzied in the later work. A sense of the unity of the original grand scheme prevails in the way individual paintings are composed. As in the Shipbuilding paintings, figures on the edge of one painting are meant to be moving into the adjoining picture to maintain continuity of action. The world Spencer creates does not end at the edge of the picture, but is implied to exist and continue beyond it. Spencer does not present a resurrection founded on biblical sources: "the world in which I am at present living is the world I have attempted to paint in these pictures. The resurrection is meant to indicate the passing of the state of non-realisation of the possibilities of heaven in this life to the sudden awakening to that fact. That is what is inspiring the people as they resurrect, namely, the new meaning they find in what they had seen before".[117] This statement is in accord with the underlying message of Spencer's oeuvre. Collis summarises his whole lifetime philosophy as a belief in the immediate possibility of a golden age as a state of mind, "the apprehension of the sublime truth that this world could be governed by love, pervaded by joy and transfigured by a

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[117] Spencer as quoted by Collis, 1962, p. 198

sense of the oneness of all life, if only we would have it so".[118] In all his work he pictures the world as such, showing us the alternative reality in which this doctrine rules.

Although contemporaneous with and usually included in the Port Glasgow series, "The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus' Daughter" is an interloper in subject and location. The side panels had been drawn as early as 1940, and the painting is set in Stonehouse, Gloucestershire. The painting depicts the miracle of Jairus's daughter as described in Mark 5:22-43 The left panel is based on a wedding photograph which had struck Spencer because it depicted a church positioned at a road junction. He imagined those who had worshipped there as being resurrected from under the paving stones of the adjoining sidewalk. The right-hand panel is based on memories of a street in Cookham, the Pound, with its rows of cottages, front gardens and railings. The central panel shows a house with a simple sash window through which the bedroom, where the miracle is being performed, can be seen. This central panel acts as a link for the religious overtones of the left-hand panel and the homely ambience of the right-hand panel.

Spencer's use of multiple viewpoints within a single work is quite evident here. He uses the elevated viewpoint, so characteristic of his visionary work, throughout the composition, but the angles vary dramatically from the left to the right hand side. In the buildings portrayed, remnants of scientific perspective remain, though disjointed, in Spencer's attempt to show maximum detail. He diverts from scientific perspective in two ways: by elevating the viewpoint of the viewer to some point above the scene depicted, creating a distance between viewer and image and by faceting or splaying the space so as to reveal as much as possible of the depicted scene.[119] It is in such treatment of depicted space that the influence of modernism, and specifically Cezanne and Cubism on Spencer again becomes clear.

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[118] Ibid.
[119] Spencer's use of an elevated viewpoint turns the viewer into a voyeur, looking down onto a scene from which he is also somewhat psychologically separated because of the elevation. The idea of voyeurism is further strengthened by a recognition of a personal subtext in an image. Nearly all Spencer's visionary paintings lack a consistent logic from a classical point of view. "The scales of objects are arbitrary, the perspective (of which his landscapes show him to have a perfectly good command) is empirical. ...It is as if he had learnt and rejected a 'Grand Manner' in order to invent one of his own." Hayes, 1986, p. 13.

Fig. 21 The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus' Daughter, 1947, oil on canvas, centre 76.8 x 88.3, sides each 76.8 x 51.4 cm

As has been shown, Spencer often uses a linear perspectival system to construct a space, and then deviates from it when depicting objects within this space. In "The Last Supper" (Fig. 5, p. 25) the bricks in the walls of the room are meticulously painted to adhere to a very specific vanishing point, while the table and figures are tilted as if viewed from a much higher angle. In "The Resurrection, Cookham" (1926) he intentionally combines two sets of linear perspective. The essential lines of perspective converge on the church porch and the figures in it. The characteristic high viewpoint is used, causing the spectator to look down onto the graveyard. To the left of the church perspective plunges into the distance, indicating a very different vanishing point and a much lower viewpoint. This recurring tendency in Spencer's application of perspective results in a suddenly exaggerated depth, as can also be seen in works like "The Betrayal" (1922-23), "Swan Upping" (1915-19), and some of the Shipbuilding panels (1940-46). This use of differing perspectives seems to be a narrative device, a way of dictating order of reading of the image: the central action is seen from above, tilted towards the viewer. The eye is then drawn into the depicted space by the use of this plunging perspective to read contents of 'secondary' importance, depicted deeper in the illusionistic space. The same fluctuation of perspective is present in "The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus' Daughter." In the construction of individual buildings in the left hand panel and parts of buildings in the central and right-hand panel, remnants of scientific perspective are evident. The entire scene is depicted from a high angle, but a gradual recession occurs towards the church and surrounding buildings in the background. In the right hand panel, on the other hand, ground-level is tilted up towards the viewer virtually to the top of the image, where it is suddenly made to dip into space. Spencer uses this device to check the discrepancy between the two panels. This pretence toward conventional illusionism is important as it maintains a conviction in the viewer that he is viewing a reasonable representation of a true situation.

