



**No. 19** ISSN 2450-0402

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# Discourses on Culture

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**Editor-in-chief: Iga Maria Lehman**





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Łódź 2023

  
WYDAWNICTWO  
SPOŁECZNEJ AKADEMII NAUK

The electronic version is the primary version of the journal

**<http://dyskursy.san.edu.pl>**

All the articles published in the journal are subject to reviews.

Editor-in-chief: **Iga Maria Lehman**

Adjustment: Agnieszka Śliz

Text design and typesetting: Studio Grafpa, [www.grafpa.pl](http://www.grafpa.pl)

Cover design: Studio Grafpa, [www.grafpa.pl](http://www.grafpa.pl)

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ISSN 2450-0402

University of Social Sciences Publishing House

Sienkiewicza 9, 90-113 Łódź

phone: 42 664 66 41

e-mail: [discourses@san.edu.pl](mailto:discourses@san.edu.pl)



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DOI 10.2478/doc-2023-0001

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Sudeep Sen

sudeepsen.net@gmail.com

# Dimensions of Intermediality & Diversions of Ekphrasis

Received 16 May 2023

Available online 20 June 2023

• **Intermediality:** A generic term for phenomena at the point of intersection  
• between different media, or crossing their borders, or for their  
• interconnection... convergence... intertextuality... [[www.oxfordreference.com](http://www.oxfordreference.com)]

• **Ekphrasis:** A literary description of or commentary on a visual work of  
• art; it is the practice of using words to comment on a piece of visual art  
• [<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ekphrasis>].

## Creativity & Theory

Being a practising poet & writer, literary translator & editor, filmmaker & photographer — I tend to think centrifugally and inter-textually; using multiple antennas to pick up creative and cerebral signals, drawing on varied forms of media to express myself; employing diverse genres — all interacting together in a holistic manner.

The process might start in a seemingly chaotic fashion, invoking Brownian Motion or Pedesis — but as I delve deeper into a subject, chisel away to reach its core, edit and re-shape draft-after-draft — the final product will take the shape of a tightly-wrought poem, a piece of micro-fiction, an essay, a distilled sharp-framed photograph — or a combination of words and images, sometimes with accompanying sound.

Usually, I leave ‘theory’ to the academics/critics, even though I might be well-versed in it. I stay far away from that mode of writing, especially when I am in a creative fervour. The former (which is, at least, a step removed from the primary source) requires a different and equally important skill-set. Creating art requires a free-flowing, associative, vulnerable part of the brain and heart. My approach is raw and visceral to begin with — though I might use my critical faculty to sharpen or chisel the creative text or image, once the basic text-object or art-form is firmly in place.

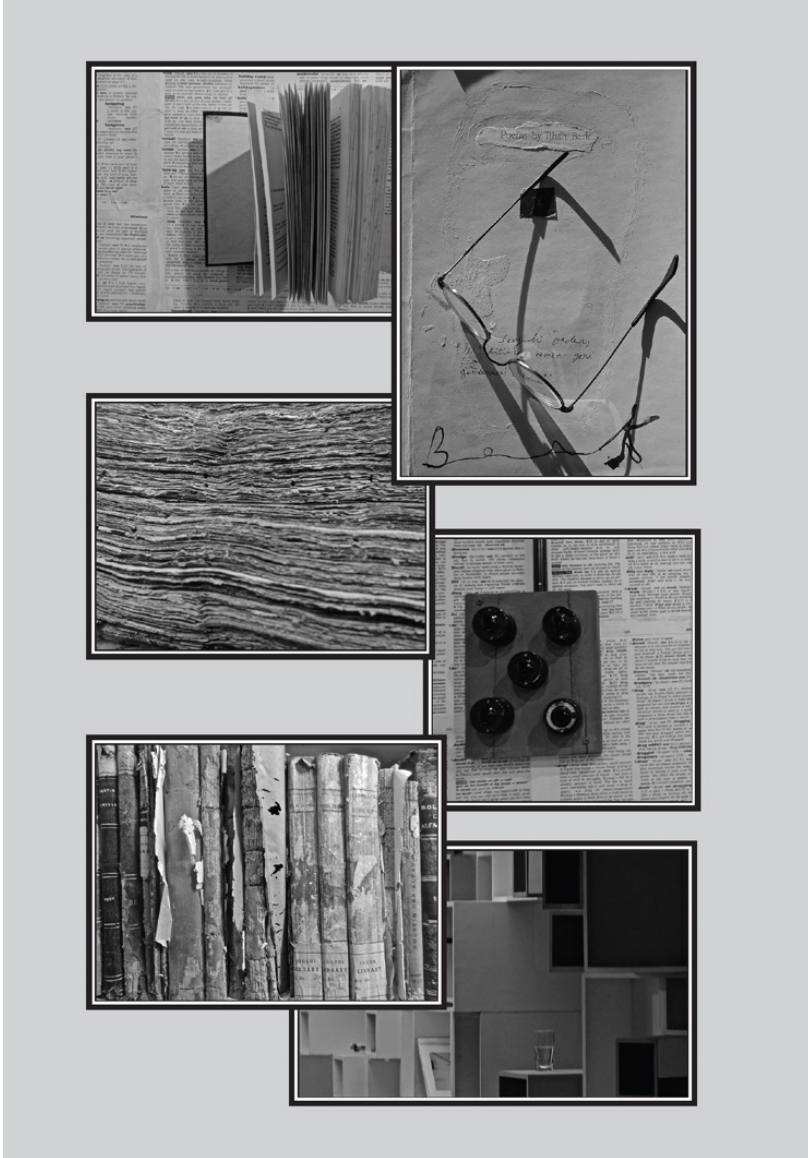
## Intermediality & Ekphrasis

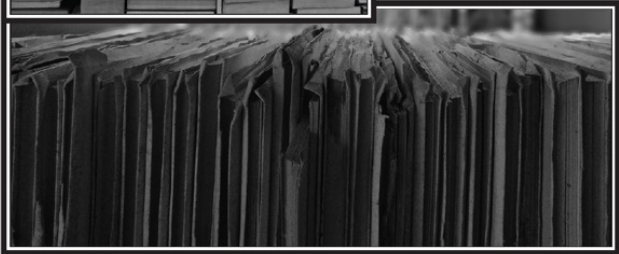
The very idea and definition of ekphrasis includes the notion of intermediality. Inspired by art or images, I might write in a literary genre. In some cases, a piece of literary writing may inspire other interpretative forms — poetry, music, dance, theatre or film. As a practitioner and collaborator, I have worked in the area of fusion and cross-arts.

Let me illustrate ‘intermediality’ in my poetic and photographic practices, through my craft of poetry and art of photography. The poem, *Paper T[r]ails*, from my latest book *Anthropocene* (London: Pippa Rann, 2021), was born



from my engagement with a series of photographs that I had taken — coming together as subsets and subtexts, both due to their provenance and their inherent themes/motifs. A close examination of the black-and-white photographs and the poem that follows, will serve as an illustration.





*Paper T[r]ails*

Paper dreams within the cover of a book,  
 book binds itself with the glue of a spine,  
  
 spine weaves together — dovetailed  
 by the grace of words — words of passion,  
  
 words of grief; words of love, hate, wisdom.  
 Paper crafts its papyrus origins  
  
 journeying from tree to table  
 through clefts, wefts, contours, textures —  
  
 transforming from wood to sheet —  
 white sheets born of unbleached  
  
 natural shade — a tabula rasa waiting  
 for ink, graphite, or sable-hair touch.  
  
 Old-fashioned switches — dormant —  
 now spark static electricity. Paper imagines —  
  
 crisp, letter-strewn, bookish, word-wedged.  
 Phrases elegantly poised, ready to trip off  
  
 a palette, exposing photographic plates —  
 bromide undulations of an untold story —  
  
 a narrative to be matted and mounted —  
 a frame freeing opens its borders to dream.

Ilhan's weathered hands, their bulbous veins  
 hold time and text beautifully phrased —  
  
 he is a poet and painter, lover of the sea,  
 light, silverfish, a sculptor of history.  
  
 Like a musician recording his lyrics —  
 magnetic forces marrying science  
  
 and arts — he swims on crest-troughs  
 of sine-graph modulations, through  
  
 physics' precision of arithmetic and tact.  
 Paper dreams in stacks, between covers,  
  
 among notes left surreptitiously  
 between pages for someone else to read.  
  
 A stray reader may find the letters —  
 electric text — unframed and borderless.

\*

It might be useful to provide a note on the poem's 'context.' *Paper T[r]ails* is a series of tightly wrought images — set as pastiche montage, sometimes in diptychs and triptychs — charting 'paper tales' through their journey of birth, growth and creativity. With subtle use of natural light and controlled framing, material textures and contours, lines and phrases from the original poem as photographic titles, the black-and-white panorama unravels a narrative that is often hidden to an everyday eye.

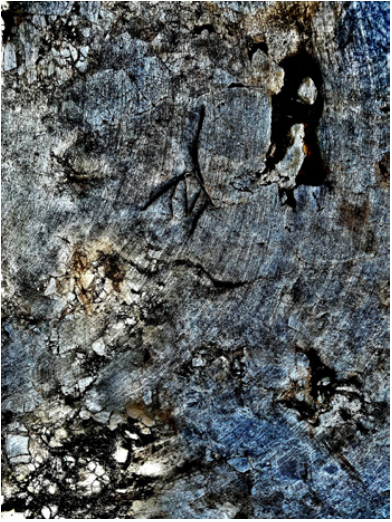
Empty shelves dream of words they may have contained, the history of their making, the music that lies therein, lover's clues to be chanced upon and uncoded. The writer is a poet, the photographer a painter, and the viewer

a lover — he is also the creator, preserver and destroyer — alluding to the triadic Hindu myth of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. However, the palette is secular in nature, precise like architecture and arithmetic, fluid and spontaneous like a song and a story.

\*

The second, more recent poem, *Split Fossil*, arises from my current fellowship as writer-in-residence at South Africa's Nirox Foundation in the 'cradle of humanity' Gauteng region. On one of my walks, I chanced upon an ancient rock that lay split open into two irregular parts, surrounded by wild bushes and verdant foliage. The flat open faces of these two stone-parts appeared like glazed mirrors in the setting sunlight.

One of the curators here, Sven Christian, showed me the various markings on it and explained some of the geological history of this stone. Since that day, I have visited and explored that same piece[s] of rock in closer detail, and photographed it from various angles and under different light conditions. The resultant art-text is a poem in couplets, *Split Fossil*. In its binary, bipolar structure — it captures the yin-yang, the inverse-obverse of the rock's dual/ holistic countenance. Once again, explore the poetry and colour photography in slow-time.



*Split Fossil*

· When an ancient rock splits open —  
· trees and skies starkly mirror  
·  
· the tectonic drama on the stone's gaping  
· weathered face. Fossils' imprinted  
·  
· striations, like those on a human palm,  
· preserve histories — dna intricacies  
·  
· only palaeontologists can decode.  
· As I run my hand on its cracked  
·  
· surface — my fingers trace a filigree  
· of coloured lace-lines, cross-etchings —  
·  
· clues to cosmic-geological calendars,  
· largely indeterminate. Mineral patina  
·  
· exfoliates, reflects, refracts: splitting light —  
· angular shafts of coloured cones  
·  
· radiating centrifugally. My focus stays  
· centred, centripetal. An invisible fulcrum  
·  
· balances this *mis-en-scene* — unravelling  
· a slide-show, in millisecond flashes.



## Architecture & Form

Architecture and form in poetry too, rely on the idea of convergence — with the interplay between the shape of a poem and its visual lineation, between the white and inked spaces on a page, between syntax and punctuation, between the inner musicality/lyricism and oral articulation.

I have written and spoken about this earlier on various occasions. In an article featured in *The Punch Magazine* (online), I have explained that this interconnection has been, “very important to me — partly because of my own inherent interest in architecture itself. During my days of apprenticeship, I consciously wrote using traditional strict forms, formal metre and rhyme schemes. I have also written in free verse, but due to my penchant for formal verse you are likely to encounter a pantoum next to an acrostic poem, a triolet juxtaposed against a ghazal, lyric narratives and prose poetry, Sapphic fragments, mosaic pastiché, ekphrastic verse, sonnet, rubai, poem songs, prayer chants, documentary feeds, rap, reggae, creole, canzone, tritina, sestina, ottava rima, rime royale and variations on waka: haiku, tanka, katauta, choka, bussokusekika, sedoka.”

As I became more experienced and skilled, I started innovating and experimenting, creating and inventing new forms and poetic structures — some of which are part of the English Prosody now. I believe that a poem should not only be linguistically challenging, but how it appears visually is an important factor as well. For me, typography and structure of a poem are just as vital as the inner spirit and content of any poem.

The poem *New York Times*, besides being a commentary on the frenetic pace of the city, has a new rhyme scheme — *abzba*. When you see the poem on the page, you will see that the middle line, i.e. the ‘z’ line, visually pushes out of the stanza. If you turn the poem 90 degrees, you will see the silhouette of the borough of Manhattan. The other reason I used the five-line stanza-format in the poem is because the city of New York itself has five boroughs: Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, Bronx, etc.

The poem, *Bharatanatyam Dancer* is another example of a new scheme, devised as a response to the subject of the poem. It might be interesting for

readers keen on form to note, that the line-end rhyme-scheme — *abacca* — in the poem, mirrors the rhythmic oral beat — *ta dhin ta thaye thaye ta* — of the classical dance step. The left-hand margin indentations further match the same scheme and form.

Early in my writing career I wrote a book-length sequence, *Mount Vesuvius in Eight Frames* (featured on BBC Radio as a verse-play, and premiered in London as a stage-play by Border Crossings directed by Michael Walling). This is based on a series of eight etchings of British artist, Peter Standen. The entire poem is set in rhymed couplets, reflecting the presence of two principal characters — man/woman, lover/other, life/death, and the other essential binaries. These are not present as obvious rhymes — they are wrap-around rhymes as opposed to end-stopped rhymes. The four stanzas in each section reflect the four seasons, the four sides of a frame, the four corners of a visual space. I also use alternating line-indentation for each couplet and stanza with the idea that the entire poem works on a cyclical principle. So, if you join all the stanzas together using the left-justified margin as a reference plane, they in fact fit in a perfect dove-tail joint.

The poem *Single Malt* is one single line, without any full-stops. The visually slender presentation is designed to convey the manner in which whiskey, when poured gently into a crystal glass, caresses its sides and subsequently the tongue's palette. Therefore, the slim verticality of this poem's structure.

There is also my book-length poem, *Distracted Geography: An Archipelago of Intent* (published by Peepal Tree (UK) & Wings Press (USA)). This is another book-length poem of 206 pages. In the epilogue of the book I have explained, "The sparse elongated structure of the poem reflects the strength and surety of the human vertebra and spine, much like Neruda's Odes that reflects the long, thin shape of Chile. The sections and subsections join together like synapses between bone and bone. The titles are translucent markers or breath pauses, not separators. The short two-line couplets echo the two-step footprints, a pathway mapped on the atlas. The 12 sections correspond to the 12 bones in a human ribcage, the 12 months in a year, the two 12-hour cycles in a day. There are 26 bones in the human vertebrae, and the 26 parts in the poem slowly assemble themselves and form a montage of tenuously strung lyrics. The 206 pages in this book match the exact number of bones in a human body."

## Location & Dislocation

Virtual and actual location, whether imagined or real, are equally my homes. I am both local and global at the same time. If I have to locate myself specifically, then I would say I am a Bengali poet writing in English. I was born into a Bengali family, in a Bengali-speaking neighbourhood of New Delhi. I grew up speaking Bangla at home, English at school, and Hindi around the city. All three languages are my mother tongues. Surrounded as I was by a Bengali milieu, the cultural, historical, linguistic and literary traditions of the Bengali language have had a significant impact on my poetic cadence, texture, rhythm and early rhyme-construction. A case in point is my poem *Durga Puja*. In the days preceding the eponymous festival, prayers are chanted from *Chandipaath*. The poem tries to capture the slow, languorous, song-like cadence, as well the long-lined couplet structure of the prayer.

I am constantly innovating with form and structure, allowing me to invent and introduce new aspects of prosody in the English poetry tradition. Even as the voice and technique are in a constant state of flux and growth, there is always a distinct personal signature. At the end, it is this seamless 'local-global' nature of my outlook and experience, that informs my overall creative practice.

Ultimately, it is not just an onlooker's gaze, but also the artist's and critic's inter-relational gaze, that lead to multiple interpretations — invoking John Berger's "ways of seeing." Artistic creations, both analogue and digital, have intimate parallelism and are enriched by dualities — between the intermediality of the arts and the sciences, between articulation and silence, between presence and absence, between logic and fantasy — all intricately cross-wired and inter-connected.



**Sudeep Sen**'s prize-winning books include *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins), *Rain, Ladakh, Aria* (A. K. Ramanujan Translation Award), *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry* (editor), *Fractals: New & Selected Poems | Translations 1980-2015* (London Magazine Editions), *EroText* (Vintage: Penguin Random House), *Kaifi Azmi: Poems/Nazms* (Bloomsbury), *Anthropocene* (Pippa Rann), and *Red. The Whispering Anklets and Blue Nude: New Poems | Ekphrasis* (Jorge Zalamea International Poetry Prize) is forthcoming. He is the editorial director of AARK ARTS, and editor of *Atlas*. The Government of India awarded him the senior fellowship for "outstanding persons in the field of culture/literature." Sen is the first Asian honoured to deliver the Derek Walcott Lecture and read his poetry at the Nobel Laureate Festival [[www.sudeepsen.org](http://www.sudeepsen.org)].

## Postscript:

*'Intermobility' overview, as seen through essays by the various contributors*

Central to the idea of 'intermobility' is the cross-disciplinary perspective of artists, writers, theorists and critics. Edyta Frelík's paper *What Scene, What's Seen, What's in a... Word: Thoughts in and on Artists' Writings* explores this "multimodal domain" with interest, citing American modernist artists, and "correlations between the painterly and writerly intuitions and competences at play in artworks and texts produced by artist-writers."<sup>1</sup>

*Transmedial Creation of Text Worlds: Pictorial Narration in Response to Verbal Texts* by Elżbieta Chrzanowska-Kluczevska furthers the above trope, investigating "world-formation," "media transformation (transmediation)" in "pictorial narrativity." She draws on Elleström, Li, Zlatev, Weitzmann, Varga, Sonesson, Speidel, and others.

In his essay, *Dynamic Ways of Prospecting: Parts, Wholes, Experiential Futures, And Eating a Banana for the First Time*, Adam Cowart applies "Goethean science and dynamic ways of seeing" to "storytelling in futures and transition design." He, "proposes a methodological approach to surfacing and disrupting fixed assumptions about the future with the intention of reanimating the narrative to create space for novelty to emerge."

Alexander Scherr explores the idea of 'intermediality' through a specific filmic text, the Netflix documentary, *Tiger King*. He unravels the "Struggle for the Narrative": Cooperative and Conflictive Storyworlds in [this film]'s Intermedial Universe.

Handley & Allen's essay looks at how in the original 1958 *Alice in Wonderland* ride in Disneyland "the familiar was made strange." The ride was substantially rebuilt in 1984. In the new version "the distortions of shape and size are largely gone. We simply ride past a series of vignettes of moments as if taken from [a] Disney film." Ultimately, "both story and character gave way to

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: All the quotes in this postscript come from the respective contributions in this volume.

an emphasis on physical immersion in the environment, to take us on our own personal journey through Wonderland.”

Krzysztof Majer deals with Staatstheater Augsburg Adaptation of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. It explores David Markson's 1988 eponymous novel in Nicole Schneiderbauer's adaptation. Framing it via Virtual Reality headsets and through a conversation with the director, Majer remarks on the text under a centrifugally titled, *A Frame to the Void*.

Oleksandr Kapranov's *Throwing Soup at Van Gogh: The Framing of Art in Climate Change Activism by British Mass Media* is a novel way of approaching climate change through the lens of food, specifically through “throwing food at the world-known canvases by climate change activists.”

All these taken together present a rich, polyphonic, multi-lensed view and interpretation of ‘intermediality’ in a sound, critical and scholarly manner.

— Sudeep Sen







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# Articles

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DOI 10.2478/doc-2023-0002

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Elżbieta Chrzanowska-Kluczevska

Jagiellonian University, Poland

[elzbieta.chrzanowska-kluczevska@uj.edu.pl](mailto:elzbieta.chrzanowska-kluczevska@uj.edu.pl)

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0908-1711

# Transmedial Creation of Text Worlds. Pictorial Narration in Response to Verbal Texts

## Article history:

**Received** 14 April 2023

**Revised** 23 May 2023

**Accepted** 02 June 2023

**Available online** 20 June 2023

**Abstract:** With the narrative and visual turn engaging research in several scholarly disciplines over the last decades, the author of this article intends to approach the issue of *world-formation* in such pictorial representations that have originated in response to verbal texts, mostly literary. The study assumes a semiotic vantage point, with *text* understood broadly as any meaningful

sequence or network of signs. It draws also from Intermedial Studies, following in particular the idea of *media transformation* (*transmediation*) as proposed by Lars Elleström (2014), especially in application to “qualified” media such as artistic forms.

An analysis will be carried on the set of images (mostly Western paintings and one instance of Oriental sculpture) produced by 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century artists, all induced by well-known verbal narratives that represent three categories: a) Greek mythology, b) religious and literary-religious texts (*The New Testament*, the *Rāmāyana*) and c) English-language literature (drama and poetry). As such, these visual renditions – a reversal of traditionally conceived ekphrasis in which verbal descriptions commented on visual artefacts – qualify as transmedial phenomena.

The author’s main concern is to what extent storytelling static visual works, the instances of *secondary narrativity* (Stampoulidis, 2019), are capable of creating *text worlds* (partly) similar to *storyworlds* postulated for verbal narratives. Starting with her own taxonomy of picturing endowed with a narratorial potential (inspired by several typologies proposed for narrative images), the author will discuss the formation by pictorial means of two world-building units, namely: 1) *scenes* and 2) *small worlds/sub-worlds*, both of them only parts of full-blown text worlds. Temporality emerges as a foundational but not exclusive property of text worlds in the verbal and pictorial arts. This study is a continuation of the author’s previous research (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2009, 2016, 2019) that points to an incremental growth of possible worlds into text worlds into discourse worlds in verbal and visual media.

**Key words:** transmediality, possible worlds/text worlds/discourse worlds, pictorial narrativity, scenes, small worlds/sub-worlds

“The construction of fictional possible worlds occurs, primarily, in cultural activities – poetry and music composition, mythology and storytelling, painting and sculpting, theatre and dance performance, film making, etc.”

(Doležel, 1989, p. 236)

## Introduction

The quotation from Lubomir Doležel that serves as an opening motto subsumes three concepts crucial for our considerations in this short study, namely *possible worlds*, *culture* and *transmediality*. The last notion is not yet explicitly voiced as Doležel’s article appeared before the advent of contemporary Intermedial Studies, which is roughly traceable to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, among others to Werner Wolf’s (1999, 2005a), Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin’s (1999) and Iryna O. Rajewsky’s (2005) studies on intermediality and remediation, yet the idea of crossing borders between various media, modes and modalities of artistic representation is clearly recognizable in the citation.

Soon after, Umberto Eco (1990, p. 66) states that possible worlds of literary fiction “can be viewed [...] as cultural constructs, matter of stipulation or semiotic products,” thereby highlighting not only their imaginary mode of existence but also their embeddedness in a specific culture as well as their semiotic nature. The last-mentioned quality is important insofar as the present article assumes a semiotic perspective on *text*, understood broadly in accordance with Boris Uspensky’s definition (cf. Uspensky, 1973/1977, p. 211) as *any meaningful sequence of signs*, inclusive of verbal, non-verbal and mixed modes of expression. This idea remains in consonance with the Tartu-Moscow school’s belief in “the semiotic essence of culture,” itself conceived as a system or network of signs (Lotman & Uspensky, 1978, p. 211).

In *Transmediality defined* the phenomenon of *transmediality* will be discussed in more detail, pointing to what I call a 'narrow' and 'broad' understanding of this term and its relationship to the superordinate idea of *intermediality*. Transmediality will then be extended to cover text worlds of literary and pictorial representations.

*Text worlds and narrativity* takes up the issue of transmedial character of narrativity and text worlds in the situation when literary texts find their reflection in pictorial representations. Its first part is devoted to a brief description of three incrementally growing types of worlds – from logically constructed possible worlds of analytical philosophers and modal logicians (Kripke, 1963/1971; Hintikka, 1989; Rescher, 1975, 1999) to their applications to literary fictions in the garb of *text worlds* (Doležel, 1989, 1995; Werth, 1999; Stockwell, 2002) and, ultimately, to cognitively and pragmatically enriched *discourse worlds* (Werth, 1999; Stockwell, 2002; Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2009). In particular, the focus of our attention will go to the building blocks of such imaginary worlds postulated for literary fiction. Of special interest is *temporality (timeline)*, taken to be an indispensable feature of text/discourse worlds on condition they support narrative texts.

The second part of this section is devoted to instances of narrativity in the visual arts, which albeit treated as basically atemporal and non-anecdotal, boast several genres endowed with a *narrative potential*. Here, I propose my own detailed taxonomy of paintings and sculptures according to their narrative load, drawn on the basis of several typologies forwarded by art historians, theoreticians and semioticians of art.<sup>1</sup>

In *Transmediality exemplified*, with the above-mentioned methodological instruments in hand, an analysis of narrativity in modern (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century) painting and sculpture will be conducted on a selection of such artworks that have originated in response to well-known verbal texts, mostly literary. Such *pre-texts* (underlying stories) will be grouped

---

<sup>1</sup> All instances of artworks described in this article belong to Static Visual Narratives (SVN), postulated as a sub-genre of Visual Narratives (VN) by Sherline Pimenta and Ravi Poovaiah (2010, p. 25).

into three classes: a) Greek myths, b) religious texts (*The New Testament* and the *Rāmāyana* as representatives of Western scriptures and an Eastern moralizing epic, respectively) and c) English-language literary texts (Shakespearian drama, modern American poetry). Sometimes classified as *history paintings* (Pimenta & Poovaiah, 2010, p. 26), the visual images in this guise illustrate a traditionally conceived ekphrasis in reverse, in which pictorial renditions comment on verbal works. According to Georgios Stampoulidis's (2019, pp. 34–35) nomenclature, applied also by Wenjing Li and Jordan Zlatev (2022), such visual reflections of verbal *storyworlds* constitute cases of *secondary narrativity*. *The construction of visual-conceptual text worlds* is an attempt at answering the main query: How do the visual artworks under analysis, with a limited choice of the building blocks of *worldness* and an irregular chronology, project two *world-building units*, expanding from *simple scenes* into *small worlds* (*sub-worlds*), namely fragments of full-blown *text* and *discourse worlds*?

## Transmediality defined

Before producing a workable definition of one of our pivotal concepts, a brief explanation of three terms basic for Intermedial Studies should be provided. Unfortunately, the terminology in this field has been far from consistent; therefore, for the purposes of this article I offer the following explanation (after Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019, p. 288, 2022, p. 11; cf. also Ryan, 2005a, 2014/2019):

- 1) *Medium* can refer to three phenomena (from the most general to the most specific):
  - a *channel of transmission/means of communication*, e.g. verbal (written or spoken), the press, radio, TV, Internet;
  - *artistic medium/art form* (included by Elleström, 2014, p. 19 within the class of “historically and communicatively situated” *qualified media*), e.g. literature, painting, sculpture, installation (as representatives of the visual arts), architecture, music, dance,



photography, as well as *composite media* such as theatre, opera, ballet, film, video, etc., which are hybrid – verbal and non-verbal – in their make-up;

- *technical support/carrier*, e.g. stone, wood, canvas, paper, cardboard, gypsum, metal, screen, light, etc.
- 2) *Mode* (often identified with *medium*, cf. Wolf, 2005a) denotes a *semiotic system/code*, e.g. natural language, static image (two- or three-dimensional), moving image, sound, gesture, dance, architectonic structure, design (interior, garden, urban, fashion, etc.), computer games, etc.
  - 3) *Modality*, best understood as a perceptual platform of delivery, described as sensory experience coming from sight (visual), sound (aural/acoustic), touch (tactile/haptic), smell (olfactory), taste (gustatory), movement (kinaesthetic), also the feeling of space (spatial) and of temperature, awareness of time (temporal), etc.<sup>2</sup>

*Intermediality*, then, in line with its most capacious understanding, emerges as any kind of interrelationships between various media/modes (Elleström, 2014, p. 3), with modalities being involved automatically in such relations. Initially, the term (coined by Aage A. Hansen-Löwe in 1983) was meant to refer to correspondences between literature and visual art but soon became extrapolated onto an ever-growing area of human creativity in representation and communication.

*Transmediality*, in turn, is a subtype of intermediality but with a different scope assigned to it by various researchers. In what I dub the *narrow*

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<sup>2</sup> Over the last decades, the list of human senses has been enlarged by neuroscientists beyond the traditional 'Big Five' as a reflection of multiplicity of distinct groups of sensory cell types in the brain, with their number raised to 21 or even 53 (Francis, 2020, IS). Ellen Spolsky (1993, p. 27) brought to our attention the fact that Peter Brooks, citing Louis Mink, postulated that "the production and understanding of plot or narrative is the human way of knowing how one fits into the dimension of time," while Daniel Dennett perceived the narrative ability as "the source of the sense of self." Albeit located beyond purely neurological classifications, these ideas are worth quoting in the context of our ponderings on verbal and non-verbal narrativity.

approach, transmediality (the term itself comes from Iryna O. Rajewsky, 2002) is a subcategory of *extracompositional intermediality*<sup>3</sup> that obtains between various works and/or media and refers to “phenomena that are non-specific to individual media” (Wolf, 2005a, p. 253). This means that transmediality so conceived denotes ‘medium-independent’ phenomena (Wolf, 2005b, p. 431), in which there is no transgression of borders between media/modes and no transfer of properties between them. Wolf mentions two groups of such phenomena: a) motifs and thematic variations, and b) narrativity and metalepsis, that is the blurring of narrative levels. My own proposal, voiced in several publications (cf. Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2022) has been to add to this list c) figuration<sup>4</sup> and d) text worlds. The claim that the last-mentioned category qualifies to be included in the list will, hopefully, find support in our discussion devoted to text world theories.

In contrast, the *broad* scope of transmedial phenomena as proposed by Elleström emerges from the following quotation:

Whereas I use the term *intermedial* to broadly refer to all types of relations among different types of media, the term *transmedial* should be understood to refer to intermedial relations that are characterized by actual or potential transfers (Elleström, 2014, p. 3, italics original).

By *transfer* Elleström (2014, pp. 9, 14) denotes the carrying-over of media characteristics across their borders, the idea absent in Wolf’s definition, referring to it also as *media transformation*.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Wolf (2005a) and Chrzanowska-Kluczevska (2019) for more details on the distinction between intra- and extracompositional intermediality.

<sup>4</sup> The term *figuration* is ambiguous. It can refer either to a topological structure of a given (art)work or to the main feature of the non-abstract visual arts. I apply it (and the adjective *figurative*) in the first sense, using *figural* for the latter.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan (2014/2019) refers to both versions of transmediality without, however, giving them specific names. In Chrzanowska-Kluczevska (2022) I apply the broad notion of transmediality to describe the phenomena of transgressing textual frames in the visual arts and theatre.

Subsequently, Elleström proposes two types of this transformation, namely:

- *transmediation of media characteristics*, in other words *transmedial remediation* (typically, an adaptation, like in a filmic adaptation of a literary work, reminiscent of Jakobsonian *intersemiotic translation*);
- *transmedial media representation (reference)*, in which one medium represents another (typically, ekphrasis) (cf. Elleström, 2014, p. 15).

Type b) is of main import for our discussion further on, devoted to an analysis of pictorial works that refer to verbal texts.

The term *remediation* deserves a brief comment at this point. Introduced by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) on the wave of excitement and fascination with the spread of the new media, it originally carried an evaluative overtone, the belief that the transformative power offered by new technological affordances would lead to improved renditions of original works in different media or modes. With time, the realization came that transmediation did not necessarily result in ameliorated versions. Elleström (2014, p. 5), while pondering on the nature of changes in the cognitive structure of works (texts) during intermedial transfers, points to the possibility of even corrupting the original product.

Since the two artistic media on which this article is focused are by no means new, we do not have to raise axiological questions about the effects of their transmediation. Rather, we can safely treat the term *remediation* according to the sense normally ascribed to the prefix *re-* in English, namely “to do something anew,” “to repeat something in a novel way.” Such is also the objective interpretation of this term by Elleström (2014, p. 90), who describes “remediation in general” as “repeated mediation of sensory configurations leading to a new representation of any media characteristics.” Worth noting is the fact that this definition aptly points to a concurrent transformation of modalities that obligatorily accompanies alterations of media/modes.

