

***Engaging with the Bible in Visual Culture: Hermeneutics Between Word and Image, with Broomberg and Chanarin's Holy Bible***  
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Increasingly articulate contemporary art practices are engaging with biblical representation, revealing new relationships with religion through the availability of the word in image. Taking as exemplary the photographic publication of Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's *Holy Bible* (2013), this article considers the evidence for their hermeneutics between image and word that is characterized by open awareness of and expansive participation in the (rereading of the) Bible. Discussing this engagement, I explore imagistic readings of the Bible through the artists' strategies of interpolation and repetition, as well as examining their chosen theme -- catastrophe -- for its revelatory power. Through the artists' self-reflexive hermeneutics of indeterminacy, I argue that the discussion of the return of religion in art needs attuning to this kind of specific practitioner experience: a hermeneutical circle of imaginative, dialogical, and dynamic interpretative positions in which the notion of indeterminacy is persuasive for interpretative grist, historical accountability, and theological horizon.

**Keywords:** *Bible; Holy Bible; hermeneutics; visual culture; photography; Archive of Modern Conflict; visual culture criticism; art history; reception theory; theology; Christianity; Gadamer; indeterminacy; Broomberg; Chanarin.*

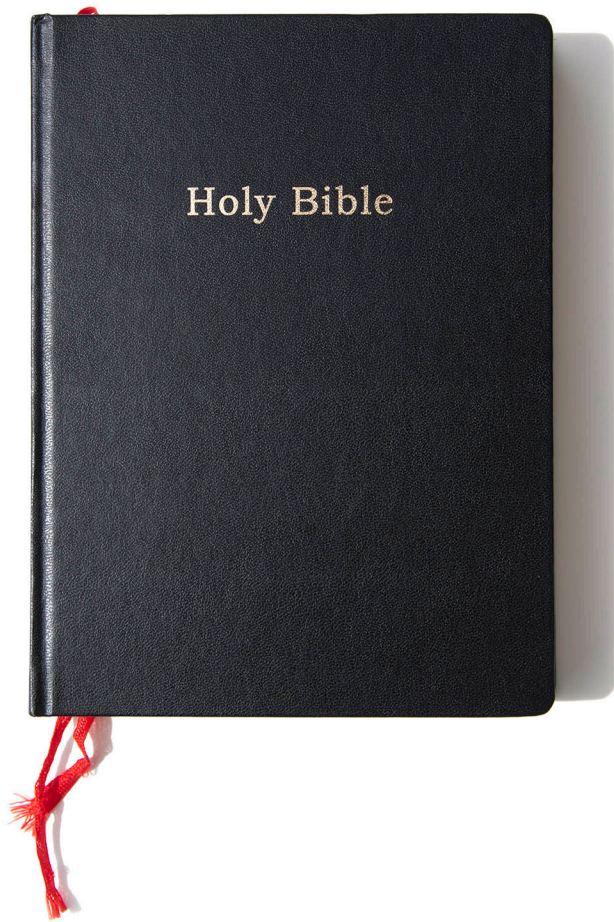
The idea of treating 'word and image' as a distinct theoretical problem that requires not only semiotic, formal analysis, but also a historical and ideological contextualising, has been highly productive in a number of fields.

-- Mitchell, "Visual Literacy or Literary Visualcy?" 21

From a figure firmly established in visual culture criticism, W. J. T. Mitchell's statement posits a certain continuity between image and text. Representational theory and media culture have, for decades, treated the habitus of visual and textual material and communication in these reciprocal terms. Yet in many challenging respects, this is to negotiate what has been more commonly understood as a fault-line between images and texts more generally. In the West, we inherit a cultural dichotomy and hierarchy which has tended to privilege the word over the image: the latter's 'transgressive character' (Mitchell 24) has for centuries been associated with the prohibition of idolatry in the Bible (the second commandment, Exodus 20: 4-6), and with Christendom's long endorsement of the Word as the route to enlightenment and transformation. Traditional scholarly attention to fine art and religion undoubtedly shores up, and is shored up by, what has been disciplinary separation premised upon fundamental ontological difference.<sup>1</sup>

In drawing here on *Holy Bible* (2013), the work of Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, I explore the legacies of contested terrain which simmer through their simultaneous presentation of photographic image and biblical text.<sup>2</sup> Their artwork leads me to discuss the Bible in the