Spencer's application of perspective, while constituting an eccentric way of seeing, also implies a specific intended way of reading. Not only does he present us with different viewpoints, but also with different points of view as can be seen in "The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus' Daughter". Pople links the central window scene in "The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus' Daughter" to the lighted interior of the church in "Travoys arriving with wounded soldiers at a

dressing station at Smol, Macedonia" (1919) (Fig. 22, p. 63); it similarly combines an ordinary domestic image with a religious image as a means of finding an affirmative revelation in even the most mundane moments of life. In both paintings the device of framing a 'picture within a picture' is used to isolate an image in order to emphasise the meaning conveyed in it, and relating that meaning to the content of the picture as a whole. This device was commonly used in narrative painting before the sixteenth century to depict and reveal the message or discourse of characters in a narrative within a painting. It usually took the form of a panel or window depicted adjoining the protagonists on which their thoughts or topic of discussion was displayed in an image. By setting these images apart from the 'real' action in the depiction, much like the comic-book convention of using speech-bubbles, the artist avoided the risk of confusing the viewer as to the 'levels of reality' in the representation.

In 'Travoys', Spencer depicts the arrival of wounded at a dressing station after a night of heavy fighting in the Dorian-Vardar sector of the front in September 1916. The travoys are spread out fanwise in front of the brightly lit church which was converted into a makeshift field hospital. Through the window a brightly lit operating theatre is visible in which an operation is being performed is visible. The painting resembles a traditional Adoration scene, with the travoys replacing the kings and shepherds, and the operating table, scene of physical 'salvation', doubling as altar.[120] Spencer found deep religious significance in the scene, and aimed to portray peace in the middle of confusion; the wounded in the painting are in a state of detachment from the physical, a state of peace: "All those wounded men were calm and at peace with everything...Like Christ on the Cross (the wounded) belonged to a different world than those tending them".[121] The operating theatre is isolated within its light and its frame to appear almost like a vision of salvation to these unfortunate spectators. In "The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus' Daughter" Spencer similarly inserts the New Testament narrative of the miracle into a descriptive narrative of his own devising. In this case the isolation of the biblical narrative is somewhat unusual as Spencer generally presents his biblical themes in an ordinary guise, i.e. the everyday is totally absorbed into the religious theme. Although there is a suggestion of continuity between the central panel and its

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[120] Bell, 1992, p. 35-37
[121] Spencer as quoted by Pople, 1991, p. 189

Fig. 22 Travoys of Wounded Soldiers arriving at a Dressing Station in Smol, Macedonia, 1919, oil
on canvas, 183 x 218.4 cm.

wings, the scene of the miracle is isolated by the frame of the window through which we observe the domestic interior from the outside. The implications of the content conveyed in the miracle scene is depicted in the outdoor activity shown in the wings: an expression of the joy of reclaiming deceased loved ones here and now. The 'image within an image' here functions not as a depiction of the thoughts or discourse of one of the protagonists, but as the voice of the artist.

Spencer's application of architectural structures to divide the picture plane and isolate figure groups from one another calls to mind another early Renaissance narrative device. Towards the end of the Medieval period the differentiation between scenes in inscenated narratives was achieved more explicitly by means of architectural stage design in which arcades and walls were used to separate individual episodes. In "The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus' Daughter" the figures and actions are divided by the central building into three areas of occurrence. While encapsulating the scene of the miracle within its walls, the building creates a definite division between the resurrection of the dead on the left, and the homecoming and reunion on the right. In the left-hand panel the dead are being resurrected from the sidewalk, assisted by passersby and friends, welcoming them back in the manner of welcoming soldiers from the war as implied by the flags, banners and bunting above the door. In the right-hand panel the resurrected are seen to be returning from their graves in the churchyard to the garden gates of their former dwellings in the village. This activity is meant to echo the abundant joy at the miracle performed inside the room. The action on the right is further compartmentalised by garden walls and fences, breaking it up into intimate little scenes of rejoicing, thereby emphasising the public and universal implication of the miracle. Ringbom indicates a secondary purpose of this device: apart from functioning as a temporal marker, it also defines reported content. The wall, arcade or window, apart from marking an event as part of another chronological phase, also "serves to frame the dream or speech topic, and thus assigns to it an order of reality different from that of the protagonist".[122] The miracle inside the room is implied to function on a different level of reality to the scenes outside the room.