Finally, a word of caution comes from Elleström himself (2014, pp. 15–16): “Although the two types of media transformation – transmediation and media

representation – are possible to distinguish theoretically in a rather clear-cut way, they are evidently intricately interrelated.” For this reason, I will henceforth apply *transmediation* as a cover term for the two types of media transformation.<sup>6</sup>

## Text worlds and narrativity – transmediation from verbal to pictorial works

### *Possible worlds – text worlds – discourse worlds*

The ‘story’ of the concept of possible worlds in contemporary linguistic and literary theorizing begins with the onset of *possible-worlds semantics*, developed since the turn of the 1950<sup>s</sup> by modal logicians and analytic philosophers, although its roots lie all the way back in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s *possible universes*. A limited scope of this article allows for only a very succinct summary of the development of this theory (cf. Ryan, 1991, 2005b; Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2009 for more details).

The most widely accepted *conceptual theory* of possible worlds (Kripke, 1963/1971; Hintikka, 1969, 1989; Rescher, 1975, 1999) defines them as situations in which speakers might possibly find themselves, if only in their imagination. This approach clearly points to a dual nature of possible worlds – they come to life as *entia imaginationis*, artefacts of our mental activities, intellectual projections that can but do not have to be translated into natural language and offered to public scrutiny. This cognitive-linguistic character of possible worlds becomes reversed in the process of reading/listening, when the verbal description of such an alternative reality becomes reconceptualized by the receiver. The *actual world* (*aw*), the model of reality and the point of

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<sup>6</sup> On similar grounds, the distinction between *intermediality* and *transmediality* may be difficult to observe as transfer of media characteristics is ubiquitous. Hence *transmediality* is sometimes levelled with *intermediality* and becomes its near-synonym.

departure for the creation and interpretation of *possible worlds* (pw's), constitutes the central and most prominent element in the set of possible worlds, which are related to it through the relation called *accessibility*. Possible worlds are thus more or less proximate to or distant from our reality (cf. Kripke, 1971; Ryan, 1991).

What matters for our discussion are components of pw's, their *building blocks*. Logicians and philosophers have provided us with the following list:

- collections of possible individuals (entities),
- configurations that mutually relate possible individuals,
- states of affairs that act as subparts of more inclusive pw's,
- properties out of which individuals are constructed,
- a temporal setting, a 'history' (cf. Hintikka's, 1989, p. 55).

The last-mentioned constituent of a possible world, that is its *timeline*, seems in many respects fundamental in its creation, although it was sometimes not mentioned explicitly but rather taken for granted in the vast formally-oriented literature on the subject. It was Eco (1979/1994, p. 226) who emphatically claimed that "A fabula is a possible world," thus equating the timeline with a possible world of narrative fiction.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, Eco (1990, p. 65) soon came up with the criticism of possible worlds as envisaged by logicians and maintained that they had never been satisfactory as an analytical tool for literary scholars. Despite the fact that the metaphor of *world* had been borrowed by logicians from literary studies, as a formal construction it lacked a psycholinguistic credibility. The second accusation raised by Eco was the *emptiness* of pw's in terms of contextual details missing from their model-theoretic set-up. Consequently, Eco's (1994, p. 183) program was to build fuller *furnished possible worlds* more adequate for coping with

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<sup>7</sup> In the introduction to his book *Lector in fabula*, Eco (1994, p. 14) states that – in line with a semiotic conception of text he espouses – the theoretical findings he forwards for narrative fiction are extendable to non-literary and non-verbal texts, in particular painting, film and theatre.

fictional creations. This line of thought found its realization in the course taken by several researchers who decided to enrich the concept of possible world and make it. Within the current of linguistic stylistics, Nils Erik Enkvist (1989) introduces two interrelated terms: *text world* and *universe of discourse*. The former is a possible world that prototypically supports a work of narrative fiction, the latter – a semantic model of the real world without which the interpretation of the text world would be difficult to achieve.

In a similar vein, Lubomir Doležel lists the necessary components of literary text worlds:

- Literature deals with concrete fictional persons in specific spatial and
- temporal settings, bound by peculiar relationships and engaged in unique
- struggles, quests, frustrations (Doležel, 1989, p. 228).

The “peculiar relationships” correspond to configurations of possible individuals mentioned above, but the spatiotemporal setting is an obvious widening of the original list of constituents of pw’s. Importantly, the components missing in the formal description appear now as propositional attitudes, emotions and feelings of literary characters, a highly subjective dimension, partly to be inferred by text receivers.

A cognitivist, Paul Werth (1999) launches the *Text World Theory*, later developed by Peter Stockwell and Joanna Gavins (cf. also Semino, 1997), within the framework of cognitive stylistics and poetics. Stockwell (2002, pp. 137, 140) offers the following list of *world-builders*: a) time, b) location, c) characters, d) objects, complemented with e) function advancing propositions (scene- and plot-advancing), which boil down to a narrative structure “enriched by our ongoing knowledge of the previous text and the inferences that we make” (Stockwell, 2002, p. 139). Apart from an active participation of the receiver in the construal of a text world on the basis of text-internal inferences, worth noting is an important position ascribed to temporality, with flashback and flashforwards seen as deictic sub-worlds of a text world.

From a philosophical vantage point, Carl H. Hausman (1989/1991, p. 191) provides the definition of *world* as a totality of *identities*. *Identity* appears

to be an all-inclusive term that “carries the idea of whatever is or could be”; it covers natural and physical entities (individuals, objects, events, etc.) as well as mental phenomena, including “consciousness itself.” Although Hausman refers basically to the real world, in my view his description can be extrapolated to cover possible worlds of verbal and non-verbal art. In fact, it comes close to the ‘rich’ understanding of the text world provided above.

Finally, developing the ideas of Werth (1999), Stockwell (2002, p. 93) postulates the third, expanded type called *discourse worlds* and defined as “dynamic readerly interactions with possible worlds: possible worlds with a cognitive dimension” (Stockwell, 2002, p. 93). Actually, we can claim that these are text worlds enlarged with the real world experience of both their authors and their interpreters (including critics and translators). So understood, discourse worlds become “dialogic machines” that link the knowledge and imagination of the text creator(s) with the same quality displayed by text receivers (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2009).<sup>8</sup>

It is time now to compare the constituents of text worlds with the defining components of *storyworlds* and *narrativity* itself. According to Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (2014, p. 4), these are: a) characters, b) events, c) setting, d) time, e) space, f) causality and f) narrator (for some media only). It is easily noticeable that the list largely overlaps with the building blocks of a text world. No wonder then that the distinction between text worlds and

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<sup>8</sup> Text world theories form a set of proposals that originated in various academic milieus and developed in slightly different directions. One of early definitions of a *textual world* (Ger. *Textwelt*) came from the current called *Textlinguistik*, practiced in German-speaking environments throughout the 1970<sup>s</sup>. Robert-Alain de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Ulrich Dressler (1990, p. 21) define a textual world as a configuration of ideas and relationships that lie at the foundation of the surface text and can be equaled with the mechanisms of coherence. This definition is capacious and assumes that every coherent verbal text is based on a corresponding conceptual textual world. Elaborating on this idea, other researchers in this tradition proposed a *discourse-world model*, an integrated configuration of all textual worlds within a specific discourse (de Beaugrande & Dressler, 1990, pp. 257–258). This conception is not very distinct from the cognitively formed discourse worlds described above. It seems also extendable to include texts produced in non-verbal media/modes.



storyworlds/narration becomes easily obliterated. This is particularly well-visible in application to the pictorial arts, where an extensive literature treats about narrativity in visual representations but few works (cf. Sonesson, 1997; Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2016, 2019) inquire about the creation of text worlds in such art forms, for all practical purposes levelling a *story* (whether conceived as *fabula* or *plot*) with a text world it (re)creates and (re)construes.

### *Narrativity and temporality in the pictorial arts*<sup>9</sup>

Before delving into an analysis of storytelling representations in figural art,<sup>10</sup> it seems proper to cite some definitions/descriptions of a narrative text. The opening definition I propose comes from Michael Toolan's study devoted to narrativity from a literary-linguistic perspective:

⋮ A narrative is a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events,  
 ⋮ typically involving, as the experiencing agonist, humans or quasi-humans,  
 ⋮ or other sentient beings, from whose experience we humans can learn  
 ⋮ (Toolan, 2001, p. 8).

This definition is valuable in that it does not commit itself to specifying the number of events expected to realize a minimal story. On the logical grounds, a sequence implies at least two events, although the traditional Aristotelian formula that a story should possess a beginning, middle and end, would point to at least three events connected via a *complication-resolution schema* (cf. 4.1). Ryan (2014/2019, p. 14) mentions a more general qualification in this respect, namely that a narration requires “a succession of events that brings transformation to the state of the storyworld.” In turn, Klaus Speidel

<sup>9</sup> The pictorial arts include several sub-genres apart from painting and sculpture, to which our discussion is limited, for instance wall-paintings, stained-glass windows, mosaics, drawings, illuminations, embroidery, etc.

<sup>10</sup> The assumption made for the purposes of this article is that non-figural art is hardly, if at all, capable of creating narrative pieces in accordance with the elements claimed above as necessary for *storification*.

(2018, pp. 17, 19) reminds us that Gérard Genette (1966, p. 152) in his description of verbal narration mentions the possibility of basing it on a single event. Such was also the stance assumed initially by Gerald Prince (1987/2003) for deploying a minimal narrative, later abandoned.

One more crucial quality of *storification*, present already in the Aristotelian formula, is *tellability* of a narrative – the newsworthiness and attractiveness of the story matter (cf. Fludernik, 1996; Ryan, 2005c; Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019). In a word, a story should be a “good story” (Sonesson, 1997, p. 246), cognitively exciting for the receiver, based on suspense and a resolution through deduction, falsification and verification of the receiver's expectations.

However, narrativity/storification may come *in degrees* for not all texts (produced in any kind of medium) are supported by fully developed stories. This is not only the case of lyric poetry, for which *scenes* with their *scripts* (Schank, 1982, p. 86, quoted in Semino, 1997, pp. 142–143), rather than *worlds* can be claimed to serve as a support,<sup>11</sup> but of several visual artworks, apparently featuring only one scene or one moment in time yet able to trigger a story in the eyes of the beholder. Single *monochronic static pictures*<sup>12</sup> in Ryan's (2014/2019, p. 9) opinion pose a real interpretative challenge for they “compress the narrative arc into a single scene.” Such scenes possess what I call a *narrative trigger*, Gotthold E. Lessing's (1766/2012, pp. 16, 60) famed “pregnant moment” or “frozen action,” endowed with a narrative potential.

<sup>11</sup> It is worth mentioning here a prose work by Czesław Miłosz titled *The Issa Valley* (1955/1981). This genological conundrum, a partly autobiographical rendition of the poet's happy childhood in a Lithuanian scenery in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., to which the translator into English, Louis Iribarne, added the subtitle *A novel*, despite presenting a chronological sequence of events, does not possess a consistent storyline. The critic Alan Sheridan (1981, n. pag.) maintains that this work lacks a plot but displays the linear movement from one stage to another. We can also claim that it projects a powerful and intricate text world.

<sup>12</sup> Different terms appear in the visual research to describe single static pictorial representations – *monoscenic* (Weitzman, Kibedy Varga), *monophase* (Wolf, 2005b, pp. 431–432; Ryan, 2014/2019, p. 9) or *monochronic* (Speidel, 2018, p. 27). Speidel argues that *monoscenic* is equivocal since one scene may contain several moment. Henceforth, I will apply Speidel's nomenclature concerning single pictures.

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Franz Wickhoff proposed the first modern taxonomy of narrative images, several typologies have been forwarded by art historians, theoreticians of art, archaeologists, narratologists and semioticians, to mention only Kurt Weitzmann (1947), Marilyn Aronberg Lavin (1990), Áron Kibedi Varga (1993), Göran Sonesson (1997), Wolf (2005b), Ryan (2014), Speidel (2018). I refer the reader to a comprehensive overview of taxonomies proposed across various disciplines before 2016, presented in an article by Gyöngyvér Horváth (2016). Speidel (2018, pp. 26–29), additionally, has the following distinction for single static images: a) *achrony* (no specific moment in time indicated, e.g. symbolic representations), b) *monochrony* (one moment), c) *polychrony* (several moments), d) *eonochrony* (ever-recurring events, eternal states).

However, in the face of terminological overlap and ambiguity, I propose below my own typology of temporality in *picturing*, that is in painting and sculpture (cf. also Sonesson, 1997). This taxonomy is applied in an analysis forthcoming in Section 4, where the main question to be raised is: What kind of text world (or its subpart) can be projected by particular types of narrative imagery?

#### Types of static (still) pictures according to their temporality:

- 1) A single picture, *achronic/monochronic* but *non-narrative*, e.g. still lifes, landscapes with no animate agents, some genre scenes.
- 2) A single *monochronic* picture with *implied narrativity*, e.g. a famous Paleolithic hunting scene from Lascaux (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019, p. 292; Speidel, 2018, pp. 10–11). Several such instances will be described in Section 4.
- 3) A single *polychronic* picture with a *minimal narration*, e.g. the opening panel in Veit Stoss's sculpted pentaptych (1477–1489) in St. Mary's church in Krakow, which combines two events: Annunciation to St. Joachim and the subsequent meeting of St. Joachim and St. Anne at the Golden Gate (cf. Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019, p. 294).
- 4) A *temporal sequence in a single work*, e.g. hagiographical, Passion or Last Judgement icons, with one central picture and the story in smaller pictures placed around in different arrangements; Veit Stoss's sculpted altar with the stories of Mary and Jesus intertwined,

presented in several panels (cf. Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2016, 2019 for more details).

- 5) *A temporal set, built of separate pictures united by a common theme*, e.g. William Hogarth's eight-item *A Rake's Progress* (1735, cf. Wolf, 2005b, p. 433), Jerzy Duda-Gracz's Passion set *The Jasna Góra Golgotha of the Third Millennium* (2001, cf. Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019, pp. 292–293) or Robert Devriendt's "condensed painted narratives" (2015–2016) (cf. Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019, pp. 294–295). Such discrete pictures show a narration with unspecified breaks in-between particular images.
- 6) *A temporal series, a continuous train of images, not separated by distinct frames*, e.g. the sculpted *Rāmāyana* story in the Batu Caves, near Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, discussed in Section 4; also Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion* (1938), with a chaotic narration occurring within one composition (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019, pp. 293–294).
- 7) *A cycle or a pictorial network, a set of distinct pictures united by a common theme, either with a cyclical temporality or with no particular chronology implied (network of relations), like in Chagall's entire oeuvre* (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2016, pp. 60–65).<sup>13</sup>

## Transmediality exemplified – pictorial narration and the creation of text worlds

### *Pictorial works in response to literary texts*

Equipped with the descriptive apparatus presented above, we can now turn to a practical analysis of selected instances of plastic arts. Our examples are

<sup>13</sup> In both Chrzanowska-Kluczevska (2016) and (2019) I used the term *cycle* with reference to Chagall's oeuvre. Speidel (2018, p. 26) rightly points out that the *cyclical method* should be limited to representations of recurring events, like the four seasons of the year. Consequently, I have changed my terminology and propose *network* for events that do not iterate regularly.

predominantly modern paintings, with two exception of sculptural works – a medieval representation and a product of contemporary popular art. Since all of them function as illustrations to well-known verbal texts of culture (myths, scriptures, literature), I refer to them as the *traditional ekphrasis* (in the spirit of Leo Spitzer) *in reverse*. However, Siglind Bruhn (2000, p. 8) can be credited with an opening of the scope of ekphrasis to subsume all media, in a word, making it “a representation in one medium of a text composed in another medium,” which is also fully satisfactory from the semiotic perspective.

All examples of pictures described below exemplify what Georgios Stampoulidis (2019, pp. 34–35) calls *secondary narrativity*<sup>14</sup> as they draw from *pre-texts* (*primary narratives*). Weijing Li and Jordan Zlatev (2022, pp. 318, 320) treat secondary narrativity as an instance of *intersemiotic translation* and introduce, parallelly, the notion of *polysemiotic narrative*, in our case realized as a combination of a verbal story (source) and pictorial expression (target). Both these phenomena instantiate transmediation.

The verbal pre-texts in our examples are strongly anchored in culture (Western for the paintings and Eastern for the sculpted series), which should make the interpretation of their visual counterparts easier on condition the spectator is well-acquainted with the primary narration. Hence, the *cultural background* and the *verbal co-text* guarantee a successful ‘reading’ of the image and the subsequent construal of the text world (or its fragment) by the receiver. The knowledge of the pre-texts helps also to fill in textual *gaps* – Ingardenian *spots of indeterminacy*, that is epistemic lacunae, of necessity present in visual narration as they are in every text composed in any kind of medium.

The illustrations have been selected mostly from Jon Thompson’s (2006) compendium of modern Western art and will be grouped into three categories, according to the source verbal text: 1) Greek mythology, 2) religious texts and 3) works of English and American literature. Before looking at particular

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<sup>14</sup> Ryan (2014/2019, p. 9), citing Kibédý-Varga (1988), refers to pictorial narratives as “parasitic” on the original verbal text. I consider this epithet a pejoration, preferring to use the objective concept of “secondary” narrativity.

pictures, let us list the most important stages of a prototypical verbal narrative. In line with Gustav Freytag's well-known pyramid that shows the structure of a tragedy, these are: 1) *exposition*, 2) *complication*, 3) *climax*, 4) *resolution*, 5) *catastrophe*. The last stage can be generalized to *closure* (cf. Jahn, 2005, pp. 189–190), to fit other genres as well. Tzvetan Todorov (1971, quoted also in Stampoulidis, 2019, pp. 35–36) proposed a more general schema: 1) *initial equilibrium*, 2) *disturbance/disruption*, 3) *recognition of disruption*, 4) *attempts to repair the disturbance*, 5) *restoration of the equilibrium*. Still, some stories may lack a certain stage. Importantly, Freytag's original schema possesses no happy ending, while Todorov and Jahn make an allowance for such a resolution, so an overlap of the two postulated sequences is also possible.

### Paintings related to Greek myths

- A) Probably one of the best-known instances of such transmedial relation is *The fall of Icarus* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1557). This single monochronic picture with implied narrativity (type 2 in our taxonomy) is a landscape/genre scene which at first sight does not seem to contain any mythological references. Only after a careful scrutiny will the viewer notice the legs of a drowning person and feathers falling into the water around. The pre-text is thus the myth of Icarus to be found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Still, if it were not for the title (*paratext*), the narration implied in a very discreet, even hardly noticeable way, could be entirely lost. The “frozen moment” shows the very catastrophe of the storyline and the temporal reconstruction of the plot has to work backwards.

Wystan H. Auden's poem *Musée des Beaux-Arts* (1938), a commentary on Bruegel's work, highlights the painter's message about human indifference to tragedies happening daily around us. It also closes a double ekphrasis: myth→painting→poem, in which the source and the final target are verbal texts.

- B) The second of our examples (type 2), *A young girl carrying Orpheus's head* by the French painter Gustave Moreau (1865) (Thompson, 2006, p. 19), owing to its title, directs the spectator's

attention to the source narration. However, instead of focusing on a “pregnant moment” from the myth of Orpheus that would arouse our curiosity and make us speculate about or recreate in our memory the development of the action, the painter chose the post-climactic and even the post-catastrophic event, indeed the closure of the storyline. Orpheus has failed to keep his vow to Persephone, his beloved Eurydice will stay in Hades forever, his body has been already dismembered by furious Menads. According to the legend, his head and the lyre, carried by water, eventually reaches Lesbos. It is here that a young woman, the painting’s protagonist, picks up his head and his instrument. Her face shows sadness and resignation – most certainly, she has recognized Orpheus, a famed Thracian poet and musician. The scene looks like an attempt at restoring equilibrium and the plot has to be deployed in a reverse order, assuming the viewer knows not only the dramatic story of Orpheus trying to regain his dead wife but also the sequel about the fate of his remnants. The picture, owing to its melancholy ambience implies a tragical course of events, even though the painter decided to show only the final episode. The reconstruction of the story is facilitated by Thompson, who appends pre-texts to the paintings presented in his book if need arises.

- C) *The Argonauts*, a triptych painted by the German artist Max Beckmann (1949–1950) (Thompson, 2006, pp. 228–229), constitutes a strange combination of a medieval form filled with an ancient content. The central part of the composition (type 4 – a temporal sequence in a single work) shows the ‘pregnant’ moment of the narration, the beginning of the fabula located on board the ship ‘Argo’ that triggers the story of Jason’s expedition to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece. The knowledge of the myth is obligatory to identify Jason, Orpheus and the sea-god Glaukos, as well as the cruel Medea (left wing) and the treacherous Sirens (right wing). The story has been modernized and recontextualized, especially in the wings. Originally, the title of this work was *Artists*, no

wonder than that the triptych alludes to contemporary painters and musicians. Medea, brandishing a sword, is actually a model posing to the painter and the Sirens have been transformed into ladies singers and instrumentalists. The representation has assumed the shape of a grotesque, ironical commentary on the life of professional artists. Moreover, the central panel is an intertextual allusion to several paintings that feature male nudes, a theme that fascinated Beckmann. The timeline has to be inferred on the basis of three moments only.

### Pictorial illustrations to religious texts

In the Western artistic tradition, the biblical motifs hold the place of pride among innumerable religious visual representations, abundantly produced over the centuries, well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when a growing secularization started to impress itself on art.

- D) Narrative picturing had its heyday in the Middle Ages, to which the famous high altar by Veit Stoss in St. Mary's basilica in Krakow bears a powerful witness. The narration, executed on richly colored and gilded panels carved in linden wood, exemplifies a temporal sequence of events (type 4) based on the *New Testament* and Apocrypha. When open, the central panel and the wings, consisting of nine separate scenes, relate the so-called Mary's Joys; while closed, the altar shows 12 scenes with Mary's Sorrows (three scenes from Mary's life and nine taken from Jesus' life and Passion). The storyline is deployed irregularly, non-sequentially, so the basic knowledge of the Scriptures is required to follow the chronological path in the panels. Time gaps between particular scenes are of varying length but the general rule is unsurprisingly *synecdochical* – only the most salient events have been chosen for presentation. For the open altar, the climax coincides with the largest, central scene of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, above which two vertically arranged smaller scenes with the Assumption and Coronation of Mary lead the viewer's eyes to the glorious closure.



- E) Let us now make a big jump in time, to consider an important event from Christ's life, missing from Veit Stoss's altar, namely his entry into Jerusalem. James Ensor, a Belgian painter, produced a large-scale drawing *Christ entering Jerusalem* (1885), yet our attention will go to a travesty of this subject titled *Christ entering Brussels in 1889* (Thompson, 2006, pp. 54–55, type 2). As an atheist, the painter allowed himself of a religious provocation. Jesus, riding a donkey, placed centrally but in a peculiar perspective that moves him to the background, is surrounded by a throng of ugly faces, many of them wearing strange carnivalesque masks. To the right, on the foregrounded stage some apparently important personages appear. Ensor himself impersonates Jesus and his usurping blessings, in Thompson's opinion meant to present him as a savior of Belgian art and popular culture, are supported by social and political slogans inscribed on banners. We can claim the narrative moment to be climactic – the last situation from Jesus' earthly life when he is received with honors by the volatile crowd that will soon demand his death. In fact, the above-mentioned podium with a military, a clergyman, a lay dignitary and a clown can be seen as an absurdly looking foreboding of Christ's judgement by the High Priests and Pilate. Like in example C above, Jesus' story has been recontextualized and placed in the setting co-temporary with the artist's life. We may wonder to what extent Ensor, simultaneously poking fun of Jesus entering the capital city and seeing himself in Christ's role, realized that – narratively speaking – the glory of this very moment is a sad forecast of the imminent tragedy on the cross.
- F) Christ's life remained a source of inspiration for the visual arts also in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1909, Emil (Hansen) Nolde, a German painter born into a deeply religious family, produced three religious compositions (type 5, a temporal set of separate images) titled *The Last Supper*, *Christ mocked* and *The descent of the Holy Ghost*. The middle work is our focus of attention (Thompson, 2006, pp. 100–101), featuring an incident that precedes the Way of the Cross. It is expressionistic in

style – painted in loud colors which Thompson describes as dissonant juxtapositions of yellow, orange, green and red hues. In Jesus' face and clothing the color green dominates, to distinguish him from five ugly scoffers – some soldiers, some elderly men. Thompson (p. 100) points out that “on the narrative plane,” the focal points are the sneering mouths of the grotesquely rendered personages baring their teeth as well as their eyes, piercing like daggers. We can add that from the temporal viewpoint, this highly dramatic “frozen moment” is a part of the climactic sequence of Jesus' Passion that ends in Crucifixion, which to the real witnesses of this event denoted a total catastrophe. The second climax of the empty tomb is still far removed in time.

- G) In 1984, another German artist, Georg Baselitz, creates one of his ‘reversed’ pictures, a deeply emotional and somber *Abgar's head* (Thompson, 2006, pp. 364–365). Seemingly, it is a composition that wavers between type 1 (non-narrative) and type 2 (with a ‘seed’ of narrativity present). It portrays an upturned face, executed predominantly in black, with one green eye and the other navy-blue and black, the mouth half-red, half-green. Yet, the pinkish crown of thorns above the eyes points unequivocally to the image of Christ. As such, it locates us in the midst of the Passion, similarly to F above. However, the paratextual information contained in the title directs us to an apocryphal legend, summarized by Thompson to help the viewers not acquainted with its content. The pre-text, then, is a story of King Abgar from Edessa (Mesopotamia), who – tormented by an illness – sends a letter to Jesus, imploring him to restore his health. The event happens shortly before Jesus' entering Jerusalem. Jesus dictates a letter to the King's scribe, foretelling his own death and resurrection. At the same time, he removes sweat from his face, which becomes imprinted on a piece of cloth and taken to Abgar as a “picture not made by a human hand.” Later, it will pass in history as the Holy Face of Edessa. As a result, this seemingly static portrait of a suffering human being triggers two distinct yet interwoven narratives. Hence, the degree of *storification* it contains is quite high.

**Figure 1. The Ramayana scene. Batu Caves**

Phot. by the author

- H) We now move to an example of Eastern modern popular art. The eponymous Rāmāyana Cave (in the Batu Caves complex near Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) houses a sculptured reflection on one of the major epics of Hinduism, composed in Sanskrit between 8<sup>th</sup> BCE and 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. The narration covers the ups and downs in the life of a legendary Prince Rama from the city of Ayodhya and his beloved wife Sita, the Princess of Janakpur. With time, the figure of Rama, an exemplar of a brave and virtuous ruler and husband, became deified. The colorfully illuminated, realistically rendered story (type 6 – a temporal series in a continuous sequence that resembles a cinematic mode, with particular scenes acting as film stills, Figure 1) has been exquisitely located in a natural limestone cave, within the complex of a well-known Tamil Hindu shrine dedicated to the Lord Murugan. Labels in Tamil and English aid visitors, especially

the non-Hindu tourists, to identify particular events from a long and involved storyline, but some familiarity with the underlying literary-moralizing text conditions a proper flow of narration. The pre-text belongs to the genre of *Itihasa*, a story of past events combined with ethical instructions on how to live according to the ideals set for particular social positions. It is thus a regular epic, with elements of philosophical and religious teachings (cf. *Ramayana*, IS). The story has some climactic moments, like the exile of Rama to the forest for 14 years, or winning his wife's hand by stringing a famous bow. The abduction of Sita by Ravana, the King of Demons, a catastrophic episode, sets in motion the successful war waged by Rama and his brother Lakshmana against Ravana. Hanuman, the Monkey-Hero, also deified, plays a prominent role in saving Sita, so the presence of his huge sculpted figure placed at the entrance to the cave can be seen as one of the "seeds" of the narration that develops inside. The popular art aesthetics of this sculpted series, enriched with the mysterious backdrop of the cave formations and of the surrounding darkness, calls to life an exotic tourist attraction and a *religious and cultural landscape* fit for the taste of worshippers.

### Pictorial narration to literary texts

If it is true that without the familiarity with Greek and Roman mythology, the Bible and Shakespeare's oeuvre, the reception of British literature and culture would be severely impaired, then the image below will certainly corroborate this claim.

- 1) In 1885, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, a renowned Dutch painter who had moved to Great Britain, created the composition *The meeting of Antony and Cleopatra* (private collection; Figure 2, *The meeting of Antony and Cleopatra*, IS) inspired by a well-known excerpt from Shakespeare's Roman tragedy *Anthony and Cleopatra* (Act I. Scene II, cf. Shakespeare, 1947, p. 934). The first lines set the framework for the painting: "The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne, / Burnt

on the water [...]". The image features a pre-arranged meeting of Cleopatra VII, the last queen of the Hellenistic Egypt (ruling 51–30 BC), with the Roman general Marcus Antonius, known to the readers from Shakespeare's earlier drama *Julius Caesar*. The great playwright, in turn, had drawn from Plutarch's description of Cleopatra's barge. The painting is primarily a portraiture of the woman famous for her beauty and the splendor that surrounded her:

For her own person,  
It beggar'd all description: she did lie  
In her pavilion [...]  
Over-picturing that Venus where we see  
The fancy outwork nature.

**Figure 2. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema – *The Meeting of Antony and Cleopatra***



Source: [meisterdrucke.uk/the-art-prints/Lawrence-Alma-Tadema/30809/the-Meeting-of-Antony-and-Cleopatra](https://meisterdrucke.uk/the-art-prints/Lawrence-Alma-Tadema/30809/the-Meeting-of-Antony-and-Cleopatra). Accessed 17 March 2023

- J) Yet, the painting is not a faithful rendition of the play, according to which Antony, enthroned, is waiting for Cleopatra in a market-place. Instead, the artist shows him standing on a boat and peeping into the pavilion with great curiosity. In this way a narrative trigger has been added to the otherwise static scene, which without Antony's presence would qualify as type 1 rather than 2. We face an exposition and the climax following in close succession – the moment that will ignite one of the most ardent romances in history and one of the most tragic, ending in an ultimate catastrophe – the suicidal death of both lovers in 30 BC. A critical commentary appended to this work, Oriental in style and very much to the liking of Victorian audiences, signals some cues of the future sad development of the story: “signs of decay” – the petals fallen from the garland and the skin of a leopard – “a useless remnant of the noble wildcat.” Hence, an “unhappy ending” is already indirectly inscribed into this apparently quiet scene, with Cleopatra reclining dreamily inside her floating shelter.
- K) The last image to be examined transports us to New York of the 1920<sup>s</sup>. In 1920, William Carlos Williams, excited by the view of a fire engine passing him at high speed on 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue, on the spur of the moment composes his “imagistic” 31-word-long poem *The great figure* (Williams, IS):

Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the figure 5  
in gold  
on a red  
firetruck  
moving  
tense  
unheeded  
to gong clangs  
siren howls  
and wheels rumbling  
through the dark city.

**Figure 3. Charles Demuth. *I saw the figure 5 in gold*, 1928**



Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I\\_Saw\\_the\\_Figure\\_5\\_in\\_Gold](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Saw_the_Figure_5_in_Gold).

Accessed 21 April 2021

Eight years later, the American painter Charles Demuth, inspired by the poem, composes a Precisionist painting entitled *I saw the figure 5 in gold* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Figure 3), a direct citation from its primary source. The scene presented to us is a nocturnal cityscape, with high-rise buildings on both sides and street lamps. Precisionism was a combination of Cubism with Futurism and such is this picture. Its protagonist is not an animate being, like in all the previous examples, but the rushing fire engine, geometrically rendered. The painter recreates the kinesthetic perception of this event in a masterly way – the number five is repeated four times in diminishing sizes, to show the back of the truck disappearing quickly in the tunnel of the street. Judith H. Dobrzynski summarized the image's message as follows: "It's a witty homage to his close friend, the poet William Carlos

Williams, and a *transliteration into paint* of his poem (*I saw the figure 5 in gold*, IS, emphasis mine). The italicized phrase refers metaphorically to *ekphrasis* and to its superordinate term *transmediation*. The painting instantiates type 2, for its inner dynamics makes us speculate about the development of this action – a fire brigade in a hurry to save human lives, although the pre-text itself is descriptive and non-anecdotal, as several non-epic poems tend to be.

With this selection of ten works of the pictorial arts that comment ekphrastically on their verbal sources, each one in its own distinct way, it is time to move to the last query about the make-up of the text worlds thus projected.

## The construction of visual-conceptual text worlds as a transmedial operation

I cannot think of a better way to start this section than to quote Joan Miró: “Painting must be fertile. It must give birth to a world... It must fertilize the imagination” (*Top 25 quotes...*, IS). In Miró’s words I find support for my own initial claim (Section 2) that text worlds are transmedial phenomena in the ‘narrow’ sense, i.e. they are projected by all kinds of media, including the visual arts. The problem lies only in the specificity of their construction by the receiver, which for all the works analyzed above turns out to be transmedial also in the second, ‘broad’ sense of *transmediation* (*remediation*) – a transformative crossing of the boundaries between media/modes. The commentaries on the visual works A–J above clearly demonstrate that in the case of secondary narratives, the role played by the primary stories, their underlying verbal texts, is essential.