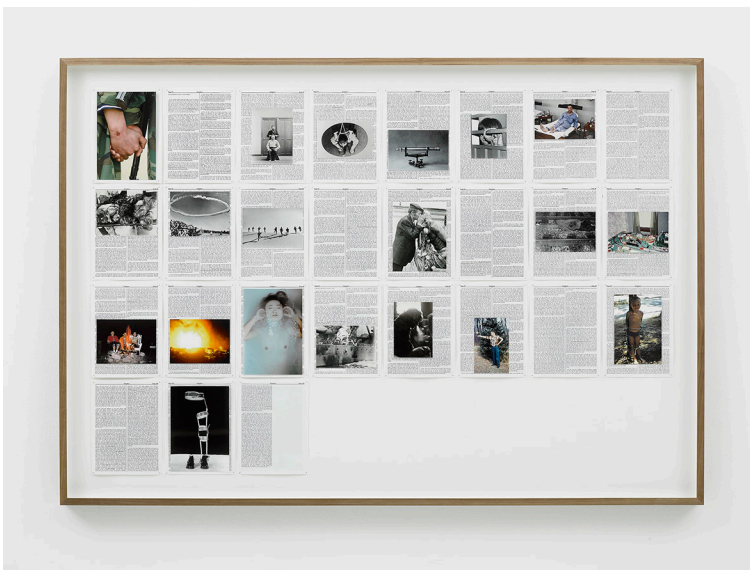
contemporary arena of hermeneutics, particularly in the approaches of the artists themselves. Hermeneutics is understood to mean the principles and methods of interpretation as they are applied across a variety of disciplines, from the more conventionally understood within texts and linguistics, to the non-verbal in art, archaeology, even sociology. Across such academic diversity, it is also consistently 'rooted in lived experience', whose relevance and originally biblical tradition brings a dialogical bearing to this, and indeed, any study (Bühler 295). My position, alongside others, is that hermeneutics enables rigorous engagement with theological horizon in visual culture by ascribing specificity to interpretative procedures and postures, rather more than by ascribing specificity to the media of image and text.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1:** Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Holy Bible*, 2013 (front cover).

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin are a Jewish artist duo, based in London, who have been working together since their employment as photographers for *Colors* magazine in the 1990s. A magazine founded to "show the world to the world," *Colors* celebrates global multiculturalism and diversity through a non-traditional journalism: attention to the page designs for text and photography emphasizes a conceptualization of the whole that former creative director Tibor Kalman described as "a mix of *National Geographic* and *Life*, on acid" ([colors magazine.com](http://colors magazine.com)). This register of social/political literacy and communication, when visually combined with photography's 'extra'-documentary capacity has enlivened the pair's ongoing practice ever since, and informs the project

of central interest to this paper. *Holy Bible* is a Bible, to all intents and purposes a complete printing of the King James Version, on whose pages the artists have superimposed their selected photographs as well as underlining in red the relevant text (figs. 1 and 2). The images are appropriated from the Archive of Modern Conflict (AMC) in London, an eclectic collection of over four million photographs (and other paraphernalia) notionally related to war and violence across the globe. In this archive, as in the experiences of conflict the artists themselves have had (in South Africa and Afghanistan), the imprint of immediately witnessed suffering is cascaded through a very contemporary nexus of moral, political, and aesthetic ideas related to photography and vision. And it is at such a juncture that the Bible is invited to contribute.



**Figure 2:** Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Holy Bible*, 2013 (framed spreads from Numbers).

Shortlisted for the Paris Photo-Aperture Foundation PhotoBook Awards in 2013, *Holy Bible* was produced in a limited edition in the same year. Pages have also been shown in multiple framed wall-mounted arrangements (with individual frames collating individual books of the Bible, as in fig. 2), most recently at the Centre Pompidou in Paris for the exhibition *Divine Violence* (Feb-May 2018). The digitization of the whole in publication (they are not physically superimposed images, and the physical underlining has most likely been scanned from original spreads) includes the biblical text itself, which has a kind of objectified status without any of the preliminary publishing identification, no referencing, and minimal titling throughout.

“The Bible is a piece of public property; everybody feels ownership over it,” Chanarin has said (*The Daily Telegraph*), revealing his sense of its cultural availability even in the face of its unfamiliarity. Indeed, the Bible’s availability as a piece of culture is what prompted the duo’s concern to read it (from cover-to-cover for this project) when they came across Bertolt Brecht’s Bible in the playwright’s archives. Captivated as they had been by Brecht’s *War Primer* (1955), they also saw his annotated and collaged Bible as a text-image collusion in which press images received scriptural illustration: the Bible was paradoxically like a visual stanza, an object of visionary import, to the photographs’ apparent readability.

This struck them as remarkably prescient after their reading, for the Bible’s visuality as such was inscribed in its language too, particularly in the dramatic language of divine retribution and

apocalypse. What began as a highlighting of references to image-making became a modality of vision defined by catastrophe, in which the AMC photographs found a new significance:

If you read the Old Testament from cover to cover, you notice very quickly that God reveals himself through acts of catastrophe, through violence. Awful things keep happening: a flood that just about wipes out most of his creation, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah -- we constantly witness death on an epic scale ... The camera has always been drawn to these themes, to sites of human suffering. Since its inception it has been used to record and also participate in catastrophic events. (*Time*)

At one level, ringing with a popular understanding of the Bible's preoccupation with punishment and eschatology, this dystopian vision is also taken by Broomberg and Chanarin to be a critical touchstone for modern governance and warfare. In this, they refer to philosopher Adi Ophir's reflections in *Divine Violence: Two Essays on God and Disaster* (2013), a short extract from which is included at the end of *Holy Bible*.<sup>4</sup> Drawing explicit parallels between the authoritarian control of God over his people and the authoritarian control of mediatized<sup>5</sup> politics over Western society, Ophir sees the catastrophe and its representation as part of orchestrated regime stability and hegemony - even if it manifests itself as rebellion or interruption to that regime.

