Ekphrasis and the writing process

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Abstract

In contemporary literary studies, the term *ekphrasis* refers almost exclusively to a poem created by a poet looking at a painting. In the visual arts and music it is used more broadly to describe intermedial creative processes where, for example, a painting is inspired by a piece of music, or the composition of a piece of music is inspired by a poem. The ekphrasis concept is based on the ancient Greek ἑκφρασις, which were rhetorical ‘description’ exercises considered important for developing written and perceptual skills.

This article considers the gradual recognition by creative writers, and especially novelists, that ekphrasis is a key aspect of their practice. It examines the original purpose of ekphrasis as a rhetorical exercise, then considers how this was interpreted in the time of the first novel writers. It assesses how the technology that changed the way we see – photography – influenced prose writing in the modern era. It looks at how neuroscience and cognitive psychology have attempted to explain what goes on in our minds when we do ekphrasis. And it reports on what writers themselves have said about their visualizing techniques. Overall, this article analyses ekphrasis as a key element in the creative writing process.

Keywords: Ekphrasis, creative writing process, fiction, the mind’s eye, the inner voice

Introduction

Recent focus on the ekphrasis genre demonstrates a revival of interest in a creative process first identified two millennia ago – in the Roman Empire in the first century CE. The guiding statement for modern scholars and contemporary practitioners has been Plutarch’s quote from

Simonides – ‘Painting is silent poetry, and poetry is painting that speaks’ (Plutarch, *De gloria Atheniensium* 3.346f, quoted, for example, in Segal 1995: 200) – even though in his time Plutarch was not talking about ekphrasis in particular. As Ruth Webb points out:

Over the last few decades, ekphrasis has been defined as “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art”, “the verbal representation of visual representation” or “words about an image”. For all their variety, these definitions place a central importance on a certain type of referent: the visual arts... But this was not its ancient sense... There was [then] indisputably a strong tradition of describing real or imaginary works of art in oratory, historiography, epigram, epic and other poetry. But there is no evidence that these were considered to form a single genre, or that that genre had a name, still less that that name would have been “ekphrasis”. (Webb 2009: 1-2)

While, simply put, ekphrasis is about perceiving something, visualizing that something, and conveying that something to others, the perceiving/visualizing/re-presenting process involved in ekphrasis provides a territory of investigation where insights into how artists paint, how writers write, how musicians compose, etc becomes amplified and potentially accessible.

In ‘Figure: Ekphrasis’ (2013), Froma Zeitlin describes early uses of the term *ekphrasis* as found in the Greek rhetoric handbooks (*progymnasmata*). She quotes from Theon’s *Progymnasmata* (a work probably of the 1st century CE): ‘Ekphrasis is a descriptive speech that brings the thing shown vividly before the eyes’ (Zeitlin 2013: 17-18). Required for this kind of description are:

First and foremost ... the qualities of *enargeia* (vividness), *sapheneia* (clarity), and *phantasia* (mental image), which, taken together, aim to turn listeners (or readers) into viewers and to evoke an emotional response through an appeal to the immediacy of an imagined presence. (Zeitlin 2013: 17)

‘*Phantasia* (mental image)’ is the key element in the process: the language used must create a transferable mind-image; the qualities of ‘*enargeia* (vividness)’ and ‘*sapheneia* (clarity)’ are aimed at forceful stimulation of the receiver’s mental image – a process which begins in the speaker/writer’s mind and ends in the listener/reader’s mind. Goldhill explains the first-century CE understanding of the *phantasia* mind-site in the following way:

When Longinus introduces the topic of *phantasia*, he writes, “I use this word *phantasia* for what some people call *eidolopoiein*, image production” – the very word Plutarch uses for the shared aim of poets and painters. Longinus continues:

The term *phantasia* is used generally for anything that in any way suggests a thought productive of speech; but the word has also come into fashion for the

situation in which enthusiasm and emotion make the speaker *see* what he is saying and bring it *visually* before the audience. [in *On the Sublime*, 15.1]
(Goldhill 2007: 6, italics in original)

Longinus suggested that mental imagery operates in both verbal and visual production processes. His *On the Sublime*, dated to the first century CE, shows remarkable insight into the creative writing process, proposing that the creative speaker/writer/painter sees the original mental image excitedly and because of this excitement is able to convey its qualities to another in an effective way. In this process, what happens on the *phantasia* mind-site – for both sender and receiver of the mental image – is critical. The better-skilled the speaker/writer/painter (and also, we suggest, the better-skilled the listener/reader/viewer) the better the image communicated.

While many studies have examined the relationship between image and word in the intermedial process where poems are produced by writers considering real or imagined etchings and paintings – from Homer’s verse stimulated by Hephaestus’ art work on Achilles’ shield (Homer nd), through William Carlos Williams’ famous series of poems inspired by Breugel’s paintings (Williams 1962), and so on – in this article we take a different perspective. We claim that the *ordinary* process of writing involves ekphrasis: that ekphrasis is not restricted to the special situation where an art image inspires a textual work; rather, that the production of a mental image occurs in many kinds of writing situations and that the transfer of its evocative emotional presence from one mind (the writer’s) to another (the reader’s) is a key part of the writing process generally in all forms – fiction, poetry, nonfiction, etc.