A prototypical order in which the beholders construct a visual-conceptual world for ekphrastic picturing is as follows. The initial trigger is the *paratextual information*<sup>15</sup> contained in the title that streamlines the viewers’ expectations

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<sup>15</sup> It should be borne in mind that titles of artworks, more often than not, come not from their creators but from art collectors, museum curators, art dealers, sometimes even artists’ friends, etc.



and directs them to the source message. Next, this *verbal pre-text* should help the viewers to recreate the initial text world called to life by its author. This *primary text world* will, subsequently, guide the viewers in their interpretation of a visual work and in the construction of the *secondary text world* that will overlap to a certain degree with the ideas formed on the basis of the verbal text. The two cognitive operations will ultimately coincide, so that the ultimate product emerges as a cognitive blend, a *transmedial visual-conceptual world*.

The things are not that smooth in all situations, however, so at this point let us group the visual works we described in 4.1. into two distinct categories.

- A) Type 2, a *single monochronic picture with 'seeds' of temporality and narrativity*, is well-exemplified in our material (A, B, E, F, G, I, J), but it should be remembered that from a narrative viewpoint, it is the most controversial group of works. Enlarging on my previous proposals (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019), which stand in agreement with Speidel's (2013, 2018) extensive argumentation on this subject, I have assumed that all these works are endowed with a narrative potential. Yet, the narration in them is only *implied*, not shown in a direct way as it happens in the pre-texts that underlie them. Although they all possess *narrative triggers* (Lessing's "fertile" or "frozen moments"), from a formal viewpoint they are deficient, which does not allow them to become a basis for the construction of a full text world. Having in mind the list of the *building blocks* necessary to create a possible world, we can notice that the works in this group are *skeletal* – they do not show all the possible individuals that inhabit the primary text world, neither can they illustrate all the configurations among the denizens of this world and the ensuing states of affairs, for the simple reason that they present to us only one stage of this world.

They also lack a history, for the timeline is non-existent in them, only alluded to. If the measure of being a full-blown world is the possession of a fabula/plot, then they fail in this respect for the fabula implied is not the fabula presented. Example B constitutes the most extreme case – the heroine of the picture is an anonymous

person and almost all the protagonists of the primary narrative are missing, unless we count the decapitated Orpheus as somehow present in the visual world. What's more, the moment of action marks its very closure and the entire *narrative arc* is recoverable only on the basis of the myth. Despite its considerable emotional load, the visual text world comes out as a *truncated world*, for which reason I postulate that narrative images of Types 2 and 3 endowed with an *implied (folded) narration* (sometimes referred to as *minimal* or *micro-narration*) are capable by themselves of projecting only *scenes*, the smallest units of *worldness*, close to a single state of affairs.

Example E, in addition, violates one of conditions imposed on narrativity by Toolan, namely it does not feature any "sentient being" as an agent, for its protagonist is a machine, one of greatest fascinations of Futurists.

- B) In contrast, Types 4 (C, D), 5 (F, if three works are considered as a unity) and 6 (H), that is *temporal sequences, sets and series*, respectively, fare much better in their world-building potential. They depict a progressive increase in the number of individuals, configurations and states of affairs. Even more importantly, they boast an in-built storyline, albeit rather gappy in sequences and sets. While visual temporal sets and sequences project only *small worlds (subworlds)*, the *Rāmāyana* series comes closest to evoking a *bigger visual-conceptual subworld*, although still only a selection of the events drawn from the very rich primary storyworld.

The construal of the text world for a visual artwork that possesses its underlying verbal source is a complex process. The pictorial representation alone is not enough to project the world intended by its author. In this sense the construction of such secondary text worlds, obligatorily conditioned by their verbal substratum, turns *ekphrastic visual-conceptual worlds* into genuinely *transmedial artefacts* – a joint enterprise between the verbal and the pictorial medium. To what extent such remediation of a text world based on the verbal source into a visual target world results in an amelioration or

deterioration of the original is an involved issue that lies beyond the scope of our discussion.

It should be realized that viewers will build their transmedial worlds depending on their individual degree of familiarity with the primary narrative, their individual cultural encyclopedia and artistic literacy. Some of our examples, like C and E, call for the creation of a *hybrid text world*, half-fictional and half-real, in which the source message has been recontextualized to fit into the actual world of the painter. Such recontextualizations may become parodistic and grotesque, like in Beckmann's or Ensor's travesties, but do not necessarily have to be ironical or absurd.

In any case, such transmediations emphatically point to the fact that we often need a larger modelling unit, a *discourse world*, to describe the complexity of interpretative operations performed by the viewers. This time, they will bring into the reconstruction of the fictional primary (verbal) and secondary (visual) text worlds their own *extra-textual* knowledge of the actual world in its inexhaustible richness and variability, in which cultural frames will play a fundamental role. It is in this sense that the viewers, with their imagination fertilized by both texts will become also "explorers who, in turn, become world-builders" (Boni, 2017, p. 10).

## Conclusions

This short excursion into the intricacies of transmedial operations between two groups of semiotic artefacts – literary and visual artworks – opens only a small window on the vastness of the topic. In particular, the issue of the creation, remediation and recreation of text worlds that simultaneously belong to two distinct artistic media/modes is open to further research. Both storyworlds in literary creations and the issue of narrativity in visual art boast an extensive scholarly coverage – not so the ekphrastic text- and discourse worlds whose source lies in language and target in pictorial renderings.

My paper argues for the transmedial character of such text worlds on the narrow and broad approach to transmediality. As to the former, all semiotic

systems seem capable of calling to life imaginary worlds, whether totally fictitious or hybrid (real-fictional); as to the latter, the polysemiotic narratives, like the combination of the verbal with the visual storytelling, rely on complicated crossings of the boundaries between the relevant media, modes and accompanying perceptual modalities.

The text worlds of so-called history paintings and sculptures briefly analyzed in the preceding sections emerge as cognitive blends of the primary worlds projected by their verbal pre-texts with the secondary visual-conceptual worlds created by their spectators. They become also automatically expandable into discourse worlds whenever the interpretative practices of the viewers draw on their individual encyclopedic knowledge of the actual world, their ability to travel across various collectively constructed cultural frames and their openness to distinct artistic sensibilities.

Our discussion has been limited to the formation of two categories of *worldness* in picturing, namely:

- 1) *scenes*, evoked by single monochronic images endowed with narrative seeds/triggers;
- 2) *small worlds/subworlds*, evoked by temporal sequences, sets and series.

Both these world-forming types build only fragments of full-blown visual text worlds, rather infrequent in the pictorial arts and realized as complex networks of numerous images related by several common motifs and subjects (like Chagall's entire oeuvre, cf. Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019).

Temporality has often been presented as a foundational characteristic of a storyworld in literature. However, it cannot be identified with the text world itself, which requires a whole set of building blocks to achieve its worldness. Apart from a timeline, these are: a set of the world's inhabitants, with all their properties, propositional attitudes cherished, feelings and emotions plus the configurations (states of affairs) into which they enter. The pictorial scenes, sequences, sets and series form incrementally growing units of worldness, with scenes being the most deficient in terms of the required

constituents and lacking a full narrative arc, with only an irregular selection of moments on which to deploy a proper chronology of events.

A problem to be considered in further research is the manner of constructing visual-conceptual text worlds for secondary narrativity in non-ideal situations in which the beholder has no clear memory of or no familiarity whatsoever with the verbal pre-text of the visual work under scrutiny. Human imagination is capable of overcoming such hindrances but the risk of under- or over-interpretation when no recourse to the verbal substratum can be made appears to be considerable. Marta Boni (2017, p. 10), in her discussion of transmedia worlds, refers to them as “immersive realms.” This also holds true of the process of ‘reading’ images and entering the worlds they open to us. The degree of immersion depends, nonetheless, on several factors – the structure of the text worlds or their subparts, recollection or knowledge of pre-texts (for secondary, tertiary, etc. narratives), the scope and character of individual imagination, the cultural background and, last but not least, the aesthetic competence of the beholder.

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**DOI** 10.2478/doc-2023-0003

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Edyta Frelik

**Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland**

[edyta.frelik@mail.umcs.pl](mailto:edyta.frelik@mail.umcs.pl)

**ORCID ID:** 0000-0003-2065-5795

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# What Scene, What's Seen, What's in A... Word: Thoughts in and on Artists' Writings

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## Article history:

**Received** 16 April 2023

**Revised** 24 May 2023

**Accepted** 28 May 2023

**Available online** 20 June 2023

**Abstract:** While the humanities have become a multimodal domain in which visual culture is immanent and various new cross-disciplinary perspectives and theories are being employed to investigate the relationship between artistic and literary forms of representation, artists' writings remain understudied and underappreciated. Art/literature studies often proceed by pairing

a specific work of art with a particular literary text or an aesthetic style with a poetics or a narrative technique, but they rarely consider situations when both elements of the chosen pair come from the same source – an artist-writer. But questions related to whether and how an artist's 'natural' visual disposition may impact on how she/he approaches and handles verbal language and vice versa need to be asked to illuminate what is still a shadow zone in word and image studies. Citing examples of major representatives of American modernism in art and literature, the essay addresses some of the problematic issues involved in studying verbal expression by visual artists and the cogency of posited correlations between the painterly and writerly intuitions and competences at play in artworks and texts produced by artist-writers.

**Key words:** artists' writings, word and image, interart correspondences, American modernism, art history, literary studies

## The Problematic Nature of Interartistic Comparisons

Concluding her lecture from 1934 titled *Pictures*, Gertrude Stein declares clearly and unambiguously: "The literary ideas painters have and that they paint are not at all the literary ideas writers have" (Stein, 1975, p. 89). Then, as if to give more substance to the blunt statement, she repeats it in several successive sentences in rehashed form, but the effect is that, rather than being enhanced – made "slowly clear" (Stein, 1975, p. 90) – her argumentation gets progressively more muddled and irresolute. What at first seems simple and intuitively obvious in the end appears tangled and ambiguous. Ironically, the sense of incertitude is engendered here by the dubiousness of the very concept of 'literary idea,' how differently it might be conceived by painters and writers, and how the differences may affect each group's understanding of the relation between word and image

and their ways of bringing it into play. Stein's herself is a good example of the possible consequences of this type of unclearness. That her writing was affected by modern art is an undisputable fact, but the exact nature of that influence is less apparent. She admitted her strongest inspirations were a novelist and a painter: "Everything I have done has been influenced by Flaubert<sup>1</sup> and Cézanne, and this gave me a new feeling about composition" (Haas, 1976, p. 15). But an overwhelming majority of comparative studies devoted to Stein's work tend to explore her connection to Analytical Cubism rather than the post-Impressionist/proto-Cubist stimulus coming from Cézanne and other related artists. As has been argued by Marjorie Perloff (1981), postulating the existence of a direct link between Stein's writing and Cubist painting is not only partial, but is in fact ill-conceived, for their relation is more nuanced and less straightforward than is posited by countless interpretations of her texts as instances of 'literary' Cubism. For one thing, many scholars start from the wrong premise about Cubism itself, ignoring the fact that, as Perloff points out after Robert Rosenblum, "Cubism is part of a larger continuum which includes Vorticism and Futurism, Dada and Surrealism" (Perloff, 1981, p. 72). For instance, Perloff exposes affinities between some of Stein's narrative strategies and Cézanne's compositional solutions, such as his "un-definition" of objects and the "intermittency principle" (Leo Steinberg's terms). She also detects in Stein's texts evidence of the presence of "the Dada matrix" and strong Duchampian tones (pp. 99–100) albeit without denying their Cubist flavor. At the same time, in her always precise and unambiguous inquiries into the complex nature of the correspondences between art and literature, Perloff also acknowledges the potential pitfalls of the application of terms and tools from art history and aesthetics to talk about literature. Of the "indeterminacy" entailed in such interpretative strategies, she writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, as is well known, Flaubert's views about narrative and style were largely shaped by his interest in music and the visual arts.

In discussing Stein's Cubism, critics repeatedly speak of "non-representational" or "abstract" art, of "flat surface," "shifting perspective" and "interacting planes." All these are slippery terms: Kandinsky was one of the first non-representational painters of the twentieth century but he was hardly a Cubist. "Flat surface" is one of the central features of Oriental art which is nonetheless illusionist. "Shifts in perspective" are a hallmark of the Baroque, and so on. The paintings of Picasso and Braque are, in fact, "abstractions" only in a very special sense (Perloff, 1981, p. 71).

The question of how best to describe perceived parallelisms and analogies between verbal and visual works in a conceptually cogent and methodologically rigorous manner in order to bring out congruencies among domains that seem at once separate and related has long been a subject of disputes among literary and cultural scholars and art historians and theoreticians of various persuasions, with the latter often expressing concern about the danger of their discipline becoming subjugated by literary scholars with 'imperialistic' inclinations. When Norman Bryson (1983), an art historian, in the 1980s criticized art history for its inertia and refusal to welcome "the extraordinary and fertile change" (p. xi) that had already occurred in the fields of literature, history and anthropology, he was accused of being one of the "mischievous, troublemaking outsiders" representing "the colonizing, consumerist tendencies in English studies, eagerly reducing art to text, turning visual art into linguistic art, vision into sign – in effect arguing the case for Derrida's assertion that 'the collusion between painting... and writing is constant'" (Kuspit, 1987, p. 345).<sup>2</sup> To be fair, the viability of the "contest for dominion" (Gilman, 1989, p. 5) between traditionally autonomous and separate disciplines had proponents and opponents on both sides. Judith Dundas (1979) was among those literary critics who feared that the revival of the idea

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<sup>2</sup> Kuspit's term "outsider" is in fact a misnomer, for Bryson is a renowned art historian. What the critic more likely meant, but perhaps did not want to say so openly, is that he considered Bryson a kind of renegade because the scholar was at the time the director of English Studies at King's College.



of *ut pictura poesis* in literary criticism led to “the retreat from the word to the image” and to “a certain disregard of the medium of literature and the kind of stylistic analysis appropriate to language” (Dundas, 1979, p. 333).

Referring to the inherently antagonistic implications of interartistic comparisons, for which Leonardo invented the concept of *paragone*, J. W. T. Mitchell (1986) described the ongoing debates on the relations between the visual and verbal arts as an all-out “war of signs.” According to him, the fundamental reason why such discussions repeatedly result in disagreements is that, on the one hand, the belief persists that words and pictures “are not merely *different* kinds of creatures, but *opposite* kinds,” and on the other, both sides “lay claim to the same territory (reference, representation, denotation, meaning)” (Mitchell, 1986, p. 47). The remedy Mitchell proposed as a scholar happily embracing both literature and art history was raising the respective disciplines’ self-understanding and making the word/image conundrum not only a central feature of investigation and analysis on both sides of the divide, but one that can be a subject of “collaboration and dialogue, not defensive reflexes” (Mitchell, 1996, p. 53).

## The Benefits and Pitfalls of Studying Artists’ Writings

Yet, while it is certainly true that Mitchell’s plea was heard and has been given respectful recognition in many fields of research, increasing scholars’ openness to hybridity, polysemy and transmediation, phenomena which have played a crucial role in the transformation of the humanities into a multimodal domain where visual culture is immanent, there still exist shadow zones that need to be better illuminated and explored. With new research methods applicable both to the visual arts and to literature developed by semioticians, comparatists and rhetorical studies scholars, various cross-disciplinary perspectives and theories are available today which can be used to this end. One fertile but still uncharted territory that deserves a methodical and comprehensive survey is broadly defined literary creativity of visual artists.

Their writings often and, so to speak, naturally belong to two domains at once and yet they are rarely studied as examples of works that can overcome, bridge, combine and reconcile the differences between the visual and verbal media and the respective sensibilities, skills and practices associated with them. The most common strategy in art-literature studies is to pair a specific work of art with a particular literary text or an aesthetic style with a poetics or a narrative technique (vide the case of Stein vis-à-vis Cubism), but few consider verbal endeavors of visual artists as instances of creations in which a visual disposition may directly impact verbal expression and vice versa. William Blake is probably the best-known example of an artist whose full recognition was delayed by critics' inability, or unwillingness, to accept that in his unified system of signification the verbal and the visual are intertwined to the point of being inextricable. It took over a century and a half before Blake scholars began to acknowledge that some of his works are unique verbal-visual 'composites' and their understanding and appreciation hangs on the recognition of words and images as fully conterminous, all obvious and inconspicuous differences notwithstanding. Yet, Blake is exceptional among those visual artists who were also writers. According to William H. Gass (1997), "in most cases, when the dual muse is present, one shows itself as a gift, the other as an aptitude" (p. 62), but since the publication of Northrop Frye's *Poetry and Design in William Blake* (1951) the consensus among art historians and literary scholars has been that he is not just one of the greatest artists *and* poets English culture has produced, but arguably one of the greatest artist-writers ever.

Writing almost fifty years after Frye, Gass echoes his opinion that when the same person has the ability to paint and the ability to write "it is rare to find them equally developed... When the two are combined, one usually predominates" (Frye, 1951, p. 35).<sup>3</sup> In the case of recognized visual artists the implication clearly is that, one, their literary endeavors should be seen as products of an activity that is by nature separate from their visual enterprise and, two, that they are secondary and subservient at best and amateurish

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<sup>3</sup> Fry cites as examples the work of Edward Lear, Dante Rossetti, D.H. Lawrence, and Wyndham Lewis.

and inconsequential at worst. Among such texts it is mostly those which have some identifiably theoretical or pedagogical intent that make it into academic curricula, mainly in art history departments. Manifestos, catalogue statements, memoirs, and correspondence are considered as relevant sources inasmuch as they shed light on the artist's own practice and the nature of craft in general, but little or no attention is given to their value as literature. Even when intended as creative rather than merely utilitarian, many such texts remain confined to the archive or, when published, are classified as supplementary historical documents, useful in explaining artists' aesthetic views, inspirations and techniques, but not as autonomous instances of verbal art worthy of serious scholarly investigation and appreciation on their own terms. While art historians and critics, who are not equipped with the tools necessary for analyzing creative literature, can perhaps be excused for their slackness in the recognition of some artists' exceptional literary talent and craft, it is much less obvious why literary scholars and critics also have a tendency to resist or disregard their literary endeavors. The common assumption that artists' writings are by definition, if not intent, transgressive, perhaps ingenuous but rarely ingenious, has not only negatively affected the critical and popular reception of their literary interests and ambitions, but in quite a few known instances seems to have impaired their self-confidence when they resorted to verbal language to communicate their thoughts and ideas. Here are just a few examples of symptomatic 'disclaimers' from an array of twentieth-century and contemporary American artists recognized both for their visual works and writings:

- Georgia O'Keeffe: "I'm quite illiterate" (1987, p. 222),
- Man Ray: "Words have never been my true fort [sic]" (2016, p. 291),
- Robert Motherwell: "I must beg your pardon for how elementary and simple my discourse has been" (2007, p. 80),
- Romare Bearden: "A lot of the technical things that are no problem to me in paintings are problems to me in writing" (2019, p. 79),
- Jasper Johns: "I find it very hard to say anything" (1996, p. 145),
- Ursula von Ryginsvärd: "I'm not a good writer!" (in a private conversation with the author).

In this connection, Stein's impatience with the idea that an artist might want to pursue a literary career is as legendary as it is puzzling and controversial. Not only was she capable of turning a blind eye to the writings of painters whose art she thought highly of (Marsden Hartley, a prolific poet, essayist and autobiographer, is one example), but she could also vehemently deny them the right to even try their hand at writing, as happened when she learned that Picasso, her favorite artist, had taken up poetry (Stein, 1971, pp. 15–37). It is a fact that, despite her own accomplishments as a literary innovator, her own significance was for a long time seen as principally associated with the achievements of the artists she helped promote as paragons of modernist invention, so there certainly was an element of rivalry for success and recognition there, but the nature of the rivalry, as Perloff (2016) points out, is more complex than it might seem. Recalling Stein's squabble with Picasso, the critic observes that what infuriated Stein was “not just, as is often assumed... Picasso's invasion of her territory,” and it was not “her surprisingly traditional insistence on the separation of the arts,” either (p. 127). What vexed her was what kind of poetry he wrote – the fact that he did not take her as his literary model (she ignored the fact that he could not read her texts because of the language barrier) and, worse still, that his poetry was in the style of the French Surrealists, whose diction was antithetical to her own poetic. She dismissed them as being *ancien* rather than *avant* by pointing out that they “still see things as everyone sees them, they complicate them in a different way but the vision is that of every one else, in short the complication is the complication of the twentieth century but the vision is that of the nineteenth century” (Stein, 1959, p. 43). But would Stein really have approved of Picasso's poetry had he written, as she did, in a genuinely modernist, avant-garde fashion? Her temperamental and slightly (though perhaps deliberately so) muddled explanation of her irritation with Picasso is symptomatic of the difficulties one is bound to encounter when faced with the question of how visual artists and writers see and think and how they express their perceptions and ideas by means of images and words.

The problem, according to Stein, may be largely conceptual and have to do with different ways in which artists' minds process data, but it all boils

down to the question of awareness – one's understanding of the specificity of the medium chosen. Stein explains:

: A painter's literary idea always consists not in the action but in  
 : the distortion of the form. This could never be a writer's literary idea.  
 : Then a painter's idea of action always has to do with something else  
 : moving rather than the center of the picture. This is just the opposite of  
 : the writer's idea, everything else can be quiet, except the central thing  
 : which has to move. And because of all this a painter cannot really write  
 : and a writer cannot really paint, even fairly badly (Stein, 1975, pp. 89–90).

Yet, while it may seem that both as a writer and an arbiter of taste Stein unreservedly championed the idea of generic fluidity and transgression, her views in this regard are in fact surprisingly middle-of-the-road. On the one hand, they hark back to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766), where he famously stated that “painting employs wholly different signs or means of imitation from poetry, – the one using forms and colors in space, the other articulate sounds in time” (Lessing, 1969, p. 91). On the other, they tie her in to the purist aesthetic of Clement Greenberg, who in 1940 would denounce any “attempt to escape from the problems of the medium of one art by taking refuge in the effects of another” as “artistic dishonesty” (Greenberg, 1986, p. 26). Identifying these affinities allows us to correctly understand Stein's rather unseemly conservatism. According to Mitchell (1986), the tendency “to breach the supposed boundaries between temporal and spatial arts is not a marginal or exceptional practice, but a fundamental impulse in both the theory and practice of the arts, one which is not confined to any particular genre or period” (Mitchell, 1986, p. 98), but the historical significance of the modernist revolution as Stein understood and explained it is that it distinguished between breaching boundaries and confusing them. Stein embodied the avant-garde's awareness of the difference for, while admitting that she derived inspiration from the visual arts and was keenly interested in how painters deal with representing “the problem of the external and the internal” (Stein, 1961, p. 119), she at the same time consistently followed

her essentially literary intuition in her own struggle with and in language, the only medium in which she felt she could effectively challenge and explode the conventions of visual representation by imitation. This is best illustrated by her portraits, in which she employed words to get at the essence of personal identity not by describing her subject's appearance or attitude, but, as Ulla Haselstein (2003) observes about Stein's second portrait of Picasso, by staging "a theatrical struggle" between herself and the portrayed artist in which resemblance is "a formal textual device" (p. 738). What emerges as Stein's verbal brushwork unfolds in the space of the page, where stroke after stroke surging words fall into place *against* the accepted rules of syntax and discursive logic, is in fact a double portrait, one in which the presentation of Stein's subject is an occasion for her to present herself as well – herself caught in the act of transposing an image or an idea in her mind into a verbal likeness.

Alfred Stieglitz may have been one of the first to note the inspirational potential for visual artists of Stein's double-exposure when he published her portraits of Matisse and Picasso in his magazine *Camera Work* (1912). Among those the famous photographer and gallery owner mentored who openly shared his enthusiasm for Stein's "grand writing so effortless so alive" (Stieglitz, 2011, p. 712) was the most committed painter-writer in his circle, Marsden Hartley. He responded to Stieglitz's embracement of Stein by painting, as his colleague Charles Demuth also would, an abstract composition, entitled *One Portrait of One Woman* (c. 1916), which can be seen as an attempt to emulate visually Stein's method of portraiture. Enthralled by her bold experiments with language, he also tried to assimilate her style in his writings in the hope of demonstrating to her that perhaps he could be the one exception to her rule: a good painter who could write well as well. But given the circumstances his predicament was an impossible one. If he could convince Stein that he was capable of writing, he would be undermining her authority or, alternatively, risking losing his status as an important painter, a tradeoff he did not crave at all. Throughout his entire career Hartley (1921) concerned himself with what he called "the business of transmutation" (p. 8), trying to establish if images and words can be reciprocally conjoined and even complementary. Always unsure of his own choices, he could, however, be as categorical and biased

as Stein was when others were concerned. For instance, he criticized Dante Gabriel Rossetti, considered by him a 'great' poet, for attempting, in his opinion ineptly, to also be a painter. His case, Hartley wrote, proved that "if you sing a thing you can't dance it – or if you write it you can't paint it" (2002, p. 139).

## What The Case of Thomas Hart Benton Proves and Disproves

To another early Stieglitz associate, Thomas Hart Benton, who, however, quickly dropped out of the great mentor's aegis and chose an independent and ostentatiously anti-modernist artistic path, such deliberations addressed issues that were completely immaterial. Impatient with the "tortured intelligence" (Benton, 1951, p. 46) and "tiresome, meaningless aesthetic jargon" (p. 274) of the avant-garde's apologists, he would find Stein's ruminations about the equivalence of the literary ideas and egotisms of painters and writers rather spurious and pointless, but that does not mean that his case is not pertinent to these questions. Quite the contrary, it may be one of the clearest examples of dispositions and sensibilities which Stein saw as antithetical co-existing harmoniously and productively in the creative mind of a consummate visual artist endowed with a matching literary talent. In the 1930<sup>s</sup>, Benton was a leading exponent of Regionalism, also called American Scene painting, a figurative style in which he created monumental panoptical murals envisioned by him as a wholesomely indigenous alternative to the "bitter emptiness" of abstract art, for him the epitome of cosmopolitan and elitist modernism (as cited in Wolff, 2012, p. 285). He also wrote many "occasional" essays and articles as well as two autobiographical books which met with praise from authority figures associated with both literature and art. For instance, novelist Sinclair Lewis declared after reading his *An Artist in America* (1937): "Here's a rare thing, a painter who can write" (as cited in Wolff, 2012, p. 261). Art critic Hilton Kramer expressed a similar view, calling the book "a splendidly written memoir," though as one of the strongest post-World War II detractors of Benton's art, which he considered backward and provincial, he

qualified his compliment saying: "I think that Benton really missed his vocation. He should have been a writer rather than a painter" (Burns, 1988). But could Benton be as good a writer as both commentators agreed he was if he were not also the kind of painter he was? And wasn't his choice of a straightforward narrative style and determination to rely on the vernacular – when so many of his literary-minded peers sought more sophisticated, poetic rather than prosaic, forms of verbal expression – an indication that his literary ideas were not only as different from dominant modernist notions as his painterly ideas were from those of the avant-garde, but that they were, if not derived from his thinking about painting, then at least strongly influenced by it?

Luckily, Benton's writings share many tangible attributes with his visual works, so positing the existence of a direct correlation between his folksy version of pictorial mannerism and his down-home storytelling style is not merely a matter of common-sense reasoning. The problem is rather that few have bothered to take a closer look at his literary output at all, the main reason probably being the persistence of the view that his staunch anti-modernism and populist idealism resulted in what many consider "simple art for simple people," the kind that offers little beyond what is self-evident and already familiar. Yet, while it is true that Benton wanted his portrayal of "the simple spectacle of American life" (Benton, 1969, p. 67) to first of all appeal to ordinary people, especially rural and small-town Midwesterners he got to know well during his travels around various parts of the country, he was himself a cultivated man and an extraordinary craftsman. In his vocabulary simplicity signified authenticity and candor, but not simple-mindedness, and so to consider his folksy directness of presentation as plain and unremarkable realism is to miss what his narratives truly represent. Like his panoramic mosaics, in which the 'natural' look is achieved by rigorous and skillful execution of a masterful design, the way he tells his stories is far from unsophisticated, both hiding and displaying various refined and deliberate strategies and devices which, while medium specific, not only closely resemble his pictorial solutions but also match their efficacy. In painting, the mural was Benton's favorite format because its grand scale best suited his technique, which he described as "the amalgamation of many subjects having



little or no relationship to one another in such a way that they would function as parts of an overall pictorial form" (Benton, 1969, p. 63). The impression that authentic life unrolled in front of the spectator's eyes was particularly vivid in panels painted on all four walls of a room, where the looker, enveloped by the panorama, tries to slowly absorb the view by pivoting the head horizontally while the eye is every now and then diverted by narrative vectors pointing in other directions. Such viewing is not unlike reading a book, which cannot be 'grasped' all at once but must be taken in sentence after sentence, scene after scene, one story at a time. In both media Benton achieves narrative coherence by "locking the different subjects together" (Benton, 1969, p. 67) arbitrarily splicing and interweaving various sub-narratives – folk legends, myths, tall tales, proverbial anecdotes, vignettes, jokes and recollections – without clearly marking hierarchies of subplots, themes, voices or points of view, but always in full control of the medium and the compositional procedure. As Matthew Baigell (1975) observes in his study of Benton, contrary to what many of his critics allege, in his paintings "underlying diagonals, X patterns, related verticals and horizontals, and fulcrums around which pivot associated shapes" (p. 67) all serve carefully calculated end, the most distinctive being the push-pull effect produced by the alternating convexities and concavities – Benton's famous "bumps and hollows" – whose rhythmic throbbing is perceived by the eyes as a pulsating sensation. In open violation of rules of realistic depiction, he often mixes foreground and background while arbitrarily altering relative proportions and distorting perspective so that figures, objects and natural features seem to encroach on one another. Dispensing with conventional visual syntax, his dynamic configurations of rhythmic structures often rely on wholly artificial forms, such as white sharp-edged moldings and distinct wavy or curly lines, with which self-contained segments are merged into a continuous, unfolding panoramic whole.

To achieve similar effects in his prose, *An Artist in America* being the example considered here, Benton uses several surprisingly 'modern' methods of driving the narrative to convey life's fluidity, multifariousness and open-endedness. For instance, just as his paintings do not just show series of arrested moments of the rich spectacle of life but also display how the artist

sets the stage for the unfolding drama, his autobiography employs the frame narrative technique, a device otherwise known as a “story within a story,” to achieve a similar effect. Surrendering his narrative authority to others allows Benton to present and amalgamate many different voices, registers, points of view, perceptions and insights. The authentic spoken utterances he registered on paper during his travels using his own transcription system are usually quoted by him word for word, demonstrating how remarkably attuned he was to sound and speech idiosyncrasies. What kind of person a character is often encapsulated in just a few words he or she says, revealed in inflection and phrasing. But this is just one example of how individual words and their composites, what he called “patterns of words,” are used both as construction material and as signposts which point to the seams and stitchings that hold words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs together. One of the rarely noticed marks of Benton’s genuinely modernist mindset, his dexterity as a conscious and deliberate manipulator of the medium at hand also shows in how with just a few word strokes (often humorous one-liners) he can briskly draw a vibrant form, whether a human figure, an object or a landmark, or convey perceptual relativity by slowing down or quickening the story’s unfolding by thoughtful and selective application of different parts of speech. Another important device in Benton’s literary palette is the technique of metanarration, which takes the form of interjected self-referential remarks that have the effect of raising readers awareness that reading, like viewing an art work or listening to music, can be an enchanting participatory experience made possible thanks to the mediation of an object that is a record of the creative process of writing which transforms thought into text via imagination and physical manipulation of ink and paper in ways akin to drawing or painting an image.

Benton’s skilled use of advanced narrative strategies as described here briefly disproves the view held by many in the Stieglitz circle and outside of it that, because he reneged on his art schooling and affiliations and degenerated into, as Leo Mazow (2012) puts it, “an arbiter of kitsch” (p. 2), he was ignorant of and did not care about the modernization of American art. More importantly, a close reading of his books and articles gives credibility to the common-sense assumption that how a painter writes is determined by and reflects how he

paints, and the other way around; or, to put it in Steinian terms, it shows that a painter's literary ideas are (the same as) a writer's literary ideas if the painter and the writer are the same person. By the same token, evidence is provided that the affinity between painting and writing has a strong generic component and that is why a painter who chooses figurative realism is most likely, if not certain, to choose for verbal expression a literary genre closest in character and capacity to this style of painting. But such constataions about the work of one artist-writer do not really resolve Stein's quandary, for the question of boundaries, relations and interactions is infinitely more complex than Benton's case suggests and certainly requires deeper more systematic investigation. My own research so far indicates that every instance is unique in more than one way and even if a close reading of particular artists' writings against their visual works reveals the existence of discernible lines of separation and contact, they rarely form a grid or pattern. When that occurs, the perceived regularities still raise interpretative problems, as is also true about Benton, allegedly a simple-minded regressive realist whose work, however, has a clear modernist edge, with all the attendant consequences as far the handling of the medium and compositional strategies are concerned. Several other major early and high modernist artist-writers I have studied – Georgia O'Keeffe, Man Ray, Ad Reinhardt and Robert Motherwell – exemplify even more patently the problematic nature of analogies and relationships across the broad spectrum of literary genres and visual forms and styles represented. At the polar opposite of Benton's realistic pictures and prose are Ad Reinhardt's "purist" abstractions, which he contextualized in several different voices – from academic lecturer and pungent polemicist to author of calligraphed poem-like manifestos that both in terms of visual and verbal form and content approximate his black squares. Somewhere between the extremities of the spectrum is O'Keeffe with her quintessentially modernist paintings that mix abstraction and figuration and her autobiographical and epistolary prose that seems ordinary but is informed by a poetic sensibility. Then there is Man Ray, a natural-born iconoclast who as a visual artist tried his hand, though with the least impressive results in painting, at every kind of modernist style, figurative and non-representational, from Cubism and Expressionism to

Surrealism and Abstractionism, and who as a writer effortlessly moved from poetry to expository and autobiographical prose, attempted to write a novel but really distinguished himself as the author of verbal contraptions disguised as proverbs, aphorisms and platitudes which challenge routine thinking and language use. Finally, there is Robert Motherwell (2007), a leading Abstract Expressionist who, describing himself as “a lyrical artist, a ‘poet’” (p. 76), was a master of essayistic prose in which he achieved discursive cohesiveness by means of collage, one of the preeminent techniques of avant-garde art. Examples of many other configurations of correlatable styles and genres of painting and writing could be readily provided, but it seems the situation would only be further compounded rather than clarified.