The sense in which these associations draw on critical theory's suspicion of "scopic regimes" (Jay) shows the artists' awareness of visual culture criticism and its potential applicability to the biblical text. Amongst other things, the writings of Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio can be applied here for a linking of the photographic with notions of the omniscient gaze and the Bible's own "dysteleology."<sup>6</sup> However, for the purposes of this essay, we remain concerned with *how* the conjunction of images and text lead to an open, indeterminate hermeneutic -- one in which the artists' identification of a theme such as catastrophe is inscribed through viewing-reading processes and the dialogical modes of engagement they solicit. As well as *Holy Bible*'s presentation as a discrete object, which the artists relate to in the immediacy and fluidity of reading, the sense in which it is understood as conversational visionary literature will be explored in the following two sections.

### Reading the Bible Imagistically

A remarkably static object until it is read, the Bible as experienced in the sequential pattern of reading is more accurately understood as "so digressive that it forces us into other perspectives along the way" (Frye 63). The sense in which this digression is about imaginative interpretative agency and involvement is precisely the sense in which the Bible is received by Broomberg and Chanarin as something other than a closed historical text(s) with some interesting self-contained image- and word-play. Its stories revive, expand, and live on in their reception and interpretation by people down the ages, for whom the worlds of contemporary and ancient meaning overlap in a variety of ways. If the world of realistic representation which the Bible presents would seem in many ways to be a small one -- tracing the swirls of Palestine dust disturbed by Jewish and Roman footfall -- in other ways its earthly plot is also supernaturally exploded, and continually inscribes the material frame (which is also *our* material frame) with divine orchestration without or involvement within, making it "the biggest of all possible worlds."<sup>7</sup> This is the Bible's engine, a religious excess or "surplus of meaning" that sometimes simmers, sometimes explodes in our own cultural milieu (Croatto 27).



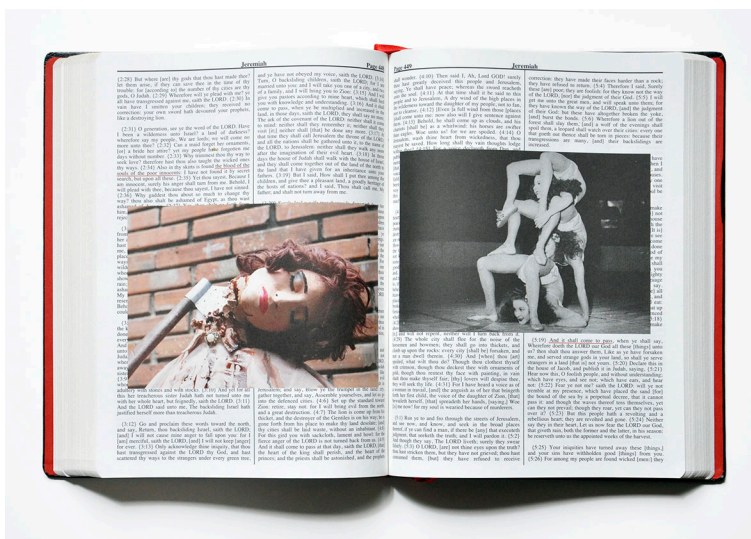
In this sense, Broomberg and Chanarin's photographic relation to the worldhood of the Bible hinges on both its realism and the visionary occupation or identification of our position within it. More than a wide-angle view movie epic, this is the Bible's generative, conversational capacity to extend the frame itself. Inasmuch as both photography and the Bible speak of specific people, places, and times, they would assert an apparently static viewfinder on a limited, but verifiably, concrete world. But as with photography, where Broomberg and Chanarin are "more intrigued by the economic, political, cultural and moral currency an image has than in the medium" so reading the Bible prompts identification with "ecosystem" rather than "species" (Broomberg and Chanarin, *Time*). In its broadening impulse, they say,

It struck us that the Bible fits so well with photography. Since its beginning the camera has had a biblical reach; it has tried to describe and witness everything. (*The Daily Telegraph*)

Particularly so in the digital era, the multiplicity and ubiquity of the photographic image has created a spreading so immersive and continuous as to extend the capacity of vision itself, much as Marshall McLuhan optimistically anticipated for human relations. For Broomberg and Chanarin, the continuous nature of this visionary extension of photography can be applied to a literary field by way of a kind of symbiosis. The Bible-as-object is not, in their work, effaced by a visual surplus overtaking the text -- rather the unfolding, splintering, drama of the text itself (which they underline on every page) is of a piece with the imagistic continuum of the photographs.

The imagistic continuum in *Holy Bible*, taken as a whole in this way, is initially treated through the liberal imposition of representational content. On every two-page spread either one or two photographs appear (with an exception in Leviticus, noted in the next section), totalling 512 images across 724 pages. In selecting from the AMC, the artist duo mimics its own strategy of collection and selection, which is known to depend on contextual obliqueness rather than category fittingness. Privately founded and invested, the AMC has developed since 1992 according to the interest and connections of its curator and editor, Timothy Prus. The diversity and variation within the disparate collection (and also revealed in the choices of Broomberg and Chanarin) "ramifies according to visual and conceptual lines of inquiry as much as accident and whim," according to a bemused reviewer (Dillon). Significantly then, the hermeneutic employed by the artists emerges from an excess which practices lack of categorization even as it proposes a continuum with the world.

