

The Ekphrastic Gaze in British Postmodern Fiction

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 The Current State of Research in the Study of Ekphrasis in British Literature.....	2
1.2 Issues of Methodology.....	5
2. The Postmodern Turn Through the Ekphrastic Gaze in British Fiction.....	17
2.1 The Shift from Modernism to Postmodernism in the Arts.....	17
2.2 The Sociocultural Poetics and Politics of the Ekphrastic Gaze in British Postmodern Fiction.....	20
3. The (De-/Re-)Construction of the Object of the Ekphrastic Gaze: In the Interstices between Art, Words, and Life.....	33
3.1 “Could a Life be a Work of Art”?.....	33
3.2 The Compositional Fabrication of Ekphrastic Reality.....	44
3.2.1 The Ekphrastic Gaze and Its ‘Secret Geometry’: From a Michelangelesque Discharge Bucket to a Giottesque Perfect Circle.....	47
3.3 The Iconography and the Iconology of Ekphrastic Reality.....	55
3.3.1 The Ekphrastic Gaze and the Third Dimension of a Work of Art: From the Removal of Three Centuries of Dirt to the Revelation of a Gainsboroughesque Dream.....	59
3.3.2 The Ekphrastic Gaze and the ‘Docile Body’: From the Antichrist’s Michelangelesque Curls to Erato’s Rokeby Venus Pose.....	70
3.4 Conclusion.....	83
4. The (De-/Re-)Construction of the Ekphrastic Beholder: In the Interstices between the Gazes of Author, Character, and Reader.....	86
4.1 Who Was the Ekphrastic Beholder After All?.....	86
4.2 The Dialectic of the Ekphrastic Beholder as the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur.....	93
4.2.1 Through the (Pseudo-)‘Intellectual Lens’ of the Ekphrastic Beholder’s Gaze: The ‘Bloody Ruskin’ of British Postmodern Fiction.....	97
4.2.2 On the (Pseudo-)‘Moral Retina’ of the Ekphrastic Beholder’s Gaze: The ‘Con-Turned-Artist’ of British Postmodern Fiction.....	107
4.3 The Interplay between the Three Ekphrastic Gazes of Author, Character, and Reader.....	116

4.3.1 Following in the Footsteps of Author and Character: The ‘Scholarly’ and ‘Alert’ Reader of British Postmodern Fiction.....	120
4.3.2 The Reader’s Ekphrastic Gaze as an Instrument of ‘Constructive Visualising Work’	128
4.4 Conclusion.....	134
5. The (De-/Re-)Construction of the Meta-Ekphrastic Discourse in British Postmodern Fiction: Between the <i>Métarécits</i> and the <i>Petits Récits</i> of the Ekphrastic Gaze.....	136
5.1 Conclusion.....	158
6. Conclusion.....	160
Bibliography.....	166

1. Introduction

This study examines the dynamics of the sociocultural poetics and politics of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction. It establishes that the ekphrastic gaze expresses the aesthetic, historical, and socioculturally specific shift: the postmodern turn. It is a turn away from the aesthetic forms and ideologies of modernism and modernity towards a new postmodern paradigm in British fiction. In this sense, the ekphrastic gaze helps to contextualise British postmodern fiction within the multilayered Western ekphrastic tradition in general and within the British ekphrastic tradition in particular. Appearing time and again in works of British postmodern fiction, it contributes to the (de-/re-)construction of a wide variety of meanings that can be classified into two strata: iconographical meanings expressed by recurrent art-historical or art-related themes/motifs on the one hand, and iconological meanings contained in the sociocultural ideologies underlying their recycling in a postmodern context on the other.

I should like to begin with an example from John Lanchester's novel *The Debt to Pleasure* that illustrates the way the ekphrastic gaze expresses the sociocultural postmodern turn and creates a link between British postmodern fiction and the interdisciplinary tradition of ekphrasis.

As part of his musings about food and art, the hedonistic and snobbish narrator of Lanchester's postmodern culinary-narrative, a self-proclaimed genius Tarquin Winot, appropriates Oscar Wilde's semi-ironic idea of looking at sunsets as J.M.W. Turner's inventions (Wilde, "Decay" 28-29)¹ to suggest that T.S. Eliot may be similarly regarded as an inventor of the spring upsurge of suicide attempts:

. . . I must say that I have often wondered whether, just as Turner invented sunsets, T.S. Eliot may have invented the seasonal surge in the incidence of people attempting to do away with themselves . . . (Lanchester 63)

Post-ironically enough, in accordance with Tarquin Winot's pretentious display of what John Banville calls "cod scholarship" (x) in the introduction to Lanchester's novel, this appeal to the now iconic – if not paradigmatic – standpoint that "Life imitates Art" (Wilde, "Decay" 26) simultaneously masks and unmasks the unreliability of his

¹ See, for example, Turner's painting *The Scarlet Sunset* painted in c. 1830-40 and located at Tate Britain in London.

postmodern narrative. After all, he only makes this appeal in order to explain the death of his nanny – one of the many deaths the narrator himself is, in fact, responsible for. This blatant hint at *The Debt to Pleasure*'s protagonist as a postmodern Dorian Gray is accentuated by his cheeky indication of the juxtaposition between modernism and postmodernism: “Modernism is about finding out how much you could get away with leaving out. Post-modernism is about how much you can get away with putting in” (159).

Whether or not Tarquin Winot actually succeeds at “gett[ing] away with putting in” (159) his philosophy and aesthetics of murder as artistic activity and getting away with murder itself, such an instance epitomises a parodistic return to the existing ekphrastic discourse. It is a return to the whole sociocultural and interdisciplinary – rather than exclusively literary – metanarrative of ekphrastically formulated ways of seeing. At the same time, it is a turn towards postmodern (de-/re-)construction of meaning(s) through a postmodern subject's ekphrastic gaze.

Thus, whether or not Lanchester's recycled ekphrastic image of a simultaneously Turneresque and Wildean sunset epitomises British postmodern ekphrasis, it illustrates the postmodern poetics and politics of the ekphrastic gaze. It demonstrates how the ekphrastic gaze helps to produce a socioculturally and ideologically motivated construct of artistically modified reality as an ‘already made’² or, rather, a *déjà vu* (‘already seen’). Moreover, this example locates what may be regarded as an aesthetic and sociocultural milestone in the British and Irish ekphrastic tradition essential to the formation of a postmodern ekphrastic way of seeing. It also indicates the meta-ekphrastic discourse in the interdisciplinary ekphrastic tradition that consists in revisiting and recycling existing modes of seeing rather than inventing new ones. Finally, it demonstrates the (de-/re-)construction of recurrent meaning(s) by means of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction. These meanings are explicit and implicit, (pseudo-)innovative and parodistic. They are also (self-)contradictory, (self-)subversive, aesthetic, historical, ideological, inherently socioculturally specific, and vividly postmodern.

1.1 The Current State of Research in the Study of Ekphrasis in British Literature

Ever since the publication of James Heffernan's influential study on the history of ekphrastic poetry *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*

² This term is borrowed from Abigail Solomon-Godeau's conceptualisation of the aesthetics of postmodernism (qtd. in Hutcheon, *Politics* 89; cf. ch. 2).

in 1993 the historical approach has rapidly gained popularity in the study of the tradition of ekphrasis. Thus, we have Michael Benton's historical survey of the role of the spectator in ekphrastic poetry from Homer's shield of Achilles as "[t]he classical paradigm" (Benton 40) of ekphrasis to W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" as "[t]he doyen of ekphrastic poems of the twentieth century" (40). The historical approach to the ekphrastic tradition that takes into account instances in narrative fiction can be found in Michael Hattaway's analysis of ekphrastic representations of houses in English fiction as descendants of Homer's shield of Achilles and Virgil's shield of Aeneas (6), in Rebecca Warburton Boylan's treatment of the history of ekphrasis from Homer's shield to Oscar Wilde's fan (ix), and in Valentine Cunningham's overview of the ekphrastic tradition from Homer's *The Iliad* to Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (67).

Nevertheless, one aspect receives particular attention in the scholarly works on the history of ekphrasis: the perceptual dimension of this phenomenon. Thus, in his 2007 article "Why Ekphrasis?", Cunningham looks at the tradition of Western literature as a tradition guided by the "ekphrastist[']s" (63) determination "to direct his gaze, his characters' gaze, our [readers' – N.G.] gaze" (57) towards an ekphrastic object. In doing so, the scholar establishes that "the western *imaginaire*" (58) pivots on such a perceptually motivated "ekphrastic encounter" (58) and particularly on so-called textual revivals and revisions of previous encounters. To illustrate his point, Cunningham refers to the motif of recycling and reworking the Homeric encounter with the shield of Achilles first by Virgil and later by Auden. What underlies the reliance of Western literature upon the ekphrastic encounter, as Cunningham suggests, is the desire for the "real presence" (61) and "knowability" (61) of the referent even "in our modernist, and postmodernist, climate of doubting about the production of meaning" (67). What arises from this is "an intertextual, intermedial genre: loose; shifting over time; merging, of course, into the discourses of art history, and the textuality of anthropology and cultural studies" (60).

Cunningham's establishment of the tradition of ekphrasis as a cyclical tradition narratologically guided by the "ekphrastic gaze" (68) on different levels of discourse gives a new impetus and vigour to the academic discourse on ekphrasis and inspires a number of questions: What are the continuities and discontinuities in the Western ekphrastic tradition as a tradition underpinned by the ekphrastic gaze? In what way is the ekphrastic gaze conditioned by the aesthetic, sociocultural, historical, and

ideological contexts in which it appears? How does the ekphrastic gaze connect the literary discourse of ekphrasis with other discourses and, specifically, the discourse of art history? To what extent are previous perceptually motivated ekphrastic encounters recycled in fiction, including postmodern fiction? Last but not least, in what ways does the ekphrastic gaze contribute to the (de-/re-)construction of meaning, especially in a particular national narrative?

Whether explicitly or implicitly, some of these questions have been touched upon by scholars with regard to manifestations of ekphrasis in different national literatures and different epochs. Within the study of ekphrasis in British literature, Boylan's treatment of ekphrasis in nineteenth-century narrative fiction is particularly interesting. The nineteenth-century ekphrasis is shown to be the result of a historical development "[f]rom Shield to Fan" (ix), specifically Lady Windermere's fan in Oscar Wilde's play of the same name. In *The Moving Still: Ekphrasis in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (2006) that anticipates Cunningham's article, the scholar draws attention to ekphrasis as "a preserver" (x) and particularly to Homer's shield of Achilles as "an obvious preserver of humanity" (xi). Consequently, she draws upon eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories of perception and conception to address the role of perception as "a part of conception" (xxiv) in the ekphrasis of this particular period. In doing so, Boylan reveals how the act of seeing (performed by both character and reader) contributes to the acquisition and preservation of intellectual, aesthetic, and ethical knowledge deliberately incorporated into texts by the nineteenth-century authors of ekphrasis.

The first and by far the only study to offer an overview of the issue of ekphrasis in contemporary fiction³ is Doris Bremm's *Representation Beyond Representation: Modes of Ekphrasis in Contemporary Narratives* (2007) which includes British, Irish, and American authors such as Peter Ackroyd, John Banville, Julian Barnes, A.S. Byatt, Tracy Chevalier, Mary Gordon, Salman Rushdie, and Susan Vreeland. Bremm examines ekphrastic instances in their works as "descriptions of a singular 'event of viewing' . . . , as encounters with an aesthetic appearing, rather than as descriptions of a work of art in the traditional sense of the word" (*Representation* 38). The scholar takes

³ Another comparative study of postmodern fiction is Jarosław Hetman's monograph with the all-encompassing title *Ekphrastic Conceptualism in Postmodern British and American Novels* (2015). However, it focuses on ekphrastic representations and interpretations of conceptual art in the works of three authors mentioned in the subtitle, only one of them British: Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, and Tom McCarthy.

into account that every object can constitute an aesthetic object insofar as it can be perceived. Moreover, Bremm connects ekphrasis with the problem of representation. The scholar argues that contemporary ekphrasis is performative and constitutes what she calls a “*Darstellung* (a presencing or staging)” (9). However, not only is Bremm’s study primarily a study of contemporary (rather than postmodern) and anglophone (rather than specifically British) fiction; it is also mainly concerned with the issues of ekphrasis and perception in connection to the question of performativity in representation.

Thus, curiously enough, while recent years have witnessed an upsurge of academic interest in both poetic and fictional ekphrasis in general, it currently remains a widely understudied phenomenon in British fiction. Moreover, there is still virtually no comprehensive survey of the poetics and politics of ekphrasis in British postmodern fiction.

1.2 Issues of Methodology

Building upon existing research on ekphrasis in British literature, this study provides a comprehensive study of British postmodern narrative fiction as part of the Western ekphrastic tradition guided by the ekphrastic gaze. In doing so, it offers close readings of British postmodern texts and insights into the narratological, aesthetic, historical, sociocultural, and ideological role of the ekphrastic gaze in shaping the British and postmodern *imaginaire*.

The corpus of primary texts analysed in this study consists of a selection of over thirty British postmodern novels, novellas, and short stories. They have been chosen with a view to their comparability as to the general thematic focus of the study, because they embody specific characteristics relevant for an investigation of the central topic. As the thematic focus is on postmodern (de-/re-)construction of sociocultural meaning(s) by means of the ekphrastic gaze, the works chosen form an adequate basis for comparing them as to their various conceptualisations of the ekphrastic gaze. The specific actualisations of the ekphrastic gaze in these texts, both on the intratextual and the extratextual levels of the discourse, can be shown as interconnected with certain bigger narratological, historical, and ideological issues of British postmodern fiction and the phenomenon of postmodernism at large.

As a result, the central questions that lead and guide the content, methodology, structure, and aims of this study are:

- What is the role of the ekphrastic gaze within the discourse of the postmodern turn in British fiction?
- In what way are ekphrastic instances in British postmodern fiction interlinked with British and Irish literary, aesthetic, and sociocultural traditions, especially through ‘doxas’⁴ about artistic and aesthetic perception?
- In what type of British works of fiction is the postmodern turn most vividly actualised by means of the ekphrastic gaze?
- How can we describe the variety of iconographical and iconological meanings conveyed through the ekphrastic gaze in this type of texts?
- What kind of character type is the ekphrastic beholder and what are the sociocultural peculiarities of the way he/she functions in exemplary fictional texts?
- To what extent is it possible to talk of an interplay between the ekphrastic gazes of character, reader, and author and what does this interplay consist in in British postmodern fiction?
- In what way can the ekphrastic gaze be employed as a reading method?
- How does the ekphrastic gaze contribute to the (de-/re-)construction of the meta-ekphrastic discourse?
- In what way is it particularly expressive and/or subversive of the ‘cultural mystification’⁵ in the discourse of art in general and in the discourse of art history in particular?

With a view to answering these questions, the study pursues various interlinked aims:

(1) To analyse the phenomenon of the ekphrastic gaze in the context of the postmodern turn in British fiction and, consequently, in connection to British and Irish literary, aesthetic, and sociocultural traditions, particularly through the problem of artistic and aesthetic perception.

(2) To re-define and critically re-assess the narratological, historical, and ideological significance of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction.

(3) To delineate the sociocultural poetics and politics of the ekphrastic gaze to make up for certain deficits in the current understanding of ekphrasis in British postmodern

⁴ Here, the term is employed in accordance with Linda Hutcheon’s use of Roland Barthes’s term (qtd. in *Politics* 3; cf. ch. 2).

⁵ The term is borrowed from John Berger’s book *Ways of Seeing* (11; cf. ch. 5).

fiction.

(4) To develop a more systematic classification of its manifestations.

(5) To offer a comprehensive overview of the iconographical and iconological meanings conveyed through the ekphrastic gaze on different levels of the discourse in British postmodern fiction.

(6) To conceptualise the ekphrastic gaze as a deconstructionist reading tool.

(7) To delineate the emergence of an intertextual meta-ekphrastic discourse.

In this sense, it might be helpful to briefly address the terminology that will be used throughout this study. To begin with, in using the term ‘ekphrasis’ in general, I take into account a wide variety of conceptualisations of this phenomenon not only in literary studies but also across multiple fields.⁶ However, for the purposes of this study, I primarily follow the treatment of ekphrasis as a rhetorical genre in art-related disciplines and the discipline of art history in particular. Thus, David Carrier calls ekphrasis one of the two “modes of artwriting” (104) as opposed to interpretation, while Cole Swensen refers to it as “a subset of art writing” (162). In his turn, Jaś Elsner insists on the interpretative nature of art-historical writing and argues that art history per se is “nothing other than ekphrasis” (11). In doing so, the scholar suggests that any new art-historical writing about a work of art “is dragging it into a network of concepts generated by the ekphrastic tradition of art history over many centuries” (22) due to the fact that we can neither unwrite the existing texts about art nor undo the “ideological conditioning” (22) of our education that is based on their study:

In finding the terms to formulate my object in description, I not only fix the direction of argument in which it will lead, but am dependent on the structures, tropes and ground-rules set up by art-historical tradition. Through my apparently personal description, the tradition seems simply to rewrite itself – finding perhaps (one hopes) more subtle meanings, better analogues, a new document or an old one more precisely assessed, a more nuanced interpretation in the process.
(25)

The scholar goes even further to suggest that “the history of art history is the same as the history of ekphrasis” (24) and that ekphrastic instances outside art-historical texts, from the passages in Homer and Virgil to those in present-day novels, also constitute an

⁶ See, especially, Benton’s definition of ekphrasis as “a rhetorical game played by poets and a spectator sport for the reader” (40); Heffernan’s theorisation of ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of visual representation” (93).

important part of art historiography insofar as they exemplify the use of ekphrastic strategies of interpretation: “[the fact t]hat they may turn the discussion to other directions than just ‘art history’ has the potential to add possibilities to our own practice” (25). Finally, Elsner connects the role of ekphrasis (and of art history as ekphrasis) with the traditional rhetorical desire “to make the reader or the listener ‘see’ more than they saw before, when they encounter the object next” (26).

I find Elsner’s definition particularly interesting and useful not only within the context of postmodernism and the postmodern play with conventions and different modes of thinking, writing, and seeing but specifically within the context of the (de-/re-)construction of meaning in British postmodern fiction (cf. ch. 2). In this sense, this study focuses on a distinctive type of ekphrasis, the ‘ekphrastic gaze’. So far, in literary studies, the phenomenon of the ‘ekphrastic gaze’ has been mainly looked at from a narratological point of view with regard to its functions as a narrative construct that relates to a relationship between the observer and the observed, whether it is a work of art or any other ekphrastically perceived and re-presented object. Thus, drawing upon Roland Barthes’s idea of *l’effet du réel* (Cunningham 62), Valentine Cunningham makes use of the term ‘ekphrastic gaze’ to underscore the representational power of ekphrasis to depict the object that appears before the observer “as if alive, but only *as if*” (68) within the Western literary tradition of ekphrasis. Moreover, the scholar establishes three manifestations of the gaze at the intra- and extratextual levels of discourse: the gaze of the writer/poet, the gaze of the character, and the gaze of the reader. According to Cunningham, the latter two are directed by the writer/poet (57). As I have also argued in my study of the narrative arrangement of images of art in the works of the Irish writer John Banville, the ekphrastic gaze can be seen as an (anti-)narrative device that establishes the “[a]ctive role of the subject of the ekphrastic gaze” (my trans.; *Images of Art* 32).⁷ There, I suggested that its function consists in expressing the observer’s creative interpretation of the observed as a superimposition of his/her subjective experience upon objective reality (27).⁸ However, these theorisations focus on the

⁷ “Активная роль субъекта экфрасического взгляда” (Gorbina, *Images of Art* 32).

⁸ It is worth specifying that the concept of the ekphrastic gaze was used in my study of Banville’s ekphrasis as to its narratological qualities which were derived from the existing academic and largely formalist/structuralist discourse on poetic and fictional ekphrasis on the one hand, and from the discussions of the ‘gaze’ on the other. In this sense, it was taken outside the discourse on the ekphrastic gaze represented by Cunningham, Mitchell, and della Dora, and it was not considered as to its fundamental role in the (de-/re-)construction of sociocultural and ideological discourses and meanings within the Western interdisciplinary ekphrastic tradition (cf. this study). See Nataliya Gorbina’s *Images of Art in J. Banville’s Novels* [Образы Искусства в Романах Дж. Бэнвилла]. 2016. Southern Federal U, MA thesis.

ekphrastic gaze as a strategy of representation rather than the outcome of its use in a specific historical, sociocultural, and ideological context.

In this sense, W.J.T. Mitchell's theorisation of the ekphrastic gaze particularly stands out here. The scholar also draws attention to the narrative function of the ekphrastic gaze as a link between "the active gazer" (*Picture* 173) and "passive recipients" (173). In doing so, he speaks of "the power of the ekphrastic gaze" (172) to reverse the positions of the observer and the observed. At the same time, however, Mitchell proceeds to allude to the way the ekphrastic gaze appears to express sociocultural trends in nineteenth-century Britain insofar as it belongs not only to "a dangerous female other" (172) but also to "the political Other . . . of revolution . . ." (174).

Moreover, in art-related disciplines and in cultural studies, the term 'ekphrastic gaze' is even closer associated with the construction of sociocultural and ideological meaning. In particular, Veronica della Dora introduces "what we might call the 'ekphrastic gaze', a distinctively Byzantine mode of perceiving and representing space and time . . ." (57-58). The scholar specifies that

[i]n medieval Byzantium the ekphrastic gaze was not confined to painted icons. It embraced the physical environment; it wrapped the entire world. Both image and place were experienced as a relation between the visible and the invisible in the ontological sense described by Dionysios and Maximos. . . . Approached through scriptural topographies, the whole earth was a living icon of the face of God. (58)

More specifically, della Dora argues that the ekphrastic gaze helped the Byzantine viewer to recognise the iconographical "continuity and *repetition* of previous 'standard' biblical *topoi*" (57) in the sacred images as well as in the reality around him/her. This reveals as much about the sociocultural and ideological, i.e. iconological, attitude of the observer as it does about the sacred iconographical meanings contained in the observed.

Thus, building upon these intersecting interdisciplinary theorisations and conceptualisations of the ekphrastic gaze including my own previous contribution to the subject mentioned above, this study introduces the historical, sociocultural, and ideological dimensions of this phenomenon within the context of the postmodern turn insofar as it treats it as a verbally actualised mode of 'artseeing'⁹ as derived from the ekphrastic tradition and particularly from the conventions and ideologies of the

⁹ Cf. Carrier's term 'artwriting' (104).

ekphrastic tradition of art history. At the same time, this study revises and expands on the narratological characteristics of the ekphrastic gaze within the context of the sociocultural postmodern turn in British fiction. It addresses this phenomenon in relation to such devices of postmodernism as pastiche and parody, explores its chronotopicity, examines its function as a postmodern deconstructionist reading method, and approaches it as a means of (de-/re-)constructing meta-ekphrastic discourse.

In order to talk about the discourse that emerges in British postmodern fiction and that the ekphrastic gaze contributes to, this study makes use of the term ‘meta-ekphrasis’. So far, the term has been largely employed either to indicate the multilayered character of certain ekphrastic structures or to underscore the inherently representational nature of ekphrasis. On the one hand, it has been used to describe the particular case of an ekphrastic instance framed by another ekphrastic instance (De Armas 10). On the other, it has been employed in order to underscore the metafictional nature of ekphrasis. Thus, Ruth Webb refers to the portrayal of works of art as meta-ekphrasis because they contain another level of representation: “If all ekphrasis, of whatever subject, is like a painting or sculpture in its aim to ‘place before the eyes’, an ekphrasis of visual representation is doubly ekphrastic” (186). More importantly, Webb argues that meta-ekphrasis can offer a comment on its own ekphrastic essence. She exemplifies this point by addressing the way some instances of ancient ekphrasis reflect the Greek rhetorical tradition of ekphrasis within which they emerge. According to Webb, the ekphrastic descriptions of statues by Nikolaos, one of the authors of a series of rhetorical exercises *Progymnasmata*, demonstrate the use of techniques of ekphrasis “by the book” (186), i.e. in accordance with the way the rhetorical exercise of ekphrasis was taught in ancient Greece. At the same time, the *Eikones* by the Greek sophist Elder Philostratos present not only descriptions of paintings but also “the ‘manner in which’ paintings are viewed” (189).

Drawing upon Webb’s conceptualisation of ‘meta-ekphrasis’, this study further specifies this term in line with the epistemological understanding of the prefix ‘meta-’¹⁰ as indicative of a secondary discourse. Within the examination of the sociocultural poetics and politics of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction, meta-ekphrasis is to be understood as an ekphrasis of/about ekphrasis. Here, I make use of this term to describe a fictional ekphrastic discourse on the non-fictional, but equally ekphrastic

¹⁰ From the Greek μετά - ‘higher, beyond’ (“Meta-”).

discourse on art in general and on artistic/aesthetic perception in particular. While not necessarily self-conscious, meta-ekphrasis reveals its own inherently ekphrastic constructedness as a doubled structure. As a secondary discourse, it addresses the precursory dominant discourse of art disciplines and either implicitly or explicitly refers back to the conventions of writing about art – and specifically writing about looking at art – established within them. This means that meta-ekphrasis not only (re-)presents its referent indirectly as a construction of an ‘already made’¹¹ through the scholarly frame of art history, art theory or aesthetics, but it also shifts attention towards such a discursive frame per se. It seeks to reveal the continuities and discontinuities in the existing ekphrastic tradition and to expand upon it. Meta-ekphrasis strives towards creating its own self-sufficient discourse but is ultimately unable to do so. It is possible to talk about a meta-ekphrastic narrative: a work of fiction that engages with ekphrastic metanarratives of art history, art theory, and aesthetics.

Let me define the use of the terms ‘postmodernism’ and ‘postmodern’ now. Postmodernism is mainly understood as a phenomenon simultaneously continuous and discontinuous with the cultural expressions of modernism. It is characterised by inherently contradictory modes of thinking, seeing, and expressing oneself. Thus, in using the term ‘postmodernism’, I mainly follow Linda Hutcheon’s conceptualisation and theorisation of this phenomenon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989):

. . . [P]ostmodernism is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political.

Postmodernism manifests itself in many fields of cultural endeavor – architecture, literature, photography, film, painting, video, dance, music, and elsewhere. In general terms it takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or ‘highlight,’ and to subvert, or ‘subvert,’ and the mode is therefore a ‘knowing’ and an ironic – or even ‘ironic’ one. Postmodernism’s distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale ‘nudging’ commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. In many ways it is an even-handed process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to

¹¹ Term used by Abigail Solomon-Godeau as qtd. in Hutcheon, *Politics* 89; cf. ch. 2.

challenge. (1-2)¹²

At the same time, I have opted for the term ‘postmodern’ rather than ‘postmodernist’ in the title of this study insofar as it alludes to the way the general sociocultural and economic condition of the era of postmodernity is expressed in the art forms of postmodernism. In what follows, Jean-François Lyotard’s understanding of the concept ‘postmodern’ will be particularly useful. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) he sees it as a turn away from the general construct of *métarécits* (‘metanarratives’, ‘grand narratives’) of modernity towards *petits récits* (‘small narratives’). On the one hand, he speaks of a distrust and subversion of – rather than a break with – the totalising ideology of metanarratives as a means of “the legitimation of knowledge” (37). On the other, the scholar emphasises the postmodern production of an infinite plurality of diverse and contradictory small narratives.

As to the term ‘fiction’, I use it primarily in the sense of prose that does not lay claim to any kind of accuracy and primarily deals with imaginary characters and events, i.e. products of the author’s imagination as opposed to non-fiction. It predominantly concerns such forms of written expression as novels, novellas, and short stories. However, where appropriate, I will draw parallels with other art forms of fictional representation including film and television series.

Finally, by ‘British’ postmodern fiction I do not mean only novels, novellas, and short stories written by authors considered British either by birth or place of residence but also works of postcolonial literature associated with/dealing with the topics about Britain and its impact on the former colonies of the British Empire. This includes for example works of the US-born and UK-based Mexican writer Chloe Aridjis, the Germany-born British author John Lanchester, the Anglo-Irish novelist Iris Murdoch, and the British Indian writer Salman Rushdie.

In order to achieve the envisaged aims delineated above, this study requires an interdisciplinary approach that would reflect the complex, multilayered, and controversial nature of its subject. Therefore, it integrates theories, methods, and critical approaches from a wide variety of academic fields and disciplines including: literary studies (literary criticism and theory, genre poetics, textual analysis and interpretation, literary history and sociology), aesthetics, art history, art theory, cultural studies and social sciences (cultural anthropology, education, gender studies, material culture

¹² See also Linda Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. 1988. Routledge, 2003.

studies, sociology, and social psychology), linguistics (historical linguistics, pragmatics, semiotics, and syntax), film/video studies, historiography, ethics, psychiatry, and criminology.

The application of various critical methods and approaches are determined by the aim to reveal and clarify different sides of the sociocultural poetics and politics of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction. To begin with, a detailed account of the actualisation of its poetics and politics is to be achieved by means of a combination of all four groups of theoretical approaches to literature: text-oriented, reader-oriented, author-oriented, and context-oriented approaches.

To begin with, in order to expose different layers of intrinsic meanings conveyed by the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction, this study primarily relies on Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction. In accordance with Derrida's ideas that have helped to lay the foundations of deconstructive criticism and particularly deconstructive literary criticism, this study will locate and pinpoint heterogeneous meanings and interpretations contained in the texts under discussion by means of trying to "remain faithful . . . to the injunctions of the text" (qtd. in Wolfreys 50). In doing so, the study will pay close attention to what Derrida calls "the production of meaning through *différance* and dissemination, through a complex play of signifying traces" (qtd. in Wolfreys 51) and it will question "the covert philosophical and political presuppositions of institutionalized critical methods which generally govern our reading of a text" (qtd. in Wolfreys 51). In other words, the study will address the perpetual postponement of the signified through a continuous flow of signifiers actualised by the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction. At the same time, it will try to determine the authoritative ideologies underlying the reader's traditional (modern) interpretation and construction of knowledge and establish the ekphrastic gaze per se as a (postmodern) deconstructionist reading method.

The approach of the Reception Theory is particularly important for an understanding of the functions of the ekphrastic gaze. The theoretical postmodern turn towards the reader in literary studies witnessed a growing awareness of the subjectivity of a text and the multiplicity of its meaning. In particular, Thomas Docherty in *Reading (Absent) Character* (1983) argues that both author and reader take part in the process of characterization, i.e. the establishment of the discontinuous self of the character. According to Docherty, both author and reader also engage in the construction of the meaning(s) of the text in general (xiii-xv).

At the same time, this study takes into account the Barthesian death of the author as the sole constructor of meaning and the subsequent birth of the reader of the text as “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (“Death” 146) and “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (146). Drawing upon a cluster of reader-oriented theories of literary interpretation (primarily those suggested by Jonathan Culler, Stanley E. Fish, Walker Gibson, Wolfgang Iser), the study will delineate the interplay between the ekphrastic gazes of character, reader, and the questionable figure of the postmodern author and formulate how the ekphrastic gaze may function as a reading tool.

At the same time, due to the peculiar character of the phenomenon of ekphrasis as a sociocultural construct, it is helpful to apply theories and methodologies at the intersection between the disciplines of aesthetics, art history, and art theory on the one hand, and cultural studies and the social sciences on the other. This study mainly relies on the modes of art-historical and sociocultural inquiry as theorised by Erwin Panofsky in his *Studies in Iconology* (1939): the methods of iconography and iconology. Firstly, the analysis of the phenomenon of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction as what Panofsky calls “*pre-iconographical description*” (5) and “*iconographical analysis in the narrower sense*” (7) will help us understand what is depicted and how it is depicted with regard to recurrent culturally transmitted themes, motifs, and concepts. Secondly, the “*iconographical interpretation in a deeper sense*” (8), i.e. iconological analysis, will provide an “insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, *essential tendencies of the human mind* were expressed by specific *themes and concepts*” (15). Panofsky’s iconographical and iconological methods are chosen in this study not only as a means to analyse the scope of meanings that are (de-)constructed with the help of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction but also as a means to (de-)construct these meanings per se, whether by an intratextual or an extratextual ekphrastic beholder.

It is essential to note that iconographical and iconological approaches are not new in the study of postmodernism in art or that of the relationship between words and images. Thus, Charles Jencks argues that the terms ‘iconography’ and ‘iconology’ are “very important to communication and the story of post-modernism” (12) with regard to his study of postmodern architecture. In his turn, Mitchell’s makes use of the concept of iconology in his book *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986) to refer to his study of “what images say” (1-2) on the one hand, and “what to say about images” (1), i.e. “the

tradition of ‘art writing’” (1), on the other. So far, however, this art-historical approach (the way it was formulated by Panofsky) has not been used for the study of the recurrent ekphrastic themes, motifs, and ideologies in British postmodern fiction.

The use of the iconological method of interpretation evokes yet more theories from cultural studies and the social sciences. The following theories/concepts/ideas will be particularly useful: Roland Barthes’s concept of ‘doxa’ adopted by Linda Hutcheon in her *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989); John Berger’s idea of ‘cultural mystification’ of the discourse of art and art history from his *Ways of Seeing* (1972); Émile Durkheim’s sociological theorisation of the notion of ‘collective consciousness’ in his *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893); Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘docile body’ in his *Discipline and Punish* (1975); Carl Jung’s concept of ‘persona’ in his essay “The Relation of the Ego to the Unconscious” (1928); Jean-François Lyotard’s concepts of *métarécits* and *petits récits* from his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1979); Karl Marx’s theorisation of a ‘commodity’ in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and *Capital* (1867).

With a view to providing an in-depth insight into the (de-/re-)construction of a wide variety of aesthetic, sociocultural, and ideological meaning(s) by means of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction, this study is divided into six chapters, including introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1, “Introduction”, sets the scene for the study of the expression of the postmodern turn in British postmodern fiction and (de-/re-)construction of meaning through the ekphrastic gaze. It surveys the current state of research in the study of ekphrasis in British literature and outlines the issues of methodology. Chapter 2, “The Postmodern Turn Through the Ekphrastic Gaze in British Fiction”, provides a theoretical introduction to the phenomenon of the postmodern turn and its socioculturally specific actualisation by means of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction. It addresses the poetics and politics of the ekphrastic gaze with regard to the continuities and discontinuities in the sociocultural and aesthetic tradition of British ekphrasis. Furthermore, it delineates the peculiarities of the ekphrastic organisation of iconographical and iconological meanings and establishes the chronotopicity of a perceptually motivated ekphrastic encounter in British postmodern fiction.

Chapter 3, “The (De-/Re-)Construction of the Object of the Ekphrastic Gaze: In the Interstices between Art, Words, and Life”, explores the recurrent artistic themes and motifs that are (de-/re-)constructed through the ekphrastic gaze and the prevalent

sociocultural and aesthetic discourses underlying their (de-/re-)construction at the intratextual level of discourse. It outlines the narratological and ideological peculiarities of ekphrastic composition and pays particular attention to ekphrastic geometry. Furthermore, it surveys the variety of meanings conveyed in the (re-)presentations of artworks and human beings placed under the scrutiny of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction.

Chapter 4, “The (De-/Re-)Construction of the Ekphrastic Beholder: In the Interstices between the Gazes of Author, Character, and Reader”, focuses on the iconography and iconology of the ekphrastic beholder’s persona of the (pseudo-)connoisseur with regard to different literary, aesthetic, and sociocultural contexts. It examines two main aspects of this persona: (pseudo-)intelligence and (pseudo-)morality. At the same time, it assesses the relationship between the gazes of the intra- and extratextual ekphrastic beholders and delineates the functions of the ekphrastic gaze as a reading tool.

Chapter 5, “The (De-/Re-)Construction of the Meta-Ekphrastic Discourse in British Postmodern Fiction: Between the *Métarécits* and the *Petits Récits* of the Ekphrastic Gaze”, deepens the understanding of the sociocultural and ideological interconnectedness of the intra- and extratextual dimensions of the ekphrastic gaze. It demonstrates the interplay between the fictional and non-fictional ekphrastic discourses actualised through the ekphrastic gaze. It specifically focuses on the identification of motifs and concepts regarding the artistic and aesthetic perception in the metanarratives of the art discourse and their meta-ekphrastic recycling and (de-)mystification in British postmodern fiction.

Chapter 6, “Conclusion”, summarises the findings regarding the sociocultural poetics and politics of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction and provides an outlook on future research.

2. The Postmodern Turn Through the Ekphrastic Gaze in British Fiction

In their work *The Postmodern Turn* (1997), Steven Best and Douglas Kellner argue that “[d]espite the heterogeneity of the various postmodern turns in the arts, they share key concerns and family resemblances” (135). In this chapter, I should like to look at the peculiarities of the general phenomenon of the postmodern turn in the arts and problematise the ekphrastic gaze as an instrument of its actualisation in British postmodern fiction. Thus, this chapter primarily aims to answer the following questions: What is the postmodern turn and what are some of its defining characteristics in the arts? More specifically, how does this shift towards postmodernism manifest itself in the cultural – rather than exclusively literary – British tradition of ekphrasis? And in what way does the ekphrastic gaze express the postmodern turn in British fiction?

2.1 The Shift from Modernism to Postmodernism in the Arts

To begin with, let us address the general issue of what has been explicated by scholars as the phenomenon of the postmodern turn. Across multiple disciplines, the postmodern turn has come to be understood as an all-encompassing sociocultural phenomenon marked by changes in the wide variety of paradigms in the Western world of the second half of the twentieth century.¹ In particular, the scholars Best and Kellner use the term ‘postmodern turn’ to refer to the historical transition from modernism to postmodernism as a “dramatic transformation in social life, the arts, science, philosophy, and theory” (viii). In the arts, the authors of *The Postmodern Turn* (1997) proceed to theorise this transformation as a postmodern challenge to the paradigm of modernism. In this sense, the scholars regard it as essential to understand the forms and ideas of modernism that postmodernism rejects or/and parodies. Best and Kellner stress that, among other things, postmodernist artists challenge or even mock such modernist claims as modernist artists’ pretentious and elitist repudiation of the tradition and their unfaltering experimentation with new forms with the main view of achieving aesthetic – rather than any other – goals.

Best and Kellner underscore that postmodernism’s reaction against the

¹ For a detailed interdisciplinary discussion of the postmodern turn, see, for example, Steven Seidman’s introduction to *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, edited by Steven Seidman, Cambridge UP, 1994, pp. 1-26. Cf. also Simon Susen’s classification of the scholars who contributed to the phenomenon of the postmodern turn in Susen 22-30.

modernist desire “to generate new modes of art and new ways of seeing and thinking” (128) is pivotal to the paradigm of postmodernism. They reveal that postmodernism particularly challenges the “intrinsic features of modernist aesthetics” (128) such as ‘masterpiece’ (128), ‘genius’ (128), ‘monumentalism’ (128), ‘distinctive style and vision’ (128), ‘creativity’ (130), and ‘originality’ (132). At the same time, the scholars point out that the modernist artists’ obsession with innovation was based on the “[b]elief in art for art’s sake and the autonomy of art” (126). In doing so, Best and Kellner draw attention to the fact that this meant that sometimes modernist artists concentrated exclusively on artistic form rather than on expressing the concerns of social reality. However, the general focus on innovation echoed “the logic of cultural modernity” (127).

As Best and Kellner explain, postmodernists choose to “draw on past forms, which are ironically quoted and eclectically combined” (132) to problematise sociocultural reality. This includes a recycling and recontextualisation of past themes and motifs, images and styles, beliefs and concepts as part of the “postmodern play” (134) by the postmodern artist as “a *bricoleur* who just rearranges the debris of the cultural past” (133). The scholars proceed to specify that the shift towards postmodernism in the arts is connected with the establishment of pastiche and parody as the main mechanisms – if not defining signifiers – of postmodernism:

Rather than expanding on the themes of selfhood, authenticity, originality, and liberation, postmodern artists parody them. Rather than inventing new materials, postmodernists quote what’s already around and combine fragments in a pastiche – as Robert Rauschenberg pastes texts from newspapers and images from classical paintings onto his canvases The postmodern turn is well exemplified in the work of Andy Warhol, who boasted he could produce as many works of art in a day through mechanical reproduction as Picasso could in a lifetime. . . .

Hence, the modern concern for monumentality, for great and original works, gives way to the postmodern theme of irony, and modernist seriousness passes over to postmodern play. (133-34)

Considered either in synonymity or juxtaposition with each other by the leading theorists of postmodernism,² both pastiche and parody are generally conceptualised as

² For example, Hutcheon addresses parody and points out that it is “often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality” (*Politics* 89). Cf. also Hutcheon, *Poetics* 26-27.

instruments that allow postmodern artists to return to the past aesthetic forms and place them alongside – or rather superimpose them upon – the present ones. However, as delineated by one of the main advocates of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon, such a return is seen negatively by the majority of critics: they speak of it as a shallow, decontextualised and “de-historicized quotation of past forms” (*Politics* 90). In his attack on the regressive culture of postmodernism, Fredric Jameson, in particular, makes use of the term ‘pastiche’ to problematise such an evocation of past forms as meaningless and ahistorical insofar as it constitutes an “imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language” (17).³

Arguing against this negative view of postmodernism as empty and apolitical, Hutcheon sees such a postmodern appeal to conventions as ultimately self-reflexively ideological and subversive. She chooses to draw upon Roland Barthes’s concept of the ‘doxa’ (qtd. in *Politics* 3)⁴ to suggest that postmodernism strives “to ‘de-doxify’ our cultural representations and their undeniable political import” (3), and that parody becomes the main tool and expression of such ‘de-doxification’:

Contrary to the prevailing view of parody as a kind of ahistorical and apolitical pastiche, postmodern art . . . uses parody and irony to engage the history of art and the memory of the viewer in a re-evaluation of aesthetic forms and contents through a reconsideration of their usually unacknowledged politics of representation. (96)

It is essential, of course, to remember that Hutcheon’s broad conceptualisation of postmodern parody goes beyond the modern association of this word with the idea of ridicule. For the scholar, postmodern parody ranges “from that witty ridicule to the playfully ludic to the seriously respectful” (90). In this sense, the scholar explicates that one of the goals of postmodern parody is to problematise the “politics of representation” (96). Hutcheon specifies that this includes challenging the established modern presumptions concerning creative authenticity and ingenuity as well as questioning both the aesthetic and the economic value of the original. As a result, “through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come

³ Cf. the treatment of postmodern pastiche in postmodern music as ‘anti-historical’ insofar as it merges the past with the present as opposed to modernist pastiche in which “the past is reinterpreted in the present” (Kramer 75).

⁴ In his essay “Change the Object Itself: Mythology today”, Barthes uses the term ‘doxa’ to summarise “Common Sense, Right Reason, the Norm, General Opinion” (165).

from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (89).

2.2 The Sociocultural Poetics and Politics of the Ekphrastic Gaze in British Postmodern Fiction

How does the postmodern turn manifest itself, then, in such a phenomenon at the crossroads of literature and the visual arts as ekphrasis and specifically in ekphrasis in British fiction? While scholars acknowledge certain changes in the paradigm of ekphrasis, they have so far mainly conceived them as a general shift in the visual culture of the twentieth century.

On the one hand, such interdisciplinary terms as Werner Wolf’s ‘intermedial turn’,⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell’s ‘pictorial turn’⁶ or ‘ekphrastic turn’ in the title of the anthology *The Ekphrastic Turn: Inter-art Dialogues* (2015) edited by Asunción López-Varela Azcárate and Ananta Charan Sukla⁷ denote a shift in the interaction between various art forms that has been inspired by the emergence and popularisation of new technologies and media of art. On the other, they refer to a shift in the scholarly reception of and discourse on ekphrasis caused by the emergence of studies on intermediality in the 1960s.⁸ Even when one of the leading experts on ekphrasis James Heffernan speaks of “modern and postmodern ekphrasis” (135) in the eponymous chapter of his historical study of ekphrastic poetry, he mostly addresses similarities and differences between the general phenomenon of the “[t]wentieth-century ekphrasis” and its precursors (138).

However, I find it necessary to differentiate between the paradigms of modernist and postmodernist ekphrases. Moreover, in accordance with the centrality of the topic of vision and visuality to the postmodern turn in the arts, this study argues that the

⁵ Werner Wolf refers to the twentieth-century phenomenon of an ‘intermedial turn’ as an upsurge of interactions between various media and the consequent appearance of an interdisciplinary attention to such intermediality. See Wolf, “Functional Analysis” 15 and *Musicalization 2*.

⁶ Mitchell suggests to differentiate between “the pictorial turn as a matter of mass perception, collective anxiety about images and visual media . . . and a turn to images and visual culture within the realm of the intellectual disciplines . . .” (“Images and their Incarnations” 191). For more detail, see W.J.T. Mitchell’s *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. 1994. The U of Chicago P, 1995.

⁷ Foregrounded in the title of the anthology *The Ekphrastic Turn: Inter-art Dialogues* (2015), edited by Azcárate and Sukla, the term ‘ekphrastic turn’ is employed in connection to the concepts of ‘inter-’ and ‘transmediality’ to mark a shift of attention towards the multimedial nature of ekphrasis. It refers to the study of storytelling which is redefined in line with “materiality and mediality of cultural practices” (xiii). See the Introduction to *The Ekphrastic Turn: Inter-art Dialogues*, edited by Asunción López-Varela Azcárate and Ananta Charan Sukla, Common Ground Publishing, 2015, pp. xiii-xix.

⁸ Cf. the assessment of the heterogeneity of academic narratological approaches to ekphrasis with regard to the semantic broadening of the term in Gorbina, *Images of Art* 14-23.

postmodern turn in the tradition of ekphrasis in general and specifically in the cultural and aesthetic tradition of ekphrasis in British fiction, is particularly prominently actualised through a distinctive type of ekphrasis that underpins the development of the whole Western ekphrastic tradition: the ekphrastic gaze. In accordance with Linda Hutcheon's treatment of postmodern representation,⁹ the British and postmodern manifestation of the ekphrastic gaze can also be seen as a means to postulate simultaneously and "self-consciously all of these – image, narrative, product of (and producer of) ideology" (*Politics* 29).

The ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction epitomises a specific British reaction against modernism – something that is usually understood by scholars as a primarily Anglo-American phenomenon (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 4).¹⁰ In particular, the renditions of ekphrastically perceived and (re-)presented objects in British postmodern fiction convey a reaction against modernist tropes and forms of expression as epitomised by modernist ekphrasis on the one hand, and a playful and eclectic incorporation and recycling of the verities of earlier British and Irish literary and aesthetic trends within contemporary sociocultural context on the other.

Thus, the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction primarily reacts against the ideas expressed by national modernist ekphrasis through mocking the general phenomenon of what Claudia Olk refers to as "the Modernist concern with seeing in a 'modern' way" (3). In her study of the aesthetics of vision in Virginia Woolf's works, the scholar reveals that an obsession with vision and the visual is pivotal to the whole modernist discourse with its snobbish rejection of traditional and objective modes of seeing and its search for innovative and unique ways to express individual experience and specifically aesthetic experience. Olk alludes to this modernist phenomenon at the beginning of the twentieth century as a "turn towards the visual" (2). As a result of modernists' exploration of the visual, the scholar argues, it has ironically become, in fact, conventional to talk about "the Modernist novel as a visual wonderland or Modernist poetics as some kind of Modernity-induced *ut pictura poesis*" (7).

More specifically, numerous fascinating visual experiments by modernist writers aimed at the revitalisation of art and culture concerned an inherently sociocultural and aesthetic engagement with painting. As Woolf writes in her essay "Pictures", ". . . it

⁹ As Hutcheon suggests, "ekphrases (or verbal representations of visual representations) often have central representational functions" in postmodern narratives (*Poetics* 121).

¹⁰ Cf. comparisons with the function of the ekphrastic gaze in other Western and Eastern postmodern literatures in ch. 3 and ch. 4.

would seem on the face of it that literature has always been the most sociable and the most impressionable of [the arts – N.G.]” (140) and that it has always been under the influence of other art forms. In particular, Woolf defines English literature at the beginning of the twentieth century as being “undoubtedly . . . under the dominion of painting” (140). Whether it is Virginia Woolf’s direct engagement with Roger Fry’s aesthetic ideas and values in her novel *The Waves*¹¹ or what the English author and critic Frank Swinnerton calls James Joyce’s “kind of literary post-impressionism” (627) with reference to his influential novels *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, ekphrasis in the literature of British and Irish modernism echoed contemporary trends in the world of the visual arts. On the one hand, this concerned recent developments in French art “discovered”, legitimised, and introduced to the British public (that reacted in a very hostile way; cf. below; cf. also modern prose drama) as the art of post-impressionists by the authoritative Bloomsbury art critic – or as Virginia Woolf called him, “a critic of taste” (*Roger Fry* 157) – Roger Fry. On the other, it included theoretical tenets of intrinsically phenomenological¹² modernist formalism primarily introduced in Britain by Roger Fry and Clive Bell as well. One of Fry’s inventions included a theoretical introduction of three distinctive types of vision in his essay “The Artist’s Vision”: ‘curiosity vision’, ‘aesthetic vision’ and ‘creative vision’ (32-33). Fry claimed that aesthetic vision is reserved for the contemplation of works of art and curiosity vision – for the contemplation of the objects with peculiar, i.e. extraordinary, appearance. However, while creative vision, according to Fry, addresses itself to all kinds of objects, it is unable to assess the aesthetic value of the observed (34-35).

At the same time, the modernist establishment of connoisseurship as a profession is significant. In his essay “Art and the State” Roger Fry argued that the

¹¹ Woolf’s conscious use of Fry’s ideas of post-impressionist formalism in her artistic practice and in her modernist and formalist experimentations with the form was examined in more detail in Nataliya Gorbina’s paper “Ecstasy of Ordinary Experience in V. Woolf’s Fiction” presented at the Third International Conference of the French Society for Modernist Studies “Modernist Objects”, 15 June 2018, Paris Sorbonne University.

See also Julia Briggs’s chapter “The Search for Form (i): Fry, Formalism and Fiction” in *Reading Virginia Woolf*, Edinburgh UP, 2006, pp. 96-112, Claudia Olk’s chapter “The Poetry of Aesthetic Vision in *The Waves*” in *Virginia Woolf and the Aesthetics of Vision*, De Gruyter, 2014, pp. 155-83, and Anthony Uhlmann’s essay “Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury Aesthetics” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, edited by Maggie Humm, Edinburgh UP, 2010, pp. 58-73.

¹² Roger Fry’s formalism can be seen as inherently phenomenological if we take into consideration his abiding interest in phenomenology that found particular expression in the title of a dissertation he submitted – albeit unsuccessfully – at Cambridge: “On Laws of Phenomenology and their Application to Greek Painting”. For more detail, see Woolf, *Roger Fry* 60.

“intelligent understanding of the artistic products of mankind . . . is a quite serious profession, and one which requires a very thorough and somewhat special training from comparatively early years” (qtd. in Hoberman 57). As pointed out by Ruth Hoberman, Fry’s search greatly owed to the ideas of Giovanni Morelli who had introduced “scientific connoisseurship” in 1880 as a challenge to the existing tradition of art education. Morelli’s critique concerned the fact that this tradition was based on “studying art from books only, instead of from the works of art themselves” (qtd. in Hoberman 60).

Another important popular modernist trend consisted in the establishment of the authority of modernism by means of a sociocultural and aesthetic break with the authority of tradition and specifically a vindictive break with the authority of the Renaissance in contemporary Britain – a break, once again, propagated by Roger Fry, Clive Bell and T.E. Hulme.¹³ In his study on the formation of modernist vision and visuality, the art critic Jonathan Crary specifies it as “a rupture with Renaissance, or *classical*, models of vision and of the observer” (3) and determines that it was a process dependent upon the general sociocultural reconstruction of knowledge (3). However, such a break as established by the modernist art critics and theorists at the beginning of the twentieth century was tainted by the refusal of the British public to accept it. Roger Fry, in particular, discerned a connection between the audience’s outrage at post-impressionists and their pre- and misconceptions about what art should be. In his essay “The Grafton Gallery – I”, the art critic explicated that the public reluctance to let go of traditionally mimetic/representational art was contingent upon the art-historical discourse that continued to insist on seeing art history as an evolutionary progress and upon judging artistic accomplishments by the artist’s “power of representing nature” in a realistic way (87).¹⁴ Such stagnation of public taste in Britain is illustrated and openly satirised in the works of the ‘reluctant modernist’¹⁵ Aldous Huxley and particularly in his short story “The Portrait” with its sale of “sham Old Masters” (264) to fashionable and rich, yet ignorant, customers.

¹³ On the modernist repudiation of the Renaissance, see, in particular, Lynne Walhout Hinojosa’s *The Renaissance, English Cultural Nationalism, and Modernism, 1860-1920*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

¹⁴ For more detail on the modernist art critics’ argument against the Renaissance as “the root of modern art’s demise” (Hinojosa 114) and as the main reason for “the decrepit state of public taste” (117), see Lynne Walhout Hinojosa’s chapter “The Modernist Rejection of the Renaissance: Fry, Bell, Hulme” in *The Renaissance, English Cultural Nationalism, and Modernism, 1860-1920*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 113-42.

¹⁵ This expression is borrowed from the title of Peter Edgerly Firchow and Janice Rossen’s collection of essays *Reluctant Modernists: Aldous Huxley and Some Contemporaries* (2003), edited by Evelyn S. Firchow and Bernfried Nügel, LIT Verlag, 2002.

In its reaction against the elitist culture and principles of modernism, the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction showcases a pompous return to the verities of the art-historical tradition including the verities of the Renaissance. Ekphrastic instances in British postmodern fiction seemingly appear conservative rather than radical insofar as they do not explicitly attempt to expand upon the experience of perception by creating new aesthetic values or modes of seeing the way modernist ekphrasis did. Instead, the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction chooses to borrow ideas from the past and, either directly or indirectly, only semi-jokingly embraces the vestiges of its own sociocultural tradition and history.

Unlike modernist ekphrasis that constituted a direct engagement with contemporary trends in the visual arts, ekphrastic renditions in British postmodern fiction draw upon artistic trends of the second half of the twentieth century indirectly. For instance, while postmodern writers time and again choose to evoke the conventional vision of Sandro Botticelli's female beauty rather than more recent Andy Warhol's digital pop appropriation of *The Birth of Venus* or its quotation in fashion by Dolce & Gabbana,¹⁶ the very fact that this is one of the most recurrent ekphrastic motifs echoes the general sociocultural trend of recycling the works of this particular master in culture and specifically in postmodern and contemporary art.¹⁷

As long as the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction appears to evoke sociocultural stereotypes about the past rather than attempts – or even wants – to reconstruct the past authentically, it can be seen as a result of what Jameson calls “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past” (18). Furthermore, to adapt Jameson's use of Henri Lefebvre's term ‘neo’ (18) with regard to the pseudo-innovations of postmodernist culture, British postmodern ekphrasis becomes neo-ekphrasis that introduces recycled versions of such neo-Botticellis ultimately devoid of artistic authenticity. It reflects the state of postmodern reality and marks the “emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” (Jameson 9).

However, if we return to Hutcheon's understanding of postmodernism and its mechanism of parody, British postmodern ekphrastic gaze can be conceptualised as

¹⁶ See Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* painted in c. 1485-86 and located at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Andy Warhol's *Details of Renaissance Paintings* (Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*) created in 1984 and located in a private collection, and Dolce & Gabbana *Venus Dress* from the collection Spring/Summer 1993.

¹⁷ On the persistent revival and recycling of Botticelli's *Venus*, see *Botticelli Reimagined*, edited by Mark Evans et al., V&A Publishing, 2016.

being inherently ideologically parodistic. The conscious refusal of the authors of postmodern ekphrasis to invent anything new seems to express a transition indicated by Abigail Solomon-Godeau and referred to by Hutcheon: the transition from the ‘ready made’ of modernism towards the ‘already made’ of postmodernism (qtd. in *Politics* 89). As an ‘already made’ (or rather ‘already seen’), the vision (re-)presented by the ekphrastic gaze is a product and a producer of a feeling of *déjà vu* insofar as it expresses the postmodern mockery of the ideas of authenticity and uniqueness of individual aesthetic experience pertinent to modernism and reveals the ultimate lack of artistic and intellectual freedom from existing conventions.

Employing another term of Hutcheon’s, ‘de-naturalization’ (*Politics* 2), we can see that such an ekphrastic gaze addresses sociocultural and aesthetic conventions, preconceptions and ideologies that have become embedded in the collective consciousness as ‘natural’. The ekphrastic gaze simultaneously reinforces and strives to ‘de-naturalize’ them as ‘cultural’ (*Politics* 2).

Thus, one of the most influential ideologies simultaneously adopted and subverted by the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction is John Ruskin’s aesthetics of vision. Interestingly enough, as pointed out by Elizabeth Helsinger in the introduction to *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* (1982), “[t]he beholder he [Ruskin – N.G.] addresses, in *Modern Painters* or *The Stones of Venice*, can learn to combine seeing with reading because Ruskin is principally concerned with art or literature where seeing and reading overlap, where language is visible or images readable [*sic*]” (3). The scholar points out that not only do the critic’s texts demand an equally learned reader but they themselves also become a means to educate the reader “how to look at Turner or Venetian architecture” (3). Whether explicitly or implicitly, the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction draws upon Ruskin’s idea of the act of beholding as an educational tool and particularly his use of ekphrastic beholding to educate Victorian public. The ekphrastic gaze creates a link between intra- and extratextual observers and masks as an educational tool. In doing so, however, it shames both the intra- and extratextual reader into being a knowledgeable – or rather (pseudo-)knowledgeable – ekphrastic beholder rather than genuinely enriches his/her aesthetic taste and knowledge. At the extratextual level in particular, it turns the reader into an accomplice to the intratextual observers’ crimes rather than helps to really instill in him/her any moral values.

Perhaps the most important aesthetic model – or rather an ideological position –

that underlies such (de-/re-)construction of the simultaneously old and new, compliant and subversive aesthetics by means of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction is Oscar Wilde's playful argument that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" ("Decay" 22). Ekphrastically expressed in his essay "The Decay of Lying", Wilde's idea has become taken for granted as a doxa across a wide variety of interrelated discourses including aesthetic, literary, ekphrastic, and sociocultural discourses. As such a common belief (if not an indisputable truth by consensus), Wilde's doxa reverberates in postmodern culture and in postmodern ekphrastic renditions as a way of not only looking at and thinking about the relationship between art and life but also writing about it – an inherently *cultural* way that is, however, embedded in the collective consciousness as *natural*.

As we know, Wilde problematises the ontology of reality as the artist's fabrication by drawing attention to the way people's perception of the world around them is shaped by art and particularly by influential artists. As outlined by Wilde's mouthpiece in the essay, Vivian, this includes the creation of a public – rather than solely individual – awareness of the beauty of certain visual elements of reality through art as well as the popularisation of certain images and ideals. For example, Vivian informs his interlocutor Cyril that while fogs may have existed in London for a long time, people finally see them because artists and particularly the impressionists "have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects" (28). At the same time, Vivian addresses the way "two imaginative painters" (22), i.e. the influential Pre-Raphaelite artists Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, have created and publicised "a certain curious and fascinating type of beauty" (22) that shaped the contemporary beauty ideal and even became a fashion trend. The type of beauty Vivian talks about is Botticellian beauty that was revived and popularised through the art of the Pre-Raphaelites.¹⁸

Playfully, Wilde postulates perception as a sociocultural construct that depends on the beholder's social status on the one hand, and on contemporary cultural trends on the other. In doing so, he emphasises the juxtaposition between the modes of seeing of "the cultured" (28) and "the uncultured" (28). Thus, the aesthetic taste of a more

¹⁸ See Paul Fortunato's treatment of Wilde's appeal to the influence of Pre-Raphaelite paintings on the audience as an expression of his "consumer-based aesthetic" (viii) in *Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde*. Routledge, 2007. On the *English* rebirth of Botticellian woman at the end of the nineteenth century and the way his art has shaped modern idea of beauty, see, for example, Elizabeth Prettejohn's "Botticelli and the Pre-Raphaelites" in *Botticelli Reimagined*, edited by Mark Evans et al., V&A Publishing, 2016, pp. 76-81.

educated observer allows him/her not only to notice and recognise the influences of the arts in the world around him/her but also to respond to them in accordance with the latest important aesthetic trends. This should include, according to Wilde, an expression of distaste for the obsolete realism of the Victorian culture: “They [fogs – N.G.] have become the mere mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis. Where the cultured catch an effect, the uncultured catch cold” (28). As postulated by Wilde’s mouthpiece, it would appear an indicator of the lack of sophistication to draw – or even to pay – attention to sunsets as Turner’s already outdated inventions: “Nobody of any *real culture*, for instance, ever talks nowadays about the beauty of a sunset. Sunsets are quite old-fashioned. They belong to the time when Turner was the last note in art. To admire them is a distinct sign of provincialism of temperament” (28; emphasis added).

Wilde’s semi-satirical statement about life as an imitation of art becomes a perfect foundation for the ideology of the parodistic ‘already made’ of postmodernism. One curious example of the way Wilde’s aesthetic model finds expression in postmodern culture is the feature introduced by Google’s app *Arts & Culture* in 2018 that allows people to upload pictures of their faces and discover their look-alikes among the world’s most famous works of art. As Anthony Cuthbertson reports for *The Independent*, the app invites users in the following manner:

‘Travel through artworks and discover which ones look most like you,’ the app explains. ‘This new, experimental feature uses computer vision technology to compare your selfie with faces in 1,000s of historical artworks.’ (Cuthbertson, “Google Art Selfie App”)

The ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction revisits and plays with Wilde’s ideas of the lack of aesthetic originality in life as opposed to art and the lack of originality in societal aesthetic perception as perception through currently available and fashionable cultural lens. Moreover, ekphrastic renditions in British postmodern fiction draw upon Wilde’s doxa not only thematically but also structurally insofar as they recycle the very structure of his ekphrasis: the ekphrastic gaze also evokes a socioculturally-conditioned perceptual construct of artistically modified reality rather than portrays a more or less traditional work of visual arts. Every element of ‘Life’ (as understood by Wilde) is subjected to the sociocultural power of the ekphrastic gaze that ‘copies and pastes’ it from the realm of art. Moreover, in accordance with Wilde’s conceptualisation of the way life imitates visual art rather than any other art form, this primarily relates to

perceptually accessible appearances of the objects that can be visually – and therefore ekphrastically – (re-)presented.

In line with the phenomenon of the postmodern turn, the ekphrastic gaze ultimately emerges as a self-consciously post-ironic parody, a (pseudo-)intellectual and intertextual assemblage of quotations and allusions as well as, ultimately, an ideologically (self-)subversive and (self-)contradictory palimpsest of socioculturally specific conventions expressed and preserved in the tradition of British and Irish ekphrasis at large. It actualises the postmodern turn in British fiction by means of creating an interplay between a variety of meanings. These meanings, however, can be further subdivided into two levels: the level of visible aesthetic meanings and the level of sociocultural and ideological meanings. In order to theorise these two aspects, I should like to draw upon Erwin Panofsky's differentiation of iconography and iconology in art-historical analysis as outlined in his *Studies in Iconology* (1939). While the revelation of iconographical meanings through the ekphrastic gaze is explicit, its expression of iconology is implicit.

Thus, pre-iconographically and iconographically, the ekphrastic gaze explicitly addresses and underscores what Panofsky refers to as “the *primary* or *natural* and the *secondary* or *conventional*” (*Studies* 5) meanings. In accordance with Panofsky's theorisation of primary or natural meanings, it concerns the establishment of “artistic *motifs*” (5): this includes identification of such elements of art as line, colour and shape; identification of “representations of natural *objects*” (5) including human beings and relationships between these objects; identification of poses and gestures. At the same time, as delineated by Panofsky, a recognition of secondary or conventional meanings requires to connect “artistic *motifs* and combinations of artistic *motifs* (*compositions*) with *themes* or *concepts*” (6). Moreover, as an instrument of iconographical interpretation, the ekphrastic gaze also draws upon what Panofsky summarises as “a familiarity with specific *themes* or *concepts* as transmitted through literary sources, whether acquired by purposeful reading or by oral tradition” (11).

At the same time, iconologically, the ekphrastic gaze reveals what Panofsky calls the “*intrinsic meaning* or *content*” (5) and provides an insight into “the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work” (7). Panofsky proceeds to explicate the difference between iconography and iconology and the necessity to take into account both types of meanings in the following way:

As long as we limit ourselves to stating that Leonardo da Vinci's famous fresco shows a group of thirteen men around a dinner table, and that this group of men represents the Last Supper, we deal with the work of art as such, and we interpret its compositional and iconographical features as its own properties or qualifications. But when we try to understand it as a document of Leonardo's personality, or of the civilization of the Italian High Renaissance, or of a peculiar religious attitude, we deal with the work of art as a symptom of something else which expresses itself in a countless variety of other symptoms, and we interpret its compositional and iconographical features as more particularized evidence of this 'something else.' (8)

However, we need to take into consideration that the ekphrastic gaze constitutes an instrument of the observer not only as an interpreter of meaning but also as a creator of sociocultural and ideological meaning. This means that the iconological aspect of the ekphrastic gaze concerns the implicit revelation of socioculturally relevant facets of the observed on the one hand, and the revelation of unconscious aspects of the personality of the observer and ideological trends underlying his/her use of the ekphrastic gaze on the other.

Such an interplay between the iconography of the past with the iconology of the present as well as a general playful superimposition of the plane of an artwork upon the plane of reality postulates the ekphrastic gaze as inherently chronotopic in British postmodern fiction both narratologically and ideologically.¹⁹ Drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin's theorisation of the chronotope in his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" (1975) as well as his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), I should like to argue that the chronotopicity of the ekphrastic gaze determines and is determined by the generic peculiarities of the works of postmodern fiction that make prolific use of this model of ekphrasis. Poly-stylistic and inter-generic insofar as it blends fiction with non-fiction, intellectual thriller with farce, bears traces of both *Künstlerroman* and adventure novel, such a postmodern text is characterised by what I suggest to call the postmodern *chronotope of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest*.²⁰ This

¹⁹ On the narratological and ideological/sociocultural facets of Bakhtin's chronotope, see McCallum 184-86.

²⁰ The chronotope of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest was examined in more detail as to its function in Michael Frayn's *Headlong* in Nataliya Gorbina's paper "Chronotopic Encounter with a Bruegel in M. Frayn's *Headlong* (1999)" presented at the International Conference "Taking Place", 5 Oct. 2018, Paris Sorbonne University.

chronotope produces a particular kind of (anti-)hero²¹ who performs particular kinds of actions and becomes a bearer of a particular sociocultural worldview: a (pseudo-)connoisseur who appeals to the authority of art in search of authenticity, beauty and meaning but turns out to be guided by epistemological and aesthetic misconceptions and ends up reproducing sociocultural stereotypes and clichés instead. Moreover, the postmodern chronotope of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest is contingent upon the motif of an ekphrastic encounter as a chronotopic encounter with an object of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial beholder's ekphrastic gaze.

While the phenomenon of a perceptually motivated ekphrastic encounter has to date been essentially problematised and theorised outside the framework of Bakhtin's chronotope, the spatio-temporal logic of ekphrasis has long since been established as constitutive of its functioning as a literary device. For instance, seeing it as a driving force behind the Western literary tradition, Valentine Cunningham uses the concept of a n 'ekphrastic encounter' which he presents as a means to bridge the semantic gap between 'thisness' and 'thereness' of the encountered and ekphrastically perceived aesthetic object, namely its spatio-temporally defined sign and referent (60-61). Though Heffernan does not appeal to Bakhtin's terminology, his understanding of an ekphrastic encounter in modern and postmodern poetry is likewise implicitly chronotopic. It is particularly contingent upon the sociocultural chronotope of the museum. As the scholar argues, "[t]wentieth-century ekphrasis springs from the museum, the shrine where all poets worship in a secular age" (138). Finally, the editors of the anthology of essays *Ekphrastic Encounters* (2018) David Kennedy and Richard Meek summarise the heterogeneity of ekphrastic encounters that can take place "between word and image, . . . between literary texts . . . [,] between emotional individuals, between art and life, between the reader and the text, between the present and past, and even between scholarly disciplines" (14-15).

The motif of meeting with the object of the ekphrastic gaze in a postmodern narrative of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest actualises itself in an interplay with other motifs postulated by Bakhtin as chronotopic, including the motifs of "meeting/parting (separation), loss/acquisition, search/discovery, recognition/nonrecognition" ("Forms of

²¹ On the role and function of spatio-temporal coordinates in the narrative (re-)construction of identity, see Christiane Bimberg's articles "Place, Character and Identity: Urban Space in Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day*" in *Isvestiya Juznogo Federalnogo Universiteta. Filologitcheskiye Nauki*, no. 1, 2010, pp. 37-50 and "Urban Space, City Life, and Identity Construction in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*" in *Isvestiya Juznogo Federalnogo Universiteta. Filologitcheskiye Nauki*, nos. 1-2, 2007, pp. 80-93.

Time” 97), escape, love motifs as well as the chronotope of the road (“Forms of Time” 98). At the same time, of course, it plays with the conventions of the chronotope of the museum. As Bakhtin points out, the motif of meeting is “after all impossible in isolation” (“Forms of Time” 97), i.e. it is always constitutive of the chronotopic unity of the narrative.

Drawing upon Bakhtin’s ideas, I should like to suggest that the motif of meeting with the object of the ekphrastic gaze actualises and is actualised by a multilayered postmodern play with different chronotopic patterns. The chronotope of such a narrative of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest arises as a parodistic recycling of several chronotopic patterns: primarily, those of adventure- and carnival-time.²² Moreover, it also plays with the conventions of idyllic and (auto-)biographical chronotopes. Thus, the protagonist’s literal or/and figurative journey constitutes a Platonic model of “the seeker’s path”, “the seeker’s passage” (“Forms of Time” 130) from one stage of knowledge to another as characteristic of Bakhtin’s (auto-)biographical chronotope. However, this journey is connected with an ontological yearning, nevertheless, for a seemingly idyllic chronotope of the domain of art with its rhythmical and cyclical temporality.²³

At the same time, while the anti-hero of such a narrative of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest is meant to fail the test of integrity, selfhood of Bakhtinian adventurist time, his/her failure is a predetermined failure of an individual devoid of agency, “a person to whom something happens” (“Forms of Time” 95) and whose actions are predetermined by an irrational force – specifically, by the irrational force of art. This means that within the poetics of a postmodern narrative the ideology of adventurism is subverted, or rather carnivalised. Bakhtin theorises carnivalistic life as a life “drawn out of its *usual* rut” (*Problems* 122). The scholar proceeds to argue that “it is to some extent ‘life turned inside out,’ ‘the reverse side of the world’ (*monde à l’envers*)” (*Problems* 122). The postmodern anti-hero’s (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest therefore correlates with the metaphorical chronotope of the threshold because it indicates a Carrollian passage through the looking-glass, an entry into “the reverse side of the world”, a world in which the logic of “ordinary, that is noncarnival, life”

²² Cf. Doris Bremm’s appeal to Bakhtin’s concept of ‘carnival’ to argue that the authors of contemporary ekphrastic narratives “turn to a playful use of language to create fictive worlds rather than trying to represent reality” (13) in *Representation Beyond Representation: Modes of Ekphrasis in Contemporary Narratives*. 2007. U of Florida, PhD dissertation.

²³ On Bakhtin’s theorisation of the rhythm and cyclicity of the idyllic time, see Bakhtin, “Forms of Time” 230.

(*Problems* 122) is suspended; essentially, the entry into the world of art.

The reversed – inherently ideological – logic of carnival time mock-crowns and decrowns its anti-hero as the carnival king/queen, or rather as the carnival (pseudo-)connoisseur within the postmodern framework of the chronotope of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest. His/her metaphorical mock-coronation is indicated in the establishment of his/her questionable authority as an art expert. However, the ritual act of crowning the protagonist of such a narrative as a carnival (pseudo-)connoisseur “already contains the idea of immanent decrowning” (*Problems* 124) and he/she eventually emerges as the carnivalistic figure of a jester, a fool.

Thus, as demonstrated above, the postmodern turn in the arts constitutes a sociocultural shift of paradigm: from the tenets of modernism towards a new postmodern ideology of parodistic ‘de-doxification’. In British fiction, this shift is accomplished through the ekphrastic gaze which reacts against the visual experiments of British and Irish modernism and revisits such ekphrastically defined aesthetic doxas as those established by Ruskin and Wilde. In doing so, the ekphrastic gaze constructs two major strata of meanings: iconography and iconology. The interplay between these meanings is particularly actualised by means of the chronotope of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest.

3. The (De-/Re-)Construction of the Object of the Ekphrastic Gaze: In the Interstices between Art, Words, and Life

At the end of Julian Barnes's novel *Metroland*, the narrator asks himself a question that explicitly echoes Oscar Wilde's idea of life as an imitation of art: "Could a life be a work of art; or a work of art a higher form of life?" (128) In this chapter, I should like to survey the iconographical and iconological continuities and discontinuities in the (de-/re-)construction of fictionally (re-)presented life as a work of art through the ekphrastic gaze. The main questions of this chapter are: In what ways does life become an iconographical and iconological imitation of art under the ekphrastic gaze of a British postmodern observer? What are the central artistic themes and motifs of this transformation? What are the sociocultural and ideological implications?

3.1 "Could a Life be a Work of Art"?

To begin with, let us briefly return to Wilde's essay "The Decay of Lying". In his explication of the ways in which life imitates art, Vivian, Wilde's mouthpiece in the essay, provides the following example to illustrate his point:

Yesterday evening Mrs Arundel insisted on my going to the *window*, and looking at the glorious sky, as she called it. Of course I had to look at it. She is one of those absurdly pretty Philistines to whom one can deny nothing. And what was it? It was simply a very second-rate Turner, a Turner of a bad period, with all the painter's worst faults exaggerated and over-emphasized. (28-29; emphasis added)

As we can see, Wilde's central argument concerning the socioculturally conditioned perception of an artistically modified reality is underpinned by a curious image: a window as a frame that possibly inspires – or rather facilitates – ekphrastic perception. The 'window' metaphor is not uncommon: neither in interdisciplinary discussions of ekphrasis, of problems of perception and the representation of reality,¹ nor in works of

¹ Characteristically, Roland Barthes makes use of the 'window' metaphor to discuss the nature of literary description: a writer, and, curiously enough, particularly a writer of realism, is understood as a "pasticheur" (*S/Z* 55). According to Barthes, the writer "transforms the 'real' into a depicted (framed) object" (55) as if standing at a window and then he/she has to "de-depict" it (55). In her turn, the English writer Jeanette Winterson employs the 'window' metaphor to sum up the representational nature of all art: "Art is visionary; it sees beyond the view from the window, even though the window is its frame" (136).

the visual arts and literature themselves. Within the Western intellectual ekphrastic discourse, the scholarly as well as the artistic origin of the ‘window’ metaphor can be traced back to Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise *On Painting* (1435). Conceptualising the artistic method of linear perspective, the Renaissance art theorist imagines a canvas as “an open window through which the *historia* is observed . . .” (39).² Moreover, in art history, the ‘window’ metaphor is treated in relation to its function as a symbolically connoted image, motif or subject of the painting.³

In British postmodern fiction, the ‘window’ metaphor occupies an important place as to the (de-/re-)construction of meaning through ekphrastic perception. Thus, activated by the window frame during a direct encounter with the observed, the ekphrastic gaze constitutes a (pseudo-)connoisseurial gaze at something situated on the other side of a window. Akin to Wilde’s Mrs Arundel in “The Decay of Lying”, the (pseudo-)connoisseurial ekphrastic beholder sees a sunset as a socioculturally conditioned Turner – albeit post-ironically “a very second-rate Turner” (Wilde, “Decay” 28) – only because there is a frame, whether actual or metaphorical, that guides his/her gaze and inspires him/her to look at life as a work of art.

More importantly, the ‘window’ metaphor constitutes one of the central motifs associated with ekphrastic perception in British postmodern fiction. In order to illustrate the pivotal role of this motif as well as its sociocultural and ideological implications, let us look at A.S. Byatt’s recurrent image of the window. Should the reader use the Random House edition of Byatt’s *The Matisse Stories*, his/her gaze will fall upon a print of Henri Matisse’s painting *The Silence that Lives in Houses* on its cover: a painting that features a window. Should the reader glance at the opening sentence of the first story “Medusa’s Ankles”, he/she will be introduced to the story about a middle-aged *literata* who is lured into a beauty parlour by a print of Matisse’s *Pink Nude* that she spots through the window. In the article “‘Truth in Framing’: Medusa’s Defeat or the Triumph of the ‘Framed’ Self in A.S. Byatt’s *Medusa’s Ankles*”, Laurence Petit addresses the complex interplay between Byatt’s intertextual frames and those of the paratext. As the scholar argues, external frames include the name of Matisse himself framed in the title of the collection, *The Matisse Stories*, as well as the “frames-within-

² Central to Alberti’s theory, the term ‘*historia*’ continues to perplex scholars as to its meaning. As indicated by Anthony Grafton, however, Alberti primarily makes use of this term to refer not only to “a painting, but in most cases a large-scale painting executed in a public place” (Grafton 56).

³ In her book *The Window in Art* (1981), Gottlieb traces the change of symbolical meanings of the window in Western painting.

the-frame” (118) of reproductions of Matisse’s pictures on the front and back covers of the Random House edition.⁴

Byatt’s window as a foregrounded frame guides the spectator’s eye towards the principal scene and creates an illusion of depth: “She had walked in one day because she had seen the Rosy Nude through the plate glass” (“Medusa’s Ankles” 3). This reminds us of Matisse’s use of the window as a *repoussoir* device⁵ as to the manipulation of the direction of the beholder’s gaze through the compositional foregrounding of the window frame. For example, as Carla Gottlieb points out in her article “The Role of the Window in the Art of Matisse”, the foregrounded jambs of windows in Matisse’s paintings *Notre-Dame* and *Pont Saint-Michel* create depth by guiding the gaze towards the depicted cityscapes. However, as indicated by Gottlieb, this depth is as compositional and aesthetic as it is socioculturally specific and inherently ideological: “Whether looking to the left at Pont St. Michel or to the right at Notre Dame, the view depicts an urban waterscape and centers on a public monument” (395).

In Byatt’s short story, however, the appearance of the window as a showcase in a beauty parlour reverses the direction of the gaze. Unlike Matisse’s invitation to look out of the window from the depicted space of a room, Byatt’s windows invite the spectator inside enclosed interior chronotopes (e.g. the beauty parlour in “Medusa’s Ankles”; artists’ spaces in “Art Work”; a Chinese restaurant in “The Chinese Lobster”). Byatt’s interior space and what it encompasses (including the body of the protagonist him-/herself) emerges as the object of the ekphrastic gaze. In “Medusa’s Ankles” in particular, the (de-/re-)construction of the interior of the beauty parlour is ensured by Matisse’s painting that Byatt’s spectator sees in the showcase. Thus, the perceptual placement of Matisse’s picture in front of the interior space allows to problematise not only the iconographical elements of British interior design, but also the iconology of a work of art used as a publicity image and the ideology of the body associated with it (cf. ch. 3.3.1).

The artistic motif of a frame that conceptualises the object of the ekphrastic gaze both iconographically and iconologically appears time and again in various manifestations (cf. ch. 3.2.1 and 3.3.1). In Barnes’s *Metroland*, the cultured narrator uses binoculars to watch the visitors of the National Gallery who seem uncultured to his

⁴ For more detail on the role and function of the reader’s ekphrastic gaze see ch. 4.

⁵ In discourse on art, the term ‘repoussoir’ refers to the object that is depicted in the foreground of a work of art and that guides the direction of the spectator’s gaze.

young yet snobbish gaze, including a woman who looks to him like a provincial from the English village of Bagshot (11-12). In Byatt's *Still Life*, one of the protagonists contemplates the continental Otherness of the Provençal scenery through Van-Goghian "poppy-scarlet lenses" (96). In Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, the protagonist directs his gaze at the objects lying on the console table (including "spare car keys, opera glasses, one of Gerald's grey fedoras, a letter 'By Hand' . . ."; 171) through the frame of a mirror. Thinking of this arrangement of different objects as "a careless still life" (171), Hollinghurst's protagonist finds it "both wonderful and embarrassing" (171) because it reflects the aesthetics – or rather, as Linda Hutcheon would say,⁶ 'aesthetics' – of the Tory MP Gerald Fedden's philistine reality of London in the 1980s: an aesthetics despised by the novel's protagonist who prides himself on being a true aesthete.

Implicit in the understanding of the iconographical and iconological perception of life as an imitation of art is the narratological and ideological chronotopicity of this activity. The direct perceptual interaction constitutes an authoritative model of a chronotopic encounter with the observed. The narrator of *Headlong* is motivated to (re-)construct the reality around him – including the principal object of his gaze, a picture painted by a certain Sebastian Vrancz according to its label – as a socioculturally recognisable picture painted by Bruegel. It takes place within the spatiotemporal confines of the moment of a direct encounter with it at his and his wife's neighbours' house: "I recognize it instantly. I say I recognize it. I've never seen it before. I've never seen even a description of it" (42). The rootedness of this instant recognition in the ideology of a contemporary obsession with famous masterpieces is post-ironically alluded to by Frayn's narrator himself: he points out that certain artworks are familiar to everyone because they are "part of the common currency of names and images and stories that a whole culture takes for granted" (57).⁷

Such an encounter inspires verbalisation – immediate and/or retrospective – of the spectator's remarks regarding his/her observations. Thus, the ekphrastic beholder of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, an American journalist, promptly records his impressions of the aerialiste's performance in his notebook: "First impression: physical ungainliness. Such a lump it seems! But soon, quite soon, an acquired grace asserts itself, probably the result of strenuous exercise" (15). In a similar fashion, *Metroland*'s

⁶ See Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism in Hutcheon, *Politics* 1-2; cf. ch. 1.2.

⁷ Cf. ch. 5.

narrator recounts/dictates his observations of people in the museum to his companion who records them in a notebook: “Sort of religious peace,’ I muttered to Toni. ‘Well, quasi-religious, anyway; put that.’” (12). At the same time, the encounter with a hypothetical Bruegel in *Headlong* will be recorded and presented to the reader retrospectively in a form of a “report” (1), i.e. the novel itself.

An imaginary or mental retrospective encounter is possible if it is based on a previous physical encounter. Whenever Frayn’s narrator describes the picture that he imagines to be painted by Bruegel, “what [he is] contemplating is not the picture but [his] accumulated recollection of it” (43), i.e. a recollection of his encounter with it during the visit to the estate of his and his wife’s neighbours in the countryside on the one hand, and his encounter with authentic Bruegels at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna on the other. Similarly, the narrator of Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince* is able to recall the “English water-colour eyes” (238) of his beloved because he has looked at her before.

At the same time, the authoritative authenticity of a direct perceptual interaction with the object of the gaze is contested by various intermedial strategies. The reflections of Frayn’s and Byatt’s protagonists illustrate how the chronotopicity of a museum is challenged by a print reproduction that offers the possibility of an artificial, yet globalised and easily accessible, indirect encounter with a work of art:

[N]ow that images can be reproduced so easily and so accurately, now that mass tourism and universal education have filled the great galleries of the world with holidaymakers and schoolchildren, now that you can buy a painting and send your greetings home on the back of it for the price of the stamp you stick on it, some of these images have become even more pervasive. (Frayn, *Headlong* 57)

On one long wall hung a row of Van Goghs, including an Arles ‘Poets’ Garden’ he [Alexander – N.G.] hadn’t seen before, but recognised, from small photographs, from charged descriptions in the painter’s letters. (Byatt, *Still Life* 1)

It may, however, seem surprising to discover that an encounter with objects of the ekphrastic gaze (and with paintings and sculptures in particular) within a digital chronotope is almost absent in British postmodern fiction. In Murdoch’s *The Sandcastle*, an art teacher makes use of an epidiacope to show slides of paintings during his lecture on portraiture (253-55). In a similar way, the stage production of a play about

Van Gogh and Gauguin in Byatt's *Still Life* involves a projection of magnified transparencies of various paintings on a blank canvas (374-76).

The adherence of British postmodern fiction to relatively conventional representations of chronotopic encounters with the observed contrasts with the representation of reality in American postmodern/contemporary literature and film. Highly digitalised (not necessarily sci-fi), they offer instances of the ekphrastic object being gazed at through a computer/smartphone screen. For example, in the film *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), an adaptation of Dan Brown's novel of the same name, the characters use technology to zoom in on the details of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* on a computer screen, while the camera follows the direction of their gazes (01:07:11-01:11:00). In Elizabeth Kostova's novel *The Swan Thieves*, we see the narrator use a computer screen to research on contemporary sceneries of Étretat that make him think about Claude Monet's paintings of Normandy (257-58). In Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*, we read that the body shape of the virtual avatar of the narrator's 'cyber-crush' is described by him as "Rubenesque" (35). And, finally, in Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*, we discover that the protagonist's obsession with Carel Fabritius's painting *The Goldfinch* motivates him to stare at its photographs on his computer and his phone while he is yearning for the painting itself:

Fully conscious of my folly, I'd downloaded pictures of it to my computer and my phone so I could gloat upon the image in private, brushstrokes rendered digitally, a scrap of seventeenth-century sunlight compressed into dots and pixels, but the purer the color, the richer the sense of impasto, the more I hungered for the thing itself, the irreplaceable, glorious, light-rinsed object. (582)

The chronotope of a museum remains a pre-eminent narratological and ideological frame for an encounter with the object of the gaze in the ekphrastic tradition,⁸ but, as subchapter 3.3 will demonstrate, its role in the (de-/re-)construction of meaning(s) in British postmodern fiction is reevaluated. At the same time, the road becomes a particular point of departures and a particular place for meetings that have a fatal significance and mark the progression of the plot in the British postmodern texts under discussion. More importantly, the chronotope of the road may also underlie an encounter with the object of the ekphrastic gaze. For example, the *Headlong* narrative

⁸ Speaking of ekphrastic poetry, James Heffernan argues that "[t]wentieth-century ekphrasis springs from the museum, the shrine where all poets worship in a secular age" (138).

begins on the road, with the protagonist and his family's escape from the art-related temptations of London into the English countryside (5-10). Their arrival there is marked by a random encounter with their neighbour Tony Churt, a meeting that will lead to the protagonist's encounter with a hypothetical Bruegel later on (40-49). The entire narrative of John Lanchester's *The Debt to Pleasure* likewise takes place on the road and concerns a serial killer's pursuit of a young couple, future victims of his aesthetic murder.

Within the paradigm of Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotopic encounter, the ekphrastic gaze problematises an interplay between various strata of created meanings: between the levels of iconography and iconology (cf. ch. 2.2). The iconographical analysis of reality through the ekphrastic gaze begins with the recognition of its subject matter as a superimposition of the pictorial chronotope of the past upon the chronotope of the present. When Frederica Potter, one of the protagonists of Byatt's *Still Life*, travels to Provence, the colour of the walls in her new room makes her think of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (65), the picture that is known to have been inspired by the landscape surrounding the asylum at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence where Van Gogh spent a year. However, interestingly enough, the iconographical chronotopicity of this painting is questionable. After all, though Van Gogh himself propagated the idea of "painting on the spot at night" (qtd. in Heugten et al. 135), his *Starry Night* was painted in his room in the asylum at Saint-Rémy. In *The Starry Night*, as Ronald Pickvance suggests, Van Gogh may have not only borrowed the Provençal elements of the paintings *Mountainous Landscape Behind the Asylum* and the *Wheat Field* that he had just finished but he may also have placed a Dutch village within the Provençal landscape (103-06).

Nevertheless, "Provence," we read in Byatt's *Still Life*, "is as he [Van Gogh – N.G.] painted it, we use his images as *icons* by which to *recognise* certain things, the cypresses above all, the olives, some configurations of rock and vegetation, the line of the Alpilles, the plain of the Crau, the light itself" (74; emphasis added). This is directly reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's ekphrastic reflections on the artistic invention of French sunlight. In the essay "The Decay of Lying", Wilde's mouthpiece Vivian argues that the peculiar sunlight in France at the end of the nineteenth century is the creation of French impressionists: "That white quivering sunlight that one sees now in France, . . . is her [Art's – N.G.] latest fancy, and on the whole, Nature reproduces it quite admirably. Where she used to give us Corots and Daubignys, she gives us now exquisite Monets

and entrancing Pissarros” (28). This implies that such a play of French sunlight exists due to the affinity between the chronotope of life and that of art, and it is underscored by the socioculturally relevant artistic and aesthetic trends.

Be it cypresses, olives or boats in *Still Life*'s Provençal landscapes, the observed is seen as ekphrastically reminiscent of the iconography of Van Gogh's paintings as long as it can be – though perhaps only seemingly correctly – identified as having been painted *into* contemporary reality by the Dutch painter. The use of the painter's name as an epithet underscores the identification of the subject matter of the images. Such phrases as “Van Gogh chrome” (*Still Life* 92) or “Van Gogh boats” (96) postulate recognition of conventional iconographical meanings of these particular elements of Provençal reality.⁹ This means that a particular colour palette – specifically “a triangular patch of yellow like a painted sun” (92) – is iconographically Van Gogh's not only due to its emphasis on the colours particularly characteristic of the painter, but also due to its supposedly accurate allocation within the chronotopic coordinates of the South of France.¹⁰

A similar trend of a chronotopic understanding of iconography can be observed in other national literatures. Thus, in Donna Tartt's American and yet so-called “Dickensian novel” (Kakutani, “Painting as Talisman”) *The Goldfinch*, we find the protagonist's allusion to the Dutch painter Aert van der Neer that he makes in order to underscore the inherently Dutch iconography and inescapable Dutch character of Amsterdam (Tartt 769).

However, within the British postmodern discourse, the compatibility of/affinity between the chronotope of a piece of art and the chronotope of fictional reality is an exception rather than a rule. Moreover, it is a subversive exception that mocks the desire of the ekphrastic beholder (including the reader as an ekphrastic beholder) for modern order and continuity rather than satisfies it (cf. ch. 4.3). In his tribute to John Updike written for *The New Yorker*, Barnes post-ironically accentuates the reader's disappointment within the interdisciplinary ekphrastic tradition at large: “Like many others, I've regularly taken Ruskin's ‘The Stones of Venice’ with me to Venice, and regularly failed to read a word of it there. That reader's hoped-for matching of text to

⁹ See, for example, Van Gogh's depictions of fishing boats in his series of seascapes painted in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in the South of France, especially his *Seascape at Saintes-Maries* (painted in 1888 and located at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow) and *Fishing Boats on the Beach at Saintes-Maries* (painted in 1888 and located at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg).

¹⁰ See, for example, Van Gogh's depiction of the sun in *The Starry Night*.

place frequently disappoints” (Barnes, “Remembering”).

As a result, this iconographical recognition in British postmodern fiction is most often imposed upon the observed reality rather than extracted from it. Instead of superseding the chronotope of the British or Belarussian countryside, the ekphrastic gaze strives to construct its own dimension, its own chronotopic site of iconographical reconciliation. The peasant iconography of the Bruegel family in particular becomes a means of assessing both the British and the Belarussian countryside in Michael Frayn’s novel *Headlong* and Colin Thubron’s travelogue *Among the Russians* respectively. As the vision of Frayn’s narrator becomes more and more clouded by his obsession with Bruegel¹¹ and Bruegel’s iconography, he becomes aware of his wife as “[his] own fat peasant” (*Headlong* 204) and, furthermore, of himself as one of Bruegel’s depicted personages.

