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Still Ekphrasis? Visual and Non-Visual Art in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction

ABSTRACT

The article explores the ancient notion of ekphrasis in an attempt to further adjust it to the requirements of the contemporary literary and artistic landscape. An overview of the transformations in the world of art in the 20th century allows us to update our understanding of what art is today and to examine its existence within the literary context. In light of the above, I emphasize the significance of broadening the definition of ekphrasis so as to include not only painting and sculpture on the one side, and poetry on the other, but also to open it up to less conventional forms of artistic expression, and popularize its use in reference to prose. In order to illustrate its relevance to the novel, I have conducted a study of three contemporary novels – John Banville’s *Athena*, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard* and Don DeLillo’s *Mao II* – in order to uncover the innovative ways in which novelists nowadays use ekphrasis to reinvent long prose.

Keywords: ekphrasis, allographic art, autographic art, notional ekphrasis, visual art, Banville, DeLillo, Vonnegut

Ekphrasis has a long and eventful history in the studies of Western literature. Ekphrastic texts are those that feature prominent descriptions of pieces of art; however, any scholar of the *belles-lettres* would be quick to point out that such a definition is hardly adequate for any serious study of the fascinating phenomena that occur at the intersection of the visual and the literary. I see this as an excellent opportunity to observe the way we have perceived these fields in the past, and how our current views, on fine arts especially, have contributed to the development of new paths in literary expression. In order to discuss the way in which visual, and later, conceptual arts have provided inspiration to writers across the centuries, I would first like to focus on the contemporary understanding of art.

The perspective I would like to offer might be seen as controversial, though, as I will argue, it reflects well the situation at hand. Gérard Genette, one of the most distinguished representatives of the narratological approach to literature, is not

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always remembered for his contributions to the study of non-literary arts, and yet I find his remarks published in *The Work of Art: Immanence and Transcendence* (1997) particularly illuminating for reflecting on ekphrasis. Granted, opponents of adopting a narratological perspective on all arts might argue that this take will inevitably be biased in favor of literature as narratology's main subject of interest, but we should remember that this bias is already inscribed in ekphrasis itself, a *literary* description of an *extra-literary* form of expression.¹ Genette's venture to introduce a set of concepts uniform to all arts should allow us to move easily across the generic boundaries to observe the fascinating cross-inseminations that enrich today's literature.

Genette's most significant contribution to our discussion consists in the distinction of two qualities that define every work of art: immanence and transcendence, the former explaining the necessity of each work of art to have a material manifestation, the latter showing that in order to function in an artistic way, each such work also needs to venture beyond its materiality (Genette, 1997, p. 11). This seemingly trivial observation has some rather profound consequences. It tackles the phenomenological problem of art's ontology: in order for anyone to perceive a work of art, and to classify it as such, that work of art has to offer itself, or at least signal its existence to the audience's senses. The fact that such a work transcends its material manifestation defines its status as art but is also instrumental for ekphrasis, for it is one thing to perceive an object, and quite another to perceive it as artistic.

In relation to the issue of immanence, Genette calls upon Goodman's distinction between allographic and autographic art: "if music and literature (among other arts) are allographic, the act of writing, printing, or performing a text or score is for its part an autographic art" (Goodman, 1968, p. 112), refining and updating it to more contemporary needs:

[s]ince the opposition material/ideal bears on immanence alone, and sometimes divides artistic practices that are in all other respects homogeneous, I will generally avoid speaking of autographic or allographic *arts* or works (transparent metonymies aside), reserving these adjectives for the *objects of immanence* of such works; "autographic art", for example, will henceforth mean nothing more for us than "an art whose works have autographic, or material objects of immanence". Moreover, the category for greatest relevance for us will be one that often cuts across a considerable number of traditional artistic distinctions: that of the *regime of immanence*, autographic or allographic (Genette, 1997, p. 24).