A typical spread in *The Holy Bible* is seen in figure 3, showing two pages from the early chapters of Jeremiah. A photograph of a dummy's decapitation is adjacent to a black-and-white photograph showing three acrobats in performance; the former receives an underlined association with a segment of Jeremiah 2: 34, "the blood of the souls of the poor innocents," while the latter is paired with the beginning of Jeremiah 5: 19, "And it shall come to pass." Throughout the work, it is the disjunct of photography's sharp corporeality with an abstracted text that creates a category confusion. The texts do not provide the normative semantic anchor, indeed they often exaggerate a tautological redundancy such as 'And he was sad' (Mark 10: 22) with a photograph of a crying man, or 'In the daytime also he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a light of fire' (Psalm 78: 14) opposite a photograph of a billowing volcanic cloud. As a result of either redundancy or incongruity, what the text *cannot* assert is the linearity of a normative reading continuum, only a pictorial nexus or matrix in which it provokes imaginative departure.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 3:** Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Holy Bible*, 2013 (pp.448-449).

What does this mean for the underlined biblical 'quotations' themselves? David Tollerton's is a typically cautious response for the biblical scholar careful to identify compromised readings for biblical acuity: proof-texting is problematic, and the artists are in danger of misreading with simplistic image-text relations, just as much as they may unintentionally sensationalise and anonymise violence (Tollerton 152-159). Tollerton himself recognizes the degree to which the artists knowingly play an open game here,<sup>9</sup> though he hesitates to describe it in positive terms: at best the artists enable a critical awareness of mediation to percolate image-text association. I would argue that it misrepresents artistic endeavour generally, and Broomberg and Chanarin specifically, to claim that an indeterminate hermeneutics has only this cerebral balancing act in mind. In my opinion, the cultural freight of the Bible-object, together with the expressed intentional reading by Broomberg and Chanarin, results in the texts' repeated appearing, rather than their removal to safe critical distance, or rather than disappearing into banality. Repetitive highlighting is an obvious way in which this is achieved, but it is also the inclination towards the catastrophic which reveals the intensification of imagistic representation frequently occurring in the Bible. More than that, reception of this catastrophic tone, as recognized through centuries of scholarly and artistic interpretation, and straddling the mythic realm of enduring cultural memory across image and text, compounds the appropriation and 'return' of imagistic reading.

Most acutely perhaps, this relation of repetition and catastrophe is explored in the repetition of the underlined phrase "And it came to pass" in numerous parts of the Bible, receiving the consistently absurdist interruption of images related to magicians, acrobats, and feats of illusion. For the artists, this is more than simply surreal intervention, being an intentional pairing of image and text: "In theological terms, you might call them miracles" (*The Daily Telegraph*). The disjunct of the image itself acts to reinforce what is a hegemony of biblical disruption -- equally into the black (catastrophe) then white (miracle), then black then white, etc. in the continuum of "coming to pass." Anti-linear interpretation is played out, repetitively and disruptively, at both the micro-level and the macro-level of this book, supporting a more positive and indeed theologically-engaged wrestling with the relations of narrative turning, divine inversion, and teleology.

Further, it is the specificity of photography here which consistently resists a logic of semantic accord between the images of magicians and images of human trauma. If it were possible to read the Bible's shifting discourses of divine affirmation and negation as something like a scripted drama, in whose interpretation the artists would ultimately secure the storied promise of the whole, their use of the photographic subverts this. For the coy, occasionally comic scenes of human entertainment and carefully constructed feats of illusion evoke uncomfortable semantic discord with the harrowing realism of the trauma photographs. The sharpened feeling of recognition, experienced through our relation to a medium which we habitually understand to mirror our world (as well as in the identification of known images such as the nuclear mushroom cloud or the Nazi death camps), weighs in with heightened ethical, political, and psychological self-involvement at the representations of subjects so incongruous. So understood, this seems a particularly animate challenge to self, and registers a particularly visceral connection to biblical reading, that would compound the full discomforts of its realism with ours. And again, it is my argument for what I understand to be Broomberg and Chanarin's intention, that this is to stake a claim for legitimate interpretative antipathy and recoil (as a process), rather more than it is to legislate for some intellectually wholesome meaning in the images or texts.

## Vision as Biblical Revelation

Thus far, then, such artistic engagement with the biblical texts articulates a more richly coloured hermeneutical encounter, primarily through the animating agency of a reading/looking process. The highlighting of such a process in Broomberg and Chanarin's *Holy Bible* carries the impetus of interrogative power, working at a deeper level than the static identification of proof-texting, repetitive association, and indifferent (even indecent) image association. An open, indeterminate hermeneutic works hard to wield this clout through apparent simplicity or innocence. Yet we need to acknowledge that this clout, in part at least, receives its frame from the imposed theme of catastrophe. Without it, an exploration of the imaginative outworking of the text is simply a one-way street for interpretation. The dialogic, in the hands of this artistic enterprise, is hinged to the theme, which precipitates a returning discursivity or a conversation. Such is the mark of the artful purposing of creativity, a serious intent towards communicative endeavor.

