



Eyeing the creatures: an exploration of mirth as a personal function of art

J.R. Botha
School for Communication Studies
Potchefstroom Campus
North-West University
POTCHEFSTROOM
E-mail: John.Botha@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

Eyeing the creatures: an exploration of mirth as a personal function of art

This article investigates the contribution by artist Jan van der Merwe to the project known as the “Creative creatures”. The project, initiated by Franci Greyling and Ian Marley, was based on the descriptions of a collection of fantastic creatures as relayed by Marley’s five year-old son, Joshua. Van der Merwe opted to design a special set of glasses for each of the creatures, and these works are discussed within the broader context of mirth in art.

In order to explicate the term “mirth”, a brief art-historical survey is done with reference to key figures such as Bosch, Bruegel and others. The role of scary creatures in art is contextualised by comparing the work done by the stonemasons of the Gothic period with those of Van der Merwe done for the “Creative creatures” project.

Throughout the article mirth as a personal function of art is discussed by interpreting the creative role of selected artists and their works. In conclusion it is suggested that the engagement with (scary) visual art should be enjoyed as a reciprocal event akin to a game – a game in which the mirthful characteristics of the work of art should be seen as a function to be savoured.

Opsomming

Oë vir die kreature: 'n verkenning van pret as 'n persoonlike funksie van kuns

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die bydrae van Jan van der Merwe tot die projek wat bekend staan as die “Kreatiewe kreature”. Hierdie projek, wat onder leiding van Franci Greyling en Ian Marley gedoen is, is gebaseer op beskrywings van 'n versameling verbeeldingryke kreature soos verwoord deur sy vyfjarige seun, Joshua. Van der Merwe se bydrae was die ontwerp van 'n spesiale bril vir elkeen van die kreature, en hierdie werke van hom word binne die breëre konteks van pret in kuns bespreek.

Ten einde die begrip “pret” (eintlik moeilik te vertaal vanuit die Engelse “mirth”) te verduidelik, is 'n bondige kunsgeskiedkundige oorsig gedoen met verwysing na figure soos Bosch, Bruegel en andere. Verder is die rol van vreesaanjaende kreature binne die konteks van die klipkapwerkers van die Gotiese styl gedoen en vergelyk met dié van Van der Merwe se werke vir die “Kreatiewe kreature”.

In die artikel is die rol van pret deurlopend as 'n persoonlike funksie van kuns bespreek deur die bydraes van geselekteerde kunstenaars en hulle werke te interpreteer. Ten slotte word voorgestel dat die interaksie met (vreesaanjaende) visuele kunswerke geniet moet word as 'n wederkerende spel – 'n spel waarin die prettige karakteristieke van die kunswerk as 'n waardevolle funksie tot 'n persoonlike belewenis gekoester moet word.

1. Introduction and prologue: an enigmatic approach to interpretation

During the era known as postmodernism a decidedly eclectic and non-hierarchical approach to art has proliferated in which an enlightened and often playful (Zurbrugg, 1993:29; Epstein, 1997:32) approach to both the creation and discussion of art has shifted the focus from the work of art to the art viewer. At the same time this has allowed for the re-evaluation of previously accepted tenets of art historical research and paved the way to argue for a more informal approach in our assessment of works of art, in other words, to not take things too seriously (Sim, 2005:246).

Add to this that a cluster of characteristics closely identified with the postmodern era includes terms such as the *absurd* (Bové, 1995:23-24; Fokkema & Bertens, 1986:202), *irony* (Malpas, 2005:8; McHale, 1992:21; Sim, 2005:246, 289), *parody* (Connor, 2005:50, McHale,

1992:24), *pastiche* (Anderson, 1998:61; Connor, 2005:48-49; Malpas, 2005:25), *bizarre* (Malpas, 2005:24), *ludic* (Zurbrugg, 1993:163), and even the need for an anagogical interpretation (McGuckin, 2009:50-51). This terminology emphasises a shift of focus, for while Modernist art was studied in a very academic and overtly serious way, contemporary approaches to art historical discourse confirms a tendency towards the informal (Klages, 2003:1-3). In the visual arts this tendency was already noticeable in art of the Dadaists and Surrealists, who discarded the logic and reason of Modernism (Kleiner, 2009:928, 943). This was continued in the playful approach of Pop Art of the sixties (Kleiner, 2009:981), that related art consumerism and made it more accessible to the public.

It was a similar need for an informal approach that initiated this article. The first was the collective artwork called *Eye test* contributed by artist Jan van der Merwe to the *Creative creatures* project referred to in the first article of this journal (Greyling & Marley, 2009). The second source was the art works of the stone carvers of the medieval cathedrals. The common denominator between these seemingly disparate sources lies in the enigmatic way in which they can be interpreted. These interpretations in turn will primarily be based on two questions, namely how do we “see” the creatures, and how do the creatures “see” us. The reason for this is the enigmatic nature of the art works as pictorial representations that seemingly *contain hidden meaning(s) to be discovered* (Kellerman, 1981:326).

The *Creative creatures* project used as point of departure a series of nine illustrations of creatures by the artist Ian Marley based on concepts springing from the narrated imagination of his five year old son, Joshua (Greyling & Marley, 2009). Visual and other artists were invited to participate in this project, and within the creative freedom intended by the brief, Van der Merwe created a series of glasses or eyepieces for the creatures. His approach turned out to be fun-filled, mirthful and very informal.

It was during a visit some months later to the great Gothic cathedrals of France, and on perceiving the gargoyles and other creatures by the stonemasons of these buildings, that the same pervasive sense of fun-filled and mirthful interpretation became apparent to the author – an observation that seemed to be at odds with a statement by Weir and Jerman (1986:8) when they say that “sculptors then, as workers now, did not carve what they were not commissioned to do, nor what they were not paid for”. This statement acted as a catalyst for an inner dialogue that brought into question the role of mirth in art, particularly as related to the freedom (or absence thereof)

inherent to the brief or commission. In focusing on mirth as primarily a personal, but also a social function of a work of art, this article makes use of the works of the stonemasons as a point of reference in order to discuss contextually the collective work *Eye test* by Van der Merwe. Both the stone sculptures and *Eye test* display enormous potential for an enigmatic interpretation that can move the viewer beyond the mere formal or visually obvious meanings of the works as decorative appendages of a bigger overall concept. The individual art work may therefore exhibit ways of “seeking my recognition while preserving his *incognito*, disdaining recourse to a wink-of-the-eye of understanding or complicity, this way of manifesting himself without manifesting himself” (Levinas, 1996:70). This approach towards the work of art that Levinas (1996:70) refers to as the *enigma*, compels the viewer to look beyond the perhaps iconographically more superficial meanings, to explore more deeply hidden interpretations by way of creative play, seeking the humour and mirth within.