Similarly, the narrator of Thubron’s travelogue recognises the European iconography of “a truck packed with frosty-eyed Brueghel peasantry” (*Among the Russians* 2) on his way from Brest to Minsk. This use of a well-known and easily recognisable ekphrastic image specifically echoes Christiane Bimberg’s idea about Thubron’s sociocultural and reader-oriented use of comparisons:

Comparisons are [a] distinctive feature of his [Thubron’s – N.G.] travelogue. Thubron thus connects Cold-War Russia interculturally to other regions of the world, creates sympathy and understanding for it in readers from the other bloc system and thus heightens its appeal to the rest of the world. (“Colin Thubron” 140)

The ability to identify the iconography of the object of the gaze establishes the beholder as a figure of (pseudo-)connoisseurial authority, the owner of a canonically legitimised scope of sociocultural knowledge and values. Be it the beauty parlour as seen through a picture by Matisse in Byatt’s “Medusa’s Ankles”, or the painting of an unknown artist as seen through pictures of Pieter Bruegel in Michael Frayn’s *Headlong*, the ekphrastic

¹¹ My preference for the spelling ‘Bruegel’ draws upon its usage by the figures of art-historical authority including R. van Bastelaer, Max Friedländer, Karl Tolnai and Charles de Tolnay (Friedländer, *Pieter Bruegel* 12). As suggested by Friedländer in particular, this spelling was preferred by the master himself (*From Van Eyck* 135). Moreover, my choice of this spelling follows its use in Michael Frayn’s novel *Headlong* as the main narrative dealing with the *oeuvre* of this artist addressed within the scope of this study. Aware of the mysteries surrounding the spelling of the artist’s name (65-67), the novel’s narrator himself consciously opts for the spelling ‘Bruegel’. At the same time, the alternative spellings ‘Breughel’ (29) and ‘Brueghel’ (2) used in John Fowles’s “The Ebony Tower” and Colin Thubron’s *Among the Russians* respectively have been retained in the quotations from these works of British fiction. However, as the quotations demonstrate, they constitute a more ambiguous reference to the whole Bruegel family.

gaze presents life as an imitation of art – or, as we shall see, as an imitation of easily recognisable canonical and famous art (cf. ch. 4.2.1 and 5) – within the confines of not only aesthetic, but also sociocultural and ideological knowledge and values of the beholder. The iconography and the iconology of the observer are to be more thoroughly examined in chapter 4 of this study, but it is worth mentioning here that his/her sociocultural authority in recognising the iconography is most poignantly expressed in the Wildean act of the spectator’s direct attribution of the reconstructed elements of reality to particular painters as these painters’ inventions. When the narrator of Murdoch’s *The Sea, the Sea* heads to the Wallace Collection, he discovers portraits of all of his lovers painted *into* reality by renowned artists: “Lizzie by Terborch, Jeanne by Nicolaes Maes, Rita by Domenichino, Rosina by Rubens, a perfectly delightful study by Greuze of Clement as she was when I first met her” (170). Likewise, one of the protagonists of Murdoch’s *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* imagines his lover and himself to be Marsyas and Apollo, mythological figures famously painted by Titian: “You’re Apollo and I’m Marsyas. You’ll end by flaying me” (33).¹²

The important question calling for an answer here is to what extent the iconographical expression of reality is restricted in a narrative. Alexander, one of the protagonists of Byatt’s *Still Life*, cogitates the nature of language – specifically and importantly the English language – and concludes that language is inherently connected with culture and its expression through language (198-200). After all, the (de-/re-)constructed reality is Van-Goghian (or Terborchian, etc.) rather than Van Gogh’s (Terborch’s, etc.) not only linguistically, but also socioculturally because the iconography of these painters is part of the cultural heritage. The nature and the boats seen by Frederica in Byatt’s *Still Life* are “uncannily like Van Gogh” (Byatt, *Still Life* 92), but “obviously” (92) so.

The ekphrastic beholder strives for what he/she believes to be the “obvious” and “correct” identification of the iconography of the observed, but ultimately – though often unknowingly to the spectator him-/herself – he/she fails to do so with regard to the socioculturally defined iconology underlying the functioning of the ekphrastic gaze. Having decided that the picture of his first true love cannot be found among the paintings of his other lovers, the protagonist of *The Sea, the Sea* finds himself in front of Titian’s painting *Perseus and Andromeda*. His contemplation of Andromeda’s “graceful

¹² Cf. the linguistically direct attribution of elements of reality to artists in Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying”: a sunset seen by a beholder is presented as “a Turner” (28) rather than as being ‘like a Turner’.

naked figure” (171) evokes an implicit comparison with his beloved, who, as he has to remind himself, is in reality “that funny old woman in the village who [is] so unlike her” (145). Moreover, he gets unnerved by the striking resemblance between Titian’s sea monster and something uncanny he has previously seen at the seaside. The narrator clearly recognises the iconography of mythological themes and motifs, but his individual predispositions determine his misunderstanding of the iconology.

Within the confines of his perception, Murdoch’s unreliable narrator sees himself as Perseus saving Andromeda from the vicious sea monster of her husband, while iconology suggests an association of the image of the monster with the narrator himself. Time and again, he will be characterised by others as “a ‘tyrant’, a ‘tartar’, and . . . a ‘power-crazed monster’” (3), “a monster, a cancer” (430) as to his snobbish, egocentric and parasitic sense of superiority as a man and as a seemingly successful director and playwright.

Be it the feeling of terror experienced by the narrator of *The Sea, the Sea*, an association of the phenomenon of love with flaying by the protagonist of *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, or the perception of Provençal boats as being “uncannily like Van Gogh” in *Still Life* (92), the concept of ‘the uncanny’ curiously recurs in association with the ekphrastic reconstruction of fictional reality and helps unveil the iconological layer of its meanings. In line with Sigmund Freud’s theorisation of the concept of ‘the uncanny’,¹³ the identification of something as being ‘uncannily like’ a painting postulates the object of the gaze as something simultaneously familiar and foreign, inspiring a postmodern feeling of socioculturally ironic terror drawn from its familiarity.

For the narrator of *The Sea, the Sea*, it is an implicitly misogynist incomprehensibility of femininity as opposed to his own dubious masculinity. For the protagonist of *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, it is the elusiveness of love in contemporary reality. For Byatt’s Frederica, it is the strangeness of French surroundings which are “uncannily like Van Gogh” (*Still Life* 92) as opposed to “the familiar, the known” (66) of her home in Britain. The introduction of the qualitative adverb ‘uncannily’ in a simile as well as the use of a literary trope of contrast reveals the spectator’s emotional attitude towards the object of the gaze. It corresponds to the general sociocultural attitude of the post-war British observer towards the continent – and France in particular – as the unknown yet fascinating Other. Thus, iconologically, the ekphrastic gaze reveals what is

¹³ See Sigmund Freud’s *The Uncanny* (1919), translated by David McLintock, with an Introduction by Hugh Haughton, Penguin Books, 2003.

socioculturally and ideologically characteristic of the comprehension of reality within the British postmodern discourse at large.

Thus, chapter 3 surveys the iconography of recurrent artistic themes and motifs as revealed through the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction. Furthermore, it addresses the iconological implications of such themes and motifs: it looks at the intrinsic sociocultural and ideological meanings that are simultaneously reinforced and subverted, constructed and deconstructed within the frame of the ekphrastic gaze.

3.2 The Compositional Fabrication of Ekphrastic Reality

In the attempt to restore the relationship with his rediscovered first love, the narrator of Iris Murdoch's novel *The Sea, the Sea*, the egotistical playwright Charles Arrowby, chases her across town. When he finally catches up with the object of his obsession, he finds himself in the enclosed space of a cul-de-sac. The walls of the surrounding houses establish a perfect frame for their encounter and motivate the (pseudo-)connoisseurial protagonist to regard the scene as a picture:

. . . I saw a little alleyway leading off the street, a narrow sunless fissure between the blank sides of two houses. I ran down it, stumbled over a strewing of pebbles, and turned a sharp corner into a square enclosed space between the low whitewashed walls of backyards, where there were a number of overflowing dustbins and old cardboard boxes and an abandoned bicycle. And there, standing quite still in the middle of this scene, was Hartley. . . .

. . . The dark shadow of a wall fell across the yard, dividing the rock and somehow composing the picture, covering Hartley's feet as she stood there holding a basket and her handbag." (132-33)

The distinctive elements of this picture detected by the narrator – the body of his beloved ('Hartley's feet'), the peculiarly quotidian objects ('overflowing dustbins', 'old cardboard boxes', 'an abandoned bicycle', 'a basket and her handbag'), and the elements of the scenery itself ('the low whitewashed walls of backyards', 'the yard') – are seemingly parts of one arrangement. A type of arrangement that Erwin Panofsky calls "pure forms" and their "expressional qualities" (*Studies* 5) at the level of "a pre-iconographical description" (5). It arises as the internal fundamental structure of a would-be picture of reality, i.e. its ekphrastic composition. This facet is addressed in this subchapter.

To what extent does the ekphrastic gaze appropriate the conventional strategies

of pictorial composition and in what ways do these help to set the scene for a further (de-/re-)construction of iconographical and iconological meanings? Explicitly, the compositional arrangement of ekphrastic reality is defined within the linguistic confines of the visual arts lexicon available to the observer. This includes direct references to specific art-related terms required for the construction and further assessment of a work of art, and, primarily, as demonstrated in the quote above, the pictorially connoted term 'composition' itself. Other terms employed with regard to their compositional – albeit not necessarily explicitly ekphrastic – connotations are for instance: 'arrangement' (Byatt, *Still Life* 198), 'frame' (Murdoch, *Unicorn* 9), and 'enclosure' (Fowles, "Cloud" 243; Murdoch, *Sea* 132).

For example, the protagonist of A.S. Byatt's *Still Life* draws a parallel between the composition in Van Gogh's painting *Still Life with Blue Enamel Coffeepot, Earthenware and Fruit* and the culturally specific arrangement on a breakfast table in his rented flat in London: "He [Alexander – N.G.] watched Elinor arrange the fruits and then watched the fruits. . . . The breakfast table was a still life, with the easy life of vegetables and culture" (198). In her turn, the protagonist of Murdoch's *The Unicorn* watches the scenery, the cultural specificity of which is underscored through the term 'frame': ". . . the scene appeared and reappeared, framed between fissured towers of grey rock which, now that she was close to it, Marian saw to be covered with yellow stonecrop and saxifrage and pink tufted moss" (9).

However, when the process of composing an ekphrastic picture of reality is not articulated with the help of an art-related terminology, the compositional principles are implicitly applied by the beholder in his/her narrativisation of the impressions of his/her gaze. The ekphrastic adaptation of compositional elements and principles is determined by the verbal nature of the medium of ekphrasis: its peculiarities as well as its limitations. Thus, a consecutive syntactic revelation of the perceived elements of reality in the passage from *The Sea, the Sea* cited above postulates the compositional focus of the ekphrastic gaze on the figure of the narrator's long-lost love. Similarly, in Murdoch's *The Green Knight*, the focus of the gaze is expressed through the coordinating conjunction 'but' which registers a compositional contrast between the organic shape of a stone and the geometric shape of a painting: "Over the bed hung the picture of her beloved, the Polish Rider. . . . But Moy was looking now, not at her hero, but at where her grotesque ugly flint stones were arranged upon a shelf. She was gazing at one stone in particular, golden brown, shapeless as crushed brown paper" (20).

Appropriated by the ekphrastic gaze, principles of pictorial composition, thus, are seemingly meant to organise and systematise the elements of reality into an articulate, congruous whole both iconographically and iconologically. The question that arises is whether they really do, whether they really *can*. In Julian Barnes's *Metroland*, the compositional paradigm of the ekphrastic gaze appears to establish the visitors in the National Gallery as a focal point through subordination, i.e. a toning down, of such other compositional elements as the space of the museum and its paintings. In Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea*, the ekphrastic gaze of the narrator seems to guide the revelation of the peculiarities of the observed as a descriptive movement from the background of the scenery to the foregrounded body of his long-lost love. However, such compositional strategies arrange the observed just as much as they disarrange it. *The Sea, the Sea*, in fact, reveals its (pseudo-)connoisseurial narrator's perception of a secluded seaside English village as a place that, unlike London, "is not infested with 'intellectuals', a hazard everywhere nowadays" (13). At the same time, *Metroland* subverts the distinguished position of a traditional art object as the principal and conventionally the only object of aesthetic interest within the chronotopic coordinates of a museum. In doing so, it challenges the traditional role of the museum as a sociocultural institution (cf. ch. 3.3).

The ekphrastic gaze strives to achieve compositional wholeness, but the wholeness that it does manage to achieve is a wholeness haunted by the postmodern paradox. It is almost a painting – but not quite, a would-be picture of life within the frame of which clash not only its elements but also various sociocultural and aesthetic contexts: "The scene possessed a strange sense of enclosure, almost that of a painting, a Courbet perhaps – or would have if the modern clothes of the eight personages and their colours had not clashed, in a way a totally urban and synthetic age cannot be expected to notice, with the setting" (Fowles, "Cloud" 243).

This postmodern composition of a would-be picture of reality is simultaneously articulate and confused, stable and unstable, whole and fragmented – an impression of a composition fabricated by the ekphrastic gaze, rather than a composition per se. Thus, subchapter 3.2 reflects on the pre-eminent compositional strategies adapted and adopted by the ekphrastic gaze for the iconographical and iconological (dis-)arrangement of the elements of reality. The analysis draws on examples from the following British narratives: Julian Barnes's *Metroland* (1980), A.S. Byatt's *Still Life* (1985), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), John Fowles's "The Cloud" (1974), Sarah Hall's

The Electric Michelangelo (2004), Tom McCarthy's *Men in Space* (2007), Ian McEwan's short story "Solid Geometry" (1975), Iris Murdoch's *The Green Knight* (1993), *The Sandcastle* (1957), *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), and *The Unicorn* (1963).

3.2.1 The Ekphrastic Gaze and Its 'Secret Geometry': From a Michelangelesque Discharge Bucket to a Giottesque Perfect Circle

In his study on composition in the fine arts *The Painter's Secret Geometry* (1963), Charles Bouleau endeavours to establish particular patterns that have implicitly guided the tradition of European painting. His overwhelmingly precise geometrical formulae are beautifully 'mystified'¹⁴ in the title of his book as a 'secret geometry'. Appropriated and recycled by the ekphrastic gaze through art, geometrical schemata are hidden behind words as pencil curves may be hidden on an underdrawing of a painting; hence the use of Bouleau's expression in the heading of this subchapter.

Thus, this subchapter looks at the application of inherently metanarrative (in Jean François Lyotard's terms of reference) scientific knowledge¹⁵ and specifically the application of geometrical formulae in the ekphrastic modification of fictional reality in British postmodern texts. It addresses the following questions: What is, then, the internal geometrical structure of the ekphrastic gaze? And to what degree does the ekphrastic gaze manage to extend its geometrical power to the reconstruction of reality and not succumb to such a modern mystification the way the protagonist of Ian McEwan's short story "Solid Geometry" succumbs to it? After all, the ekphrastic gaze folds and unfolds the plane of reality in a peculiar postmodern play with spatiotemporal dimensions, but it does not make it disappear completely. Or does it?

The functioning of intrinsically meticulous geometrical formulae within the process of an ekphrastic reconstruction of reality is based on the geometrical circumscription of the object of the gaze, i.e. the perceptual inscription of the observed fictional reality into a frame. This concerns two indissoluble points: an explicit predilection of the ekphrastic gaze for framed instances of reality and the ekphrastic gaze as an implicit perceptual frame itself.

The explicit inscription of the elements of reality into a frame is based on the

¹⁴ By John Berger's definition (*Ways* 11). Cf. ch. 5.

¹⁵ Especially important here is Lyotard's differentiation between "scientific knowledge" and "narrative knowledge": "... scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative" (7). Cf. ch. 5.

observer's use of – or rather interaction with – fundamentally geometrical (or geometrically inspired) objects, which function as observation devices in a narrative. The functioning of such observation devices within the process of ekphrastic (de-/re-)construction of reality draws upon the prephotographic history of scientific inventions of machines assisting in the representation of nature. In this context, an early perspective device introduced by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *On Painting* (1435) and alluded to above appears as particularly interesting. Described as a framed veil divided into squares, his device is intended to help the artist in using the technique of circumscription as a practice of outlining the forms as seen through a grid. According to Alberti, this technique lays the foundation for further applications, for instance in the practice that he calls 'composition' (42).¹⁶

While spectacles and windows remain the most obvious rather than the most prominent images that recur in fiction in connection with the issue of perception, practically any geometrically inspired object can be turned into an observation device by means of the ekphrastic gaze. The interaction with these tools is both intentional and accidental.

Thus, the following passage from Sarah Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo* exemplifies the protagonist's discovery of the power of his ekphrastic gaze with the help of a bucket, which is used to tend to tuberculosis patients in his mother's guest house and which, in this context, acquires the functions of an observation device:

One day, while he looked down into the discharge bucket he was carrying, a small miracle occurred. He had of course looked down, being of an eternally curious and vitiating disposition. . . . Cradled within its mucus, red shapes appeared like spilled ink on a blotter, to form an accidental painting, except the shapes were never-setting, they continued moving and in a moment the image changed and was reformed. The boat became a seagull with crooked wings, which then became a blooming flower, which then became the turret of a castle. He moved the basin in a circle, like Gypsy Alva the fortune teller in the Curiosity Arcade rotating upturned cups to charm the tea leaves from which she would divine a life. (19-20)

In Hall's novel, intentionality is stimulated by an accident: the protagonist's seemingly coincidental ekphrastic perception of the basin's contents as an "accidental painting"

¹⁶ For a concise account of the artistic use of optical devices, see Martin Kemp's *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat*. Yale UP, 1990.

(19) motivates him to physically move the basin in a circle in order to manipulate the formation of images. In Julian Barnes's *Metroland*, on the contrary, the narrator makes use of binoculars for the deliberate observation of people in the National Gallery. However, his search for "examples of pure aesthetic pleasure" (*Metroland* 29) leads to an unexpected and, thus, quite accidental revelation of people's prevalent emotional state of boredom rather than aesthetic pleasure in their contemplation of pictures. In Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, the intentional observation of the performance of an aerialiste through opera-glasses also leads to the ekphrastic focus on her body and to the beholder's unexpected recognition of gracefulness in the aerialiste's "Rubenesque form" (15).

Unsurprisingly, the recurring forms of such tools of observation are derived from two principal forms of picture frames as legitimised by Bouleau's art-historical survey. While drawing attention to the diversity of architectural frames (e.g. circles, lancets, multifoils) characteristic of the Gothic period, Bouleau observes a predominant tendency of simplification of picture frames towards two particular forms: the *circle* and the *rectangle*. According to the French painter and art theorist, the circle originates from Egyptian textiles and the mosaics of the Roman and, consequently, the Byzantine Empire, but is revived as a *tondo* in Renaissance Italy. At the same time, the rectangle is conceptualised by Bouleau as "the usual shape for the frame of an easel picture, and the one to which most of the other shapes can be reduced" (42).

Thus, the circular shape of an instrument affecting perception is expressed in *Metroland's* emphasis on the fact that, for his observations, the narrator makes specific use of – indisputably circularly shaped – binoculars and not just any other glasses. Equally purely circular appear the opera-glasses, through which the journalist observes the aerialiste in *Nights at the Circus*. Similarly, the remark that Hall's protagonist "move[s] the basin in a circle" (19) in *The Electric Michelangelo* suggests that the basin is more likely to be purely circular rather than oval or rectangular.

At the same time, while the geometrical form is always implicitly intrinsic to the shape of tools employed by the observer, it is rarely linguistically (e.g. by means of an epithet) defined or can be resolutely derived by the reader from the nature of the tool. The form of observation devices appearing in fiction is generally more geometrically ambiguous. Being, however, that of a closed curve, the geometry of glasses as the most beneficially prominent observation device would appear to be post-ironically outweighed by their other qualities. The functionality of lens-based instruments of

observation in the ekphrastic discourse largely echoes the particular art-related functionality of the optical device of the camera obscura. In the context of its technological development, the effects of a camera obscura are defined as a production of “condensed enhancement of tone and colour” (Kemp, *Science* 193). While the importance of a geometrical frame is implied in the very technology of a camera obscura, it is curiously mystified insofar as this is not stressed. However, another interesting point concerns a particular popularity of the camera obscura in the context of natural magic during the Renaissance in Italy, but also in Holland and in Britain (Kemp, *Science* 190-92).

Be it the glasses that produce a curious reflection of the street in Tom McCarthy’s *Men in Space* or particularly poppy-scarlet-coloured glasses in A.S. Byatt’s *Still Life*, their geometrical peculiarities are not specified. At the same time, the reflective properties of *Men in Space*’s glasses create a collagelike assemblage of fragments of reality, while the Van-Goghian colour of *Still Life*’s spectacles enhances, as mentioned above, the Van-Goghian perception of continental Otherness.

The elusiveness of the geometrical shape of such instruments of perception essentialises the ambivalence of their (multi-)functionality in British postmodern narratives. At the same time, the implicit fundamentality of geometrical scaffolding in the ekphrastic “art of composing a picture” (Bouleau 10) relates to the establishments and simultaneous subversions of ‘pure’¹⁷ geometrical forms of observation devices.

Assumed to be purely circular in its shape, *The Electric Michelangelo*’s bucket serves as much as a physical container for tuberculosis patients’ bloody waste as a perceptual container that helps the observer’s ekphrastic gaze to organise this messy substance into an accidental painting. The patterns that young Electric Michelangelo discerns in the bowl, are liquid and, thus, a priori and by nature unstable. If, then, we consider the bloody substance of biological waste to epitomise the sociocultural reality as the object of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction in general, *The Electric Michelangelo*’s particular use of a geometrically-defined instrument of perception is simultaneously an attempt to harness the disjointed reality as well as its emphatic failure to do so. As Hall’s protagonist covers his clients’ bodies with tattoos,

¹⁷ The word ‘pure’ is understood here in the context of synthetic (pure) geometry as theorised primarily by Euclid in his mathematical treatise *The Elements* (see I. Todhunter’s *The Elements of Euclid for the Use of Schools and Colleges*. 1862. New edition, London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1869) as well as in the context of the polysemy of the word ‘pure’ per se (‘pure’ as ‘not mixed with anything else’; ‘morally good’ as well as a reference to ‘an area of study that is studied only for the purpose of developing theories about it’; “Pure”).

he uncovers, layer by layer, the incoherence of reality. In the end, post-ironically and yet predictably, his life turns full circle, when he comes home to England and has an apprentice of his own.

Thus, an ekphrastically appropriated geometrically defined frame and a circular frame in particular, simultaneously stabilises and destabilises its contents, both literally and metaphorically. The function of an ekphrastic geometrical frame relates to the problematisation and subversion of the canonical function of the frame in visual art that, as we read in Max Friedländer's *On Art and Connoisseurship* (1942), "consists in this, that it assures us of the wholeness of the composition and encloses the work of art, isolating it" (94).

What is paradoxical in its postmodern nature is: the more conventional the geometry, the more ambivalently disruptive its function appears to be. The seeming geometrical purity of young Electric Michelangelo's observation device is reinforced by the comparison of the protagonist's manipulation of the basin to a gypsy fortune teller's manipulation of a cup with tea leaves from which she "would divine a life" (Hall 20). In this context, the implication of the divine proportion – famously employed by Michelangelo, albeit not as famously as by Da Vinci¹⁸ – is semiotic rather than mathematical, but it nevertheless emerges to evoke and to question the preconceptions about the canonically aesthetic appeal of 'pure' geometry.

Employed by the ekphrastic gaze, geometrical continuities and the geometry of the golden section in particular, impose the aesthetic qualities upon the object of the gaze rather than extract them from within it. Forced to assist his mother in carrying the tuberculosis patients' bloody waste, young Electric Michelangelo wishes his eyes did not see the world the way it is: "If the eyes could lie, his troubles might all be over" (7). While the trick of not looking down at the contents of the basin does not work, he manages to ignore the truth of reality through his ekphrastic gaze. The pictures of a boat and a seagull that he divines in the basin's contents are, ultimately, the lies that he teaches his own eyes to show him. While they contribute to the aestheticisation of the

¹⁸ The concept of the divine proportion (golden ratio) is based on the ancient Greek exploration of mathematical harmony of nature (see, for example, H.E. Huntley's *The Divine Proportion: A Study in Mathematical Beauty*. Dover Publications, 1970). The divine proportion as "the expression of perfect beauty" (Bouleau 73) was thoroughly explored in the Middle Ages in Luca Pacioli's treatise *De divina proportione* (1509) with the illustrations provided by Leonardo da Vinci. Michelangelo, in particular, is believed to have made use of the divine proportion. For example, as Stephen Miller points out in his *The Word made Visible in the Painted Image* (2016), Michelangelo's *Doni Madonna*, a painting in the form of a tondo, offers a portrayal of the Holy Family positioned within the golden ratio of a pentagram (49).

object of the gaze, they do not underscore the innate beauty of the truth of sociocultural reality the way it is. It will be something that the protagonist will learn later. This will happen when an assailant throws sulphuric acid at his beloved because of his sexist and religious prejudices and because of his desire to have her body “restored to grace and femininity, restored to God’s blueprint for her kind” (286). After that, the Electric Michelangelo will be forced to embrace the inherently beautiful grotesqueness of her altered rebellious body as “a fresco” (306).

The devices of perception operate as tools of subversive games provided that they are employed by the ekphrastic gaze. Hence the compositional role of the geometry of devices in the ekphrastic reconstruction of reality rather than the significance of the geometrical shape of the devices per se. In *Men in Space*, the character wearing the shades is sitting beside a window, and the street outside is embedded within the geometrical scheme of her spectacles (*and* that of a window), producing an effect of passers-by “walking down a tunnel into and out of her skull” (104). It is, thus, rather a superimposition of two geometrical forms – a closed curve of spectacles and a quadrangle of a window – that enhances the “visually fascinating” (104) effect and inscribes a whole set of implications, e.g. the anatomism of art, the fragmentation and disintegration of contemporary reality, the multiperspectivity.

Within postmodern aesthetics, the compliance with geometrical laws amounts to their subversion, especially at the level of iconology. As mentioned above, *Metroland*’s narrator resorts to the help of binoculars to observe a woman contemplating, in her turn, Anthony Van Dyck’s *Equestrian Portrait of Charles I* in London’s National Gallery in the 1960s. The origin of the European circular picture, a quintessentially pure circle of the Renaissance *tondo*, as we read in Bouleau, experienced a shift from the depiction of secular subjects to the portrayal of two subjects in particular – the Virgin and Child (37). Thus iconographically, the circular frame guiding the observations of *Metroland*’s spectator presupposes a portrayal of a religious subject matter and, indeed, inspires him to paint the religious iconography into the observed reality. As the narrator watches the woman, he points out that

[s]he was gazing up at the picture now like an icon-worshipper. Her eyes hosed it swiftly up and down, then settled, and began to move slowly over its surface. At times, her head would cock sideways and her neck thrust forward; her nostrils appeared to widen, as if she scented new correspondences in the painting; her hands moved on her thighs in little flutters. Gradually, her movements quietened

down. (12)

In particular, the woman's gesture of tilting her head towards the object of her gaze is a gesture characteristic of Renaissance portrayals of the Virgin Mary, e.g. in Sandro Botticelli's famous tondo *The Madonna of the Magnificat*.¹⁹ Assuming the observed woman to be in a state of religious peace, the spectator, however, immediately corrects himself: "Well, quasi-religious, anyway; put that" (12). Barnes's postmodern irony, echoing the irony of the British postmodern novel in general, undermines the iconographical conformity to the conventions of a frame by means of the frame's geometry. Ultimately, the spectator's gaze underpins the iconological essence of an inherently postmodern attitude towards religion and particularly its controversial role in British society in the 1960s. More specifically, it expresses what Hugh McLeod refers to in the title of his book as 'The Religious Crisis of the 1960s'. As the scholar reveals, this included secularisation and "a drop in church-going" (1) in almost all Western countries on the one hand and a shift towards pluralism and eclecticism of beliefs on the other.

Thus, on the whole, such a subversion of artistic geometry is a subversion of the authorial paradigms of Lyotard's grand narratives by means of geometrically inspired small narratives, a replacement of the discursive scientific knowledge with a more subjective narrative knowledge. This specifically concerns the subversion of art-related metanarratives and art-historical knowledge. Thus, Iris Murdoch's *The Sandcastle* offers an interesting instance of a postmodern play with the Renaissance aesthetics of rebirth through an ekphrastic revival of Giotto's anecdotal 'perfect circle'.²⁰

The ekphrastic gaze simultaneously establishes and undermines the canonical correlation between painterly geometry and iconography. Such an interdependence of themes and composition was established as an authoritative artistic paradigm in the Middle Ages. "To the persistence of the iconography," we read in Bouleau, "was added the persistence of certain geometrical forms bound up with it by custom" (60-61). The particularly prevalent ekphrastic continuity of the geometrical shape of the circle from a

¹⁹ For more detail on the gestural peculiarities of the Renaissance portrayals of the Virgin Mary and what Yukio Yashiro calls the "drooping head of Botticelli's figures" (186) in particular, see Loren Patridge's *Art of Renaissance Florence, 1400-1600*. The U of California P, 2009 and Yukio Yashiro's *Sandro Botticelli and the Florentine Renaissance*. Revised edition, The Medici Society, 1929.

²⁰ On the role of Giotto's 'perfect circle' in the postmodern (re-)conceptualisation and (re-)contextualisation of the Renaissance narrative of rebirth, see Nataliya Gorbina's "The Aesthetics of Giotto's 'Perfect Circle' in/and Iris Murdoch's *The Sandcastle*" in *University of Bucharest Review* ns, vol. 7, no. 1, 2017, pp. 45-53.

Michelangesque discharge bucket to a Giottesque perfect circle underscores the focus of the ekphrastic gaze on the human body (that is to be more thoroughly assessed in ch. 3.3.2), but simultaneously subverts the sociocultural metanarratives associated with it, including the Christian metanarrative of the holy body of the Virgin Mary alluded to above.

This ekphrastically expressed geometrical continuity is particularly enhanced by the symbolic continuity of colour. Both Hall and Murdoch's circles are associated with the red colour. While the contents of the Electric Michelangelo's discharge bucket is undeniably red-coloured, it is interesting to note – in the context of ekphrastic geometry as an underdrawing – that Michelangelo himself came to prefer the medium of red chalk to the black chalk or the pen technique. As we read in Clifford S. Ackley et al.'s account of Michelangelo's use of red chalk, "the rich tonal variety that it permitted made it an ideal medium for worked-up, plastically realized figure studies" (28). While Murdoch's narrative does not specify the colour of Giotto's circle, Giorgio Vasari's anecdotal account of it makes it clear that it was red. "Giotto, who was very courteous," we read in Vasari's chapter on Giotto in his multivolume *Lives* (1550), "took a sheet of paper, and a pencil dipped in a red colour; then . . . he drew a circle, so perfect and exact that it was a marvel to behold" (1: 102-03).

Ultimately, the (not so) secret geometry of British postmodern narratives is, after all, McEwan's 'solid geometry': semantically 'solid' insofar as it is expressed by means of palpably hard objects of the observation devices, and contextually auto-antonymously 'non-solid' insofar as it abides by the terms of postmodern irony, demystification, and subversiveness. In accordance with modernist/postmodernist (dis-)continuity, such understanding of 'solidity' is highly evocative of the understanding of this concept in the Bloomsbury aesthetics as theorised primarily by Roger Fry who viewed solidity as a category of form.²¹

Ultimately, the ekphrastic gaze mocks the modernist idea of a solidity of the form. It discovers the "plane without a surface" (McEwan 17), but the ekphrastically folded picture-space of reality only *seems* to disappear the way McEwan's paper flower "disappear[s] while its external properties remain[]" (18) in "Solid Geometry". To make it disappear means to look beyond the mucous reality of a discharge bucket and to see a seagull or a flower; to return to and abide by the doxas of mathematics and geometry in art only to discover that scientific knowledge is nothing but a product of metanarrative

²¹ For example, Fry refers to Giotto's "sense of roundness and solid relief of the form" ("Giotto" 100).

mystification.

3.3 The Iconography and the Iconology of Ekphrastic Reality

As part of their youthful attempts to understand human emotions, the protagonists of Julian Barnes's novel *Metroland* choose London's National Gallery as the main site for their observational experiments. Within the confines of the museum space and particularly within the confines of the perceptual space offered by binoculars as an observation device, two types of elements of reality draw the attention of the young connoisseurs: paintings and the visitors of the gallery contemplating these paintings. However, even when the narrator's binoculars zoom in on Anthony van Dyck's *Equestrian Portrait of Charles I* or an unnamed painting by Franz Hals, the narrator and his companion feign interest in a work of art only because it constitutes a "useful pictur[e]" (11) in their study of people's aesthetic responses to art:

Then we came to one of our favourite rooms, and one of our most *useful* pictures: Van Dyck's equestrian portrait of Charles I. A middle-aged lady in a red mackintosh was sitting in front of it. Toni and I walked quietly to the padded bench at the other end of the room, and pretended interest in a tritely jocund Franz Hals. Then, while he shielded me, I moved forward a little and focussed the glasses on her. (11; emphasis added)

On the one hand, this shift of attention epitomises the ekphrastic establishment of the practical rather than aesthetic value of a work of art. On the other, it illustrates the motif of placing the work of art in juxtaposition with the human being as another locus of (pseudo-)innovative observational experiments. This chapter looks at the (re-)presentation of the iconography and iconology of reality under the scrutiny of the ekphrastic gaze. It investigates the following questions: In what way and to what extent is the treatment of an artwork as a conventional object of aesthetic perception reinforced and subverted when it becomes the object of the ekphrastic gaze? What kind of a relationship is established between the work of art and the human being and which literary and aesthetic contexts contribute to that?

The postmodern destabilisation of an art object in its traditional conceptualisation as the centre of aesthetically heightened attention is connected with its placement in direct or indirect relation to the human being as an art object that is perceptually framed as such. The complex relationship formed between a work of art and a human being as objects of the ekphrastic gaze is most vividly accentuated through

the chrotonope of the museum. Within the poetics of postmodern narrative, the museum becomes a particularly useful frame that puts on display both the work of art and the human being as aesthetically charged physical items of reality frozen in an ekphrastic moment of contemplation. At the same time, the orderly nature of the museum inspires and facilitates the situation of a pronounced juxtaposition between these elements of reality under the scrutiny of the ekphrastic gaze.²² In other words, the ekphrastic beholders of British postmodern fiction as museum-goers rarely find themselves contemplating the works of art for the sake of aesthetic experience per se.²³ More often than not, the work of art encountered in the museum becomes of interest only in relation to other visitors, to absent people that the beholder is reminded of, or in relation to the beholder him-/herself.

Thus, similarly to *Metroland*'s young museum-goers, the protagonists of Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* are keen on going to the museum because it allows them to see and learn more about the anatomy of the naked human body. "It's research," (20) justifies it one of Miss Brodie's students, Sandy, after suggesting to go to the museum to look at the nude statue of a Greek god.

When the protagonist of Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* gets a job as a museum guard, he starts paying attention both to artworks and visitors even though he has previously been of the opinion that "no human presence could compete against the more enduring identity of the paintings upon the walls" (323). In her turn, when the international assassin of Luke Jennings's *Codename Villanelle* finds herself sitting in front of Antonio Canova's *Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss* in the Louvre Museum, her psychopathically calculated ekphrastic gaze considers the statue in connection to the passers-by and to herself. On the one hand, Villanelle endows the artwork with connotations that betray her own manipulative and promiscuous personality: "Is Cupid luring Psyche into a sense of false security so that he can rape her? Or is it Psyche that's sexually manipulating him, by pretending to be passive and feminine?" (41). On the other, her simultaneously aesthetic and pragmatic attention shifts towards the visitors who appear to interpret the statue as a representation of romantic love. As she watches a

²² Cf. Ruth Hoberman's suggestion that the phenomenon of the museum (especially the modern museum) is inherently connected with the paradoxical idea of (dis-)order: "From its earliest incarnation, the museum has seemed inseparable from the imagination of disorder: its evocation of extreme order brings with it an impish vision of havoc" (3).

²³ Cf. Doris Bremm's treatment/focus on a work of art as the only object of aesthetic experience within the space of the museum as "a liminal space of performance" ("Viewing" 98) in ekphrastic narratives, including Julian Barnes's *Metroland* as well as A.S. Byatt's novels *Still Life* and *The Virgin in the Garden*.

young couple strike – or rather recreate – the pose of the Italian artist’s sculpture, she studies the sequence of the girl’s expressions and emotions that Villanelle, as a psychopath, is unable to feel, and “files it [the sequence of these expressions and emotions – N.G.] away for future use” (42).

Either intentional or unintentional, explicit or implicit, the placement of a work of art next to a human being as part of (pseudo-)innovative observational experiments conducted by means of the ekphrastic gaze often brings forward macabre similarities between the two. Fascinated by the idea of decay, the narrator of Chloe Aridjis’s *Asunder*, a guard in the National Gallery, shifts her gaze from the paintings to the visitors in search of similar patterns of painterly craquelure in their faces – a search that rouses some dark force in her as well: “The longer I applied what I’d just heard to the living specimens around me, imagining more and more fissures in their façades, the louder these fantasies of decomposition started to gather force” (115).

The shift of attention from a work of art towards the human being as a work of art bears traces of ekphrasis in the Gothic literary tradition. This concerns particularly the Edwardian literary subgenre that Ruth Hoberman terms “museum gothic: stories that endow museum-displayed objects with supernatural power” (78).²⁴ An art object in postmodern fiction does not supernaturally come alive before the beholder and speak to him/her the way it does within the morbid atmosphere of the museum setting in the works of the museum gothic. However, the postmodern art object is indeed perceived as being on the same ontological level as a human being the way it is in the Edwardian museum gothic. This kind of perception simultaneously reinforces and expresses the mockery of the Gothic idea of “deadness intrinsic to the museum display itself” (Hoberman 86).

When the narrator of Ackroyd’s *English Music* speaks of having worked as a museum guard for three years, he refers to this period of his life as “a wasted life” (323).²⁵ When the disillusioned protagonists of Barnes’s *Metroland* will meet again years later, they will bitterly conclude that it was pointless to search for “a spark of response in the commuters and hand-jobbers” (165) who are not in any way more alive than the canonical masterpieces of the National Gallery: these masterpieces will be personified by the narrator’s companion as “dead fucks” (165) and metaphorised as

²⁴ Cf. Barbara J. Black’s term ‘museal gothic’ (qtd. in Notes in Hoberman 198-99).

²⁵ Cf. Aleid Fokkema’s study of Ackroyd’s postmodern establishment of a link between the past and the present through an appeal to the Gothic tradition and to the concept of the uncanny in Ackroyd’s other works including *Hawksmoor* and *First Light*.

“gravestones” (164) in a “cemetery” (165). Even more morbid – in fact, psychopathically so – is the analogy between the interest of the unreliable narrator of John Lanchester’s *The Debt to Pleasure* in the marble stones of the family mausoleum in the French Château d’Herbault and his interest in the Château’s other visitors, a young couple who he is stalking and who will later become victims of his aesthetic murder (164).

Thus, iconologically, the motif of regarding artworks in relation to human beings reveals simultaneous reinforcement and subversion not only of the conventions of the Edwardian literary subgenre of the museum Gothic, but also the sociocultural ideology of the modern institution of the museum as what is called the “encyclopedic museum” (Cuno 11). Ekphrastic beholders continue to visit these famous prototypically encyclopedic museums “born of the intellectual ferment of early modern Europe” (Cuno 11): the National Gallery in Barnes’s *Metroland* and Chloe Aridjis’s *Asunder*, the National Portrait Gallery in A.S. Byatt’s *The Virgin in the Garden* and the Royal Academy of Arts in *Still Life*, the Louvre in Luke Jennings’s *Codename Villanelle*, Kunsthistorisches Museum in Michael Frayn’s *Headlong*, and many others. However, the shift of the beholders’ attention from artworks towards visitors plays with the ideas of diversity, hybridity, and intercultural exchange of the encyclopedic museum insofar as British postmodern fiction introduces a human being as an exhibit placed next to a more traditional artwork.

Nevertheless, it is essential to remember that while a work of art and a human being remain at the centre of the ekphrastic beholder’s attention, the iconography and iconology of other elements of reality often become identified through the ekphrastic gaze as well. This is particularly true for man-made objects, food objects, and elements of scenery. For example, the ekphrastic visions of man-made objects and food objects may be found in A.S. Byatt’s *Still Life*. They include a Picasso-esque Vallauris pottery cup (134) and a Van-Goghian French coffeepot (198, 202). These ekphrastic images conceptualise the emergence of a British post-war gastronomic narrative as a narrative of aesthetic vision inspired by Elizabeth David’s cookery books about continental cuisines and especially French provincial cuisine. Byatt’s incorporation of expressly decorative French crockery into the reality of a British household reflects the post-war trend of aesthetic Francisation of the British dining table and echoes, in particular, Elizabeth David’s ekphrastic conceptualisation of the decorative functionality of

tableware in her cookery book *French Provincial Cooking* (1960).²⁶

At the same time, in John Fowles's *The Magus*, the Greek landscape on Conchis's side of the island is treated as a painting by Claude Monet as opposed to its "oppressed and banal" (*The Magus* 74) other side. This may be said to reflect the clash indicated by Matthew J. Hurwitz with regard to the construction of postimperial British identity in *The Magus* in general: the Orientalist clash between the idealised image of Greece as part of the Western European consciousness and actual modern Greece within the discourse of postimperial travel (Hurwitz 70-72).

Subchapter 3.3 therefore provides a more in-depth analysis of the iconography and the iconology of the ekphrastic reality that is (de-/re-)constructed under the ekphrastic gaze. The study draws upon the examples from the following works of British postmodern fiction: Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* (1992), Chloe Aridjis's *Asunder* (2013), Julian Barnes's *Metroland* (1980) and *Talking it Over* (1991), A.S. Byatt's *The Matisse Stories* (1993), *Still Life* (1985), and *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), John Fowles's novels *The Collector* (1963), *The Magus* (1965), *Mantissa* (1982), and the short story "The Ebony Tower" (1974), Michael Frayn's *Headlong* (1999), Sarah Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo* (2004), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), Luke Jennings's *Codename Villanelle* (2014), John Lanchester's *The Debt to Pleasure* (1996), Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (1973), *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), and *The Unicorn* (1963), Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's *Good Omens* (1990), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), and Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961).

3.3.1 The Ekphrastic Gaze and the Third Dimension of a Work of Art: From the Removal of Three Centuries of Dirt to the Revelation of a Gainsborougesque Dream

When one of the protagonists of Julian Barnes's novel *Talking it Over* falls in love with his friend's wife, an art restorer, he begins to enjoy spending time in her studio and

²⁶ The intercultural aesthetics of consumption and the postmodern ekphrastic recontextualisation of visual representations of French food culture were examined in more detail in Nataliya Gorbina's paper "The 'Easy Life of Vegetables and Culture' in A.S. Byatt's *Still Life*" presented at the International Conference "Pies in the Sky. Food in Great Britain and in France: How Representations and Practices Have Changed", 28 Sept. 2018, Bordeaux Montaigne University. On the gastronomic turn in post-war Britain as a "culinary enlightenment" (Panayi 191) sparked off by the writings of the British cookery writer Elizabeth David, see, in particular, Panikos Panayi's *Spicing Up Britain: The Multicultural History of British Food*. Reaktion, 2008.

watching her work on paintings that need to be repaired, cleaned and/or retouched. In line with the novel's polyphonic interplay of three simultaneously contending and complementary narrative voices that each present their version of the story to the reader, Gillian and Oliver take turns to reveal their respective perspectives on one such painting to the reader. While the beholders sketch out the iconographical elements of the winter scene in front of them such as the frozen river Thames, skaters, and a bonfire, their attention quickly shifts towards the material properties of the painting. They focus not only on the painting's original paint layers but also on its outward layers of varnish, overpaint as well as the layers of dirt on the painting's surface. Assembled under the ekphrastic gazes of several beholders, including the extratextual gaze of the reader, the painting is acknowledged both as an art object and as an artifact.²⁷

This particular aspect is taken up in this subchapter. It discusses the (de-/re-)construction of the materiality of a work of art as an object of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction. Here, the following questions are addressed: Which material properties of a work of art are highlighted by the ekphrastic gaze and which sociocultural and aesthetic contexts underlie the establishment of its ontological status as an object of physical reality? To what degree does the ekphrastic beholder manage to shift his/her attention to the material substance of the artwork without losing sight of its content, the message(s) conveyed and, consequently, its artistic and aesthetic value? And, finally, in what way does the revelation of the physical presence of the art object under the ekphrastic gaze affect the (de-)construction of its meaning?

The focus on the materiality of the work of art is not new in the Western ekphrastic tradition. In particular, Valentine Cunningham alludes to it as a literary motif that can be traced back to Homer's ekphrasis: "Look there; touch the shield, this urn, this picture, and the reality you finger is just metal, just paint, and so on. The accounts of the shields of Achilles and Aeneas keep calling attention to the gold and so forth – the mere medium of the object" (68).

Within the scope of this study, the term 'materiality' in its application to a work of art is understood as a set of properties that establishes the work of art as what Michael Yonan refers to as "part of a larger material culture" (240). In his discussion of the connections between material culture studies and the discipline of art history, the

²⁷ Cf. Cunningham's treatment of Barnes's ekphrastic depiction of Géricault's painting in his other novel *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. The scholar points out Barnes's emphasis on Géricault's painting as an artifact, "the painting as painting, something made in a studio" (67) and goes on to argue that in Barnes's novel "[h]istory has become artifact" (67).

scholar draws our attention to the fact that, for art historians, the material culture most often continues to be associated with the genre of the decorative (i.e. minor) arts as opposed to the fine (i.e. high) arts. Furthermore, Yonan points out that the Marxist understanding of the material side of a work of art as an expression of the sociocultural and economic conditions that contribute to/underlie its production remains one of the few and one of the most important – albeit not widely accepted – approaches to the materiality of a work of art within the art-historical discourse. Moreover, the scholar suggests that “art history has tricked itself into believing that it is a discipline of images, when really it has always been a discipline of objects” (240). Specifically drawing upon the works of such art historians as Heinrich Wölfflin and Erwin Panofsky, Yonan argues that the materiality is usually referred to in art-historical studies as its medium, i.e. materials used in the creation of an artwork. At the same time, both Wölfflin and Panofsky largely ignore the role of the material aspects of a work of art in the construction of its meaning. As the scholar concludes, “[t]he two-dimensional image remains the focal point of the great majority of art-historical activity” (238).²⁸

Simultaneously faithful to and subversive of this conventional art-discursive treatment of the material qualities of a work of art, the ekphrastic gaze appeals to the physical nature of the art object in order to achieve what *Talking it Over*'s art restorer sees as her objective and motivation. It is to transform the picture into “something three-dimensional” (119), i.e. to (re-)present it as a volumetric object (both internally and externally) rather than a flat image. The reminder that a work of art constitutes a man-made object relates to its placement within a sociocultural and economic context as a placement in spatiotemporal relation to the rest of the material world.