## Questions to Ask, Challenges to Answer

In my monograph *Painter's Word: Thomas Hart Benton, Marsden Hartley and Ad Reinhardt as Writers* (Frelik, 2016), as part of the concluding remarks about the challenges that studying interartistic correspondences poses, I cite a rare and noteworthy attempt to address the matter by applying a methodology developed for the scientific study of how language relates to things outside language which, however, seems to have been insufficiently thought-out and as a result some of the inferences made in conclusion are open to question, making the ambitious project more of a cautionary tale than an applicable solution. The project's author, cognitive linguist Karen Sullivan (2009), selected 160 short statements by painters representing a broad spectrum of painterly styles, for the purpose of the study divided into three groups: purely representational, partly representational, and nonrepresentational. She then analyzed the authors' conceptualizations of their own art by applying the cognitive theory of conceptual blending to identify the correlation between their works and the metaphors they use to describe them. The main conclusion of the analysis is as welcome as it is predictable: a clear pattern is identified which shows that artists belonging to each group may use the same metaphoric words (*language* being the key concept) to tell their “stories,”

but they “exhibit different conceptual processes” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 517), with representational ones tending to focus on the subject matter and their paintings’ effect on the viewer, nonrepresentational painters applying similar vocabulary to talk about colors, shapes, and the artistic process, and those in between using a mixture of both. These differences, Sullivan writes, translate directly into generic consequences: representational artists privilege “genres of writing that represent real-world people, and events, such as ‘journalism,’ ‘biography,’ ‘autobiography,’ or ‘diary’” (2009, p. 552) and nonrepresentational ones choose “‘poetry’ rather than ‘journalism’” as better suited for the “aesthetic” and “affective” “impact” they aim at (p. 557).

The biggest weakness of Sullivan’s project stems from her corpus consisting of ekphrastic (a limitation in its own right) statements by mostly young, aspiring artists preselected for presentation in *New American Painting*, a “juried exhibition-in-print,” that is, texts that by definition lack the authoritativeness similar declarations by historically significant artists would have, which the author acknowledges by citing Paul Cézanne as an example that contravenes her findings. It is not so much the dubiousness of the method applied that is the problem here, though, but rather the absence of clear selection and categorization criteria needed for designing a comprehensive analysis of such material. Surprisingly but symptomatically, there are very few instances of critical literature about artists’ writings that recognize the significance of this fact by acknowledging that, as Stein would say, “this is very important because it is important” (1975, p. 90). One notable exception is an essay by Richard Hobbs (2002) titled *Reading Artists’ Words*, in which the scholar highlights the correspondences between artists’ visual and verbal works that reveal “patterns of meaning” and “reliable ideological and cultural grids” (p. 173). In an effort to identify the exact reasons why artists’ texts are rarely studied as literature despite their being so often referred to in monographs, exhibition catalogs, and cultural histories, he points to the “widespread distrust, notably within the French semiotic tradition, of the notion of a synergetic relationship between visual images and artists’ words, on the grounds that the specificity of each medium separates them fundamentally” (p. 173). As the title of the present article also suggests,

the key to answering the nagging questions that interpose themselves in all discussions of this subject, is, first of all, to formulate them correctly and comprehensively. Hobbs offers a list of such questions to which I fully subscribe, so I want to close these remarks by quoting it in full:

[H]ow can we define [artists' writings] as a mode of expression? How, indeed, do we read them? Do they have common features that combine to give a distinct category of cultural activity or are they simply a confused jumble of various types of verbal creation? How do they relate to the visual creativity that is their author's main activity? Do we read them in the same way as any text that we encounter, or by assuming that a form of hybridity is at stake in which the artist's creativity becomes dual, verbal as well as visual? Would such hybridity demand an analogous hybridity of reading practice in which we shift the horizons of our expectation to a word and image dynamic? Are we right, above all, to give artists' writings special status and authority in attempts at exegesis of visual works of art? (Hobbs, 2002, p. 175)

The essay was written as part of the research project no. 2021/05/X/HS2/00764 financed by the National Science Center.

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**DOI** 10.2478/doc-2023-0004

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Krzysztof Majer

**University of Lodz, Poland**

krzysztof.majer@uni.lodz.pl

**ORCID ID:** 0000-0001-9660-1465

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# A Frame to the Void: Some Remarks on the Staatstheater Augsburg Adaptation of Wittgenstein's *Mistress* and a Conversation with Nicole Schneiderbauer

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## Article history:

**Received** 17 April 2023

**Revised** 23 May 2023

**Accepted** 30 May 2023

**Available online** 20 June 2023

**Abstract:** Nicole Schneiderbauer's adaptation of David Markson's 1988 novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress* – a first-person account of usually single-sentence paragraphs by a middle-aged woman who believes herself to be the sole inhabitant of the entire world – premiered at Staatstheater Augsburg on 18 November 2022, and quickly garnered much praise for its inventive handling of complex literary material. I saw the performance on December 9, three weeks after the premiere. In this article, I offer an analysis of some of the most important creative choices made by Schneiderbauer in terms of translating Markson's novel into the language of the stage. As proved by my conversation with the director, her bold decisions – which may at first seem at odds with the spirit of Markson's novel – are precisely what has ensured the remarkable success of the whole enterprise. Avoiding the novel's more immediately theatrical aspects, reducing it to a 'condensate,' pluralizing the protagonist and dialing down on the absurdist humor, Schneiderbauer has succeeded at what may be the most valuable aspect of adaptation: that it is, in Linda Hutcheon's memorable words, "repetition with variation."

**Key words:** David Markson, *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Nicole Schneiderbauer, Staatstheater Augsburg, adaptation, theater, intermediality, postmodernism, experimental novel, metafiction, American literature

*Wittgensteins Mätresse* – Nicole Schneiderbauer's adaptation of David Markson's 1988 novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, in Sissi Tax's translation – premiered at Staatstheater Augsburg on 18 November 2022, and quickly garnered much praise for its inventive handling of complex literary material. Rather than employing the theater's main venues, Schneiderbauer chose the confined, dimly lit industrial space of a defunct gas house, Am Alten Gaswerk, which has been used for cultural events since 2019 ("Eröffnung..."). I saw the performance on December 9, three weeks after the premiere. From the hallway of the newly renovated multipurpose building – after a 15-minute introduction, which highlighted the figure of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the relevance of his philosophy of language to the novel – we were led to

the performance space proper. The viewers were given Virtual Reality helmets and instructed to put them on when the actors did so; this would happen several times during the performance, and the 'screenings' of VR material would last no more than a few minutes.

The novel itself is a first-person account of overwhelming solitude, given in short, usually single-sentence paragraphs by a middle-aged woman who either is the sole inhabitant of the entire world or believes herself to be in this very situation. Extremely unreliable as narrator, the woman whom we know as Kate – although even that is far from certain – is apparently typing her sentences on a typewriter found in a beach house which she currently occupies, somewhere on the American East Coast. She is a painter who has not touched the tools of her trade for years, but her thinking is deeply influenced by the arts. In a non-chronological and often baffling manner, she narrates various events from the last ten years of her life, apparently spent travelling by boats and cars around the curiously emptied world. In telling this, she circles around, and avoids revealing, a personal tragedy: the death of her young son and the guilt connected with it. Perhaps this is the catastrophe which, in her shattered mental state, she casts in global or cosmic terms. What is even more striking about this non-linear, self-conscious narrative is that Kate thinks about the world through a muddle of cultural, literary and historical artifacts, and her 'tale' is an orgy of misquotation, misattribution and misremembering. If, as the narrator of Flann O'Brien's 1939 novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* half-jokingly prophesied, "[t]he entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw" and "[t]he modern novel should be largely a work of reference" (p. 25), *Wittgenstein's Mistress* more than delivers on this idea. Either a work of belated high modernism, following in the wake of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Malcolm Lowry, or a postmodernist text in the spirit of the literatures of exhaustion and replenishment as theorized by John Barth (1997, pp. 62–67; 193–206), *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is a labyrinth of metafictional allusion and association, filled with supposedly offhand speculation in the vein of the eponymous philosopher. Nevertheless – and

this, perhaps, is the greatest achievement – out of these various pieces and ‘broken images’ Markson manages to conjure a heartbreakingly real narrative self.

It should come as no surprise that this perplexing, purposely incomplete and circuitous text poses a great challenge to a prospective adapter. As director, Nicole Schneiderbauer – so far as I can tell, the first person ever to stage this work – made crucial creative choices in terms of translating Markson’s novel into the language of the stage and adjusting the performance space. Her bold decisions, which may at first seem at odds with the spirit of Markson’s novel, are precisely what has ensured its safe transition to the world of theatre and the remarkable success of the whole enterprise.

First of all, the performance features more than one Kate. In Markson’s novel, the protagonist’s singleness is the governing principle; here, there are five Kates, played by two actresses (Ute Fiedler, Jenny Langner) and three actors (Florian Gerteis, Andrej Kaminsky, Thomas Prazak) in identical black dresses with silver, irregularly shaped reflecting surfaces sewn on top, worn over black trousers. The fluidity of masculine and feminine incarnations corresponds interestingly with an important aspect of the text and its adaptation. After all, a male author, David Markson, has fashioned a female voice through which to speak, frequently, in the voices of (absent) men – Rembrandt, Spinoza, Heidegger or, indeed, Wittgenstein – and it is this already complex, effectively non-binary voice, in turn, that a woman, Nicole Schneiderbauer, brings to the stage. The actors employ a variety of tones, move in different ways, enforce diverse tempos, but what comes through is the coherence of a tight ensemble. They pass one another by, cross paths, observe one another through the empty frames which comprise the minimalistic stage design. The members of the audience – who have no assigned seats and who wander the underlit room – can follow one of the Kates or else assume a further vantage point from which more than one ‘incarnation’ can be seen; it is impossible, however, to keep track of all five, and this impossibility is calculated.



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Usually only one Kate is speaking, although at times her communication is amplified or interrupted by another voice; the actors may deliver two differing lines concurrently, as if in counterpoint. Crucially, however, this multiplication does not preclude the solipsism that is the basis of the novel: on the contrary, the solipsistic elements are thrown into sharper relief. Kate – splintered, fragmented, yearning to meet anyone or anything alive – keeps encountering herself. She also encounters us, viewers, and regards us closely, disbelievingly. Her long, suspicious gaze is difficult to endure. The presence of several actors onstage makes it possible to embody, even if only for a moment, the memories of lost loved ones, mainly Kate's mother and son. Her shattered selves, then, also function onstage as phantoms of memory. We, the viewers, become phantoms ourselves, we lurk in the shadows, keeping to the fringes of the performance space: mute, immobile, we watch the solitary, possibly insane protagonist. The spectators become specters.

Secondly, Schneiderbauer abandons the idea of using the entire text of Markson's novel. Although the strategy of compression belongs in the standard adaptational toolbox, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is notoriously

difficult to excerpt or abridge. It has no paragraphs or chapters, no readily extractable sections or even a discrete textual unit other than the sentence. Occurring one after another in a seemingly infinite series, these sentences are variously entangled, and their (comic, tragic) effect often stems from ingeniously deployed repetition and syntactical / lexical referentiality. Yet it is difficult to imagine actors speaking two hundred and fifty pages' worth of text, unless in a performance stretched to several hours. Schneiderbauer's adaptation is a breezy 75 minutes, including moments of near-silence and unsettling ambient noise, so perforce we hear only some of the sentences typed by the novel's protagonist. Their order is (as far as I was able to determine) chronological, which means that particular sentences often represent an elaborate sequence of several pages in length – for instance where Kate describes cartons with books found in the basement, or where she speculates about the figure which is perhaps visible in the window of the house represented in a painting on the wall. The result is eerie, because the logic of the narrative – often already threadbare in Markson's novel, or else requiring cognitive leaps to rival those of Kate's – becomes even more strained. In effect, the text heard during the performance is more radically fragmented, and (as is frequently the case with adapted fiction) less intelligible. This prompts the question: who is the recipient of an adapted novel – not just this one, but more generally? And what effect does such an adaptation have on someone with no prior knowledge of the original? Despite the brief introduction to Wittgenstein's philosophy and the plot of Markson's novel, all of which precedes the performance, I see Schneiderbauer's efforts as a variation on the theme that is *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. And since variation is a mode which the novel frequently engages – the repetitions of sentence structures with new elements, but also endless recycling of objects, place names, and much, much more – this adaptational strategy seems perfectly suitable.

Thirdly, the performance is (unless my feel for German delivery fails me) almost entirely devoid of humor. Watching the trailers a few months before the premiere, I worried that the adaptation might prove too brooding and



oppressive, whereas humor – naturally of a certain dark, existentially-tinged variety, typical of American postmodernism – seemed to me the novel's *sine qua non*. During the performance which I attended, the audience did not laugh, and, in truth, there was little occasion for this. I did not laugh, either, and not just out of fear of disturbing the peculiar atmosphere which Schneiderbauer and the actors carefully constructed. Perhaps it was because Kate's bizarre statements – about the cat which may be living in the Colosseum, about the seagull which in all likelihood is merely a scrap of burnt paper, about pretending that the signs written in the sand are Greek letters – sound all the more desperate when spoken by a live voice, accompanied by particular facial expressions. Not impossibly, many of these declarations would slide into farcicality unless given a somber reading.

Markson was famously proud of the fact that his novel was irreducible either to its postapocalyptic interpretation (the protagonist is indeed alone in the world) or to a 'medical' one (the protagonist is mad and only imagines herself to be solitary) (Tabbi, 1990, pp. 111–112). In Schneiderbauer's rendition, the scales are tipped towards the latter meaning, and there is understandably less space for humor. But this has to do, I think, with an important shift. We are no longer readers, but viewers, with all that such a transposition entails: rather than ensconced in Kate's mind, we observe her from the outside, which complicates our reaction to the character, generating a different kind of sympathy. I see this, again, as variation, justified within the very broad spectrum of meanings engendered by the novel. A variation, more importantly, which I find poignant. I need only to think back to the moment from the Augsburg production when Kate remembers a snatch of melody from *Les Troyens*. Many a director would have supplied a relevant musical fragment by Berlioz to point up the extent to which the boundaries between the real and the imagined have been blurred in Kate's world. But Schneiderbauer's Kate – each of the five Kates, in fact – is frozen to the spot, and for a minute we listen to silence, as John Cage would have it: the creaking of the few chairs, someone's careful footsteps, the subtle white-noise pulsation of near-vacant spaces.



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In the novel, Kate has the whole world at her disposal; however, in David Foster Wallace's memorable phrasing, it is an "empty plenum," an empire built of signs meant to detour the protagonist through a collective cultural past, and away from her own unbearable personal story. In the performance, she traverses the shadowy room, constantly bumping into, or attempting to scale, its boundaries – a clear allusion to Wittgenstein's most famous quotation about the limits of language. Yet the primary visual motif is the empty frame: the protagonist poses in them, walks through them, shatters them, constantly problematizing the boundary between (artistic / linguistic) representation and what we may call 'reality' or 'world.' This simple prop proves semantically

capacious: as needed, it becomes a window, a mirror, a painting, all three of which are closely aligned in Markson's novel. In this context, the five Kates' costume, designed by Miriam Busch, also becomes legible: they are wearing shards of a broken mirror.

The VR environment, created specifically for the purpose by video artist Stefanie Sixt and made available through Heimspiel technology, renders the boundary between reality and representation even more fluid. The novel's iconic spaces – the seashore, the empty street, the stairs, the dilapidated house – are here combined into impossible, mostly monochromatic mindscapes, reminiscent of video game settings. If colors come into play, their cold shades only intensify the effect of the pale, seemingly subaquatic light of the performance area; these are disorienting spaces, with no stable ground, producing in the viewer a sense of being suspended in the air over a void. In these oneiric spaces we, ghosts ourselves, encounter phantoms of Kate. One of the early virtual scenes has Jenny Langner approach us warily, uncertain if we are there at all. Trying to walk through us to make sure, at the last moment she bounces off our virtual body, and her face registers a mixture of disbelief and alarm.

The use of VR harmonizes with Markson's problematization of the line separating that which exists from that which can be thought. Hence the importance of the maneuver, near the end of the performance, where what is transmitted directly to the VR helmets is the signal from the camera set up in the middle of the room. Reviewing *Wittgensteins Mätresse* for *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Yvonne Poppek complained that the visual loop is a gimmick in an otherwise strong performance (Poppek, 2022): this is not my sense, at all. When, as viewers, we see ourselves in odd, clumsy poses, next to the actors – all with the inevitable defamiliarizing delay – the circle is complete: it is no longer clear who has been watching whom, who has imagined whom, whose existence is solid and whose is spectral. This naturally corresponds to the loop in the text, and to the repetition of the sentence from the novel's beginning: "Jemand lebt an diesem Strand". "Somebody is living on this beach."

I left the Staatstheater Augsburg adaptation of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* greatly impressed by how much thought Nicole Schneiderbauer gave to the question of the novel's theatricality, avoiding its more immediate aspect:

indeed, many would be tempted to see the sentence-by-sentence first-person narrative as monodrama waiting to happen. Pluralizing the protagonist, she has succeeded in that which, following Linda Hutcheon's sentiments, I consider to be the most valuable aspect of adaptation: "repetition without replication," or "repetition with variation" (Hutcheon, 2006, pp. 7–8). In her *Wittgensteins Mätresse*, Schneiderbauer offers an (ironically!) unverbose variation on Markson's novel, a variation that is significantly darker, and spellbinding from the first minute to the seventy-fifth.

Below is a conversation which I conducted with Nicole Schneiderbauer by e-mail four months after the premiere, following the completed first run of *Wittgensteins Mätresse*, when the show was scheduled to return in the fall season of 2023.

**Krzysztof Majer:** Nicole, you're no stranger to adapting American literature, including experimental postmodernist works. You've directed *Tiny Kushner*, a series of shorter plays by the author of *Angels in America*; and you've taken on daunting adaptation challenges, like William T. Vollmann's 800-page novel, *Europe Central*. Would you say that *Wittgenstein's Mistress* was a natural next step for you?

**Nicole Schneiderbauer:** After adapting and dealing with *Europe Central*, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* was indeed a logical next step for me, artistically. Both works are unique literary reflections on history (or the history of mind), human suffering and existence. They're works of art that seem to go beyond the boundaries of their form because of their intermedial perspective. This is what captivated me about both texts in their own unique way. In the development of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, however, the approach was very different from that which I employed with *Europe Central*. I discovered *Wittgenstein's Mistress* during my research, but then had it sitting in my bookcase for about a year before I read it. As soon as I picked it up, I was fascinated by Markson's post-apocalyptic setting and his attempt to grasp the world, memory, language, art, being – and all of this in an almost playful way. The novel is like a huge surface of projection: what is true? What false? What has happened to the protagonist? Who or what is she anyway? A game of realities, or a never-ending emotional state?

**KM:** You've emphasized the intermediality of the two novels, which, I think, poses an interesting challenge in itself. After all, theatre is, in its essence, 'always already' intermedial, involving – even in its classical forms – the verbal medium, the visual, the musical. On top of these, contemporary practitioners add more recent media, such as the filmic or the digital, as in the case of your *Wittgensteins Mätresse*. But intermediality in a literary text is a different matter, wouldn't you agree? Neither Markson's novel, nor Vollmann's, involves other media in the strict sense, but rather representations of them – what we get is ekphrasis, then, or melophrasis. Much of the tension in Markson's novel is built on that – on the absence of the work, whether visual or musical, which Kate is forced to reimagine and translate into language. In that sense, I think, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is unique, because it asks both its narrator and its reader to do away with other senses – to render everything linguistic. Markson wrote it before the Internet changed all of our lives, and I often wonder about the extent to which it complicated his idea for the novel. Nowadays we can all google Pinturicchio's rendition of Penelope at the loom, or even use DALL-E to generate the nonexistent Van Gogh painting that Kate mentions! How did you approach this idea of intermediality? Does adapting a work like *Wittgenstein's Mistress* mean that you have to restrain the urge to, for lack of a better word, intermedialize, or does it give that urge free rein? Was it similar with *Europe Central*?

**NS:** In Kate's world, language is the only thing that 'exists,' in a way. As an artist she no longer has any painting utensils, as she says herself. So she tries to use language to make her world and her own history transportable, to archive them, to create a huge medium of memory – to build a system of coordinates to which she can relate and through which she can exist. Practically speaking, language is the only medium with which Kate can 'translate' pictures or music. And yet, by using images, stories, music – some of which are deeply inscribed in Western cultural history, with ideas or associations in our own cultural memory – Markson taps into our space of imagination. One can hear Maria Callas, or at least snatches of her singing, one can see the coins painted on the floor of Rembrandt's studio or (figuratively)

chase after the cat, there are the references to Greek antiquity, to Helen, Odysseus, Achilles... The exciting aspect of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is that Kate puts her situation and especially her emotions into already existing cultural images and stories, trying to recognize herself in them.

We tried to research as many of the mentioned artworks and references in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* during the production, to track down all the traces. Without the Internet, that would not have been possible in the same form. I have the feeling that the Internet is even expanding the associative space of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* – which is great.

And to return briefly to the topic of intermediality. Theatre tells stories intermedially, if you will, but a novel like *Wittgenstein's Mistress* definitely needs other attempts and forms beyond classical approaches in its transmission. This is also true for *Europe Central*. You have to ask yourself other questions in the making.

**KM:** And how important has this particular site, the defunct gasworks, been to the Augsburg production? Is your *Wittgensteins Mätresse* typical fare for this space, or are you breaking new ground here?

**NS:** The Staatstheater Augsburg has two main venues – one is the brechtbühne (on the gasworks area) and the other is the martini-Park. For special formats / productions we always look for other venues in the city. The theater already used the Kühlergebäude on the gasworks area in 2018 for two productions, but at that time there was a 'classic' seating situation, which means that we had a tribune and fixed seating installed. After that, the Kühlergebäude was being renovated and was closed to audiences.

With *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, it took us a long time to find a suitable location, and when the Kühlergebäude finished renovating, it was immediately clear to me that this location is perfect for Miriam Busch's stage design – the sculpture built from different picture frames. It was also very important for me that the audience can move freely in the Kühlergebäude, that they can be part of the installation, and that everyone has to search for their own narrative thread, feeling their way around Kate's mindscape. In this process, everything is fragmented, only perceptible in excerpts, and ultimately you yourself become part of this memory palace as a shadow or a mirror image.



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**KM:** This is also a very interesting decision – one that I applaud! – but that needs to be investigated, because, after all, the nonlinearity of Markson’s novel is a strictly constructed one. For an experimental and fragmented novel, which it undoubtedly is, it’s also rigorous in building towards certain revelations, jokes, reinterpretations of existing texts, and so on. Unlike Cortazar’s *Hopscotch*, or what’s been described as “shuffle literature” (Husárová & Montfort, 2012) – say, B. S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* or Herta Müller’s *The Fox Was Ever the Hunter* – Markson’s novel does not invite us, let alone force us, to read out of order, or skip. I think this is one of the reasons for which some critics insist that *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* is the sort of high

modernist artifice – like *Ulysses*, *Under the Volcano*, or *The Sound and the Fury* – where the chaos of experience is aesthetically ordered, organized into a literary representation of chaos, but is not chaotic in itself: far from it, in fact. So would you say you're taking Markson across that threshold into postmodernity (towards which he gestures here, but perhaps does not take the leap) – pluralizing Kate, disjoining the threads, fragmenting the reception?

**NS:** I try to approach the question from my own artistic perspective. Everything we have done in the making and in the examination of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* has resulted from the fact that the novel is the way it is – from its inner order, its logic, and its chaos. Kate is both a character and a broken mirror, a fragment, she is both intangible and multifaceted. What I can perceive as a reader of the novel is limited at first, I don't have the chance to understand it to its core. I can develop a desire, however, to bring light into this darkness. For that I would have to read and re-read, interrupt the reading and search 'outside' the novel, and then read it again. But ultimately I will always fail because I don't have the chance to even begin to 'understand' anything, just as Kate doesn't have the chance to understand herself or her story. It all slips like sand through her fingers. Maybe Markson doesn't invite us to read his novel differently, but he doesn't forbid it, either. In other words, he tries to seduce us via variation, repetition, and deception so that we constantly have to reevaluate our own impressions.

**KM:** Let's talk a little more about some of the searching that has to happen outside of the novel. How important, would you say, is the German and Austrian resonance of the subject announced in the title? After all, despite his Cambridge fame, Wittgenstein is the quintessential Viennese philosopher, and Heidegger – perhaps the second thinker most frequently mentioned in the novel – is firmly associated with the Baden-Württemberg countryside. These two throughlines never cross, but they are perhaps also a way of demarcating the painful landscape of twentieth century history.





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**NS:** *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is a playground of references, a huge archive or memory palace full of traces. One has the sense of never coming to an end of searching and discovering information and links – this is all very tempting, but it also drives one crazy. Wittgenstein and Heidegger, who interestingly never met even though they were both born in the same year (1889) and were already very well known throughout their lives, are Kate's logical points of reference for me. Both dealt with the foundations of cognition, proclaiming a different way of philosophizing, speaking, thinking, and trying to make the world habitable. Moreover, both have been described as 'the last philosophers.' So is Kate. I've heard the novel called 'philosophical science fiction.'

**KM:** Yes, it was David Foster Wallace who used that phrase, though I think it's more than a little misleading, especially when one couples it with the postapocalyptic setting: I think it tends to generate expectations that will have to be frustrated! I love the figure of the memory palace, though: memory in Markson's novel is spatialized, potentially infinite, confusing in its jumbled excess. A colleague of mine has described the world of the novel as a library without a catalogue – how Borgesian! An archive, too, or a “bloody museum,” as Kate calls it, since she has been “appointed curator of all the world” (Markson, 2010, p. 227).

I'm interested in the 'lastness' that you mention: Kate is the 'last woman,' to paraphrase the title of Mary Shelley's apocalyptic novel – the last painter, the last art historian (*sui generis*, of course), the last thinker. This sense of lastness, with names of infamously difficult philosophers thrown in, can be foreboding to viewers. Markson has often been praised for the lightness with which he approaches philosophical questions; did you strive for a similar kind of lightness, or did you decide to take in stride the weight of the material to which Markson alludes?

**NS:** Both – we consciously looked for this lightness in the acting and in the performance, but even so, there is this emotional weight and the quasi-plot, transferred from the novel to the stage, with Kate's family history and the supposed death of her son. Deep emotional confrontation in theatre is always important to me, personally, and I deliberately seek that out. Reading the novel, one gets the impression that Kate is trying different ways to avoid having to deal with her memories, specifically the loss of her son and what really happened in Mexico ten years earlier or so. But as it is in life, one cannot escape one's own pain points even with a lot of wit and humor. And the memories take on a life of their own, so Kate is not always the 'master' of her own world.

**KM:** With that last phrase you bring out another aspect of the title. After all, the word 'mistress' is the feminine version of 'master.' Actually, English dictionaries (*Oxford, Cambridge, Merriam-Webster*) give this sense – a woman in a position of authority, control or responsibility – as the first, with the 'illicit female lover' or 'kept woman' only a secondary or even tertiary one.

Of course, it's the philosopher's name in front which brings that erotic / sexual meaning to the fore, and famous artists' mistresses – Jeanne Hébuterne or Suzanne Valadon – are mentioned, but maybe this needn't be the dominant idea. Translating the novel into Polish, I couldn't find a word that would fit both of these meanings, so I've had to go with *kochanka* (lover, though not necessarily an illicit one). I wonder to what degree the aspect of mastery is present in the German title. The word *Mätresse* seems like a close analogue to the English, but how far would German readers and viewers expect the theme of mastery or mastering (of the world, of language, of one's own solitude) to appear in the text? Is there a sense here of someone overpowering or overcoming Wittgenstein, would you say?

**NS:** The German word 'Mätresse' comes very close to the English meaning of the word and captures all aspects. I don't know what the audience expects, though. But I'm very interested in the question, and I've asked it myself many times. Does Kate overcome or overpower Wittgenstein? Sometimes I think yes and sometimes no. It's definitely possible. What would you say?

**KM:** Well, since the theme of masters and pupils is such an important one in the novel, and since Kate is set on reasserting female presence in such lineages – a feminist critique of art history – it would be tempting to think of a female master in the sphere of philosophy, or writing. I've looked at it through the biographical lens, which we haven't mentioned yet. Markson dedicated the novel to the painter Joan Semmel, his *de facto* mistress. It seems that Semmel taught him a thing or two about appreciating women's contribution to world and art history. Reading Markson's novels in order, one is simply thrown by how different and original *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is, and a big part of that must be Semmel's influence. So if he, Markson, identified in any way with Wittgenstein, through his own writing and concerns, then she, Semmel, was both his lover and his teacher, I'd say. She did leave him in the end, too, which could account for some of the melancholy tone... In the novel itself, though, I guess we also have Wittgenstein overpowering or overcoming himself, because, as a number of people have demonstrated (e.g. Ambroży, 2015, pp. 72–73), the novel illustrates the shift from early Wittgenstein, of the *Tractatus*, to the late Wittgenstein, of *Philosophical Investigations*. And for

him to move from that first stage to the second he needed to make a spectacular about-turn, reopen the questions that he thought he'd dealt with once and for all in the *Tractatus*. And Markson's own dynamic is similar, in the sense that *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is such an unexpected about-turn in his writing, too; all his later novels live in its shadow, and there's no getting back from this radical shift. So yes, I'd say there is some overpowering of Wittgenstein going on here.

**NS:** I absolutely agree. But it's like almost everything in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* – it's never one thing, but always many things, and always depends on the way or the angle from which you look at it.

**KM:** Indeed! And since we've touched on the subject of translation – interestingly also one of the many subjects that spark Kate's curiosity at a few points – I wonder about the role, if any, of the German translator, Sissi Tax. In Poznań's Teatr Polski, where Maja Kleczewska, one of our most exciting and notorious directors, recently staged Joyce's *Ulysses*, the author of the new translation and of a hefty book on the subject, Maciej Świerkocki, attended several rehearsals, instructing the actors on interpretation and delivery. Sissi Tax is a writer herself, and from what I understand, her stature as an author has had a big impact on how her translation of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* was viewed in German-speaking countries, or how much attention it received; Elfriede Jelinek's afterword must have played a part, too. Has Tax been involved in your production, especially as far as abridging the text went, or have you consulted her in other ways? Has she seen the production yet?

**NS:** Sissi Tax was not involved in our production, and, to my knowledge, has not yet seen it. As for adapting the novel, we used a very unusual process. When I read the novel, I immediately had the feeling that it couldn't be adapted into a theatrical version like other texts, and that we had to choose a different approach in order to do justice to Markson's novel with all its variations, repetitions, images, and time jumps... So together with the dramaturge, Sabeth Braun, I created a 'condensate' of the novel, so to speak: a textual basis with which we started the rehearsals. From this textual basis, with the help of our research and through body improvisations, each actor developed their own narrative thread – their own Kate. In the next step we layered these threads together and interwove them, and that's how the version of the play finally came into being.

**KM:** That's a fascinating way to go about the process, and, I believe, empowering to the actors. But I'm curious also about what got left out of the 'condensate,' and why – what stayed on the cutting room floor, as it were. I had the feeling that some narrative or thematic threads were represented by shorter versions of themselves, but others seemed to have disappeared altogether. Can you tell me more about how you made the necessary decisions to snip this or bolster that, and about the rationale behind this? Were there any aspects of the novel that you thought were outdated, or simply less relevant – or others that you thought the adaptation could not do without? Did the actors themselves also make such decisions, or at least partly?