I would like to claim that this typology could become more fruitful if we could slightly depart from what both Goodman and Genette are arguing by stating that

¹ It is worth noting that the conviction of literature's superiority to visual arts has a long tradition, which can be perhaps best observed in the case of the classical *Laokoon. An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766) by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

autographic works of art manifest themselves in a particular materiality, exist in a singularity and make it possible to distinguish between the original and the copy. By contrast, allographic works of art, despite having a material existence, are significantly less limited by it. They exist in plurality, and therefore are potentially indestructible, thus they function like Baudrillard's *simulacra*, where the original, a manuscript, for instance, would rather be perceived within the autographic regime, existing in its singularity and often valued because of this.

In the last decades, we have been observing an increased interest in the notion of ekphrasis, and I believe that much of it has to do with the significant developments in the world of fine arts in the twentieth century. In his book, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, Heffernan (1993) begins his study with the following definition: "ekphrasis is the verbal representation of a visual representation" (p. 3). We must at this stage, however, distinguish between literary and non-literary ekphrasis to honor the roots of the term. Originally included in the *Progymnasmata*, ekphrasis was one of the exercises the ancient Greeks and Romans used in teaching rhetoric (Webb, 2009, p. 3). With time, the skill of vividly describing a work of art (and works of art were used for didactic purposes to provide students with more challenging material for description) was appreciated by Greek and Roman poets, and in this form ekphrasis survived without many substantial changes roughly up until the twentieth century. However, with the rapid developments in the fine arts, it became apparent that this way of understanding ekphrasis had become outdated. I would like to argue that in attempting to redefine the term, we should be concerned with the principal mechanisms that govern the functioning of ekphrasis and not focus on the conventional limitations.

The example that Heffernan uses in trying to explain these mechanisms is very revealing. The scholar brings to our attention the famous painting by Pieter Breughel the Elder, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (ca. 1557) and two twentieth-century poems depicting it: Wystan Hugh Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938) and William Carlos Williams's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" (1960). Both poets focus their ekphrastic works on Breughel's famous use of perspective. By placing in the foreground a peasant ploughing a field, the painter draws our attention to the mundane chore, and away from the death of the mythical Icarus, whose demise is merely signaled by a pair of legs sticking out above the surface of the sea. We only learn that those legs belong to the son of Daedalus from the painting's title. Breughel thus "outsources" much of the meaning of his autographic work to the allographic regime represented by the title, and in this, I would like to argue, he emphasizes its conceptual dimension of the canvas, and the concept, I would like to posit, is allographic in nature. Accordingly, both ekphrastic poems refer more to the conceptual aspect of the canvas than to its strictly visual properties² (it

² And through the concept, also to the myth.

could be argued that perspective is a visual property, but I believe that it is not the perspective itself that occupies the poets but rather its consequences). To Auden, the indifference to Icarus' death becomes an impulse to reflect on stoicism from almost a monist perspective. Williams too draws heavily on the consequences of Breughel's use of perspective, but his poem does not suggest indifference, but rather the limits of human perception, suggesting that even events of great significance can go unnoticed, I believe.

While studying the various instances of ekphrasis across the centuries, Heffernan distinguishes a subtype of the concept that will prove particularly useful in reading contemporary literature, which he calls "notional ekphrasis": one that offers the reader a work of art that was conceived in the imagination of the ekphrasis' author (Heffernan, 1993, p. 14). To illustrate what makes this type of ekphrasis both different from traditional ekphrasis while at the same time adhering to its fundamental principles, Heffernan (1993) focuses on John Keats's famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819) (pp. 113–114). The scholar is correct in pointing out that Keats constructs his ekphrasis *as if* he was dealing with an actual piece of art. That is why the poet uses language as if it was striving to challenge its own limitations, which it is obviously not. What makes Keats's work special, and additionally necessitates its notional character, is the theme the poet chooses to discuss. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a reflection on the passage of time in the face of a hypothetical eternity. The imagined work of autographic art represents this, as we have observed above, seemingly eternal duration of a material object in contrast with the fleetingness of human life depicted by it. Notably, that representing object is a symbol of death. If we imagine an urn decorated with the depictions of life, this image creates the foundation for the conceptual dimension of Keats's poem, which itself offers a haunting vision of eternity, one of stillness and unfulfilled desires. In the case of notional ekphrasis, we can see how an author can not only creatively interpret a work of art, but conceptually mold it to fit the thematic requirements of the ekphrasis. This quality will prove particularly important to the work of the contemporary authors that I discuss below.