Whether it is the semi-ironic acknowledgement of the “majestic presence” (33) of the family heirloom in Michael Frayn's *Headlong* or the awareness that the depiction of the young Elizabethan explorer Walter Raleigh is “framed in teak” (166) in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the explicit recognition of the physical nature of a work of art is interlinked with the recurrent theme of a revelation of the work of art as a sociocultural commodity under the gaze of the ekphrastic beholder. The iconography

²⁸ Cf. Richard Wollheim's argument against the hypothesis that all works of art are physical objects and George Dickie's concept of artifactuality. On the one hand, Wollheim suggests that while the “physical-object hypothesis” is false, it does not mean that works of art are not characterised by distinctive physical properties (3-4). On the other, Dickie argues that an object is to be construed as a work of art only on condition that it is an artifact and that it is created with the social intention to be displayed. See chapters “Art as Artifice” and “The Institutional Nature of Art” in George Dickie's *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art*. Haven Publications, 1984.

and the iconology of this theme are borrowed from the visual arts. In his *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger addresses “the tradition whose subject is an art lover” (85) which can be traced back to the sixteenth century. He draws our attention to the fact that paintings like David Teniers’s *Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in his Private Picture Gallery* depict the figure of an art collector in a room of paintings as “sights of what he may possess” (85). Drawing upon the ideas of Lévi-Strauss, Berger reveals that, in doing so, these paintings “confirm the pride and amour-propre of the collector” (86) and, ideologically, give “a new power of capital” (86) to their actual owner.

In Karl Marx’s terms of reference, the work of art as an object of the ekphrastic gaze emerges as something that has both a “use-value” and an “exchange value” of a commodity (*Contribution* 27).²⁹ When the postmodern ekphrastic beholder’s gaze happens to fall on a work of art, he/she is motivated to put it to use in accordance with its materiality as an object characterised by what Marx would refer to as “the physical palpable existence of the commodity” (*Contribution* 27). One example is the revelation of the use-value of a work of art as decoration when the postmodern beholder uses his/her ekphrastic gaze to acknowledge its materiality as the materiality of an object that occupies a socioculturally and aesthetically specific place in space and time.

Thus, when the protagonist of Frayn’s novel *Headlong* finds himself in front of a painting that his and his wife’s countryside neighbours want him to appraise, *The Rape of Helen* painted by a certain Luca Giordano in 1691,³⁰ he is primarily – albeit sarcastically – impressed by its external physical characteristics rather than the characteristics of its artistic form and content. In his description of this encounter with Giordano’s painting, he draws attention to its overwhelming dimensions, its heaviness, and the conspicuous frame that not only serves the purpose of enclosing the painting and its content but also contributes to its materiality:

It lours down enormously from its elaborate gilt frame over the screened-off fireplace in the freezing room [breakfast-room – N.G.], occupying most of the wall between mantle and ceiling. Inside the frame... well... The four of us and the dogs, who have accompanied us to the viewing, all gaze at it respectfully but

²⁹ According to Marx, “[e]very commodity . . . has a twofold aspect – *use-value* and *exchange value*” (*Contribution* 27). See also Marx, *Capital* 41-55. Cf. John A. Walker’s account of art as a commodity in Marx’s terms of reference, particularly Walker’s assessment of certain works of art that “self-reflexively illustrat[e their] status as commodity” (29).

³⁰ While Frayn’s *The Rape of Helen* appears to be a fictional painting, the ekphrastic description of its iconography is in part reminiscent of *The Abduction of Helen* painted by the Italian artist Luca Giordano in c. 1680-83 and located at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen in Caen.

with difficulty, because we're far too close to it. (33)

Thus, even before the novel's self-proclaimed art expert addresses the content of the painting, his immediately ironic and snobbish acknowledgement – rather than genuine appreciation – of its dimensions leads him to recognise its spatially marked improper use by its owners. In accordance with its decorative purpose in their neighbours' dilapidated and yet seemingly centuries-old estate,³¹ a painting with these physical characteristics seems to be – and as *Headlong*'s Martin Clay correctly concludes, turns out to be – meant to be situated at the top of a staircase. Its current position appears to be suitable only for the eyeline of his neighbours' dogs.

We find a similar appeal to the practical utility³² of a work of art as decoration under the ekphrastic gaze of the demon Crowley in Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's *Good Omens*. In this novel, a framed “cartoon for the *Mona Lisa*, Leonardo da Vinci's original sketch” (243) as “[t]he only wall decoration” (243) performs a decorative function insofar as it complements the minimalist, yet posh, style of the demon's flat in Mayfair, one of London's most affluent and luxurious districts (299).

Interestingly enough, however, the shift of the ekphrastic beholder's focus towards the materiality of a work of art makes him/her come up with other – realised or imagined – ways of putting it to use. As a result, the ekphrastically (re-)presented work of art as a physical object of reality acquires a merely utilitarian purpose in contrast to – rather than in harmony with – its seemingly primary aesthetic purpose. The *Good Omens*'s drawing in the demon's London flat, as it turns out, likewise serves an explicitly practical purpose that is directly determined by its materiality as an object of reality: it conceals a safe where the novel's protagonist keeps a thermos flask with holy water that is deadly to his own kind, i.e. all the representatives of Hell including himself (245-46). Even more post-ironic is *Headlong*'s allusion to the possible practical use of another painting in the Churts' breakfast-room. When Martin Clay's neighbours show him another heirloom, a Dutch winter landscape by Philips Wouwerman, it reminds him of “the lid of a rather large box of chocolates” (39).

³¹ On the role of paintings which could be either framed or incorporated into the wall panelling within the spatial organisation of the English country house and specifically on the growing popularity of “paintings as mere decorations for, or furnishings in, country houses” (Anderson 93), see, Jocelyn Anderson's *Touring and Publicizing England's Country Houses in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Bloomsbury, 2018, Christopher Christie's *The British Country House in the Eighteenth Century*. Manchester UP, 2000, and Michael I. Wilson's *The English Country House and its Furnishings*. B.T. Batsford, 1977.

³² The term ‘utility’ is used here according to Marx's understanding of utility as an aspect of an object that contributes to its status as a use-value: “The utility of a thing makes it a use-value” (*Capital* 42).

In this sense, the establishment of the use-value of a work of art on the basis of its physical – rather than aesthetic – properties is inherently linked with the assessment of its exchange value under the ekphrastic gaze. Bought from the Italian genius himself, Pratchett and Gaiman’s sketch for the *Mona Lisa* is commodified by the ekphrastic gaze of the novel’s demon in accordance with its exchange-value. Even without being, as both Crowley and Leonardo appear to have agreed, “superior to the final painting” (243), it would constitute one of the most – if not the most – virtually priceless works of art on the present-day art market. Alongside the most advanced modern technologies in Crowley’s London flat, such a long-lost authentic masterpiece primarily emerges as an expensive commodity rather than an art object, as something “the sort of human he tried to be would have” (241).

Post-ironically, this treatment of works of art as what they inherently and unavoidably are – physical objects – simultaneously reduces and increases their value under the gaze of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial beholder. Invited to the estate of the wealthy Greek recluse Maurice Conchis, the main narrator of John Fowles’s *The Magus*, Nicholas Urfe, is introduced to Conchis’s collection of allegedly original artworks. While Nicholas’s immediate assumption is that the works in the possession of his host are just reproductions, Conchis’s dismissive attitude to “treat them as what they are – squares of painted canvas” (96) rather than “gold ingots” (96) only reinforces their authenticity and, consequently, their monetary and aesthetic value in Nicholas’s eyes. In particular, Nicholas’s belief in their authenticity is enhanced by the combination of the sense of sight with the sense of touch that the treatment of a work of art as a physical object allows: “. . . I stared again at the Modigliani, caressed the Rodin, surveyed the room. I felt rather like a man who has knocked on a cottage door and found himself in a palace . . .” (97-98). He will belatedly realise that his initial judgement was seemingly correct once he will do some research and be able to trace the actual locations of the originals of all of Conchis’s artworks except for his Modigliani (591-92).

The physical attributes of a work of art simultaneously guide and misguide the ekphrastic beholder’s (pseudo-)connoisseurial judgement. Thus, the narrator of *Headlong* ends up spatialising and temporalising the value of a Giordano in accordance with what he believes to be the established standards of appraising this particular type of paintings. As a result, he wrongly assumes that “pictures of this sort have a value as interior decorators’ properties” (38), i.e. that they are “sold by acreage, like so much arable or grazing” (38). Quite literally, the novel’s art enthusiast derives the painting’s

monetary value from its material dimensions:

How much per square foot for basic period oil on canvas? It can scarcely be less than £100. So what are we looking at here? It's about as tall as I am, and a foot or so longer. Say six foot by seven foot. Forty-two square feet. What's that? Over £4,000! This is ridiculous. (38)

Post-ironically enough, such an unprofessional assumption results in a miscalculated appraisal: the painting that the protagonist appraises at £4,000 will be, later, professionally appraised at Christie's at more than £100,000 insofar as its quality is established to be on the same level as one of Giordano's most outstanding paintings, *Mythological Scene with the Rape of Proserpine* from his series of ten preparatory oil studies *Modelli for the Palazzo Medici Riccardi* (*Headlong* 314-15).³³

More subtle but as striking is the discrepancy between the non-recognition of the value of yet another heirloom kept by the Churts in their breakfast-room when the novel's beholder is first introduced to its material attributes, and his recognition of its seemingly high aesthetic and commercial value when he sees its content. While *Headlong's* self-proclaimed art expert claims that he immediately understands the painting in front of him to be a Bruegel, he only does so when he notices and recognises its subject matter. However, before that happens, the work of art first appears before his ekphrastic gaze as nothing but "a large, unframed wooden board" (40) that Laura Churt retrieves from the empty fireplace and that, according to her, "weighs a ton" (40). When Laura quickly scrubs off the soot covering the board and they place it on the table, the first thing *Headlong's* narrator will see (in a moment that simultaneously precedes his recognition and leads to it) is the physical properties of a painting made grimy by the hands of time and space: "The picture's uncleaned, and for a few seconds all I can see, until my eye adjusts to the gloom, is the pall of dirt and discoloured varnish" (42).

The commodification of the original work of art is inherently connected with – if not determined by – the realisation that a work of art as an ontologically physical object of reality is intrinsically susceptible to modification – or even destruction – whether by natural decay or human violence. The artwork ekphrastically (re-)presented as a commodity emerges as an object of the beholder's materialistic desire to possess it.³⁴

³³ Cf. the prices realised for some of Giordano's paintings sold at Christie's. For example, the Italian artist's *The Rape of Deianira* and *The Rape of Persephone* were sold for £87,500 in 2018, while his *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* went for £962,500 in 2014 ("Luca Giordano").

³⁴ Cf. Berger's suggestion that "[i]f you buy a painting you buy also the look of the thing it represents" (*Ways* 83).

Forced to spend hours watching artworks as part of her job as a guard at the National Gallery in London, the narrator of Chloe Aridjis's *Asunder* recalls conversations with her colleagues. She reveals that most of these beholders by profession claim that they would sell a painting the moment they would somehow acquire it. When discussing a hypothetical fire situation and which artwork they would save, they seem to attempt "to think of the most valuable, usually a da Vinci or, for some reason, a Manet" (6).

Curiously enough, while materiality becomes an integral – if not fundamental – part of the original work of art when it is placed under the ekphrastic gaze, the physical properties of a reproduction are often omitted or deliberately ignored. In an equally dangerous way, such disregard of the different type of materiality of a reproduction emerges as symptomatic of the beholder's (pseudo-)connoisseurial hypocrisy and the commodification of the work of art under his gaze as his/her fixation on the materiality of the original. After all, as Berger indicates in his *Ways of Seeing* (1972), "reproductions are still used to bolster the illusion that nothing has changed, that art, with its unique undiminished authority, justifies most other forms of authority" (29).

While the protagonist of A.S. Byatt's "Medusa's Ankles" is evidently lured inside a beauty parlour by a reproduction of Henri Matisse's *Pink Nude* and not the French artist's original painting, its actual material status is never explicitly acknowledged. "I like your Matisse, . . . The pink nude. I love her," (4) she tells her hairdresser. The disregard of the material status of the Matisse in the beauty parlour is further underscored by the contrast to the acknowledgement of the material status of new decorations: "The Rosy Nude was taken down. In her place were photographs of girls with grey faces . . ." (16). Nevertheless, Byatt's *Rosy Nude* displayed in the shop window of the beauty salon is nothing but a publicity image aimed to create an impression of sophistication/refinement and trustworthiness as well as to provide an illusory promise of transformation and beauty. As Berger explains,

[p]ublicity images often use sculptures or paintings to lend allure or authority to their own message. Framed oil paintings often hang in shop windows as part of their display.

Any work of art 'quoted' by publicity serves two purposes. Art is a sign of affluence; it belongs to the good life; it is part of the furnishing which the world gives to the rich and the beautiful. (*Ways* 135)

Byatt's protagonist's failure to notice the material status of *Pink Nude* not simply as a reproduction with a decorative use-value, but also as a publicity image results in the fact

that she succumbs to the illusion of her youth. This illusion will be shattered when the beauty parlour is redecorated and the Matisse is replaced with photographs. With the Matissean rosy haze gone, the protagonist of “Medusa’s Ankles” looks in the mirror and faces reality: “‘It’s horrible,’ said Susannah. ‘I look like a middle-aged woman with a hair-do.’ She could see them all looking at each other, sharing the knowledge that this was exactly what she was” (24).³⁵

Nevertheless, the shift of the ekphrastic beholder’s focus towards the physical properties of a work of art is ultimately subversive of the art-historical tradition to intentionally overlook and ignore the materiality of a work of art. “[T]he idea of Beauty,” the art historian Charlotte Guichard reminds us, “promoted by a humanistic theory of painting and by its elevation to the level of the liberal arts, was precisely built against this reminder of materiality in the work of art, of the object within art” (my trans.; 95).³⁶

The material status of the artwork as the object of the ekphrastic gaze seemingly emerges as the major obstacle to seeing its beauty and to grasping its true meaning. In Barnes’s *Talking it Over*, the painting is established as the object of an art restorer’s gaze. While the novel’s art restorer Gillian reveals that it is a picture of a winter scene, the painting becomes primarily assessed as to its spatiotemporally marked and modified physical existence rather than its subject matter:

Gillian . . . ‘No,’ he [Oliver – N.G.] said. ‘Just talk to me as you do it.’

I went back to the picture. It was a little winter scene – the Thames frozen from bank to bank, people skating, and children playing round a bonfire on the ice. Quite jolly, and quite filthy, having hung in the banqueting hall of a City guild for centuries. (*Talking it Over* 117)

Oliver It’s wonderful. I go and sit there while she works. The hungry eye hovers up her stout jugful of brushes, her bottled solvents – xylene, propanol, acetone – her jars of vivacious pigment, her special picture restorer’s cotton wool which with teasing banality turns out to be mere Economy Pleat from Pretty. She sits in a soft curve at her easel, gently swabbing away three centuries

³⁵ Cf. Doris Bremm’s argument that seeing Matisse’s nude empowers the protagonist of “Medusa’s Ankles” rather than misleads her (*Representation* 122-24).

³⁶ “L’idée du Beau, portée par une théorie humaniste de la peinture et par l’élévation de celle-ci au rang des arts libéraux, s’est précisément construite contre ce rappel de la matière dans l’œuvre, de l’objet dans l’art” (Guichard, “Image” 95).

from a grumpy London sky. Three centuries of what? Of jaundiced varnish, wood-smoke, grease, candle-wax, cigarette smoke and fly-shit. I kid you not. What I deconstructed as distant birds dotted into a sullen sky by a brief wrist declining detail turned out to be – fly-shit. (*Talking it Over* 118-19)

However, both beholders focus on the external materiality of the painting only insofar as it allows them to discover secrets that have been hidden – if not mystified – from view over centuries. Their revelation unhinges/destabilises the seemingly fixed content of the painting: depictions of birds end up being nothing but faeces of flies. As Gillian reveals to Oliver, “[f]inding something you didn’t know was there, when you take off overpaint, that’s the best. Watching something two-dimensional gradually turn into something three-dimensional” (119). Similarly, the gaze of the protagonist of Frayn’s *Headlong* keeps getting drawn to “an ill-defined, somehow anomalous black patch” (251) at the bottom right corner of his hypothetical Bruegel rather than to what is actually depicted in the painting. While overlooked by him at first, it now becomes an object of his fixation due to his worry that this patch of dirt or ink might be concealing a signature. The revelation of this signature might, consequently, unveil its secrets – its true value and identity, its Bruegelness as well as the narrator’s own secret of his discovery – before he is able to get hold of the painting and be praised/crowned as the discoverer of such a long-lost important masterpiece.

At the same time, as suggested by Berger, “[w]hen a painting is put to use, its meaning is either modified or totally changed” (*Ways* 24). The acceptance of the fact that the beauty and meaning of a work of art are dependent upon the peculiarities of its external materiality as much as upon the peculiarities of the internal materiality of its artistic form and content leads to the revelation that the materiality of a frame helps to merge the world contained within the frame with the ekphrastic beholder’s physical reality outside the frame rather than to divide them.

As we can see in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, a “teak frame” (167) that encloses John Everett Millais’s *The Boyhood of Raleigh* portraying the young Walter Raleigh, the future eminent Elizabethan explorer, integrates it within the physical reality of postcolonial India. In doing so, it simultaneously reinforces and modifies the painting’s meaning. The quintessence of British heroic imperialism, the alleged reproduction of Millais’s painting adorning the wall above the narrator’s crib is post-ironically one “of the few survivals of the days of” (175) British colonialism in India. In line with the traditional twofold aesthetic/decorative and practical purpose of a frame, a

frame made of teak helps create a controversial sense of continuity between the imperialist subject matter and the rest of contemporary reality.³⁷ This is achieved through the geographical and, consequently, cultural specificity of teak that is not only a tree native to India but also its most valuable timber. A teak frame positions the picture in India's material reality alongside other physical objects depicted in the novel such as "a thick teak door" (21) and "a teak almirah" (169). It thus underscores the shift of focus towards the world of labour represented in the painting through the figure of a fisherman. As a result, however, it evokes the dependence of the British Empire's navy upon teak timber plantations in India in the nineteenth century, i.e. at the time of Millais's creation of the painting.³⁸

Taken to its metafictional extreme, the continuity between the materiality of a painting and the materiality of the ekphrastic beholder's reality takes the form of an ekphrastic vision. Similarly to the way Rushdie's protagonist imagines himself sitting next to the young Walter Raleigh and following the direction of a fisherman's finger, Frayn's narrator of *Headlong* is "looking down from wooded hills into a valley" (43) as if from within the physical world of the hypothetical Bruegel and inviting the reader to follow him as well.

In his turn, the narrator of Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* finds himself "enter[ing] the frame" (301) of one of Thomas Gainsborough's landscape paintings he has been contemplating at an art gallery when he is overcome by one of his visions. Curiously enough, he is able to do so only when he becomes acutely aware of both the material and immaterial qualities of the artwork he is currently contemplating:

Sometimes I sat down on one of the wooden benches placed in the middle of each room and stared at a particular face or a particular landscape until I had forgotten everything else around me. Then the very materials of the painting – the canvas, the encrusted paint, the mottled surface of the varnish – seemed to me to have a visible presence. It was not the presence of the sitter or the landscape, but rather of the person who had created them. (300)

³⁷ Cf. Neil Ten Kortenaar's suggestion that the Millais print, the newspaper clipping celebrating the protagonist's birth, and the window looking out at Bombay are juxtaposed with each other as three frames on the wall in Saleem's bedroom. The scholar points out that the "readers are . . . invited to consider the painting alongside the scene of the city's dispossessed and to contemplate the unorthodox reframing of Millais's original framing of imperial history" (242). At the same time, however, the scholar is convinced that in his ekphrastic description of the reproduction, "Saleem removes the frame of the painting" (240) insofar as he sees the continuity of the sky-blue wall.

³⁸ For more detail on the dependence of the British Empire on India's teak timber, see, in particular, Brett M. Bennett's "The Origins of Timber Plantations in India" in *Agricultural History Review*, vol. 62, no. 1, June 2014, pp. 98-118.

In agreement with the general theme of the novel, the recognition of the physical nature of the paintings before the eyes of Ackroyd's protagonist as a recognition of their artists' presence is conducive to establishing the continuity of English culture and history. The work of art as both an art object and an artifact is transformed into a physical link between past and present, artist and audience. A gate rather than an obstacle, the frame enclosing Gainsborough's painting in particular triggers Timothy Harcombe's ekphrastic and intertextual dream in which the works of the pre-eminent British artists become superimposed upon each other to form a vision of England as a palimpsest.

On the one hand, the ekphrastic gaze allows to overcome the conventional treatment of a work of art as a two-dimensional image and unveil the third – simultaneously sociocultural and aesthetic – dimension of a work of art as an artifact. In doing so, it adds to the value and meaning of the artwork as a whole. On the other, the work of art itself becomes the third dimension of the ekphrastic beholder's physical world insofar as it adds depth and meaning – rather than truth – to the otherwise two-dimensional, flat, and boring reality. After all, as Oliver echoes the words of his beloved in *Talking it Over*: “Oh effulgent relativity! *There is no 'real' picture under there waiting to be revealed.* What I've always said about life itself” (120).

3.3.2 The Ekphrastic Gaze and the 'Docile Body': From the Antichrist's Michelangelesque Curls to Erato's Rokeby Venus Pose

In John Fowles's self-reflexive novel *Mantissa*, the seemingly imaginary embodiment of the Muse of lyric poetry Erato accuses her alleged creator of abusing his power of a writer and a man to alter both her appearance and personality in accordance with his own fantasies and desires. Within his general metafictional manipulation of reality, Fowles's protagonist makes use of his creative gaze to visualise the Greek goddess as an intimidating doctor and a rebellious punk rocker, a West Indian nurse and a sensual Japanese geisha, a vulnerable Botticellian beauty and an exhibitionistic Rokeby Venus.

Similarly ekphrastically polymorphic becomes the object of the male protagonist's desires in John Fowles's other major novel *The Magus*, a mysterious young woman with multiple identities involved in the novel's psychological games. Under the narrator's gaze, Lily Montgomery emerges as a Botticellian woman (118), “a Renoir” (198), and a “Goya's *Maja Desnuda*” (537). Not only does such a diversity of painterly incarnations reveal iconographical similarities rather than dissimilarities,

continuities rather than discontinuities in their construction under the ekphrastic gaze, but it also reflects a whole series/repertoire of iconological contexts and discourses.

In this subchapter I shall therefore explore the plurality of ekphrastically motivated avatars of an individual as the object of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction. My discussion will be guided by the following questions: What are some of the iconographically distinct aspects of ekphrastic corporeality and how do they become (de-/re-)constructed through the gaze of postmodern beholders? To what extent does the sentient observed submit to the power of the ekphrastic gaze and in what way is this submission similar to or different from that of an inanimate object of the gaze? What nuances does the ekphrastic modification of the human being reveal about the relationship between the observer and the observed? And, finally, which discursive practices contribute to the emergence of the ekphrastically (re-)presented body as an iconologically Foucauldian ‘docile body’?

Whether the ekphrastic alteration of the human being is playfully taken to the metafictional extreme as in Fowles’s *Mantissa* or does not explicitly leave the confines of the beholder’s imagination as in most texts under discussion, it is based on similar socioculturally and aesthetically motivated strategies of subjugating the observed to the power of the ekphrastic gaze. This process relates to the ekphrastic beholder’s inherently socioculturally objectifying focus on body and appearance as the only visually and perceptually accessible dimensions of a human being. At the same time, the confirmation of the subordinate status of another human being in his/her relation to the ekphrastic beholder is interlinked with the explication and justification of it as an aesthetic phenomenon.

To begin with, the ekphrastic gaze contributes to the establishment of the intratextually corporeal existence of the observed within the largely explicit narrative characterisation of fictional personages and specifically within the description of their physical appearance. It does so by accentuating a resemblance to a certain – often canonised and recurrent – painterly or sculptural representation of the human form. Underscored by the ekphrastic gaze are not only the physical traits of the observed but also the general arrangement of his/her body in line with the traditional Western iconography of bodily poses and gestures in art. This means that the ekphrastic gaze often renders the socioculturally and aesthetically stereotypical aspects of appearance. Moreover, the postmodern ekphrastic beholder’s gaze emerges as (pseudo-)scientifically physiognomic insofar as it defines the observed not only in

relation to major stereotypes concerning physical appearance but also in relation to personality traits associated with the depiction of these stereotypes.

Thus, when the protagonist of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* uses his ekphrastic gaze to sum up the full-figured aerialiste as having a "Rubenesque form" (15), such a descriptive reference comments on the socioculturally established iconography of the body type associated with Peter Paul Rubens's traditional portrayal of women: curvaceous and robust, more realistic and naturally beautiful. At the same time, it underlies the stereotypical personality characteristics associated with a Rubenesque woman insofar as it refers back to the beholder's impression that "any gesture of hers [had] that kind of grand, vulgar, careless generosity about it" (9).³⁹

Another stereotype can be found in the implication of the Botticellian type of beauty and the sense of dignity and self-worth as a trait associated with it in the concise description of the observed actress as having "a face like a Botticelli Venus, a Beauty Queen's body, and a dignified manner" in A.S. Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden* (383). In its turn, the accentuation of "the modest Venus" (74) pose mockingly struck by an art student in front of the protagonist of John Fowles's novella "The Ebony Tower" refers to the recurrent and conventionally aesthetic classical stance of a nude woman with one hand lifted to cover her breasts and the other placed over her pubic area. Under the objectifying gaze of the novella's male observer who begins to see her "as female object" (74), it expresses the sexist association of this gesture with a woman's promiscuity as well as underscores the woman's acute consciousness of being looked at and specifically of being looked at by a man.

"We defend ourselves by descriptions," admits the narrator of Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*, Bradley Pearson, "and tame the world by generalizing. . . . So art becomes not communication but mystification" (87).⁴⁰ Bradley's realisation that he appears to have feelings for his friend's daughter activates his ekphrastic gaze that turns her ordinary "watery-blue eyes" (56) into more aesthetic "English water-colour eyes" (238). However, such an ekphrastically accentuated vision – by means of a painterly reference – generalises the physical appearance of his beloved even further rather than gives nuances to it insofar as it is rooted in the sociocultural and aesthetic stereotype of

³⁹ Cf. Ernst Gombrich's art-historical reference to Rubens's "joy in exuberant and almost boisterous life in all its manifestations" (*Story* 403).

⁴⁰ I shall return to the idea of mystification and de-mystification of the metanarrative ideology of the discourse of art with the help of the ekphrastic gaze in accordance with John Berger's conceptualisation of this phenomenon in chapter 5 of this study.

blue-eyed female beauty.⁴¹

More often than not, the revelation of socioculturally and aesthetically established stereotypes of appearance and personality traits associated with it through the ekphrastic gaze is masked as a search for idiosyncratic authenticity. The corporeality of the human being that is placed under the ekphrastic gaze is not only given more attention than that of everyone else within the confines of fictional reality, but it also emerges as being supposedly more nuanced and complex. The reader comes across a description of the statuesque facial features of the beholder's lover in Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* (66-67) or a reference to the Michelangelesque "golden curls" (138) of the Antichrist in Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's *Good Omens*. We also read about Lily Montgomery's "little moue", "embarrassed yet mischievous smile" (198) when she is perceived by the beholder as a Renoir woman or her "tapering curves, thighs, ankles, small bare feet" (537) when she appears as Goya's nude maja in John Fowles's *The Magus*.

Under the scrutiny of the fictional beholder's gaze, the bodily dimension of another human being's existence emerges as an incomplete assemblage of ekphrastically explicated and highlighted fragments/aspects rather than a complete picture. Subversively detail-oriented, the museum guard's search for craquelure in the visitors' appearance in Chloe Aridjis's *Asunder* accentuates what is deemed socioculturally and aesthetically unappealing and what, consequently, often remains purposefully overlooked because of that. In particular, the novel's beholder pays attention to wrinkles and lines on young people's faces not as imperfections but as "horizontal brushstroke cracks running across his [a male student's – N.G.] face as if following grooves of the brush in the paint layer" or "garland cracks, small short curves disrupting the marginal areas of her [a girl's – N.G.] face like tiny waves" (115).

Such fragmentary (re-)presentation of the human figure as the object of the ekphrastic gaze reveals the constructedness of another individual's ontology and its dependence on the postmodern beholder as the creator of unreliably subjective and unstable – yet simultaneously culturally and aesthetically formulaic and universal – meaning. In other words, the corporeality of the observed largely emerges as a phenomenological reverie dependent not only on the observer's idiosyncratic

⁴¹ On the blue-eyed stereotype of beauty and the lack of scientific connection between eye colour and attractiveness see, for example, the essay by Martin Gründl et al.'s "The Blue-Eyes Stereotype: Do Eye Color, Pupil Diameter, and Scleral Color Affect Attractiveness?" in *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery*, vol. 36, no. 2, Aug. 2011, pp. 234-40.

imagination but also on various discourses that underpin its elusive – if not illusive – nature.

Reminiscent of the interest in the representation of the divine in the visual arts, the inherently ethereal nature of corporeality as (de-)constructed by the ekphrastic gaze is most vividly epitomised by the recurrent ekphrastically motivated allusion to the observed as an other-worldly and even divine apparition. Ekphrastically phantasmagorical, the fragmented corporeality of the Antichrist Adam Young appears before the gaze of the witch Anathema in Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's *Good Omens* as a biblically and mythologically hybrid corporeality. On the one hand, the novel's witch will compare her epiphanic vision of the boy with a vision of "a Biblical illustration" (137). On the other, she will see him as "a prepubescent Greek god" (137) and focus on the fact that his face "was thatched with golden curls which glowed. Michelangelo should have sculpted it" (Pratchett and Gaiman 138).

Similarly phantasmagorical is the ekphrastic corporeality of a human being in operation in John Fowles's ambitiously metafictional novel *The Magus*. Thus, the mysterious Greek recluse Maurice Conchis appears before the gaze of the novel's protagonist Nicholas Urfe in all his mysteriousness and displaced other-worldliness as "a Rembrandt, disturbingly authentic and yet enormously out of place" (144). In line with the psychological game – or, as the original title of the novel conceptualised it, "*The Godgame*" (Fowles, "Interview" 35) – played on Nicholas by Conchis, the establishment of Lily Montgomery's being, in its turn, is based upon the accentuation of her Botticellian beauty as the fragmentary beauty of her hair and eyes. Similarly to the iconographically Michelangelesque rendition of the Antichrist's hair in *Good Omens*,⁴² a reference to these particular iconographical elements of Botticelli's portrayal of women⁴³ supports Conchis's appeal to sociocultural conventions of beauty to instill a certain mental picture of his long-deceased fiancée in Nicholas's mind: a picture of ethereal and god-like perfect beauty. At the same time, it also underscores the fact that Lily's corporeal existence per se turns out to be contingent upon the ekphrastic gaze. Thus, in his description of Lily to his guest, Conchis sketches out her physical appearance as having "a Botticelli beauty, long fair hair, grey-violet eyes" (Fowles,

⁴² Cf. Michelangelo's rendering of his male figures' hair and especially Adam's hair in the frescoes adorning the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel including *The Creation of Adam*, *The Creation of Eve*, and *The Temptation and Fall of Adam and Eve*.

⁴³ Cf. Botticelli's depiction of this type of hair and eyes in his paintings *The Birth of Venus* and *The Spring (Primavera)*.

Magus 118). A few pages later, the recognition of these Botticellian features ascribed to Lily by Conchis will motivate Nicholas to conclude that the girl he glimpses in Conchis's house is meant to represent a phantasm of his host's dead lover: "I knew I was supposed to be looking at Lily. . . . The Botticelli face; grey-violet eyes. The eyes especially were beautiful; very large, their ovals faintly twisted, a cool doe's eyes, almond eyes, giving a natural mystery to a face otherwise so regular that it risked perfection" (158).

However, by subjecting the observed to meticulous perceptual examination, the ekphrastic gaze strives to strip him/her of his/her divinity rather than to enhance it. "You look like a god," tells Mary to her lover Colin when they wake up in the house of mysterious Venetians in Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*, "I think I'll have to take you to bed" (69). "I've only to look at you lying there, in that Rokesby [*sic*] Venus pose," echoes the protagonist of John Fowles's *Mantissa*, addressing the imaginary embodiment of Erato, "to see how ridiculous it was" (91).

Thus, the ekphrastic gaze unveils another individual in all his/her physical and emotional weakness and vulnerability, exposing him/her not only literally but also figuratively. For example, *Good Omens*'s ekphrastic (de-)construction of the image of the Antichrist is subverted into a revelation of his human innocence and vulnerability rather than supernatural invincibility. Reminiscent of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, it emerges as the creation of the simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary typically British eleven-year-old boy Adam Young. In its turn, Conchis's reference to Lily's Botticellian beauty unveils the equally Botticellian frailty of both her body and her soul: "She had something that is gone from the world, from the female world. A sweetness without sentimentality, a limpidity without naïvety. She was so easy to hurt, to tease" (Fowles, *Magus* 118).⁴⁴

Similarly to Conchis's ekphrastic (re-)construction of Lily's largely phantasmagorical corporeality, *Mantissa*'s protagonist makes a mocking remark about Erato's nude Rokeby Venus pose to accentuate the dependence of her metafictionally corporeal existence upon his creative gaze. This constitutes an implicit reference to the fact that the identity of the model who posed for Diego Velázquez's *The Rokeby Venus* remains, to this day, unknown. As particularly examined by Andreas Prater, it could have been either the artist's intentional decision to leave it to the viewer's imagination

⁴⁴ Cf. Ernst Gombrich's description of Botticelli's Venus as "an infinitely tender and delicate being, wafted to our shores as a gift from Heaven" (*Story* 264).

or the necessity to conceal her identity at a time when female nudes were a dangerous subject matter in Spain (45-57). In this context, *Mantissa*'s remark exposes the alleged embodiment of Erato both physically and emotionally. Immediately feeling defensive, the Greek goddess reacts through body language: by sitting up, folding her arms and looking at her beholder "with tight-pressed mouth and eyes gone as hard as obsidian" (92).

By following the Hogarthian curves of his lover's naked body, the ekphrastic gaze of the protagonist of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* helps to reveal his lover's state of melancholic *tristesse* as a recognition of "a slight to his dignity" (200) caused by his socioculturally internalised homophobia of being ashamed of his homosexuality.

Such ekphrastic exposure as a revelation of the inherently ideologically marked vulnerability of the observed – under the gaze of the reader as much as that of the character as an ekphrastic beholder – is often linked with two recurrent and often inextricably interrelated motifs: the motif of sleep/death as sleep and the motif of nudity. Reimagined in line with the poetics of the ekphrastic gaze (as ekphrastic rather than simply literary categories), these particular motifs are reminiscent of the painterly and sculptural renderings of the nude human figure in repose. They articulate the same canonical connotations as the analogous motifs in works of the visual arts and accentuate the suspended visuality of this state of exposed stillness and unconscious submission of the body to the control of the observer's gaze. In doing so, these motifs bring forward similarities between the real human body and a work of art as objects of the ekphrastic gaze.

In her assessment of the depiction of the sleeping nude in Italian Renaissance art, Maria Ruvoldt draws upon Erwin Panofsky and Edgar Wind's iconographical method of analysis to approach the variety of connotations that the rendering of this image entails. For the scholar, this includes the melancholic "passivity [as] a spiritual, rather than sexual, state" (38) of Plato's *vacatio* of the sleeping male nude who constitutes a "sleeping intellectual" (38) in unity with the divine on the one hand, and the eroticism of the sleeping female nude specifically created for the viewer's voyeuristic gaze on the other. Ruvoldt suggests that the imagery of sleep plays the role of "a pictorial device that affects a viewer's relationship to an image" (91) in the visual

arts.⁴⁵ This understanding of the sociocultural role of the female nude particularly echoes John Berger's treatment of the model's nakedness as "a sign of her submission to the owner's feelings or demands. (The owner of both woman and painting.)" (*Ways* 52) in Peter Lely's painting of Charles the Second's mistress *Nell Gwynne* commissioned by the King.

Particularly reminiscent of the rendering of the sleeping male nude in Italian Renaissance art, the motifs of sleep and nudity become intertwined in the observation of her sleeping lover's naked body by the protagonist of Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*. Colin's state of sleep in the nude brings about Mary's perceptual discovery of his corporeality in its aesthetic "distance from the mundane" (Ruvoldt 32) akin to that of the Renaissance sleeping male nude. In doing so, it also inspires the explication of such a discovery by means of the device of analogy between the process of contemplating the human body and that of contemplating a statue:

Like her he was naked and lay above the sheets, prone below the waist, above it twisted a little awkwardly towards her. His arms were crossed foetally over his chest and his slender, hairless legs were set a little apart, the feet, abnormally small like a child's, pointing inwards. The fine bones of his spine ran into a deep groove in the small of his back, and along this line, picked out by the low light from the shutters, grew a fine down. . . . Mary leaned forwards to stroke him, and changed her mind. Instead she set her water down on the table and moved closer to examine his face, as one might a statue's.

It was exquisitely made, with an ingenious disregard for the usual proportions. The ear – only one was visible – was large and protruded slightly; the skin was so pale and fine it was almost translucent . . . The nose, like the ears, was long, but in profile it did not protrude; instead it lay flat, along the face, and carved into its base, like commas, were extraordinarily small nostrils. (McEwan, *Comfort* 66-67)

Mary's connoisseurial judgement of her lover's face as a work of art playfully reveals its ekphrastic constructedness. This constructedness can even be said to be metafictionally ekphrastic if we take into account the parenthesised comparison of nostrils with commas. Mary's examination of her lover's face also underscores the

⁴⁵ Cf. Colin Shapiro et al.'s account of connotations associated with the subject of sleep in the tradition of Western art including languour and weakness, innocence and divinity, eroticism of the body and voyeurism of the spectator's gaze. See Colin Shapiro et al.'s "Sleep in Art and Literature" in *Atlas of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, 2nd ed., edited by Meir H. Kryger, Saunders, 2014, pp. 1-9.

dependence of its corporeality upon this suspended moment of ekphrastic contemplation.

Leisurely and yet meticulous and almost systematic, Mary's perceptual examination of her lover exposes his body at the fundamental and almost anatomical level of its muscles and bones rather than just at the surface level of the skin. Nevertheless, she notes the anatomical constitution of her lover only insofar as it offers her a better visual understanding of his body. Her artistic and aesthetic, rather than purely scientific, fascination with anatomy echoes the interest of the Italian Renaissance artists in anatomy (through the dissection of dead bodies as part of studying the representation of the nude). After all, according to Giorgio Vasari, Antonio Pollaiuolo was the first master who "treated his nude figures in a manner which approaches more nearly to that of the moderns than was usual with the artists who had preceded him; he dissected many human bodies to study the anatomy, and was the first who investigated the action of the muscles in this manner" (2: 227).⁴⁶

In accordance with the motif of sleep/death as sleep and the motif of nudity, the act of looking at the human figure evokes a desire to explore and confirm the corporeality of the observed through the use of touch – a desire the fulfilment of which threatens to expose the true essence of the observer him-/herself. The motif of sleep/death as sleep in particular endows the beholder's desire to touch the object of the gaze with morbid connotations. Similarly to Mary's conscious choice of exploring/caressing and dissecting her lover's body with her eyes rather than her hands in McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*, the protagonist of Iris Murdoch's *The Unicorn*, Effingham Cooper, "[feels] a stirring in his hand, a desire to whisk off the sheet" (256) and look under the veil that covers the dead bodies of his beloved, her husband, and her custodian, but decides against it for fear of seeing in their disfigured faces a Wildean reflection of the hideousness of his own soul. Not only does he prefer an aestheticised vision of their bodies in their detachment from reality the way Dorian Gray chooses to hide his portrait from his own gaze, but he also chooses to maintain perceptual control over their bodies to a haptic revelation of his own vulnerability:

He saw in the engraved twilight, as in a picture by Blake, the three recumbent forms and the folds of the white sheets reaching to the floor. They seemed

⁴⁶ For more details on the influence of anatomical studies of the depiction of the human figure and especially the nude in Italian Renaissance art, see, for instance, Domenico Laurenza's *Art and Anatomy in Renaissance Italy: Images from a Scientific Revolution*, translated by Frank Dabell, The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Yale UP, 2012.

already like three funeral monuments. He stood quite still. They slept together now, those three entwined destinies, they lay now helpless and complete before whatever judgement there might be in earth or heaven. (255)

The ekphrastic beholder is able to maintain the power of his/her gaze over the observed only as long as he/she does not succumb to the temptations of the sense of touch. Perceptual and imaginative possession of the body is understood by the beholder not only as aesthetic but even virtuous. Thus, the narrator of Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* allows himself to "caress[] and possess[]" the object of his love with "[his] eyes and [his] thoughts" (271-72). He does so by indulging in an enjoyable recollection of his friend's daughter as an ekphrastically inspired recollection of her body that makes him feel better about himself: "I thought about the sky-cleanness of her English water-colour eyes. I thought about her breasts. I felt completely happy and I felt good. (I mean virtuous.)" (238). Such erotically connoted subjection/possession is justified, for him, by the apparent impossibility to ever attain his beloved.

In this sense, the (re-)presentation of a woman under the ekphrastic gaze remains fundamentally different from the (re-)presentation of a man. The motif of nudity reinforces these differences. After all, as Berger reminds us in his *Ways of Seeing* (1972), the genre of the nude in European oil painting mainly concerns itself with a woman as "a sight" (47). Moreover, "the essential way of seeing women," the scholar concludes, "the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed. . . . [T]he 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him" (64). Thus, the fictional portrayal of women through the ekphrastic gaze does not overcome the conventions and stereotypes of how women have always been portrayed, viewed, and treated most of the time. The ekphrastically (re-)presented woman does the same as a woman in a painting, as a woman in society: as Berger would conceptualise it, she *appears* rather than *acts*.⁴⁷ In his turn, the male spectator acts, however, with the aim of "improving" the object of his gaze, of transforming her in accordance with his – fundamentally male – notion of a perfect woman. This transformation can be either metaphorical or quite literal as for instance in Fowles's *Mantissa*:

⁴⁷ As suggested by Berger, "men act and women appear" (*Ways* 47). While Doris Bremm also draws upon Berger's argument, the scholar, however, addresses contemporary ekphrastic fiction written by women and argues that it is characterised by the woman's "use [of] her role as a spectacle to her favor" (*Representation* 110). Moreover, Bremm sees contemporary ekphrastic nudes "as a way of empowering female characters and through them, the (female) readers" (108).

‘But you are always trying to turn me into something I’m not. As if you’d like me better if I was perfect. Or Nurse Cory. I feel I never quite live up to what you really want. I know I have faults. Actually my nose *is* a few millimetres too long.’ (177)

Moreover, the desire of the ekphrastic beholder and particularly the male ekphrastic beholder as a more recurrent figure in British postmodern fiction ultimately remains the desire of somebody whom Berger calls “the spectator-owner” (*Ways* 56). It is the wish to possess the woman as the object of his gaze “as female object” (Fowles, “Ebony Tower” 74), “a brainless female body” (Fowles, *Mantissa* 61). It is the desire to possess her, as A.S. Byatt suggests with regard to Marcel Proust’s Botticellian ekphrasis (Proust, *Swann* 312, 314, 332, 431), both in a sexual and an aesthetic way. In Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, as the English novelist argues, Swann’s recognition of a resemblance between Botticelli’s woman and the object of his obsession, Odette, is his way to “give[] value” (Byatt, *Portraits* 6) to her. Byatt recounts what Proust’s narrator tells us:

Swann, he tells us, adapts the idea of beauty he had formed from his aesthetic interests to the idea of a living woman, and transforms this idea into physical characteristics which he can then congratulate himself on having found assembled in a being it is possible for him to possess. Painting-into-woman-into-painting-into-woman, and the final woman as something which can be possessed both sexually and as *objet d’art* [*sic*]. (Byatt, *Portraits* 8)

In this sense, the body of the observed may be understood as a Foucauldian ‘docile body’ on which the ekphrastic gaze inscribes its power – a body which, in fact, is produced by the ideological power of the ekphrastic gaze. Drawing upon Foucault’s conceptualisation of this phenomenon in his *Discipline and Punish* (1975), we can describe the ekphrastically (re-)presented body as an observable, obedient and “manipulable body” that “may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (Foucault, *Discipline* 136) in line with both sociocultural and aesthetic norms and beliefs, stereotypes, and hierarchies.

Ultimately, we see that the relationship established between the ekphrastic beholder and the observed as the object of his/her gaze emerges, on the one hand, as an implicitly proprietorial relationship between an artist and a work of art and, on the other hand, as an explicitly proprietorial relationship between a (pseudo-)connoisseurial collector and a collectable, a curio. When the eponymous protagonist of Sarah Hall’s

The Electric Michelangelo talks about Grace, a circus performer whose body he has covered with tattoos of eyes, he uses the possessive pronoun ‘my’ to refer to her: “I painted her. She’s my Sistine Chapel, you see” (292).

Similarly linguistically accentuated is the ideological establishment of Lily Montgomery’s corporeality as something to be possessed in *The Magus*. “You look so ravishing,” says Nicholas, “Like a Renoir” (198). Reinforced by the negative connotations underlying the epithet ‘ravishing’,⁴⁸ such a reference postulates Lily’s ontological status as that of a Renoir, i.e. a painting, rather than a woman painted by Renoir, i.e. a woman in a painting. When *The Magus*’s search for Lily leads its narrator to her mother, Mrs de Seitas points out to him that her daughter is, for him, just a desired and desirable possession the way a painting is for a selfish collector.

Post-ironically enough, Nicholas’s attempt to argue against such a comparison by stripping his alleged beloved of any aesthetic value only results in his further objectification of Lily’s body as a subservient object of male desire, an object to be controlled and used:

‘My daughters were nothing but a personification of your own selfishness.’

A dull, deep rage was brewing in me.

‘I happened – stupidly, I grant you – to fall in love with one of them.’

‘As an unscrupulous collector falls in love with a painting he wants. And will do anything to get.’