2. Creative play, humour and mirth in art

One would want to disagree with the statement by Weir and Jerman (1986:8) in the previous paragraph in truly believing that these craftsmen (as they were deemed) could not or did not find an ulterior creative pleasure in the execution of their work(s), and it would seem virtually impossible to imagine that they did not also infuse their works with elements of wit, mockery and playful comment, often at the cost of their lords and masters who commissioned the works.

If, while keeping this in mind, one considers that the creation and/or function of the work of art can be linked either to the intentions with the commission (where and why the intended work was to be displayed) or to individual choice (as a personal function of art divorced from its public or social purposes) and thus done for pure satisfaction or contemplation. This often puts the artist in the midst of conflicting demands. Rookmaaker says that on the one hand the artist is put in a very peculiar position as a highly regarded “priest of culture” with knowledge of the secrets of reality, yet on the other hand the artist is as often regarded a superfluous person of whom people think highly, yet will be quite ready to let starve.

We want the artist to be serious and create deep things that have almost eternal value ... [b]ut if he wants to be successful he has to bow down to present tastes, be commercial, and play the clown rather than the sage. (Rookmaaker, 1978:9.)

This statement emphasises the need of many art viewers for art that is popular and more readily digestible, art with a social or even more important, a personal function catering for the tastes of the less serious, or an art in which happiness, creative play and mirth is central.

Mirth can be described as a state of happiness or merriment, indicative of fun, potentially eliciting laughter (Hornby, 2005:936). Roget's Thesaurus (Kirkpatrick, 1987:415-416) further explains mirth as a term reflecting hilarity, exhilaration, merry-making, humour, satire and amusement, and even links it to fun and games.

For Van der Merwe fun and games is a key point of departure in his personal stance towards the creative process. In 1986 he submitted a minidissertation towards obtaining a National Higher Diploma, in which he commented on the aspect of *play* (as in *games*), as art (*spel as kuns*), with reference to a number of his own works (Van der Merwe, 1986:1).

He quotes Gadamer by referring to the artist as “a sensitive overgrown child for whom there is a distinct sensual pleasure to be gained from playing with forms and manipulation of material in pleasing proportions” (Van der Merwe, 1986:2). He refers on the same page to the idea that art as a game contains a holy kind of seriousness, and he remarks that if a player does not take the game seriously, he spoils the game. One could surmise a kind of *spirituality*, in that the game has its own dynamics and purposes. Conversely, De Tolnay (1966:16) refers to the *game*-aspect in a painting by Hieronymous Bosch (c.1470-1516) entitled *The conjuror* (c.1478), compelling the viewer to conclude, as Van der Merwe does, that while the game is in progress it is also master (of the situation). From this one can deduce that De Tolnay means the act of “playing” has its own rules and dictates even within the playful act of participating in the game, that is, the laws according to which the game should be played (Van der Merwe, 1986:2).

In the annals of art history there are numerous examples of artists in effect playing this game, and artworks depicting happiness, humour, wit and mirth. A sculptured relief of Akhenaton and his family (Kleiner, 2009:75), the playful statuettes of a jockey (Richter, 1994:178) and musician (Fleming, 1995:83) from Greek Hellenistic art; the irreverent tugging of dad's toga from a little boy on the Ara Pacis (Kleiner, 2009:257) all date from the pre-Christian era. Examples of mirthful art during the Middle Ages abound (see 5 below for further discussion). The paintings of Bosch also often reflect a mockery through humour and satire (De Tolnay, 1966:13, 348), and

works by Bruegel tend to show most of the characteristics mentioned above (Cutler, 1973:469-471). Of Bruegel's extraordinary inventiveness with his paintings, Vöhringer (1999:9) asks the question: "where did such originality come from? Was it the native wit of a peasant from a village called Bruegel who observed his peers with equanimity and humor?" Vöhringer (1999:9) also quotes the early art historian Carel van Mander, as having referred to Bruegel as a "witty and humorous artist" from an obscure village in Brabant.

Jan Steen (1626-1679) and William Hogarth (1697-1764) poke fun at all and sundry (Kleiner, 2009:689, 762), and in the nineteenth century Daumier's (1808-1879) satirical lithographs stand out as an exercise in ironic mirth (Kleiner, 2009:801). As for the twentieth century, Van der Merwe (1986:24-26) points out that the works by both Picasso and Braque demonstrate for him a playful approach akin to a *visual game*, and it is this *visual game* that is qualified, for the purposes of this article, by terms and words or characteristics such as playfulness, humour, satire, wit, the absurd, irony, parody, and even the bizarre and mockery.

Mockery, for example, is also an element that Van der Merwe (1999:57) mentions and links to the use of a found object, such as in his work *Eye test*. Jackson (1975:314) fittingly remarks that often one should not read into every Gothic trefoil a mystic struggle between good and evil, but read what the sculptor probably merely meant for a picture, often satirical mockery of the life of his day, or perhaps only a sporting subject.

But even while celebrating the frivolously mirthful, there was also another side to mirth, a black humour associated with the history of medieval beasts and monsters such as an aquatic animal devouring a man on a Romanesque tympanum from central France (Souchal, 1968:120-121). This figure is very similar to the way Bosch depicted his inventions of beasts and creatures of the netherworld. As Vöhringer (1999:9) says, Bosch's underworld enriched with monsters and demons have been traced back time and again to esoteric doctrines of the Middle Ages. Thus the depiction of fearsome creatures in art boasts a history spanning millennia.

3. The portrayal of fearsome creatures in art

Monsters and creatures of the imagination came into existence at the same time that humankind did, and they have shared a long and compelling but very often frightful co-existence. Gods and demons became the omnipotent beings that controlled humankind's des-

tinies, and when humans had needs, or seemed to be in line for the reception of a boon or disfavour, these gods and devils were held responsible and they had to be appeased, usually by way of sacrifice or by statues and other art works.

The creation of these devils were always deemed essential to the functioning of religious practices, for they formed the foundation on which the shamans, witchdoctors, priests and religious functionaries throughout history based their positions of privilege in society (Cavendish, 1980:9). Priests have habitually nurtured the fear that ordinary people seemed to have for these denizens of the dark, because it provided the balance required for the religious beliefs of the people, with the added bonus that it also provided the priest with spiritual and often secular authority (Charles, 2009:1). These evil creatures eventually all found their way into the repertoire of the visual arts, whether beasts, devils or gargoyles, and in the Middle Ages shared space with saints and sinners on the pages of manuscripts and the edifices of cathedrals.