In this section, we examine the relating of catastrophe to the artists' project, in the first instance as seen in the inclusion of Adi Ophir's text *Divine Violence* in *Holy Bible*. As a full-stop or epilogue to the convulsing, bright, image-tripping kaleidoscope of the main Bible text, Ophir's essay extract appears white-on-black as a tipped-in five-page pamphlet tucked inside the back cover. This inclusion declares a commandeering 'after the event', so to speak, as if an inverted version of the traditional commissioning preface that typically begins the King James Version (absent from this edition). It acts like a cultural authorization which has originated in the outside, exerting credence over the textual inside. It argues that rather than the Bible containing explosive imagery, explosive imagery contains the Bible. We read that "images of a destructive violence that encompasses the whole world, related to human deeds yet exceeding any human capacity to contain it" speak the Bible's language. Though God has been effaced and "the modern state has taken His place," "the chaotic space created by greater calamities has always been and still is an arena for divine revelation."<sup>10</sup>

For Ophir, catastrophe and its representations have this catalyzing effect on perceptions of God in the world. Indeed, to understand the power of representation (in the mediatized sense of war reportage and documentary film/photography), one must understand that it involves the manipulation of a god's eye view. Aside from the question of outcome (tragedy or triumph), dramatic change is endorsed through the authoritative spin of an event carried by and through visionary report. Photographic depiction itself, and most specifically the witnessed reality of a world experiencing violent upheaval, is a heady combination of a world indisputably real, in the here and now, and an other-worldly transformation seemingly happening from without (also implied through the structure of witnessing). This is why, for Ophir, apocalyptic disaster as we have witnessed it in the modern era always has a typological presentness, an invocation of immediate revelation, and it particularly trades, we note, on his take on the impassivity engendered through photographic looking. We the viewers are already out of the frame (especially through the explicit modality of technological looking that does not require our presence, such as surveillance imaging, drone cameras, and satellite photography), so any apocalypse detected within it invokes the suggestion of "divine violence."

Such are the ideas woven through Broomberg & Chanarin's take on catastrophe in *Holy Bible*. If, for Ophir, Sodom and Gomorrah are "the Hiroshima and Nagasaki of their age" (Ophir n.p.), Broomberg and Chanarin's visceral photographic pull into a twentieth-century panoply of disaster reportage includes the very same associations with images of atomic explosions and landscape devastation: for example, 2 Kings 1: 14, "There came fire down from heaven" is underlined opposite a full page aerial view of a military strike. "There" becomes "here," and the image drives a hermeneutic of "facingness," as Michael Fried has described Luc Delahaye's large format photographs of world conflicts (111). Almost inevitably, the penultimate spread in the book of Revelation shows a photograph of the World Trade Center on 9/11, opposite three underlined excerpts: "worship the beast and his image" (14: 9), "worship the beast and his image" (14: 11), and "victory over the beast, and over his image" (15: 2). An awareness of photographic potency here mounts to a climax with what David Levi Strauss claims is "the most photographed event in history," an apex of visualization that nevertheless seemed unreal to those who witnessed it, "not legible as 'reality'," even "like a movie."<sup>11</sup>

And as with revelation, so with Revelation: the textual mode of catastrophe which has so defined the term's apocalyptic reach evokes this movie-like apex of visualization, as Catherine Keller has playfully evoked:

I still try to slow down the hyperspeed of John's vision, flashing like MTV to the next image, and the next, and – his sentences are grammatically gorged with 'and' – the images multiply like the eyes. Something in this text keeps winking at me, something still trying, for all the hallucinogenic overexposure of The Apocalypse, to get some attention. Pssst, here, look. (Keller 254)

Of all the biblical texts which are explicit visionary report (others include parts of Daniel and Ezekiel -- and interestingly it is Ezekiel 6: 4, "Your images shall be broken," which receives another photograph of 9/11 in *Holy Bible*), it is Revelation which is both energized and energizing in a contemporary "facingness." One might feel its massive visual key change (within the New Testament subtext of careful accounting for/exhortation of the witnessed gospel) as a return to the kind of absolute concern of Genesis, except now it is a concern for endings rather than beginnings. These



endings involve much that is obliterating (Armageddon being just one), but they also involve a revelation: everything revealed and unveiled, all the visual availability of heavenly mysteries, incumbent upon the witness and his documentary report.

Compounding the escalation of visual return, all of the five photographs straddling Revelation's text in *Holy Bible* associate with the idea of camera-produced footage: it opens and closes with images of coiled or blasted film strip, and the two black-and-white photographs prior to the photograph of the Twin Towers show black box imaging equipment (a single remotely-operated bomb detonator and a cargo-load of televisions, lights and cameras). The typical standing of reportage as would collude with the sense of a wrapped up script is undermined throughout: Revelation's opening image of the coiled film strip appears to unfurl around an egg, alongside the underlining of 'the beginning' (Revelation 1: 8) and "he that liveth" (Revelation 1: 18); the abundance of visual equipment laid out in a methodical grid is as darkly foreboding as the 'bottomless pit' associated with it (Revelation 9: 1; 9: 11; 11: 7); and where at the opening of *Holy Bible* the title page has a blacked-out rectangle covering part of the text, closing the book of Revelation is the suggestion of a film strip's incandescence or "white-out," where the absent, bleaching image curiously "covers" the words with its lack, literally a lack of ink (see fig. 4). Hence the authority of the Bible's status as report, and the vivid realism in the witness testimonies of God in the world of the Israelites and the disciples cannot lead here to a passive lens. The endgame is instead "convulsive," "schizophrenic," "tyrannical," and a "heterotopia,"<sup>12</sup> which shatters self-constituting knowledge, opening onto a horizon of the unknowable God. Revelation's -- and photography's -- capacity to deny a hermeneutical ending is indeed a particularly a visionary one.