Zeitlin says the Greek rhetoric handbooks allowed for a variety of definitions for ekphrasis – ‘a rhetorical exercise, a literary genre (or mode), a narrative digression, a species of description, or a poetic (even metapoetic or meta-representational) technique’ (Zeitlin 2013: 17). She states: ‘Only belatedly (or by implication) does ekphrasis include descriptions of works of art, the common usage today’ (18). Originally, the standard topics for ekphrasis were not art works but ‘battles, landscapes, festivals, seasons, people, animals, and object[s]’ (18). The ekphrastic rhetoric exercise was about *describing* – the clear and vivid depicting/portraying/representing of an event, a view, a person or object in such a way that the ‘enthralment of the viewer’ became the enthralment of the ‘would-be viewer’ (30). The Ekphrasis exercise sat alongside other exercises in the rhetoric handbooks including those for

Narrative, Personification and Thesis. To excel at Ekphrasis, the writer had to perfect the transfer of an image created *from reality* in their own mind, to the mind of another.

We will return to the cognitive neuroscience of visualisation – how images form in the mind – in due course, but here we look further at the ancient implications of the ekphrastic exercise for the development of creative writing. In ‘Simple Magic: Ekphrasis from Antiquity to the Age of Cervantes’ (2005), Frederick de Armas proposes a list of ekphrastic usages recognised by around the year 1600, the time when Cervantes created, arguably, the first novel, *Don Quixote* (1605). De Armas’ list shows that while by the seventeenth century the concept may have settled into a genre where an art work was involved, it nevertheless utilised a variety of narrative processes in a variety of narrative situations:

In terms of form and function, ekphrasis can be allegorical, emblematic, decorative, or veiled; and it can serve as a rhetorical or mnemonic device (or both)... In terms of pictorial models and how these are used, ekphrasis can be notional (based on an imagined work of art), or actual or true (based on a real work of art). It can also be combinatory (combining two or more works of art), transformative (changing some elements in the art work into others that can be connected to the original ones), metadescriptive (based on a textual description of a work of art which may or may not exist), or fragmented (using parts of a work). Ekphrasis can conform to the pause in the narrative to describe an object (descriptive ekphrasis), or it can tell the story depicted in the art work – and even expand on the incidents (narrative ekphrasis). There is also the ekphrasis of an object that is being created, such as Vulcan’s forging of Achilles’ shield – a shaping ekphrasis. Finally, an ekphrasis can be contained within another ekphrasis, creating a metaekphrasis... Paradoxically, ekphrasis can also be dramatic, using the art object to construct a developing action – thus taking to an extreme, the narrative ekphrasis. And, beyond this, the device can become an *ur-ekphrasis, existing as a concept of ekphrasis in a character’s mind ... thus foregrounding the process of artistic creation.* (de Armas 2005: 21-23, our italics)

De Armas suggests that in Cervantes’ time ekphrasis, as *description*, was seen to be a key theoretical concept in writing, and the applicability of ekphrastic process to a wide range of writing situations was being investigated, including in the several ways Cervantes himself used it innovatively for the writing of his novel (de Armas 2005: 20-21).

In the centuries following, the focus of the ekphrasis genre narrowed for writers until it was seen as a device mainly of relevance to specialist investigations of the relationship between visual art works and poetry. In most writers’ minds, this is the current usage. Three well-known critical works are examples – Emily Bilman’s *Modern Ekphrasis* (2013), Stephen Cheeke’s *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (2008), and James Heffernan’s

Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery (2004 [1993]): they each look at ekphrasis as a process where a painting becomes a poem. Indicating the popularity of this view, Robert Denham's bibliographic tome *Poets on Paintings* (2010) is a 200-page list of ekphrastic poetry volumes, anthologies, journals and websites plus an 80-page list of critical works to 2010. There are now more to add.

Having claimed a right to it – perhaps based on misplaced faith in the Plutarch (via Simonides) edict, 'Painting is silent poetry, and poetry is painting that speaks' – the poetry industry does not tend to question whether its focus in any way limits the rhetoric handbooks' definitions of ekphrasis. For example, only one of the critical works cited in the paragraph above has 'poetry' or 'poetics' specifically in its title; and each uses a standard process of comparing the words in a poem with an associated painting – although Cheeke's book, after six chapters about poetry and painting, has sequestered chapters on 'Photography and elegy' and 'Prose ekphrasis' (Cheeke 2008: 142-189). Lately, however, other art forms have been laying strong claims to the ekphrastic process. These include music, film and photography. Other writing forms have asserted themselves too, including the short story, nonfiction and theatre.