Dante (c.1265-1321), writing on monsters and creatures (beasts), could be deemed an excellent point of departure for this discussion, with his *Inferno* (1308-1321) as perhaps the most well known text that comments on the creatures of the netherworld (Hartt, 1980:75). The text of the *Inferno* subdivides into three broad discussions of heaven, purgatory and hell, and what is of significance is the eventual genesis of the story of two humans who successfully negotiated an excursion to hell and lived to tell the tale, namely Dante himself and Virgil. In essence they were the “proof” that hell really existed, because without this deterrent, the very existence of heaven could be challenged. Furthermore, it was in part the physical interpretation of Dante’s works in the form of sculpture (and painting) that inspired artists to adorn churches with creatures that could portray visually the imperilled world of human perfidy and sin.

Although the repertoires of angels, saints, believers, sinners and beasts in the Middle Ages were mostly based on careful planning and a strict hierarchy (Fleming, 1995:194), it seems reasonable to assume that the exact portrayal of these figures, and especially the monsters and devils, were also the products or results of the individual artist’s imagination. But were these creations based on commission or the capricious nature of the stone masons? Were they created for the sake of “sheer fun and devilment” (Weir & Jerman, 1986:8), and how did the artists go about the portrayal of these creatures? Did they have prototypes, and where did their inspiration stem from?

It was also during the Middle Ages that the work known as the bestiary or *Book of beasts* developed. This was a collection of stories and descriptions of animals and birds, some imagined and some real, to which, according to Payne (1990:9), Christian moral and allegorical interpretations should be attached. The bestiary provided the medieval artist with a virtually infinite source of imaginative creatures from which could be chosen an endless variety of devils, monsters and other creatures that would populate the cathedrals, where they could fulfill their roles of interpreting the liturgical message for the common man (Jackson, 1975:312). This anagogical analysis of Biblical texts most often inferred a spiritual interpretation rather than a literal meaning (cf. also McGuckin, 2009:50), but it is more than natural to suppose a more down to earth reading of the sculpture-as-text by the illiterate commoners of the day.

After the Middle Ages monsters, creatures and beasts continued to appear in art, and many well known artists from Giotto (c.1267-1337), Michelangelo (1475-1564) and Bosch through to Goya (1746-1828), Fuseli (1741-1825), William Blake (1757-1821), Gericault (1791-1824), Delacroix (1789-1863), Moreau (1826-98), Redon (1840-1916) and Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), to name but a few, spanned the period from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century with works that depicted the devil and a myriad of other creatures. Finally, the zoomorphic creations of the Surrealists were merely precursors to the major domain of the most fantastic creatures of the twentieth century, who found for themselves a whole new realm in cinema.

It is not far fetched to identify in many of the scary creatures referred to in the discussion above the archetypes of those created by Joshua and Ian Marley (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2009), particularly the idea of the vampire, the fish, the wolf and of course the frog. In these works, as with all the others, it is the enigmatic and mirthful qualities that sound an echo in the manner in which the stone masons may have reacted to their creations, or, conversely, how these creatures may have reacted to us, the onlookers.

4. The *Creative creatures* project and the artistic freedom of the brief

Artists participating in the *Creative creatures* project were given much creative freedom in the execution of their individual artworks. While Van der Merwe is well known for his works that are characterised as found objects covered by rusted metal in, as he refers to

it, his signature style (Van der Merwe, 1999:58), his contribution to the *Creative creatures* project departed from this “norm” and focused on the eyes of the creatures with a view to design for each creature a pair of glasses. Instead of making a rusted metal jacket for each creature as he originally intended, he did stay true to form by again using found objects (glasses), as he had previously done in various works, notably in *Watchman* (1996), *Story board 6* (1997), and with references to glasses as in glass cases in *The end* (2006).

This project allowed for a great deal of social interaction. Whereas Van der Merwe’s technique is usually studio bound and relatively private, oral evidence suggests that this project was conducted in a manner much more accessible to the public eye of not only his own family, but also friends, visitors and other eyes. He explains that the process became, in effect, an enjoyable and participative exercise, nearly like a game that onlookers were playing and where everybody contributed fantastic and often mirthful insights (Van der Merwe, 2008).

In giving glasses (sight) to the creatures, and as part of the game, the reciprocal viewing by the creatures of the humans must elicit in the mind’s eye of the viewer *how* the creature must be looking and *what* he is seeing. This, in effect, adds another dimension or function to his art not normally found therein, namely the *mirthful* and communal interaction of the “game”. This in turn begs the question: does *Eye test*, or the sculptures of the Middle Ages, allow us a different type of “reading” that contributes to our pleasure in experiencing art? Do we, from this experience, learn anything valuable that we can harvest in the “game” of our aesthetic contemplation of the work of art, and can we identify a function of art that enhances our appreciation of these art works?

5. Saints, sinners, devils and gargoyles: mirth as a personal function of art

Feldman (1967:15) states that there exists a popular and preconceived notion that art, generally speaking, serves little or no practical purpose, but at the same time he points out that the (visual) arts are, in fact, employed in many useful ways in everyday life. He states that art is created to have personal, social as well as physical functions, and alludes to the fact that art can certainly be shown to contribute positively to our lives in a number of ways.

During the early Middle Ages Christian and Byzantine art reflected spiritually inward-looking societies that set the stage for the Ro-

manesque and Gothic periods that followed. These constituted the period of the artist-as-craftsman and the great era of stone masonry on cathedrals (Williamson, 1988:11). During these latter periods the porches with their tympanums, archivolts, columns and galleries as well as other parts of the buildings were lavishly decorated with figures ostensibly intended to support liturgical text (Fleming, 1995: 208-209).

The figures depicted prophets, evangelists, Old and New Testament figures, human and animal, real and imagined. The onlooker was confronted as much by saints and angels as by devils, monsters and beasts ranging in poses from the sublime to the ridiculous, with gross emotion and distortion as a primary characteristic. These creatures have their origins not only in Christian but also heathen sources (Weir & Jerman, 1986:32), and seem to lean enigmatically towards the contemplative, the sublime and the serious. At first glance they rarely reflect relaxed happiness, joy or mirth.