Figure 4: Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Holy Bible*, 2013 (pp.720-721).

Other clamorous rifts in the logic of realistic representation and document could be attended to, and have more readily received their codification by theologians in a hermeneutics of control -- such as the moralizing limits placed around sword-happy retribution stories (for example, Genesis 34), or the doctrines containing the cataclysmic earth-splitting at Jesus' death (Matthew 27). David Morgan has pointed out the typical Protestant tendency to write meaning into and out of uncomfortable images, noting that "It is virtually impossible not to manufacture such interpretations if one is to enforce the covenant that expects a systemic, overarching rationale or program of meaning in the image" (Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze* 87). Similarly, Michael Austin observes the habit of biblical studies that

more often than not attempts "to tame its chaos and superabundance. We, as it were, make the Bible submit to our rational understanding. We attempt to make it conform to us rather than allow it radically to challenge and bewilder us" (Austin 128). Instead, he suggests that "deconstructive trust,"<sup>13</sup> or what I identify here as Broomberg and Chanarin's hermeneutic of indeterminacy, might well shake up a hermeneutics of control, and indeed goes a long way towards courting readerly openness for the sake of a revelatory (rather than ideological) situating of God in the world.

That which causes shock or discomfort in the biblical text, which overtly volunteers its lack of comprehensibility, is, I think, a visionary challenge at a deeper level, too. Consciously on the part of Broomberg and Chanarin, the photographic sometimes serves to halt discourse in a way that is more than interruption or interpolation. Vision as lack of conversation, as much as vision as lack of comprehension. A danger in attending to "lack" in catastrophe, and its photographic associations, perhaps inevitably drifts into meaning-forming again, with the creep of an ideological attempt to fill the "silence in heaven" (Revelation 8: 1). Where Broomberg and Chanarin practice the evocation of this lack or silence, however, it is important to recognize that it is in association with a sense of a implicated if not challenged self. In *Holy Bible's* Leviticus, it is legislation pertaining to uncleanness that receives the most underlining in the whole Bible, being particularly striking for presenting three spreads without photographs. The reverberations of "unclean" in the text compound the void of picturing, a picturing that has had the overwhelming effect of making the viewer feel "unclean," as the artists have suggested from their experience of being immersed in the Archive's images.<sup>14</sup>

We might imagine this as an iconoclasm of images, and a silence of words. But this is not to present a deconstruction for deconstruction's sake, evincing total break with/from hermeneutical exchange. It is more subtly predicated on the idea of a break as itself a form of hermeneutical exchange. When linked with biblical ideas pertaining to human selfhood before God, the concepts of uncleanness (in association with catastrophe or trauma) play along quite closely with what we might identify as the decentering effect of reading the Bible, its challenge to self-constituting intellectual purchasing power and our ordering of the world.<sup>15</sup> Such a challenge typically receives revelatory disclosure in the Bible: the holiness of Yahweh in the middle of the Israelites, Job's encounter with the divine through suffering, Christ's foolishness on the cross. Yet whatever the form of this revelation, the sense of imperative laid on the witness is an unavoidable relaying of personal effect, the deepening of answerability.

As Catherine Keller has said of the text of Revelation, which could as well be said of *Holy Bible*, "the mythopoeic vortex of the imagery" (256) is not an endlessly proliferating destruction of sense and sensibility, with catastrophe read for ultimate nihilism and deconstructionism. Rather the Bible's violence and its artistic interpretation finds in the visual an accreditation based on its re-orienting and energizing spectacular effect. Keller, and the artists, resist telling us what the theological promise of visualized catastrophe is (including its visualized absence) and instead emphasize,

A theological hermeneutic of relation, that is, of indeterminacy -- rather on the model of quantum theory, in which the relation of observer and observed evinces an uncontrollable and irreducible mutuality. (Keller 255)

Thus described, it is not that biblical content in visual culture exists as recoverable theme/codification. Rather biblical content itself is to be seen as part of the expanded, available,

externalized, revelatory and catastrophic contemporary scene; as something inhabited and internalized through involved, reflexive, reciprocal, and dialogic interaction.

## Conclusion

My discussion of Broomberg and Chanarin's photo-biblical hermeneutic in this essay has explored indeterminacy between word and image. That they deliberately plumb the depths of this relation cannot be denied. Occupying the grey areas of a spectrum between critical and credulous approaches to the Bible, they prove to be far from shy in their engagement with the texts, receiving them in traditionally less-hallowed registers of personally-directed reading and digitally appropriated multimedia. The artists' open intentions to respond to the text, their sense of ownership over its availability, and their gravitation towards the themes of catastrophe and image break-down all evidence an exploration of theological horizon consisting not so much in the content of their reading as in the manner of it. At the same time, the Bible in evidence here is hinged by its own "scandal of particularity,"<sup>16</sup> that preoccupation with actual events, people, and places, to the artists' own specific loci within the modern world, through that most realistic of visual media, photography.