In light of the present argument, therefore, it would be worth to acknowledge that we are currently witnessing what Sawa (2009) calls a "pro-narrative" tendency in studies on ekphrasis, which poses the question if ekphrasis must be strictly limited to poetry and the visual arts (p. 101), which is especially legitimate if we keep in mind what Mitchell (2005) observes in the context of contemporary art that "[f]or art historians today, the safest conclusion would be that the notion of a purely visual work of art was a temporary anomaly, a deviation from the much more durable tradition of mixed and hybrid media" (p. 395). Therefore, expanding the definition of ekphrasis is merely bringing it up to date with the current scholarship on the fine arts. Analogically, it makes sense to expand our understanding of ekphrasis in the other direction, and acknowledge its presence

in prose (Sawa, 2009, p. 100) for, as I have argued, it is more reasonable to define a concept by explaining its principal mechanisms and not the instances of its manifestation.

The literary landscape of the 20th century and beyond has been changing dramatically, and with the current wealth of the novelistic tradition, it would be risky to argue that long prose lacks the sophistication of poetry. The novels that I propose for analysis vary significantly in their ekphrastic interests, the functions art plays within their poetics, and the theoretical problems they pose. John Banville's *Athena* (1995) could be called a postmodern detective story that examines the notion of authenticity in art, and more broadly, in culture. Kurt Vonnegut's *Bluebeard* examines the emergence of American abstract expressionism and reflects upon the relationship between representational and non-representational art in the second half of the 20th century. Don DeLillo's *Mao II* studies the ideological and political implications of both art and literature in the context of media discourse. This, by no means, is an exhaustive list, but merely a display of the possibilities ekphrasis offers to the contemporary novelist.

Banville's *Athena* is, without doubt, the most conservative novel of the three as regards the choice of the type of artwork it discusses. The main character's task is to verify the authenticity of a number of canvases by Dutch and Italian painters for a group of criminals operating on the black market. The paintings are unveiled to us in a manner that resembles lengthy excerpts from an art history book or an exhibition catalogue, rather than a piece of traditional ekphrastic literature (Banville, 1995, loc. 217). On the one hand, the passages are undoubtedly vivid descriptions of works of art, much in the vein of classical ekphrasis, whilst being strikingly different. Rather than an artistic re-creation of the canvas, we are offered what seems like a scholarly account. The overwhelming technical details, references to real scholars, and even the sheer length of the passages, give the convincing impression that we are dealing with a non-fiction source. However, if we try to find information on Johann Lievelb, or any of the other painters whose work is depicted in *Athena* (L. van Habelijn, Giovanni Belli, Job van Hellin, L. E. Oklbijn, J. van Hollbein, Jan Vibell), we will only be able to re-trace these names back to the novel, and, on closer inspection, we will discover that these names are anagrams or near-anagrams of the name "John Banville." Clearly then the author employs notional ekphrasis, which is molded to the specific needs of the novel, primarily concerned with the notion of authenticity. It quickly transpires that Banville skillfully challenges its validity in relation to a work of art. On the level of the plot, the issue of whether the characters are in the possession of authentic works of art or their copies is significant mostly for financial reasons, but on the level of appreciating a literary work of art, it becomes irrelevant, largely legitimizing Genette's distinction between allographic and autographic regimes. Autographic works of art become of interest to Banville's criminals not because of

their aesthetic but monetary value, which is a direct consequence of their singular existence. The precise information regarding the artistic quality and significance is irrelevant to them.