We can focus, for example, on three critical works: Siglind Bruhn's *Musical Ekphrasis: Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting* (2000), Laura Eidt's *Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film* (2008) and Andrew Miller's *Poetry, Photography, Ekphrasis: Lyrical Representations of Photographs from the 19th Century to the Present* (2015). Each sets up a conversation between the 'traditional' participants in ekphrasis – poetry and painting – and a new area of involvement, i.e. music, film and photography. They call for 'expanding the definition of ekphrasis' (Eidt 2008: 16) to include the creative processes they espouse. Bruhn and Eidt move the definition of ekphrasis forward via Claus Clüver's earlier articles (Clüver & Watson 1989, Clüver 1997) to the idea where ultimately Eidt quotes WJT Mitchell's classic *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (1994), saying that despite the ideological battles,

there is no essential difference between the two arts [visual and textual]. In other words, neither are the visual arts "inherently spatial, static, corporeal, and shapely", nor are "arguments, addresses, ideas, and narratives" proper to language. Although the visual and verbal media are different "at the level of sign-types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions", Mitchell emphasizes that semantically, that is, in terms of "expressing intentions and producing effects in a viewer/listener,

there is no essential difference between texts and images”. Thus, in contrast to the restrictive, cautionary warnings of earlier critics, for Mitchell “the problem is that we have not gone nearly far enough in our exploration of text-image relations”. (Eidt 2008: 15)

As Webb (2009), Goldhill (2007) and Zeitlin (2013) confirm, approaches to ekphrasis in the new millennium have opened up new attitudes and exploration. This reflects a new sense of intermediality – a greater awareness and understanding of the transfer of narratives between platforms in different media, and between different writing and reading modes. We know we don’t think in words alone any more, nor in images alone; we do both together. The influence of screens in the computer age – and before that, film and TV – have changed our ways of reading and writing, giving them more spatial and less linear orientations (Kress 2003, 2010). In the centuries following the establishment of the printing press, we grew dependent on the textual/verbal mode of reading and understanding. But in the computer age we are sophisticated ekphrasis participants: we have greater intermedial capability to turn images into words, and words into images – as also, ironically, humans were capable of before Gutenberg and printing, when oral and visual traditions prevailed and the cathedral with its exemplary murals, statuary, sculpted doors and stained glass windows was as much a Bible for the illiterate listener as were the words read out by the literate priest (see McGann 2001: xii; Calvino 2016: 105-6). The process where a writer translates a painting into words today no longer holds the status it held for the last 600 years. The parameters for the practice of ekphrasis have changed.

Zeitlin refers to this when she says:

...beyond this brief definition [i.e. *enargeia* (vividness), *sapheneia* (clarity), and *phantasia* (mental image)], the word “ekphrasis” immediately ushers us into a whole set of questions regarding its intermedial status in a potential contest between verbal and visual representations, the uses of mimesis with regard to verisimilitude (reality–illusion; truth–fiction), and its cognitive, psychological, and mnemonic values in the cultural expectations of its era. It would not be hyperbole to suggest that no other rhetorical term has aroused such interest in recent years among classicists and non-classicists alike, involving aesthetic considerations, theories of vision, modes of viewing, mental impressions, and the complex relationships between word and image. (Zeitlin 2013: 17)

In our article here, we show that ekphrasis is a key practice in the creative writing process. Its relevance to writing is clearer now due to developments triggered by the invention of photography in the nineteenth century, and to technological developments after that.

Photography re-focused and revitalised visual thinking in the western world in the nineteenth century; it allowed us to understand better how the process from mental image in one head can be transferred to another head. Photography marshalled into the ekphrasis process something other than painting, etching and sculpture art forms: convincingly, photography put a 'reproduction' of reality itself – seemingly without second-handedness – into the minds of viewers.

Nineteenth century and contemporary applications of ekphrasis – photography and prose

Nineteenth century applications

The nineteenth century brought with it new ways of seeing and interacting with the world: massive industry which changed perception of size and speed; a grand-scale propulsion of colonisation which had its groundwork laid in the eighteenth century; and especially important for our discussion here, steady progress in the development of photography, leading to an ease of acquisition and consumerism of images. This in turn gave the western world a new concept of what the reproduction of reality might look like, and also the capacity for visual stereotyping based on seemingly real impressions. The Victorians learned quickly to recognise and embrace a stereotypical view of others in photographic portraiture, while at the same time they saw themselves in 'authentic' photographic 'reflection' which painted portraits lacked. In 1840, Edgar Allan Poe said of photography:

All language must fall short of conveying any just idea of the truth, and this will not appear so wonderful when we reflect that the source of vision itself has been, in this instance [i.e. the daguerreotype], the designer. Perhaps, if we imagine the distinctness with which an object is reflected in a positively perfect mirror, we come as near the reality as by any other means. (Poe 2008)

Poe here indicates the effect this new way of seeing had on writers. Visually, photography was perceived as lacking that hand-of-the-artist necessary to painting or sculpture. The photographer was not yet (in most cases) considered to have artistic power over the presented image. 'In the first decades of its existence, photography was dubbed "sun-painting", a phrase often intended to be derisive, and one which epitomized the seemingly inescapable

confrontation of photography's mechanical character to the painter's artistic freedom' (Brunet 2009: 7). In a significant way, photography seemed to short-circuit the ekphrastic process: it could apparently represent reality as 'reality'; there was evidently no longer the need for artistic or writerly labour in re-presentation. The visual image in the mind could be transferred via the visual image in the camera.