‘Except that this wasn’t a painting. It was a girl with as much morality as a worn-out whore from the Place Pigalle.’ (612-13)

The Magus’s metaphorisation of the woman as a collectable object of the painterly ekphrastic beholder’s voyeuristic desire echoes *The Collector*’s conceptualisation of her: it is a photographic ekphrasis that is not explicitly addressed in this study. Underscored by the combination of the motif of sleep/death as sleep and the motif of nudity, the novel’s photographic ekphrastic (re-)presentation of the victim relates to the placement of her naked sleeping body under the voyeuristic and perverted gaze of her kidnapper’s camera: “She looked a real picture lying there with only what Aunt Annie called strips of nothing on. . . . It was my chance I had been waiting for [*sic*]. I got the old camera and took some photos” (Fowles, *Collector* 87). Soon, Clegg’s loss of respect for Miranda after her attempt to seduce him results in his forcing himself upon her both

⁴⁸ While the adjective ‘ravishing’ itself is generally characterised by positive connotations as a synonym of the adjective ‘beautiful’, it evidently evokes a negative association with the verb it is derived from: the verb ‘ravish’ as a synonym of the verb ‘to seize (someone) by violence’ (“Ravishing”).

literally (physically) and figuratively (visually), and “[taking] her till [he] had no more bulbs left” (110).

Very rarely does the postmodern ekphrastic beholder manage to keep his/her distance from the object of his gaze and desire. This results in an exposure of the iconography and the iconology of the beholder him-/herself. Throughout the novel, *The Magus*'s narrator will keep on deriving pleasure from fantasising about the submission of the continuously idealised and aestheticised object of his obsession as “a wildness, a willing rape” (238) but the actual sexual intercourse with Lily in Chapter 58 of the novel will finally lead to the revelation of his own true nature at the Trial. The novel's final grand theatrical spectacle organised by Conchis for his guest culminates in Lily's appearance before her ekphrastic beholder unashamedly reclining on a couch “in a deliberate imitation of Goya's *Maja Desnuda*” (537). Handcuffed to a frame, Nicholas will be forced to watch Lily make love with Joe, one of Conchis's actors, but will not be able to touch “this naked enigma, this forever unattainable” (537) himself. Similarly to the way a beholder of erotic prints is intended to identify with the man in the painting,⁴⁹ Nicholas's desire to touch Lily as Goya's nude *Maja* will be fulfilled indirectly through the figure of Joe. And the voyeuristic pleasure derived from this fulfilment will reveal to him his role in Conchis's scenario as a villain, like Shakespeare's Iago.⁵⁰

Moreover, in accordance with the iconography of erotic prints,⁵¹ the male ekphrastic beholder sometimes emerges, either literally or figuratively, as a satyr in his relation of the object of his gaze as an object of erotic/libidinal desire. Unlike the more metaphorical metamorphosis of the ekphrastic beholder into a satyr in John Fowles's *The Magus*, who will entertain the thought that he “became the satyr” (238) in his relationship with Lily, *Mantissa*'s beholder of polymorphic Erato and especially her incarnation of Velázquez's Venus in particular will be quite literally – albeit still within the confines of the novel's metafictional reality – transformed into a lascivious satyr. He

⁴⁹ As suggested by Berger, the depiction of sexual intercourse in pornographic pictures presupposes that “the spectator-owner” (*Ways* 56) will identify with the man in the painting.

⁵⁰ Cf. Brooke Lenz's account of Nicholas's voyeurism and violence in *The Magus* and particularly the scholar's suggestion that “Lily/Julie perfectly personifies those qualities he seeks in women – qualities that allow him to project his essentially autoerotic desires onto an object whose most striking characteristic is teasing compliance” (87).

⁵¹ For more detail on the history of the erotic representation and interpretation of the satyr image in art and particularly in Mannerist erotic prints, see Paul Grootker's “The Satyr” in *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide*, edited by Malcolm South, Greenwood P, 1987, pp. 207-24, Catherine Johns's *Sex or Symbol? Erotic Images of Greece and Rome*. Routledge, 1982, and Lynn Frier Kaufmann's *The Noble Savage: Satyrs and Satyr Families in Renaissance Art*. 1979. U of Pennsylvania. PhD dissertation.

will blame this transformation on Erato who has heretofore mainly appeared as a figment of his imagination and – with “the primeval cry of the male” (Fowles, *Mantissa* 190) – will dash towards her and try to assault her. Particularly reminiscent of the interpretation of the viewer of Velázquez’s painting as a satyr,⁵² Fowles’s protagonist emerges as an embodiment of voyeuristic desire: not only his own but also that of the audience, i.e. the reader.

Ultimately, the ekphrastically (re-)presented woman talks back to her male beholder the way *Mantissa*’s Erato eventually does and reveals that he is nothing but “a modern satyr”: “someone who invents a woman on paper so that he can force her to say and do things no real woman in her right mind ever would” (85). Ultimately, the ekphrastic gaze directs its attention back to the beholder him-/herself and inspires us to ask ourselves: Who is this “modern satyr” exactly and what does it mean when this satyr darkly threatens the object of the gaze by announcing “I could have made it far worse” (57)?

3.4 Conclusion

To sum up, the ekphrastic gaze (de-/re-)constructs varied iconographical and iconological meanings at the intratextual level of discourse in British postmodern fiction.

At the level of pre-iconographical description, the ekphrastic gaze contributes to the formal arrangement of the observed. It also establishes a perceptual and conceptual frame for further (de-/re-)construction of iconography and iconology. Among the artistic motifs that can be ekphrastically identified in British postmodern fiction particularly important are:

- geometrical forms of circle and rectangle
- representations of human beings (especially women), man-made objects (especially traditional works of art), food objects, elements of scenery
- the recurrent perceptual event of regarding artworks in relation to human beings (including the observer him-/herself)
- the recurrent motif of a frame (including the motifs of looking through a frame and looking at the frame itself), interrelated motifs of nudity and sleep/death,

⁵² Andreas Prater connects the tradition of erotic prints that depict satyrs as voyeuristic “accomplices of the spectator whose possible feelings they exemplify” (58) with Velázquez’s painting *The Rokeby Venus* and suggests that the painting’s viewer is assigned the role of the satyr or of Pan.

and the recurrent recumbent poses and gestures associated with these motifs

- a wide variety of expressional qualities suggested by additional epithets

Iconographically, the ekphrastic gaze draws upon the continuities and discontinuities of the interdisciplinary ekphrastic tradition and reveals the recognition of those conventional art-historical meanings that underly these motifs. In doing so, it helps to establish the art-related subject matter of the observed. Some of the prevalent imagery conveyed through the ekphrastic gaze in the iconographical sense is:

- Renaissance iconography (particularly represented by Botticelli and Michelangelo), impressionist and post-impressionist iconography (Matisse, Renoir, Van Gogh)
- recurrent themes and concepts iconographically borrowed from the visual arts such as beauty, love, sexuality, dreams/visions/divine apparitions, temptation, destruction, ownership/possession, folly, voyeurism, biblical and mythical iconography

Iconologically, the ekphrastic gaze discloses various trends symptomatic of the condition of postmodernity in British discourse at large. The ekphrastic gaze helps to reveal interrelated aesthetic and sociocultural contexts such as:

- the postmodern play with the ideas and conventions of aesthetic and literary traditions
- art as a commodity in contemporary reality
- religion in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century
- a juxtaposition of English rusticity and urbanity
- gastronomic discourse in post-war Britain
- sociocultural reality of postcolonial India
- continental Otherness

At the same time, the ekphrastic gaze contributes to an accentuation and subversion of discursive 'truths' and 'values'. This relates to:

- the ideology of art, art history, and aesthetics
- the ideology of beauty

- the ideology of the body
- the ideology of gender roles
- works of art as conventional objects of aesthetic perception
- the ideology of the museum
- metanarrativity of scientific knowledge
- history and ideology of British imperialism

4. The (De-/Re-)Construction of the Ekphrastic Beholder: In the Interstices between the Gazes of Author, Character, and Reader

Who is lured by the reproduction of a Matisse in A.S. Byatt's "Medusa's Ankles"? Whose gaze accentuates the Van-Goghian pathos of Provençal landscapes in *Still Life*? Who watches the visitors of the Louvre Museum in Luke Jennings's *Codename Villanelle* or the visitors of the National Gallery in Julian Barnes's *Metroland*? Who asks himself the metafictionally electrifying question: "What was I after all?" (549) in John Fowles's *The Magus*?

In this chapter, I should like to look at the figure of the ekphrastic beholder in British postmodern fiction. The leading questions of this chapter are: Whose ekphrastic gaze or gazes contribute to the (de-/re)construction of the iconography and the iconology of fictionally (re-)presented life? In what way can we describe and summarise the key characteristics of the postmodern ekphrastic beholder? Which contexts and discourses underlie the sociocultural construct of the ekphrastic beholder in British postmodern fiction?

4.1 Who Was the Ekphrastic Beholder After All?

While chapter 3 was guided by the question "*What Are We Looking At?*" (Frayn, *Headlong* 55) – used in one of the chapter headings of Frayn's novel –, what is being looked at and in what way (with regard to its iconography and iconology) is contingent on the ekphrastic beholder. Thus, chapter 4 aims to determine *who* is looking.

On the one hand, the British postmodern ekphrastic beholder belongs to and emerges from a culturally specific literary and aesthetic tradition of character types. On the other, the postmodern functionality of such an observer transgresses the intratextual level of discourse and related to the interplay of the intra- and extratextual ekphrastic beholders and their sociocultural values.

Even though the investigation of the (de-/re-)construction of meaning through the ekphrastic gaze has been mainly concerned with the iconography and iconology of the object of the ekphrastic gaze so far, it inevitably touched upon the subject of the ekphrastic beholder already. However, this was largely a discussion of his/her role at the functional level of the narration. It mainly alluded to the ekphrastic beholder as an agent defined by his/her constituent narrative function: the ekphrastic (de-/re-)construction of

the observed. Chapter 4 now expands on the examination of the ekphrastic beholder at the thematic level. It regards the ekphrastic beholder and particularly the intratextual beholder as a product of two processes: iconographical typologisation and iconological typification.¹

Be it the “art whizz” (23) of Michael Frayn’s *Headlong* or the “bloody little intellectual wanker” (49) of Julian Barnes’s *Metroland*, the “little aesthete” (441) of Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* or the “con-turned-artist” (81) of Irvine Welsh’s *The Blade Artist*, the ekphrastic beholder constitutes a specific character type. He/she typifies the (anti-)hero that emerges within the British postmodern discourse: the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur. To date, this figure has not yet been approached as a character type in literary criticism. More particularly, this study draws upon the similarities between various protagonists in British postmodern fiction with the aim of typologising and typifying the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur as a character type.² The figure of the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur both evolves from and subverts a particularly British interdisciplinary aesthetic tradition of (anti-)heroic character types. Among the literary antecedents of the postmodern (Pseudo-)Connoisseur several character types stand out. They exemplify the diachronic intricacies and countercurrents in the establishment of such a character type: the Byronic Hero, the Dandy-Aesthete, and the Modern Connoisseur.

The Byronic Hero lays the foundations for the formation of the figure of the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur as an (anti-)hero that adapts the traits and behaviour patterns characteristic of the Byronic Hero as an epitome of the Romantic Hero. As defined by the nineteenth-century British historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, the prototypical Byronic Hero is “a man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection” (152). Moreover, as the British scholar Rupert Christiansen points out, the

¹ Within the discussion of the ekphrastic beholder, this study employs the term ‘type’ as a literary term in its connection with two processes: *typologisation* and *typification*. Thus, the Russian philologist Valentin Chalizev distinguishes between ‘type’ as a means of classification (e.g. personality types in psychology, etc.) – which refers to the expression of a recurring trait or characteristic in a literary character on the one hand, and ‘type’ as “*any* expression of the generic in the individual (insofar as it attains vividness and integrity)”, on the other (“любое воплощение общего в индивидуальном (если оно достигает яркости и полноты)”; my trans.; 42). The second definition refers to what the Russian philologist Gennadii Pospelov explicated as “the process and result of creative typification of social characters in a work of art” (“процесс и результат творческой типизации социальных характеров в произведениях искусства”; my trans.; 59).

² Cf. Jarosław Hetman’s notion of postmodern pseudo-artistic ‘pseudo-conceptualists’ in Paul Auster’s fiction who “observe reality, select elements of it in an act of *documentation* and then . . . only seemingly fail at conveying them to the audiences” (157).

emergence of such a character type is connected with the epitomisation of Lord Byron himself as the Byronic Hero: “A steadier, happier Byron would not have been so interesting or saleable. His readers wanted him struggling, not happy; and so that muddling idea ‘the Byronic Hero’ developed, reflected in his verse and distorted by the myths of his personality” (201).³

Thus, the (Pseudo-)Connoisseurs of Peter Ackroyd’s *English Music* or Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*, John Fowles’s “The Ebony Tower” or Julian Barnes’s *Talking it Over*, Chloe Aridjis’s *Asunder* or A.S. Byatt’s “Medusa’s Ankles” demonstrate the development of the paradoxical stance of the Byronic Hero, i.e. the contradictory co-operation/co-functioning of such qualities as intelligence and arrogance, individualism and self-indulgence, idealism and cynicism. While the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur of British postmodern fiction seemingly inherits the sophisticated world view of the Byronic Hero, we shall see that this is rather the pseudo-sophisticated vanity of a postmodern subject. Moreover, the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur is also a complex construct at the intersection between intra- and extratextual discourses. Unlike the Byronic Hero, however, the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur typifies and parodies the alleged personality of the reader him-/herself – or, as we shall see, primarily the personality of the ‘mock reader’.⁴

At the same time, the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur (de-/re-)contextualises a range of aspects associated with the Dandy-Aesthete. Defined by Kelly Comfort as the “artist of the self”, the Dandy-Aesthete “embraces the ‘art for art’s sake’ idea that artistic creations should lack all extrinsic purposes, be they moral or social, since their sole objectives should be to be beautiful and to give pleasure” (88). As a descendant of the Dandy-Aesthete, the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur believes him-/herself to be a creator of art for art’s sake the way the Dandy-Aesthete is. In truth, however, akin to the Dandy-Aesthete, the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur is a narcissist whose perception of reality reveals the true object of his/her gaze: his/her self. This means that the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur’s (de-/re-)construction of life as art primarily reflects his/her own personality and draws upon the sociocultural beliefs and preconceptions underlying this. As a postmodern subject, the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur “play[s] the aesthete” (Hollinghurst, *Line of Beauty* 304) rather than genuinely appears to be one. In particular, the egocentric and hedonistic

³ Cf. Peter L. Thorslev’s *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*. U of Minnesota P, 1962.

⁴ As understood by Walker Gibson in his “Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers” in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, edited by Jane P. Tompkins, The Johns Hopkins UP, 1980, pp. 1-6.

world view inherent in the Dandy-Aesthete is most explicitly reappropriated by the protagonists of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* and Luke Jennings's *Codename Villanelle*. While the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur does not necessarily free him-/herself from moral constraints the way Irvine Welsh and John Lanchester's postmodern manifestations of Dorian Gray do, he/she often alternates between adherence to and disregard for moral values. Thus, the morally and ethically dubious actions of the narrators of *Headlong* or *The Magus*, *The Black Prince* or *Talking it Over* unmask these characters as morally ambiguous.

Finally, the postmodern (Pseudo-)Connoisseur oscillates between taking on and playing with the sophistication pertaining to the Modern Connoisseur. As defined by Mary Ann Calo with regard to the American art historian Bernard Berenson, such a Modern (or Morellian) Connoisseur is guided by Giovanni Morelli's method of connoisseurship that "placed more faith in visual evidence" (qtd. in Roffman 37) than in scholarly evidence. In particular, Berenson explained this method in his letter to the pre-eminent theorist of British modernist aesthetics Roger Fry: ". . . You will perhaps do well to rest assured that I am not in the first place 'scholarly' and 'learned'. I hate to read about art, and love to use my eyes" (Berenson 113). Being thus introduced into the British interdisciplinary aesthetic discourse by Roger Fry, the figure of the Modern Connoisseur found its way into the works of modernist writers, particularly those of Virginia Woolf. For example, the narrator in the short story "The Mark on the Wall" echoes Morelli's line of thought by drawing our attention to the idea that "the less we honour them [learned men – N.G.] as our superstitions dwindle and our respect for beauty and health of mind increases" (46).

On the one hand, the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur adopts the Morellian method of connoisseurship as a way of approaching reality in general and specifically the Modern Connoisseur's reliance upon observation. On the other, such connoisseurship is undermined by the ironic self-disruptive strategies of the postmodern discourse. Flaunted by the protagonists of Michael Frayn or John Fowles, Alan Hollinghurst or Iris Murdoch, the connoisseurial authority of postmodern (Pseudo-)Connoisseurs is the sociocultural authority of a pseudo-intellectual elitism that finds particular expression in the use and misapplication of the ekphrastic gaze. As a result, the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur returns to and relies on the conventional and patriarchal knowledge of "learned men" (Woolf, "Mark" 46) that the Modern Connoisseur rejects.

Thus, stemming from such character types as the Byronic Hero, the Dandy-

Aesthete, and the Modern Connoisseur, the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur is a character type that defines and is defined by the use of the ekphrastic gaze as his/her pivotal attribute/quality, if not his/her decisive personality trait. At the same time, it is an inherently postmodern, (meta-)fictional and chronotopically motivated character type that hybridises and destabilises, pastichises and ironises the fluid, fractured, and unstable postmodern subject⁵ within the processes of iconographical typologisation and iconological typification.

In this sense, it is not sufficient to consider the ekphrastic beholder only as an intratextually defined product of these interconnected processes. A.S. Byatt's middle-aged professor of classics is not the only one who is lured by a Matisse. And Michael Frayn's headlong lecturer in philosophy on sabbatical leave is not the only one who poses the question "*What Are We Looking At?*" (Frayn, *Headlong* 55). As *Headlong*'s phrasing of the question suggests, there is more than one observer. And as the phrasing of the heading of this chapter, in its turn, suggests, there are at least three of them: author, character, and reader. While this study of the ekphrastic gaze has mainly been concerned with the character and his/her mark on the observed so far, this chapter now addresses the figures of the author and the reader as integral components in operation within the (de-/re-)construction of ekphrastic meaning.

In order to understand the interplay between the gazes of the observers situated at different levels of the discourse, it is necessary to analyse how these observers are connected to each other. The reborn author and the newborn reader enter the ekphrastic discourse as sociocultural constructs that are simultaneously superior, inferior, and equal to the character.⁶ This results in the paradoxical constellation of intersecting and interacting ekphrastic gazes. The combination of all three gazes is important to the (de-/re-)construction of iconographical and iconological meanings conveyed through the text (cf. ch. 3).

More specifically, the ideological function of the postmodern author relates to the establishment of the paradoxical authority of the extratextual referent of ekphrasis rather than the authority of the author him-/herself: the authority of Bruegel and the art historians who examined his paintings rather than the authority of Michael Frayn; the

⁵ As conceptualised by the British literary historian and theorist Terry Eagleton: "The creature who emerges from postmodern thought is centreless, hedonistic, self-inventing, ceaselessly adaptive" (190).

⁶ Cf. the idea regarding John Banville's works that his character's aesthetics expresses the author's asocial and apolitical meta-aesthetics, i.e. Banville's views about the creative process, in Gorbina, *Images of Art* 65-73.

authority of Matisse and Titian rather than that of A.S. Byatt and Iris Murdoch.

At the same time, the activity of the reader as an ekphrastic beholder stems from an encounter with an ekphrastic or ekphrastically motivated image of art and consists in what A.S. Byatt refers to as a “constructive visualising work” (*Portraits* 2). While the reader as an ekphrastic beholder is invited to engage in the (de-)construction of the meaning(s) of a text, he/she, too, emerges as a sociocultural manifestation of the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur as long as he/she is guided by the author’s inherently manipulative postmodern strategies as grounded in the authority of the extratextual referent of ekphrasis.

The (de-)construction of meaning by the reader of A.S. Byatt’s *The Matisse Stories* or *Still Life*, Michael Frayn’s *Headlong* or Chloe Aridjis’s *Asunder* is guided both at the intra- and paratextual levels of discourse. Apart from the intratextual incorporations of ekphrastic instances, the reader’s ekphrastic gaze is stimulated by the paratextual reproductions of paintings on the front and back covers of certain editions as well as by the paratextual ekphrastic references and allusions that the reader encounters in titles or summaries. Thus, the reader of the Vintage edition of Chloe Aridjis’s *Asunder* is lured inside by the tantalizing gaze of John Opie’s *Maria Godsal* on its cover, while depictions of fruits from the paintings by Cézanne and Renoir whet the appetite of the reader of the Vintage edition of A.S. Byatt’s *Still Life*. At the same time, the reader’s ekphrastic gaze is attracted by the ekphrastic thematisation in the title of A.S. Byatt’s collection of short stories *The Matisse Stories* or by the allusion to Velázquez’s *The Rokeby Venus* in the summary to Aridjis’s *Asunder*.

Thus, the interaction between the ekphrastic gazes of author, character, and reader relates to the authorial establishment of an ‘already made’ authoritative frame. Mediated through the voice of an intratextual ekphrastic beholder, such a frame directs the ekphrastic gaze of the reader as a (pseudo-)connoisseur. It controls the reader’s recognition of iconography and the (de-)construction of iconological meanings rather than helps to unleash his/her imagination. In particular, the reader’s construction of *Headlong*’s discovered painting as a long-lost Bruegel is framed by a continuous flow of references to and citations from canonically authoritative sources within Frayn’s postmodern text as a Barthesian “tissue of quotations” (Barthes, “Death” 146):

On the table in front of me I have Friedländer (of course), Glück, Grossmann, Tolnay, Stechow, Genaille and Bianconi. They quote each other freely, together with various other authors not available in the London Library – Hulin de Loo,

Michel, Romdahl, Stridbeck and Dvořák – and they refer to the often mutually contradictory iconography used in two breviaries illuminated by Simon Bening of Bruges in the second and third decades of the sixteenth century, the Hours of Hennessy and the Hours of Costa; in the Grimani Breviary, also done, a little earlier, by Simon Bening and his father Alexander Bening, although the calendar itself is attributed to Gerard Horenbout; and in our own dear *Calendrier flamand*, as I think of it, in the Bavarian State Library. (Frayn, *Headlong* 70-71)

Articulated through the voice of the novel's – albeit inherently unreliable – narrator, such extratextually authentic and ontologically superior scholarly materials, however, offer a convenient and extratextually trustworthy authoritative ideological frame for the reader's (de-)construction of meaning. Created by the author in collaboration with the character, this frame determines the direction of the reader's ekphrastic gaze, establishes its limits/boundaries and suggests a particular reading of the text. *Headlong's* long-lost masterpiece could be a Bruegel as long as the reader is convinced by the protagonist's art-historical investigation that is not only seemingly logical and rational, but also extratextually trustworthy and convincing.

At the same time, the joint (de-)construction of meaning by author, character, and reader as ekphrastic beholders is determined by what Brian McHale refers to as “[t]he metafictional gesture of frame-breaking” (197) in postmodernist fiction. According to McHale, when the author's reality is presented as ontologically superior, it “*relativizes* reality; . . . destabilizes ontology” (197). The author's reality becomes, in fact, “just another level of fiction” (197). The authorial act of incorporating references to art-historical sources or works of art proper fictionalises and destabilises their extratextual authority rather than supports and reinforces it.

The present chapter therefore addresses two major issues: the iconographical and iconological (de-)construction of the figure of the ekphrastic beholder and his/her function at the various levels of discourse. The chapter investigates the peculiarities of the typologisation and typification of the observer in British postmodern fiction. It establishes the emergence of the ekphrastic beholder as the character type of the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur. At the same time, it discusses the classification of ekphrastic beholders in postmodern narrative and delineates the sociocultural interplay of the gazes of author, character, and reader as participants in the process of a postmodern (de-)construction of meaning.

4.2 The Dialectic of the Ekphrastic Beholder as the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur

When the protagonist of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, Nick Guest, is invited to the opulent mansion of the rich Lebanese businessman Bertrand Ouradi for lunch on Sunday, he manages to navigate the world of London's more exalted social class while concealing the truth about himself. This truth concerns facts about himself that would not have been accepted in the 1980s, especially in London's upper-class social circles: his homosexuality and his actual status as the lover of Bertrand Ouradi's son, Antoine "Wani" Ouradi, as well as their drug- and sex-fuelled decadent lifestyle. Nick manages to hide this by way of taking advantage of his so-called "aesthete persona" (Hollinghurst 215):

Wani said, 'You must be longing to see round the house.'

'Oh, yes,' said Nick, getting up with a flattered smile. He felt that Wani had almost overdone the coolness and dissimulation, he'd barely spoken to him, and even now, as he lifted Nick on a wave of secret intentions, his expression gave nothing away, not even the warmth that the family might have expected between two old college friends.

'Yes, take him round,' said Bertrand. 'Show him all the bloody pictures and bloody things we've got.'

'I'd love that,' said Nick, seeing the hidden advantage of the aesthete persona, even in a house where the good things had the glare of reproductions. (214-15)

A similar persona of an "art whizz" (23) gives the narrator of Michael Frayn's *Headlong* access to the family heirloom of his and his wife's countryside neighbours whom he considers local landed gentry. In its turn, the persona of a "con-turned-artist" (81) allows Irvine Welsh's blade artist to operate both in the American world of art and in the Scottish world of crime in *The Blade Artist*.

The ekphrastic beholder in British postmodern fiction assumes the specific persona of someone who *appears* to be knowledgeable about art and who exhibits and applies his/her knowledge through the ekphrastic gaze. It is the persona of an art connoisseur.⁷ The questions addressed here are: how exactly does the ekphrastic gaze contribute to the establishment of such a persona and, moreover, which contexts

⁷ The rootedness of the connoisseur in perceptual knowledge is supported by its etymology. Borrowed from French, the word *connoisseur* (F. *connaissance*) is derived from the Old French verb *conoistre* (F. *connaître*), 'to know', which, in its turn, comes from the Latin verb *cognōscere*, 'to become acquainted with; perceive, understand, know' (Klein 336).

underlie his/her iconography and iconology, construction and simultaneous deconstruction as the mock persona of a (pseudo-)connoisseur?⁸

To begin with, the construction of the persona of an art connoisseur is defined by the redirection of the beholder's ekphrastic gaze towards his/her own self and the establishment of his/her own iconography. Being simultaneously the subject and the object of his/her own ekphrastic gaze, the beholder positions him-/herself as such an iconographically defined and recognisable authoritative figure of an art connoisseur. This means that the ekphrastic beholder takes a connoisseurial stance, both literally and figuratively. He/she may adopt a particular pose, i.e. use certain physical ruses/tricks and behavioural patterns that would underscore his/her infallible authority insofar as these patterns are iconographically associated with the image of the connoisseur. When the protagonist of Frayn's *Headlong* is asked by his countryside neighbours to look at a painting on their estate, he sags at the knees in front of the painting because of its wrong position in the breakfast-room instead of its original position at the head of the stairs. Such "respectful cringe" (33) in front of a painting of unknown value establishes Frayn's unreliable narrator as a figure of authority as long as he wishes to be perceived as such. A similar air of sophistication is created through the use of binoculars by the young protagonists of Julian Barnes's *Metroland* to observe the visitors of the National Gallery (11).

Being enthralled by the figure of Henry James, Hollinghurst's Nick Guest, in his turn, not only applies Henry James's aesthetic ideas and principles to his own perception and treatment of reality, but also often – both intentionally and unintentionally – adopts his expressions and mannerisms. The scholar of post-Victorian fiction Andrea Kirchknopf draws attention to Nick Guest's frequent use of Henry James's quotes in his speech (Hollinghurst 208) and to his imitation of the novelist's manner and style of dictating long sentences to his typist (Hollinghurst 396). The scholar theorises such an imitation as an "impersonation of Henry James" (Kirchknopf 69).

Thus, in Kirchknopf's terms of reference, the postmodern ekphrastic beholder

⁸ On the one hand, the term 'persona' is used here synonymously with the term 'character type'. Such understanding draws, in particular, on Vladimir Propp's conceptualisation and classification of characters as 'dramatis personae' (e.g. the hero, the villain, etc.) in his *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928). On the other, this study takes into consideration the sociocultural denotations and connotations of this term, its synonymy with the term 'social role'. On the sociological treatment of the term 'persona', see Helen Harris Perlman's *Persona: Social Role and Personality*. The U of Chicago P, 1968.

often *impersonates* a specific historical figure from the world of art and aesthetics, i.e. reappropriates the iconographical stance of such a figure of artistic and connoisseurial authority either intentionally or unintentionally, explicitly or implicitly. Thus, the narrator of Frayn's *Headlong* largely, albeit implicitly, adopts the stance of the art historian Erwin Panofsky: he draws on the art historian's ideas as to the iconographical and iconological analysis of works of art. Specifically, he applies Panofsky's methods of art-historical analysis to discuss – seemingly sarcastically – the iconography and the iconology of mundane things associated with their neighbours in the countryside, “from the baler twine to the holes in the carpet” (31).⁹ In his turn, Irvine Welsh's psychopathic murderer in *The Blade Artist* emerges as both a Dorian Gray and a Basil Hallward insofar as he cursorily associates his art with Dorian's disfigured portrait (*Blade Artist* 117). The protagonist of Sarah Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo*, as indicated in the title of the novel itself, puts on the mask of the Renaissance sculptor and painter Michelangelo: “He was going to be the Electric Michelangelo. He was going to be his own master” (165).

Hollinghurst's protagonist does indeed consider himself a Jamesian aesthete. As demonstrated in the passage quoted above, he acknowledges that there are some “good things” (215) in Bertrand's collection and, as an aesthete, he is disgusted by the fact that its owner values paintings only “as necessary trappings of his position” (209-10). Nevertheless, Nick is more interested in Bertrand's son Wani than in Bertrand's art collection. Wani's suggestion to show his guest around the house becomes a pretext to sneak away to enjoy the pleasures of drugs and sex rather than the pleasure of looking at the art objects.

In his turn, Frayn's protagonist seemingly acknowledges the fact that his area of expertise is philosophy rather than art. However, it does not prevent him from slipping on the mask of an “art whizz” (23) that is assigned to him – not without a hint of postmodern irony – by the seemingly unsophisticated neighbour Laura Churt. Even more heavily charged with postmodern irony are the paradoxical masks of artists socially assigned to the murderous protagonists of *Codename Villanelle* or *The Blade Artist*.

In this sense, the iconological deconstruction of the ekphrastic beholder's persona as the mock persona of a (pseudo-)connoisseur is actualised at the intersection of the gaze directed by the beholder and the gaze(s) directed at the beholder. In Carl

⁹ See also Frayn, *Headlong* 15, 26.

Jung's terms of reference, this is revealed as "a mask of the collective psyche, a mask that is a substitute for individuality, intending to make others as well as oneself believe one is individual" (Jung 165). Disclosed by his/her own unreliable ekphrastic gaze within the context of postmodern unreliable narration, the iconography of the beholder as a sophisticated connoisseur is challenged by the ironic sociocultural gaze that underscores the iconological implications of such a stance as "only a rôle that is played", "what a man should 'appear to be'" (Jung 165) in society rather than who he/she genuinely is.

Placed under the contemptuous gaze of London's upper classes, *The Line of Beauty*'s Nick Guest is assigned the role of "Antoine's aesthete" (209), "the bloody aesthete" (221) by Wani's philistine father Bertrand. At the same time, his "knowledgeable attachment" (7) to the artworks in the house of the Sloane Ranger family with whom he is staying motivates another character, Catherine Feddens, to call him "a snob" (7). *Metroland*'s young protagonist will be summed up – with the intention to mock rather than to insult – as "[b]loody Ruskin", a "bloody little intellectual wanker" (49) by his less sophisticated and more practical uncle. This description starkly contrasts with that given by the protagonist to a stranger on the tube whom he sums up as an "ambitious old turd, no doubt, who couldn't tell Tissot from Titian" (37).

"You think you're so soddin' clever, don't you? "Iconography of the Renaissance" – Jesus," (58) will exclaim, in John Fowles's *Mantissa*, the figment of its protagonist's imagination. Finally, *The Blade Artist*'s protagonist will find solace in thinking about his mutilated sculptures of celebrities as "those attic versions of Dorian Gray, drenched in blood red" (117). As Irvine Welsh's postmodern Dorian Gray is about to murder the criminal art collector David "Tyrone" Power and to destroy his art collection, his victim appeals – motivated by fear rather than respect – to his persona of an artist: "[T]hey have tae be enjoyed by future generations! You're an artist, he pleads, – ye surely huv tae get that! [*sic*]" (261).

The connotations of the words that are used to describe/characterise the ekphrastic beholder are revealed at the sociolinguistic level of the narrative. The connotations of the expletives 'bloody' and 'sodding' or the derogatory term 'wanker', the slang word 'whizz' or the reference to John Ruskin and Dorian Gray are as ironic as they are socioculturally specific. Etymologically British, the iconology of such words emphasises the inherent Britishness of the ekphrastic beholder's mock persona of the

(pseudo-)connoisseur.

Within the poetics and politics of British postmodernism, the beholder's ekphrastic gaze itself is a metaphorical mask as "a semblance, a two dimensional reality" (Jung 165). However, it is also the gaze *of* the mask and yet, at the same time, it is the gaze directed through the slits of a sociocultural mask, the only link to the individuality of whoever is hiding behind it – if there is anyone. Is there?

Subchapter 4.2 will now survey the dialectical (de-/re-)construction of the iconography and iconology of the ekphrastic beholder's sociocultural persona as a (pseudo-)connoisseur. The study uses examples from the following British novels and short stories: Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* (1992), Chloe Aridjis's *Asunder* (2013), Julian Barnes's *Metroland* (1980), A.S. Byatt's *The Matisse Stories* (1993), *Still Life* (1985), and *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), John Fowles's novels *The Magus* (1965) and *Mantissa* (1982) and his short story "The Ebony Tower" (1974), Michael Frayn's *Headlong* (1999), Sarah Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo* (2004), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), Luke Jennings's *Codename Villanelle* (2014) and *Villanelle: No Tomorrow* (2018), John Lanchester's *The Debt to Pleasure* (1996), Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (1973), *The Sandcastle* (1957), and *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), and Irvine Welsh's *The Blade Artist* (2016).

4.2.1 Through the (Pseudo-)‘Intellectual Lens’ of the Ekphrastic Beholder’s Gaze: The ‘Bloody Ruskin’ of British Postmodern Fiction

From an early age, John Ruskin was set on the path to becoming one of the most prominent figures in the history of art and connoisseurship. Introduced to art by his family, he learned about painting and sculpture from the books given to him by his father and from the family trips across Europe, from the paintings he saw in those books and on those tours, and from the sceneries that became familiar to him from the paintings (Cook 18-19; 33-37; 40). Such education was instrumental in the formation and cultivation of his gaze – the polymathic gaze of an art critic, an artist, and a social thinker who would develop his own educational philosophy. In particular, Ruskin would argue that the truth of nature is available to those who exercise their mind and look consciously and objectively, to those who respect the dialectic between "the intellectual lens and moral retina" (Ruskin, *Modern Painters* 2: 10) and do not fall into the trap of "[t]he great leading error of modern times [that] is the mistaking erudition for

education” (Ruskin, *Stones of Venice* 3: 230).

Following in Ruskin’s footsteps, the ekphrastic beholder of British postmodern fiction frequents galleries and libraries, looks at art objects, reads about art history and theory, and draws on this knowledge in his/her attempt to make sense of reality. But the question that arises immediately is whether, in the process of doing so, the ekphrastic beholder does not perhaps fail to distinguish between intelligence and pseudo-intelligence. “Bloody Ruskin,” shouts *Metroland*’s narrator’s uncle at him, “[B]loody little intellectual wanker. Give you a pig’s arse you wouldn’t know what to do with it, would you, son?” (49) And if the ekphrastic beholder does, after all, fail to distinguish between intelligence and pseudo-intelligence, how does such an error contribute to the deconstruction of the ekphrastic beholder as a (pseudo-)connoisseur or, in Julian Barnes’s terms of reference, as the post-ironic and socioculturally specific “Bloody Ruskin” (*Metroland* 49) of British postmodern fiction?

Within the chronotope of this (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest, the ekphrastic beholder is guided by his/her reliance upon knowledge of art and art history as a foothold in the fluid and unstable postmodern reality. It relates to the epistemic trap that our observer falls into: the trap of his/her own (pseudo-)connoisseurial stance. Set by the ekphrastic beholder him-/herself, such a trap is intrinsic to the venture undertaken by the Bloody Ruskin of British postmodern fiction. The ekphrastic beholder embarks on a search for the universal truth about the world, about others, about him-/herself.

The narrator of Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince* declares himself to be “a seeker” (4) of the truth of life and, particularly, the truth of his own life. Barnes’s young flâneurs “hunt[] jumpily for the original, the picturesque, the authentic” (29) in *Metroland*, while Luke Jennings’s psychopathic assassin seemingly hunts for the opposite in *Codename Villanelle*: common facial expressions and human emotions that she has never experienced herself, but that she would be able to “simulate” (42). The search of *Headlong*’s narrator is an arduous search for art-historical evidence to ascertain the provenance of the discovered painting. At the same time, it is also a more practical, yet equally arduous search for ways and means to get hold of the masterpiece with the seemingly chivalrous aim of performing a public service. In his turn, the protagonist of John Fowles’s novella “The Ebony Tower” arrives at the painter Henry Breasley’s mansion in Brittany in search of the truth about the painter’s artistic influences. The protagonist of Fowles’s other novel *Mantissa* wakes up in a hospital room – a metaphorisation of his own mind – with no memory and begins a search for

his identity, for himself as “an aesthetic being, a person of taste, a true if temporarily lost Miles Green” (36). The beholders of *The Magus* and “Medusa’s Ankles” also search, *inter alia*, for themselves. The beholders of *The Line of Beauty* and *The Electric Michelangelo* search for beauty.

While the ekphrastic *aficionado*’s search is first and foremost a mental process, i.e. localised in his/her mind, the ekphrastically epistemic essence of the search is particularly underscored by its physical actualisation in such conspicuously thought-provoking/mind-stimulating places of knowledge as libraries, museums, and art galleries. Thus, the protagonists of both *Metroland* and *Codename Villanelle* conduct their observational studies – hunts – at the modern epicentres/meccas of art (cf. ch. 3.3): in London’s National Gallery and Paris’s Louvre respectively. Meanwhile, in *Headlong*, the narrator’s obsession with Bruegel keeps drawing him back to the museums and libraries of London and especially the London Library, the National Art Library in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Library.¹⁰ And as he peruses major authoritative art history sources on this Early Netherlandish painter¹¹ in search of clues to the chronotopic mystery of his seasonal panels, he finds himself looking back upon his pre-scholarly aesthetic experience at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna where he first saw Bruegel’s *The Months*.

While such locale as the library or the museum epitomise the chronotope of a (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest, the ekphrastic beholder’s search often actualises itself in an interplay with other chronotopic motifs. For instance, the headlong narrator’s scholarly and non-scholarly cogitations about the discovered hypothetical Bruegel are marked by the use of the chronotope of the road.¹² The novel’s chronotope of the road spatio-temporalises the climax and the denouement of the protagonist’s quest: the protagonist will eventually steal the object of his obsession and will attempt to flee. He will be chased by Tony Churt and, in a chronotopically charged moment of figurative

¹⁰ See Frayn, *Headlong* 54, 64, 84-85, 175.

¹¹ The term “Early Netherlandish painting” is borrowed here from the art-historical discourse. Mainly introduced by the pioneers in the field of early Netherlandish painting Max Friedländer and Erwin Panofsky, this term continues to refer to artists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the region of the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands as opposed to the terms “Dutch” and “Flemish” that are usually applied to works of the seventeenth and later centuries (Friedländer, *From Van Eyck* 1-5). The use of the term in the current art discourse can be observed, for example, in such scholarly works as Bret L. Rothstein’s *Sight and Spirituality in Early Netherlandish Painting*. Cambridge UP, 2005, *Early Netherlandish Painting at the Crossroads: A Critical Look at Current Methodologies*, edited by Maryan W. Ainsworth, The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Yale UP, 2001, and *Early Netherlandish Paintings: Rediscovery, Reception and Research*, edited by Bernhard Ridderbos et al., Amsterdam UP, 2005.

¹² See Frayn, *Headlong* 91-96; 195-98; 383-88.

“*chance rupture*” (Bakhtin, “Forms” 92), will watch the painting disappear in the flames, failing to confirm whether it portrays the detail that, as he has finally discovered, would establish the picture’s Bruegelness. Meanwhile, the quests of the protagonists of A.S. Byatt’s “Medusa’s Ankles” and John Fowles’s *The Magus* are marked by the chronotopes of a beauty parlour and a Greek island respectively.

Whether conscious or subconscious, implicit or explicit, the ekphrastic beholder’s search is a hunt through the intellectual lens of the ekphrastic gaze as his/her hunting weapon, i.e. a search guided by the hunter’s knowledge. The knowledge that underlies the position and authority of the ekphrastic beholder as such a hunter is defined by adjectives – and comparative adjectives in particular – as “a *nobler* knowledge” (Hall, *Electric Michelangelo* 88; emphasis added), “*more challenging* stuff” (Welsh, *Blade Artist* 76; emphasis added), “some *real* knowledge of art history” (Fowles, “Ebony Tower” 20; emphasis added). In this sense, it is a kind of knowledge that is intellectually superior and socioculturally privileged with regard to its accessibility, a kind of knowledge that is embedded in the Western – and particularly British – consciousness as inherently elitist and axiomatic: a knowledge of art.

The protagonists of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* or “The Chinese Lobster” never miss a chance to show off their seeming familiarity with art. Miss Brodie skips from talking about Cimabue to Mussolini, from talking about the Pope to Botticelli, and from Botticelli to her own dress (44). The protagonist of “The Chinese Lobster” Peregrine Diss spices up his speech with the French titles of Matisse’s paintings.¹³ As the narrator of *Headlong* explains the topic of his research to their unsophisticated neighbours in the countryside, he drops – without any further explanations – the names of such Early Netherlandish painters as Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden as well as the names of Max Friedländer and Erwin Panofsky, the scholars who contributed to these painters’ canonisation (25-26).¹⁴ As an aesthete, the protagonist of *The Line of Beauty*, in his turn, does not conceal feeling that he “own[s], all ironically and art-historically,” (161) St Paul’s Cathedral and its artworks more than his lover’s less sophisticated yet more religious mother, “a mere credulous Christian” (161).

The demonstration of such intellectual power reinforces the ekphrastic

¹³ See Byatt, “Chinese Lobster” 111, 115, 121, 131.

¹⁴ See, for example, Max Friedländer’s *From Van Eyck to Bruegel* (1956), edited and annotated by F. Grossmann, translated by Marguerite Kay, Phaidon / Cornell UP, 1981 and Erwin Panofsky’s “Jan Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini* Portrait” in *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, vol. 64, no. 372, 1934, pp. 117-27.

beholder's authoritative supremacy as to a privileged access to truth. More specifically, the Bloody Ruskin's connoisseurial authority is rooted in his/her authoritative knowledge of the edifice of the socioculturally legitimised canon as the cornerstone of art. This canon is characterised by two features: Eurocentrism and androcentrism.¹⁵ After all, even female beholders discuss the art of Van Gogh and Matisse in Byatt's works. And they demonstrate their familiarity with and reverence for the art of Giotto and Titian in Murdoch's novels. And whether it is Botticelli's art that is referred to in *The Magus* as an epitomisation of female beauty (118) or Millais's Victorian painting that ultimately (mis)guides the beholder's perception of India's postcolonial reality in *Midnight's Children*, the Western – and primarily European – male-centred traditional canon is respected, even idolised by the ekphrastic beholder as an authoritative source of fundamental truths, a key to understanding the world around him/her as well as his/her own place within it.¹⁶ The authority of the ekphrastic beholder, thus, becomes the patriarchal authority of the Western art-historical canon per se. Addressed by John Berger with regard to its use in advertising to affect the consumer as a beholder, “. . . a work of art . . . suggests a cultural authority, a form of dignity, even of wisdom, which is superior to any vulgar material interest; an oil painting belongs to the cultural heritage; it is a reminder of what it means to be a cultivated European” (*Ways* 135).

While direct encounters with art contribute to the formation of the ekphrastic beholder's connoisseurial stance, his/her knowledge of the canon is fundamentally an ekphrastic or an ekphrastically motivated knowledge, i.e. the knowledge accumulated from written sources in art history and theory that shaped the canon of works of art and became part of the academic canon themselves. The expression that is employed in John Fowles's short story “The Ebony Tower” with regard to its protagonist is that the ekphrastic beholder is “encapsulated in book-knowledge, art as social institution” (109). Unsurprisingly, the written sources in art history and theory are equally Western- and

¹⁵ The term ‘Western-centric canon’ primarily refers here to the canon of Western Europe. However, it also implies a bias towards the canon of Western culture in general. For a discussion of the (de-)construction of the canon in modern consciousness, see, in particular, Jan Gorak's *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea*. Athlone, 1991.

At the same time, the particular focus on European artists within the corpus of analysed British postmodern narratives contrasts with other literatures. For instance, *The Goldfinch* by the American author Donna Tartt presents an ekphrastic image based on a reference to a Mexican painter Diego Rivera (320).

¹⁶ Cf. the struggle for authority between the Western and the Eastern canon in Eastern postmodern literatures: for example, the cross-cultural search for pictorial representations of the stories and myths of filicide and patricide as a search for truth about his life by the narrator of Orhan Pamuk's *The Red-Haired Woman* (134-36, 155-58).

male-dominated and offer an inherently patriarchal perspective on art and its history.¹⁷ Both intra- and extratextual beholders of British postmodern fiction are guided by the works of Giorgio Vasari and William Hogarth, Lawrence Gowing and William Orpen, Max Friedländer and Erwin Panofsky.