**NS:** Because we developed the piece in this way, we made most of the decisions together. Some of them were made consciously, others less so, through and in the many improvisations. These gave rise to images, sequences, situations, among other things, which we tried to organize from the inside (from the character's perspective) and from the outside (from the director's perspective). The coordinate system was always the novel and our condensed version of it. At the beginning of the rehearsals (we rehearsed in two phases: in April 2021 and in October/November 2022) we were limited in terms of the duration of the evening due to the Corona pandemic. Originally, I thought about setting the evening at five to six hours, and really treating it as a world in which one can immerse oneself, but also lose oneself – in which sequences, scenes, and reflections are repeated in slight variations. But since we were limited to 90 minutes, the theme of perpetual repetition and variation can only be glimpsed in rudiments in our *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Also, many humorous language games would not have transferred well to the stage. One aspect I'm personally sorry about cutting – one which we tried to translate, but ended up discarding – was Markson's handling of the theme of time.

**KM:** I'm intrigued by this. Can you say more about the parts that you mean and what about them, in particular, seemed more difficult to transfer to the stage?

**NS:** Theatre thrives on emotions, situations and actions, on immersion in atmospheres and relationships. We have tried to make Kate's world tangible, and have dealt intensively with her attempts to construct it. However, in

the novel there is a lot of focus on Kate's family history, on her identity as an artist, and on the emotional phases that she goes through, because inscribed in the novel is a strong emotional charge that is dramatic and exciting. We shifted the focus from the text to different theatrical means as a way of translating Kate's situation and the motifs of the novel into images, moods, associations. What Markson does in his novel would not have worked in this form on the stage, because it must be spoken language rather than read, and because reading is perceived differently than seeing or experiencing physically. Markson develops trains of thought over several pages, in parts and in layers. There is also a great desire for (factual) knowledge – I think that would have been very boring to transfer on a one-to-one scale.



**KM:** The performance works marvelously, but I wonder if you've had to overcome any resistance at Staatstheater Augsburg when you first presented your idea there. Or did the project instantly meet with enthusiasm?

**NS:** The plan to realize *Wittgenstein's Mistress* as a theatre performance coincided with the beginning of the Corona pandemic and thus took on its own explosive level of meaning – Kate's loneliness, the post-apocalyptic mood, her lack of relationships – suddenly this was also a major social issue. So yes, there was a great interest of the Staatstheater Augsburg in realizing it.

**KM:** The context of the pandemic is particularly interesting to me, because it was a similar case with my translation into Polish. I started working on the first 25 pages for an online magazine in January 2020, so by the time I had the fragment ready for publication, sometime in the spring, we were all looking at the most famous places in the world emptied out, with rumors of wild animals reappearing in the canals of Venice, and so on. The novel took on a resonance which I didn't notice when I first read it ten years earlier, or even when I re-read it just a few months earlier – it activated not only new ideas of what solitude can mean, but also ecocritical / post-anthropocenic readings, which are key in our day and age. Can you tell me more about how you and the ensemble worked these meanings into your adaptation? Did the actors' own experiences of seclusion and separation during the Corona crisis translate into how they approached their versions of Kate?

**NS:** We talked a lot about loneliness, and in that context, of course, about the setting of the novel and Kate's being alone after a nameless disaster: whether she is really alone or simply no longer able to notice anyone else. And, of course, about our own experiences, how the separation and lack of contact felt, what happened to our bodies, how one longed for touch, for another person. But also about the grief and loss. That was a very present theme and it imprinted itself deeply on the actors' engagement with their Kate.

There's this beautiful line in the novel that says, essentially, that what people admired about Rubens, even if they weren't always aware of it, is the way everyone was touching. That was one of the central phrases for us. True, it is not said on stage. But it is present, because there is no physical touch between the performers, only the longing for it.

**KM:** Yes, the exact sentence is: “One of the things people generally admired about Rubens, even if they were not always aware of it, was the way everybody in his paintings is always touching everybody else” (Markson, 2010, p. 102). The idea returns later, but only once, when Kate is talking about Anthony Van Dyck as Rubens’ student. With so many other concepts that recur in the novel, this is one of the less prominent ones, and yet – I agree completely – crucial in identifying the human touch as what Kate is missing so badly. And that you’ve kept the sentence itself out of the text spoken onstage is very much in the vein of the novel: an absence, a void, in the middle of things.

But since we’re talking about sensualities and bodies: how important is the theme of femininity here, as a lived, corporeal experience? David Foster Wallace insisted that this was one of the very few aspects – or maybe the only aspect – in which the novel fails. He quoted some female readers who found the frequent references to menstruation, for example, as “ringing false” – that is, as Markson trying too hard to authenticate the female experience (p. 233). But Sherrill Grace, for example, thought that Kate “speaks from her mind and body about all aspects of the world” (1990, p. 212). Some of my female colleagues, friends, and students tell me that the voice sounds very convincing to them – as if a woman had written it, one of them even said. What is your sense of this? The theme does come up in your adaptation – if I remember correctly – through the verbal descriptions of the aging body and the menopausal mood swings. Visually, it is conveyed, for example, in the VR sequence where the actor’s hand is held waist-high like a brush with dark paint, which is then dripped onto the legs and the floor. But it is one of the male authors who is pictured in this way, so there’s more complexity here, it seems – more ‘gender trouble.’

**NS:** For me, Kate reveals another aspect of the female body, that connected with birth and offspring – Kate will not be able to have any more children in the foreseeable future. Not only is she alone in the world, but even in the most unlikely event that she would find someone, there will be no more children. She really is the last person. Beyond that, menstruation also provides her with a foothold in terms of regularity, structure. But that also no longer works – because of the actual irregularity of her periods. We talked a lot about this aspect in the production and I would say our take was a mix of



David Foster Wallace and Sherill Grace. Personally, I think it's important that Markson addresses the issue as it's an essential aspect of the female body, and part of Kate's everyday life and body experience, much like masturbation. These topics are talked about far too little in our society and when they are, there is usually a strange form of shame involved. What mattered to us in the VR sequence was opening up this field of tension between male and female aspects, but also to pose the question of authorship – who is talking about whom? At the same time, the male actor is still Kate, and an author of his own 'thread' in the process of creating the character. The setting opens up a multitude of possible interpretations, thereby allowing gender to become fluid, and one can try to overcome it through this.

**KM:** That's so true: no futurity here, just an eternal present, which keeps repeating – irregularly at that, as you say – since the body clock is going the way of all the other clocks in the novel, which stopped working long ago. And the theme of masturbation, apart from emphasizing the bodily, ties in with the themes of solitude, the closed circuit of the self. I continue to be amazed by how Markson makes each aspect of the novel meaningful on a number of levels, and how these meanings can be extended – as you've done, for instance, with Kate's gender fluidity.

I know that the response to your production has been very positive. Can you say a few words about that?

**NS:** Both the critics and the audience were very taken by *Wittgensteins Mätresse*, and enthusiastic about it. It was described as a multimedia theatre adventure, because on the one hand you encounter the big questions of the history of philosophy, understand their emotional weight, too, and at the same time keep asking: is it all just a fantasy? The audience is immersed in this "bloody museum," in Kate's head, and, like Kate, they become curators of their own history and experience. It's interesting that many people don't want to leave the room after the piece ends, or say that they could have watched it for hours.

**KM:** I can understand this reaction and relate to it, because the space you've created is eerily hospitable. I wonder also how important sound design has been to constructing that space. The Augsburg Staatstheater page doesn't

list a separate person responsible for sound, so I understand that these were collective decisions, too – about the relative absence of sound or the use of what I would call ambient ‘white noise.’ Was it clear to you from the start that silence would feature so prominently?

**NS:** It was immediately clear to me that silence would play such a big role, yes. I tried to imagine very early what sounds are still there in Kate’s world, and what her actual soundscape might be. On the one hand, there are the elements (fire, water, earth, air), and on the other hand the noisy space of her memory, and her own attempts to make sounds, like setting several alarm clocks to ring or rolling tennis balls down the Spanish Steps. We then developed together all the sounds that the audience ‘hears.’

**KM:** I was also curious about the VR process. How much influence did you have on Stefanie Sixt’s astounding virtual mindscapes? Did the artist read the novel and develop her own ideas on the basis of this, or did you commission specific types of images and / or offer suggestions? Was this a collaborative process, and if so, to what extent?

**NS:** Stefanie and I have been working together for six years now. Our collaboration is close and trusting, and we usually develop the initial ideas together. Since VR plays a very important part in the production, we worked intensively on *Wittgensteins Mätresse*. After reading the novel, we worked out what the VR should be in terms of content and dramaturgy, and gave a lot of thought to the merging of VR and performance. The VR worlds are a mix of 2D and 3D shots and 360-degree images. The idea was to build associative image spaces consisting of landscapes, stills, portraits, and abandoned apocalyptic places. They are spaces in between, where time functions in a distorted way and which are upside down. Another important aspect was Kate’s searching and her traveling. We wanted the audience to have the same experience as Kate – being alone, thrown back on themselves, trapped in their own head, in their own memory.

I’m very happy with the aesthetics of Stefanie’s VR worlds. They are powerful, sensual and poetic, and it is hard to ‘get rid’ of the images. And I am happy that we managed to use the live VR camera profitably despite the great technical challenges. We weren’t sure until the end if it would work.



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**KM:** It does work, indeed, and it manages to point up the theme of circularity and self-consciousness in marvelous ways. And to circle back, Markson-style, to where we began: is such minimalistic stage design, near-absence of sound, the presence of multimedia / VR typical for your theatre work? Did you readily inhabit the physical world of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, or did you need to leave your comfort zone in order to make it work?

**NS:** *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is a typical evening in terms of my formal language. I like to work in installations, associatively, physically, and with proximity to the audience. What was different compared to other works is the approach to the material and the development. I always leave my comfort zone when directing. I can't imagine it any other way.

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DOI 10.2478/doc-2023-0005

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Alexander Scherr

Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, Germany

Alexander.scherr@anglistik-uni-giessen.de

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# The ‘Struggle for the Narrative’: Cooperation and Conflict in *Tiger King*’s Intermedial Universe

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## Article history:

**Received** 13 April 2023

**Revised** 24 May 2023

**Accepted** 30 May 2023

**Available online** 20 June 2023

**Abstract:** This article examines the disputed status of narratives in the Netflix documentary *Tiger King* (2020–2021), and the ways in which the series’ actors use media to bolster their particular version of a narrative. While

classic studies of intermediality have productively analyzed the relations between the multiple semiotic resources employed in narrative forms, I offer an approach to intermediality in documentary art that enriches the structuralist paradigm insofar as it calls additional attention to the various human actors that put the worldmaking power of media to use.

Assuming that in filmmaking the creation of a storyworld is a fundamentally cooperative, while also potentially conflictive, endeavor, I examine the Netflix hit show as a documentary in which narrative co-construction is particularly significant. The series introduces its audience to the strange world of 'big cat owners' in the United States – a world which is populated by dubious storytellers and full of conflicts of interests. *Tiger King*'s 'hyperreal' world is saturated with media and images that are employed by its actors for storytelling purposes on a contested narrative territory. I argue that the actors' 'struggle for the narrative' resonates with the show's Darwinian themes and its interests in documenting a world in which the true predators are not the tigers but the human 'storytelling animals.' By examining how the various actors boost their own narratives while discrediting those of other players, I aim to illuminate the fine line between narrative co-construction and conflict in the show's intermedial storyworld.

**Key words:** documentary storytelling, intermediality, metamediality, *Tiger King*, co-construction vs. conflict

## Intermediality in Documentary Film Art

To say that documentary films and series are intermedial is almost a truism. As a specific form of film art, any documentary is a 'multi-, poly- or plurimedial' artefact (cf. Rajewsky, 2004, p. 14) whose semiotic resources are, in the most general sense, visual and auditory. Viewers of a documentary may also be presented with images of newspapers or archival footage, and some documentaries, such as Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), even employ animated sequences. In principle, then, it is possible to consider a given



documentary as an intermedial artefact in the sense that the narrative it tells emerges from an interplay of various material-semiotic resources. My general impression is that most classic studies of intermedial artworks, including Wolf (1999), Rajewsky (2002), Chrzanowska-Kluczevska (2019), and the contributions in Rippl (2015), would look at the documentary film in this way, studying it as a narrative medium with a complex semiotic surface. With regard to the focus of the present thematic issue on intermedial co-construction, these classic or 'structuralist' approaches would posit that it is the different semiotic carriers of meaning that contribute to the documentary's intermedial storyworld.<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding the merits of the structuralist tradition in intermediality studies, my approach to narrative co-construction in documentary art differs in several respects from the classic framework. While analyzing the meaning-making potential of forms and media is always important, narratives in documentary films are not only the result of an interplay of material-semiotic resources but also of interactive processes between human agents. As I argue elsewhere (Scherr, 2023, forthcoming), a documentary usually begins as an open narrative project characterized by different, and sometimes conflict-ridden, intentions of various human actors. It is thus not only the makers of a documentary (the director/s and the film team) who creatively employ different medial resources for storytelling purposes; the social actors who feature in the documentary often have an agenda of their own and might likewise

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<sup>1</sup> Another theoretical tradition would speak of the film as a 'multimodal' artefact (see Bateman & Schmidt, 2012; Thon, 2019). This tradition, too, would posit that the meaning of films (and other media) emerges from an interplay of medium-specific semantic resources (i.e., 'modes'). While theorists of multimodality are often interested in the same phenomena as scholars of intermediality, the history of the two disciplines is different and there is some disagreement as to how 'media' should be conceptualized (see Hallet, 2015).

try to impress their voice onto the narrative.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, then, the story of a documentary project is – for a long time – an *emerging* narrative, a work in progress, and it is not always clear from the beginning what resources and media the different agents (the filmmakers and the actors) will utilize to shape the narrative in a way that serves their respective interests. To use a phrase that is intentionally modelled after Darwin, one could say that there is something like a ‘struggle for the narrative’ in documentary projects – a contest during which different stakeholders try to ensure that the story gets told in a particular way.

In the present essay, my example for discussing the fine line between narrative co-construction and conflict in documentary art is the Netflix hit show *Tiger King* (2020–2021).<sup>3</sup> The series has been considered as a representative of true crime documentaries à la *Making a Murderer* (2015–2018). However, it also has a strong Darwinian subtext that resonates with the way in which I have outlined the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in documentary film projects. More specifically, the show introduces its audience to the strange world of big cat owners in the United States – a world which is populated by dubious storytellers and full of conflicts of interests. Despite its focus on preying animals, *Tiger King* is not a nature documentary. The true predators are neither the tigers nor other wildlife showcased in the series but the human ‘storytelling animals’ who aim to bolster their particular version of a narrative while discrediting the stories of other players.

To be clear about one thing from the beginning: as a call for attention to animal rights, *Tiger King* is a modest success at best, and the show has

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<sup>2</sup> Following an established convention in documentary studies, I will continue to refer to the real-life individuals depicted in documentaries as “social actors” (Nichols, 2001, p. 5), or simply as ‘actors.’ Actors in this sense must be distinguished from professional actors and theatrical performers. However, the authenticity of the performance is a matter of debate in several documentaries, including the series which will later be considered in this article: since the social actors who feature in a documentary project know they are being filmed, “[t]he degree to which people’s behavior and personality change during the making of a film can introduce and element of fiction into the documentary process” (Nichols, 2001, p. 6).

<sup>3</sup> While the show was renewed for a second season in 2021, my discussion in this article will draw on examples from the first season only.

rightfully been critiqued from a human-animal studies perspective (Bauer, 2020). Nonetheless, what the series documents well is the 'hyperreal' world of big cat owners (see Baudrillard, 1983) – a world which is saturated with media and images that are employed for storytelling purposes on a contested narrative territory. The show might revolve around wildlife and human-animal relations, yet there is surprisingly little in *Tiger King* that is 'natural' or 'authentic.'

Although the finished series (after post-production) clearly bears the filmic voice of its directors, Eric Goode and Rebecca Chaiklin, the filmmakers are not the only media professionals involved in the making of *Tiger King's* narrative(s). Goode and Chaiklin make a point of foregrounding the series' cooperative aspects; they use different strategies to introduce their audience to a society of media users who are as adept at posing in front of a camera as they are at handling wildlife. *Tiger King* does not so much tell a narrative with absolute authority as examine the different narrative agendas of its real-life actors. We see these media experts participate in the making of several narratives, sometimes giving the Netflix filmmakers instructions on how to shoot a scene in a particular way; and we also see how they study (often suspiciously) and comment on the medial artefacts produced by other players in an attempt to assert control over the story.

As *Tiger King* thus explores the role of media in the making of marketable images, there is a close connection between intermediality and 'metamediality' – a relationship which is not at all uncommon according to Wolf (1999, p. 49): "in works in which intermediality appears repeatedly or in a conspicuous way the assumption is at least not far-fetched that there might be a connection: that intermediality here is coupled with a tendency towards meta-reflection on problems of mediality or fictionality and related questions." Indeed, we will see that *Tiger King* is acutely aware of the worldmaking power of narratives that, more often than not, straddle the boundaries between fictionality and nonfictionality. The meta-reflective qualities of the series thus relate to the involvement of media in the fabrication of such narratives, on the one hand, and to the various forms of interaction (be they collaborative or antagonistic) between its media-savvy actors, on the other hand.

## Of Animals and Storytelling Animals: *Tiger King*'s Intermedial Universe

I have indicated before that narrative co-construction is an important element in *Tiger King* insofar as the real-life actors depicted in the series form (temporary) alliances with other players in order to control the narrative. What *the* narrative is, however, is surprisingly difficult to explain as the agendas of the individual players are so different that discrediting other people's stories is just as important as promoting one's own image. One could thus argue that *Tiger King* is a documentary about ownership in two regards: as a show about big cat owners and animal-rights activists, it is a documentary about *animal* ownership. As a show about the power of narratives and images (produced and disseminated with the help of media), it is a documentary about *narrative* ownership.

These two points are related. Using C. B. MacPherson's term (1962), one could describe (most of) the key actors in the series as "possessive individualists": their sense of self rests on the fact that they own wild animals and other property, including the means of production they use for distributing profitable images and stories which they are not shy of marketing in a contested struggle for (economic) survival. In *Tiger King*'s media-saturated world, representations constantly compete with other representations – so much so that the series is less a documentary of 'real life' in an abstract sense than of the ways in which media are instrumentalized to promote a compelling story (see Mäkelä et al., 2021). There is a metamedial quality to many scenes in that the camera frequently captures other media or shows us the media experts at work.<sup>4</sup>

The key player in the series is a man who goes by the stage name of 'Joe Exotic.' Joe is the owner of a private zoo in Wynnewood, Oklahoma, in which he keeps various specimen of wildlife, especially big cats. Various other facets

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<sup>4</sup> By 'metamediality,' I mean the self-reflexive situation that occurs when a medium references other media or calls attention to its own mediality (see Wolf, 1999, pp. 48–49; Rajewsky, 2002, p. 81; Hauthal et al., 2007).

of what appears to be an eventful biography are revealed in the course of the series. These events include that Joe has been married to various husbands and, for a while, was in a three-way relationship with two husbands at once (neither of whom, as it turns out, were actually gay, and one of whom took his life in Joe's park). Moreover, Joe ran for President of the United States in 2016 and for Governor of Oklahoma in 2018. At the point in time when *Tiger King* is narrated, Joe is in prison after having been convicted on various charges of animal abuse and for having ordered an attempt on Carole Baskin's life. Carole is the second protagonist in the series and Joe's nemesis: an animal rights activist, she runs a conservation reservoir called 'Big Cat Rescue' in Tampa, Florida, and has been in a number of feuds with Joe over the years. There is tellability to Carole's biography, too, for she is rumored to have been involved in the disappearance of her well-to-do second husband, whose money she inherited after he was declared legally dead. Much of the series revolves around the battle between Joe and Carole but other players enter the stage. There is Bhagavan 'Doc' Antle, a big cat trainer who owns a wildlife preserve in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina; Jeff Lowe, who will later assert control over Joe's zoo and is associated with organized crime; and Rick Kirkham, a documentary filmmaker who used to work for Joe and ran his YouTube channel Joe Exotic TV. Last but not least, there are a number of former employees at Joe's zoo who speak out in front of the camera, including the zoo's manager John Reinke, the animal keeper 'Saff' Saffery, Joe's ex-husband John Finlay, and the head zookeeper Erik Cowie.

This selective introduction to the show's characters and some of the key events may serve to underline that *Tiger King* presents the audience with astonishing content that would not have fitted into one documentary film and instead calls for a serial format. As one German reviewer has put it, the series is so larger than life that the most remarkable thing about it is "that it exists" (Mangold, 2020; my translation). Everything in *Tiger King* is so hard to believe that one almost feels it could not have been imagined as fiction. What the audience sees on the screen is a 'post-truth' society in which marketable stories with a strong emotional appeal have replaced a common trust in an intersubjectively shared reality (cf. Browse et al., 2019; Ryan, 2023). Media

play a significant role in this society for they assure that stories (about oneself or one's opponents) can be disseminated and go viral. *Tiger King's* inter- and metamedial qualities thus lie in the fact that the series makes a statement on the highly mediatized world in which we live by showing the audience how profitable stories are fabricated on tape, television, websites, YouTube, and other media.

This situation has implications for the work of the filmmakers and how they understand their own role as storytellers. In the first episode, entitled *Not Your Average Joe*, viewers get to witness how the production team visit Doc Antle's 50-acre preserve in South Carolina. As Antle drives the team to his house, he instructs them about how to film the introduction of his persona in what will later be the edited documentary: "Go to the front door and I'll open it and say, 'Hi. How you doing? Come in.'" The sequence will then be shot in the exact way in which Antle has ordered it. The filmmaker Goode responds by saying, "I like that Doc is better at directing than we are." The comment is revealing about the unusual way in which the main actors cooperate with the filmmakers: as media experts and professional fiction-makers, the actors require hardly any guidance on how to make a compelling film. Anticipating their own representation, it is them who instruct the producers of the documentary with the intention of influencing what gets told and how.

Joe appears in the show as the most creative storytelling animal of all and this also concerns the narratives he has produced about his opponent Carole Baskin in order to damage her image. One of the most ludicrous outcomes of his narrative art is revealed in season 1, episode 3 (*The Secret*), in which viewers see a music video about Carole that Joe once produced. The video, which is called *Here Kitty Kitty* and available on Joe's YouTube channel (JoeExoticTV, 2015), relates the rumors about the disappearance of Carole's second husband Don and alleges that Carole orchestrated it, going so far as to imply that she even fed Don's body to her tigers.<sup>5</sup> To top things off, the video

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<sup>5</sup> This allegation is most explicitly articulated at the end of the song's second verse: "No bones, no remains but that won't change the fact / That Don sure ain't comin' back / But you can't prosecute, there's just no use / There's nothin' left but tiger tracks."

shows the audience a Carole body double who feeds pieces of meat to a tiger while Joe, dressed in a black country outfit, sings along to the action, acting as a narrator figure who provides an authoritative version of the events.

The relationship between nonfictionality and fictionality in the video is ambivalent. The clip's message is blatantly obvious but the art form of the music video, which falls under the protection of artistic freedom, provides Joe with a relatively secure platform on which he can launch his attacks against Carole in an attempt to seize narrative authority. It bears pointing out, in this context, that music videos are often situated in the borderland of the fictional and the factual. As Kobena Mercer (1986) demonstrates in her analysis of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* video, the form can be used by artists to negotiate their image – a narrative construct that is particularly effective when its 'reality' cannot be distinguished clearly from its 'fictionality' (as was the case with the image of Jackson's sexuality around the time when *Thriller* came out). In precisely this way, though with less subtlety, the music video is also used by Joe, who employs it to affect Carole's image negatively while bolstering his own image.

The fact that scenes from the music video are reproduced in the Netflix documentary underlines that the show frequently examines the narratives of media that already exist. This form of intermediality is not uncommon in the documentary film, which often resorts to archival material in addition to footage that is shot by the filmmakers "on the spot" (Nichols, 2001, p. 46). What is special about the Netflix series, though, is that it places almost every representation in a web of stories in which the authority of one narrative constantly clashes with another actor's version of events in a different medium. In this way, the truth status of the representations that are integrated within the show becomes an omnipresent metafictional and metamedial concern.

In keeping with its general approach to representation, *Tiger King* makes a point of clarifying that Joe's life was already a reality show before Goode and Chaiklin's intervention. The role of Rick Kirkham is interesting in this regard since Kirkham was actually the first documentary filmmaker who had a deal with Joe. There was an agreement that he would run Joe Exotic TV if Joe consented to Kirkham's doing his own reality show about the zoo. As Kirkham

explains in season 1, episode 4 (*Playing with Fire*): “Doing his little Internet shows was only my way of getting into the zoo, because I had a camera crew shooting a reality show behind the crews shooting his Internet show.” In the style of an infinite regress, *Tiger King* turns out to be a film project about another film project (which was itself a project about yet another film project). It is a documentary about a society that is always already ‘mediatized,’ meaning that there is no access to reality – not even to the supposedly ‘natural’ world of wildlife – that is not shaped through media and narratives (cf. Hepp & Krotz, 2014).

To explore how people use media to make stories, the Netflix documentary employs a making-of structure and often takes the audience behind the camera set. In so doing, it marks the shifts in narrative levels from the content fabricated by the actors to the behind-the-scenes negotiations of how scenes should be filmed.<sup>6</sup> Joe, in particular, is a natural for conceptualizing his own filmic representations and so we repeatedly get to see him order how a scene be shot. Like so many twenty-first-century autobiographical storytellers (from vloggers to reality TV participants), he lives his life in the future tense, strategically considering how his actions need to be captured such that they will appear to his audience in a particular way. As Joe understands his own life as one big story and actively contributes to its making, Kirkham describes his own task during his time at the zoo in the following way: “All I did constantly was: ‘Roll the camera, roll the camera, roll the camera,’ to get all that shit on tape” (*Playing with Fire*).

There is a twist even to Kirkham’s story, which is revealed in the same episode. As the title *Playing with Fire* already indicates, narrative control is a form of power that is always precarious in *Tiger King*. Kirkham puts his cards on the table when he explains in one of the interview shots that he literally ‘owned’ Joe in the form of the representations he had on tape and which he had copyrighted in the contract both had made. The episode then goes on to relate that the recording studio in which this material was kept mysteriously

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<sup>6</sup> For the notion of ‘narrative levels,’ see Pier (2014).



burnt down. The arsonist was never tracked down, but there is suggestive footage in the episode that compromises Joe, exposing as it does the interest he had in the destruction of Kirkham's delicate material.

Again, we can see how ownership is negotiated on two levels in *Tiger King*. The documentary is, in a very literal sense, a show about copyright, which concerns the question of who owns the very media of which copies can be produced and sold.<sup>7</sup> But it is also a meditation over the symbolic power through which storytellers can 'own' a narrative to gain a positive effect for their image, which is a way of generating capital in its own right. One of the show's key insights is that, in a neoliberal market society in which even wild animals can be kept, bred, and sold, the multiplication of fictions and stories through media is a profitable good regardless of their truth status. In the same way in which genes have to produce copies of themselves to survive in a Darwinian world (cf. Dawkins, 2006), narratives in the world of *Tiger King* have to go viral to benefit their producers.

All of this goes to show that the media society depicted in the Netflix documentary is founded upon the Darwinian principles of cooperation and competition. To emphasize how the human animals 'prey' on other animals (both human and non-human), the filmmakers invite comparisons between the big cats and the human protagonists by intercutting shots of humans with images of tigers. Even Carole, the animal rights activist, is not excluded from the metaphorization of humans as predators. The third episode (*The Secret*), for example, which targets the rumors around Carole and the legal death of her ex-husband, employs close-up shots of growling tigers and suggestively juxtaposes them with images of Carole, one of which shows her holding a tiger on a leash and controlling it in this way. The implied message crafted by the filmmakers is clear enough: Carole's role is highly ambivalent; doubts remain if she authentically cares about big cats, or if she is simply a more sophisticated storyteller than Joe.

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<sup>7</sup> Copyright issues are not only relevant to the question of who owns the filmic material. They also regulate how the zoo owners think about their animals, for the big cats are bred to be multiplied, which generates capital.

The juxtaposition of images of humans next to images of big cats serves to underline that the former are the real predators in an ongoing struggle for survival. In this Darwinian contest, stories and fictions can give individuals temporary advantages over other players, but they can also backfire. After all, Joe's lifelong dream of becoming famous is assured by *Tiger King's* overwhelming success with audiences worldwide and, at least in this sense, the show caters to the maintenance of his image. However, the success of this story cannot be separated from the way in which it ends for him: in a cage in the form of a prison cell. While his excessive use of narratives may have provided Joe with short-term advantages (raising the attractiveness of his zoo, etc.), the series demonstrates that a society in which medially crafted representations are entirely detached from their truth status is not sustainable in the long term and runs into serious problems. Again, we can see how the show combines metafictional concerns about the truth/fictionality of stories with metamedial concerns about the (social) media through which such narratives are produced and disseminated.

If anything in *Tiger King* can reliably be assumed as being authentic, it is the affection of some of Joe's former employees for the animals. In Saff, in particular, who does not seem to care too much about his image and who has chosen to live with disability, we find an actor who does not exploit storytelling to promote his own advantages. Saff's loyalty, as he declares in the after-show to the first season (*The Tiger King and I*), is with the animals and not, as one feels inclined to add, with the *storytelling* animals. In this way, Saff articulates awareness of the fact that what appears as 'authentic' or 'natural' can itself be a carefully crafted fiction, embedded in power structures.

## Conclusion

This last observation is linked to a more general point that this article has made with regard to the role of intermediality and narrative co-construction in *Tiger King*. We generally tend to assume that documentary works use specific media (cameras, microphones, software, and other equipment) and the semiotic

resources of filmic language to provide their audiences with a creative, but nonetheless sincere and authentic, representation of real life. *Tiger King* challenges this assumption: it does not so much offer us an authoritative image of 'reality' with the help of media than explore the constitutive role of media in the making of compelling stories that are marketed as real and authentic. This interpretation of the Netflix documentary is in keeping with the way in which literary and media scholars have come to understand authenticity. In this view, (the impression of) authenticity is the *result* of mediated performances and not its opposite: "Promising the genuine and the immediate and by this, at least to some extent, an escape from mediated existence and experience, authenticity itself turns into a quality of mediation and is thus conditioned by what it seems to deny" (Funk et al., 2012, p. 10).

In *Tiger King*, authenticity, sincerity, and realness are notoriously contested issues. Narrative versions of the real (crafted and disseminated by gifted storytellers) are constantly in the making and conflict with other stories. Media play a key role in this Darwinian 'struggle for the narrative': the actors involved cooperate with other actors (and the Netflix filmmakers) when they have the chance to produce a favorable image of themselves but they also use media to contest and discredit the narratives of other players. *Tiger King* shows the audience a highly intermedial world and also possesses a strong metamedial quality due to its reflective stance on the worldmaking power of media. Ostensibly a show about wildlife, the series is at its most revealing when it documents the Darwinian competition between the human (storytelling) animals and the various media with which they promote their narratives.

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DOI 10.2478/doc-2023-0006

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Agata Handley

**University of Łódź, Poland**

agata.handley@uni.lodz.pl

**ORCID ID:** 0000-0001-9315-9165

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David Allen

**Midland Actors Theatre, United Kingdom**

david@midlandactorstheatre.com

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## Ekphrasis in Disneyland: *The Alice in Wonderland Ride* (1958)

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**Abstract:** The *Alice in Wonderland* ride in Disneyland, which opened in 1958, was designed to place visitors inside the action, as if seeing things through Alice's eyes. It drew on the film and on concept artwork, as well as the Lewis Carroll book; and can be seen as a transmedial work, which utilised a complex set of media elements. It can also be considered ekphrastic, in the way it referred to source media texts, but elaborated on them, and repurposed them.

The concept of ekphrasis has traditionally been applied to verbal representations of visual art works. Modern theoretical approaches, however, have challenged the idea that language is the only acceptable target medium; the concept has been applied to different media products, including films, music videos, video games, etc. Cecilia Lindhé (2016) has emphasized the ancient Greco-Roman understanding of ekphrasis, which highlighted the question of *enargeia*: the imaginative and physical response in the reader or viewer. The *Alice* ride was like a journey through a strange dream, a series of random, even surreal encounters; it exemplified the concept of *enargeia*, in making visitors feel, not only as if they were present at events, but that it was happening to them.

**Key words:** ekphrasis, *enargeia*, Disney, Disneyland, transmediality, Elleström, Carroll

“Disneyland is like Alice stepping through the looking glass,” Walt Disney once declared (as cited in Finnie, 2006, p. 20). But it was not until 1958 – three years after the park opened – that it got an *Alice in Wonderland* ride.<sup>1</sup> It was a so-called ‘dark ride’: i.e., an indoor attraction that utilizes atmospheric special effects, such as ultraviolet or ‘black’ light, and is often associated with ‘haunted house’ attractions. It was located in the ‘Fantasyland’ area, which was primarily aimed at children; and joined three other dark rides in the same area, all based on familiar stories that had been turned into popular Disney films: *Snow White and her Adventures*, *Mr Toad’s Wild Ride* and *Peter Pan’s Flight*.