It seems natural then that writers, like Poe, would for the most part take photography as literal, as reality, rather than as an artist's version of vision, and that their engagement with photographs would be influenced by their perception of photographs as authentic, as an effortless presentation (outside of the handling of equipment) of the 'real'. Thus, the concept of writers' work was changed radically in the nineteenth century – they were no longer the slaving ekphrastists, those burdened with the task of describing the real to the readership. They were being replaced by the photograph, and they had to adapt to the potential threat of its technology.

In the newly-emerged Victorian realist novels,

“the image” – or, more accurately, a differential system thereof – supplanted writing as the grounding of fiction. Visual culture supplied the social classifications that novelists had to confirm, adjust, criticize, or update if they wished to hold the readership's attention. (Armstrong 1999: 3)

Writers had to learn to re-see the people and scenes around them in the terms dictated by the new technology, and adapt their descriptions to suit. In effect, writers had to contend with a developing set of visual clichés:

Rather than inspiring a proliferation of photographic types and genres ... the increasing demand for new faces and exotic costumes fueled a countertendency to portray all new visual information in one of several familiar ways, among them, family portraiture, celebrity portraiture, mug shots, picturesque types, and native peoples of the world. As photographic subject matter increased in scope and variety, the kind of shot that was used acquired greater predictability. The distinction between the portrait of a loved one and that of a criminal became just as obvious as that differentiating either a celebrity from a native or a sentimental illustration from a political cartoon... By the sheer force of repetition, moreover, these categories established not only how objects and people were supposed to look but also what would happen to their appearance, were they to violate the norms of reason and respectability. (Armstrong 1999: 129-130)

For Victorian writers, this categorical and stereotypical imaging of people meant the possibility of quicker, easier characterisation than previously. To write a character as a drunk or a buffoon could now mean describing them purely in visual terms – shabby clothing, bulbous features, a slack face – and the writer could do away with the kind of exploration of identity that may have previously been required to breathe life into a character.

Clearly writers in the nineteenth century felt an obligation to interact with photography, to stay ahead of the game in some way, to appear up-to-date, just as contemporary writers feel obliged to use social media to promote themselves, to give their plots and characters relevance to readers, etc. For his part, eminent art critic and academic John Ruskin at first embraced photography as a ‘blessed invention’ in the 1840s and 1850s (cited in Rabb 1995: 110). He likewise referred to the daguerreotype as

“...a noble invention – say what they will of it – and anyone who has worked and blundered and stammered as I have done for four days [of drawing], and then sees the thing he has been trying to do so long in vain, done perfectly and faultlessly in half a minute, won’t abuse it afterwards.” (From a letter written by Ruskin to his father in 1845, quoted in Harvey 1984: 25)

But Ruskin despaired photography’s existence later in life, coming to consider it ‘another example of a machine undermining the creativity, spirit, and dignity of human labour’ (Rabb 1995: 110). Ruskin’s derision of photography as a practice, and of the photograph (‘sun-blackened paper’ and ‘black art’) as the end result, became particularly venomous in the 1870s and 1880s. He warned his contemporaries not to waste their ‘human labour’ on photography of landscapes especially, because

photographs ... give you nothing you do not work for... They are not true, though they seem so. They are merely spoiled nature. If it is not human design you are looking for, there is more beauty in the next wayside bank than in all the sun-blackened paper you could collect in a lifetime (Ruskin 1870: 42)... For geographical and geological purposes they are worth anything; for art purposes, worth a good deal less than zero. (Ruskin 1906 [1872]: 220)

We can see that Ruskin eventually used against it what photography lacked. For example, photography was not capable of producing images in colour, being then limited to black or white, or shades of grey. It was not then perceived as being capable of (purposefully) manipulating the desired image in order to be artistic; or at least this was not desired, yet, by the audience of photography. Ruskin showed that photography lacked the human element inherent to art: its limitations seemed to be precisely related to its lack of ekphrastic potential

in the sense that ekphrasis as rhetorical device is not a process solely about transferral of a visual image from one mind to another, it also involves emotion, engagement, interpretation, enthrallment, and so on.

In “‘Visit to Plumbe’s Gallery,” July 2, 1846’, Walt Whitman describes his experience in ‘*Plumbe’s Daguerreotype establishment*’ – ‘the Picture Gallery at the upper corner of Murray street and Broadway’ in New York. He says he was in the midst of ‘a great legion of human faces’ surrounded by an immense gallery of portraits:

What a spectacle! In whatever direction you turn your peering gaze, you see naught but human faces! There they stretch, from floor to ceiling – hundreds of them. Ah! *What tales might those pictures tell if their mute lips had the power of speech!* ... There is always, to us, a strange fascination, in portraits. We love to dwell upon them – *to infer many things, from the text they preach* – to pursue the current of thoughts running riot about them... We have miniatures in our possession, which we have often held, and gazed upon the eyes in them for the half-hour! An electric chain seems to vibrate, as it were, between our brain and him or her preserved there so well by the limner’s cunning. *Time, space, both are annihilated*, and we identify the semblance with the reality. (Whitman 2008, emphasis added)