The plasticity of notional ekphrasis also allows Banville to put the paintings in relation to the conceptual dimension of the novel. All of the canvases depict mythological scenes that can be seen as a form of commentary on ekphrasis itself. For instance, Livelb's painting draws on the myth of Apollo and Daphne, where Eros takes his revenge on Apollo for mocking him. To do so, he makes the son of Zeus fall in love with Daphne, whilst simultaneously causing Daphne's loathing of Apollo. When Apollo is about to catch Daphne in pursuit, the nymph asks her father to turn her into a tree. The myth itself explores themes of desire and loathing, chastity and the curse of unfulfilled love. In the history of studying the relationship between art and literature, gendering both forms of artistic expression is not new. Lessing does this permanently in his *Laokoon*, implying that painting is feminine – beautiful but passive – whereas writing is masculine – active and dynamic.³ Interestingly, Mitchell too, though to a different effect, asserts the femininity of the visual:

The painting's desire, in short, is to change places with the beholder, to transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him into an image for the gaze of the picture in what might be called "the Medusa effect." This effect is perhaps the clearest demonstration we have that the power of pictures and of women are modeled on one another and that this is a model of both pictures and women that is abject, mutilated, and castrated. The power they want is manifested as *lack*, not as possession [emphasis original] (Mitchell, 1996, p. 78).

With the above in mind, we can easily see Daphne, the female object of desire, eventually mutilated, as painting and Apollo's desire as the ekphrastic attempt to take possession of something that cannot be owned.

Although the object of Banville's ekphrastic interest is the most conventional among the novels that I have selected for analysis, the author's approach to visual art is far from conventional, as it partially resembles Keats's take on ekphrasis but with a distinctively postmodernist undertone. The Irish author invites us to play a game, and within a novel that features investigating the authenticity of works of art, he has us doing the investigating, which in turn leads us to consider questions of art and literary theory.

While Banville resorts to ancient mythology to discuss issues of literature and art, Vonnegut employs the old French folktale of Bluebeard (first published in 1697). In the novel, the castle chamber filled with dead women is replaced by a barn, where the protagonist, Rabo Karabekian, keeps his final work of art, with no real intention of showing it to anybody. As the action unfolds, we learn the

³ The sexism of this in today's view needs no further commentary (cf. Mitchell, 1994).

story of Karabekian becoming a famous painter and a prominent (if fictional) representative of American abstract expressionism. The novel itself is presented as a memoir of the artist, and thus Vonnegut establishes the primary link between visual art and literature: "I am writing in this museum. Yes, it's true: I, old Rabo Karabekian, having disgraced myself in the visual arts, am now having a go at literature" (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 2).

From a very early age, Karabekian shows considerable artistic talent, which eventually leads him to become an apprentice to Dan Gregory, who in the world of the novel is depicted as an equivalent of Norman Rockwell. Vonnegut thus begins his study of contemporary art from the point of radical mimesis, just to expose its shortcomings early on in *Bluebeard*: "Dan Gregory was a taxidermist. He stuffed and mounted and varnished and mothproofed supposedly great moments, all of which turn out to be depressing dust-catchers, like a moosehead bought at a country auction or a sailfish on the wall of a dentist's waiting room" (Vonnegut 2011, p. 10). He describes such mimesis in the categories of forgery: "Nobody could counterfeit rust and rust-stained oak like Dan Gregory. Nobody could counterfeit verdigris like Dan Gregory. Nobody could counterfeit plant diseases like Dan Gregory" (p. 10). Eventually, Karabekian comes to the conclusion that mimesis unattached to anything else (apart from commercialism), becomes a perversion of art (p. 15), and by extension, art cannot dwell in a form that merely seems artistic. As a result, Karabekian becomes fascinated with abstract painting, which resides on the opposite side of the spectrum of representation. It is noteworthy that Vonnegut makes his transition resemble that of Marcel Duchamp, the creator of the famous *Fountain* (1917). Had it not been for the fact that the father of the *readymade* was already an established painter prior to abandoning the easel, his gesture of exhibiting an object of everyday use in a gallery would not have produced any meaning. In this case it is clear that meaning is strictly connected with the sacrifice legitimizing the *readymade*, i.e. the work of art produces meaning because Duchamp is *not* employing his skills as a painter. Similarly, Karabekian's abstract art is only appreciated fully when it is revealed that he has the technical skill to paint in a realistic way (p. 33). It would then follow that art, at least in part, has to be immanent not exclusively in the physical object of its manifestation.