As stated above, Weir and Jerman (1986:8) warn that these creations of whim and fancy were items of stonemasonry that they would not have carved if they had not been commissioned and paid to do so. It is difficult to agree with this statement. It seems unnatural, impossible even, to imagine that these craftsmen created their astonishing works with absolutely no sense of the possibilities of mirthful enjoyment in rendering their creatures. For the masons the creative process of certain types of art work must have been motivated by their own very fertile imaginations, including the desire to stimulate the imaginations of the congregants (Fleming, 1995:201). It could be assumed that they lustily enjoyed at least a part of this creative process, as when a sculptor at Chartres cathedral shows two young pupils, one laughing and pulling the other's hair (Fleming, 1995:211).

Although the clergy prescribed to the sculptor a conventional approach to the subjects to be carved, it can be assumed that he had, within limits, a free hand in the treatment and execution of his carvings, and as sculptural style improved artistic considerations would tend to push hieratic conventions aside (Jackson, 1975:313). This is corroborated by Cram (quoted in Bridaham, 1969:vii) when he, by way of introduction to this book, writes that the Middle Ages was an era when fun was fast and furious, expressing itself in "really amusing ways". Hauser (1973:236) confirms this when he refers to the artistic tastes of the era known as late Gothic as "more 'vulgar', more realistic and more earthy and playful" than the preceding period of high Gothic.

One of the legacies from the Romanesque period that would strongly influence Gothic art was their rejection of the natural order of things, and the replacement thereof with the supernatural (Fleming, 1995:193). Of these artists and monks Fleming (1995:194) says that they never doubted the existence of the angels and demons. In fact, “the monsters whose fearsome characteristics were described in the bestiaries ... had a moral and symbolic function far more real than any animals of mere physical existence” (Fleming, 1995:194), therefore, in effect, emphasising a social and personal function that superseded mere decoration. Sitwell (1969:76-77) describes the “strange populations” of the gargoyles leaning out over Paris as having been placed there also for entertainment of the crowd below. Highly individualised features must, according to Fleming (1995:212), indicate a certain artistic licence in the execution of the figures.

This signifies a typical Gothic dualism whereby the rendering of art clashed with interpretations of the particular and the universal and allowed for personal interpretation while concurrently answering the brief of the bishops (Fleming, 1995:220; Panofsky, 1976:65). Generally speaking, the choice of subject matter and mode of depiction was therefore not left to the discretion of the masons or artists (Jackson, 1975:311), but Weir and Jerman (1986:38) acknowledge that sculptors did enjoy some freedom of choice in the rendering of works, even when the rendering turned somewhat lewd. Many of the sculptures were of a sexual nature, often in acrobatic and weird postures. Weir and Jerman (1986:84-85) suggest that an alternative acceptance of sexuality or perception of right and wrong existed during medieval times, perhaps explaining why sometimes lewd, playfully mirthful portrayals made their appearance. It seems that the “rules of the game” were somewhat different than one would surmise today.

No doubt the intention of the liturgical message was to portray these sexual acts as sinful, regardless of how witty the depictions may seem (Weir & Jerman, 1986:42-43). On occasion the masons also rendered portrait heads, and even here we find countless surprising designs (Aubert, 1972:13). According to Bridaham (1969:xiv) the sculptor “made sarcastic heads of the men he saw in the market place, or of a monk, that amused him, or of an imaginary animal”. Sitwell (1969:77) describes some figures as dancing to music, and mentions that figures are also shown mocking and tormenting the living, and indulging in other pleasures. Inspiration, therefore, certainly came from their own immediate environments (Aubert,

1972:68), and one must accept that the stonemasons also played their own mirthful games in the rendering of their sculptures.

In drawing a parallel between the works by the stonemasons and *Eye test*, by Van der Merwe, it is of great importance to emphasise the notion of mirthful play. The reason for playing the game is not just to allow the participants the opportunity to experience the game, but to transfer an overall reality that is presented in a particular format, thereby communicating the *meaning* of the game. In dealing with scary creatures, it is therefore also the very nature of scary creatures to be “enjoyed” mirthfully when “playing the game” of viewing such creatures, whether they be Gothic gargoyles, cinematic werewolves or postmodern creatures with glasses. This explains why Van der Merwe places such an emphasis on the similarities between artworks and the act of playing (Afrikaans: *spel*) (Van der Merwe, 1986:4-5).

In the context of this article an enigmatic parallel was made obvious in the mind of the writer when considering the mirthful possibilities in creating sets of glasses for the gargoyles on the cathedrals, or conversely, to place the Marley creatures on the edifices of the Gothic structures, in effect *eyeing* the creatures; allowing us new insights into them, and conversely from them directed at us.

6. Eyeing the creatures: from Marley to Van der Merwe

The characteristics of scary creatures, found in both the evolution of creatures in art history – with their particular reference to their role in medieval art – can be seen to have a contextual link to the *Creative creatures* of the Marley project. The enigmatic interpretation of these creatures sets the stage for the last part of this discussion, especially if this link becomes the hermeunetic appreciation in the works seeming to share the possibility that in our viewing of them, even recreating (“playing”) the creative process (or “game”), the human characteristic of *mirth* may be read as a distinct common denominator.

The decision by Van der Merwe to focus on sets of glasses for the *Creative creatures* project is likewise a further development of an everyday occurrence in the immediate environment of the artist. Van der Merwe (1999:51, 92) states that the glasses utilised in this project as found objects should be seen as signs and carriers of a message that can be decoded when the *contexts* are considered. In a personal interview (Van der Merwe, 2008) he admitted that the project was also a revisiting of the research, dissertation and prac-

tical work he had done previously for his Masters' degree (Van der Merwe, 1999).

For Van der Merwe the *Creative creatures* project presented a particular challenge to which he envisaged an innovative solution. When the idea first entered his mind during a visit to the optician, he saw an opportunity to use the collection of glasses that he had "found" during other projects, but also to work with a project that suggested a myriad of possible responses. Van der Merwe saw the project as one of tremendous interaction, working from the human scale to the creature scale, and in a playful way using the glasses as metaphors operating in a nearly spiritual dimension. Naturally a discussion of these works cannot be divorced from both young Joshua Marley's initial narrative (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2009) and his father's rendering of the creatures, remembering in particular that when conceiving these creatures Joshua was only five years old, and that the dialogue with his father was, in reality, only a game.

For Van der Merwe, on the other hand, his mirthful contribution to the project entailed not only the creation of unique glasses for each of the creatures, but also the continuation and extension of the game played by Josh and Ian Marley. In the final eventuality, the viewer must play the game to the end, and "complete" the creative task by enjoying each work.