Whitman refers to the collapse of time and space when he describes the effect of past and present converging within the viewer/reader/audience of an image taken in the past, by someone of the past, and looked at in the present. Whitman is transported to that subject’s presence, and then conveys it in his medium – words – also referring to the ‘tales those ... pictures tell’ and ‘the text they preach’, as if the portrait’s transferral into words, and the writer’s need to do so, is inherent. Whitman is aware of the ekphrastic process that is inevitable when one visits a gallery – that the gallery-goer tends to verbalise their viewing, prompted to transcribe visual thinking to verbal thinking while contemplating gallery images. But Whitman here insists that the photographs *preach a text* – their visuality *creates* the communication/interaction in words. The poet shows how newly he is thinking about photography – this is not Poe’s submission to the ‘positively perfect mirror’ of photography; it is Whitman’s embrace of ‘the current of thoughts running riot about them’. Whitman saw that identifying ‘the semblance with the reality’ made photography highly inspiring. The ‘electric chain’ between the writer and the contemplated photographic image ‘has a sort of magnetism’ (Whitman 2008). Ekphrasis is electrifying for Walt.

Contemporary applications

Cormac McCarthy opens his 1985 novel *Blood Meridian* with the words: ‘See the child’. This is a direct appeal to the reader, in the first sentence of a 335-page novel, to *see* the protagonist. In this way, McCarthy takes ownership of the visual aspect of his writing. He confidently points to his character and tells the reader to look.

See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire. Outside lie dark turned fields with rags of snow and darker woods beyond that harbour yet a few last wolves. His folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water but in truth his father has been a schoolmaster. He lies in drink, he quotes from poets whose names are now lost. The boy crouches by the fire and watches him. (McCarthy 1992: 3)

At the end of this passage, in which we have been told to look at the boy, we now have two characters: the boy we see, and the father he watches. This sets up for the reader an expectation that the novel is very visual, which it is. *Blood Meridian* is full of sweeping and desolate plains, of pensive and seemingly-empty villages, that will explode in violence on the next page. Reading it feels like watching a Sergio Leone western. This is the effect of writer-as-artist; the writing is so expert that the reader is transported to that scene portrayed, nervous, anxious.

Contemporary writers have given their own metaphors to the ekphrasis process, whether knowingly or unknowingly, talking about it as ‘telepathy’, as a ‘portal’, a means to transport the reader into the subject’s presence. Stephen King in *On Writing* (2000) describes telepathy as ‘what writing is’, and follows with a concise description of a table with a red tablecloth. On the table is a cage, and in the cage is a white rabbit munching a carrot-stub. The numeral 8 is marked on the rabbit’s back in blue ink.

It’s an eight. This is what we’re looking at, and we all see it... We’re not even in the same *year* together, let alone the same room... except we *are* together. We’re close. We’re having a meeting of the minds.

I sent you a table with a red cloth on it, a cage, a rabbit, and the number eight in blue ink. You got them all, especially that blue eight. We’ve engaged in an act of telepathy. (King 2000: 78-79)

This is King’s way of explaining the ekphrastic act between the writer and the reader – the transfer of a mental image from one mind into another, collapsing time and distance to bring visual life to the words chosen by the writer.

But the ekphrastic process is not limited to poetry and fiction genres. In discussing her study of Australian artist Vida Lahey, Susan Lovell writes about the biographer's need and responsibility to present the subject's life, or scenes from that life, in as respectful and truthful a manner as possible, without 'over-representing, or misrepresenting, the subject' (Lovell 2013: 273). Lovell takes an artefact from Lahey's life, *Souvenir of the West Coast*, a collection of watercolours painted in 1902 by the artist at twenty years old.

Souvenir contains the first extant art that can be attributed to Lahey. There are twenty watercolors, many accompanied by selected poetry from Romantic poets: the American, John Whittier, features strongly; Wordsworth and Coleridge play cameo roles. The images are named and dated and extra detail is occasionally added as notes about what was eaten or experienced; there is also some dried and faded vegetation. More than a hundred and ten years old, the homemade binding of soft green cardboard is now coming apart. (Lovell 2013: 273)

Lovell discusses the temptation to imagine the significance of the material, the book's relevance to the artist's life and work, the insight contained within. In biography, the writer needs to temper the urge to embellish or dramatize the story at the detriment of accuracy, when attempting to transport the reader to scenes of the life depicted, to close the gap between observer/observed by shifting time. Lovell calls this a 'portal', as coined by Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux (cited in Lovell 2013: 274), and applies it to the biographer's task.

The special feature of an ekphrastic [sic] method in biography is that it consciously strives for this portal experience to generate presence, collapse time, encourage the reader's empathic imagination, and generate an embodied experience of the subject's lived reality via the narrative. (Lovell 2013: 274)

The biographer's 'epistemological stance' is what helps to facilitate the conscientious approach to the material, and the balance between history and creativity. For a careful biographer, the material must be understood in its context before it becomes narrated into a scene.