The *Alice* ride was designed by Disney imagineer Claude Coats. Coats had worked on the 1951 Disney film; and the ride drew on the film, but also on some

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<sup>1</sup> We are not counting the *Mad Tea Party*, a ‘spinning teacups’ attraction, which was present when the park opened, but which was really a conventional fairground ‘waltzer’ ride, that used Alice as a ‘theme.’ (Themed elements included Japanese lanterns hanging overhead, which also appear in the film.) An *Alice* dark ride was evidently planned as early as 1954; see Janzen & Janzen (1999, p. 26).



of the background and concept artwork that was produced for it.<sup>2</sup> In this way, it can be seen as a transmedial work, which utilised and transformed a complex set of media elements (including, of course, the original Lewis Carroll book). It can also be considered ekphrastic, in the way it referred to source media texts, but elaborated on them, and repurposed them. The ride, to some degree, depended on visitors' knowledge of the source texts, but it also played against expectations, in a kind of transmedial 'game' of allusion, incorporation and transformation.

It might seem surprising to discuss a theme park ride in terms of ekphrasis. The concept has traditionally been applied to verbal representations of visual art works; it can be understood, more generally, as "an example of a transmediation between a source media product and a target media product, belonging to different media types that are structured differently on the level of the semiotic modality" (Bruhn, 2000, p. 148). Modern theoretical approaches to ekphrasis have, in fact, emphasized the intermedial character of contemporary art forms, and challenged the idea that language is "the only acceptable target medium" (Cariboni Killander et al., 2014, p. 10), making the concept applicable to different media products, including films, music videos, video games and comic books, but also art installations and architecture. As Heidrun Führer and Anna Kraus observe, currently, "ekphrasis studies include media products outside the word/image dichotomy and the traditional system of arts as source and target medium" (Führer & Kraus, 2020, p. 98).<sup>3</sup> In their study of Gordon Matta-Clark's art, Führer<sup>4</sup> and Kraus stress the participatory potential of ekphrasis; they analyse it as an "performative process of pro-duc[ing] and performing something for an audience in the flow and entanglement of signs" (Führer & Kraus, 2020,

<sup>2</sup> Concept artists create sketches and colour palettes that serve as guidelines and inspiration for the animators working on a Disney film.

<sup>3</sup> For example: Goehr, 2010; Lindhé, 2013, Führer and Kraus, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> In an earlier study, *Thinking ekphrasis through the digital* (2017), Heidrun Führer explains her aim of establishing an alternative view of ekphrasis within digital media, which questions the understanding of ekphrasis as translation between source and target medium.

p. 99).<sup>5</sup> This element in ekphrasis is also foregrounded in research by Renate Brosch, who calls it a “performative strategy.” She argues for

a revival of rhetorical and performative understandings of ekphrasis that can augment theoretical conceptualizations and bring them into line with the participatory and hybrid practices of ekphrasis today. Increasingly, what used to be a central aim of ekphrasis – the description of an artwork – has been replaced by modes of rewriting the artwork and in the process questioning accepted meanings, values, and beliefs, not just relating to the particular artwork in question but referencing the ways of seeing and the scopic regimes of the culture at large (Brosch, 2018, p. 225).

Approaches like this stress ekphrasis as a process, rather than a static form (Brosch, 2018, p. 226). This produces a shift of focus, from the medium, to the question of reader/viewer response, and the ways in which ekphrastic strategies can create a shift in perspective, and have an immersive impact on the reader/viewer/participant (Brosch, 2018, p. 226).

Siglind Bruhn has offered one of the most radical re-definitions of ekphrasis, seeing it as the “representation in one medium of a real or fictitious text composed in another medium” (Bruhn, 2000, pp. 7–8). This means that the “recreating medium need not always be verbal, but can itself be any of the art forms other than the one in which the primary ‘text’ is cast” (Cariboni Killander et al., 2014, p. 12). Agnes Pethö, for example, investigates the use of ekphrasis in cinema, arguing that the uniqueness of the medium stems from its complex and mixed mediality. Pethö defines ekphrasis as “a case of media being incorporated, repurposed by other media” (Pethö, 2010, p. 214). In place of a unity of image, language, and sound (etc.), there is an unstable set of interrelations between elements. In this way, the medium can “remediate” all other forms (Pethö, 2010, p. 211).

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<sup>5</sup> This study stresses that transmediation of the ekphrastic process “is far from always a clear-cut, easily demarcated phenomenon” (Elleström, 2020, p. 11), especially in the case of collaborations which involve multiple media forms.

Ekphrasis in cinema, text and photography, has also been examined by Laura Sager Eidt. She proposes four categories of ekphrasis: “attributive” (allusion or brief mention); “depictive” (more detailed description); “interpretive” (more detailed reflection, with a higher degree of transformation); and “dramatic”, which has a high degree of “*enargeia*,” i.e., the capability to generate images in recipients’ minds (Sager Eidt, 2008, pp. 45–56). The final category is particularly relevant to the present study, as it involves a theatricalization of a work of art, to such an extent that it seems to take on a life of its own (Sager Eidt, 2008, p. 50).

Elleström sees ekphrasis as an example of “complex representation of media products” (Elleström, 2014, p. 32).<sup>6</sup> Following Elleström, Cariboni Killander et al. suggest that the representation is simple when “the media product is briefly referred to or quoted in a different media product,” and complex when it is “more developed, elaborated and accurate, in other words if a larger amount of media characteristics are transferred from the source medium to the target medium” (Cariboni Killander et al., 2014, p. 12). They argue that, in order for “simple media representation to become ekphrasis” (Cariboni Killander et al., 2014, p. 14), additional conditions have to be fulfilled:

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<sup>6</sup> Elleström explains ekphrasis within the frame of media representation; however, he notes that “representing a media product in general includes transmediating it to some extent. Ekphrasis would indeed seem quite pointless if the characteristics of the source media product were not represented again by the target media product” (Elleström, 2014, p. 8). Thus, in the process of ekphrasis, media characteristics of the source medium become transmediated into the target medium. In this article, transmediation and media representation are understood in line with the recent understanding of the terms offered by Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirmacher, who claim that: “Transmediation reconstructs meaning that was previously mediated by another media type; a film adaptation, for example, may mediate the same story as a novel. When we analyse transmediations, we focus on a diachronic process and we explore the relation between a source media product and a target media product and analysing what is transferred and what is transformed... When exploring media representation, we analyse how one medium represents the characteristics of another medium, such as when a poem describes a painting not only by way of representing the image or the depicted scene but also offers a depiction of the painting as an object” (Bruhn & Schirmacher, 2022, p. 104).

[A]n ekphrasis occurs when one media product (the source, for example a painting) is represented in a different media product (the target, for example a photograph) with a certain degree of elaboration (*energeia*), including the repurposing of the source – for instance through a semiotic process – and eliciting *energeia* in the receiver (Cariboni Killander et al., 2014, p. 14).<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, it can be said that the elaboration of the source media object, and the re-purposing of this object in the target medium,<sup>8</sup> are necessary for ekphrasis to occur. The nature and degree of ‘repurposing’ and ‘elaboration’ are unique for each instance of ekphrasis. As Elleström suggests, we should not ignore the fact that “representations of media products are possible, common and [thus] worthwhile to theorize about far beyond the more conventional modern borders of ekphrasis” (Elleström, 2014, p. 8). The following discussion seeks to go beyond those conventional “borders,” to investigate the repurposing and elaboration of source media – in this case, a book and a film – in a multimedial, and multisensory, target medium: a Disney theme park ride.

Cecilia Lindhé, in her analysis of ekphrasis in contemporary art installations, has emphasized audience response, rather than the verbal description of the artwork or artifact (Lindhé, 2016, p. 32). She points to the relevance of the ancient Greek and Roman understanding of ekphrasis, which highlighted the impact on the audience,<sup>9</sup> making it an important aspect of the “ekphrastic interaction” (Brosch, 2018, p. 235). This again places

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<sup>7</sup> To illustrate their point, Cariboni Killander et al. offer an analysis of a sequence from the 2012 film *Barbara*, directed by Christian Petzold, which was set in 1980s’ East Germany. One scene features Rembrandt’s painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). The authors undertake a detailed analysis of the “relation between *energeia*, as a potentiality in the object (the media product), and *energeia*, as an actualisation in the head of the subject (receiver)” (Cariboni Killander et al., 2014, p. 14).

<sup>8</sup> See Cariboni Killander et al (2014, p. 14).

<sup>9</sup> See Lindhé (2016, p. 32), Brosch (2018, p. 235).

the focus, less on the medium, than on the question of *enargeia*: the response in the reader or viewer.<sup>10</sup> *Enargeia* is here understood as vividness (Lindhé, 2016, p. 34), which engages the imagination of the audience, and appeals to the senses, so making them feel as if they were present at the events. The immediacy, spectatorship, and the existence of the live audience (Lindhé, 2016, p. 34), were crucial elements in the rhetorical practice of ekphrasis, in terms of the effect it has on the body of the listener/spectator (Lindhé, 2016, p. 34). As Ruth Webb observes: “in the ancient definition the referent is only of secondary importance; what matters... is the impact” (Webb, 2009, p. 7), and the power to penetrate the emotions, through an appeal to the “eyes of the mind” (Webb, 2009, p. 98).

It should be noted that this understanding of ekphrasis acknowledges its *processual* character, and the changes and impact which occur in the process of visualization. Lindhé discusses the way that ekphrasis works in art installations, evoking “a variety of imaginative, emotional, and rational reactions” in the viewer (Lindhé, 2016, p. 36). Arguably, this may also be applied to the Disneyland ‘dark rides,’ which utilized transformative and interventionist strategies, turning the spectator into an active participant, who experienced events as if they were actually ‘there,’ immersed in the action.

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The Fantasyland rides such as *Alice* were originally conceived to place the visitor inside the action, seeing things as if from the point of view of the main character. There was no Snow White in the *Snow White* ride, for example; instead, it was the visitor who travelled through the dark wood, and was offered the apple by the witch, etc. In filmic terms, the experience was akin to a sustained tracking shot from the character's point-of-view, as the ride took visitors through a series of different environments. They were puzzled, however, by the absence of their favourite character. Disney Imagineer Ken Anderson observed that “nobody

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<sup>10</sup> See Brosch (2018, p. 226).

got it... They just wondered where the hell Snow White was" (as cited in Janzen, 1992, p. 25). Nevertheless, as Jack Janzen suggests, even if visitors did not understand they were supposed to be Snow White, they still felt "threatened by the Witch, the Evil Forest... the twisting and confining mine tunnels, the looming boulders... and the dark!" (Janzen, 1992, p. 25).

Elleström observes that "transfers among different media always entail changes" (Elleström, 2020, p. 2). In the *Snow White* ride, one of the major changes made, in the transmedial process of adaptation/transformation from book and film, was that a number of scenes that might be considered essential to telling the story, were omitted; there was an emphasis instead on immersion in a series of dark and forbidding environments (the castle, the dark wood, etc.). Visitors were threatened by objects: for example, in the castle dungeons, a skeleton hanging from a wall "stretched its neck and opened its jaws" (Sundberg, 2013) as cars passed by, culminating in the climax when the witch, standing on a cliff above, was poised to drop a boulder on visitors' heads. ("Goodbye, dearie!" she cried [Sundberg, 2013].)

In the 1958 *Alice* ride, similarly, visitors 'became' Alice, or rather, assumed her place/perspective. Alice herself only appeared as a voice-over. In this way, the shift in perspective was characterised by the transfer of the ride visitor into the position of participant. At the start of the ride, the cars entered a tunnel, as if passing underground, and visitors heard Alice in the darkness say, "My adventures in Wonderland began when I followed a white rabbit down a rabbit hole. All of a sudden, I fell! Down, down, down..." (as cited in Seegar, 1993, p. 44). It was as if this was a voice in the visitor's own head. Here, then, was a simple device that shifted guests immediately into the position of character/participant.

The ride was like a journey through a strange dream, a series of random and even surreal encounters. The visitor 'became' Alice, then, not by following her narrative journey; rather, the ride was a *psychological* journey through the various environments – or perhaps, rather, the subjective spaces – of "Wonderland"; as if it was all happening in the rider's head, like a waking dream. The effect of the transmedial transfer and transformation was, to use Webb's words, to transport the "audience in imagination... to the events in

questions, making use of the ability of *enargeia*" (Webb, 2016, p. 101) – in this case, making visitors feel, not only "as if" they were present" (Webb, 2016, p. 101), but that it was happening *to them*. The images in the source media were given physical form, and yet, the idea remained of an *imaginative* immersion, through the "eyes of the mind" (Webb, 2009, p. 98).

There was a switch, then, from narrative – (re)telling the story – to the effect on the viewer. The familiar storyline of the book and film was disrupted. Many of the most popular characters and episodes were missing: there was no Tweedledee and Tweedledum, even no Queen of Hearts. This also meant a deliberate loss of clear 'markers' of the storyline, generating a certain feeling of randomness, an uncertainty about what was happening, and what would happen next. This replicated Alice's own experiences: in the book, and the film, she often repeats that she feels lost. If the ride had followed the familiar narrative line, then visitors would not have experienced the same sense of disorientation.

From the start, the ride offered a sense of transformation, which was also a disruption of visitor expectations. It began in an outdoor garden. Coats' design here was based on the 'caterpillar' scene in the film: it included a gigantic mushroom, like the one the caterpillar sits on. This was not a natural garden, but something more fantasmagoric. The artificial plant leaves were the height of trees; they towered over the guests, as if they were already seeing things from Alice's perspective when, in the story and film, she shrinks to three inches. To see this in ekphrastic terms: the effect of Alice's diminution was first described in the book, then visualised in the film, and then physically embodied, with the visitor's position moved from reader/viewer, to participant.

The shapes and colours of the plant leaves in the garden, with their baroque twirls, recalled the wisps of smoke that, in the film, rise from the caterpillar's hookah. The ride cars wound through the 'garden' and then into a tunnel, as if going 'underground' (down the 'rabbit hole'). The cars were designed to resemble giant versions of the caterpillar, with its curved shapes, as if the riders were accompanying this creature in burrowing into the ground. The cars were also painted in a range of bright colours, like the caterpillar's multi-coloured smoke.

The 'caterpillar' scene occurs later in the book/film, and so was here transposed in position in the narrative structure. The opening of the ride, moreover, was an example of transmediation, with an elaboration and repurposing of familiar elements, motifs, and characters. The caterpillar, present in both novel and film, underwent not only a repurposing (as a vehicle); it was also hybridised, and so elaborated upon. Retaining its identity, it was also something more than just a caterpillar. It was as if the creature was a guide or psychopomp, taking visitors into the underworld.

The first environment encountered by visitors, as they descended 'underground,' was the 'Upside Down' room. This does not appear either in the book or film (although the design incorporated certain recognisable motifs); signalling at once that the ride experience would parallel Alice's journey in the film, but not follow it. The room was a 'subjective' or dream space, in the sense that it was designed to have a psychological effect on the visitor; simulating the disorientation of Alice's fall down the rabbit hole. We may see it, then, not as a direct representation or reproduction of something in the source media, or even simply a repurposing or elaboration. Rather, it was a form of 'objective correlative' – i.e., it was designed to generate an emotional impact on visitors, which correlated to Alice's experiences, through the combination of sound, image, and objects. In other words: there was an ekphrastic transposition and transformation, not only of visual/textual elements in the source media, but of emotional or psychological experience or affect.

What visitors saw on the ride was a cosy domestic interior – ostensibly the home of the White Rabbit, with family portraits hanging on the walls;<sup>11</sup> but everything was upside-down, with furniture hanging down over the heads of the guests. In the film, when she is falling, Alice sees herself for a moment upside-down in a mirror; and here, visitors could see an image of themselves in a mirror on the wall, but *upside-down*, as if they no longer had their feet on the ground.

One of Coats' concept sketches for the film can be seen as a source medium for the 'Upside Down' room. It shows Alice's fall down the rabbit

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<sup>11</sup> There is a White Rabbit's house in the Disney film, but it is very different in design from the Upside Down room on the ride.



hole.<sup>12</sup> The walls are panelled, as if she is actually in someone's home; she passes various domestic objects as she falls (armchair, stool, table, etc.). There is the long line of a chimney, not straight, but twisting like a snake; its brickwork could be the snake's scales. There is what looks like a lampshade hanging down (but it could equally be a gilded bird cage); and a twisted picture frame, with curled edges that make it look like some organic plant-form, growing from the walls of the tunnel. The sketch is dominated by a stuffed armchair. To use a term from animation, the object has been 'stretched' (as opposed to 'squashed'): the chair back has been elongated and twisted. Moreover, the chair seems to have animal features, as if it is some strange subterranean creature, with the chair arms for eyes, the seat forming a mouth, and the wide sides like monstrous flapping ears. In this way, it combines the 'natural' and the 'man-made.' There is a certain parallel here with the so-called 'Museum of the Weird' which was designed by imagineer Rolly Crump (but never built) for the Disneyland *Haunted Mansion* attraction. It included domestic objects that combined the animate and the inanimate: an armchair with a human face, which would "stand up and speak to visitors"; a plant with a demon face; a melting "Candle Man," etc. (Janzen, 1990, pp. 24–27). We may recall the way that surrealists like Salvador Dalí created unexpected combinations of natural and domestic objects – for example, the umbrellas that perch like vultures in Dalí's *Sewing Machine with Umbrella in a Surrealistic Landscape* (1941). The combination produces the "uncanny" (to use Freud's term): i.e. the object is familiar, and yet strange at the same time. Disney artists might well have studied surrealists such as Dalí in preparation for the *Alice* film; it includes uncanny hybrids such as flamingo-umbrellas. (It may be no coincidence that Dalí himself worked for a time at the Disney studios in the 1940s<sup>13</sup>).

<sup>12</sup> See Girveau (2007, p. 31).

<sup>13</sup> Dalí worked at the Disney Studios over some two months in 1946. He produced sketches and inspirational paintings for a planned short film, *Destino*, which was never made (see Allen, 2020). A version of the film, reconstructed from Dalí's sketches, was finally produced in 2003; it was featured on the 2010 blu-ray release of *Fantasia 2000*.

On the *Alice* ride, the Upside Down room contained some of the same objects that appear in Coats' sketch, and in the film (armchair and footstool, vases, lamps, picture frames, etc.). It conformed in this sense to Elleström's notion that a significant amount of "media characteristics" are "transferred from the source medium to the target medium" (Elleström, 2014, p. 13). The images of domesticity, although easily recognised as elements transferred from the film, were transformed in the target medium. They were "made strange," not only by being squashed or stretched, but also by being *inverted*. For example, there was an upside-down fireplace; with its curtain of flames, it was like some gaping mouth of hell. The inverted fender, hanging over it at the top, looked like a threatening portcullis about to drop. At one point, the ride car seemed to be heading towards the open fireplace; it was not simply an obstacle in the path of the car, but like a creature poised to swallow up the riders.

The walls of the room were twisted (squashed and stretched) out-of-shape, suggesting both 'house' and 'underground burrow.' The lamps and tablecloths were decorated with veined patterns; they had curled edges, as if they were semi-organic, and the lamp itself was shaped more like a plant. The room was dominated by organic swirls, down to the patterns covering the rugs and even the table. The colour scheme in the room was predominantly pinkish brown, with splashes of yellow, green and orange – again, suggesting some kind of underground garden. Beneath the wheels of the car, the actual floor of the ride was in darkness, so riders could not see the track ahead. There were several 'false exits': first, the car seemed to be heading towards an archway, with a view of a winding path through an ornate garden; but then, the figure of the White Rabbit swung into view, blocking the exit – blowing a trumpet, as if to warn the visitor away. The suddenness of his appearance was both comic, and threatening (even down to the blaring sound of the trumpet). (A number of figures on the ride, like this one, were two- rather than three-dimensional, making the ride, on a certain level, like a large-sized 'pop-up' storybook.)

The car swerved as if to avoid the White Rabbit, and seemed to be heading towards the open fireplace, as if the visitors were about to fall into the flames; but again, it veered away at the last moment. There were no other exits visible

in the room, and the car now appeared to be heading straight towards a wall; but in fact, this was a disguised set of doors, which parted at the last minute to let the car through. Alan Coats (Claude Coats' son) notes that, as the ride progressed, the 'crash doors' from one space to the next became progressively lower, so "you tended to want to instinctively duck your head as you passed through" (Personal correspondence, March 3, 2013). This made the doors into an obstacle, and also meant that riders experienced the classic dark-ride fear of apparent collisions looming ahead. Moreover, the crash doors, together with sudden appearances by characters such as the White Rabbit and the Cheshire Cat, generated a sense of threat, making the ride seem like a series of near-death experiences. This may itself be seen as a correlative of Alice's experiences in the book/film, plunged into a world where she could suddenly find herself under a sentence of execution ("Off with her head!").

In this way, then, elements of a standard dark ride were utilised (and repurposed) to generate a sense of physical and psychological disorientation in the rider, as an objective correlative for the character's experience. (It might equally be argued that adapting *Alice* to the format of a dark ride changed the nature of the story, into something altogether 'darker' and more threatening.) In its tortuous winding route, and abrupt changes of direction, the ride recalled the maze that appears in the Disney film (as well as the maze-like forests through which Alice wanders). The sudden changes from one environment to the next also recalled the climactic 'chase' sequence in the film, when Alice flees the Queen's court: one moment, she is skipping over rocks on the ground; the next, the 'rocks' have become tea things on a table that she is running down; then she finds herself swimming in the ocean, and so on.

Exiting the Upside Down room, riders found themselves next in the 'Oversized Room.' This can be seen as another instance of transmedial elaboration: it evokes associations with the source media, but it does not exist in either the book, or the film. If, in the first environment/scene, riders were turned upside-down, it was now as if they had suddenly grown 'small.' (The voice of Alice was heard again here: "I kept getting smaller, and smaller, and smaller" [as cited in Seegar, 1993, p. 44]). Some of the same objects

reappeared – the overstuffed armchair, a footstool, a table covered in tea things; the right way up this time, but much larger: the armchair, for example, had swollen to fifteen feet high (Janzen & Janzen, 1999, p. 30).

Mary Blair produced a number of concept sketches for the Disney film; she is widely credited as the formative influence on the film's style.<sup>14</sup> These sketches may be seen as another source medium for the ride. In one of them, Alice is sitting at the table at the Mad Hatter's tea party, a diminutive figure on a larger-than-life armchair; only her head is visible through a forest of teapots.<sup>15</sup> The image suggests her subjective viewpoint: the situation makes her feel small, and the objects seem large. Similarly, the effect of the Oversized Room on the Disney ride was less to make riders feel that *they* had shrunk in size, but rather, that the objects had *grown*, and were threatening to overwhelm them.<sup>16</sup>

On the ride, 'shrinking' the riders (relative to the objects) gave them the point-of-view of a child, surrounded now, in the Oversized Room, by (imaginary) monsters in the dark; so, for example, the armchair was like some monstrous bat, or a huge mouth, about to swallow them up. The Cheshire Cat loomed over the riders on a six-foot high footstool, with his "piano-key teeth and staring, fried eyes" (Janzen & Janzen, 1999, p. 30), as if, to him, they were a mouse that he would like to eat. The car passed under the legs of the footstool, and the cat suddenly swung into view, hanging upside-down in front of the riders (Janzen & Janzen, 1999, p. 31), just as they were about to exit through the doors ahead. Like the White Rabbit in the Upside Down room, the cat's sudden appearance was at once both comic, and threatening. The car now took a hairpin bend, as if evading the cat (another near-miss). Ahead was the doorknob (as it appears in the film, with a comic-grotesque face); its mouth

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Canemaker (1996, p. 129).

<sup>15</sup> See Canemaker (2003, p. 51).

<sup>16</sup> We may recall here the way, in some of the absurdist dramas by Eugene Ionesco, objects seem to proliferate and grow, "like the cells of a cancerous growth" (Lamont, 1993, p. 15). In *The Chairs*, for example, chairs multiply until they fill the stage; at the end of the play, the human characters depart, and the chairs are all that remains.

was open, again as if about to swallow the riders, but then, the doors parted, and the cars passed through to the 'Garden of Live Flowers.'

This transmediated environment was in many ways true to the scene in the film, but also involved a considerable level of transformation. In the film, the flowers in the garden tower over Alice.<sup>17</sup> They are predominantly portrayed as maternal, even matriarchal figures; the smaller plants such as the pansies are voiced by children, turning the garden into a kind of nursery. On the ride, the fact that the plants were larger-than-life, towering over the riders, made this environment at once both 'garden' and dense 'jungle.' They were serenaded by the flowers (as Alice is in the film), with the jolly 'nursery' song, *All in the Golden Afternoon*. The garden seemed to offer, then, a temporary refuge from danger, a *locus amoenus*.

In the film, the scene takes several minutes. On the ride, the elements of the cinematic *mise en scene* were compressed (the scene lasted seconds, not minutes). In the film, the flowers are friendly and welcoming at first, but turn hostile when they decide Alice must be a weed, and expel her. At the end of the same scene on the ride, there was also an irruption of hostility, but here, it was not given any explanation or motivation. The 'Dandy Lion' suddenly popped up from below the track path with a roar, in another random 'attack.' This was, again, an example of how the de-emphasising and compression of the narrative only added to the disorienting, nightmarish impact of the ride.

The cars veered away again, and riders were plunged into darkness. A sign read 'Tulgey Wood.' The ride passed, then, from the daylight of a "golden afternoon" to what was effectively a 'night' scene.<sup>18</sup> In the film, the wood is the darkest environment, filled with strange (uncanny) creatures of the night. It is here that the (Dalí-esque) merging or blurring of the 'natural' and the 'domestic' is most apparent. In creatures such as the Birdcage Bird,

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<sup>17</sup> In this scene in the Disney film, Alice has shrunk again to three inches high. In the equivalent scene in the book, she has returned to life-size.

<sup>18</sup> In the film, the Mad Hatter's Tea Party scene precedes Tulgey Wood; on the ride, it *followed* it. The change in order of scenes meant that Tulgey Wood acted as a gloomy counterpoint to the 'Garden of Live Flowers'; it allowed the Mad Hatter's Tea Party to form a 'climax' to the ride.

the Accordion-Neck Owl, and the Umbrella Bird (an umbrella/vulture that again recalls Dalí), it is as if domestic objects have been transformed, and come to life – or as if animals have been merged with machines in some mad scientist's lab. Tulgey Wood could also be seen as a kind of child's nursery at night, where strange mechanical toys have come to life. In the film, the various creatures perform actions that are at once 'natural' and 'mechanical': e.g. an owl hoots by stretching its accordion neck; and a 'dog,' with a broom for its head, sweeps the path (at once, both a domestic vacuum cleaner, and a canine on the trail of interesting scents).

On the ride, there was another shift of perspective, as the cars seemed now to be passing through the tree-tops of the wood, rather than on the forest floor. Riders were first confronted by numerous pairs of flaming red eyes burning menacingly in the darkness. The 'jungle' of the Flower Garden now gave way to the dark enclosing forest. The track was lined with the branches of two-dimensional giant trees (with numerous enlarged leaves); among the foliage, there were creatures such as the Birdcage Bird and Umbrella Bird. Cacophonous (and cartoonish) sounds of hooting and squawking were heard over the Cheshire Cat singing the *Jabberwocky* song. This song, taken from the film, is again like a 'nursery' song; but it was made slightly eerie though the use of an echo, as if the cat was a spirit haunting this mysterious wood. At the end of the scene, there was a sign saying 'Mad Hatter,' and then a door suddenly swung open, revealing another sign: 'Tea Party.'

As we have seen, in the film's climactic 'chase' sequence, Alice at one point finds herself running down the tea table, dancing among the tea things. This was remediated in the ride: in the 'Mad Hatter' scene, the unexpected twist was that the riders actually found ourselves *on the table itself*, with the car weaving and spinning through a maze of towering, larger-than-life tea-cups and teapots. There were swirling patterns on the 'tablecloth,' and also swirling leaf and flower motifs on the various pots and cups, making this another 'garden' or 'jungle.' The cups and pots were also like colourful, cartoonish toys from the nursery play chest – but enlarged, and made dangerous. Riders were trapped among objects which had taken on a life of their own: one tottering pile of cups seemed about to fall on the riders and tip the contents on their

heads. The figures of the Mad Hatter and the March Hare popped up from behind the table, shouting "Move Down! Move Down!" When the ride first opened, only their heads were visible; later, they were rebuilt, so they loomed high above the riders' heads, meaning they were again overwhelmed on all sides by outsized objects (Janzen & Janzen, 1999, p. 33). The cars finally 'crashed' into a huge teapot – it was another disguised set of doors – and through it into next room. There was "an explosion of strobe lights in a variety of patterns, simulating fireworks" (Seegar, 1993, p. 44). This was the 'Crash Room,' a major departure from both the book and film. It was as if the riders had now, finally, crashed for real, and were 'seeing stars.' Alice's voice was heard, crying, "Oh dear, how do I get out? Oh – I've lost my way!" (as cited in Seegar, 1993, p. 44). Signs pointed in different directions: "This Way Out" (pointing back the way that the cars had just come), "Go Back", "Up" (pointing downwards), etc. (Seegar, 1993, pp. 44–45). This was the final scene on the ride; its boldness lay in putting riders in an *empty* environment; a subjective space suggesting a state of complete cognitive disorientation. Alan Coats observes: "An early concept sketch for the Disney film by Mary Blair pretty much defines the Crash Room scene. A bewildered Alice, hands on her waist, ponders a forest of crisscrossing paths and giant tree trunks bearing the signs – 'That Way,' 'Back,' 'Beyond,' 'Over,' 'Yonder,' etc. – all adding to the confusion of her predicament of, 'How do I get out?' This certainly illustrates her state of complete disorientation" (Personal correspondence, March 3, 2013).<sup>19</sup>

Here again, then, was the image of an object – the directional signs – multiplying beyond human control.

As an ending to the ride, however, the Crash Room must have seemed somewhat bewildering and abrupt to visitors. It mediated/evoked Alice's state of mind, her psychological turmoil, but again, in place of the familiar narrative-line of the book/film. In particular, riders were surely puzzled by the omission of the character of the Queen of Hearts, who is central to the climax of the film.

<sup>19</sup> For the Mary Blair design sketch, see Canemaker et al. (2009, p. 162).

In fact, it appears that, at one point in the planning, it was intended to include a 'Queen of Hearts' scene. Alan Coats recalls:

The attraction went through many concepts, beginning several years earlier. I'm sure dad faced many obstacles – not enough money, not enough space, and engineering challenges – to complete the final version. Only three months prior to the opening, promotional material describes a show with a very different ending. I have a copy of *American Weekly* magazine dated March 9, 1958, titled *My Newest Dream* by Walt Disney. The article includes a very early rendering and copy that describes how you'll pass "through a Maze of Cards and into the fearsome presence of the Red Queen, who threatens to 'roll someone's head' with every breath." This, of course, never happened (Personal correspondence, March 3, 2013).<sup>20</sup>

The Crash Room seemed fitting, however, as a climax, and the culmination of all the previous near-death misses on the ride, and paralleling Alice's position at the end of the book/film, when she faces the threat of execution ("Off with her head!"). It was comparable to the ending of another dark ride, *Mr. Toad's Wild Ride*, where the car passed into a tunnel, and there was an explosion of bright flashing lights, as the car 'crashed' into an oncoming train. We may assume that the exit from the Crash Room was hidden, so that all that passengers could see were the flashing lights and the multiple signs. The car next smashed through three sets of doors in rapid succession – each accompanied by a loud yell from an unseen character in the dark (Seegar, 1993, p. 45). These were doors to nowhere; and it was as if, each time, riders passed through a set of doors, they had crashed ('died') again. There was one final 'yell' as the car exited the building. Alan Coats recalls that his father "wanted guests to leave laughing, and decided to use one of the funniest audio cues from Disney cartoons – the 'goof yell' (used by the hapless Goofy character as he fell off a building, or whatever). Dad must have remembered how my

<sup>20</sup> There is an early design sketch for the ride, which includes a 'Queen of Hearts' room, in Janzen & Janzen (1999, pp. 26–27).



brother and I would laugh our heads off whenever we heard this sound. So he probably decided to use this as the 'pay off' to create happy riders coming out of the Alice experience" (Personal correspondence, March 3, 2013).

We should note, however, that this sound – like the White Rabbit's trumpet, the Cheshire Cat's laugh, or the Dandy Lion's roar – was at once cartoonish, and also random and discordant. Through the final door, riders suddenly returned to the outdoor 'world,' as if they too were, like Alice, waking up from a world of darkness and nightmares. This was not quite the end, however. The car still had to descend along a winding path like a trailing vine through the outdoor garden. There were several sharp turns at the bottom of the ramp – similar to the bone-shaking turns on a 'Wild Mouse' ride, which throw you from side to side – before the car returned to the starting point. David Eppen observed: "Try to imagine the feeling of winding your way down that twisty ramp (squinting in the bright sunlight after emerging from the relative darkness). I especially loved the way they made it seem as if you might head straight off the edge each time you reached a curve... a simple effect that keeps you feeling a bit off-balance. Just like the whole crazy ride!" (Eppen, 2007).