The window scene is further isolated from the rest of the picture by the manner in which the figures inside are depicted. They are substantially larger than the figures outside the room, foregrounding

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[122] Ringbom, 1989, p. 37

the importance of the scene, and creating a pressu ⁀ intensity within the confined space. The figures playing out the biblical narrative are also much more simplified in their tubular treatment, calling to mind the block-like figures of Giotto. Spencer's treatment of figures is often inconsistent: at times he seems very aware of the structure of a body contained within clothing, especially of female figures as in "The Adoration of old Men" (1937), "Promenade of women" (1938) and some figures from the 'Beatitudes' series, but most of his figures are portrayed in his Giottesque, tubular style, in which clothing becomes a solid form in itself, giving the figures a somewhat bloated and often shapeless look. Pople ascribes such deviation from naturalistic depiction in Spencer's images to the extent of his emotional involvement in a work.[123] This can perhaps be best illustrated in "The Temptation of St. Anthony" (1945) (Fig. 23, p. 66) where the saint is depicted as being tempted by a whole bevy of nude beauties. The nudes are depicted in a surprisingly naturalistic manner[124], whereas St. Anthony is portrayed in Spencer's characteristic tubular style indicating identification with St. Anthony and thus aligning his own personal views on sexuality with the attributes of the saint. "St. Anthony eschews temptation...not because he wishes to deny it, but because he longs for sex in its perfect form. He has a perfection to reach and is aware of some imperfection in himself and is aware that he cannot *immediately* join...in what goes on around him".[125]

Such distortion in his figures, linked as such to emotional charge, would have happened subconsciously. Spencer denied ever intending to depart deliberately from natural appearances. He explained that his paintings were the product of a powerful inner need that is not covered by any real visual stimulus: The need stimulated by the inner workings of his imagination was the reality he sought to put down on canvas.[126] The distortions were not a deliberate stylistic ploy, but emerged in the compositions from his unconscious, often alarming him when discovered. Such deviations were never corrected, though, because they formed an integral part of the design, which was the result of "the fullest extent of my inspirational powers at the time of the conception...of the

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[123] Pople, p. 206.
[124] Spencer said of the nudes that he had just emptied all his Slade life drawings into the painting.
[125] Spencer as Quoted by Pople, 1991, p. 450
[126] Bell, 1992, p. 153

Fig. 23 The Temptation of St. Anthony, 1945, oil on canvas, 112 x 91.5 cm

idea".[127] Spencer lamented the increase of distortion in later years, connecting it to the loss of the innocence of his vision.

Spencer animates his images with direct and simple gestures to communicate emotions clearly and explicitly. In "Daughters of Jerusalem" (1951) the gestures of grief and lamenting are almost overstated and verge on the melodramatic. In "The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus' Daughter" these bold gestures aid the narrative in the sense that information can be more forcefully communicated than would be the case with more subtle, naturalistic poses. In the figure of Christ with outstretched hands, these exaggerated gestures capture two important aspects of the narrative at once; the raising of the child and the dismissal of the unbelievers.

Jairus' daughter died while he had gone to find Jesus to heal her illness. On Jesus' arrival at the house He told the mourners to stop mourning as the child was merely asleep. Because they didn't believe Him He chased them from the house before performing the miracle. In the painting Jairus is clutching the bed post in despair while Jesus commands the girl to rise and at the same time orders the unbelieving onlookers out of the room. Two dismissed onlookers are outside at the right-hand corner of the building. Pople points out that on two occasions Spencer drew particular attention to these two, who clearly represent himself and Hilda. They do not seem to share the joy of the other figures in the left-hand panel. "I do not know if there is any logical connection between the old unbelievers people at the foot of the central panel who are just around the corner from the people resurrecting, and being very happy about it, in the left-hand panel. One of the onlookers is looking up and clearly aware".[128] Pople indicates that a meaning can be made to appear if this is read in the context of Spencer's recondite language: he cannot see any logical connection between him and Hilda and the happiness of the resurrecting figures. He is possibly conveying an alarming prospect, the gravity of which causes him to be an unbelieving onlooker[129]: Hilda is seated. Is she too weak to stand? The excitement of the resurrecting figures is merely a curiosity

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[127] Spencer as quoted by Bell, 1992 p. 153

[128] ibid.