In Ron Hansen's novel *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (1983) we have an author using a real photograph from history, describing it as part of his historical fiction, using colours (green, blue) which could not have existed in the original photo, and then giving an historical context for the life of the dead man's image, which 'sold for two dollars apiece' (Hansen 1983: 221). When American outlaw Jesse James was murdered in 1882, his corpse was strapped to a board,

... then they tilted the man until he was nearly vertical and let the camera lens accept the scene for a minute. The man's eyes were shut, the skin around them was slightly green, and the sockets themselves seemed so cavernous that photographic copies were later repainted with two blue eyes looking serenely at some vista in the middle distance... [The prints] sold for two dollars apiece and were the models for the lithographed covers on a number of magazines. (Hansen 1983: 220-1)

Hansen employs an ekphrastic practice to reproduce the photograph in his novel, and gives some narration to what happens to the prints of this famous photo. Jesse James, who is a major character in the novel, and whom we the readers have been following closely, becomes (after death) this photograph. Hansen puts us in the room with James' corpse, as the camera lens absorbs the scene 'for a minute', then speeds up time, jumps forward to the wide dispersal of the print into American culture: worth two dollars, and used on the 'covers on a number of magazines', after being transferred into an art-form (the lithograph), another level of ekphrasis taking place. The photograph is what has become of James, in the way that the novel is what has become of his history.

In Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), photography, colour and wordplay join the traditional presentation of text as a means of narrative. The text itself is manipulated throughout the book, from appearing in sections as a single phrase on an otherwise blank page to, over ten pages, becoming so dense that the last page in the section is almost black. Likewise, pages of multicoloured words appear. The first clue that this book will take on a visual aspect occurs on page four, in the form of the business card of a limousine driver. Then, the narrator tells us about his father's red pen, which he always used to circle mistakes in magazines and newspapers. Sure enough, on page ten of the novel, the words 'not stop looking' appear circled in red, a clue to the boy from his father. This novel has come alive visually, in a literal sense. The pages of multicoloured words, representing the pads of testing paper next to a pen display in an art supply store, show that the narrator searches for clues. There is a 15-page photo essay beginning on page 53, some of the images obviously related to the narrative, some requiring the reader/viewer to decipher their connection. Foer's novel has moved beyond the usual two-way street of the ekphrastic relationship. Rather than being strictly a text that responds to images, to visuals, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* merges the two, closing the distance between the story and the reader to such an extent, bringing the reader so close, that what the narrator sees is actually what the reader sees, 'bringing the thing before the eyes' directly.

The mind's eye and the inner voice – what science says about verbal and nonverbal modes of thinking

In the 2011 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Creativity*, Edward Nęcka asserts:

Humans, in opposition to other species, can perceive the external world through images or through words. In consequence, they can think and process information in two modes: verbal and nonverbal... [These two systems] based on separate codes of information processing ... can cooperate, meaning that a piece of information obtained through the nonverbal channel can be verbalized, while verbal information can be expressed in mental images. (Nęcka 2011: 217)

Cognitive scientists Shepard and others showed that viewing a visual object involves the creation of a visual image – a picture in the mind – which our nonvisual thinking can interpret and verbalise if we so wish. As part of the ordinary experience of living, we turn seen experience into verbalised experience, and vice versa (see e.g. Arnheim 1969, Shepard 1978, Kosslyn 1983, West 1997, Pylyshyn 2003, Kosslyn, Thompson & Ganis 2006). But just how we do this has been the subject of disagreement. In 1978 Shepard wrote:

Current controversy concerning mental imagery seems to have focused on two closely related questions: (a) Do the mental images that some of us undeniably experience play a significant functional role in our thinking or are they merely epiphenomenal accompaniments of underlying processes of a very different, less pictorial character? And (b) What exactly are mental images or, more specifically, what sort of physical processes underlie them in the brain, and to what extent are these processes, like pictures, isomorphic to the external objects they represent? (Shepard 1978: 127)

To his credit as an eminent Stanford psychology professor, Shepard in this influential article ('The Mental Image', published in *American Psychologist*) quoted Coleridge, Didion and other creative writers, as if to say that only poets and novelists up to that point had spoken sensibly about the creation of images in the mind and their usefulness in thinking. For example, he says:

The contemporary American novelist Joan Didion has asserted that none of the novels that she has written began with any notion of "character" or "plot" or even "incident". Instead, each developed out of what she calls "pictures in my mind" – some of which she describes in vivid detail. Indeed, Didion claims that the very syntax and arrangement of the words of her sentences is dictated by the image: "The arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind". (Shepard 1978: 127)

In 1978, there was debate among cognitive scientists (based on Galton's nineteenth-century findings) about whether images in the mind existed at all. Today it is apparent that some 2.5% of people do not see mind-images (the condition is called 'aphantasia', see e.g. Faw 2009, Zeman et al 2015), but the argument persists (see e.g. Zenon W Pylyshyn's *Seeing and Visualizing: It's Not What You Think* [2003]). With the advent of brain-imaging techniques such as EEG, PET and fMRI (Skov et al 2007: 187), scientists now confirm that the brain activity associated with internal visualizing correlates with that of language production:

Especially important has been the growing realisation that vision and language in some respects use a shared neural substrate... This research suggests, somewhat surprisingly, that imagery and semantic concepts may make use of the same neural representations, and may provide the key to explaining how "image generation" and "wording" are linked up in the creative process... (Skov et al 2007: 186)

In 1978 Shephard advocated – seemingly unscientifically – that the most valid trajectory for insight in the situation was one's own introspective experience of thinking processes, carefully considered in light of surrounding academic, philosophical and scientific discourses:

I for one am uneasy about proceeding on the assumption that mental imagery is merely epiphenomenal – especially since *visual imagery seems to have played such a central role in the origin of the most creative of my own ideas*, and since so many other, more illustrious scientists, inventors, and writers have made similar claims concerning their thought processes. (Shepard 1978: 125, our emphasis)

Later in this article we look at a range of testimonials from significant prose writers in the last two centuries who attest to the importance of visualisation in their writing processes.

Mind activity associated with the writing process also involves verbalisation. Charles Fernyhough's *The Voices Within: The History and Science of How We Talk to Ourselves* (2016) provides an account of how we listen to the voice in our heads as we think/compose/write. While Fernyhough asserts that 'thinking is a multimedia experience' (Fernyhough 2016: 6), he focuses on recent results from scientific experiment which show

that the words that sound out in our heads play a vital part in our thinking. Psychologists are demonstrating that inner speech, as they term it, helps us to regulate our behaviour, motivate ourselves for action, evaluate those actions and even become conscious of our own selves. (Fernyhough 2016: 11)

Writers and readers familiar with stream-of-consciousness narrative techniques used by novelists, poets and dramatists over centuries will find the psychologists' 'demonstrations' underwhelming. But Fernyhough is on-side with writers – he pays particular attention to the stream-of-consciousness technique in creative writing. 'The great modernist writers had a well-documented fascination with individual psychology and the artistic challenge of how to depict it on the page', he says. 'But writers were alert to the conversational quality of inner speech long before the era of Woolf and Joyce...' (2016: 93). Fernyhough goes on to analyse Chaucer, Defoe and Charlotte Brontë as examples of writers who perfectly well understood the *dialogic* nature of their characters' internal voices.

Fernyhough's insight into the nature of the voice within is significant for writing process. The voice within is actually plural 'voices', he says:

One thing we can say about thinking is that it often appears to us as a kind of conversation between different voices propounding different points of view... Thinking is a dialogue... [When, as a child] you internalise dialogue, as you do when you develop inner speech, you internalise a structure that allows you to represent other perspectives. Those perspectives, in dialogic interplay, give your thinking some very special characteristics ... the ability to coordinate different perspectives ... and [bring] them into contact with each other. (Fernyhough 2016: 12, 98-9)

Alongside the case of stream-of-consciousness in fiction writing, the dialogic voice within is likely to be the focus of attention of writers when they are writing argumentatively – e.g. in essays, speech writing, academic articles, and so on. You listen to and modulate the voice in your head as you develop the line of reasoning; you try out the rhetorical logic of what you want to write on the audience there in your mind. According to Fernyhough, the awareness that we think dialogically was 'there in the writings of Plato, William James, Charles Sanders Pierce, George Herbert Mead and Mikhail Bakhtin' but, oddly, it has 'never been spelled out in the terms of modern cognitive psychology' (99). At Fernyhough's Hearing the Voice project at Durham University, they are studying the fact that 'inner speech is very common when people are writing' (186).

Traditionally, for writers, ekphrasis is an exchange between the seen and the written: the experience of a perceived visual object is transcribed into a verbal/written account, with special attention paid to the idea that the reader 're-experience' the original sensory encounter. From the cognitive scientists' viewpoint, the case of the person undertaking an ekphrastic exercise involves a transfer from one mode of neurological coding to another –

from an image in the mind's eye to words expressed initially by the inner voice. In the case of the person hearing or reading the ekphrastic account, the transfer goes in reverse, from word to image. The ekphrastic process draws the writer's attention to the fact that they write with both verbal and nonverbal modes in operation. Two millennia ago, ekphrasis was an exercise given to orators clearly to make them aware that they did not deal solely with the reception of words amongst listeners when they spoke out; they also dealt with mental images. For writers, who are perhaps even less likely than orators to understand that they operate upon readers' minds in two major modes – text + visual, not text alone – ekphrasis provides a portal into how our writing is received, and also how it is made.

Ekphrasis as a key element in the creative writing process

Among the literary prose writers who confirm the importance of the visual imagination in their writing process, only a small number – mainly in the last 50 years – have analysed it closely (examples are Arthur Koestler, Joan Didion, Italo Calvino and Sue Woolfe). We think this is due to that fact that the creation of visual imagery in the mind – or visualization – is so inherent to writing it is taken for granted, and goes almost unnoticed. In our own writing practices, we are aware that we:

- a) created scenes in novels significantly inspired by photographic and cinematic images which provided details for historical and social authenticity as well as prompts for character and action;
- b) produced fiction and nonfiction which responded to family photo albums, photojournalism, gallery paintings, street art, etc; and
- c) wrote stories where we took an observer's view of scenes set in other writers' stories or biographies, or we described the visual effect of poems, sculptures, musical pieces or other artworks.