6.1 Vampire



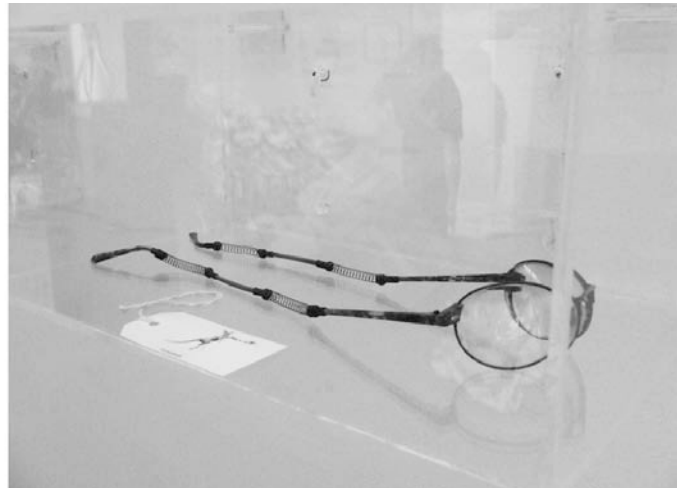
Joshua (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2009) described this fierce scary monster as his particular favourite: "That one's my favourite because he is scary. He just scares people then he takes your blood and your

lungs and eats your hands. He is much scarier than ever.” Joshua was inadvertently exposed to a vampire movie, and this left a big impression on him. The vampire is also the most humanlike of all the creatures, belonging as it were to the more contemporary mythology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with zoomorphic characteristics including protruding teeth and bat wings. While a large number of medieval gargoyles share these characteristics, it is not a creature generally associated with the bestiary, although an artist such as Bosch does depict monsters in the repulsive act of cannibalising human sinners. It is interesting to note that people often “instinctively recoil” from bats and yet are simultaneously fascinated with them, as even D.H. Lawrence (quoted in Inniss, 1971:71) was in a poem about a bat. Joshua’s reaction is similar, being scared and attracted at the same time.

This vampire sports a tricorn head, wormlike protrusions from the face, and wings that seem to belong to a bat, rather reminiscent of a scene described in Dante’s Canto 33 (Cary, 1909:143): “two mighty wings, enormous as became a bird so vast ... No plumes had they, but were in texture like a bat”, with the exception of course that this vampire displays rather smallish wings for the portly figure they would have to support. For the viewer this is in itself a rather mirthful observation to make, but added to this is the way we read the creature’s looking at us. In having a third eye, normally associated with Eastern religions as all seeing and characteristic of insightful wisdom, it was a challenge for Van der Merwe to develop a set of glasses for it. It is interesting that he decided to give the central eye a magnifying glass, signifying the particular prowess of that third eye, as if the creature is scrutinising us, the viewer. This vampire is clairvoyant, a tongue-in-cheek reference perhaps to its third eye, but also to the possibility of *enlarging* whatever is seen. This in turn could refer to the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood, a carnivorous creature with big eyes *the better to see you with*. Would this be the purpose of the vampire’s glasses: to “see” us easier as the next (sinful) victim?

In the context of this article, the vampire’s glasses in turn refocus our attention on the enigmatic role of the medieval creatures and the question how they look down upon the earthly world of sinners below. Perhaps that was exactly what the clergy hoped for – the furtive glance upwards from a perpetual guilt-ridden humanity fearing retribution, because these creatures were all-seeing? Would they have seemed nearly as scary if they too had had glasses?

6.2 Duck fix (Ostrigy)



The description by Joshua in an adapted text by his father relates as follows: “Ostrigy” Dinasaurscaberdoo – “he can shock from his eyes and he can see at the back and shock with his tail; catch mosquitoes to eat; whips eagles with his tail so an eagle can’t catch him” (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2009). In Greek mythology the bird is regarded as something of a weather prophet, and sacred to Poseidon. It is interesting to note that the Greeks regarded ducks as good subjects for comic poets, adding something of a mirthful note to this creature, who in his disproportionate physique allows for a humorous interpretation. For the Hebrews a duck represented immortality (Cooper, 1992:87), an idea that is in keeping with Joshua’s concept of Duck fix’s (ostrigy) invincibility.

Van der Merwe (2008) explains that he too had a particularly mirthful time with the creation of the glasses for this creature. In interpreting the requirements of the physiognomy of the bird and the possibilities of how to fit its lenses, he had to consider a spring-attached device that would enable this creature to adapt to the demands of its elasticised neck. It had to enable far-sighted and even backward vision, and fit perfectly onto the sides of a somewhat incongruously shaped face. Of course this creature, with its backward vision, could easier avoid the eagle mentioned above, but with its elasticised neck one can also imagine it sharing the parapets of a Gothic cathedral, and stretching its long neck with its spring-loaded and far-sighted eyes to scrutinise us from above. Van der Merwe (2009) relates that searching for and finding the right types of spring that could work well on this contraption, demanded a lot of attention (mirthfully implying also the far-sightedness of the artist in solving the creative problem). He eventually settled on the springs that are found in some ballpoint

pens, and by using these, he was enabled to make glasses that would eye this particular creature.

6.3 Duck lops (Ducky)



The next creature, Duck lops (Ducky), also exhibits the characteristics of a duck, but in this case a one-eyed bird requiring a thick lens, because he is, according to his glasses, short-sighted, but according to Joshua (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2009), can also shock with his eyes. Duck lops wears a helmetlike head cover and a lens that resembles a monocle, striking an incongruous note as an eyepiece stereotypically worn by German aristocracy, especially if one recalls the fighter pilots of the *Luftwaffe* in the First World War. “Hiding” behind this lens can be interpreted “deceitful” – a characteristic symbolically attributed to ducks, especially when flocking together. It is also regarded as a symbol of superficiality. Perhaps this is why he is short-sighted, and therefore less of a threat to us.