Refreshingly, they are just one example in a swathe of consistently mindful contemporary photographic art practice which turns to the Bible. Others include Israeli photographer Adi Nes with his award-winning *Biblical Stories* series on the patriarchs (2003-2006), David LaChapelle's continuing biblical tableau as begun with his series *Jesus is my Homeboy* (2003), the ongoing icon series of Andres Serrano, not to mention the sustained interest of Gilbert & George, Damien Hirst, Sam Taylor-Johnson, and Garry Fabian Miller in the UK. Both the millennium and the 2011 KJV celebrations saw a host of Bible-focused projects in photography, from art journal *Visionaire's* "The Bible" (1999) which invited more than thirty leading photographers to contribute to its lavish boardbook publication, to artist David Mach's internationally touring exhibition of over forty large-format collaged biblical scenes in *Precious Light* (2011). The realm of isolated biblical reference in photography undoubtedly also proliferates in more popular visual culture, as some recent studies in biblical reception attest to,<sup>17</sup> but of greater significance here is the identification of deliberate and consistent formal characteristics emerging in the techniques and interpretation of specific artists.

Between word and image a representational and hermeneutical continuum is explored through artful and conceptual combinations of image/text in dilution, superimposition, contiguity, redaction, exclusion, and more. What such a continuum is not is a pre-described, pre-authorized imposition of religious message or doctrine. Indeed in art practice, this remains an open question, a hermeneutics of indeterminacy, and is enabled as such in part through what is a situation of the hermeneutical relation in the critical discourses of the day. Hermeneutics so defined has a rather more promising relation to theological discussion and religion than it might at first seem. We are certainly in the realm of deconstructionism and relativism towards the Bible, but one need not thereby presume the destruction of theological readings. Nor need a discussion of the biblical imaginary be devoid of critical theory in its acknowledgement of a disruptive "reading" paradigm for interpreting visual culture. To the contrary, that which is understood in the Gadamerian terms of the hermeneutical circle promises an invigorated visual-theological dynamic for the text as a received visual object, predicated on interactive response and critique (rather than on say, represented content or critical perspective) across the blending of horizons.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it more closely represents the Judaic tradition

with which both Broomberg and Chanarin identify. Like so many aspects of Jewish reading of the Hebrew scriptures, including the educative progression of learning-by-heart to rabbinic discipleship, the emphasis on public recitation, and above all in the Midrash commentaries, the Bible is expected to be in constant conversation, and provokes the same in one's reading of it (Boyarin and Epstein).

Artists who are aware of, most likely through their own higher education, the theory of postmodern cultural enquiry are habituated to this kind of relativism and openness informing their own practices. Attending to the Bible in this way does not thereby bring religion back into the centre of disciplinary control, nor does it categorically refuse it -- a polarization which perhaps seems to default with criticism's lagging behind cultural production. The return of religion in art<sup>19</sup> when it is being critiqued rather than practised may need to follow with a deeper recognition of, and humility towards, newly liberal understandings of biblical content and contexts in visual culture (from the point of view of image criticism), and newly liberal understandings of images via religious reading (from the point of view of theologians). There is a danger as we have noted that as soon as a hermeneutics of indeterminacy is ringfenced for intellectual corroboration, it becomes really quite determinate, enacting once again a hermeneutics of control. Key to keeping it decentred, unstable, dialogic, is, I suggest, the need for interdisciplinary conversation, and most especially, that between academic criticism and artistic practice. In a world in which the communicative production, reception, and circulation of visual cultures are so far from binary, interpretative manoeuvres inevitably have to follow suit, and would benefit from attempts to interpolate the reactive linearity of criticism with dialogic instability, "deconstructive trust" (Austin 111), and even religious possibility.

One hopes that where visual culture criticism and the literary-critical reception of the Bible is alert to such hermeneutical circling, questions relating to theological horizon will increasingly receive their due. Contextual specificity of artworks and artists may reduce the derailment of a suspicious hermeneutics still ringing with its (politicized) ideological excising or abstraction of religion, which is increasingly looking ill-equipped to explain such works. The return of the Bible here in its fluidity may also revoke the license of academy control which would delimit its readings in institutional and monolithic terms. For the Bible as sacred text proves to be as adaptable in critical interpretation as it does in cultural appropriation, and so bends itself into the self-reflexivity of discourse as to press theological questions into a multitude of registers, including the visual. This is to claim for theological horizon, with Davide Zordan, an image-text relation that is:

Never univocal, but an uninterrupted network of intersections and connections in which it is difficult if not impossible to determine hierarchies and directions of meaning. What seems clear ... is that the most apt place for the hermeneutical endeavour is right in the interstices between image and word, where they reverse centrality and marginality, mutually underlining and even increasing their communicative efficacy and presenting opportunities for change. (Zordan 137)



<sup>1</sup> Robin Jensen, speaking for interdisciplinary engagement, remarks on the deprivable effect of disciplinary isolation as to make of the primary source, whether visual object or Christianity's texts, "a discrete form of expression, without the benefit of the added interpretive data supplied by the other" (347). This essay solicits the rather more dynamic exchange of Mitchell's discussion of 'anarchist indiscipline' (see Mitchell 1995, 541).