The Eurocentrism of the academic canon that contributes to the formation of the British postmodern ekphrastic beholder's gaze becomes evident when we look at other national literatures. Thus, for example, while the American protagonist of Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* demonstrates his familiarity with the European canon of art history and theory (e.g. the familiarity with William Hogarth and *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753); 508), he is particularly inspired by the "naked-lady book" (473), "Janson's fat and satisfying *History of Art*" (469) written by the Russian-born German-American art historian H.W. Janson. As we know, Janson's *History of Art* provides information not only about European art, but also North American and Middle Eastern art.¹⁸

Nevertheless, when the protagonist of "The Ebony Tower" looks at his host's new canvas, he demonstrates his knowledge of art history because he was taught to search for art-historical connections when looking at a painting: "There was this time an immediate echo (because one had learned to look for them) of the Breughel family" (29). In her turn, when the protagonist of A.S. Byatt's short story "Medusa's Ankles" is lured into a Matissean beauty salon,¹⁹ the reader learns that she is familiar not only with Matisse's art itself, but also with the scholarly writings of Lawrence Gowing (9), a prominent English artist, art historian, and curator who wrote extensively on art history and specifically on such European painters as Hogarth, Matisse, and Vermeer.²⁰

The protagonists of Barnes's *Metroland* "graduat[e] from the *National Geographic*" (79) as well as from more art-related books, such as "Sir William Orpen's *History of Art*" (24). Hall's Electric Michelangelo possesses his master's "old art history books with splitting spines" (110), which he will pass on to his own apprentice later, while the young Timothy Harcombe of Ackroyd's *English Music* is brought up by his father not only on general art-historical volumes but also on books with the exclusively

¹⁷ For more detail on patriarchy and the traditional discourse of art history, see, especially, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (1982), edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, Routledge, 2018.

¹⁸ See such chapters in Janson's *History of Art* (1962) as "Prehistoric Art in Europe and North America", "Egyptian Art", "Ancient Near Eastern Art", etc.

¹⁹ Cf. Doris Breimm's argument that "[t]he activity of 'seeing' . . . becomes synonymous with 'understanding'" (*Representation* 52) with regard to Byatt's *The Matisse Stories*.

²⁰ See, for example, Lawrence Gowing's *Hogarth* (1971). Tate Gallery, 1971, *Matisse* (1979). Oxford UP, 1979, and *Vermeer* (1952). U of California P, 1997.

British subject matter including a book with reproductions of the engravings of William Hogarth (22). In Murdoch's *The Sandcastle*, the protagonist's familiarity with Vasari is implied in her retelling of the anecdote about Giotto's 'perfect circle' – the anecdote originating in Vasari's *Lives* (Murdoch, *Sandcastle* 50; Vasari, *Lives* 1: 102-03). Once again, the familiarity with "the testimony of Vasari" as "an essential (*the* essential) component in the transmission of the artwork to posterity" (73) is demonstrated by the narrator of John Lanchester's *The Debt to Pleasure*.

Such a monopoly position of the canon is rooted in the Western discourse of art education in general and in the British discourse in particular. The privilege of the so-called truth offered by art remains fundamentally a sociocultural privilege of education. The sociocultural link between them is most vividly illustrated by John Berger's example of visits to the museum in his *Ways of Seeing* (1972). Drawing upon statistics by Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel in *L'Amour de l'Art* (1969), Berger indicates that most people continue to treat museums and their mysteries as inaccessible for the general public insofar as they "believe that original masterpieces belong to the preserve (both materially and spiritually) of the rich" (*Ways* 24).

At the same time, in line with the established pedagogical patterns, the cultivation of the ekphrastic beholder's knowledge of art and the authority of his/her connoisseurial stance in general are contingent on his/her relationship with the authoritative figure of the master: a relationship with the canonical artist from the past on the one hand, and with an art teacher as a mediator on the other. Thus, in the introduction to the collection of scholarly essays investigating the role of the master in art education, Matthew C. Potter argues that the tradition of art education, which has evolved on the British Isles from the European teaching practices over the last two centuries, is based on two pedagogical patterns: the relationship between the art student and the "Old Master" (1) and that between the art student and "the studio 'master'" (1) as "an important conduit for the distribution of the ideas and forms of the Old Master" (1).²¹

The importance of this pedagogical pattern in art education is particularly underscored in *The Electric Michelangelo* by the tattoo artist who takes on a young boy,

²¹ On the general problematisation of the phenomenon of institutional promotion of the canon as part of the student curriculum that can be traced back to antiquity, see, in particular, Jan Gorak's *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea*. Athlone, 1991. Cf. Francis Haskell's statement that we live in the age of "anarchy – a readiness to admire the arts of all periods and civilizations" as opposed to earlier ages and specifically the eighteenth century preoccupied with the idea of establishing "fixed canons" (5).

the future Electric Michelangelo, as his apprentice. Moreover, this teaching practice appears in contrast with the practices established at the school as a social institution:

He's learning bugger-all at school. I quizzed the boy myself not a week ago and he's sorely lacking in a nobler knowledge. Do you know the lad had never even heard of Leonardo da-bloody-Vinci? Eh? Eh? Hogarth, Rembrandt. Not a noddle. Michel-bloody-angelo! Masters, all of them. Passing their gifts down to the next generation through which honourable system, incidentally? The apprentice system. You can't have a craftsman doesn't ken these things [*sic*]. It's like having a magistrate doesn't know the law, then where would we be? The poor lad's been disadvantaged already Reeda. Sorely disadvantaged. (88)

While the beholders of *The Electric Michelangelo* or *The Blade Artist* have not attended Oxford or Cambridge university the way the protagonists of *The Frederica Quartet*, *The Line of Beauty* or *The Magus* did,²² they, too, find themselves learning about art within the model of a teacher-student relationship. Thus, *The Electric Michelangelo*'s fourteen-year-old Cyril Parks is apprenticed to the tattoo artist Eliot Riley, while the minds of the young protagonists of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* are shaped by their teacher Miss Brodie. *The Blade Artist*'s Frank "Franco" Begbie takes part in an art therapy programme while in prison.

Within the sociocultural poetics and politics of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction the teacher-student relationship is a post-ironic relationship that lays the foundation for the ekphrastic beholder's (pseudo-)connoisseurial rather than genuinely connoisseurial stance. The authority of the Western canon and the Old Master in particular is simultaneously reasserted and distorted as the subjective and biased authority of the teacher as a mediator.

Thus, the understanding of art as instilled in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*'s students by their teacher is based on her explicitly biased views supported by personal anecdotes rather than factual knowledge:

'Meantime I will tell you about my last summer holiday in Egypt... I will tell you about care of the skin, and of the hands... about the Frenchman I met in the train to Biarritz... and I must tell you about the Italian paintings I saw. Who is the greatest Italian painter?'

'Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie.'

²² The protagonists of A.S. Byatt's *Frederica Quartet* go to Cambridge and Oxford (*Still Life* 133-34; *Virgin* 17). The reader learns that the protagonists of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (9) and John Fowles's *The Magus* (17) have attended Oxford.

‘That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favourite.’ (11)

While Miss Brodie herself believes that her unorthodox teaching method of “a leading out of knowledge” challenges the traditional method of “putting in of something that is not there” (36), she does precisely the opposite and abuses her authority to promote her dogmatic – yet undoubtedly subjective – views, especially on the canon.

At the same time, what *The Electric Michelangelo*’s skilled, yet hard-drinking and abusive Riley calls “a nobler knowledge” (88) is shared by him with his apprentice largely in the form of haphazard, decontextualised, and half-fictitious anecdotes about Raphael and Rossetti, Rembrandt and Courbet, Blake and Caravaggio, Van Gogh and Bernini (69; 74; 88; 116-17). In his turn, the narrator of Ackroyd’s *English Music* grows up educated by his father on what he refers to as “‘English music’, by which he meant not only music itself but also English history, English literature and English painting” (21). As his father is skipping from one work and subject to another, all of them merge in the narrator’s imagination into “one world which [Timothy believes] to be still living” (21). As we see, this results in his densely intertextual and intermedial dreams/visions which incorporate and draw upon all the knowledge gained through his father.

Similarly unreliable – albeit admittedly so – is the knowledge of *The Debt to Pleasure*’s narrator who, only semi-ironically, recurs to Giorgio Vasari’s anecdotal account of Michelangelo’s life and art to underpin his own aesthetic views. In particular, Lanchester’s murderous (pseudo-)connoisseur recounts the tale of a snowman made by the Italian artist for Piero de’ Medici that Vasari described as “very beautiful” (Lanchester 73)²³ and that “another writer [Anthony Powell – N.G.] . . . called ‘the finest snowman on record’” (Lanchester 73).

The Blade Artist’s art therapist Melanie Francis evidently not only helps the imprisoned Frank “Franco” Begbie to unleash his creativity, but also inspires him to work on his dyslexia and eventually to “read more challenging stuff. Philosophy and art history. The biographies of the great painters” (76). However, he launches into such accumulation of ekphrastic knowledge on account of his interest in the art therapist rather than in knowledge per se: “To learn, yes, but also to impress her” (76). Thus, while Begbie puts on the mask of a “con-turned-artist” (81) for his beloved, his judgements in matters of taste will remain not only aesthetically, but also morally, dubious.

²³ For Vasari’s account of this anecdote, see Vasari, *Lives* 5: 235.

Mediated by a teacher or through books on art history and theory, the knowledge of art that shapes the ekphrastic beholder's connoisseurial authority is intrinsically destabilised. Whether he/she assimilates art knowledge from the fictionalised anecdotes told by Eliot Riley or the canonised anecdotes recorded by Giorgio Vasari, from the authoritative and yet subjective voices of Miss Brodie or Max Friedländer, the ekphrastic anti-hero emerges as a fount of largely anecdotal and biased (pseudo-)knowledge mock-crowned and decrowned within the chronotope of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest.

As we shall see later, *Headlong's* art-historical search is mainly guided by the ideas of the German museum curator and scholar Max Friedländer. Here, however, I should like to draw attention to the way such spatialisation of art-historical studies echoes Friedländer's comparison of the art historian to a traveller whose perspective is inescapably determined by the sociocultural and aesthetic chronotope of his own contemporary reality:

The art historian resembles at times the traveller who has been everywhere, is knowledgeable wherever he goes, but is nowhere at home. The fixed and inalienable point to which we always return, is and remains our home in time and space.

Every age receives fresh eyes. The Italian sees things differently from the German. (*On Art* 155)

Even though the beholder does not see it this way, his/her epistemic search never leaves the realm, the safe harbour of art: the "territory" (Frayn, *Headlong* 14) of art-historical studies, the "cemetery" of the art gallery with its canonically accepted masterpieces rather than any contemporary "live stuff" (Barnes, *Metroland* 165). By and large, the ekphrastic beholder places his/her trust in the canon-oriented knowledge of art, but it betrays his/her trust due to its remoteness:

'I don't know. I used to think I knew. I love all of it as much as I ever did: I read, I go to the theatre, I like pictures...'

'Dead cunts' pictures.'

'Old pictures, OK. I like it all; I always did; I just don't know whether there's any sort of direct link between it and me – whether the connection we force ourselves to believe in is really there.' (Barnes, *Metroland* 165)

The ekphrastic beholder comes to grasp the stagnation and even degradation of his/her generation at large – the understanding that the protagonist of "The Ebony Tower"

arrives at: “David and his generation, and all those to come, could only look back, through bars, like caged animals, born in captivity, at the old green freedom” (109). The ekphrastic beholder poses the question “What can you actually say in favour of the National Gallery?” and receives the answer: “Shit all, I agree” (Barnes, *Metroland* 166). By and large, the truth of the ekphrastic beholder is the double-edged truth of “the pretence of authority” (Fowles, “Ebony Tower” 111) – constructed not only through the (pseudo-)intellectual lens, but also on his/her (pseudo-)moral retina. The Bloody Ruskin of British postmodern fiction does, after all, have blood on his/her hands: the figurative blood of art and the literal blood of humans.

4.2.2 On the (Pseudo-)‘Moral Retina’ of the Ekphrastic Beholder’s Gaze: The ‘Con-Turned-Artist’ of British Postmodern Fiction

In his satirical essay “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” first published in 1827, Thomas De Quincey introduces the reader of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* to the so-called “Society of Connoisseurs in Murder” who “meet and criticise [murder] as they would a picture, statue, or other work of art” (8). Drawing on Immanuel Kant’s conceptualisation of aesthetics, De Quincey’s ekphrasis echoes Edmund Burke’s discussion of the sublime and underscores the post-mortem (pseudo-)connoisseurial response of those interested in murder rather than the (pseudo-)connoisseurial attitude of the murderer him-/herself. The English essayist’s humorous take on the aestheticisation of violence lays the foundation for an aesthetics of murder and establishes a paradoxical connection between murder, art, and gaze.²⁴ This connection is then explored, challenged, and subverted through the ekphrastic gaze within the poetics and politics of postmodern fiction.

Thus, this chapter aims to answer the following questions: How is the ekphrastic beholder (de-)constructed as a murderous (pseudo-)connoisseur on the thematic level of the narrative in British postmodern fiction? What are the aesthetic and ethical, sociocultural and psychological implications of murder as the quintessence of the ekphrastic alteration of reality, i.e. murder as what has long since been satirised by De Quincey as a fine art?

To begin with, the conceptualisation of the ekphrastic beholder as Irvine

²⁴ For a discussion of the interplay between art, violence, and voyeurism in romanticism and postmodernism as well as the role of De Quincey’s essays in the establishment of an aesthetic perspective on murder, see Joel Black’s *The Aesthetics of Murder: A Study in Romantic Literature and Contemporary Culture*. The Johns Hopkins UP, 1991.

Welsh's "con-turned-artist" (*Blade Artist* 81) or a murderously inclined (pseudo-)connoisseur is based on the assumption that the idea of destruction – whether literal or figurative – is always implied in life's imitation of art. Whether it is a revelation of the secret ekphrastic geometry of reality or an ekphrastic surgery figuratively performed on the body, the beholder's modification of the object of his/her gaze entails destructive interventions into its actual state. Such reasoning draws upon Dario Gamboni's challenge to the conventional understanding of the creation and deprecation of a work of art as contrasting processes, which the scholar presents in his comprehensive study on iconoclasm and vandalism. Gamboni suggests that the process of artistic creation is always historiographically contingent on interventions and modifications (e.g. conservation treatment of works of art; Gamboni 25).

Thus, in Sarah Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo*, the tattoo artist's creation of his beloved, Grace, as "[his] Sistine Chapel" (292) is inseparable from the damage as well as intrusive interventions every work of art is inevitably prone to. The alteration of Grace's tattooed body burnt by sulphuric acid thrown onto her by a religious fanatic – makes her look like "a fresco with a jar of paint stripper knocked over her" (306). It echoes, in particular, the damage caused to the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel by cracks and saltpeter as observed as early as 1547 by Paolo Giovio.²⁵

In her turn, the protagonist of A.S. Byatt's short story "Medusa's Ankles" becomes acutely distressed by the replacement of the Matisse print, which has initially lured her inside the beauty salon, and by the salon's general renovation. Though it looks fashionable and smart, the new design inspires her mental association of "[d]ried blood and instruments of slaughter" (15). The loss of the Matissean "deceptive rosy haze" (16), in particular, makes the middle-aged linguist face the reality of her age and triggers off her destruction of the new decorations. Her wrath reinstates the Matisse-ness of the beauty salon, turning it into a tableau characterised by Matissean colours, especially the colours of his *Pink Nude*:

It was a strange empty battlefield, full of glittering fragments and sweet-smelling rivulets and puddles of venous-blue and fuchsia-red unguents, patches of

²⁵ As quoted in Pierluigi De Vecchi's *Michelangelo: The Vatican Frescoes*, Paolo Giovio points out in a letter to Giorgio Vasari dated May 7, 1547, that "Michelangelo's chapel . . . is being consumed by saltpeter and cracks" (qtd. in De Vecchi 17; ellipsis in original). De Vecchi elaborates that Michelangelo's frescoes were particularly susceptible to destruction "due to their position: in addition to the deposits of dust and soot from candles, lamps, and braziers, vast whitish stains of salification caused by the seepage of rainwater (especially after fire damaged the roof in December 1544) soon appeared on the frescoed surfaces" (17).

crimson-streaked foam and odd intense spills of orange henna or cobalt and copper. (26)

An inclination towards the physical destruction of the object of the ekphrastic gaze becomes integral to the ekphrastic beholder's play with reality as part of the (de-)construction of his/her (pseudo-)connoisseurial stance. Here, it is possible to outline several major interrelated trends: the motif of violence in a work of art, the motif of the destruction of a work of art, and the motif of an aesthetically motivated and ekphrastically actualised destruction – murder – of a human being.

It is essential here to note that ekphrastic destruction often acquires chronotopically architectonic functions in the organisation of the plot. Thus, the plot in British postmodern fiction often draws upon the iconography of art-historical motifs. Particularly recurrent are mythological motifs of violence and abduction introduced into British fiction through art. In Michael Frayn's *Headlong*, the narrator's abduction and ultimate destruction of the object of his obsession, a hypothetical Bruegel, imitates the motif of the kidnapping and rape of Helen of Troy depicted in the novel's other painting, Luca Giordano's *The Rape of Helen*. In Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea*, the protagonist's unsuccessful abduction of the love of his life as part of his attempts to free her from her husband playfully echoes the iconography of the novel's central painting, Titian's *Perseus and Andromeda*.

At the same time, from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to the postmodern narratives examined in this study, the architecture of an art-related plot often pivots on the damage to or destruction of a work of art. Thus, it might either trigger the narrative action to unfold (e.g. in Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*) or correspond to the climax/dénouement of the plot (e.g. in Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, Michael Frayn's *Headlong*, Sarah Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo*, Iain Pears's *The Raphael Affair*, and Irvine Welsh's *The Blade Artist*).

Thus, in Aridjis's novel *Asunder*, the story of Mary Richardson's suffragette attack on Diego Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus*²⁶ guides the gradual collapse of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial world of the novel's protagonist, a guard at the National Gallery. Essential here is the underlying sociocultural ideology which suggests that the 'life' of a work of art is more valuable than the life of a human being. In *Asunder*, this motif is explored from a feminist perspective with regard to Richardson's attack on

²⁶ For Richardson's account of her attack on the painting see the chapter "The Rokeby Venus" in her autobiography *Laugh a Defiance* (1953), George Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953, pp. 165-73.

Velázquez's painting:

With her cleaver she had attacked flesh far more treasured than any slab of meat, and that was the point, she later said, to destroy the most beautiful woman in mythology in order to protest the imprisonment of another 'beautiful' woman, Emmeline Pankhurst, a fellow suffragette. (28)

In their turn, the ekphrastic beholders of Julian Barnes's *Metroland* arrive at the metaphorical death/destruction of art, especially that of its canon. "Quite right: no point in looking for live stuff in a cemetery. Might as well look at the dead fucks" (165), concludes the friend of *Metroland*'s narrator with regard to the National Gallery where, as youngsters, they used to hunt with binoculars for people's reactions to paintings. The (pseudo-)connoisseurial status of the narrator of Michael Frayn's *Headlong* as well as the potential Bruegelness of the painting discovered by him are forever ensured by the painting's destruction before its provenance can be established.

A particularly intertextual reference to Oscar Wilde's ekphrasis in Irvine Welsh's *The Blade Artist* not only contextualises ekphrastic violence within particularly British ekphrastic tradition but also helps to shift the focus towards the (pseudo-)connoisseur's second victim. Simultaneously a postmodern version of Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Welsh's psychopathic protagonist manages to live a double life insofar as his violence seemingly finds explicit expression only in his art: "He is thinking of his heads of actors, and specific mutilations on them. Of his canvases, those attic versions of Dorian Gray, drenched in blood red" (117).

The essence of the ekphrastic beholder as a (pseudo-)connoisseur is most poignantly underscored by way of the second type of this irreversible destruction of the object of his/her gaze, i.e. violence against a human being framed as artistic activity.

First, it relates to the motif of aestheticising violence by means of its – often post-ironical – explication through an art-related reference. Thus, the narrator of Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* and his brother-in-law, Francis Marloe, arrive at the Baffins' house after his friend and rival Arnold Baffin's telephone call about his possible accidental murder of his wife Rachel. When they do, the novel's protagonist sarcastically visualises the scene of domestic violence as a painterly crucifixion scene with Rachel as "a limp disintombed Christ figure" (37). He also sees the faces of Francis and Arnold as "faces in a crucifixion crowd which represent the painter and his friend" and with Francis's face being "bright with malign curiosity" (30). Similarly morbidly aestheticised is the violence of the Second World War in Conchis's ekphrastic

rendering of disembowelled naked bodies of Greek villagers executed by the Nazis in John Fowles's *The Magus*: "As I came to the square that was the first thing I saw. Three bodies hung from the branches, pale in the shadow, as monstrous as Goya etchings" (437).

Second, violence as an artistic activity often appears simultaneously in parallel with and in contrast to an assault on an actual work of art. Thus, the narrator of John Lanchester's *The Debt to Pleasure* suggests an "aesthetic ideology" (68): "the aesthetics of absence, of omission" (69). While murder as a creation of absence is juxtaposed with an actual work of art as a creation of presence, both activities are seen as being equally "creative", "visionary", and "assertive of the self" (226). Moreover, murder is considered to be on a par with a work of art insofar as an artist is judged by what he/she does *not* create: "a painter by his abandoned and unattempted canvases, . . . a writer by his refusal to publish or indeed to inscribe" (69).

Curiously enough, Tarquin Winot's aesthetic theory is simultaneously actualised and challenged – if not mocked – by Luke Jennings's assassin Villanelle who stages a fake murder of the MI5 agent Eve Polastri. While Villanelle employs her ekphrastic gaze to create absence, she achieves that by constructing a vividly ekphrastic crime scene without actually murdering the victim:

. . . Villanelle surveys the flat. The place is as she found it, except for the bloody tableau in the main room, which looks just as she planned. She's particularly pleased with the clotted red-brown smear on the carpet, suggesting a bled-out corpse dragged away by the legs. As to what narrative will be constructed around this, she doesn't care. (*No Tomorrow* 243)

Another comparison is drawn in Irvine Welsh's *The Blade Artist*, in which the protagonist's murder of the criminal art collector is accompanied by the demolition of his art collection. Similarly to the aesthetic theorisation of *The Debt to Pleasure*'s Tarquin Winot, the Con-Turned-Artist's reasoning behind his actions relates to the ontological establishment of the aesthetic aspects of murder and the subversion of those of actual art objects. When his victim pleads with him not to destroy the paintings of Murdo Mathieson Tait, Begbie explains that "the fun is in the daein ay them. Ye dinnae really care what happens eftir they're done, you're already workin on the next yin, ay [*sic*]" (261).

The aesthetically explicated murder as a form of ekphrastic modification of reality taken to extremes is underpinned by the equally extreme and post-ironically

subversive mask of the (pseudo-)connoisseur. The disguises of Frayn's Martin Clay, Jennings's Villanelle, or Lanchester's Tarquin Winot become integral to the aesthetics of their morbid play with reality. Thus, when *Headlong*'s narrator decides to get hold of his neighbours' painting, he not only thinks of himself as a "confidence trickster" (110) and successful "deceiver" (372), but also briefly considers wearing a false beard and feigning a foreign accent while "constituting [himself] as the helpful authority" (52). In his turn, Lanchester's murderous food lover does alter his appearance in order to remain unseen by the couple he is stalking. In particular, he wears a "false moustache" (35), changes clothes and wigs (163). Jennings's lovable assassin Villanelle pretends to be interested in the arts, and in the opera in particular, while wearing different wigs, coloured contact lenses as well as chic clothes in order to approach her high-ranking targets (*Codename Villanelle* 26-34; *No Tomorrow* 26). At the same time, when she does not want to attract unnecessary attention, Villanelle puts on a "mask of normality" (*Codename Villanelle* 22), wears T-shirts and jeans, and distances herself from the world of art by pretending she works as a day-trader (6).

In that sense, whether it is *Headlong*'s false beard and a foreign accent or *Codename Villanelle*'s haute couture Valentino dress that establish – or would establish – the protagonist as a connoisseur, a disguise is employed as a means to manipulate sociocultural expectations, simultaneously maintaining and subverting them. The sociocultural subversiveness of the female killer's mask becomes particularly foregrounded in the television adaptation of Luke Jennings's books, the BBC America's *Killing Eve*. In the fourth episode of its second series, charming but deadly Villanelle wears a mockingly pink Bavarian dirndl and an equally extravagant plastic pig mask in order to lure her target who has a fetish for "farmyard animals" (00:12:30) in Amsterdam's red-light district (00:15:00-00:19:40). Not only does such a disguise mock its own sexist connotations as pointed out by the director of the episode Lisa Brühlmann (Bradley, "Craziest Murder"), but it also destabilises the established position of woman as an object – or rather a victim – of the male gaze and desire.

The post-irony of the ekphrastic beholder's mask – whether literal or figurative – relates to the fact that it mocks itself as a required accessory characteristic of the figure of the murderer in a work of fiction: it reveals rather than conceals. It is interesting to note here that the function of a mask as a means of revealing its wearer's true nature can be traced back to its role in the theatrical traditions of ancient Rome and Greece. "Already its earliest sources in Western civilisation mark the mask as closely connected

to the notion of the person,” we read in Efrat Tseëlon, “In the classical theatrical tradition of Greek [*sic*] and Rome the mask was used as identification of character, not as a deception or disguise” (4).

The image of a mask becomes one of the major metatextual indicators of the less than honourable intentions of both *The Debt to Pleasure*’s Tarquin Winot and *Headlong*’s Martin Clay within the framework of unreliable narration. The more conspicuous the mask put on by the ekphrastic beholder is, the more appalling his/her play with the observed appears to be, and the more revealing are the peculiar undercurrents of his/her psyche. The (pseudo-)connoisseurial mask becomes what the American psychiatrist Hervey M. Cleckley metaphorises in the title of his pioneering book on psychopathy as the “mask of sanity”: the mask that conceals and reveals a psychopathically inclined personality.

The psychopathic tendencies of the ekphrastic beholder are more often acknowledged extratextually rather than intratextually. Thus, *The Guardian* introduces John Lanchester’s Tarquin Winot as “a psychopathic gourmand” (Skidelsky, “John Lanchester”), while Irvine Welsh himself summarises his blade artist as “a psychopath with a knife” (qtd. in K. Smith, “Diary”). However, Luke Jennings’s Russian-born assassin Villanelle is diagnosed as a “psycho killer” (“Killing Eve”) not only by the author himself, but also intratextually, in line with medically established guidelines for measuring psychopathy: “I am mental. Have you seen the Hare psychopathy checklist? I’m off the scale” (Jennings, *No Tomorrow* 223).

Generally, however, the postmodern (pseudo-)connoisseur does not correspond to the clear-cut socioculturally stereotypical image of a psychopath as a violent and bloodthirsty criminal, but he/she often displays – whether implicitly or explicitly – a range of traits from Cleckley’s “clinical profile” of the psychopath, including:

1. Superficial charm and good “intelligence.”
2. Absence of delusions and other signs of irrational “thinking.”
3. Absence of “nervousness” or psychoneurotic manifestations.
4. Unreliability.
5. Untruthfulness and insincerity.
6. Lack of remorse or shame.
7. Inadequately motivated antisocial behavior.
8. Poor judgment and failure to learn by experience.
9. Pathologic egocentricity . . . (355-56)

More specifically, the murderous expert judge in matters of art can be categorised as David Kennedy Henderson's 'predominantly creative psychopath': a highly intelligent and unusually creative outcast. In particular, the British psychiatrist defines a predominantly creative psychopath with regard to his/her

genius as being associated with a state of mental imbalance, of heightened sensitivity, of disordered mental equilibrium due probably to the attempt to get square with reality and even more to dominate reality as a compensation for the inner unresolved conflicts which dominate conduct. (Henderson 112)²⁷

Fundamentally, the ekphrastic beholder's twisted and macabre – albeit undeniably genius – play with reality is motivated by his/her self-interest. But curiously enough, within the postmodern reality of individualism, the ekphrastic beholder's psychopathically explicated egoism makes him/her a member of society who, according to Robert J. Smith, is "the more truthful, or at least the more accurate, reader of the important values of culture than those who profess to abhor him" (114). This means that the gaze of the psychopathically inclined ekphrastic beholder of British postmodern fiction offers a better insight into sociocultural preconceptions and ideologies (cf. ch. 3 and ch. 5).

Nevertheless, the potential psychopathy of the ekphrastic beholder pivots on his/her distorted understanding of morality. Specifically, his/her "ethics" merge with and are sometimes ultimately replaced with aesthetics. Whether it is *The Blade Artist's* understanding of murder as art, *The Debt to Pleasure's* "aesthetics of absence" (69), or *Codename Villanelle's* aspiration towards a technically "violent, artistic kill" (160), the aesthetically charged rationale that justifies the Con-Turned-Artist's self-serving and antisocial play with reality establishes his/her morality as an aesthetically motivated (pseudo-)morality. In this sense, it concerns the ekphrastic beholder's (pseudo-)moral rather than purely "moral retina" (Ruskin, *Modern Painters* 2: 10).

Thus, *The Electric Michelangelo's* disfigurement of Grace's body covered in Cyril Parks's tattoos of eyes provides a rationale for Grace and Cy's blinding of Grace's assailant: "an eye for an eye, losing sight for lost sight" (319). More implicit is the ekphrastic beholder's (pseudo-)connoisseurial perception of homicide as an aesthetically justifiable act in Michael Frayn's *Headlong*. When the novel's narrator finds himself in a car crash with Laura Churt while trying to escape with the stolen hypothetical Bruegel, his first instinct is to ascertain the safety of the painting rather

²⁷ Cf. Robert J. Smith's *The Psychopath in Society*. Academic P, 1978.

than that of his accomplice. In line with the novel's unreliable narration, such prioritisation reveals the implied lack of empathy, a subliminally aesthetic and inherently sociocultural understanding of the disregard for human life in favour of art: "Each time I smile at her I'm remembering that it could be the picture instead of her that I'm looking at" (391).

The psychopathically inclined temperament of the Con-Turned-Artist is particularly revealed in his/her display of aesthetically motivated aggression. Whether psychopathically impulsive or premeditated, it is most poignantly expressed in the highly performative actualisation/execution of murder as an ekphrastic tableau mort (rather than a tableau vivant) – a "bloody tableau" (Jennings, *No Tomorrow* 243) – which mocks the canonically ethical understanding of art. Thus, the passage from Luke Jennings's *No Tomorrow* quoted above illustrates Villanelle's meticulously premeditated and performative arrangement of a crime scene as such a painterly tableau that is characterised by the profoundly artistic attention to colour and parallels the creation of the Matissean tableau in Byatt's "Medusa's Ankles". Its impulsive violence is equally suggestive of psychopathic undertones.

Once again, Villanelle's theatricalisation of murder as a tableau mort is further explored in the television series *Killing Eve*. In her pig mask and Bavarian dirndl, the assassin suspends her victim in the window of a brothel and flamboyantly guts him in front of a crowd of curiously onnlooking passers-by who think this is just a performance (00:17:40-00:19:40). Directly inspired by Jan de Baen's painting *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers* that Villanelle sees at Rijksmuseum prior to her mission, the visual appeal of murder is more important for our murderous (pseudo-)connoisseur than its narrativity. As with Villanelle's creation of a fake murder scene, she does not bother about "what narrative will be constructed around this" (*No Tomorrow* 243) insofar as it is done for the spectator, especially for the agent Eve Polastri. Nevertheless, one of the narratives that *can* be constructed around it is subversively feminist.

Such an understanding of ekphrastic murder as a performative act can be traced back to the theatricalisation of murder in the Roman Empire. As Joel Black recounts to us, Roman convicts were forced to play a role and were executed as part of a theatrical act (4). In postmodern discourse, we can see theatrically staged art-related violence thematised both in actual plays and novels about the theatre. For example, John Berger and Nella Bielski's entire play *Goya's Last Portrait* takes place on a cemetery (13). In its turn, A.S. Byatt's novel *Still Life* deals with a play about Van Gogh and Gauguin

written by one of its protagonists. In the novel, Alexander Wedderburn's play *The Yellow Chair* theatricalises/showcases the important moments of Van Gogh's tragic last years (including the violent scenes between him and Gauguin) and Van Gogh's death (377).

"Why did it happen, this mad act of Nature, this crazed human moment?" asks the omniscient narrator of Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* in his/her metafictionally art-historical discussion of Théodore Géricault's painting *The Raft of the Medusa*, "Well, at least it produced art. Perhaps, in the end, that's what catastrophe is for" (125). Ultimately, the ekphrastic beholder's morbid play with the object of his/her gaze is framed by the pathologically unreliable and yet aesthetically alluring and paradoxically truthful narration. Inherently psychopathic, such a mode of narration is a ploy to trick the extra- and metatextual observers into participating in such a flagrant ekphrastic spectacle, i.e. to construct their own narrative(s) around it. Inherently manipulative, it turns the reader into (pseudo-)connoisseurial accessories to ekphrastic murder. After all, as De Quincey suggests by quoting from Lactantius, "the hand which inflicts the fatal blow is not more deeply imbrued in blood than his who sits and looks on . . ." (9).

4.3 The Interplay between the Three Ekphrastic Gazes of Author, Character, and Reader

In her study on ekphrastic portraiture, A.S. Byatt explicates the phenomenon of writing as the author's appeal to the reader's imagination via verbal images:

I like to say, when talking about writing, 'Imagine a woman in a chair. Now imagine that she is about thirty and dark. Now imagine that she is plump, in a green velvet dress, with her breasts showing above a décolleté neckline. Now give her big brown eyes, long lashes and a necklace of emeralds. Make the chair Gothic and put a burgundy-coloured curtain behind.' Everyone who gets through this process will have a more and more precise visual image. They will resemble each other, but, I guess, not much. Everyone sees their own woman. Put in an emotional word – 'sulky', 'voluptuous', 'gentle', 'mean' – and there will be even more variants. Writers rely on the endlessly varying visual images of individual readers and on the constructive visualising work those readers do. This is the reason, I think, why I at least am very distressed to find publishers using photographs of real, identifiable people to represent my characters on the

covers of novels. It limits the readers' imaginations. (*Portraits* 1-2)

However, what does it mean when the author uses an intratextual voice – whether that of his/her fictional character or that of an omniscient narrator – in order to appeal to the reader's gaze via specifically ekphrastic verbal images? What kinds of relationships exactly are formed between the ekphrastic beholders situated at the various levels of discourse when the author asks the reader to imagine a woman characterised by a "Botticelli beauty" (Fowles, *Magus* 118) or a "Rubenesque form" (Carter, *Nights* 15) rather than simply by such epithets as 'gentle' or 'voluptuous' as in Byatt's example? Moreover, what is implied, especially socioculturally, when the reader's gaze is lured into fictional worlds by reprints of 'real, identifiable' works of art on book covers – for instance, by the details of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Ship of Fools*, Pieter Bruegel's *The Fall of Icarus* or Henri Matisse's *The Silence that Lives in Houses* – rather than the shots of 'real, identifiable people'?

Of course, the reading process remains a complex experience and it is essential to take into consideration the varied factors that contribute to it. Here, however, I should like to draw attention to the role of the readers' collective consciousness in their (de-)construction of meaning in a text. As opposed to individual consciousness in Émile Durkheim's terms of reference, collective/common consciousness constitutes a sociocultural construct and encompasses socially transmitted knowledge, traditions, values, and attitudes of humans as members of society. It refers to the "totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society" (Durkheim 63).

The readers' collective consciousness contributes to the establishment of what will possibly be thought and understood when the reader follows the gaze of the character and looks at what the character looks at, or rather looks at its ekphrastic depiction on the page of the author's book. The reader's collective consciousness helps to define what mental image will be conjured up in the reader's mind when he/she comes across, for example, the ekphrastic reference to Lily Montgomery's "Botticelli beauty" (118) in John Fowles's *The Magus* or Sophie Fevvers's "Rubenesque form" (15) in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*.

On the one hand, the reader's familiarity with the works of these painters, i.e. the reader's scope of extra- and pre-textual knowledge and experience that shapes his/her individual consciousness as opposed to the intratextual beholder's scope of knowledge, determines what image, what association the reader's gaze will evoke in his/her mind. While the reader's gaze is ultimately defined by the iconography of its extratextual

referent – Botticellian gentleness or Rubenesque voluptuousness rather than non-ekphrastic gentleness or voluptuousness – every reader will still “see[] their own woman” (Byatt, *Portraits* 2) as long as the author, as pointed out by A.S. Byatt in the passage quoted above, and the character rely on the reader to do so. As the narrator of John Lanchester’s *The Debt to Pleasure* echoes in the preface to his unconventional cookbook, “. . . well, perhaps I can leave that to the reader’s imagination” (2). The meaning of an ekphrastic incorporation appears to be unfixed and never singular insofar as there is more than one reader.

On the other hand, however, such an ekphrastic incorporation refers to a whole set of fixed sociocultural meanings, ideas, and ideologies. Within the collective consciousness of the reader as a maker of meaning, a Botticellian reference is socioculturally associated with the Western ideal of female beauty, while the ekphrastic epithet “Rubenesque” is characterised by established associations with a woman’s sensuous plumpness. More specifically, it is very likely that the first association to spring to the reader’s mind will be the beauty of Sandro Botticelli’s Venus from his *The Birth of Venus* and the voluptuousness of the figures of Peter Paul Rubens’s Graces from *The Three Graces* and not some other less well-known, but, perhaps, more iconographically appropriate (within the context of such an ekphrastic reference) pictures. This is determined by the canonical role of these particular paintings within the Western intellectual tradition and, thus, within the reader’s cultural, or rather collective, consciousness. As articulated by the narrator of Michael Frayn’s *Headlong*, certain artworks “find some kind of universal and enduring fame” (57). Moreover, “[t]hey become part of the common currency of names and images and stories that a whole culture takes for granted” (57). Thus, when Frayn’s narrator proceeds to exemplify his point by alluding to the iconography of specific works of art without naming them, the reader is assumed to be able to immediately recognise these works because this art-related knowledge is embedded in his/her collective consciousness:

It happened with one faintly smiling Tuscan woman, one greatly amused Dutchman. It happened with a vase of Provençal sunflowers and a couple tenderly embraced in a marble kiss. It was happening already in classical antiquity, with a statue by Praxiteles of the Aphrodite of Cnidus. (57)

Moreover, the trust in the authority of a work of art within the collective consciousness of the Western-oriented reader allows the author to suggest the required associations into the reader’s mind already at the extratextual, or rather paratextual level of

discourse. After all, the reader of *The Matisse Stories* is ultimately lured, or, perhaps, even tricked into reading Matissean images and motifs into Byatt's narratives because of the title of the collection as well as the reproductions of Matisse's works on the covers of some editions. Indeed, as the reviews left on such a social cataloguing website as Goodreads confirm, at least some readers were motivated to buy and read this particular collection of short stories because of the title and the cover. Similarly, the fragment of Bruegel's painting *The Fall of Icarus* on the cover of the Faber edition of Frayn's novel *Headlong* aims to invite the reader to participate in the postmodern play between the ekphrastic gazes in the (de-/re-)construction of the novel's central painting as a Bruegel. In the Hamish Hamilton edition of Peter Ackroyd's *English Music*, the reader's understanding of the protagonist's particularly painterly dreams is guided by a fragment from Hogarth's *The Rake Progress*, Plate 8 (248) and the reproduction of Gainsborough's *Study for a Group Portrait of a Musical Party* (302). The reprints of these pictures precede the narrator's visions in Chapters 12 and 14 respectively.

Supported by the images of painterly still lives on the cover of the Vintage edition of A.S. Byatt's *Still Life*, the title of the second novel of *The Frederica Quartet* inspires the reader to read – or rather to look at – the whole novel as a visual work of art and not a verbal work of fiction. Reminiscent of Magritte's famous picture *The Treachery of Images* – the picture of a pipe that states that “This is not a pipe” – the ekphrastic self-referential metamessage in the title implying that “This is not a novel” hints at a treachery of words: the possible treachery of words in general, but primarily the words that are not aesthetically evocative, i.e. ekphrastic. This idea as part of Byatt's own set of principles indicated in the quote above is mediated to the reader via the novel's protagonist Alexander who suggests that if a writer “wishes to share a vision of [something specific] he must exclude and evoke” (*Still Life* 199) through visually expressive epithets.

The author's play with the ekphrastic gaze of the reader as a bearer of Western-centric ideas, attitudes, and knowledge is particularly interesting within the context of the postcolonial novel. In the postcolonial novel, the interplay between the gazes of author, character, and reader arises as an intercultural struggle rather than a dialogue insofar as the postcolonial author uses the ekphrastic gaze of his/her protagonist in order to subvert the reader's – arguably (pseudo-)connoisseurial – orientation towards the authority of Western iconography.

So subchapter 4.3 reconsiders the relationships established between the

ekphrastic beholders situated at the various levels of discourse and the role of the reader's ekphrastic gaze in particular. The study draws on the examples from the following British works of fiction: Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* (1992), Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989), A.S. Byatt's novel *Still Life* (1985) and her collection of short stories *The Matisse Stories* (1993), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), John Fowles's novel *The Magus* (1965) and his short story "The Ebony Tower" (1974), Michael Frayn's *Headlong* (1999), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), John Lanchester's *The Debt to Pleasure* (1996), Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), Gregory Norminton's *The Ship of Fools* (2001), and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981).

4.3.1 Following in the Footsteps of Author and Character: The 'Scholarly' and 'Alert' Reader of British Postmodern Fiction

The fifth chapter of Julian Barnes's metafictional and metahistorical novel *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* appears to invite the reader's gaze to join the gaze of its omniscient narrator in the (de-/re-)construction of Théodore Géricault's painting *The Raft of the Medusa*, its meaning(s), the history of the painting, and the historical narrative in the painting. As the chapter's recurrently appearing collective pronoun 'we' suggests, such an invitation seemingly puts the reader's gaze on the same level with that of the narrator: "What did he paint, then? Well, what does it look as if [*sic*] he painted? Let us reimagine our eye into ignorance. We scrutinize 'Scene of Shipwreck' with no knowledge of French naval history" (130).

But if the reader looks closer, he/she may discover that the novel's first-person plural personal pronoun can be understood as being exclusive rather than inclusive of the reader. It might refer to the narrator and his/her author-creator as opposed to, rather than considered together with, the reader. In his/her turn, the reader is not only excluded from participating in the workings of their "two eyes, ignorant and informed" (132), but his/her gaze is deemed ultimately inferior to those of the narrator and the author as long as the reader's presence is implied in the narrator's use of the pronoun 'you': "You'd never, for instance, guess that the Father and Son are an attenuated cannibalistic motif, would you?" (132).

So, this chapter primarily tackles the following questions: To what extent is the reader's (de-/re-)construction of meaning through his/her ekphrastic gaze guided by the author and/or/through the character? More importantly, to what extent does the reader

allow him-/herself to be guided by such puppeteers without lapsing into pseudo-connoisseurship? What can we say about the reader as a participant in this postmodern play between the ekphrastic gazes of author, character, and reader in the (de-/re-)construction of postmodern meaning? Is he/she an actual reader or, rather, a sociocultural construct of the reader as someone who is addressed by Peter Ackroyd as a “scholarly reader” and an “alert reader” (*English Music* n. pag.) in the “Acknowledgements” section to his novel *English Music*? What is, then, the role of his/her sociocultural background?

The dynamic between the ekphrastic beholders situated at the various levels of discourse is determined by the construction of the self-reflexive illusion of a continuity between their respective perceptual and cognitive spaces. This relates to two major factors: the alignment of the reader’s gaze with that of the intratextual beholder and the superimposition of the fictional perceptual space upon the extratextual one and vice versa. The reader follows the gaze situated within the fictional reality and sees, or rather imagines that he/she sees, what the intratextual ekphrastic beholder sees: Botticellian women or Hogarthian men, Van-Goghian sceneries or Cézannian food objects, or the paintings themselves – the ones the reader has seen and the exclusively fictional ones he/she will never see. Moreover, whether implicitly or explicitly, the reader is often invited to follow in the protagonist’s footsteps and to recreate his/her aesthetic experience at the extratextual level of discourse.

Thus, in general, the reader is implicitly encouraged to consider certain aspects of his/her own extratextual reality in light of the ekphrastic formulae proposed by the gaze of an intratextual observer: to regard beauty as Botticellian or Hogarthian, to think of colours as Matissean or Van-Goghian. This motif simultaneously echoes and subverts the aesthetic model embedded in the Western consciousness: the aesthetic association of Venice with John Ruskin’s ekphrastic vision of this city as presented by the art critic in *The Stones of Venice* (1851) and the collective desire to re-enact the experience of seeing Venice through Ruskin’s eyes. “Like many others,” confirms Julian Barnes in an article for *The New Yorker*, “I’ve regularly taken Ruskin’s ‘The Stones of Venice’ with me to Venice, and regularly failed to read a word of it there. That reader’s hoped-for matching of text to place frequently disappoints” (Barnes, “Remembering”).

In a similar way, though in fiction, the reader of A.S. Byatt’s *Still Life* is implicitly motivated to re-enact Van Gogh’s experience of travelling to Provence “with precise aesthetic expectations” (74):

He [Van Gogh – N.G.] expected to see ‘Japanese’ subjects, the colours of Monticelli, the forms of Cézanne and Renoir, the southern light lauded by Gauguin as a mystic necessity. He saw all these things, as he expected them. (74)

However, the reader is inspired to build upon Van Gogh’s experience and to recognise the respective Van-Goghian iconography of the object of the gaze rather than the iconography of Monticelli, Cézanne, Renoir, or Gauguin as seen by Van Gogh. The reader is inspired to follow Byatt’s fictional ekphrastic beholders rather than Van Gogh: “Provence is as he painted it, we use his images as icons by which we recognise certain things, the cypresses above all, the olives, . . . the light itself” (74).

At the same time, the direct appeal to the reader’s gaze is most often conveyed through personal pronouns and words of perception. Thus, addressed by one of its narrators, Oliver, the reader of Julian Barnes’s polyphonic novel *Talking it Over* is invited to follow the movements of Oliver’s eye as he watches his beloved work on restoring a painting. Moreover, the reader is also given advice on what to do if he/she ever faced the problem of having to remove faeces of flies from the surface of a painting: “The solvents listed above, you might care to know, make no impress on *mouche* excrement, so when confronted by this problem in your own home life use sputum or ammonia, and if that fails you must pick the droppings off with a scalpel” (119).

The reader of Gregory Norminton’s *The Ship of Fools* is motivated – or rather invited – to consider the whole novel as an ekphrastic narrativisation of Hieronymus Bosch’s painting *The Ship of Fools*. This happens through the conspicuous appeal to his/her visual sense by its seemingly omniscient narrator who retrospectively frames the novel as such in its very last line: “Let me describe it to you” (277). “Well, who am I talking to now?” echoes the narrator of Michael Frayn’s *Headlong* as he identifies the audience that he addresses, “*You*, yes. In the Reading Room with me, occupying my chair. Who are you? You’re almost as elusive as Bruegel. How much do you know already? How much do I have to explain?” (143).