A careful study of Karabekian's *opus magnum* reveals that Vonnegut looks at autographic art in a similar way to Genette (1997), at least in the dimension that all objects of art are really 'facts,' and, in consequence, inherently have a duration. Ekphrasis, as a literary device, enables us to see the dynamics of a work of art that only seemingly is unchanging. What starts life as a series of enormous abstract canvases covered with commercially available paint, eventually starts flaking. By allowing the work to age, Vonnegut (2011) reveals to us that the painting continues to produce meaning, emphasizing the fact that the temporal existence of an object is merely a fact, but a fact that is semiotically potent. Throughout the

novel, Vonnegut emphasizes the transitional quality of Karabekian's canvas, until it finally reaches its final stage, one that not only shows its temporality but also its locality.

When the painting is finally placed in the locked barn and painted over to clear space for its final incarnation, the work begins to resemble more an installation than a pictorial canvas, which illustrates Mitchell's claim that all media are mixed media, and the physical environment of a work can be seen as a part of it, as can the process of its creation and deterioration:

I had the eight panels purged of every trace of faithless Sateen Dura-Luxes, and restretched and reprimed. I had them set up in the barn, dazzling white in their restored virginity, just as they had been before I transmuted them into Windsor Blue Number Seventeen.

I explained to my wife that this eccentric project was an exorcism of an unhappy past, a symbolic repairing of all the damage I had done to myself and others during my brief career as a painter. That was yet another instance, though, of putting into words what could not be put into words: why and how a painting had come to be (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 34).

Despite being locked and kept from the eyes of a wider audience, the work shows aesthetic quality: "The powerful floodlights dangling from tracks on the ceiling were part of it, pouring megawatts of energy into all that white sizing, making it far whiter than I would have believed white could ever be" (p. 34). This, however, is the penultimate stage of the work's transformation, just before Karabekian alters it in a manner that is highly prompted by his experience with literature. Having shifted away from pure visuality, Rabo turns to something that could be called a visual narrative concerning the day that World War II ended:

There is a war story to go with every figure in the picture, no matter how small. I made up a story, and then painted the person it had happened to. I at first made myself available in the barn to tell anyone who asked what the story was of this person or that one, but soon gave up in exhaustion. Make up your own war stories as you look at the whatchamacallit, I tell people (p. 35).

If we choose to perceive the depiction of Karabekian's final work of art in terms of notional ekphrasis, we will notice that Vonnegut is almost solely concentrating on its conceptual dimension, much the way other contemporary authors do. This allows him to convey the dynamics of the work's creation and duration that offer much to our interpretation of it.

In DeLillo's *Mao II*, the existence-in-multitude that characterizes all allographic art becomes one of the central themes of the novel. In this particular instance, the significance of art for the narrative is emphasized in the title of the novel, which is taken from a painting by Andy Warhol. Pop art seems an excellent vantage point to study the social and political realities of the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the light of the surge of commercialism, pop culture and political turmoil.

Mao II's plot revolves around the character Bill Gray – an established novelist who is working in seclusion, pondering the publication of his new book. He is accompanied by his assistant Scott and his girlfriend Karen, a runaway member of a religious cult. Gray's absence from the literary spotlight attracts the attention of Brita, a photographer working on a series of portraits depicting writers. When Bill eventually decides to appear in public, he does so in order to speak in defense of an abducted fellow writer. While in London, where the speech is scheduled to take place, Gray is contacted by one of the kidnappers and decides to travel to Lebanon to negotiate the release of the captive. Due to an accident, however, he dies before he can reach his destination.

The novel is permeated with a sense of crowdedness, which is introduced as early as the opening sentences, which depict a scene of a mass marriage ceremony of the Sun Myung Moon sect members. Shortly afterwards, we are taken to a Warhol exhibition, which is presented in a similar way:

The museum lobby was crowded. He went downstairs, where people moved in nervous searching steps around the paintings. He walked past the electric-chair canvases, the repeated news images of car crashes and movie stars, and he got used to the anxious milling, it seemed entirely right, people eager to be undistracted, ray-gunned by fame and death. [...] He moved along and stood finally in a room filled with images of Chairman Mao. Photocopy Mao, silk-screen Mao, wallpaper Mao, synthetic-polymer Mao. A series of silk screens was installed over a broader surface of wallpaper serigraphs, the Chairman's face a pansy purple here, floating nearly free of its photographic source (DeLillo, 2016, loc. 253).