[129] It became apparent during the spring of 1947 that Hilda was physically ill. Spencer insisted on the care of a professional nurse, who discovered the tell-tale lump in her breast. A mastectomy was performed. It was during this time that Spencer interrupted the execution of the main resurrection series to complete this painting.

to her; she is interested but emotionally uninvolved. It seems that Spencer may be prefiguring his final loss of Hilda in this painting. He is just too aware of the fact that she will not be promptly resurrected like the little girl, hence his portrayal of them as unbelieving onlookers. The fact that he interrupted work on the Port Glasgow resurrections to do a painting that has been partially composed years earlier, right at a time when Hilda's health caused alarm, seems to support this reading. The manner in which the work is executed also seems to differ markedly from its contemporary works: in the Port Glasgow resurrections Spencer's attention to illusionary surface detail reaches a peak, resulting in some instances almost in a flattening of the picture plane. Although this work is still very detailed, it seems less joyfully so. To Spencer the concept of resurrection was the ultimate symbol of our return to 'home': the state of liberation of the spiritual from the corporeal, attainable momentarily through sex and permanently through death. Does Spencer in this picture acknowledge Hilda's impending 'spiritual liberation'? He seems to be offering Hilda the redemption he deemed possible through art, and which in previous Resurrection paintings had been offered to others: the soldiers in the "Resurrection of the Soldiers", his friends, relations and Cookhamites in "The Cookham Resurrection". To Spencer the function of religion and art is to attempt to bring about this liberation by offering the resurrected the joy of realising the hopes entertained during life.

Chapter 5

Constructing an Alternative Reality

In this chapter I discuss my own work submitted for the masters degree in relation to the preceding research. I outline my approach to the construction of an alternative reality and consider some aspects corresponding to Spencer's visionary constructions in order to clarify my own visionary intentions based on my perceptions of social mores. I also present everyday situations in my paintings and scraperboard drawings which reflect on conventional views of religion. Although never attempting anything remotely as ambitious as Spencer's grand schemes, I also depict traditional religious images associated with devotional meditation such as biblical themes, depictions of saints and the Madonna, and series relating to the life of Christ. While adhering to traditional religious conventions of portrayal of such subjects, I also deviate from them in order to subvert the conventional reading or function. This also pertains to the reading of a narrative within images through the use of fragmentation, serial composition, scale and the inclusion of ambiguous references. I also discuss the importance of medium to my realisation of an alternative reality.

As in Spencer's case, I employ two different modes of narrative in my images. The first involves a suggested chronological narrative which may refer to a biblical narrative such as the Last Supper and the Passion, or else an unspecified narrative is implied as in the "Deadly Sins" series(1996-97). The second narrative mode involves the more iconic images such as "Madonna with Walnut and Ginger" (1994) and "Partially Draped Madonna and Child" (1995). The scraperboard images fall somewhat between these two modes as they lend themselves more easily to the layering of images and symbols. The physicality of the medium as well as the ease of cutting and arranging individual segments allows for superimposition and collageing in the construction of an image. In recent works, the inclusion of painted segments has been explored, to further contrast the two media as well as suggesting different 'levels of reality'. While colour adds a quasimagical aspect in the concretion of visibility, black and white images seem even more removed from reality. The scraperboard technique also allows for a heightened sense of detail through the possibility of minute mark-making and hatching as well as the high contrast in tonal range. The dramatic