6.4 Fish (Fishy)

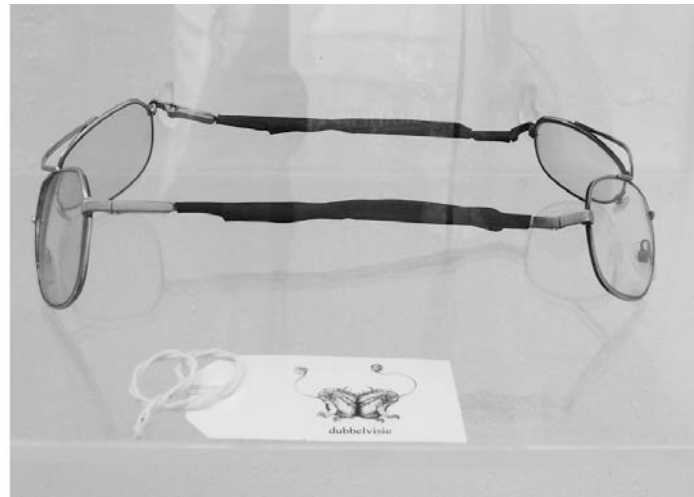
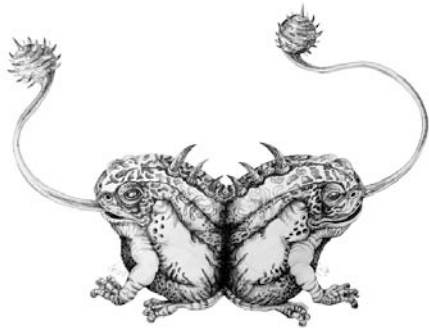


“Fishy”, according to Joshua, “was born in an egg in the deep ocean where it’s dark and you can’t see, and where there are sea creatures. You can’t catch him with a rope and hook, because he will chop the rope. When you touch him he will grab your finger. His eyes glow in the dark” and “this fish think he’s a rock” (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2009). As far as symbolism goes, this particular creature with its quadruple eyes defies categorisation. It seems far fetched to imagine that Joshua attached an anagogical meaning or spiritual dimension to this or any of the other creatures. At best it perhaps links up with the many interpretations and symbolic meanings attached to fish in general, emphasised here by the multi-focal ways in which this creature might view us. With its four eyes it reminds the viewer more of a spider than a fish – interpreted by Joshua as ready to pounce on a victim. This creature can be interpreted as very observant, aided obviously by its multiple lenses.

From mythology and the bestiary Fishy shares with the whale the folklore regarding an appetite for small fry, but all in all this particular creature fits in well with the miscellany of natural history and legend that yielded a large number of piscine curiosities (Payne, 1990:92), such as the lantern and devil fish. At the same time it is one of the most widely employed symbols, hallowed in both religion and myth (Cooper, 1992:100). The mirthful characteristics of this fish-creature must be found in its wearing multi-lensed glasses, lending not only a somewhat absurd countenance but clearly linking it to what Van der Merwe would refer to as the playfulness of a commonplace article within the ambit of the (normally) relatively serious contemplative context of art (Van der Merwe, 1986:27, 44). In this incongruity can be found a direct reference to the way in which the stonemasons

carved their Gothic statuary, particularly in the way that facial or physical features would be functionally distorted to portray sin or perfidy. In reciprocally watching us, the viewers, Fishy reminds us that some creatures come from the dark, and could perhaps see us better than we see them.

6.5 Froggies



Joshua's description of this creature is very brief: "This is a tough one and can smash stuff on the ground" (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2009). Perhaps that is why it had to be fitted with a robust double-pair of glasses, allowing this twin frog to make full use of its Siamese connection; looking with its double vision in opposite directions to maximise its smashing abilities. Frogs are described as lunar and aquatic creatures, rainmakers bringing fertility and new life, but living in the primordial slime. They are described as ageless creatures of fecundity that at the same time came to signify both resurrection and the repulsiveness of sin, worldly pleasure, envy, greed and heresy (Cooper, 1992:107).

In the New Testament frogs are also equated with unclean spirits (Cooper, 1992:107), and it is very significant that an artist such as Hieronymous Bosch turned many of his figures into toadlike creatures, with little or no indication of any benevolent meanings (as for example in his depiction of the evil world from his triptych of the flood painted in ca. 1502 as well as in the triptych known as the *Garden of earthly delights* of 1503-1504). When looking at the incongruous appearance of Froggies and particularly the glasses designed for them, it is apparent that the eyepieces have to operate as

if in tandem, allowing this evil-looking creature to function in its dedicated duty of smashing things on the ground.

Earth-bound and slimy, this creature again recalls a passage from the *Divine comedy* where Dante refers to the apparent affection that the creatures of the netherworld have for one another: “As for the brute animals, not only have they a more manifest love for their place, but we see that they love one another” (Alighieri, 1970-1975). One mirthfully surmises a relationship between the parts of the creature, and naturally, how they would compromise to have success in both hunting and smashing. Their double vision notwithstanding, the whole world must be interpreted twice, once for each part of the Siamese twin. This mirthfully also applies to the way Froggies would look at us; once from the front, and again as a rear view – you would never be able to do anything behind its back!

This creature also exemplifies the meaning of the “game” (Van der Merwe, 1986:4-5) referred to earlier, signifying perhaps a strange set of rules for their task of smashing things, but at the same time allowing us as viewers a mirthful enhancement in identifying this strange function.

6.6 Rhino

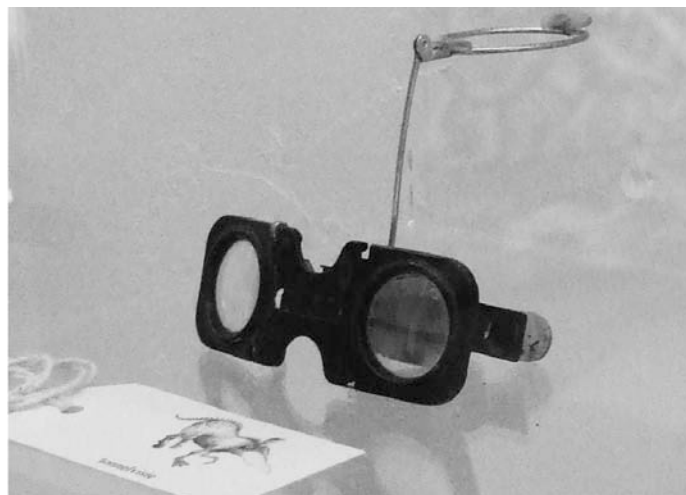


A couple of horned beasts make their appearance in the bestiary, including, naturally, the unicorn and the monoceros, an animal that also sported a single horn above the nose, but was apparently larger than the more well-known unicorn (Payne, 1990:41). The glasses designed by Van der Merwe for the creature depicted in this picture are wide set with flashy clip-on sunglasses; after all, one should keep in mind that a rhinoceros would have very weak eyes that need

to be protected! It is very obviously a type of rhinoceros; one with a slightly sheepish face and sporting a double set of wings that seem pretty inadequate to support the potential weight of this animal. In interpreting the creature, it is with playful tongue in one's cheek that we note the sheeplike top-crop of woolly hair, assumedly white, perched on the head of this "white" rhino (note the wide lip). Joshua relates that: "this rhino has small wings, but can fly fast and can bump your bum with his horn" (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2009). Adding glasses to this presumably short-sighted creature, would certainly enhance its bum-bumping, cautioning the viewer to be more carefull, or get bumped.