The reader’s establishment of the limitations of the intratextual ekphrastic beholder’s perceptual space is often made explicit and is seemingly facilitated through an autodiegetic – albeit unreliable – narration. One example is the direct invitation of the reader to follow the narrator of Michael Frayn’s *Headlong* to the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Frayn’s Martin Clay guides the reader’s gaze around the museum’s

so-called “Bruegel Gallery” (Gallery X):

When you find yourself at last before the *Hunters*, as I did on a hot summer’s afternoon seven years ago, having another of my life-changing *coups de foudre*, you’re not looking at this one work alone. Turn your head, and there are Bruegels on every wall; you’re in a room which contains about a third of all his known paintings, a room in which every gilt frame is a window looking out on to a different aspect of his world. (59)

Moreover, the protagonist specifically draws upon his own retrospectively prophetic encounter with the authentic Bruegels that chronologically precedes and arguably defines his encounter with a hypothetical masterpiece on his neighbours’ estate in the countryside: “. . . [T]hat hour in the Bruegel room, now that I look back, may have been the very beginning of it, and the future course of my life turns out to depend upon reconstructing its details” (84). Echoing *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*’s direct appeal to the reader through the second-person personal pronoun, *Headlong*’s invitation becomes an explicit encouragement of the reader to recreate the narrator’s encounter with Bruegel’s works as a life-changing experience. What this means is that the reader is invited to re-enact not only the encounter itself, but also the emotions associated with it as an encounter with the works of a genius.²⁸

However, the construction of the self-consciously fake coherence of perceptual space as a destruction of the ontological barrier between intra- and extratextual realities is supported by the fact that the reader is sometimes invited to follow not only the gaze of the protagonist but that of the author as well. After all, as Frayn reveals in an interview with Shusha Guppy for *The Paris Review*, he came up with the idea of his ninth novel *Headlong* when he was contemplating – though not for the first time – the Bruegels at the Austrian mecca for admirers of this Early Netherlandish painter. The novelist reveals that while he was moving from one painting to the next, looking first at *The Hunters in the Snow*, then at *The Return of the Herd* and the painting next to it, *The Gloomy Day*, he suddenly noticed the label he had previously ignored. The label informed visitors that these were three of the five extant paintings of Bruegel’s original series. This prompted the future author of *Headlong* to ask himself the question that

²⁸ Cf. the idea of the reader’s identification with the character and his/her adaptation of the latter’s standpoint in fiction addressed, for example, in James D. Bloom’s *Reading the Male Gaze in Literature and Culture: Studies in Erotic Epistemology*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017 and Mark P. Williams’s “Selective Traditions: Refreshing the Literary History of the Seventies” in *The 1970s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, edited by Nick Hubble et al., Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 15-42.

would guide his novel: “Well, if you thought you’d found the missing picture, what would you do?” (Frayn, “Michael Frayn”).

A similar sense of the continuity of perceptual space is inadvertently created by the British novelist Iris Murdoch. Not only do Titianesque motifs and images crop up throughout her oeuvre, but they also establish a direct link between the intra- and the extratextual perceptual spaces in general and the gazes within and across them in particular. Thus, Murdoch’s favourite painting, Titian’s *The Flaying of Marsyas*, is mentioned in her novels *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (33) and *Jackson’s Dilemma* (64). At the same time, this painting is also chosen by Murdoch as a background for her own portrait painted by Tom Phillips and located at the National Portrait Gallery in London. This becomes an invitation for the reader as a beholder to look at the intratextual reality of Murdoch’s novels as an extension of the painterly Titianesque reality of the author-creator.

The reader looks at – or rather imagines that he/she is looking at – what Frayn’s self-proclaimed art expert or Murdoch’s egotistical playwright look at. However, at the same time, he/she knows and sees more and less than the intratextual ekphrastic beholders know, see, and, consequently, recognise with regard to the iconography and iconology of the object of the gaze. The reader of Murdoch’s *The Sea, the Sea* is introduced to Titian’s *Perseus and Andromeda* and its iconography through the eyes of the novel’s narrator when he goes to the Wallace Collection and contemplates the painting. By that time, however, the narrator himself “ha[s] seen it many times before” (171). And yet, despite the fact that the character has seen what the reader has not, the character still fails to acknowledge the iconological implications of Titian’s painting as to his treatment of his relationship with his long-lost first love. He continues to see himself as Perseus saving Andromeda. In his/her turn, the reader is invited to connect the dots at the moment of this ekphrastic introduction: to draw a parallel between the narrator and the monster in Titian’s painting rather than Perseus.

The reader constructs the meaning of the text – or at least believes that he does – by assuming the role seemingly assigned to him/her by the author through the character. In particular, this relates to the reader’s acceptance of his/her role as akin to that of the character: the role of an art expert knowledgeable and observant enough to be responsive to all the iconographical and iconological implications, i.e. the persona of the connoisseur. This persona can be seen as an intratextual and inherently ideological

construct of the reader: the construct that Walker Gibson calls the ‘mock reader’ (2).²⁹ According to Gibson, the ‘mock reader’ is someone “whose mask and costume the individual takes on in order to experience the language” (2). For the scholar, the ‘mock reader’ is more important than the ‘real reader’ who is “mysterious and sometimes . . . irrelevant” (1).

Thus, the mock readers of John Lanchester’s *The Debt to Pleasure* and A.S. Byatt’s *Still Life* are encouraged to be or to become an “attentive reader” (*Debt* 80) and a “competent reader” (*Still Life* 199) respectively. And, as mentioned above, it is the mock readers of Michael Frayn’s *Headlong* and Julian Barnes’s *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* who are inspired to believe that they are participating in the (pseudo-)scholarly assessment of a painting in terms of art-historical analysis. At the same time, the mock reader of Peter Ackroyd’s *English Music* is addressed – if not confronted – at the paratextual level of its “Acknowledgements” section and is explicitly inspired – if not intimidated – to be or to become both a “scholarly reader” and an “alert reader” (*English Music* n. pag.). According to Ackroyd, such a reader will notice and understand all his intertextual and intermedial allusions, quotations, and pastiche elements. In particular, such a reader will be reminded of the visual and verbal works of William Hogarth, Thomas Gainsborough, J.M.W. Turner and other British painters and art theorists.

While the real reader is aware that the book he/she is reading is not an art-historical study on Géricault or Bruegel, the mock reader finds him-/herself in the position of trusting the ekphrastic authority rather than questioning/challenging the limits imposed upon his/her reading by the ekphrastic gazes of the author and the character. The mock reader is (de-)constructed as the mask of a (pseudo-)connoisseur on a par with that worn by the character rather than superior to him/her. And as the character’s equal, the mock reader is revealed to be an accessory to the act of the ekphrastic (de-)construction of meaning including the ekphrastic murder as analysed above. This understanding correlates with Roberta Gefer Wondrich’s general conceptualisation of the reader of a postmodern narrative as an “accomplice spectator” (86) and the scholar’s metaphorisation of the relationship between author, character, and reader as a “*menage à trois*” (87). Moreover, the engagement of the reader in the construction of an aesthetics of murder can be specifically traced back to Thomas De

²⁹ Gibson suggests that “[t]he mock reader can probably be identified most obviously in sub-literary genres crudely committed to persuasion, such as advertising and propaganda” (2).

Quincey's satirical appeal to the reader in his essay "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" (9; cf. above).³⁰

Thus, the mock reader of *The Debt to Pleasure* who plays along with the protagonist's murderous activities, who sees what he is invited to see, and who ultimately assists in the construction of an ekphrastically motivated murder is indirectly unmasked as "[a] *sale voyeur. A hypocrite lecteur*" ("a dirty voyeur, a hypocritical reader"; my trans.; 100). Asserted is not only the mock reader's (pseudo-)morality as akin to that of the novel's Tarquin Winot, but also the fundamentally voyeuristic enjoyment he/she derives from the narrative construction of murder as an aesthetically justified creation of absence insofar as its actuality is confirmed at the end of the novel. However, even though the narrator finally refers – though still semi-explicitly – to "the murdered couple" (232) in the last sentence of the novel, the murder will take place only as long as the reader interprets it and believes in it as such. But the question that remains – the question concerning the postmodern novel as a whole – is to what degree the reader's freedom of interpretation is not manipulated. After all, there is an undeniable intentionality in the narrator's claim: ". . . well, perhaps I can leave that to the reader's imagination" (2).

Similarly metatextual is the assessment of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial quality of the gaze of Julian Barnes's mock reader. Overtly addressed as "you", the mock reader of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* appears in contrast with the so-called "educated contemporary spectator" (132): someone who is familiar with a work of art and the semiotic knowledge of its iconography and iconology and someone who ultimately belongs to the same socioculturally historical context as the object of the gaze (though non-ekphrastic in this case):

You'd never, for instance, guess that the Father and Son are an attenuated cannibalistic motif, would you? As a group they first appear in Géricault's only surviving sketch of the Cannibalism scene; and any educated contemporary spectator would be assuredly reminded of Dante's description of Count Ugolino sorrowing in his Pisan tower among his dying children – whom he ate. Is that clear now? (132)

³⁰ On the discussion of the reader's role as an accomplice and/or witness to murder, see also Joel Black's *The Aesthetics of Murder: A Study in Romantic Literature and Contemporary Culture*. The Johns Hopkins UP, 1991 and Maik Goth's "John Lanchester's *The Debt to Pleasure*: An Aesthetics of Textual Surprise" in *Connotations*, vol. 14, nos. 1-3, 2004/05, pp. 135-61.

The sociocultural quality of the reader's (pseudo-)connoisseurship is made especially visible in British postcolonial fiction. This is primarily revealed in the authorial play with the ekphrastic gaze of the Western rather than the Eastern reader insofar as it relates to the post-ironic use of ekphrasis and the use of the seemingly familiar Western iconography for an explication of the possibly unfamiliar Eastern subject matter in particular. Such play subverts the reader's bias towards Western iconography and his/her potential struggle with the Eastern iconology behind it.

The reader of Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* is introduced to the cultural and historical context of post-independence India through the ekphrastic gaze of its Indian-born narrator Saleem Sinai. Here, the reader is invited to follow Saleem Sinai's maturation – as an individual, as an ekphrastic beholder, and as the nation he both represents and embodies – through the gaze directed at the picture that hangs on the wall of the young protagonist's bedroom: a reproduction of *The Boyhood of Raleigh* painted by one of the founders of the English Pre-Raphaelite movement, John Everett Millais (165-68). European and imperial in its iconography, the painting featuring young Walter Raleigh, who would later become an eminent explorer and coloniser of the Elizabethan Age, appears to render this period of Indian history in terms that are arguably more familiar to and understandable for the Western reader.

The ekphrastic depiction that conspicuously mentions neither the name of the painter nor the title of the painting arises as an image – or even an icon – addressing the sociocultural knowledge of the Western reader. As the scholar Neil Ten Kortenaar points out in his analysis of Rushdie's ekphrasis, "Millais's painting presumes viewers for whom Raleigh is part of their cultural equipment. To such viewers the tableau might be said to speak. Without such cultural literacy, the call issued by the painting will remain unheard" (243). At the same time, as the reader may deduce and as Kortenaar confirms, Rushdie's postcolonial protagonist is *not* a viewer with such socioculturally specific Western knowledge (245).

In this sense, the reader of Rushdie's novel is invited to understand the Eastern perspective of its narrator by putting on the mask of its mock reader. In particular, the mock reader of *Midnight's Children* is intratextually defined as one of its characters, Padma Mangroli, the narratee that Saleem Sinai's narrative is addressed to insofar as her image is constructed within the novel's unreliable narration. Padma as the novel's mock reader is encouraged to "read[] between the lines of the episode entitled 'The Fisherman's Pointing Finger'" (Rushdie 331) which includes a depiction of the

protagonist's maturation under the gaze of Millais's painting in order to see the "socio-political trends and events" (331) underlying India's postcolonial reality. This means understanding the narrator's gaze that follows the fisherman's finger beyond the iconographically Western and ekphrastically imagined space towards the re-imagined Eastern cityscape of Bombay, beyond the inherently colonial frame of mind towards postcolonial reality.

Having accepted the mask of the mock reader, the reader as an ekphrastic beholder finds him-/herself in the position ascribed to him/her by John Lanchester's narrator: the position of the "appalled reader[]" (*Debt* 212) who discovers that he/she has been turned into a protagonist in the postmodern narrative he/she has just finished reading:

. . . the appalled readers, unable to understand what was happening either to them or to the story, and also unable to stop reading, would watch the wholesale metastasization of the characters into one another, the collapse of the very idea of plot, of structure, of movement, of self, so that when they finally put the book down they were aware only of having been protagonists in a deep and violent dream whose sole purpose is their incurable unease. (212)

Continuously resistant, however, to the status of a (pseudo-)connoisseur assigned to him/her, the reader as a beholder cannot and will not remain a puppet within the matrix of postmodern fiction. After all, to be a reader and a reader of a postmodern text in particular means to rebel against the perspective that is imposed upon you by the text's puppeteer through the voice and gaze of its protagonist. And the ekphrastic gaze emerges as such a tool of resistance to and challenge of the strategies of a British postmodern narrative only as long as the reader consciously uses it as such.

4.3.2 The Reader's Ekphrastic Gaze as an Instrument of 'Constructive Visualising Work'

As the gaze of *Headlong*'s reader follows, word by word, the novel's descriptive (re-)presentation of a painting that its narrator believes to be a long-lost Bruegel, he/she is invited to make sense of the ekphrastic image piece by piece as if in the gradual and fragmentary emergence of a jigsaw puzzle:

What is that detail? The first one I see? I don't know. . . . But already my eye's doing what the human eye always has to do to take in the world in front of it. It's flickering and jumping in indescribably complex patterns, back and forth, up and

down, round and round, moving over and over again each second, assembling patch after patch into a first approximation of a whole; amending the approximation; amending it again. (42-43)

However, while the order and the manner in which Michael Frayn's reader is presented with each piece is guided by the unfolding narrative, it is up to the reader to produce the whole image in his/her mind and decode its meaning. In order to do so, the reader has to actively engage with the text in a way that A.S. Byatt terms "constructive visualising work" (*Portraits 2*) and that the German reader-response critic Wolfgang Iser describes as "[t]he 'picturing' that is done by our imagination", i.e. an activity "through which we form the 'gestalt' of a literary text" (58). In this study of the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction it refers to the reader's activation and application of his/her ekphrastic gaze.

Thus, this chapter explores the shift from the mock reader in his/her intratextual ontology in relation to the author and the character towards a more extratextually defined reader – who is still primarily a construct and not an actual reader either – and his/her potential use of the ekphrastic gaze. The following questions are addressed: How can the ekphrastic gaze be employed by the reader as the method of a (de/re-)constructive analysis of a literary text? What happens when this (anti-)narrative and inherently self-deconstructive device is reappropriated by the reader and used against the text in the process of his/her critical and creative reading?

The function of the ekphrastic gaze as a reading tool is primarily determined by the fact that its direction mirrors that of the gazes of the intratextual participants of the discourse. Unlike the ekphrastic gaze of the character and, by extension, the gaze of the author, the ekphrastic gaze as an extratextual reading tool is applied to a verbally formulated/recycled and inherently fictive ekphrastic image as the object of the reader's gaze. After all, what the reader's gaze is directed at within his/her extratextual reality are the words "the modest Venus" (Fowles, "Ebony Tower" 74) or "Van Gogh boats" (Byatt, *Still Life* 96) printed on the page of a book in front of him/her. The reader's (de/re-)construction of such an ekphrastic image is predicated upon his/her engagement with the denotations of an ekphrastic image as a self-contained linguistic unit on the one hand, and its connotative implications on the other.

To begin with, the reader's encounter with an ekphrastic image can be productive insofar as he/she is able to isolate such an image as a structurally distinct (anti-)narrative instance by identifying its denotative meaning. What this implies is that

the reader's engagement with an ekphrastic image is required to be fundamentally cognitive if he/she wishes to produce a response to the image. The reader's treatment of such an image depends on his/her competence and cognitive skills. The reader who knows how to use the ekphrastic gaze as a creative reading device productively may be seen to correspond to Stanley E. Fish's concept of the "informed reader": "neither an abstraction, nor an actual living reader, but a hybrid – a read [*sic*] reader (me) who does everything within his power to make himself informed" (87). More particularly, this presupposes the reader's extra- and ideally pretextual familiarity with the language of art as well as a knowledge of art theory and history that ideally surpasses not only the knowledge of a character, but also that of the author-creator. Without this knowledge, the ekphrastic quality of such a word combination as "the modest Venus" (Fowles, "Ebony Tower" 74) is likely to be overlooked by the reader insofar as he/she understands it as a free grouping of words rather than acknowledges it as a ready-made unit of an art-historical term *Venus Pudica* (lat. "modest Venus").

The idea that a certain kind of knowledge is required for the (de-)construction of the meaning of such an ekphrastic image is underscored by Alan Hollinghurst's playful use of the aesthetic and architectural term 'ogee' in his *The Line of Beauty*. In particular, the reader's potential recognition of the term and its connection to Hogarth's aesthetic theory within the construction of an ekphrastic tableau of a post-coital scene (Hollinghurst 200) emerges in opposition to the novel's protagonists' (Nick and Wani) disastrous introduction of the term as the name of a new art magazine to their unsophisticated audience a few pages later:

'So you've got a name for the bloody thing.'

'Yah, we're calling it *Ogee*, like the company,' Wani said, very straightforwardly.

Bertrand pursed his plump lips. 'I don't get it, what is it...? "Oh Gee!'," is that it?' he said, bad-tempered but pleased to have made a joke. 'You'll have to tell me again because no one's ever heard of this bloody "ogee".'

'I thought he was saying "Orgy",' said Martine.

'Orgy?!' said Bertrand.

Wani looked across the table, and since this unheard-of name had originally been his idea Nick said, 'You know, it's a double curve, such as you see in a window or a dome.' (224)

“To read a text as literature,” the American reader-response theorist Jonathan Culler reminds us, “is not to make one’s mind a *tabula rasa* and approach it without preconceptions . . .” (102). A knowledgeable reader is able to connect the word combination “the modest Venus” (74) in “The Ebony Tower” with the ekphrastically motivated description that follows it: the description of a pose assumed by a nude woman who places “one hand over her loins, the other over her breasts” (74). In their turn, the layers of meanings of such Matissean colour epithets as “venous-blue” or “fuchsia-red” (Byatt, “Medusa’s Ankles” 26) or a word combination such as “Van Gogh boats” (Byatt, *Still Life* 96) that refer to the whole set of artistic and aesthetic principles of a particular painter, might be misinterpreted and remain entirely unavailable to a reader who is unfamiliar with the works of these post-impressionists.

Equipped with the ekphrastic gaze, the reader possibly finds him-/herself questioning the authority of the postmodern text and its author. This might motivate him/her to pose – often subconsciously – several questions successively: Where do the extratextually real Bruegel or Géricault end and where do Michael Frayn and Julian Barnes’s fictional Bruegel or Géricault begin? To what extent can art-historical facts and references be trusted in a work of – especially postmodern – fiction that begins with the claim of a newly discovered masterpiece or a story of Noah’s Ark from the perspective of a woodworm? Did the French Romantic artist who immortalised in paint the wreck of a frigate really shave his head and lock himself up in his studio until he finished his picture as the chapter’s omniscient narrator reveals to us? And if we find it is confirmed that he really did, what does this mean within Julian Barnes’s general metahistorical play with fact and fiction?

The fact that such a series of questions should arise in the reader’s mind means that the reader’s ekphrastic gaze redirects the search for meaning towards the reader’s own extratextual reality and towards extratextually authentic art-related materials as a repository of meaning. Thus, the reader’s search for meaning is redirected towards the definition of *Venus Pudica* in a dictionary of art-historical terms, and towards visual examples of this classical stance of a nude female figure in sculpture and painting, or towards Van Gogh’s paintings that depict fishing boats in the Mediterranean village of Saint-Maries-de-la-Mer. At the same time, the reader’s activity shifts not only towards Bruegel or Géricault’s paintings but also towards sources of art history – those that are referred to in fiction and those that are not – as sources of meaning within the reader’s own reality. The post-irony of the ekphrastic gaze as a reading tool or even a method is

thus revealed in the paradoxical necessity to comply, to a certain degree, with the role of the mock reader as a (pseudo-)connoisseurial art expert on the one hand, and to mirror the intratextual beholder's (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest for meaning on the other.

Whether post-ironically or not, the ekphrastic gaze as a reading tool allows to establish a continuity in the (de-/re-)construction of a verbally formulated image as a mental image in the minds of different readers. After all, the workings of the reader's imagination are ultimately confined within the denotative frame of ekphrasis which does not allow for complete freedom the way a non-ekphrastic description does. The associations evoked in the minds of different readers by the ekphrastic image of "the modest Venus" (Fowles, "Ebony Tower" 74) will be more similar to one another than those evoked by the non-ekphrastic reference to "a modest beauty". On the one hand, every reader is likely to draw an emotionally subjective connection between the ekphrastic image of "the modest Venus" (74) and a specific sculptured or painted example of this stance that might have made a lasting impression on him/her. On the other, whether it is Sandro Botticelli's ethereal figure of Venus from his *The Birth of Venus* or the copy of Praxiteles's *Aphrodite of Cnidus* at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore – every reader's mental association will come from the same imaginary gallery of modest Venuses and can potentially be defined with relative precision as an image constituent not only of the individual, but also of the readers' collective consciousness.

Whether it is the acknowledgment of art-related terminology or art-related subject matter, the reader's identification of the denotative meaning of such a descriptive instance prompts the reader's gaze to interrupt the reading process and to pause in recognition of its ekphrastic quality. This extratextual interruption of the narrative flow that accentuates the (anti-)narrative qualities of ekphrasis marks the moment of the reader's reclamation of the ekphrastic gaze as a reading tool in his/her quest for meaning as part of reading as an activity located in time and space. Its use by the reader echoes, in this sense, Fish's metaphorisation of his reading method: "It is as if a slow-motion camera with an automatic stop action effect were recording our linguistic experiences and presenting them to us for viewing" (74). With the help of his/her gaze, the reader focuses on the experience of the ekphrastic image as what Fish would theorise as something that is "no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an *event*, something that *happens* to, and with the participation of, the reader" (72).

The ekphrastic gaze becomes a tool of creative reading insofar as it enables the reader to take part in the (de-/re-)construction of meaning at its connotative level(s). This relates to the reader's need to navigate between the cultural and emotional connotations suggested or even instilled into the reader's mind by the text on the one hand, and the subjective associations evoked in the reader's mind on the other. The reader's ekphrastic gaze allows him/her to determine the cultural nuances of such an ekphrastic image and to recognise the associations that are well-established in the Western discourse. Thus, the reader is able to (de-)construct the culturally specific connotations of the classical stance of the modest Venus as to her mythological iconography as a Roman goddess of love, beauty, and bodily desire.

As a reading device, the ekphrastic gaze allows its user to assess such extratextually presumed cultural connotations against the postmodern text in front of him/her. In the reading process, this means not only to understand the connotative (re-)contextualisation of an ekphrastic image in a work of fiction, but also to estimate the peculiarities of its decontextualisation during the process of critical and creative reading as the reading of a postmodern text against itself. Thus, the reader recognises the ironic playfulness of John Fowles's use of the mythologically motivated iconography in the construction of the ekphrastic image of an erotically immodest rather than an art-historically conventional modest stance: "She appraised him a moment, then stood; for a second gazed the modest Venus, one hand over her loins, the other over her breasts" ("Ebony Tower" 74). At the same time, the ekphrastic gaze as a tool of critical and creative reading challenges the reader to acknowledge that such a reference promotes rather than subverts the iconological implications that are culturally and historically pertaining to a female statue and especially to a nude statue of Venus. In particular, it might be read as reinforcing the treatment of the female body as the object of male voyeuristic desire.

Ultimately, the reader's gaze contributes to the (de-)construction of an ekphrastic image as a self-reliant art object that emerges on a par with extratextually non-ekphrastic images. With the help of his/her ekphrastic gaze, the reader reads Frayn's fictive painting into existence as a work of art that might not be an actual Bruegel, but that acquires the same ontological status in the reader's imagination as the early Netherlandish painter's series of pictures *The Months*. A statue made of words, Fowles's *Venus Pudica*, in its turn, mounts her pedestal next to *The Birth of Venus* and *Aphrodite*

of *Cnidus* within the meta-ekphrastic discourse in general and the discourse related to the postmodern recycling of the art-historical canon in particular.

4.4 Conclusion

As demonstrated above, the ekphrastic beholder in British postmodern fiction constitutes a specific character type: the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur. The (de-)construction of the ekphrastic beholder as a (Pseudo-)Connoisseur concerns two interconnected processes: iconographical typologisation and iconological typification.

At the level of pre-iconographical and iconographical analysis, the ekphrastic beholder is typologised as the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur with regard to:

- prevalent characteristics and behaviour patterns such as (pseudo-)intelligence/ (pseudo-)sophistication, (pseudo-)morality, arrogance, individualism, self-indulgence, idealism, cynicism, an egocentric and hedonistic world view
- the recurrent image of the ekphrastic beholder's metaphorical persona of the (pseudo-)connoisseur, the image of a mask/disguise that underpins it, and poses/gestures indicative of an authoritative connoisseurial stance
- the motif of violence in a work of art (especially mythological motifs of violence and abduction), the motif of the destruction of a work of art, and the motif of the murder of a human being
- themes and concepts such as art-historical knowledge and power, authority, teacher/student, creation/destruction, aesthetically motivated aggression and violence/murder as artistic activity, the (pseudo-)connoisseurial search for universal meaning/truth/beauty

Iconologically, the ekphrastic beholder as the character type of the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur emerges at the intersection of diverse iconological contexts and ideologies that are simultaneously reinforced and subverted. These are:

- the British interdisciplinary aesthetic tradition of (anti-)heroic character types, including the Byronic Hero, the Dandy-Aesthete, and the Modern Connoisseur
- ideologies of Eurocentrism and androcentrism in the traditional art-historical discourse
- the ideology of the art-historical canon
- a manipulation of sociocultural values and expectations

- the persona of the (pseudo-)connoisseur as a social role and its establishment under the gaze of society
- the sociolinguistic cultural specificity of the ekphrastic beholder as a British (Pseudo-)Connoisseur
- the British aesthetics of violence/murder as art
- discourse and ideologies of art education in Britain
- art as a sociocultural institution
- the sociocultural discourse on psychopathy and antisocial behaviour

At the same time, both author and reader also constitute ekphrastic beholders who take part in the (de-)construction of meaning within the poetics and politics of postmodern fiction. Particularly important in the interplay between the ekphrastic gazes of author, character, and reader as ekphrastic beholders are the following contexts:

- the author's authority as the authority of the extratextually trustworthy scholarly or artistic referent
- the illusion of a continuity between intra- and extratextual reality
- the reader's collective consciousness and the Western reader as a sociocultural construct
- the mock reader as a (pseudo-)connoisseur
- the reader's ekphrastic gaze as a deconstructionist reading tool

5. The (De-/Re-)Construction of the Meta-Ekphrastic Discourse in British Postmodern Fiction: Between the *Métarécits* and the *Petits Récits* of the Ekphrastic Gaze

Convinced of his discovery of a long-lost masterpiece that supposedly belongs to the renowned Early Netherlandish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder, the narrator of Michael Frayn's *Headlong* refers for methodological support of his claim to one of the major authorities in art history, the German scholar Max Friedländer. The novel's self-proclaimed art expert rationalises and justifies the workings of his ekphrastic gaze by offering a precise in-text citation from the introduction to one of the scholar's works *From Van Eyck to Bruegel* (*Headlong* 43; *From Van Eyck* ix; cf. below). The quote relates to the scholar's view on the beholder's reliance upon intuitive perception in connoisseurship and particularly in the attribution of paintings.¹ However, not only does *Headlong*'s appeal to Friedländer's understanding of perception in art post-ironically contradict the scholar's disapproval of the use of quotations in the establishment of attributions, but it also tests the applicability of such ideas of the "science" of connoisseurship as an authoritative framework and plays with its inherent subjectivity in the production of meaning.

Consequently, this chapter looks at the fictional (de-)construction of the British postmodern meta-ekphrastic discourse through the ekphrastic gaze. It attempts to answer the following questions: How are various aspects of pre-existing modes of seeing, conceptions, theories, and methods of aesthetic perception adopted and adapted within the postmodern poetics and politics of the ekphrastic gaze? How are they actualised in British works of fiction? In what way does such an intertextually ekphrastic recycling of socioculturally authoritative models of perception contribute to a revision, a subversion and – hypothetically – an ultimate replacement of the canonical art-historical, art-theoretical and aesthetic narratives that are often postulated as Jean-François Lyotard's *métarécits* ('metanarratives', 'grand narratives')? And how can we summarise and characterise the plurality of the emergent *petits récits* ('small narratives') of the ekphrastic gaze that challenge and ultimately replace these *métarécits* of

¹ The term 'attribution' is employed here in accordance with its use in art discourse. It means the action of recognising a work of art and ascribing it to a particular artist. In *From Van Eyck to Bruegel* (1956), Friedländer argues that "[t]he ability to attribute and check attributions will . . . follow automatically from study and enjoyment" (x).

modernity?²

The interplay between fictional and non-fictional ekphrastic discourses in this chapter is studied in the following exemplary British works of fiction: Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* (1992), Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989) and *Metroland* (1980), A.S. Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), J.G. Farrell's *The Singapore Grip* (1978), John Fowles's *The Magus* (1965) and *Mantissa* (1982), Michael Frayn's *Headlong* (1999), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), and John Lanchester's *The Debt to Pleasure* (1996).

To begin with, the role of the ekphrastic gaze in the meta-ekphrastic discussion which is running through British postmodern fiction consists in the discovery, assessment and revision of the continuities and discontinuities inherent in the metanarratively established and mystified truths regarding the perception of art/perception in art. These findings, in their turn, point towards bigger revelations about art and its discourse at large. This is connected with two major trends: firstly, the discovery of possibly self-refuting and self-subversive motifs in canonical authoritative paradigms of art and aesthetic perception and their controversial (un-)sustainability in contemporary reality; secondly, the meta-ekphrastic rewriting, i.e. de-mystification, of such ideas as more localised and socioculturally specific truths.

Let us briefly address the idea of metanarrativity in its application to art discourse. To begin with, “[a]rt discourse,” as Andrea Fraser argues, “. . . includes not only what critics, curators, artists, and art historians write about art, but what we say about what we do in the art field, in all its forms . . .” (99). The metanarrativity of art discourse and its modes of seeing, on the one hand, is revealed through the treatment of specific canonical narratives of art history, art theory, and aesthetics as overarching paradigms which attempt to offer universal and comprehensive knowledge of art and ways of looking at it and thinking about it. It is essential to take into consideration that Lyotard does not directly address the field of art in his discussion of metanarrativity. However, the ideas suggested in his *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) have proved particularly productive for theorising art history and for the formation of an art-historical canon as a discourse. Scholars persistently refer to the grand narratives of art

² The (de-)mystification of the metanarratives of art history and theory in British postmodern fiction is to be addressed in more detail in Nataliya Gorbina's paper “The Iconography of Sports Jackets”: (De-)mystification of Art-historical and Art-theoretical Modes of Seeing in British Postmodern Fiction” at the First Conference of the ICLA Research Committee on Literatures/Arts/Media (CLAM) “Transcodification: Literatures – Arts – Media”, 1-3 July 2020 (postponed to 14-16 January 2021), University of L'Aquila.

history constructed in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives* (e.g. Blum 280) or Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art* (e.g. Gorak 89; Rampley 194).³

Furthermore, the metanarrativity of art discourse and its modes of seeing extends to a conceptualisation of the long-established art discourse as metanarratively defined in general insofar as any art discipline constitutes a "science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind" (Lyotard xxiii). What is particularly important here is to see the metanarrativity of art discourse from the perspective of what the postmodern art critic John Berger refers to as a "cultural mystification" in *Ways of Seeing* (11), a book that critiques the conventional art discourse. As actualisations of such a cultural mystification, as Berger tells us, traditional narratives of art emerge as stories of art and its history. They have all been constructed by an elite and for an elite that aims to promote the "sophisticated culture of art experts" (22). Furthermore, the scholar argues that these stories of art and its history dictate to the public a particular way of looking at art in order to legitimise the superior role and privileged position of a select few. As a consequence, the way people look at works of art – as well as life – is determined by preconceived ideas formed about them. Berger proceeds to specify these preconceptions as primarily related to "Beauty, Truth, Genius, Civilization, Form, Status, Taste, etc." (11).

Drawing upon Berger's idea of cultural mystification, we discover that the ekphrastic gaze relies upon canonical paternalistic grand narratives that mystify aesthetic perception in British postmodern fiction insofar as these narratives provide the beholder with commonly and conventionally accepted truths – or rather truths by consensus – about art, the beholder him-/herself, and the world around him/her. The revelation of these assumptions through the ekphrastic gaze as a postmodern instrument of subversion, however, results in their de-mystification as such.

Thus, as we shall see, the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction draws upon both theoretical and conceptual formulae of artistic/aesthetic perception that emerge from the orthodox metanarratives of art, art history and theory, and aesthetics. These narratives include Giorgio Vasari and Ernst Gombrich's overarching surveys of the history of art, Max Friedländer and Erwin Panofsky's theoretical and critical studies of Renaissance art and early Netherlandish painting as well as the aesthetic theories formulated by British art critics and theorists such as William Hogarth, John Ruskin,

³ On the postmodern challenge to and rewriting of history in general, cf., in particular, *British Postmodern Fiction*, edited by Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens, Rodopi, 1993 and Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. 1988. Routledge, 2003.

and Oscar Wilde.

Thus, the ekphrastically inspired world view of the protagonists of Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* is particularly affected by the way of looking at life and art as promoted by the painter and art theorist William Hogarth. The (de-)constructive observations in Julian Barnes's novels *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* and *Metroland* specifically echo, primarily theoretically, the aesthetic ideas of one of the most – if not the most – prominent English art critic John Ruskin. At the same time, the aesthetic views of John Lanchester's psychopathic serial killer in *The Debt to Pleasure* are inspired by the ideas of Oscar Wilde and Giorgio Vasari (as one of the founders of the discipline of art history). In a less murderous, but still morally dubious, way, the ekphrastic gaze of Michael Frayn's narrator of *Headlong* is formed at the intersection of multiple perceptually-grounded theories, including those suggested by the art historians Max Friedländer and Erwin Panofsky.

The meta-ekphrastic appropriation of art-discursive ways of mystification is most explicitly marked by various intertextual mechanisms, including allusion, quotation, and pastiche. Inspired by a visit to Hogarth's House, the protagonist of *English Music* has a dream vision in which William Hogarth shows him the reality of London's psychiatric hospital Bedlam (Bethlem Royal Hospital) as depicted in his series of engravings and paintings *A Rake's Progress*. Apart from that, Hogarth shows the novel's protagonist, in the form of a pastiche of his aesthetic treatise *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), his way of searching for beauty and specifically for the serpentine line of beauty in the world around them through his gaze:

'Do you see that waving line which the shadows of our heads make against the wall here? In common walking, upon which you and I are now so pleasantly engaged, the body creates an undulating motion like a wave or moving landscape. It comes from no mechanic art of posture, but is the natural line of the body in the world. A line among other lines, working together towards an harmonious unity.' (Ackroyd, *English Music* 250-51)

In its turn, the whole worldview of *Headlong*'s narrator is impacted by Max Friedländer's ideas about connoisseurial vision – the ideas that are directly quoted, indirectly imitated, or alluded to. When the novel's self-proclaimed art expert directs his (meta-)ekphrastic gaze at the English landscape around him, he modifies it in accordance with the art of the pioneers of landscape as an independent painting genre,

Patinir and Bruegel: “I Patinirize it as I look at it, I Bruegelize it. A little practice for my project” (94). While such an exercise evidently echoes Oscar Wilde’s idea of Turner’s invention of sunsets, it draws more directly upon Friedländer’s connoisseurial formula of understanding and looking at nature through art: “I go into the open air, after having looked at a picture by Cézanne, and perceive in nature paintings by Cézanne. I have learnt to see from the master” (*On Art* 26).

In this sense, the postmodern ekphrastic beholder’s particular orientation towards the established well-formulated and coherent models of perception within his/her general reliance upon metanarratively orthodox knowledge of art in the understanding of reality seemingly validates their authority outside the purview of the original non-fictional art-historical discourse. More specifically, their credibility is legitimised not only aesthetically, but also socioculturally. This means that the authority of art and its discourse is addressed only insofar as it “justifies most other forms of authority, . . . makes inequality seem noble and hierarchies seem thrilling” (Berger, *Ways* 29).

Another example is the persistent fictional assertion of the ekphrastic beholder’s authority and hegemonic status of a well-educated male over the object of his gaze aided by Panofsky’s methods of iconographical and iconological analysis. In particular, the protagonist of Fowles’s *Mantissa* appeals to the German art historian’s authoritative art-theoretical mode of seeing in order to establish his own superiority as a writer and man over the Greek Muse Erato, presumably an object of his imagination. In one of her manifestations, *Mantissa*’s Muse of creative inspiration is reimagined into an ekphrastic being within the framework of “the iconography of Renaissance humanism. Botticelli and all of that” (57) and, specifically, the Renaissance iconography of Erato as metanarratively recorded by Panofsky. Subject to the transformative power of her creator’s ekphrastic gaze, she appears before him barefoot, dark-haired, holding a lyre and wearing a tunic which is fastened around the middle with a girdle and leaves one of her shoulders bare. This ekphrastic depiction echoes, in particular, the iconography established by Panofsky in Filippino Lippi’s portrayal of Erato in his painting *Allegory of Music*.⁴

In a similar way Panofsky’s perceptually motivated methods of art-historical analysis are employed by the ekphrastic beholder of Michael Frayn’s *Headlong* not only

⁴ On the Renaissance iconography of Erato in Filippino Lippi’s *Allegory of Music*, see Panofsky, *Renaissance* 203-04.

to help him construct the meaning of reality around him but also – more importantly – to help him show off his own intellectual superiority both to other characters and to the reader. We see the novel's narrator Martin Clay direct his gaze at the English countryside and its inhabitants the way the narrator – if one may call him/her that – of Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology* (1939) directs his/her gaze at an acquaintance in the street in the art historian's introductory example of three levels of art-historical analysis (Panofsky, *Studies* 3-5).

The overarching authority of Panofsky's methodologically grounded mode of perceptual analysis is demonstrated by the novel's narrator in a way that seemingly explains and gives meaning to social and cultural differences between the English countryside and the city. In line with the German art historian's theorisation of iconography and iconology, Martin Clay's assessment of his neighbour's sports jacket is rooted in his familiarity not only “with the practical world of objects and events, but also with the more-than-practical world of customs and cultural traditions peculiar to a certain civilization” (Panofsky, *Studies* 4):

‘The iconography of sports jackets. Why does Tony Churt's brown check sports jacket make it clear that he's a country landowner, while my grey pepper-and-salt sports jacket announces me as an urban intellectual? Why does the seediness of my jacket suggest high-mindedness and poverty, while the seediness of his indicates limited intelligence and wealth?’ (Frayn, *Headlong* 15)

Moreover, the authority of Panofsky's metanarrative is reinforced through its placement within a corpus of what is considered extratextually as authentic and sophisticated knowledge. Persistent in his application of Panofsky's methods of art-historical analysis, Martin Clay attempts an iconological analysis of the look that his neighbour Laura Churt has on her face when he and his wife talk about art. With the help of Panofsky's theory, *Headlong's* narrator comes to the conclusion that she is familiar neither with the name of Erwin Panofsky nor even with London's National Gallery (25-26). In the narrator's continuously semi-ironic musings and snobbish remarks about the countryside, this non-recognition of the name of one of the leading art historians becomes a particularly important marker of what appears to him to be intellectual inferiority of the English countryside as opposed to the city with its museums, libraries, and, moreover, its supposedly superior modes of seeing.

While the mystifying authority of the inherited art-discursive formulae of perception is not undermined as being completely unsustainable just yet, it is certainly

shaken – if not mocked – through the revelation of the inability of the ekphrastic beholder as a (pseudo-)connoisseur to make productive use of them. In *Headlong*, the beholder's failure to notice that the poverty of their neighbours is genuine is simultaneously a lack of common sense and intellectual competence. In its turn, the appeal to Panofsky's ideas by *Mantissa*'s protagonist is made fun of by the object of his allegedly creative gaze. This attempt to show off his knowledge results in undermining rather than enhancing the male power and intellectual superiority that he keeps trying to establish: “‘Iconography of the Renaissance’ – Jesus. You don't know nothin' – you don't even know what I really looked like when I started” (58).

Within this appropriation of metanarratively established ways of seeing – or rather ways of mystification – certain motifs become particularly important in British postmodern fiction. (De-/re-)contextualised within the meta-ekphrastic discourse of postmodern fiction, these motifs are simultaneously reasserted as particularly significant themes in the discussion of perception in art and destabilised with regard to the way they mystify the very phenomenon of aesthetic perception as a special skill that is ultimately attainable only by a privileged sophisticated few.

One such motif concerns the mystified dialectic of eye and mind in aesthetic perception. Within the postmodern meta-ekphrastic discourse, the interplay between eye and mind gets re-problematised through the application of metanarrative formulae that establish the workings of the mind in the event of an immediate encounter with the object of the gaze.

Thus, the ekphrastic gaze plays with an overtheorised understanding of perception as a process that should be guided by recollections. One example is the perception of the human body by the protagonist of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* who is particularly motivated by the empirical methods underlying William Hogarth's aesthetic ideas. In his appreciation of his lover's body, Nick Guest follows its line of beauty with his gaze in a manner indicated by the author of *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753):

Wani was distant after sex, as if assessing a slight to his dignity. He turned his head aside in thoughtful grievance. Nick looked for reassurance in remembering social triumphs he had had, clever things he had said. He expounded the ogee to an appreciative friend, who was briefly the Duchess, and then Catherine, and then a different lover from Wani. The double curve was Hogarth's 'line of beauty', the snakelike flicker of an instinct, of two compulsions held in one

unfolding movement. He ran his hand down Wani's back. He didn't think Hogarth had illustrated this best example of it, the dip and swell – he had chosen harps and branches, bones rather than flesh. Really it was time for a new *Analysis of Beauty*. (Hollinghurst 200)

Nick's observation of the object of his gaze as an action of following a succession of mental recollections stems from Hogarth's belief in the active role of the mind and its love of any pursuit that offers pleasure.⁵ It is particularly reminiscent of the English art theorist's curiously ekphrastic comparison between the beholder's perceptual pursuit of a serpentine line in a work of visual art and the reader's processing of letters during the event of reading as a pursuit of recollected images that allows for the formation of the picture as a whole (*Analysis* 33).

However, Nick's post-coital contemplation of his lover's body is a pursuit of recollected images of his previous lovers and other people that he knows. This becomes a post-ironic realisation of Hogarth's idea of the "love of pursuit, merely as pursuit, [that] is implanted in our natures" (*Analysis* 32). Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* and particularly Nick's line of beauty decontextualises Hogarth's idea of an inherently moral pursuit as an idea of the pursuit of pleasures and, more specifically, sexual pleasures. The aesthetics of the English artist and art theorist who was famously perturbed by moral deterioration in eighteenth-century Britain is used to paint a similar – and yet different – and controversially decadent picture of the pursuit of pleasures in the London of the early 1980s. This is a picture that simultaneously echoes and challenges the moral themes of Hogarth's own modern series of engravings and paintings⁶ – a post-ironic, rather than a satirically moralising, picture of sexually liberated London at the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Similarly inherently recollective – albeit primarily aesthetically rather than socioculturally – is the Hogarthian vision of people's faces by the narrator of Ackroyd's *English Music*. When Timothy Harcombe, in his childhood recollections, remembers having assisted his father during his performances at the Chemical Theatre, he recalls seeing the spectators as "made up only of outlines, of serpentine lines, that were so

⁵ As Hogarth argues, "[p]ursuing is the business of our lives; and even abstracted from any other view, gives pleasure. . . . Wherein would consist the joys of hunting, shooting, fishing, and many other favourite diversions, without the frequent turns and difficulties, and disappointments, that are daily met with in the pursuit?" (*Analysis* 32)

⁶ On the problematisation of venereal disease in eighteenth-century Britain in William Hogarth's modern series of paintings and engravings, see, for example, N.F. Lowe's "The Meaning of Venereal Disease in Hogarth's Graphic Art" in *The Secret Malady: Venereal Disease in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France*, edited by Linda E. Merians, The UP of Kentucky, 1996, pp. 168-82.

sharply distinguished from the light that the people seemed to be bound by thin wires which trembled in the confined air” (Ackroyd, *English Music* 5). Apart from being a recollection, “so distant and so dispossessed that it might be the memory of some other person” (Ackroyd, *English Music* 5), such a meta-ekphrastic vision is also intrinsically recollective due to the very fact that it bears evident palimpsest traces of William Hogarth’s *Analysis of Beauty* (1753). Timothy’s vision is made up of terms and expressions used by the English art theorist and painter including “outlines” (e.g. Hogarth 22, 56, 57), “serpentine lines” (e.g. Hogarth 51, 94, 95), and “wires” (e.g. Hogarth 23, 58). Recycled by the ekphrastic gaze of the novel’s protagonist, however, this Hogarthian line of beauty will be transformed into “a line of music” (Ackroyd, *English Music* 308): the continuous and inherently nostalgic line of English history and culture at large.

In its turn, *Headlong*’s post-ironic conceptualisation of the first encounter with a hypothetical Bruegel echoes Friedländer’s theoretical explication of the event of gazing at an object as “a visual action directed by the mind [that consists] of a linking together of recollected images, a gathering and assimilating of many impressions” (*On Art* 20): “Already, even as I look at it in those first few instants, what I’m contemplating is not the picture but my accumulated recollection of it” (*Headlong* 43).