qualities of light and shadow obtainable in this medium make it ideal for the construction of an alternative reality. Being a reductive process, scraperboard images require a greater technical control in execution, and therefore a more fully realised image before starting.[130] "Double Exposure" (1995) (Fig 24) consists of two large scraperboard panels (122 x 100 cm each) depicting two Madonna's, one black (left panel), the other white, facing each other as if in confrontation, and clutching their children protectively. The children face directly outwards, seemingly appealing to the viewer. The figures are mirror-image cut-outs of the same stencil, pasted onto a bleak rural landscape. Paper jets (cut-outs) are represented hovering above them, while forbidding clouds, suggesting speech-bubbles or smoke, rise above each figure group. While activating the space above them, the paper jets also imply movement as well as menace in their pointed shapes[131]. The self-conscious staging of an event by means of aligning two Madonna images allows the viewer to meditate on the situation posed. Whereas traditional visionary images of the Madonna and child in glory tend to elevate the viewer's mind to the contemplation of higher beings, my depiction places the two women in a South African context, implying a secular, associative reading.
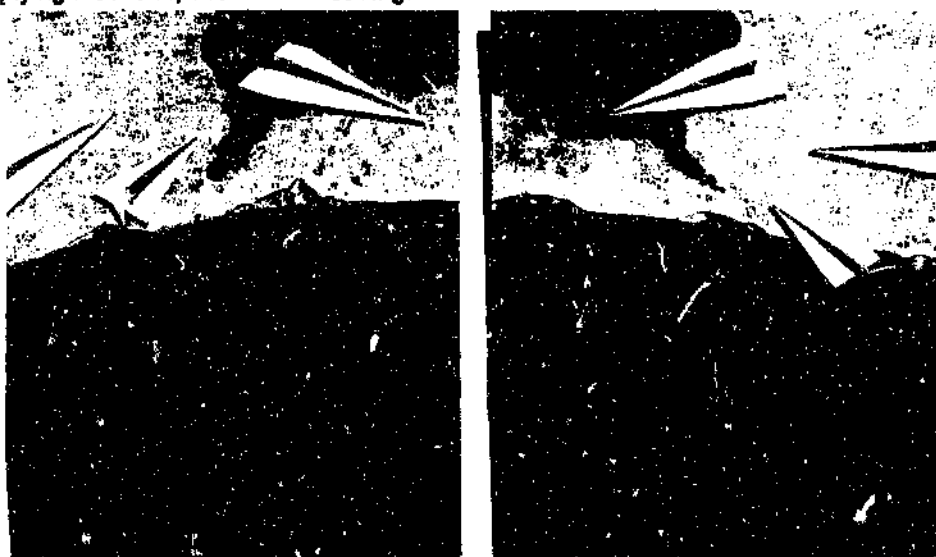

Fig. 24 Double Exposure, 1995, Scraperboard, 122 x 100 cm

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[130] Because of the scale of these drawings I had to develop my own board. Several layers of white paint are applied to marine plywood. The surface is sanded between application of coats to obtain a smooth surface. The board is then covered with a thin layer of printing ink. Scratching is done with a variety of instruments, e.g. cutting blades, sandpaper, etc.

[131] The paper jet is a recurring motif in my work; see also in "Madonna with Walnut and Ginger" and "Incriminating Evidence"

In "Still-life with French Bread" (1996) (Fig. 25, p 72) four apples, two tubes of paint, an open sheet of paper with a drawn image of the still-life and a pencil appear scattered on a round table. The scene is tipped up towards the viewer and two baguettes, painted in oils, are affixed diagonally across the surface in the form of a cross. The scraperboard image is presented in an incomplete state, implying an artwork in progress while the superimposed cross acts as a sign of cancellation. The bread, while symbolising nurturing, also takes on a negative connotation. The black and white image on scraperboard is presented to the viewer in the form of a traditional artistic genre, presented as an observational study. The painted baguettes have a stronger presence in their colour against the subdued, monochrome background. In "Incriminating Evidence" (1996) (Fig. 26, p. 72) and "Even Here" (1996) (Fig. 27, p. 72), a similar combination of media is used. When displayed together, the superimposed, painted shapes recall religious symbols such as the cross and the crown of thorns, while at the same time alluding to the game of naughts and crosses. Two modes of representation are thus counterposed to set up a dialogue requiring associative reading.

I use both oil paints and gouache in my colour depictions. Gouache is used for small-scale work and allows for quicker and thus more intuitive execution of ideas. In the series "Storyboard for a Documentary" (1994-), for example, which comprises an ongoing sequence of small images in the form of a visual notebook executed continuously throughout my practice since 1994, this medium has enabled a more immediate, almost 'snap-shot', rendering of narrative ideas. Sixteen of these panels are submitted for the M.A. degree, depicting various subjects in which the background landscape often functions as unifying feature. Thus, disparate ideas may come together as a visual unit to suggest a continuous narrative. The format calls to mind the comic strip in which one panel leads sequentially into the other as an ongoing narrative. The series thus functions as a documentation of ideas which may at a later stage be developed as individual themes in other media.