In mythology the rhinoceros is depicted as a symbol of power and sovereignty with a horn that could detect poisons (Cooper, 1992:193). It is therefore mirthfully incongruous that this rhino should have glasses in order to hopefully find the victim whose bum it needs to bump. Even though rhinos are known to have weak eyesight and would be in need of thick lenses such as the ones Van der Merwe has made for this creature, it is paradoxically normal in nature that flying creatures would have excellent eyesight. Add to this the somewhat unfortunate symbolism that the horn can be used as an aphrodisiac and to cure impotence, then the fact that it seeks to bump your bum could have an interesting postmodern allusion with a rather queer undertone.

6.7 Tree picker (Choppy)



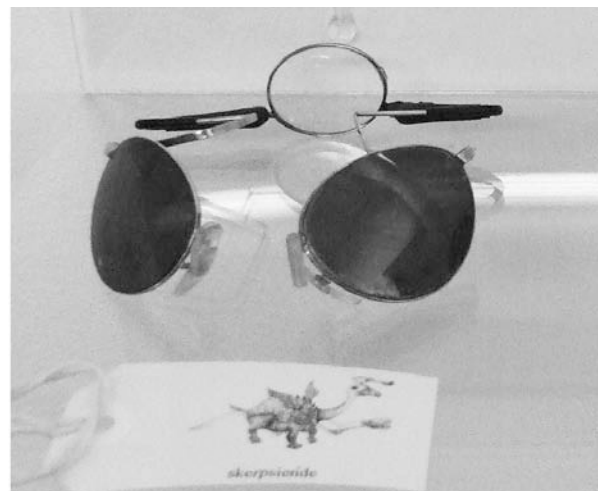
The Tree picker is also known as Choppy. This is a very powerful creature. Joshua (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2009) says he can kill metal. The beak is made of metronic and he is fast too, and makes a

loud sound; it goes everywhere, even America. Joshua also says that he chops trees and when he's done chopping the tree he blows it down with that thing on his head.

From the description given above by Joshua and modified by Ian Marley (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2009), it is clear that we are dealing with a particularly hybrid creature, with attributes that we can hardly recognise or describe: a four-legged creature with a long and seemingly powerful beaklike snout and leathery skin. Van der Merwe designed a set of glasses for this animal that is equally hybrid, with something akin to the ocular frames that opticians use when performing an eye test. This looks like a burrowing creature reminiscent of an aardvark, and it is therefore mirthfully fitting that it should have tunnel vision, including a pair of glasses for this condition.

In regarding us, the viewers, this creature would seem to be somewhat myopic, yet the physical characteristics of the creature and especially the investigative nature of its glasses infer an earth-bound quality that frighteningly puts it "down to earth" and on our level.

6.8 Turtle (Canny)

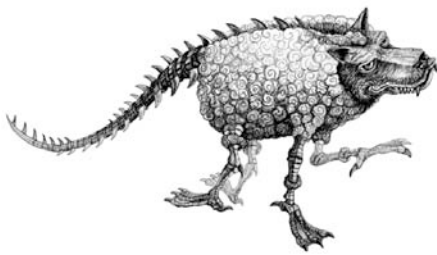


Canny is an equally hybrid creature, with a turtlelike shell, reptile tail and goose head. Again we see a four-legged creature that can fly, and again its wings are very small for its largish body. The secondary proboscis on the head is in actual fact some kind of weapon, and Joshua (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2009) describes this creature as really strong and capable of shooting things out of his head. He adds the following: "When close he will pinch you. Change his feather tail into a dragon tail 'cause his bum looks like a

chicken without feathers. On top of his head there's a cannon and he fights the army with those tanks. There is a tortoise shell on his back to protect him so bullets just fly over him but he won't die. These claws are so strong it can break metal."

Naturally, as a fighter, he needs to be sharp sighted (in order to do sharp shooting). Like any pilot of note, he sports dark clip-on lenses, perhaps to aid his more clandestine pinching preoccupation. It is easy to imagine him stalking his prey, the prey being us, the viewers. The hybrid nature of both creature and glasses acts as a reminder of the hybrid qualities shared by many of the gargoyles and other Gothic creatures.

6.9 Wolf (Wolfie)



Fondly referred to by Joshua as Wolfie (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2009), we are dealing here with an animal that has very special demands for the designer of his lenses, because "he has special eyes to look backwards". It is noticeable that Van der Merwe designed these glasses to fit the ears from the inside out. Perhaps this will serve to keep them more firmly in position when this creature, according to the artists (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2009), "hides in the woolly bushes; that's his camouflage". As wolves are predisposed to do, he eats sheep. This is quite in keeping with a wolves' reputation for being evil, destructive and devouring. From an anagogical point of view a Christian could interpret the sheep as being the saved flock of Christ (Cooper, 1992:210), and therefore compound the meaning of the wolf as an evil threat to the Christian viewer.

Even so, the bestiary reveals that wolves in their fierceness also have attributes of being protective and therefore worthy of veneration (Cooper, 1992:248). The wolf is a creature of the night, and Wolfie has a fear of light and therefore must wear dark glasses. Van der Merwe has added one other humorous dimension in that a creature that can look backwards, must also wear his glasses inside out. Again Van der Merwe's design for this particular creature's glasses, as with all the others, underlines an obvious similarity with the works of the medieval stonemasons, namely the demands of finding technical solutions to the creation of a completed work of art, and again the viewer is made abundantly aware of the fun that the artist had in finding these solutions thereby adding to his/her own mirthful enjoyment of the end product.

7. Epilogue

Perhaps this is the eventual function of both Van der Merwe's and the medieval stonemasons' art, namely that we should grasp the opportunity that these artists of the inferno and other fantasy worlds give us to enjoy the thrill of being mirthfully frightened. As adults we often lose the childhood fascination of being scared out of our wits by the monsters in fairy tales, and yet enjoying it! By understanding the origins of our fascination with the strangely macabre, as in medieval statuary or the Marley creatures, and employing as a device the *Eye test* given us by Van der Merwe, we add a new dimension to our appreciation of art. We give ourselves the opportunity to enjoy at an enigmatic level, and with mirth, these fascinating and frightening inventions, both the gargoyles, devils and other creatures found on the cathedrals as well as the Marley creatures.