The ride was substantially rebuilt in 1984. The new version exhibited a lesser degree of elaboration and repurposing; and there was a restructuring of the riders' experience and physical involvement. Alice herself now appeared; a clear signal that the aim was no longer to make the rider into the character/participant. Gone were the Upside Down and the Oversized rooms, and the new ride was more like a two-minute re-run of highlights from the movie, a series of vignettes of memorable moments and characters from the film: for example, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, the Caterpillar smoking his hookah, etc. Riders were no longer threatened and overwhelmed on all sides by outsized objects. In the 'tea party,' for example, instead of being on the table, amid the tottering cups, the cars simply rode past a vignette of the scene. Rather than being submerged in the story, riders were observing how it unfolds – a passive position, akin to the gaze of the cinema spectator. In other words: the ride no longer sought to simulate the experience of the lost and confused Alice. It did not penetrate the emotions and affect the body of the participant, or make them feel as if they were present in the action,

in the same way. (In the absence of the Oversized Room, for example, they remained 'life-size' throughout.) The original ride took us into a nightmarish world where threats and 'monsters' lurked in the 'safest' domestic objects and environments; the new version offered a much safer experience and, to a large extent, a linear recreation of the story. It was still ekphrastic in the sense that the story was given transmedial form, and characteristics were transferred from the source (film) to the target medium (ride); but the repurposing and elaboration which Cariboni Killander et al. see as key elements of the process, were missing, or occurred to only a limited degree.

This was, moreover, ekphrasis without *enargeia*. Arguably, any examination of ekphrasis needs to consider, not only the formal transfer of characteristics from one medium to another, but the question of reader/viewer response, the way the reader/viewer is positioned in relation to the work, and the nature and degree of participation/immersion that is invoked. The transformation and transposition that occur are not simply on the level of style or media characteristics, but on the level of *enargeia* and affect. In the case of the *Alice* ride, the ekphrastic transformations made the riders feel as if they were actually *there*, immersed in the action, rather than simply observers of the image. At the same time, it was as if the physical/three-dimensional elements of the ride were so many phantoms or fantasmagoria; *psychological* transformations, occurring in the "eyes of the mind" (Webb, 2009, p. 98).

The concept of ekphrasis, as we have seen, has its roots in antiquity, where it was used in the study and practice of rhetoric (Webb, 2009). As such, its primary medium, at that time, was verbal. In the *Alice* ride, the elements that were used were multimedial – a combination of different signing systems: sound, light and dark, images and objects, and movement. These signing systems were primarily non-verbal, but may be seen as so many 'texts.' There was an emphasis on the ride, less on narrative, than on environment as psychological space. The design sought to reach beyond the familiar storyline, to the *experience* of physical and psychological disorientation (falling, shrinking, being lost, etc.). Indeed, at times, it deliberately avoided the direct

representation of the familiar story, looking instead for its own objective correlatives to convey these underlying states.

Lydia Goehr (among others) has challenged the “assumption that ekphrasis is performed only through the medium of words” (Goehr, 2010, p. 389). We may see it as a transformative tool, which plays a crucial role in creating a participatory experience for the audience. In the case of the *Alice* ride, ekphrasis sheds light on the ride’s dynamic ‘architecture’ which resulted in part from the transformation of elements that were transmediated from the source media to the target medium. It also foregrounds the question of *enargeia*. As in the practice of rhetoric, the focus in the ride was on effect; the different ‘texts’ or signs were selected for their effectiveness *as texts*, in generating a response, and creating a vivid – multisensory and physical – immersion in this fictitious world.

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**DOI** 10.2478/doc-2023-0007

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Adam Cowart

**Carnegie Mellon University, School of Design,  
University of Houston, United States**

[acowart@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:acowart@andrew.cmu.edu)

**ORCID ID:** 0000-0002-3173-909X

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# Dynamic Ways of Prospecting: Parts, Wholes, Experiential Futures, And Eating a Banana for the First Time

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## **Article history:**

**Received** 02 May 2023

**Revised** 30 May 2023

**Accepted** 05 June 2023

**Available online** 20 June 2023

**Abstract:** This paper explores the complex relationship between the parts and wholes of prospective narratives and the form and function of those narratives. Applying Goethean science and dynamic ways of seeing

to storytelling in futures and transition design, the paper proposes a methodological approach to surfacing and disrupting fixed assumptions about the future with the intention of reanimating the narrative to create space for novelty to emerge. This reanimation is made possible because of the holographic nature and inherent systemicity of stories, which provides multi-scalar affordances through the wholes and the parts of the narrative. The paper delves into an experiential futures case study, *The Museum of Food*, to demonstrate the role that encounters with the future can play in disrupting future fixedness in playful but meaningful ways. By entangling reanimated prospective narratives with staged experiential encounters, participant audiences are provided with the incremental scaffolding, the prospective plot points, to reimagine and reauthor their own stories about the future, dismantling used and colonized futures in the process.

**Key words:** narrative, antenarrative, futures, experiential futures, storytelling, emplotment

## Introduction

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is best known for his poetry and dramatic writings, but his work also included scientific works, particularly in botany and color. While not as well known, “Goethe was able to achieve an unprecedented awakening of artistic consciousness within the domain of science” (Hoffmann, 2007, p. 7) through a “way of science, understood as a phenomenology of nature” (Seamon, 2005, p. 86). For Goethe, “the effort to understand a thing’s meaning through prolonged empathetic looking and seeing grounded in direct experience” (Seamon & Zajonc, 1998, p. 3) required a particular form of attention he referred to as “exact sensorial imagination.”

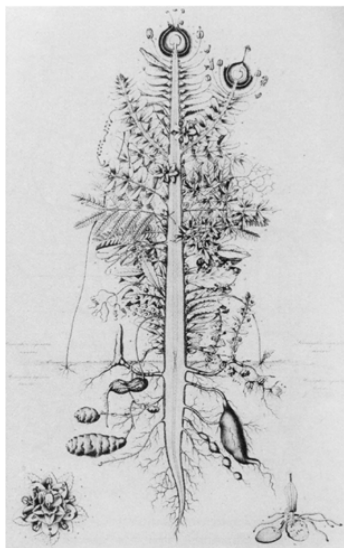
Henri Bortoft in his influential work *Wholeness of Nature*, explores exact sensorial imagination and the wholeness of nature as it is revealed through the parts. He proposes the cultivation of “imagination as an organ of perception” drawing on the active observation of a plant in which “Suddenly there is



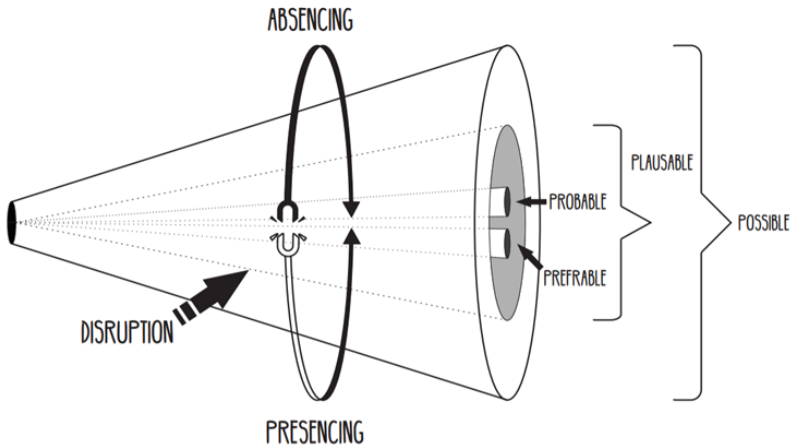
a movement, a dynamic movement, as you begin to see not the individual leaf but the dynamic movement. The plant is the dynamical movement. That is the reality..." (Scharmer, 1999). During his doctoral research in physics, Bortoft worked with David Bohm to better understand quantum mechanics and wholeness (Seamon, 2013). Critical to his thinking of Goethean science was the reframing of observation and scientific inquiry away from the study of the organism or phenomenon as a static object and instead cultivate the level of awareness to observe the dynamic coming into being of the object.

Goethe illustrates this point with his concept of the *Urpflanze*, an archetypal plant with the capability to "unlock the potential of any future form" (Jackson, 2013). Similar conceptual frameworks exist in futures and storytelling, most notably the futures cone in which the future becomes increasingly divergent as imagined time moves further from the present into the future (Voros, 2003). While the *Urpflanze* moves horizontally (see figure 1), and the futures cone moves vertically (see figure 2), both are visual conceptualizations of an anticipatory imagination.

**Figure 1. Goethe's *Urpflanze* Proto-Plant**



Source: Wikimedia Commons

**Figure 2. The Futures Cone with Theory U Overlay**

Source: (Cowart, 2019)

This underlying anticipatory awareness can be applied to storytelling as a particular form of imagination in which the emplotment of the story, so often perceived as a mechanistic cause and effect object, can instead be imagined actively and dynamically as an organism or phenomenological experience. Story is one of our oldest technologies to form and influence social cohesion, to communicate complex information, and to imagine otherwise (Boyd, 2010; Gottschall, 2012; Harari, 2014; Storr, 2020). Story is also our gateway to the future, the form of imagination that allows human beings to ‘time travel’ and access the not-now. Here the author suggests an alternative posture to futures thinking: an organic and holistic approach; incorporating and cultivating storytelling as an organ of prospection rather than perception.

Narratives about the future are often objectified as images (Fred, 1973), held up as static, problematic, rather than dynamic and constantly in a state of change and transformation. This static objectification can lead to used futures (Inayatullah, 2008) in which the image is borrowed or imposed from a different ethnotemporal (Margaret & Robert, 2005) context, or disowned futures in which the self disassociates from the actual preferred future

(Inayatullah, 2005). Colonized futures are also ubiquitous, fetishized representations of futures that reinforce systems of power and are portrayed as inevitable.

Despite the sense of inevitability conveyed in these stories, the inherently fragmentary nature of anticipatory narratives is well established in storytelling theories on ante-narrative bets on the future and pre-employment (Boje, 2001, 2008) in which “Story is an account of incidents or events, but narrative comes after and adds ‘plot’ and ‘coherence’ to the story line. Story is therefore ‘ante’ to story and narrative is post-story... ‘ante’ combined with ‘narrative’ means earlier than narrative” (Boje, 2001, p. 1). This fragmentary and yet-to-be determined nature of anticipatory narratives is also evident in the nodal power of future narratives defined as “the degree to which a situation is open” (Bode & Dietrich, 2013, p. 47).

The critical need to avoid narrative ‘foreclosure’ on the future is a commonly expressed concern. Rather than perception as the observational posture, by highlighting the anticipatory nature of this coming into being and focusing in on the particular anticipatory temporal element of perception, *perception* can be reframed as *prospection*, an anticipatory form of perceiving the world. It is what Goethe called the “generative force.” Thus, Goethean science and the concept of imagination as an organ of perception can be redefined as storytelling as an organ of *prospection*. This storytelling posture moves away from causality to relationality, away from cause and effect linkages in plot, in which the components of the story, or ‘members,’ “are not merely acting *on* each other (to form a coordinated mechanical system) but are deriving *from* each other, creating each other” (Hoffmann, 2007, p. 17).

Existing work has been done to synthesize futures thinking with elements of Goethean science and Bortoft’s work on clarifying the Goethean approach to phenomenology through Otto Scharmer’s *Theory U* framework and presencing (Senge et al., 2005). “Presencing is a combination of ‘sensing’ and ‘presence,’ meaning to sense deeply into the present moment to become aware of our highest future potential as it emerges” (Cewart, 2020, p. 98). This is the coming into being of the formal expression temporally, in which “The present moment is viewed as possessing a past facing and future facing side. The past facing

side is shaped by past patterns of behavior and assumptions based on experience" (Cowart, 2020, p. 98). *Theory U* is a framework to access and then action insights gained through presencing (Scharmer, 2009). Next, we turn to Goethe's approach to phenomenology.

## The Goethean Process

Although Goethe himself never clearly defined a process, numerous Goethean scholars have articulated variations on Goethe's phenomenological observational approach (Bortoft, 1996; Brook, 1998; Hoffman, 1998; Holdrege, 2005; Seamon, 1998; Wahl, n.d.). In a literature audit of Goethean scholars, Terry Irwin distills various approaches down to a 4 stage process (Irwin, 2008):

- 0) *The preparatory stage*: in which curiosity ignites attention and begins the process of raising the level of awareness as a phenomenon is observed.
- 1) *Exact sense perception*: in which the senses are engaged and an intensive process of observation occurs and the parts are scrutinized in order to discern wholeness. Totality is not wholeness, nor is the sum of the parts wholeness.
- 2) *Exact Sensorial Imagination*: in which the imagination is activated in order to observe the form of the whole as it dynamically comes into being. The observation is dynamic in that it encapsulates a temporal wholeness in which the past, present and future reside in unity versus distinct static snapshots in time.
- 3) *Seeing in Beholding*: in which the observed expresses itself through gestures, in which the agency of becoming shifts from observer to the observed.
- 4) *Being One with the Object*: in which an awakening or extended consciousness emerges between the observer and the phenomenon, and the relationship between observer and observed harmonizes patterns and meaning of form fully express themselves.

In order to shift our level of awareness and imagine stories about the future that are in themselves rooted in wholeness and emergent properties, some variation of this process can be enacted and practiced over time, in essence ‘flexing’ or exercising storytelling as an organ of prospection as a form of relationality and interactivity. “There seems to be a relationship between the degree of interactivity that is offered by a FN [future narrative] on the one hand and its radicality on the other – if by radicality we mean the degree to which a FN does indeed *stage* openness, indeterminacy, potentiality, etc.” (Bode & Dietrich, 2013, p. 52).

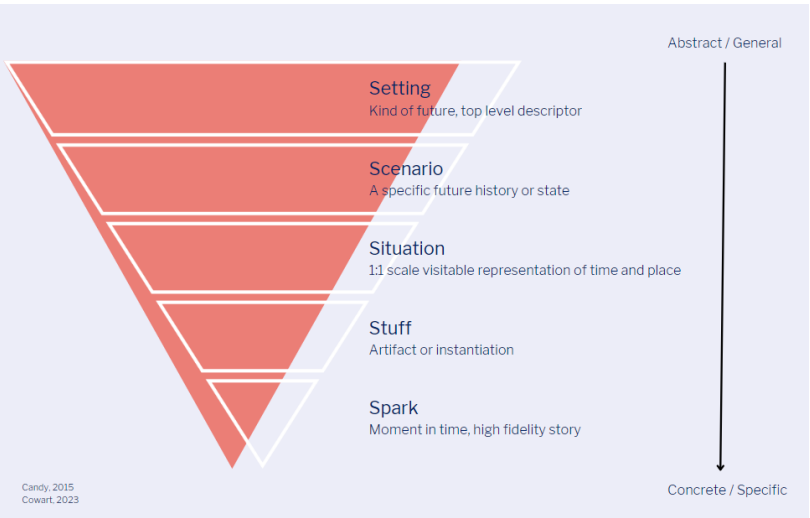
## A Case Example: The Museum of Food

In March of 2023, *The Museum of Food*, an experiential future, was staged at Carnegie Mellon University. Experiential futures is a discipline developed to address “the persistence of an experiential gulf in foresight work” (Candy & Dunagan, 2016, p. 26) in which an abstract future difficult to imagine is materialized and encountered by audiences in order to draw inferences and make evaluative judgements (Lee et al., 2021). A common method to develop experiential futures is the experiential futures ladder used to move from high-level ‘future of’ abstraction to a high fidelity moment in time materialized and encountered by willing and consensual participants.<sup>1</sup> See figure 3.

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<sup>1</sup> Note there is a niche offshoot of experiential futures, Guerilla Futures, which merges the concept of experiential futures with guerilla marketing to confront *unsuspecting* participants with possible futures in unlikely contexts.

Figure 3. Experiential Futures Ladder



Source: (Cowart, 2023)

The intention of the *Museum of Food* project was to speculate on a future in which hyper-personalization of food nutrition and the desire for convenience leads to a ‘cube food’ future. The experiential future takes place in a world where cube food is so ubiquitous that the average person is unfamiliar with basic foods such as a grape, a piece of steak, a pickle, or any sort of common foodstuff obvious to the population of the present. Building on the conceit of a museum, these pieces of food were staged in large, sterile exhibition spaces. As well, the museum offered many educational sessions, including an introduction to *Lucky Charms*, and a history lesson on the dessert spoon. However, during the experiential future a workshop on identifying and eating fruit was staged. On this particular day in the future, the fruit participants learned to identify and consume properly was the banana.

What follows is a transcription of a chosen selection from the experiential future. After sharing the text and action descriptions, an analysis of the emergent future story and suggestions on theoretical importance is provided by considering the 4 stage process of Goethean phenomenological

observation and traces of the process present in the emergent actions of the participants during the enactment of this possible future.

**Table 1. Museum of Food – How to Eat a Banana**

[The facilitator asks for volunteers for the demonstration. 3 volunteers come forward.]
Facilitator: Thank you so much for joining us. Thank you so much for joining us today. Today, we will be learning a very, very, very special process. This is true. It is known as the banana.
[Facilitator pulls out a bunch of bananas.]
It is a fruit and they used to get it off these old wooden shelves. And these come in bunches of like five or six. Yeah, it comes in multiples. And you could buy them together and pay money for them and just take them home. That's the origin of finance. Have you ever seen or tasted a banana?
[Participants shake their head.]
Have any of you ever seen a banana before?
[Audience members call out 'no.']
Well, today's your lucky day, I guess. So today we will learn a very, very technical and special process. It's called 'How to Peel a Banana.'
[Participants look worried and unsure.]
It can be a little tricky. I could also warn you that when you, if you decide that you want to taste it and you want to eat it, it might be... it's a new experience. We're not used to having flavor and taste today. So it might be a little overwhelming. might feel a little slimy. It's all part of the process. Trigger warnings. I would avoid drinking water half an hour after eating the banana. It feels a little weird. Some people you know, they don't like it. They come and complain to the museum. We can't do anything about it beforehand.
[Participants nod gravely.]
Yeah. So back in the day, if they ever saw a banana on the shelf, they could always go and purchase in an exchange for money. Right? Today we don't have, we don't use money to buy food. We just go and show our hands.
[Facilitator gestures as if her hand is being scanned.]
That's how we do it today. But back in the day, you could give money in exchange for food. The only time you can never ever ever eat a banana, if it was taped up on the wall. It's called Art. So should we begin? Any questions? Does anyone have any questions today?

Participant 1 (pointing to the banana in the facilitator's hand): Yeah, what's the elaborate pattern?

Facilitator: Thank you for asking. I was gonna get to that. So, back in the day, what they used to believe is that the more pattern it had the more flavorful. And the more ready it was to eat. If it was green, you don't usually eat it. When its yellow then you eat it. If it gets too brown, they will not eat it again. So you have to find the perfect time when the banana was ready. It was a very very delicate process.

Participant 2: Is it safe to eat them?

Facilitator: Yeah, all the bananas that we have in the museum today are extremely safe to eat. Yeah, any other questions?

Audience member: How does the skin taste?

Facilitator: How does the skin taste? So back in the day they would not eat this outer layer that they call the skin they would just throw it away so there is no documentation on how to use it as far as we know. But it's great that you know that's called the skin you're one step ahead of me. There you go.

[Facilitator hands banana to participant 1. Participant 1 takes it gingerly, holding it back from their body.]

Participant 1: Do you need a tool to open it?

Facilitator: I will take you through the steps.

[Facilitator turns back to the rest of the bananas and holds them up.]

Facilitator: So this is called a bunch.

[Audience members ooh and ahh.]

Facilitator: They come in multiples. I'm going to do this process because it is a little difficult as well tricky to you know pick it apart.

[Facilitator begins to break up the bananas in the bunch.]

Audience Member: And what is their relation to each other?

Facilitator: They just feel like, bond together. They were found together at the store. I can only tell you how much is documented what we know of humankind back in the day.

[Facilitator hands out bananas to participants 2 and 3.]

Facilitator: Are we ready?

[Participants begin to smell and nibble at the bananas.]

Facilitator: Careful, careful. Please, please wait for instructions. You don't want to break the banana and have a slippery floor right? Our guests will slip and fall.

Participant 2: Sorry.



Participant 1: I'm sorry.

Facilitator: Caution. Like I said, safety first. Alright. So. Hold the banana upright.

[Facilitator holds her banana upright. All 3 participants follow suit. Participant 2 holds the banana incorrectly. Facilitator emphasizes how she is holding it.]

Participant 2: Uh...

Facilitator: Raise your right hand up and...

[She gestures with her right hand.]

Facilitator: OK?

Participant 2: I'm left handed.

Facilitator: Oh. Want me to give you instructions for that way.

[Facilitator reverses her grip on the banana. Shows Participant 1.]

Facilitator: Can you mirror me?

Participant 2: Yeah.

Facilitator: Hold the top tip.

[Facilitator demonstrates.]

Facilitator: With your other hand just grab it.

[Participants are confused.]

Facilitator: Grab it like you're grabbing someone's neck.

Participant 2: Oooh. Ok.

[All participants successfully grip the banana.]

Facilitator: Now with the back hand hold it tight. Can we break it? We're going to snap it.

Participant 1: Right now?

Facilitator: Yes.

Participant 1: My God that's so barbaric.

Facilitator: We're gonna snap it in three. Are you ready? One, two, three!

[Participants 1 and 2 successfully snap the top off their bananas. Participant 3 accidentally rips their banana in half. Participant 2 points at Participant 3's banana in shock.]

Participant 2: Can you still eat that one?

Facilitator: As you can see this is a very, very technical procedure. Yeah, no, you can't eat that one now. Like I said, it's a very sensitive process.

Participant 2: How about mine?

Facilitator: You did great. Really, you too. Does anyone want to taste it?

Participant 1: I'm a little scared.

Participant 2: I'm not sure.

Participant 3: Could I, like, try a little.

Facilitator: No, no, not yet! So now, you need to pull it apart. First, like he said, the skin.

[Facilitator demonstrates by peeling the banana.]

Facilitator: Come on. That's it. Follow me. You got this.

[Participants all slowly and hesitantly peel their bananas, following along with the Facilitator.]

Facilitator: Then, once you are done, you can take it home, you can eat it, you can share with other guests.

[Participant 2 holds up his fully peeled banana.]

Participant 2: Like this?

Facilitator: And yeah, that's it. Enjoy your banana.

Participant 1: Mine has weird strings on it.

Facilitator: Yeah I would not eat that.

[Participant 2 helps Participant 1 remove the banana strings.]

Participant 3: Are you sure you can eat this?

Facilitator: For sure.

Participant 2: How do you eat it?

[Facilitator breaks off a piece of their banana and puts it in her mouth.]

Facilitator: Just put it in your mouth.

[Participant 1 holds the banana in both hands and takes a bite out of the middle, like a sandwich.]

Participant 1: It's sweet!

## The Museum of Food: Storytelling as an Organ of Prospection

Mapping the Goethean science approach as articulated by Irwin, the following observations on *The Museum of Food* banana eating exhibit have been made:

- 0) *The preparatory stage*: There is a freshness to the observed world of the future, a newness in relation to food and consumption. Between the present and the future world changes have occurred. The world and the initial experience is both familiar and strange simultaneously, inviting curiosity without debilitating fear. Enough of a storyworld and mediated experience is present to provide adequate context.
- 1) *Exact sense perception*: Initially participants and audience work to sense and perceive the internal logic of the storyworld around them, a world still somewhat separate from their own in time and imagination. The senses are engaged, visual observation as well as sound, touch, smell and eventually taste. Participants begin to enter into the parts – dialogue, artifacts, emplotment of the historical future events.
- 2) *Exact Sensorial Imagination*: Participants begin to discern the future storyworld through the parts and the relationality that emerges from co-sensing into the emerging future. Participants increasingly engage in the storyworld or storyfield, expressing variations on the coming into being of the form of the future, emplotting variation through prospective anticipation of the whole. The hermeneutic nature of the storyworld starts to clarify, revealing the past, present and future and wholeness through the parts as materialized by participants, objects, and plot points entangled within and throughout the storyworld.
- 3) *Seeing in Beholding*: The essence of the future story being experienced becomes clear to participants as their sense of relationality to the future and confidence grows as they deepen into the future and welcome emergent variations. The future storyfield speaks back

to participants as the dynamical force of the anticipatory narrative takes on a “life of its own.” By embracing variations, participants enter the dynamic flow of the story, reanimating the story through regenerative and restorative gestures. To participate is, by definition, to take part in something. Put slightly differently, to take on a part OF something. Participation, then, is to embody and take on the being-ness of a part in order to sense and shape the expression of the dynamic whole. Extending this definition to an experiential future, the activation of the prospective storytelling field and the invitation to participate provides the conditions in which variation emerges and the parts perceive the whole.

- 4) *Being One with the Object*: The participants did not reach the stage of being one with the object – in this case, the phenomenon of the storyfield of the experiential future. In this final stage, the form of the object or phenomenon, here the future story, “becomes its own explanation” (Bortoft, 1996, p. 75). Perhaps, given more time to inhabit the world of the future, or providing replicable opportunities for participants to re-engage in the storyfield of the experiential future, this stage would have been achieved.

Imagination as an organ of perception “is done by using the sense to systematically come to know, or ‘dwell’ in, the different plant parts, and in so doing encounter the wholeness of which these are different expressions” (Kossoff, 2011, p. 80). Storytelling as an organ of prospection requires the audience or participant as both an observer and actor, as both sensing the field of the whole and active participant as a part, to dwell in the moment of the prospective time-space as it unfolds. Well crafted experiential futures allow participants to be parts of the whole and to dwell in the future in such a way as to facilitate emergence and variation of the whole, thereby undermining old and used stories about the future. Variable constraints on the success of participants to achieve a oneness with the phenomenological experience includes previous participant experience, vividness and strength of the storyworld, and duration, among others.

Moving from a critical and academic lens to an action research posture, we can thus propose that the crafting of new and generative futures so important to imagining systems level transformation through approaches such as Transition Design, is an exercise in awareness, observation, and formalism. It is the form, the SHAPE of the story which is simply the contours of the whole, in which the greatest source of innovative and imaginative spirit lies. This co-creative storytelling as an organ of prospection becomes an act of restorying which enables this imaginative re-rendering and perception of various configurations and imbues the larger storyworld of the experiential future and primes participants with “the different metamorphoses that exist as potentialities” (Kossoff, 2011, p. 80).

## Conclusion

Futures thinking has long been concerned with cultivating multiplicity in its frameworks and methods, a multiplicity that more contemporarily has been critiqued and reframed as lacking plurality (Bisht, 2020). In Goethean science, this tension is not new. Bortoft contends that unity may be found in multiplicity, but that multiplicity cannot be derived from unity. Moving away from multiplicity to plurality in futures conception, seen through this sleight of hand, becomes a redundant exercise. The problem is not the instinctual foresight tendency towards multiplicity in futures without plurality, rather it is the reduction of multiplicity into unity, a reductivist shorthand that is applied both prospectively and retrospectively, which then cannot be recycled back into multiplicity. “This is the mechanical unity of a pile of bricks, and not the organic unity of life” and must be “understood intensively, not extensively” (Bortoft, 1996, pp. 84–85). We see this unity in processes of visioning and consensus storytelling where output is concentrated into a singular agreed upon path forward out of a multiplicity of future stories. Thus, “the polyphony of unmerged voices” must be sustained to avoid the reductionist monological masquerading as unity (Boje et al., 2021, p. 112). The “bricks” of the future are organized and constructed extensively, when they must be co-constructed organically and intensively.

Storytelling as an organ of prospection is a dynamic, participatory mode of engagement, a co-construction of the future through the shared field of a future narrative, held together through wholeness, adapting variations and offshoots of the future through modes of openness, improvisation, and experimentation through the parts or elements of the story. To tell new and generative stories about the future, we must first imagine other stories about the future.

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**DOI** 10.2478/doc-2023-0008

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Oleksandr Kapranov

**NLA University College, campus Oslo, Norway**

oleksandr.kapranov@nla.no

**ORCID ID:** 0000-0002-9056-3311

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# Throwing Soup at Van Gogh: The Framing of Art in Climate Change Activism by British Mass Media

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## Article history:

**Received** 10 April 2023

**Revised** 12 May 2023

**Accepted** 18 May 2023

**Available online** 20 June 2023

**Abstract:** Throwing food at famous paintings (e.g., a can of soup thrown at Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*) represents a rather novel form of climate change protest. The study, which is further presented in the article, seeks to unpack the way British mass media cover the food-throwing incidents that take

place in the context of climate change activism. To that end, a corpus of texts was collected on the official websites of the leading British mass media outlets that describe the instances of throwing food at the world-known canvases by climate change activists. The corpus was analysed qualitatively in line with the theoretical premises of i) intermedial ecocriticism proposed by Bruhn (2020a, 2020b) and ii) framing methodology developed by Entman (2007). The results of the corpus analysis indicated that British mass media frame the famous paintings involved in the climate change protest incidents by foregrounding the monetary value of the paintings and the extent of damage done to them concurrently with de-emphasising the climate change component. The findings are further discussed and illustrated in the article.

**Key words:** art, British mass media, climate change activism, framing, intermedial ecocriticism, throwing food at art

## Introduction

In concord with the volume's art-centred research theme, the article presents and discusses a qualitative study that seeks to identify how mass media in the United Kingdom frame throwing food at art objects (typically, iconic paintings by famous artists), which constitutes a relatively recent form of climate change activism. The first incident of throwing food at well-known canvases took place on 14 October 2022 at the National Gallery in London, the UK, when two climate change activists threw an open can of soup at *Sunflowers* by Vincent Van Gogh. Following that, a similar incident was reported to have taken place at the Barberini Museum in Potsdam, Germany, where a group of climate change protesters threw potato puree at Claude Monet's *Grainstacks*.

Whilst these incidents represent climate change activists' protest against political and corporate actors' inaction to undertake proper measures in order to mitigate the effects of climate change (Chen et al., 2022a, 2022b; Fisher & Nasrin, 2021; Kapranov, 2022; Svensson & Wahlström, 2023), they reflect an intricate and multi-layered interplay between climate change activism on

the one hand and famous art objects on the other hand. It should be noted that the world-renowned paintings, which are involved in the food-throwing episodes, are not reflective of any noteworthy anti-climate change agenda. On the contrary, they are associated with the motifs of nature, which is the case of both Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and Monet's *Grainstacks*. Whereas it would be more logical to expect throwing food at a canvas that depicts an industrial landscape with numerous factory pipes that pollute the atmosphere with greenhouse gasses, climate change activists' food-throwing acts, evidently, appear to be centred on the famous paintings with climate-change friendly motifs. Conceivably, the food-throwing incidents are not as linear and simple as they might seem and they are in need of a comprehensive scientific investigation.

However, there is no state-of-the-art research that elucidates throwing food at the legendary canvases as a form of climate change activism. Moreover, there is no current research that addresses mass media's coverage of throwing food at the acclaimed paintings. The present qualitative study is one of the first attempts to bridge the existing gap in scholarship by means of providing an account of how British mass media frame throwing food at art by climate change activists. In this regard, the article's author concurs with Chen et al. (2022a, p. 1), who posit that more research is needed in order to understand how climate change protests are discussed, framed and presented in the digital discursive space of mass media. Arguably, shedding light onto the framing of climate change protests associated with throwing food at famous art objects by British mass media could facilitate the general public's awareness of and interest in understanding this novel phenomenon (Chen et al., 2022b). Guided by the aforementioned considerations, the study aims at answering the following research question (RQ):

**RQ:** How do British mass media frame throwing food at paintings?

Seeking to answer the RQ, the study utilises the following theoretical considerations: i) framing (Entman, 1993), which is applied to the reporting of climate change activism by British mass media and ii) intermediality, which is contextualised in the study under the aegis of intermedial ecocriticism (Bruhn, 2020a). Framing and intermediality, respectively, are briefly outlined in the subsequent sections of the article. Thereafter, the article proceeds

to the present study and discusses its major findings. Finally, the article concludes with the summary of the findings.

## Intermedial Ecocriticism: Theoretical Considerations

Conceived broadly, intermediality is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that liaises media with artistic, scholarly and everyday communication (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019, p. 288). In line with Elleström (2010) and Chrzanowska-Kluczevska (2019), intermediality is regarded as a transgression of boundaries between heterogeneous media types (e.g., a poem and a painting) that facilitates the comparison of their form/forms and content. Whilst the present study is informed by the broad interpretation of intermediality (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019; Elleström, 2013), its theoretical underpinnings, however, involve a narrow approach towards intermediality, which, in accordance with Bruhn (2020a; 2020b), is referred to as intermedial ecocriticism. Following Bruhn (2020a, 2020b), intermediate ecocriticism is operationalised in the study as the relationship between the human and non-human that is manifested by means of a critical analysis of literary and media representations, as well as aesthetic practices in the context of the Anthropocene (Bruhn, 2020a, pp. 8–9). In other words, intermedial ecocriticism involves cultural practices that are reflective of human attitudes and behaviours towards the non-human world, for instance, nature, artifacts, art objects, etc. (Geal, 2023, p. 1). It should be noted that in addition to intermediality (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019; Elleström, 2013), Bruhn's (2020a, 2020b) intermedial ecocriticism is informed by a long-standing Anglo-Saxon approach to ecocriticism (Buell, 2001; Heise, 2006; Khan, 2019; Małecki & Woźniak, 2020).