Such a reliance on the mnemonic capabilities of the mind in aesthetic perception emerges as post-ironical insofar as *Headlong*’s entirely questionable claim will be based on its protagonist’s recollective impressions rather than on a direct and meticulous perceptual and scientific examination of a hypothetical masterpiece. Not only will he come into direct contact with the object of his obsession only several times throughout the whole novel, but he will also persistently avoid looking at it properly even when he can (*Headlong* 45-46, 251).

On the one hand, such an avoidance seemingly reflects Friedländer’s belief in the power of the first contact with a work of art as well as actualises the scholar’s advice “to look at a picture periodically for six seconds rather than once for a whole minute” (*On Art* 177). On the other, this does not help *Headlong*’s protagonist to confirm the provenance of the painting which will eventually mock him by disappearing in the flames right before his eyes. His gaze will fail to make out the detail that he believes would finally confirm the painting’s Bruegelness: “My eyes reach the man just as the blackness does. And he’s gone” (*Headlong* 388).

At the same time, the idea of an immediate recognition of the object of the gaze

as a paradoxical event of remembering even during the very first encounter is directly connected with the aesthetic discourse on intuition in art and connoisseurship and the role of the beholder's pre-existent and recollected knowledge in intuitive perception.⁷ The decontextualisation rather than recontextualisation of this concept within the meta-ekphrastic discourse in postmodern fiction reminds us of the ambivalently idiosyncratic and self-contradictory nature of intuition and the inherently postmodern irony of relying on it as a source of objective meaning in the assessment of art.

In particular, *Headlong*'s ekphrastic modification of reality emerges at the point of intersection between Panofsky and Friedländer's conceptualisations of intuition and its role in the (de-)construction of meaning. In his assessment of reality and, specifically, the reality of the English countryside as delineated above, the protagonist of Frayn's novel appears to be guided by Panofsky's treatment of "synthetic intuition" as "a mental faculty comparable to that of a diagnostician" (*Studies* 14-15) which relies upon a pre-existing in-depth familiarity with the required themes and concepts. Asked to take a look at the family heirloom of his and his wife's neighbours – an intratextually fictional *The Rape of Helen* painted by Giordano – Martin Clay pedantically and ostentatiously refuses to appraise the painting due to the fact that it falls outside his area of expertise: "Fifteenth-century Netherlandish I might just conceivably be able to help you with. Seventeenth-century Italian – you might as well ask me about pheasant breeding" (*Headlong* 38).

Paradoxically enough, a few moments later, *Headlong*'s protagonist will see a painting that he will immediately believe to be Pieter Bruegel's long-lost masterpiece and will appeal to Friedländer's ideas of "unthinking recognition" and "intuitive connoisseurship" (*From Van Eyck* ix) when establishing attributions to justify his belief:⁸

How do I know what it is that I'm seeing? As with the orange of oranges once again, as with the loveliness of Tilda, I just do. Friedländer, the great Max Friedländer, is very good on this. 'Correct attributions', he says, 'generally appear spontaneously and "prima vista". We recognize a friend without ever

⁷ The discussion of the concept of aesthetic intuition is primarily about the evaluation of various conceptualisations of its sustainability in art-related discourse. Thus, for example, Louis Arnaud Reid differentiates between "the intuition of art and conceptual talk about it" (35) in his "Intuition and Art" in *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 15, no. 3, July 1981, pp. 27-38.

⁸ For more detail on intuition in Friedländer's theory of connoisseurship, his defence of the subjectivity of intuition in connoisseurship "as a necessary evil" (175), and the importance of the first impression, see Friedländer, *On Art* 172-78.

having determined wherein his particular qualities lie and that with a certainty that not even the most detailed description can give.’ Friedländer, of course, had spent his life among these friends of his. I’ve spent only whatever time I could manage over the last five years or so. (*Headlong* 43)

Friedländer’s ideas complement rather than contradict Panofsky’s distrust of subjective and irrational analysis insofar as his understanding of intuition also relies upon the pre-existing familiarity with works of art that the scholar personifies as “friends” (*From Van Eyck* ix).⁹ Such a rhetorical device not only mystifies the relationship between the beholder and the work of art but it also underscores its egoistically exclusive nature. Thus, when his wife also sees the picture, he feels jealous and bitter about having lost what he believes to be his “exclusive acquaintance with the picture” (*Headlong* 213). However, the use of Friedländer’s theory destabilises the claim of *Headlong*’s protagonist rather than supports it: after all, Bruegel and the Netherlandish art of the sixteenth-century fall outside Martin Clay’s area of expertise as well.

The questionable and even ironical nature of Martin Clay’s appeal to Friedländer’s methods of connoisseurship to support his seemingly intuitive recognition of a painting as a Bruegel is further underscored by his quotes from the scholar’s works. The novel’s self-proclaimed art expert fails to take into account that Friedländer himself is against the use of quotations, against what he refers to as “formulated characterization[s]”, “fixed ideas” (*From Van Eyck* ix), i.e. someone else’s – or even his own – ideas concerning the qualities of paintings. While the narrator of *Headlong* appears to rely only upon Friedländer’s methods of assessment of artworks rather than the scholar’s characterisations in this particular use of a quotation mentioned above, it will soon become evident that his obsession with his neighbours’ painting as a Bruegel is rooted in Friedländer’s characterisations as well.

However, the ekphrastic gaze not only helps to revisit pre-existing conceptions and theories explicating perception as a dialectic of eye and mind, but it also draws upon them to suggest new possible ways of theorising perception in art. Particularly remarkable is Julian Barnes’s elaboration on John Ruskin’s concept of the “*innocence of the eye*” (qtd. in Gombrich, *Art* 250). The art critic imagines a child as an innately

⁹ Cf. Till-Holger Borchert’s account of Friedländer’s own verbalisation of his “intuitively gained insights” (14) on the basis of his accumulated knowledge and his scepticism towards such scientific methods of analysis as x-ray. See Borchert’s “From Intuition to Intellect: Max J. Friedländer and the Verbalisation of Connoisseurship” in *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, 2004/2005, pp. 9-18.

uninhibited visionary whose power the artist should aspire to recover (qtd. in Gombrich, *Art* 250-51). In Barnes's fiction, this idea appears to find its actualisation in the attempt to grasp the essence of reality through the magnifying lenses of binoculars by *Metroland's* "[b]loody Ruskin" (*Metroland* 49). Neither completely unsophisticated nor innocent, Barnes's young protagonist does not observe the world "without consciousness" (qtd. in Gombrich, *Art* 250) the way Ruskin's child should, but searches, purposefully and deliberately, for meaning and truth. The innocence of his eye, however, consists in his unshakeable belief in art – a belief that will he will have lost as the result of having grown up by the time he returns to the place of his and his friend's childhood experiments and questions the meaning and purpose of art: "Very nice for us that the Renaissance occurred and all that; but it's all really about ego and aggro, isn't it?" (*Metroland* 167).

Ruskin's innocent eye is replaced by Barnes's post-ironically de-mystified "ignorant eye" (*History* 130) in his analysis of Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. By contrast to the "informed eye" (*History* 130), this mode of perception emerges as a conscious disregard for any pre-existing knowledge in the event of looking at and thinking about a work of art. This is specifically addressed by the omniscient narrator to help him/her to answer the preliminary question in the novel's analysis of the painting: "Well, what does it look as if [*sic*] he painted? Let us reimagine our eye into ignorance. We scrutinize 'Scene of Shipwreck' with no knowledge of French naval history" (*History* 130). Reappearing in Barnes's non-fictional collection of essays published twenty six years later,¹⁰ the concept of the ignorant eye underpins not only the highly idiosyncratic truth of an indefinite history of the world – 'a history' rather than 'the history' – as a tapestry of fragmented small narratives,¹¹ but also as the idiosyncratic truth of art-historical analysis.

However, such mode of perceptual analysis appears to take place in a constant battle with the seemingly contrasting method that presupposes the beholder's familiarity with metanarrative knowledge of art and history. For the time being, "[t]he ignorant eye yields, with a certain testy reluctance, to the informed eye" (*History* 130). Having

¹⁰ First published as a short story "Shipwreck" in *The New Yorker* and as a chapter of his metafictional novel *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989), the analysis of Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* would later become a piece in Barnes's collection of essays *Keeping an Eye Open: Essays on Art* (2015).

¹¹ On the deconstruction of metanarrativity and the subversion of the authoritative historical discourse in Julian Barnes's fiction, cf. Guignery, *Fiction* 66-72.

considered the painting against the narrative of the actual survivors of the shipwreck Henri Savigny and Alexandre Corréard, the omniscient narrator, however, appears to arrive at a similar conclusion as the protagonist of *Metroland*: “. . . [A] narrative is forgotten, yet its representation still magnetizes (the ignorant eye triumphs – how galling for the informed eye)” (133). Yet again, the triumph of the ignorant eye is only temporary and illusory. The metanarrative knowledge associated with the informed eye turns out to be inescapable in such “[m]odern and ignorant” (133) rewriting of history. Controversially enough, Barnes’s metafictional analysis goes back to the use of the informed eye. It presents historical facts about the creation of the painting and concludes with referring us back to the mystified and mystifying authority of “[o]ur leading expert on Géricault” (139).

Thus, from Frayn’s recontextualisation of Friedländer’s mode of connoisseurial perception to Barnes’s problematisation of Ruskin’s idea of the innocent eye, the proliferation of conceptions and theories revived in British postmodern fiction arises as fundamentally self-subversive insofar as it undermines their credibility as universal and objective sources of meaning. The metanarratively defined ways of seeing are rejected as easily as they are accepted by the postmodern beholder who appeals to them in order to justify his/her own vision.

However, the de-mystification of the metanarrative ideology of the art discourse in British postmodern fiction is evident not only in the recycling of specific theories of aesthetic perception, but also in the problematisation of perceptually grounded preconceptions in/about art. Within the corpus of the examined narratives, such preconceptions are revisited in the form of metanarratively defined connotations in the construction of persistently recurrent ekphrastic images. Most vividly, the recontextualisation of metanarratively motivated connotations is exemplified by the persistence of the ekphrastic conceptualisation – and ultimately mystification – of beauty in its association with love as Botticellian. The reader comes across recurring appreciations of female beauty as “a Botticelli beauty” in Fowles’s *The Magus* (118, 158) and *Mantissa* (57-58), or as the beauty of “a Botticelli Venus, a Beauty Queen’s body” in A.S. Byatt’s *The Virgin in the Garden* (383). Using a subordinate clause, J.G. Farrell’s novel *The Singapore Grip*, in its turn, demonstrates – at the linguistic level of the narrative – the causality of the idea of beauty as being instilled into the beholder’s mind and imprinted upon his/her retina by Botticelli’s art:

Looking at Mrs Blackett’s disappointed, once-beautiful face, Matthew suddenly

recognised that Joan was a beauty It was a process not very different, he supposed, from thinking a girl was beautiful because she reminded you of a painting by Botticelli: if you had never seen the painting you would not have noticed her. (119-20)

This particular way of noticing and looking at beauty through Botticelli's art is dictated, however, by the predominant association of this particular artist with love and beauty – rather than any other themes and concepts – within the grand art-historical narratives. While attempting to provide a universal understanding of art history, these grand narratives are ultimately individually formulated and constructed by pre-eminent scholars in the field of art history. Thus, for example, of all Botticelli's paintings, Ernst Gombrich's fundamentally selective and highly influential metanarrative of the history of art *The Story of Art* chooses to focus on the Renaissance painter's *The Birth of Venus*. And on the painting's representation of the mythological story of Venus's birth as seen by Botticelli's scholarly contemporaries: “the symbol of mystery through which the divine message of beauty came into the world” (Gombrich, *Story* 264).

The shift of attention towards this particular painting and the theme of beauty as a largely sociocultural shift within the art-historical discourse becomes evident through the contrast with the account of Botticelli's art as recorded by Vasari.¹² The author of the first book on art history treats all of the painter's works equally instead of singling out his *The Birth of Venus* or *The Spring (Primavera)* the way art historians would do since the Pre-Raphaelites' artistic and academic revival of interest in Botticelli.¹³

The construction of discursive connotations which underlie ekphrastic images is further reinforced by the – equally verbal rather than visual – metanarrative of iconographical meanings, i.e. what Panofsky summarises as “*themes* or *concepts* as transmitted through literary sources” (*Studies* 11). On the one hand, Botticelli's depiction of Venus draws upon the mythological discourse that establishes the association of this Roman goddess with the concepts of love and beauty in general. However, its specificity becomes evident when we look at other ekphrastic references to pictorial representations of Venus that reveal different mythological associations. In

¹² See Vasari's brief account of Botticelli's “numerous figures of women undraped” (*Lives* 2: 232) and his main focus on the artist's depiction of biblical subject matter.

¹³ For more details on the phenomenon of the general discourse of the rediscovery of Botticelli in the nineteenth century, see Haskell, *Rediscoveries* 174-78 and Kermode, *Forms of Attention* 1-32. For further discussion of the association of Botticelli and his art with the concept of beauty, see, for example, *Concepts of Beauty in Renaissance Art* (1998), edited by Francis Ames-Lewis and Mary Rogers, Routledge, 2018.

Fowles's *Mantissa*, the perception of the object of the protagonist's gaze and imagination as a Botticellian girl is replaced with his comparison of her pose with that of Velázquez's Venus. This marks an inherently ideological shift in mythological associations: Botticelli's Venus – as a goddess of conventionally pure love and beauty – gives way to Velázquez's Venus – as a goddess of dangerous erotic desires (*Mantissa* 57-58; 91-92).

At the same time, scholars believe that Botticelli's Venus also echoes Angelo Poliziano's poem *Stanze per la giostra* and the second *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. Thus, in his investigation of the literary sources underlying Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, the German art historian and art theorist Aby Warburg argues that both Botticelli and Poliziano's depictions of Venus appear to draw upon the second *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (Warburg 1-4). While neither Poliziano nor Homer are mentioned as to the ekphrastic image of Botticellian beauty in British postmodern fiction, their intertextual presence is always implied in the reference to Botticelli itself.

More straightforward is the intertextuality that legitimises the perpetuation of certain ekphrastic images within fictional discourse. Thus, the rhetoric of the Botticellian beauty in its connection to love is underpinned through an intertextually ekphrastic reference to Marcel Proust's persistent association of female beauty with Botticelli in his *In Search of Lost Time*.¹⁴ In particular, A.S. Byatt's construction of her "Botticelli Venus, a Beauty Queen's body" (*Virgin* 383) echoes Proust's Botticellian ekphrasis the connotations of which Byatt analyses in her study *Portraits in Fiction* (6-8; cf. ch. 3.3.2). Another, but this time intratextually explicit, mention of Proust's Botticelli can be found in Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* in which the narrator's friend and guardian, Hobie, recounts to him the way Proust's protagonist Swann falls in love with Odette "because she looks like a Botticelli girl from a slightly damaged fresco" (845).

As one of the most popular ekphrastic images that can be found in the analysed corpus of fiction, the image of a Botticellian woman entails a whole set of assumptions instilled in the beholder's consciousness. The persistence of this particular reference demonstrates that the body image and female beauty continue to be conventionalised in terms of Western standards – standards that are quintessentially embodied by Botticelli's gentle, slender, and feminine women and his Venus in particular. The

¹⁴ See, in particular, Swann's growing desire for Odette as a result of noticing a Botticellian beauty in her features in Proust, *Swann* 312, 314, 332, 431.

recurrence of this image reflects the historical and sociocultural shift in the beauty ideal from the fleshier Rubenesque forms associated with female physical attractiveness between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries towards a modern Western ideal of Botticellian slimness revived through the art of the Pre-Raphaelites.¹⁵ In this sense, the contemporary notion of female beauty per se is characterised by fixed ekphrastic connotations insofar as it has become semantically synonymous with the name of this Renaissance painter.

Framed by the ekphrastic gaze, however, the contexts in which the image of the Botticellian woman appears in British postmodern fiction underscore these preconceptions only with the aim of questioning and subverting them as unsustainable and unacceptable in contemporary reality. Fowles's *Mantissa* demonstrates the inherent ambivalence and misogyny of this image in a most fascinating exchange between the ekphrastic beholder and the object of his gaze and imagination:

‘I was totally wrong. You look stunning. Out of this world.’ He seeks for words, or appears to do so. ‘More childlike. Vulnerable. Sweet.’

‘More feminine?’

‘Incontestably.’

‘Easier to exploit.’ (59)

Similarly de-mystifying is Byatt's Botticellian ekphrasis which reveals the hypocritical bias towards conventional beauty in her *The Virgin in the Garden*. The novel's Botticellian-looking Anthea Warburton gets a part in a play as a result of a casting that Byatt's protagonist Frederica Potter disdainfully calls “a beauty contest” (*Virgin* 96). This is particularly reminiscent of Berger's suggestion that the art discourse contributed to the establishment of a competitive quality of beauty as something to be judged upon. Addressing the theme of The Judgement of Paris (rendered, for example, by Lucas Cranach the Elder or Peter Paul Rubens), the art critic points out that “[t]oday The Judgement of Paris has become the Beauty Contest” (*Ways* 52). In other words, he adds, “[t]hose who are not judged beautiful are *not beautiful*. Those who are, are given the prize” (52).

Finally, turning to Farrell's *The Singapore Grip*, we will discover that its reference to Botticelli in the quote above reflects the societal inclination to judge a

¹⁵ The idea of Botticellian beauty as primarily a Pre-Raphaelite concept in the modern consciousness can be detected in John Fowles's *The Magus*. Conchis's description of Lily Montgomery's “Botticelli beauty” makes him point out that such a reference “makes her sound too pale, too Pre-Raphaelite” (118).

woman's physical attractiveness by measuring it against certain socioculturally preconceived and accepted assumptions of beauty and against the image of a Botticellian woman as a paragon of beauty in particular. The novel's ekphrastic reference supports its protagonist's sudden realisation and recognition of the woman's beauty. This happens when he sees her mother, who was considered to be beautiful when she was young, and thinks to himself: "So that's the sort of face it's supposed to be!" (120).

As we notice, the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction still prefers *The Birth of Venus* by Botticelli to Venuses painted by Gérôme or Duval; the bodies created by Michelangelo to those done by Bernini. Bruegel is preferred to the Master of the Embroidered Foliage or Aert van der Neer, Old Masters are favoured to contemporary artists. Such fundamentally important but, at first sight, surprising selectivity of the ekphrastic gaze is rooted in the selectivity of the art-historical discourse that has long since contributed to the hierarchical understanding and perception of art. The logic of elevating or even treating certain artists and certain works of outstanding merit as having sacred qualities and omitting others from the art-historical metanarrative is particularly underscored through the legitimising concepts of 'genius' and 'masterpiece' that go back to the founder of art history Giorgio Vasari.¹⁶

"I have a discovery to report," reads the first sentence of Frayn's novel *Headlong*, "Many of the world's great treasures are known to have been lost over the centuries. I believe I may have found one of them. What follows is the evidence for my claim" (1). Convinced of his intellectual superiority, the novel's snobbish narrator Martin Clay, a self-proclaimed "urban intellectual" (15), addresses the reader in the introductory chapter of the novel – a chapter titled "Aims and Approaches" – to announce that he wants to share his important discovery with the world.

The reader might have already noticed and recognised the fragment of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Fall of Icarus* on the cover of the Faber edition of the novel. And he/she will eventually see that Martin Clay's discovery is, indeed, what he believes to be a virtually priceless missing painting from Bruegel's calendar series *The Months* that he stumbles upon on the estate of his and his wife's neighbours. However, imbued

¹⁶ It is essential to remember here that the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction relies primarily on the modern art discourse rather than the contemporary one that calls into question and ultimately rejects the ideas of genius and masterpiece. For more details on the treatment and use of these concepts in the art discourse, see, for example, Arthur C. Danto's "Masterpieces and the Museum" in *Grand Street*, vol. 9, no. 2, Winter 1990, pp. 108-27.

with a sense of ominous anxiety and pathos, the unreliable narrator's opening statement does not disclose the identity of the newly-uncovered artwork. Instead, it obscures/disguises it as one of "the world's great treasures" (*Headlong* 1), a long-lost masterpiece. Not only such a seemingly (pseudo-)scientific approach actually echoes what Berger calls 'cultural mystification' underlying Western art-historical discourse, but it also expresses the state of Western and particularly British consciousness.

"As you know," the snobbish (pseudo-)connoisseur of John Lanchester's *The Debt to Pleasure* reminds us, "the idea of genius was invented by Giorgio Vasari, a gossipy, intelligent man of surprisingly and surpassingly accurate judgement" (72-73). His authority rests, according to the novel's narrator, on his high status as a "witness" (73). As such a witness, Vasari not only wrote Michelangelo's works into existence – including his creation of a snowman that does not, of course, exist any more – but he also established within the art discourse the way of looking at them as the works of a genius (*Debt* 72-3; *Lives* 5: 235).¹⁷

The way the discursive frame of the history of art contributes to a redirection of the ekphrastic gaze away from those painters that are metanarratively established as minor, and towards the ones mystified as genii, is well illustrated in the relationship between the (pseudo-)connoisseurial beholder and the authoritative figure of Max Friedländer in Michael Frayn's *Headlong*. Post-ironically enough, the novel begins with a revelation of its protagonist's unsuccessful attempt to challenge the German scholar's treatment of the Master of the Embroidered Foliage as an insignificant representative of Early Netherlandish painting:

'Because Friedländer is so ridiculously dismissive of him,' I insanely feel obliged to explain.

Laura turns from me to Kate and back to me.

'Max Friedländer,' I have to tell her. 'The great authority on all the early Netherlandish stuff.'

'But then,' says Kate, 'he decided Friedländer was right after all.' (25)

Indeed, if we turn to Friedländer's brief examination of this artist (or a group of artists) that the scholar named the Master of the Embroidered Foliage in his volume primarily

¹⁷ For a scholarly discussion of Giorgio Vasari's conceptualisation of the notion of "genius" and his treatment of Michelangelo's genius as a model of excellence against which he measures up all the other artists in his *Lives*, see, for example, Martin Kemp's "The 'Super-artist' as Genius: The Sixteenth-Century View" in *Genius: The History of an Idea*, edited by Penelope Murray, Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. 32-53, and Lisa Pon's "Michelangelo's *Lives*: Sixteenth-Century Books by Vasari, Condivi, and Others" in *The Sixteenth-Century Journal*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1996, pp. 1015-37.

dedicated to the life and art of Hugo van der Goes, we will see that his dismissive attitude is evident already in the use of epithets to assess the *oeuvre* of this painter: “stereotyped”, “pedantically”, “monotonous” (*Hugo van der Goes* 65).¹⁸

As one of the first scholars to draw attention to Early Netherlandish painting and to define the hierarchy of its pre-eminent figures, Friedländer, however, famously contributed to the elevation – if not glorification – of another Netherlandish painter that had been previously overlooked within the art-historical discourse: Pieter Bruegel the Elder.¹⁹ In his survey *From Van Eyck to Bruegel* (1956), the scholar challenges the public – rather than his fellow scholars – by elevating Bruegel to the level of Rembrandt and Jan Van Eyck: “The master does not seem to occupy his rightful place in the public mind. It is to be feared that even to mention Jan van Eyck and Bruegel in one breath may sound provocative” (135).²⁰

More curiously self-refuting is Friedländer’s placement of his views within the context of Bruegel scholarship at the beginning of the twentieth century. In his volume *Pieter Bruegel in Early Netherlandish Painting* – dedicated to the art and the life of this exceptional painter – the scholar appears to openly and even sarcastically criticise art historians for overemphasising some features of Bruegel’s *oeuvre* and overlooking others in their attempts to “outdo[] one another as apostles of the new deity” (*Pieter Bruegel* 40). Having seemingly spoken against such mystification, Friedländer, however, proceeds to reinforce rather than challenge it by concluding that “[e]ven so, the fervour of their [art historians’ – N.G.] efforts and the oracular tone of their disquisitions testify to the profound impact of this creative genius [Bruegel – N.G.]” (*Pieter Bruegel* 40).

Not only does the logic of *Headlong*’s protagonist echo the preferential logic of Friedländer’s pioneering research on Early Netherlandish painting; it is revealed as being fundamentally rooted in the academic popularisation of Bruegel since the beginning of the twentieth century. For the novel’s art enthusiast Martin Clay, the amount of scholarly works and the overall institutional attention prove the painter’s genius: “. . . this is precisely why there isn’t an entire gallery in the Kunsthistorisches

¹⁸ See, for example, the painting *Virgin and Child in a Landscape* painted in c. 1500 and located at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Philadelphia.

¹⁹ As pointed out by Friedländer, Bruegel scholarship can be traced back only as far as the year 1890 that saw a sudden upsurge of scholarly attention to this painter (*Pieter Bruegel* 12, 40).

²⁰ Moreover, as Friedländer asserts, “to place him [Bruegel – N.G.] alongside Jan van Eyck and Rembrandt is to emphasize what is essential in the course of Netherlandish painting” (*From Van Eyck* 143).

Museum, or a whole row of books in the London Library, devoted to Sebastian Vrancz or me, and why there is to Pieter Bruegel” (*Headlong* 80).

More specifically, *Headlong*’s obsession with the hypothetical Bruegel stems from its protagonist’s obsession with “Max Friedländer’s wise words” (121), “Friedländer, the great Max Friedländer” (43) and particularly from the idea of Bruegel’s exceptional mastery promoted by the German scholar. While the novel’s art enthusiast and aspiring art expert still believes to be the only one who knows the truth about the Churts’ painting, he thinks of himself as “the only priest admitted to its mysteries” (207). Moreover, sharply defined by him as a “sacred object” (46), the hypothetical Bruegel appears to him in stark contrast with other paintings discovered in his neighbours’ breakfast room. These are the paintings that will be revealed to be the works of lesser-known painters such as Philips Wouwerman and Aert van der Neer as well as Sebastian Vrancz that the label on the hypothetical Bruegel – in the narrator’s view, wrongly – attributes it to. At first sight, our self-proclaimed art expert refuses to refer to them as “Dutch buggers” (40) or “duds” (45) the way his unsophisticated and unashamedly materialistic neighbour Tony Churt does. But they are, however, evidently treated by him as such insofar as the renowned Early Netherlandish painter becomes the object of *Headlong*’s research and morally dubious actions and as long as the narrator and, consequently, the reader show only brief interest in the novel’s other paintings.

The more obsessed Frayn’s unreliable narrator gets with his neighbours’ heirloom, the more apparent do the mercenary and hypocritical undercurrents of his motivation become. Fundamentally, his motivation is not much different from that of Tony Churt. While the novel’s (pseudo-)connoisseurial beholder will keep on denying it, it will get more and more evident that the painting is valuable to him only as long as he believes it to be a masterpiece, a work of the Early Netherlandish genius, and as long as its discovery can help him obtain not only fame and reputation – if not glory – as a discoverer of a masterpiece, but also financial prosperity.

Headlong’s endowment of a hypothetical Bruegel with sacred qualities is connected with another level of mystification inherently determined by the scholarly glorification of this painter since the beginning of the twentieth century: the sacralisation of a masterpiece as opposed to the de-sacralisation of a lesser work of art on the basis of its market value. In fact, Friedländer blatantly confirms the idea that the value of a painting is established by art experts:

Every work of art has a financial value, which largely depends on the view taken

of its authorship. This value also depends on its artistic value, which is difficult to assess, and in any case can be sent considerably up or down through the verdict of the expert. The expert comes up against financial interests and gets regrettably caught up in them. (*On Art* 180)²¹

Thus, the success of Bruegel among “the rich and powerful” (*Pieter Bruegel* 40) in his own time is employed by Friedländer to support his argument, while this scholarly revival and popularisation of Bruegel’s works contributes to an increase in their value on the art market in the twentieth century.²²

After all, both for the novel’s narrator as well as for the novel’s reader, *Headlong*’s painting is ultimately interesting only as long as our aspiring art expert Martin Clay perceives and treats it as a long-lost masterpiece by Pieter Bruegel rather than a painting by the virtually unknown Sebastian Vrancz and as long as we pretend to believe him.

Similar to *Headlong*’s post-ironic de-mystification of the sociocultural value of a masterpiece is *The Debt to Pleasure*’s destabilisation of the concept of the ‘genius’. In particular, Lanchester’s novel calls into question the conventional art-historical understanding of what makes up creative genius and problematises the role of authority figures in establishing and promoting it. The novel does so by playing with the idea that Michelangelo’s art has been treated as the quintessence – if not a touchstone – of artistic mastery and that his name has become synonymous with the concept of genius ever since Vasari’s invention of it. After all, the treatment of Michelangelo as a paragon of genius goes as far back as the use of his art and name per se in the Renaissance discussions of the concept of the ‘genius’. As pointed out by Martin Kemp, Michelangelo’s genius became a “point of reference when [Italian authors writing about visual art in the period] wished to discuss creative ‘genius’ at the very highest level” (sic; qtd. in Biow 55).

The Debt to Pleasure’s references to the Italian sculptor’s name guide the meta-aesthetic and post-ironically subversive discussion of the differences and similarities

²¹ Cf. Berger’s idea of mystifying original works of art as sacred objects as opposed to reproductions. The English art critic primarily argues that this “bogus religiosity” (*Ways* 23) is connected with the rarity of the original and its market value as a consequence of this rarity. Additionally, the scholar sees the contribution of art experts as figures of authority to such mystification in their attempts to prove or disprove the authenticity of a work of art.

²² Cf. the examination of the influence of art experts on the market value of the works of Pieter Bruegel the Younger in Victor A. Ginsburgh et al.’s “The Implicit Value of Art Experts: The Case of Klaus Ertz and Pieter Brueghel the Younger” in *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, vol. 159, 2019, pp. 36-50.

between the traditional artist and the murderer as an artist and help destabilise the traditional conceptualisation of genius in its applicability to the latter. In this sense, Lanchester's de-mystification of the traditional conceptualisation of creative genius is particularly reminiscent of Thomas De Quincey's satirical treatment of a murderer as a genius. In his "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts", the English essayist ironises the possibility to talk about a murderer's genius as long as the murderer's activity can be conceptualised as art.²³ Moreover, he makes specific reference to Michelangelo's excellence in the art of painting in order to argue for a parallel to the sense of sublimity evoked by the work of a creative genius, be it poetry, painting, or murder:

Mr Williams has exalted the ideal of murder to all of us; and to me, therefore, in particular, has deepened the arduousness of my task. Like Aeschylus or Milton in poetry, like Michael Angelo in painting, he has carried his art to a point of colossal sublimity; and, as Mr Wordsworth observes, has in a manner 'created the taste by which he is to be enjoyed.' (10).

Even though Lanchester's unreliable narrator Tarquin Winot hypocritically refuses to be called a genius (Lanchester 18), he evidently has no doubt about being one. Far from implicitly, he places himself on a par with Michelangelo the way De Quincey does with the murderer John Williams. In a conversation with his interviewer, Laura Tavistock, the novel's protagonist shares his thoughts on Vasari's role in the invention of the concept of 'genius' as well as his thoughts on his role in the preservation of Michelangelo's masterpieces for future generations. Moreover, he proceeds to invite Laura to become such "a collaborator, an apostle, a witness" for his own artwork, to be his "partner, companion, evangelist" (74) the way Vasari had been for Michelangelo. A few pages later we come across his brazen and boastful reference to the "Michelangelesque *terribilità*" (87) of his culinary creations. Hugely ironic and macabre – if we take into consideration his hobby as a serial killer –, this is a reference to the emotive power of his culinary creations as akin to that of Michelangelo's art to provoke transcendental and sublime awe and terror in the beholder.

Ironically enough, the interviewer is there to write a biography of his brother Bartholomew, an acclaimed sculptor dismissed by Tarquin Winot as talentless. The narrator's self-proclaimed genius emerges in contrast with his brother's genius that is

²³ See, for example, De Quincey's ironical suggestion that "[a]s the inventor of murder, and the father of the art, Cain must have been a man of first-rate genius" (13).

likewise defined through references to Michelangelo. In particular, we learn that their French tutor was sure that Bartholomew was “going to be the greatest sculptor since Michelangelo” (199) and that the director of the Texas museum, who acquires Bartholomew’s sculptures, evidently considers him as “having a kind of Frink-Moore-Michelangelo thing” (142).

Situated between the lines of Tarquin Winot’s unreliable narration, these conventional comparisons with Michelangelo become evidence of his brother’s artistic genius insofar as they are communicated by the witnesses to his life and art. However, the reader’s traditional understanding of the idea of ‘genius’ is challenged insofar as he/she is invited to become not only an accomplice to Tarquin Winot’s murders, but also, more importantly, the only witness to and apostle of his genius. Put in the position of a witness as well, the reader is seemingly assigned the agency to determine what constitutes a genius and to what extent it is justified to liken a murderer’s genius to that of Michelangelo without falling victim to the postmodern irony of this analogy. After all, the novel’s – ultimately undeniably creative – serial killer redefines this concept: “Genius is close to imposture; the correlation between interestingness and fraudulence is ‘disturbingly’ high” (70-71).

Thus, whether it adapts metanarratively formulated methods or ideologies that underpin the perception and understanding of art, the ekphrastic gaze contributes to a rewriting of the metanarratives of the art discourse: they appear as localised and fundamentally subjective small narratives. Within the postmodern meta-ekphrastic discourse, we see the emergence of a variety of little localised and idiosyncratic – yet paradoxically nostalgic – stories about Friedländer’s expert judges in matters of taste, Vasarian geniuses, Botticellian women, and Hogarthian men. We see a reinvention of Hogarth’s *Analysis of Beauty* (1753) as a more erotic fictional treatise on homosexual beauty and a rewriting of Panofsky’s *Studies in Iconology* (1939) as a humorous study of the iconology and iconography of English society. We see a replacement of the traditional art-historical study with metafictional musings about the wreck of the frigate *Méduse* and – “[m]odern and ignorant, we reimagine the story” (Barnes, *History* 133).

5.1 Conclusion

To sum up, the ekphrastic gaze is instrumental in (de-/re-)constructing the meta-ekphrastic discourse in British postmodern fiction. It helps to actualise the interplay between the fictional and non-fictional ekphrastic discourses. In doing so, it contributes

to the meta-ekphrastic rewriting and (de-)mystification of the metanarratives of art, its history and theory. More specifically, the ekphrastic gaze recycles socioculturally authoritative modes of seeing, conceptions, methods, and theories regarding aesthetic and artistic perception. This includes the following motifs and contexts:

- a problematisation of the Lyotardian metanarrativity of the art discourse with regard to the art-discursive construction of sociocultural knowledge
- a (de-)mystification of the art-related metanarratives of aesthetic perception as small narratives
- a (de-)mystification of the role of the art expert in the establishment of certain ‘truths’ and ‘values’ in the art discourse
- a recycling of theoretical formulae of aesthetic and artistic perception such as William Hogarth’s ‘line of beauty’, Max Friedländer’s methods of connoisseurship, Erwin Panofsky’s methods of iconography and iconology, John Ruskin’s idea of the ‘innocence of the eye’, the recurrent art-discursive motif of the interplay between eye and mind
- a sociocultural (de-)mystification of the inherently ideological art-discursive concepts delineated by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972): “Beauty, Truth, Genius, Civilization, Form, Status, Taste” (11), especially the concepts of Botticellian beauty, Bruegel’s mastery/genius, Michelangelo’s genius

6. Conclusion

The ekphrastic gaze helps to contextualise British postmodern fiction within the Western interdisciplinary ekphrastic tradition. From the reliance upon and glorification of Old Masters to the meta-ekphrastic revival of existing modes of artistic and aesthetic perception, the ekphrastic gaze expresses the British postmodern reaction against the aesthetics and ideologies of modernism with its rejection of the authority of the Renaissance and its search for new forms of expression.

Thus, one of the ways in which this study has expanded on the previous research on ekphrasis in British postmodern fiction (cf. ch. 1) consists in finding out how the ekphrastic gaze as a distinctive type of ekphrasis expresses the sociocultural postmodern turn in British fiction. The scholars who previously offered comparative overviews that took into account instances of British postmodern ekphrasis primarily focused on the narratological aspects of ekphrasis and its connection to issues of perception and representation. In its turn, this study has shifted the scholarly focus towards the connection between British postmodern ekphrasis and the all-encompassing aesthetic, historical, and socioculturally specific transition from British modernism to a new postmodern paradigm that pivots on the strategy of recycling past forms, images, conventions, and ideologies.

The study has combined Erwin Panofsky's methods of iconography and iconology with other methods, approaches, and theories from different academic fields and disciplines such as literary studies, aesthetics, art history, art theory, cultural studies and social sciences, linguistics, film/video studies, historiography, ethics, psychiatry, and criminology. In doing so, the study has provided a new perspective on British postmodern ekphrasis as a phenomenon that discloses a variety of meanings centering around observer and observed. These meanings can be classified according to their nature as happening on two levels, i.e. (i) iconographical, and (ii) iconological meanings.

On the level of pre-iconographical and iconographical description, the study has demonstrated how the ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction recycles prevalent art-historical or art-related motifs and the conventional themes/concepts associated with them. On the iconological level, the study has established the underlying sociocultural trends/symptoms and ideologies that the ekphrastic gaze simultaneously reinforces and

subverts. In doing so, the study has tested the applicability of Panofsky's methods of art-historical analysis of visual images to the study of ekphrasis in British postmodern fiction. Focusing on a wider selection of British postmodern texts than previous studies on British postmodern ekphrasis, the study has provided a systematic and comparative overview of a broad variety of meanings as to their recurrence in over thirty British postmodern novels, novellas, and short stories.

Moreover, drawing upon other scholars' conceptualisations of the 'ekphrastic encounter' (cf. ch. 2), the study has provided a new perspective on the perceptually motivated ekphrastic encounter as a chronotopically defined phenomenon, both narratologically and ideologically. It introduced and tested the applicability of the concept of the postmodern chronotope of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest and a character type that this chronotope pivots on: the figure of the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur which can refer to both character and reader. At the same time, the study has drawn particular attention to an aspect that has so far been overlooked by scholars of ekphrasis in British postmodern fiction: the interplay between the fictional ekphrastic discourse and the non-fictional metanarratives of art history, art theory, and aesthetics through the meta-ekphrastic recycling of the modes of artistic and aesthetic perception.

All in all, the study has gained insights into the following contexts of ekphrasis in British postmodern fiction:

- the specificities of the postmodern turn in British fiction as to the ekphrastic discourse (a reaction against the modernist search for innovative modes of thinking and seeing; a return to the tenets of the art-historical tradition, particularly the visions of the Renaissance; the concept of the ekphrastic 'already made' or *déjà vu*; a 'de-naturalization' and 'de-doxification' of major aesthetic ideologies, including those established by John Ruskin and Oscar Wilde; the iconography and iconology of ekphrastic images)
- the chronotopicity of those British postmodern texts that make prolific use of ekphrasis and the ekphrastic gaze (the concept of the chronotope of the (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest; the figure of the (Pseudo-)Connoisseur as a postmodern character type; architectonic functions of the motif of a perceptually motivated ekphrastic encounter; its connection to other chronotopic motifs such as the motifs of search/discovery, recognition/nonrecognition, acquisition/loss, escape, love motifs, the chronotope of the road; a postmodern play with different

chronotopic values)

- the use of Erwin Panofsky's art-historical methods of iconography and iconology for a deconstructionist study of fictional ekphrasis
- the sociocultural condition of postmodernity in the British discourse (a distrust and (de-)mystification of sociocultural metanarratives of knowledge, particularly art-historical and scientific knowledge; a problematisation of ideologies such as the ideologies of the body, gender, art, knowledge, beauty, education, history, religion, gastronomy, social status, and nationality)
- the continuities and discontinuities in British and Irish literary and aesthetic traditions (the tradition of ekphrastic vision; the tradition of character types; 'museum gothic'; the aesthetics of murder as art)
- the reader's participation in the (de-/re-)construction of meaning with regard to postmodern ekphrasis (the interplay between the gazes of author, character, and reader; the 'mock reader' as a (Pseudo-)Connoisseur; the concept of the Western reader)
- issues of the traditional art discourse (recurrent artistic themes and motifs; Eurocentrism, androcentrism, and 'cultural mystification' in the art discourse; the construction of the art-historical canon; the elitism of art-related knowledge and education; the 'science' of connoisseurship; the aesthetic vs. the commercial value of a work of art; the commodification of art; the problematic discursive concepts of 'master', 'masterpiece', and 'genius')
- the interplay between the fictional and non-fictional ekphrastic discourses (meta-ekphrasis in fiction; the applicability of theoretical and conceptual formulae of artistic and aesthetic perception outside of the traditional art discourse; the postmodern recycling/rewriting of the metanarratives of art history, art theory, and aesthetics)

In terms of an outlook onto future research, this study lays the foundation for further interdisciplinary studies in the field of ekphrasis. Thus, it would be useful to examine and to compare the ways in which the ekphrastic gaze actualises the aesthetic, sociocultural, and ideological contexts in which it appears in different national literatures and different epochs. When it comes to British literature, what can be said, for example, about the ekphrastic gaze as an expression of the Renaissance aesthetics of

a nostalgia for classical antiquity in Shakespeare's works? In which ways does the Gothic manifestation of the ekphrastic gaze help to portray the *zeitgeist* of eighteenth-century England and Ireland in the Gothic fiction of that period?

At the same time, it would be rewarding to investigate the way the ekphrastic gaze contributes to the (de-/re-)construction of history in art-historical fiction and art-related historiographic metafiction.¹ Whether it is Ellis Avery's novel *The Last Nude* written from the perspective of Tamara de Lempicka's mysterious model or A.S. Byatt's short story "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary" about Diego Velázquez's work on one of his paintings, these works draw and expand on the traditional art-historical discourse. They do so in a complex way that requires a comprehensive study which would take into account the (de-)historicising power of the ekphrastic gaze in this particular type of fiction.

Moreover, it would be interesting to make art-historical texts the object of research and to look at the way the ekphrastic gaze in the Western tradition of ekphrastic fiction, including art-historical fiction/art-related historiographic metafiction, contributes to the (de-)construction of the non-fictional history of art. Specifically, it would be rewarding to see how the fictional discourse of art history affects the non-fictional one both directly and indirectly. One example of a direct influence would be Honoré de Balzac's novella "The Unknown Masterpiece" which introduces Poussin and Porbus as its protagonists. Art critics and art historians believe that this novella not only inspired the artistic gazes of Cézanne and Picasso, but also made them identify with the ekphrastic gaze of its fictional protagonist who attempts to improve Porbus's painting (Hubert 53; Kear 345). In this sense, while only hypothetical, the influence of Balzac's novella on Cézanne and Picasso contributes to the construction of a particular art-historical (meta-)narrative around it.

I should like to conclude with an anecdote which demonstrates the way the

¹ The term 'historiographic metafiction' (5) is borrowed here from Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). As indicated in chapter 1 of this study, it dealt with works about imaginary characters and events that only appeal to art and art-historical/aesthetic discourse through the perspective of a fictional contemporary observer. This allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the role that the ekphrastic gaze plays in expressing the postmodern recycling of past conventions and modes of seeing both at the intra- and extratextual level of discourse. While the study analysed certain instances of historiographic metafiction (e.g. Peter Ackroyd's *English Music*, Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*), it did not address works that attempt – or pretend to attempt – to (re-)construct history and historicity by way of introducing the historicised and historicising ekphrastic gazes of historical figures the way some other instances of art-related historiographic metafiction (e.g. Rossetti in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) and art-historical fiction do.

ekphrastic gaze in British postmodern fiction not only continues to echo the traditional art discourse, but also surprises us with its recycling of Wilde's aesthetic model of life as an imitation of art in the most fascinating way. Published in 1999, Michael Frayn's *Headlong* uncannily foreshadows the actual accidental discovery of an authentic Bruegel in 2010. As the art critic Michael Kimmelman reports for *The New York Times*, the painting *The Wine of St. Martin's Day*, newly identified as the largest painting of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, was discovered in a private collector's "proverbial dark corridor, in Córdoba, where it [had been] accumul[at]ing dirt" (Kimmelman, "Overlooked Art").

Curiously enough, it would appear that *Headlong*'s Martin Clay had hugely underestimated the market value of a Bruegel that he had judged to be worth only a couple of million pounds. Eleven years later, *The Wine of St. Martin's Day* was claimed to be worth one hundred million dollars on the open market. Yet, as Kimmelman's article "When Overlooked Art Turns Celebrity" tells us, it was acquired by the Prado Museum for nine million dollars in accordance with the Spanish patrimony law which had given the museum the right to establish the painting's price.

Post-ironically, life turns out to imitate art the way Wilde demonstrated: the extratextually real discovery of a Bruegel imitates Frayn's fictional one, while the narrative constructed around it will confirm the semi-hypocritical truth about such discoveries and the role of our own (pseudo-)connoisseurial gaze in them:

. . . [T]he news breaks about its [a discovered artwork's – N.G.] ostensible author, and we slap our heads, yet again, for relying on labels rather than on our eyes, a lesson finally learned, we tell ourselves before admiring the discovery because of its fancier label, as if anything had really changed.

Connoisseurship, notwithstanding the chemicals and gizmos modern science has concocted to aid in its detective work, remains an art. That's the beauty part of it, and what also keeps alive the business of looking, the flip side of this business being how money and fame can sometimes make dreamers or opportunists out of even the most scrupulous experts and institutions. . . .

Attributing a picture to a household deity like Bruegel or Michelangelo affirms our sense of control, our ability to get a grip on our affairs, at least for the moment. (Kimmelman, "Overlooked Art")

Whether or not Kimmelman read *Headlong*, his article about the newly rediscovered Bruegel echoes its narrative of a (pseudo-)connoisseurial quest and (de-)mystifies the

contexts and ideologies of the conventional art discourse the way Frayn's novel does. The article reminds us of the complexity of a perceptually motivated encounter with art and its pivotal role in the entire Western ekphrastic tradition as a tradition guided by the ekphrastic gaze – even if it is the (pseudo-)connoisseurial gaze that continues to appreciate a work of art on the basis of the preconceptions about its status in the current art discourse.

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Eidesstattliche Erklärung

Hiermit versichere ich, Nataliya Gorbina, gemäß § 11 (2) der Promotionsordnung der Technischen Universität Dortmund für die Fakultät Kulturwissenschaften vom 22. April 2014, dass die von mir vorgelegte Dissertation selbständig verfasst und alle in Anspruch genommenen Quellen und Hilfen in der Dissertation vermerkt wurden.

Ort, Datum _____

Unterschrift _____