The medium of oil paint allows me to develop larger themes in a more gradual manner. A painting may be put aside for later working on. Unlike Spencer, my compositions are usually not fully realised before painting commences. A general plan is sketched onto the canvas in brush before

Fig. 25 **Still-life with French Bread**, 1996, scraperboard, 122 x 122 cm.

Fig. 26 **Incriminating Evidence**, 1996, scraperboard, 122 x 122 cm.

Fig. 27 **Even Here**, 1996, scraperboard, 122 x 122 cm.
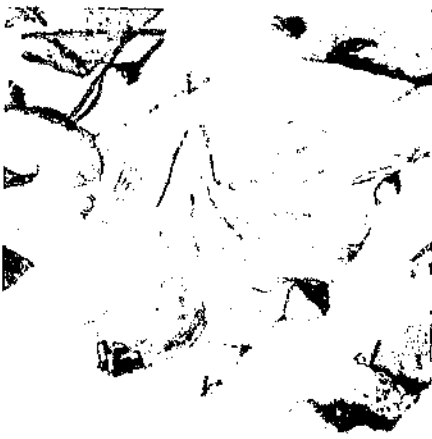
Fig. 28 **Storyboard for a documentary, 1994- , gouache, individual images of 20 x 20 cm

large areas of colour are filled in. Smaller detail is subsequently included. This procedure allows me to make changes or overpaint where necessary as the work progresses. In "Madonna with Walnut and Ginger" (1994) (Fig. 29, p. 75), a traditional central position of the Madonna and child is used. The title also reflects the Renaissance tradition of referring to specific attributes within the particular painting such as Raphael's "Madonna of the Goldfinch"(1507) in which the Christ child is depicted cupping a goldfinch, or Botticelli's "Madonna of the Magnificat" (1480-85) in which the Madonna is engaged in writing a score. "Madonna with Walnut and Ginger" depicts a sleeping cat and walnut on either side of the seated Madonna, implying a domestic scene, also by its culinary reference. The Madonna is surrounded and even pierced by paper jets and banners float across her face, obscuring one eye. Her other eye is closed, signifying an absorbed contemplation. Behind her, dark clouds gather in the distance. The quietness of the meditative image is disturbed by the flurry of paper jets, seemingly projected from outside the depicted image. By cutting across the edges of the image, the constructed world is implied to continue beyond the frame. The sleeping cat, the walnut and the Madonna, oblivious of the movement around her all indicate a suspension of time while the child is the only participant in the action. His gentle grip on the point of one of the banners signifies an awareness of the action about him.

"Partially Draped Madonna and Child"(1995) (Fig. 30, p. 75) is a much smaller image presented in an elaborate gilt frame in the tradition of conventional portraiture. The Madonna is presented semi-nude, draped with a cloth covering the right side of her face as well as the head and eyes of the child. The child is shown sucking on her finger. In both depictions of the Madonna, the religious icon, while remaining a devotional subject, is altered to upset a conventional contemplative reading of the image. While an aura of spiritual attention is present and the Madonna seems oblivious to the disruption, a sense of disquiet prevails.

In my religious paintings, I do not place the subjects in a contemporary setting merely to add a contemporary relevance to them, but rather discover in contemporary events a religious significance. This can be shown in my depiction of "The Last Supper" (1996), a large triptych resembling an altarpiece. The idea of painting the religious theme was prompted by an encounter

Fig. 29 **Madonna with Walnut and Ginger**, 1994, oil on wood, x cm

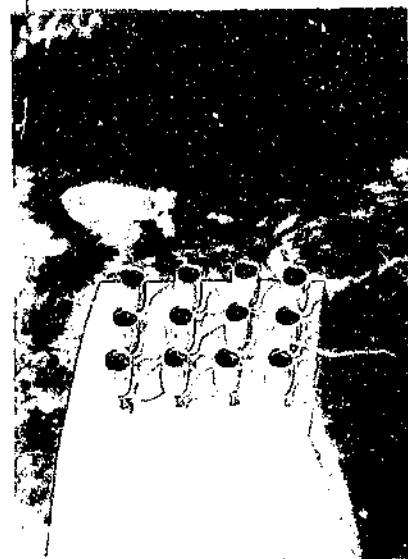Fig. 30 **Partially draped Madonna and Child**, 1995, oil on wood, x cm

Fig. 31 **The Last Supper**, 1996, oil on wood, central panel 135 x 225 cm, side panels 135 x 103 cm each.