It is easy to see that Warhol's *oeuvre* as a whole is a commentary on mass production and mass consumption as pillars of the capitalist economy, which has a profound impact on all aspects of contemporary Western life. But amongst depictions of pop-cultural icons, such as Marilyn Monroe, or the consumer goods that have largely contributed to the emergence of the culture of convenience, such as the famous Campbell's Soup, the image of Mao Zedong holds a special place. The leader of a state that would soon become the embodiment of all mass production, becomes a menacing symbol of the looming change. The entire novel is haunted by a sense of anxiety that causes Bill Gray's writer's block. It seems that he cannot complete his final novel because he has lost his belief in literature's role in shaping the collective consciousness of humanity:

The novel used to feed our search for meaning [...]. It was the great secular transcendence. [...] But our desperation has led us towards something larger and darker. So we turn to the news, which provides an unsettling mood of catastrophe. This is where we find emotional experience not available elsewhere (DeLillo, 2016, loc. 999).

In light of the above, Warhol's art, becomes a humorously dark commentary on a news-mediated reality that we currently live in. The bright pastel colors

used to represent a ruthless political leader give us a sense of the ridiculous; the multiplicity of the image mimics the aesthetics of media coverage, the blatant kitsch testifies to the irrelevance of such categories as beauty.

Warhol, much like Duchamp before him, challenges our collective understanding of art by disturbing our well-established boundaries between the allographic and autographic. His creations could be classified as allographic, be they silk prints or other artifacts of mass reproduction, which in many ways is prophetic to the changing status of the image in the contemporary world. DeLillo's novel depicts Warhol's work as dark, calling his aesthetics "death glamour" (DeLillo, 2016, loc. 1908). In a way, we can see the two artists, Gray and Warhol, as opposites. Whilst *Mao II*'s protagonist conceals himself from the public eye, Warhol merges his art with his persona, in a way consistently embodying absence and death that his work is so preoccupied with. The writer's demise can be seen as DeLillo's commentary on Gray's increasing irrelevance.

Mao II studies the aftermath of the world's growing visuality, whose immersing omnipresence can be directly related to its newly-forged allography. It is a sad novel that mourns the departure of nuanced cultural discourse and its replacement with instant, shocking, mass-produced meanings. The consequence of art no longer being tied to its object of immanence is chaos, where even brilliant artists like Andy Warhol can only discuss it by participating in it. With this in mind, the old order of clear boundaries seems peaceful, perhaps even idyllic, but then again, we might ask ourselves if our remembrance of it is not marked by nostalgia, and thus inherently false.

Postmodernism has brought about an atmosphere of finality: Barth's famous "Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), Philip Roth's repeated proclamations of the end of the novel, the pessimistic closing of *Mao II* are only a few examples of this. But, at the same time, DeLillo, speaking at the memorial service of his younger friend, David Foster Wallace, who by many was seen as the future of American literature, said the following: "But there is always another word. There is always another reader to regenerate these words. The words won't stop coming" (DeLillo, 2012, p. 24).

Just as literature was struggling to overcome its major identity crisis, the art world was experiencing an outbreak of new forms of expression, which could not go unnoticed by the literati. This creative energy quickly found its way into literature, reinvigorating it and opening it up to fresh possibilities. As I have been trying to show, this phenomenon has left us without adequate critical tools. The notion of ekphrasis had a strong tradition in literary studies, but whilst it represented well classical works of literature and art, it had little relevance to the changes brought about by the 20th century. Accordingly, I have attempted to show that expanding the term to accommodate these changes does not affect the basic principles of ekphrasis but merely alters the increasingly challenged convictions

regarding its scope. The three authors whose work I have offered for analysis employ ekphrasis in new and original ways, while maintaining its principal mechanics intact. The findings of conceptual art have unearthed the conceptual potential of both literature and visual art, providing a common space for both these fields. It seems that contemporary authors are well aware of this space and make the most of it to the great benefit of literature.

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