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible*, by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin (London: MACK, 2013), hardback, 16.2 x 21.6 x 3.5cm, 726pp., 512 photographs from The Archive of Modern Conflict, overlaid on the complete KJV text. Endpiece essay by Adi Ophir (extract), *Divine Violence: Two Essays on God and Disaster* (2013).

<sup>3</sup> I am especially indebted in this essay to Jonathan Anderson's elucidation of theological horizons in visual culture criticism, and to Christoph Uehlinger's comprehensive outline of academic interest in the field (Anderson; Uehlinger).

<sup>4</sup> The publication in its entirety is currently only available in Hebrew, though the extract in *Holy Bible* is in English.

<sup>5</sup> Mediatized in the sense in which reportage (images, texts, films, webpages, etc.) is a screen – nominally transparent, but conditioned to be so through a host of ideological assumptions and agendas.

<sup>6</sup> Sherwood 220. Sherwood's expansive selection of theorists for Jonah's most visually extraordinary of biblical texts includes Roland Barthes, Zygmunt Bauman, and Julia Kristeva.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson 165. Johnson neatly evokes the inversion practiced by our own expansive modern-day scientifically-imagined world, which is also theistically shrunken.

<sup>8</sup> I am reminded of artist Tom Phillips's *A Humument*, whose page-by-page project (since 1966) reworks editions of a Victorian novel (*A Human Document*, by W. H. Mallock) with selective effacing and highlighting of words, in the midst of highly decorative visual embellishment. Phillips's appropriation, however, does seek to create a story of his own, even if modelled on similar incongruity and happenstance of words. Broomberg and Chanarin's rather different interpolations suggest the kind of hallucinogenic interruptions that Roland Barthes so famously described of photographs, whose "power of authentication exceeds the power of representation" (89).

<sup>9</sup> "A trained scholar of the Bible may protest at their mode of reading, but it would be akin to a soccer fan crying 'handball!' at a rugby match" (Tollerton 154).

<sup>10</sup> Ophir in *Holy Bible*, np. Ophir has a similar concern to John Dominic Crossan: "Do not just read it [violence in the Bible] as a book and expect the meaning at its end, but view it as an image and expect the climax in the centre. Read it verbally, but picture it visually" (243).

<sup>11</sup> Strauss 182. The oft-mentioned phrase from witnesses of 9/11, "like a movie," is commented on by Susan Sontag as the way "survivors of a catastrophe express the short-term unassimilability of what they had gone through." See Sontag 19.

<sup>12</sup> Sherwood 218. Sherwood's focus on such biblical vision is in the prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible. For a specific accounting of similar features in Revelation, see Fletcher and Keller.

<sup>13</sup> Austin 111. 'Regarding such a transcendent reality as God to be beyond knowledge, the deconstructive trust may proceed in the belief that the divine is a mystery discernible in the subversion of the systems of reference that an image-maker, and by extension a culture, stipulates or constructs.'

<sup>14</sup> See also Sheona Beaumont, "Leviticus 15-18 Scaping Sin: Hinging on Holiness," *The Visual Commentary on Scripture*, <https://www.thevcs.org>. In the curation of three artworks exploring the Leviticus themes, I include a discussion of Broomberg and Chanarin's conceptualising of "An Unclean Concentrate."

<sup>15</sup> Others note the texts' "self-involving disclosure-function" (see Thiselton 518). To give just three further examples: for Susan Wittig, this is exemplified in parables; for R. Alan Culpepper, it is in the "mirror" characteristics of John's gospel (as opposed to its "window" on the world); for Walter Brueggemann, it is in the voice of the Psalms.

<sup>16</sup> Thiselton 161. Thiselton's use of the phrase is attributed to Alan Richardson, unreferenced.

<sup>17</sup> As well as the considerable research conducted by David J. Clines and J. Cheryl Exum at the University of Sheffield (often, also, in film), see also Aichele, and Edwards.

<sup>18</sup> Gadamer 260ff. The hermeneutical circle works "not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place" (263), namely in a circular movement which seeks to relate one's own position relative to the object of study and vice versa, in continual reflection. One only ever operates out of the tradition in which one stands, and the projection (or effacement) one might "enact"

over it for critical purchase on and isolation of the object of study is (while commanding a certain intellectual privilege) simply an ossified moment in a process of understanding predicated on exchange and event. For Gadamer, it is art that points up how much of 'event' there is in all understanding, pictorial engagement being so characterized by this kind of circular play (and the game), see especially 119ff.

<sup>19</sup> Reaching for the recovery of religious ideas in cultural history generally are Alistair Chapman et al.; and in American art, Sally M. Promey. Conversely the sociological field increasingly recognizes "secularisation in retreat" (see Berger).

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## List of Figures

(small images included here for screen resolution)

Figure 1: Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Holy Bible*, 2013 (front cover).

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Figure 2: Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Holy Bible*, 2013 (framed spreads from Numbers). © Broomberg & Chanarin; Courtesy the artists and Lisson Gallery. Photo: Jack Hems.

Figure 3: Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Holy Bible*, 2013 (pp.448-449).

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Figure 4: Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Holy Bible*, 2013 (pp.720-721).

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