in a Dutch bar in which a group of elderly tourists had assembled around an oval table for refreshments. The moment of waiting for the beverages to arrive presented a scene of joyous gathering which contrasted to the spectre of their age and mortality. In the central panel of my painting, twelve elderly figures are portrayed waiting around an oval table, perspectivally tipped to fill the frame. While a figure of Christ is absent, a suggestion of spiritual presence may be read in the strong central, but invisible light source. The scene is set on what seems like a frozen lake, on which the figures are clearly waiting, clutching worthless little attributes such as a stone, a bus ticket, a cigarette butt, a feather. The sacramental bread and wine are absent, but are depicted in the side panels, ready for consumption. Whereas in a traditional altarpiece the various panels meet in a unified and mutually supportive reading, the side panels in my depiction suggest an unattainable moment. This reading is supported by the different perspectives used in the panels as well as the contrasting landscapes. The central panel, in its tipped perspective, achieves a claustrophobic effect in its limited and flattened space, while the view beyond the tables with the bread and wine in the side panels, plunges into deep landscape. Formal links to maintain unity between the panels, involve the use of alternating areas of similar colour, as in the rendition of the ice in the central panel and the table-cloths in the side panels. The scene presents the viewer with a 'pregnant moment' in which the religious theme of the Eucharist with its ritual significance of communion is frustrated. As discussed in Chapter 2 the 'pregnant moment' presents a moment in the action that reveals all that had led up to it, and all that would follow. In "The Last Supper" the suspended poses of the figures give no evidence that any significant action preceded the portrayed moment or will follow it, implying an eternal waiting.

In "Deadly Sins" (1996-7), this form of 'reappraisal' of a traditional religious theme is continued. Consisting of a series of eight panels (80 x 80 cm), the traditional pictorial convention of the seven cardinal sins as an opportunity for devotional reflection on the seriousness of transgression, as obligated by the church, is ridiculed. Traditionally defined as those sins punishable by spiritual death, Gillie (1980) outlines the list as follows: Pride, Envy, Sloth, Gluttony, Avarice, Anger and Lust. As a farcical 'riddle' I have included the sin of 'speeding' as an additional vice, suggesting thereby that this list of sins may be endlessly expanded. As depictions of events of temptation, the viewer is enticed by the situation presented, having to figure out the sin depicted. In "Lust" (Fig.
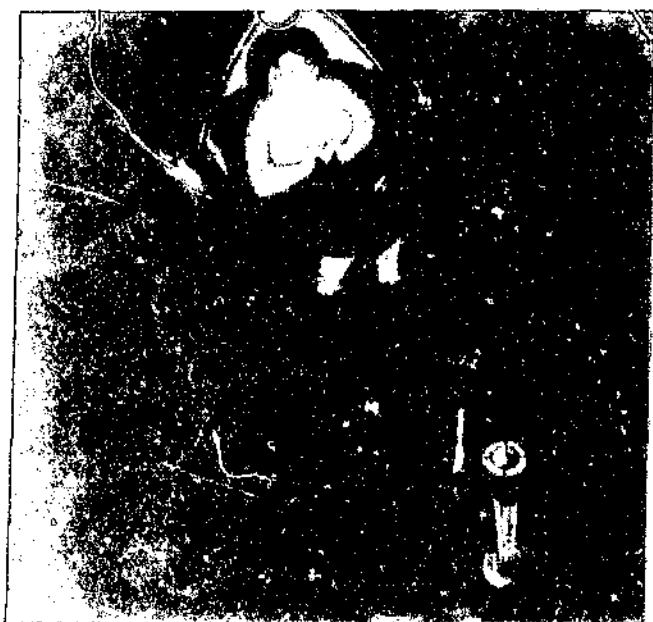
Fig. 32 Deadly Sins: Lust, 1996,
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm

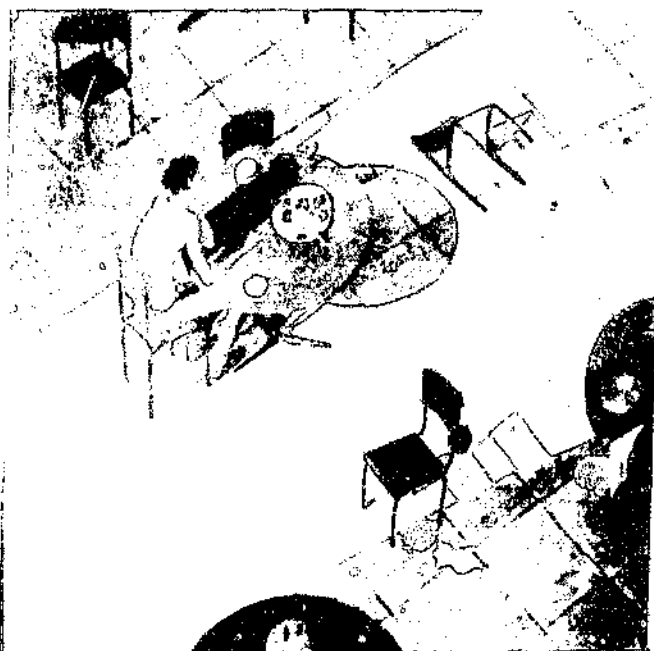Fig. 33 Deadly Sins: Greed, 1996,
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm

Fig. 34 Deadly Sins: Gluttony, 1996,
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm

Fig. 32 **Deadly Sins: Lust,** 1996,
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm

Fig. 33 **Deadly Sins: Greed,** 1996,
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm

Fig. 34 **Deadly Sins: Gluttony,** 1996,
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm

32, p. 78), a couple are seated on opposite sides of a park bench. The scene implies that they are not acquainted but their sideward glances suggest them contemplating a liaison. The image contains obvious sexual references, e.g. the bag of bananas, the phallic shape of the bench and the handbag, the empty wastebin and the incisions in the ground. Other treatments of the sins play with more complex narrative possibilities in which the 'pregnant moment' may instigate numerous fantasies in the viewer's mind. The 'before' and 'after' of the situation is not given. In some images a tension is set up through formal means to suggest potential for an act. In "Greed" (Fig. 33, p. 78), for example, a hot red carpet sets the scene for the juxtaposition of a woman on a circular couch, facing an upright ashtray. The situation suggests a hotel foyer, giving rise to numerous possible inflections on the theme of greed. A narrative is thus suggested but not completed. In images where an act has clearly taken place, as in "Gluttony"(Fig. 34, p. 78), the viewer needs to consider the details contained in the image as evidence for a construction of a narrative. The images are depicted as views from a bigger scene, where the framing seems to focus almost accidentally on insignificant detail. Lighting also suggests an unspecified moment in time as a further gesture of storytelling, but not supplying anything to be read chronologically.

In "Passion Play" (1996), fragmentation functions somewhat differently within a given narrative. Referring to traditional theatrical stagings of the suffering of Christ, the serial presentation of scenes significant to the relating of the event, is suggested by the repetition of nine panels. However, the expectation of narration is frustrated as the viewer is presented with close-up views of detail from a bigger picture. Titled as numbered details, the individual panels further suggest the fragments to belong to one bigger image. The idea of focussing in on detail as encountered, e.g. in arthistorical analysis of images, is consciously invoked. As significations of importance, they establish a sense of hierarchy of events within a narrative and recall the traditional convention of the fourteen stations of the cross where the viewer is meant to move form one scene to the next in participative contemplation of the event. While some of the images clearly reflect on the passion, others include details which point to a parallel event. In "Passion Play: Detail 6"(Fig. 35, p. 80) the red cloth held up by two hands reminds of the veil of St. Veronica while the shouting figure of a woman in front of it confuses the reading. The figure of a man lighting a cigar in "Passion Play:

Fig. 35 **Passion Play: Detail 6** , 1996, oil on wood, 61 x 61 cm

Fig. 36 **Passion Play: Detail 4** , 1996, oil on wood, 61 x 61 cm

Fig. 35 **Passion Play: Detail 6** , 1996, oil on wood, 61 x 61 cm

Fig. 36 **Passion Play: Detail 4** , 1996, oil on wood, 61 x 61 cm

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Detail 4" (Fig. 36, p. 80) similarly disrupts the reading of the passion. As such these foreign elements suggest incidents within the staging of a passion play, heightening the artifice of the staging of such a narrative. As in Spencer's series "Christ preaching at Cookham Regatta" (1956-59), the actual event is overshadowed by side events. In "Passion Play" this functions in the form of representations within a representation, the idea of a staged play already suggesting an alternative reality. The viewer is unable to enter into a conventional contemplative reflection on the passion events, being aware instead of the staging thereof, and identifying with the portrayal rather than the suffering.

Through the constructing of an alternative reality I have found a vehicle to provide situations which allow me to explore the range of narrative possibilities in my views on religious underpinnings in society. While there is a critical intent, my gestures of storytelling never prescribe a single reading but aim to present a suspended narrative, informed by my own vision.

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