But beyond again experiencing the childlike fascination that such creatures once had for us, we as art viewers (should) also see the world of human frailty through the eyes of these same creatures, and then employ this "in"-sight allowing us in turn to interpret how these creatures see us, and thus to experience the mirth intended by the creators. By putting "eyes" on these creatures, we are able to playfully harvest new meanings in terms of our aesthetic contemplation of both artworks and the human condition. In order to play this game, we should attempt to look at ourselves through the eyes of the creatures, much as a child would do it. If we fail to do this, we spoil the game (see part 2 on creative play, humour and mirth in art). When we spoil the game we fail to make use of the opportunity to contribute positively to our lives (Feldman, 1967:15)

by employing mirth in a novel way and as a personal function and experience of art.

List of references

- ALIGHIERI, DANTE. 1913. The vision of Dante Alighieri; or, Hell, purgatory, paradise. Trans. by H.F. Cary. London: Dent.
- ANDERSON, P. 1998. The origins of postmodernity. London: Verso.
- AUBERT, M. 1972. French sculpture at the beginning of the Gothic period: 1140-1225. New York: Hacker Art Books.
- BOVÉ, P.A., ed. 1995. Early postmodernism: foundational essays. Durham: Duke University Press.
- BRIDAHAM, L.M. 1969. Gargoyles, chimeres, and the grotesque in French Gothic sculpture. New York: Da Capo.
- CAVENDISH, M., ed. 1980. Mythology: an illustrated encyclopedia. London: Orbis.
- CHARLES, L. 2009. Christianity, Christian fear. http://www.angelsghosts.com/christianity_christian_fear.html Date of access: 18 Jun. 2009.
- CONNOR, S., ed. 2005. The Cambridge companion to postmodernism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- COOPER, J.C. 1992. Symbolic and mythological animals. London: Aquarian.
- CUTTLE, C.D. 1973. Northern painting: from Pucelle to Bruegel. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- DE TOLNAY, C. 1966. Hieronymous Bosch. New York: Artabras.
- EPSTEIN, B. 1997. Postmodernism and the left. *New politics*, 6(2). No. 22, Winter 1997. <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/index.html>
- FELDMAN, E.B. 1967. Varieties of visual experience. New York: Abrams.
- FLEMING, W. 1995. Arts and ideas. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- FOKKEMA, D. & BERTENS, H., eds. 1986. Approaching postmodernism. Papers presented at a Workshop on Postmodernism, 21-23 September 1984, University of Utrecht. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- GREYLING, F. & MARLEY, I. 2009. *Op die spoor van kreatiewe kreature: 'n interdissiplinêre ondersoek na die kreatiewe proses: projekbeskrywing. Literator*, 30(1):1-29.
- HARTT, F. 1980. A history of the Italian Renaissance art. London: Thames & Hudson.
- HAUSER, A. 1973. The social history of art: from prehistoric times to the Middle Ages. Vol. 1. London: Kegan Paul.
- HORNBY, A.S. 2005. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- INNISS, K. 1971. D.H. Lawrence's bestiary. The Hague: Mouton.
- JACKSON, T.G. 1975. Gothic architecture in France, England, and Italy. New York: Hacker Art Books.
- KELLERMAN, D., ed. 1981 The living Webster: Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language. s.l.: Delair.
- KIRKPATRICK, B. 1987. Roget's thesaurus of English words and phrases. London: Penguin Books.
- KLAGES, M. 2003. Postmodernism. <http://www.colorado.edu/English/courses/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html> Date of access: 20 May 2008.
- KLEINER, F.S. 2009. Gardner's art through the ages. New York: Thomson.

- LEVINAS, E. 1996. Basic philosophical writings. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- MALPAS, S. 2005. The postmodern. London: Routledge.
- McGUCKIN, A.J. 2009. The Westminster handbook to Origen. http://books.google.co.za/books?id=riEdrWEDFq0C&pg=PA50&lpg=PA50&dq=anagogical+interpretation&source=bl&ots=jTonPVRTI1&sig=6-KDPMXptg_WgDw2CP6oP2Q6aS8&hl=en&ei=qYFASqD_Bc-gjAe8qsm_Ag&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=10 Date of access: 18 Jun. 2009.
- McHALE, B. 1992. Constructing postmodernism. London: Routledge.
- PANOFSKY, E. 1976. Gothic architecture and scholasticism. New York: New American Library.
- PAYNE, A. 1990. Medieval beasts. London: British Library.
- RICHTER, G.M.A. 1994. A handbook of Greek art. London: Phaidon.
- ROOKMAAKER, H.R. 1978. Art needs no justification. Leicester: Culpin.
- SIM, S., ed. 2005. The Routledge companion to postmodernism. New York: Routledge.
- SINGLETON, C.S. 1973. Dante Alighieri: the divine comedy. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- SITWELL, S. 1969. Gothic Europe. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- SOUCHAL, F. 1968. Art of the early Middle Ages. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- VAN DER MERWE, J.L. 1986. Spel as kuns. Pretoria: Technikon Pretoria. (Nas. Hoër Dipl.: Beeldende Kuns-skripsie.)
- VAN DER MERWE, J.L. 1999. Transformasie van die gevonde in kontemporêre konteks. Pretoria: Technikon Pretoria. (M.Tech.-verhandeling.)
- VAN DER MERWE, J.L. 2008. Interview with Jan van der Merwe. (Unpublished field notes: 18 Apr. 2008.)
- VAN DER WESTHUIZEN, C.E., MARLEY, I., GREYLING, F. & COMBRINK, A. 2009. Creative creatures: digital catalogue, version 1.0. Potchefstroom: Department of Graphic Design. [CD-ROM]
- VÖHRINGER, C. 1999. Pieter Bruegel. 1525/1530-1569. Cologne: Könemann.
- WEIR, A. & JERMAN, J. 1986. Images of lust: sexual carvings on Medieval churches. London: Batsford.
- WILLIAMSON, P. 1988. Northern Gothic sculpture: 1200-1450. London: Victoria & Albert Museum.
- ZURBRUGG, N. 1993. The parameters of postmodernism. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University.

Key concepts:

art, function of
bestiary
creature
mirth
playing, act of
visual art

Kernbegrippe:

bestiarium

kreatuur

kuns, funksies van

pret

spel, aksie van/speel

visuele kuns