Harkening back to the seminal publications by Elleström (2010, 2013), intermedial ecocriticism as an approach “enables comparisons across different media types, with both form and content issues” (Bruhn, 2020a, p. 13). In terms of the cross-comparison of media types, it should be explained that a critical feature of intermedial ecocriticism is represented by media

transformation, which involves the way “medial content or form is transformed from one medium to another” (Bruhn, 2020a, p. 10), Media transformation, or in Chrzanowska-Kluczevska’s (2019) terminology “transmediality”

[...] covers phenomena non-specific to individual media but occurring across them in an independent way. These are: motifs, themes, archetypes, thematic variants, figuration, and narrativity, which all can be found in the texts of literature, opera, theatre, ballet, film, the visual arts, music (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019, p. 289).

In the context of intermedial ecocriticism, the construal of transmediality can be emblematised by a research article on climate change, which at some point in time is used as the plot of an environmentally-themed film (Bruhn, 2020a). In accordance with Bruhn (2020b), the boundary crossing between the heterogeneous media in the process of media transformation takes time, thus revealing a temporal perspective (Bruhn, 2020b, p. 123). We may illustrate the latter contention by a 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch canvas that depicts an idyllic pastoral landscape, which, later, was printed as a 20<sup>th</sup> century postcard and, currently, published online as a digital image that symbolises eco-friendly sustainability in the news coverage by a 21<sup>st</sup> century mass media outlet.

Bruhn’s (2020a, 2020b) approach towards intermedial ecocriticism and, in particular, his views on media transformation are further explored in the article in the context of food-throwing incidents that are framed by the leading British mass media outlets in their news reports. Prior to doing so, however, the construal of framing needs to be outlined and discussed, since it represents another theoretical and methodological cornerstone of the present study.

## The Framing of Climate Change in British Mass Media: Literature Review

Framing is defined as “the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them

to promote a particular interpretation” (Entman, 2007, p. 164). Typically, a frame represents the definition of a problem, its causal analysis, and a certain moral judgment in conjunction with the problem (Entman, 1993; Megura & Gunderson, 2022; Kapranov, 2016). According to Entman (1993; 2004), framing creates and points to the importance of certain ideas, and activates “schemas that encourage target audiences to think, feel, and decide in a particular way” (Entman, 2007, p. 164). It should be noted that two or more frames that share several identical or similar frame elements are regarded in the literature as mega-frames (Batchelor & Zhang, 2017).

Entman’s (1993, 2004, 2007) definition of framing and his methodological approach towards its analysis are extensively employed in research on climate change discourse (Boykoff, 2009; Kapranov, 2018a; Megura & Gunderson, 2022; Shehata et al., 2022). As far as the framing of the issue of climate change in mass media is concerned, the literature indicates that it is framed differently by mass media in the countries that are regarded as the most considerable carbon emitters, for instance, the United States of America and the UK (Boykoff, 2008; Carvalho, 2010; Chen et al., 2022a; Kapranov, 2017a, 2017b; McAllister et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2018). In particular, whilst the framing of climate change in the USA is reflective of accountability, morality, and uncertainty (Newman et al., 2018), and techno-optimism, i.e., the possibility of mitigating and, potentially, solving the issue of climate change by resorting to modern advances in technology (Megura & Gunderson, 2022), British mass media frame the issue of climate change via alarmist and denialist narratives (Boykoff, 2008; Carvalho, 2010; Kapranov, 2015; Schmid-Petri & Arlt, 2016). It has been established that the alarmist narratives are overused by the British mass media outlets, especially tabloids, whose framing of climate change is reflective of impressionistic and emotional coverages that verge on catastrophism and climate fundamentalism (Boykoff, 2009; Kapranov, 2018b; McAllister et al., 2021; Norton & Hulme, 2019; Schmid-Petri & Arlt, 2016).

The framing of climate change as the tonality of doom (Boykoff, 2008) is coupled with that of morality, which is reminiscent of the framings by the American mass media (Newman et al., 2018). In particular, *The Economist* frames Shell’s climate-change activities as i) an immoral corporation and



ii) a sinner, respectively, which evoke biblical and religious imagery and de-emphasise Shell's climate-change mitigating measures (Kapranov, 2017a). In terms of the biblical Armageddon in the framing of climate change, Norton and Hulme (2019) argue that British mass media frame the issue as an imminent catastrophe that is associated with "hurricanes, droughts, biodiversity loss, disease, instability and mass migration" (Norton & Hulme, 2019, p. 120).

Another important type of framing of climate change by the British mass media outlets involves technology-based solutions that are applied in order to mitigate the consequences of global warming. One of the solutions is represented by nuclear power (Doyle, 2011) that is framed as a crucial means of climate change mitigation. In this regard, Doyle (2011) points to nuclear power as a critical component in the range of measures that, potentially, could avert the negative consequences of climate change and, concurrently, facilitate Britain's energy security.

In addition to the technology-based and alarmist framings, Saunders, Grasso, and Hedges (2018) have found that the framing of climate change correlates with the quality and political leanings of the mass medium. Specifically, whilst *The Guardian*, which is Labour-leaning, is seemingly more engaged in covering the issue of climate change, the more conservative *The Mail*, *The Telegraph* and *The Times* are reported to be less sensitive to the climate change agenda. These findings are in line with the prior studies (Kapranov, 2018b) that point to the role of political divide in the framing of climate change by the British mass media outlets. Specifically, the literature (Kapranov, 2018b) indicates that the Conservative-affiliated mass media outlets frame the issue of climate change as a challenge, whereas their Labour counterparts tend to frame it as a battle to be won.

It follows from the literature review that climate change is associated with a wide range of frames in the British mass media outlets that are reflective of alarmist, morally-charged, and technology-related narratives. However, the literature does not specify whether or not there are frames that involve art objects, especially famous paintings, which are used as a focal point of climate change activism. Moreover, there are no published studies that shed light onto how British mass media frame the throwing of food at famous art objects

as a means of climate change protest. The study that is further presented in the subsequent section of the article provides some preliminary insights into this novel phenomenon.

## The Present Study

The present qualitative study was informed by Bruhn's (2020a, 2020b) approach to intermedial ecocriticism and anchored in the framing methodology by Entman (1993, 2004, 2007), which was employed in order to untangle the recent phenomenon of throwing food at iconic paintings as a manifestation of climate change protest. Guided by the RQ (see the introductory part of the article), the study sought to pay specific attention to unpacking how the British mass media outlets framed the famous paintings that were involved in climate change-related protests associated with throwing food at the iconic canvases (i.e., Vincent Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and Claude Monet's *Grainstacks*, respectively). To that end, the study aimed at collecting and analysing a corpus of online coverages of food-throwing acts by climate change protesters that were reported by the following British mass media outlets – *Metro*, *SkyNews*, *The BBC*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and *The Telegraph*. The choice of the mass media outlets was determined by their representation of a wide spectrum of the UK's socio-political life, including tabloids (e.g., *Metro*), the Labour-leaning *The Guardian*, the Conservative Party-affiliated *The Telegraph*, and the national broadcaster *The BBC*.

The corpus of online coverages of the food-throwing incidents was collected by means of accessing the official websites of the aforementioned media outlets. The descriptive statistics of the corpus, presented in Table 1, reflected the total number (N) of words per news coverage, the total number of multimedia (for instance, pictures, videos, etc.) per news coverage, inclusive of the number of multimedia that depicted the iconic paintings that were thrown food at (i.e., *Sunflowers* and *Grainstacks*, respectively). It should be noted that the total number of words in the corpus was calculated

to be 6 546 (mean = 467.6; standard deviation = 104.6), whereas the total number of multimedia elements was estimated at 48 (mean = 3.4; standard deviation = 2.2).

**Table 1. The Corpus of the Study**

#	Mass Media	N words	N multimedia (inclusive of iconic paintings)
1	<i>Metro</i> : the coverage of Monet	37 <sup>1</sup>	Total N = 8 (N multimedia with the painting = 6)
2	<i>Metro</i> : the coverage of Van Gogh	667	Total N = 6 (N multimedia with the painting = 4)
3	<i>SkyNews</i> : the coverage of Monet	334	Total N = 2 (N multimedia with the painting = 2)
4	<i>SkyNews</i> : the coverage of Van Gogh	42 <sup>0</sup>	Total N = 4 (N multimedia with the painting = 3)
5	<i>The BBC</i> : the coverage of Monet	503	Total N = 1 (N multimedia with the painting = 0)
6	<i>The BBC</i> : the coverage of Van Gogh	384	Total N = 2 (N multimedia with the painting = 1)
7	<i>The Daily Mail</i> : the coverage of Monet	519	Total N = 6 (N multimedia with the painting = 4)
8	<i>The Daily Mail</i> : the coverage of Van Gogh	467	Total N = 6 (N multimedia with the painting = 3)
9	<i>The Guardian</i> : the coverage of Monet	533	Total N = 1 (N multimedia with the painting = 1)
10	<i>The Guardian</i> : the coverage of Van Gogh	625	Total N = 4 (N multimedia with the painting = 3)
11	<i>The Independent</i> : the coverage of Monet	354	Total N = 2 (N multimedia with the painting = 1)
12	<i>The Independent</i> : the coverage of Van Gogh	57 <sup>1</sup>	Total N = 3 (N multimedia with the painting = 2)
13	<i>The Telegraph</i> : the coverage of Monet	325	Total N = 2 (N multimedia with the painting = 1)
14	<i>The Telegraph</i> : the coverage of Van Gogh	473	Total N = 1 (N multimedia with the painting = 1)

Source: own elaboration

In terms of the methodology, it should be specified that frames in the study were identified on the basis of the qualitative analysis developed by Entman (1993, 2004, 2007) and modified by Kapranov (2018a). In line with the methodology, the texts in the corpus (inclusive of the multimodal elements) were analysed individually by means of applying the following procedure. First, each text was analysed manually in order to identify the presence of key words (e.g., *Sunflowers*), recurring phrases (e.g., climate change) and sentences (e.g., The protesters threw a can of soup at Van Gog’s *Sunflowers*) that could point out to the issue, which in our case was represented by the incidents of throwing food at the world-famous paintings in the context of climate change protests. Thereafter, the manual procedure of looking for key words and recurring phrases/sentences was extended by the application of the computer program AntConc version 4.0.11 (Antony, 2022) that enabled the search of each individual text in the corpus for lexical bundles and key words in context (KWIC). A sample of the computer-assisted search for the KWIC “painting” in the coverage by *The Guardian* was yielded in AntConc and outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2. An Illustration of the Computer-Assisted Search for the KWIC ‘Painting’ in *The Guardian***

#	KWIC ‘Painting’ in <i>The Guardian</i>	KWIC Frequency
1	Painting is protected with a glass screen	1
2	Painting is unharmed	2
3	Painting is unlikely to have been permanently damaged	1
4	Painting of the protection of our planet and people?	1
5	Concerned about the protection of the painting	1
6	Painting, which is protected by glass	1
7	What appears to be tomato soup over the painting	1

Source: own elaboration

It should be particularly emphasised that the aforementioned computer-assisted search was used as an additional element in the qualitative analysis. Having obtained the key words and KWIC in AntCont, the author of the article reread each text in the corpus several times in order to ascertain how the recurrent words, phrases and sentences were related to such frame elements as i) the setting or formulation of the issue (e.g., a world-renowned masterpiece as a focal point of climate change activists' protests), ii) the problem's cause (in our case, the reason associated with food-throwing at), iii) the moral judgement and/or evaluation of the issue (i.e., what kinds of appraisal and/or emotive components were used by the author of the news coverage in relation to throwing food at the masterpiece), and iv) a certain conclusion and/or summary, if any, suggested in the news coverage (for instance, what kind/kinds of actions and developments could be drawn from the food-throwing incidents). The final part of the qualitative framing analysis considered whether or not a particular frame involved a multimodal visual element, if any. Specifically, each text was examined for the presence of *Sunflowers* or *Grainstacks* in the immediate textual context of the frame involved. Particularly, the analysis sought to establish the connection between the visual element (typically, a picture of *Sunflowers* or *Grainstacks*) and either the setting of the issue, the cause of the issue, and/or, a certain moral judgement or evaluation associated with it. The results of the qualitative framing analysis and their interpretation within the theoretical tenets of intermedial ecocriticism (Bruhn, 2020a, 2020b) are provided in the subsequent section of the article.

## Results and Discussion

The results of the qualitative framing analysis indicate that the British mass media outlets frame the instances of food-throwing at *Sunflowers* by Van Gogh and *Grainstacks* by Monet in a similar manner, which in all the cases highlights the throwing of food at the famous masterpieces as the formulation of the issue that is associated with the reasons that pertain to climate change

activism. In other words, it has been established that two elements of framing are identical in all news coverages in the corpus, namely the setting or formulation of the issue and its cause. However, it follows from the analysis that the framing of throwing food at *Sunflowers* and *Grainstacks*, respectively, presumes the difference in the moral judgement and evaluation of the food-throwing instances, as well as in the conclusions and further developments that are drawn from the incidents, which in their turn, define the framing. These findings are illustrated by Table 3 below.

**Table 3. The Framing of Food-Throwing at Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* and Monet’s *Grainstacks***

#	Mass Media	Framing the Instances of Food-Throwing at <i>Sunflowers</i>	Framing the Instances of Food-Throwing at <i>Grainstacks</i>
1	<i>Metro</i>	“The absence of damage”	“The valuable painting thrown food at”
2	<i>SkyNews</i>	“Criminal damage”	“The valuable painting thrown food at”
3	<i>The BBC</i>	“The absence of damage”	“The absence of damage”
4	<i>The Daily Mail</i>	“The valuable painting thrown food at”	“The valuable painting thrown food at”
5	<i>The Guardian</i>	“Criminal damage”	“Climate change protest”
6	<i>The Independent</i>	“The valuable painting thrown food at”	“The absence of damage”
7	<i>The Telegraph</i>	“The closure of exhibition of the painting”	“The closure of art galleries”

Source: own elaboration

It is seen in Table 3 that the framing of food-throwing incidents differs substantially from the types of frames that are discussed in the prior literature (Boykoff, 2008; Carvalho, 2010; Kapranov, 2018b; McAllister et al., 2021; Norton & Hulme, 2019; Schmid-Petri & Arlt, 2016), which posits that news coverages of climate change-related issues typically involve the alarmist and denialist narratives that entail catastrophism and climate fundamentalism

(Boykoff, 2009; Schmid-Petri & Arlt, 2016). Moreover, whilst the previous studies report the frames associated with environmental risks (Norton & Hulme, 2019) and the role of technology in climate change-related issues (Doyle, 2011), the analysis in the present investigation has not yielded any similar frames (see Table 3). Hence, the framing of throwing food at the famous paintings as a form of climate change activism is considered novel and divergent from the canonical frames that are typically employed by the leading British mass media outlets as far as their coverages of climate change-related issues are concerned.

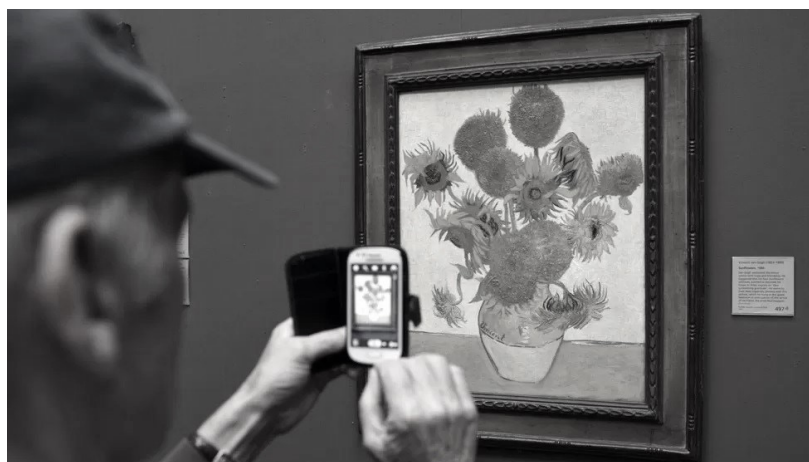
Having argued that the present findings are novel, let us discuss them through the lens of intermedial ecocriticism in the sense postulated by Bruhn (2020a, 2020b). In order to facilitate the discussion, it seems relevant to group the frames outlined in Table 3 in the following mega-frames (i.e., several different frames that share two or more elements in common):

- 1) **Damage**, which is comprised of the frames “Criminal damage” and “The absence of damage” by *Metro*, *SkyNews*, *The BBC*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent*;
- 2) **Value**, which involve the frames “The valuable painting thrown food at” by *Metro*, *SkyNews*, *The Daily Mail*, and *The Independent*;
- 3) **Climate change** protest that is represented by the frame “Climate change protest” by *The Guardian*;
- 4) **Closure**, which is composed of the frames “The closure of exhibition of the painting” and “The closure of art galleries” by *The Telegraph*.

As previously noted in the discussion, all frames in the present study exhibit two shared elements (i.e., the setting/formulation of the issue and its cause), which, consequently, entails that the aforementioned mega-frames are unified by i) the climate change activists’ food-throwing acts at the famous canvases (i.e., the setting of the issue) and ii) the context of climate change protest (i.e., the cause of the issue). It should be observed that the food-throwing acts, however, are embedded into the frames, as well as into the mega-frames, where they are not foregrounded, with the exception of “Climate change protest” by *The Guardian*.

Let us dwell upon the foregrounded, or other terminology salient (Entman, 1993) elements in the mega-frame **Damage**, which involves “Criminal damage” and “The absence of damage”, respectively. Whereas “The absence of damage” is foregrounded by *Metro*, *The BBC*, and *The Independent*, “Criminal damage” is made salient by *SkyNews* and *The Guardian*. In terms of the latter, *the BBC* reports that “one of Van Gogh’s famous Sunflowers paintings has been cleaned and is back on display” (2022). In order to amplify the frame, *The BBC*, as well as *Metro*, employ multimodality, which is represented by the photos of undamaged *Sunflowers*, as seen in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1. The Imagery Used in The BBC’s Frame “The Absence of Damage”**



Source: *The BBC* (<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-63254878>)

Unlike *Metro*, *The BBC*, and *The Independent*, however, both *SkyNews* and *The Guardian* regard throwing food at the paintings as a criminal act and frame it, accordingly, as “Criminal damage.” The salience of criminal accountability is further facilitated in the framing by the multimodal elements that emblemise the written text of the news coverage so that the visual content represented by the photographs becomes a stylistic element of the frame (Wozniak et al., 2015). This contention is illustrated by the self-evident photo that is used by *The Guardian* (see Figure 2 below).



**Figure 2. The Imagery Used in *The Guardian's* Frame “Criminal damage”**



Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/oct/15/just-stop-oil-protesters-charged-van-gogh-painting-soup-sunflowers>

The visual element in the frame “Criminal damage,” which is exemplified by Figure 2, lends further support and saliency to *The Guardian's* (2022) narrative that foregrounds the climate change activists’ criminal responsibility, e.g. “Two women have appeared in court charged with criminal damage to the frame of Vincent van Gogh’s painting *Sunflowers*.”

The mega-frame **Damage** is reflective of several interrelated and complex phenomena from the point of view of intermedial ecocriticism (Bruhn, 2020a, 2020b). First, we may argue that the relationship between the human behaviour and the non-human world, represented by art objects (Geal, 2023) is unpacked by the British mass media outlets via a purely anthropocentric approach that emphasises the extent of a physical action, in our case throwing of food at the well-known artifacts (*Sunflowers* and *Grainstacks*, respectively), that inflicts harm and impairs the artifacts’ value. Attributing salience to such human behaviour towards the paintings takes place at the expense of the broader contextual background, which involves the relationship between the humankind and the dramatic changes in the habitat associated

with the issue of climate change. Given the magnitude of climate change, it would be expected, quite logically, that the British mass media outlets would foreground the elements of the narrative associated with climate change protests as the primary focus of food-throwing incidents. Then, consequently, the mega-frame **Damage** would be characterised by a news coverage that communicates to the public at large the extent of damage the humans cause to the non-human environment, first of all, to the global climate system. However, such kind of salience is not present in the framing. On the contrary, instead of becoming a metaphor for the ideal or, leastwise, optimal human habitat (Elleström, 2013), *Sunflowers* as well as *Granstacks* are objectified in the frames (see Table 3) as artifacts whose value and material existence are damaged by the climate change activists. In other words, the symbolic value of *Sunflowers* as well as *Granstacks* as the potential beacons of a “brave new world” of the carbon-neutral future (Grafton et al., 2017) seems to be relinquished or, rather, demoted to the status of a prestigious and expensive artifact on a par with a costly car or any other material object that can be damaged.

The second phenomenon, which is associated with the mega-frame **Damage** and its constitutive frames, is less obvious in the corpus of news coverages. Nevertheless, it is evident from the corpus that the British mass media outlets quote the climate change activists, who acknowledged that they were aware of the protective glass over the paintings when they threw food at them (*Metro*, 2022). They also indicated that they knew that the glass would minimise the damage to the canvases (*The Guardian*, 2022). Whilst the climate change activists are reported to exhibit awareness of the potential damage to the paintings from their food-throwing acts, British mass media do not seem to provide evidence of the activists’ aesthetic attitudes towards the world-renowned paintings. Moreover, there are no indications in the corpus that refer to the activists’ attempts to employ the iconic paintings (i.e., *Sunflowers* and *Grainstacks*) as an aesthetic means, an epitome of their climate change protest. Conceivably, there is no apparent effort on the part of the climate change activists to incorporate the eco- and climate change-friendly motifs depicted in *Sunflowers* and *Grainstacks* as a protest symbol against climate

change inaction. From the perspective of intermedial ecocriticism, we may contend that the activists fail to turn the famous canvases into transmedial symbols (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2019), which could epitomise their activism. To be more precise, the corpus does not contain any mentions of the climate activists' attempts to produce flyers, films, installations or videos with *Sunflowers* and *Grainstacks*, respectively, as the protest symbols. It seems like the masterpieces are used as the focal point of climate change protest due to their status of the world-renowned and highly valuable paintings in the monetary sense of the word.

The aforementioned observation finds further support in the mega-frame **Value**, which is comprised of the frames "The valuable painting thrown food at" by *Metro*, *SkyNews*, *The Daily Mail*, and *The Independent*. Judging from the news coverages, these mass media outlets foreground the monetary value of the canvas by reporting that the climate change activists i) "threw two tins of Heinz tomato soup over the iconic £76 million painting" (*The Daily Mail*, 2022), ii) "threw mashed potatoes at a Monet painting worth \$110m in Germany" (*SkyNews*, 2022), and iii) "entered the museum on Sunday wearing high vis jackets before approaching the painting, which sold at auction for \$110million in 2019" (*The Daily Mail*, 2022). It seems that the aspects of value associated with *Sunflowers* and *Grainstacks*, for instance, aesthetic, functional, ideological, psychological, symbolic, etc. are backgrounded by the British mass media outlets that assign salience to the monetary aspect of value only, e.g., "Mashed potato thrown over £96,000,000 Monet painting" (*Metro*, 2022). The mega-frame **Value** and the way the British mass media outlets set priorities in reporting the acts of throwing food at the iconic paintings by climate change activists are evocative of the widely spread phenomenon of monetisation of art (Karlsen, 2022) that, seemingly, overrides a host of ethical considerations associated with human responsibility for minimising the causes and mitigating the consequences of climate change (Gardiner, 2010). Proceeding with this contention further, it appears possible to argue that the mega-frames **Value** and **Damage** are indicative of the British mass media outlets' convergence on the view of the acclaimed paintings as valuables that can be damaged.

In contrast to **Value**, however, the mega-frame **Climate change** is characterised by the exclusive focus on the issue of climate change in the narrative, which is found in *The Guardian's* coverage of the food-throwing act at Monet's *Grainstacks*, as seen in excerpt (1) below.

(1) The protesters said the stunt was designed as a wake-up call in the face of a climate catastrophe. "People are starving, people are freezing, people are dying," one of the activists said in a video of the incident tweeted by Letzte Generation (*The Guardian*, 2022).

As far as *The Guardian's* framing is concerned, its attention to the climate change-related agenda supports the prior literature (Saunders et al., 2018), which reports that the framing of climate change correlates with the political affiliation of the mass medium outlet. Given that *The Guardian* is Labour-friendly, it is, perhaps, not surprising that it is concerned with the issue of climate change and climate change activism in contrast to either conservative *The Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph* or a popular tabloid *Metro*. This finding is also in agreement with the prior studies (Kapranov, 2018b), which indicate that British mass media's political leanings play a role in the framing of climate change and climate change activism, respectively.

Unlike *The Guardian* and other mass media outlets, the Conservative-affiliated *The Telegraph* frames the climate activists' food-throwing acts as **Closure**, which is composed of the frames "The closure of exhibition of the painting" and "The closure of art galleries." Judging from *The Telegraph's* coverages, the issues of climate change and climate change-related protests are marginally mentioned, whilst the priority in the framing is given to the discussion of "the consequences for culture-lovers" (*The Telegraph*, 2022) that may arise at some point in future due to the food-throwing acts at the iconic paintings. Notably, no other moral and/or aesthetic considerations are brought to the fore in **Closure**. Moreover, it is inferred from the frames "The closure of exhibition of the painting" and "The closure of art galleries" that **Closure** is oblivious to the agenda of climate change and, as such, could be described as post-natural in the sense referred to by Oppermann (2016), which

presupposes a certain detachment from nature. Specifically, *The Telegraph's* major concern rests with the closed museums and art exhibitions, which might remain closed for a long time due to the food-throwing incidents. In this regard, the mega-frame **Closure**, which is present only in the news coverages by *The Telegraph*, seems to converge on the more frequent mega-frame **Damage** and diverge substantially from *The Guardian's* framing whose focus is on the climate change-related protest.

## Conclusions

The qualitative study that is discussed in the article has sought to establish how iconic paintings by Van Gogh and Monet are framed by the British mass media outlets in conjunction with climate change activists' protests. In particular, a specific form of climate change protest is examined in the study, namely climate change activists' food-throwing at the famous masterpieces *Sunflowers* and *Grainstacks*, respectively. Whilst climate change activism that is aimed at political and corporate actors is well-documented (Fisher & Nasrin, 2021; Kapranov, 2022; Shehata et al., 2022; Svensson & Wahlström, 2023), there are currently no published studies that focus on climate change activism associated with the iconic paintings that are exhibited at the world-famous museums. Hence, the present study should be considered one of the first attempts to elucidate the food-throwing phenomenon as a form of climate change activism.

The qualitative framing analysis has revealed that the British mass media outlets frame the food-throwing incidents by emphasising criminal damage or the absence of damage to the paintings, their monetary value, and the fear of closing the galleries and public access to the paintings due to climate change activism. With the exception of the frame by *The Guardian*, the major mass media outlets in the UK, surprisingly, do not seem to frame the incidents of food-throwing at the iconic paintings through the lens of climate change protest per se. This finding is novel, especially in light of the cornucopia of research studies on climate change activism (Buzogány & Scherhauer, 2022; Chen et al., 2022b; Kapranov, 2022).

The fact that the British mass media outlets de-emphasise the issue of climate change in the series of food-related climate change protests could be accounted by the following suggestion. Presumably, the cultural, historical, aesthetic, as well as monetary values of the famous canvases by Van Gogh and Monet override the climate change-related considerations that are involved in the food-throwing incidents discussed in the article. Paraphrasing a well-known parable “when the cannons are heard, the muses are silent,” one may argue that the issue of climate change is silenced by the iconic paintings, whose monetary value seems to suppress the issue of climate change.

## Acknowledgements

The author is appreciative of the editor and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

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## Biographies

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**David Allen** is Artistic Director of Midland Actors Theatre (UK) and Visitor Lecturer at Newman University, UK. He is the author of numerous books and articles on drama including *Performing Chekhov* (1999) and *Stanislawski for beginners* (1999/2015). He has written articles on Disney including “Seeing double: Disney’s Wilderness Lodge” (*European Journal of American Culture*, 2012); “Disneyland: Another kind of reality” (*EJAC*, 2014); “A town called Celebration” (*EJAC*, 2016); and “Dalí, Disney and Destino: Alchemy in animation” (*Text Matters*, 2020).

**Adam Cowart** is a PhD Researcher and teaching fellow in the School of Design at Carnegie Mellon University studying Transition Design. He is a strategic foresight professional, and an adjunct professor of foresight at the University of Houston. He holds a BFA and MFA in creative writing from the University of British Columbia, an MBA from Simon Fraser University, and an MSc in foresight from the University of Houston. His research focuses on the role of storytelling structures in futures imaginaries.

**Elżbieta Chrzanowska-Kluczevska**, Ph.D. is a linguist, an honorary professor ordinarius at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland and former Head of the Institute of English Studies at JU (2009-2012, 2016-2020). Her main areas of interest cover theoretical and literary semantics, stylistics, poetics, rhetoric, philosophy of language, and artistic semiotics, on which subjects she has published extensively in periodicals and collective volumes in Poland and abroad. Her monographs include *Language-Games: Pro and Against* (Kraków: Universitas, 2004) and *Much More than Metaphor. Master Tropes of Artistic Language and Imagination* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013); she also co-edited collected monographs *In Search of (Non)Sense* (with G. Szpila, Newcastle u. Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), *The Contextuality of Language and Culture* (with A. Gołda-Derejczyk, Bielsko-Biała: WSEH, 2009), and *Language - Literature - the Arts: Cognitive-Semioti Interface* (with O. Vorobyova,

Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2017). As a guest visitor she lectured in Germany, Ukraine, Russian Federation, Armenia, Georgia, and Taiwan. She co-operates with the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, as a PhD reviewer.

**Edyta Frelih** is Assistant Professor in the Department of British and American Studies at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland. She is the winner of the 2013 Terra Foundation for American Art International Essay Prize for her article “Ad Reinhardt: Painter-as-Writer.” In 2019 she was invited to contribute to a catalogue accompanying the first European retrospective exhibition of Marsden Hartley’s work at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark. She is the author of *Painter’s Word: Thomas Hart Benton, Marsden Hartley, and Ad Reinhardt as Writers* (Peter Lang 2016) and *Kiedy malarz pisze (jak się patrzy). Wstęp do badań nad pisarstwem artystów* [Writing About Seeing About Writing: An Introduction to the Study of Artists’ Writings] (Wydawnictwo UMCS 2021). Her articles appeared in the *Smithsonian Journal American Art*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Res Rhetorica* and other peer reviewed journals and magazines.

**Agata Handley** is Assistant Professor in the Department of British Literature and Culture, University of Łódź, Poland. Her main areas of interest are: contemporary British poetry; the culture of the English North; memory studies, and intermedial issues. She is the author of *Constructing identity in the poetry of Tony Harrison* (2016/2021). She is co-Editor-in-Chief of *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*. Her current research includes ekphrasis in anglophone literature and culture, and intertextuality in music videos. Recent articles include “The poet as public intellectual: Tony Harrison’s war poetry” (*British Journal of Educational Studies*, 70(5), 2022).

**Oleksandr Kapranov** is an associate professor in English linguistics at NLA University College, campus Oslo (Norway). Having obtained his PhD from The University of Western Australia in Perth (WA), he worked at a number of universities in Sweden and Norway. His was a post-doctoral fellow at The University of Bergen (Norway), where his research was focused on corporate and political discourse on climate change and sustainability.

**Krzysztof Majer** is an assistant professor in the Department of North American Literature and Culture at the University of Lodz, Poland. He has edited *Beirut to Carnival City: Reading Rawi Hage* and co-edited *Kanade, di Goldene Medine? Perspectives on Canadian-Jewish Literature and Culture*. He is an established translator (e.g., Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Gurnah's *Afterlives*). With Rawi Hage and Madeleine Thien he was awarded residence at the Banff International Literary Translation Centre. He serves as editor at *Literatura na Swiecie* and *Text Matters*; he collaborates with *Canadian Literature* as reviewer. He belongs to the Polish Association for Canadian Studies, the International Association for Word and Music Studies, and the Polish Literary Translators' Association.

**Alexander Scherr** is a postdoctoral researcher in anglophone literatures at Justus Liebig University, Giessen. From April 2021 to September 2022, he acted as Interim Junior Professor of Anglophone Literary, Cultural, and Media Studies at JLU; in the summer of 2017, he was a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Alexander's research interests include narrative theory, essay studies, the history of the novel, and literature and science. His research on his current book project on *Essayistic Forms of Life in the Anglophone Novel* is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

**Nicole Schneiderbauer** studied dramaturgy at the Bayerische Theaterakademie August Everding and at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. She then worked as an assistant director at the Nationaltheater Mannheim, where she staged her first performances. Since 2017 Nicole Schneiderbauer is Theater Director and part of the Artistic Leading Team Drama at Staatstheater Augsburg. She also works as curator of Plan A and initiates collaborations with the independent art & theater scene in Augsburg. Her artistic works move between performance, choreography and acting. In 2019 she successfully completed further education in theater management at the Ludwig Maximilian University.