In all of this, we undertook 'traditional' ekphrastic process by transforming images created by others, or from our own photography or field-note sketches, into writing via the transfer between our visual and verbal thinking.

But we were also aware that our minds' creation of the visual image from the external source correlates significantly with the process of imagining – of daydreaming, or fantasizing – where the source was an image conjured internally. So – no matter whether the source be external or internal – visual scenes, characters and action appeared on the screen in our mind, from where we transcribed them. When you imagine an *action scene* for transposing into fiction, you see it on your mind-screen (your 'mental cinema', as Calvino calls it [Calvino 2016: 102]), you run it like a movie (you are 'the cinema operator who works the projection machine', as Koestler says [Koestler 1989: 180]), and you transfer it via your fingertips to sentences on the page. When you describe a character's *physical appearance* or a *setting* – subjects with more static features – you visualise a portrait of the character, or a land- or city-scape on your mind-screen, and then 'paint' it in words. However, when you wish to reproduce the nonvisual thinking of a character, i.e. the voice speaking inside the character's head (as Joyce did with Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*), then you utilise your own verbal mode, you hear in your head the voice in the head of your creation, and write it down, as if the character's mind dictates the voice for transcription. In addition, we maintain, when you take the viewpoint of any character, you will actually see the seeing that your character is doing on your authorial mind-screen, as if looking through the eyes of the character.

In his epic study of creative thinking in the arts and sciences, *The Act of Creation* (1964), novelist Arthur Koestler quotes the biographies and autobiographies of scientists such as Einstein, Faraday and Kekulé, and creative artists such as ST Coleridge, to demonstrate that visual thinking performs a major role in invention, new discoveries and innovative thought processes. In most 'truly original acts of discovery,' Koestler says, 'the "seeing" is in fact imagining; it is done in the mind's [eye], and mostly the unconscious mind's eye' (Koestler 1989: 200). But visualization is not just done prior to the *ah-hah!* point of discovery. After the creative moment of insight for scientific problem-solving or artwork initiation, the 'unconscious mind's eye' hands over to the *conscious* mind's eye in order to continue the process of shaping the original insight into a viable, communicable work:

The visualizer ... feels his way around a problem and strokes it with his [mind's] eye ... trying to fit it into some convincing or elegant shape; he plays around with his vague forms like the couturier with his fabrics, draping and undraping them on the model. (Koestler 1989: 182-3)

As the inventor/author develops the innovative idea and builds the work, their visualizing processes resemble day-dreaming, or the conscious running of film clips in the cinema in the

head: they are ‘the cinema operator who works the projection machine, and [are] the audience at the same time’ (180). As opposed to the sleeping dreamer who is ‘the spectator passively watching the sequence of images’, the active daydreamer (the inventor with a project to develop, the creative writer with a novel to progress) is in charge of the visualizing process (180). Visualization is dominant in the developmental phase, Koestler thinks, because words are not fluid enough for truly creative thinking – they have cultural and linguistic baggage attached:

Words ... crystallize thought; they give articulation and precision to vague images and hazy intuitions. [But] the creative act ... presupposes a relaxing of the controls and a regression to modes of ideation which are indifferent to the rules of verbal logic, unperturbed by contradiction, untouched by the dogmas and taboos of so-called common sense. (Koestler 1989: 173, 178)

A long list of writers who talk about the initiating visual image at the beginning of a writing project can be quoted – John Dryden, ST Coleridge, DH Lawrence, Jean Cocteau, Tennessee Williams, Stephen Spender, and so on. Henry James (1908) recalled a dinner party conversation where another guest told a story:

There had been but ten words, yet I had recognised in them, as in a flash, all the possibilities of the little drama of [my novel *The Spoils of Poynton*], which glimmered then and there into life... (James 2009)

John Hawkes (1965) described the spark for his novels with:

...in each case I began with something immediately and intensely visual – a room, a few figures, an object, something prompted by the initial idea and then literally seen, like the visual images that come to us just before sleep. (Enck & Hawkes 1965: 148)

And EL Doctorow (1986) answered the question *What comes first?* in relation to his novel *Loon Lake* with:

I had these opening images of a private railroad train on a single track at night going up through the Adirondacks with a bunch of gangsters on board, and a beautiful girl standing, naked, holding a white dress up in front of a mirror to see if she should put it on... I kept thinking about the images. (Doctorow 1986)

Beyond initial motivating visualizations, fiction writers confirm that they develop, manipulate and narrativize their starting images using visual and verbal transformations to get written text onto the page. Writers who have analysed in detail the role of the visual

imagination in the writing process include Mary Shelley, Joan Didion, Italo Calvino and Sue Woolfe. In an 'Author's Introduction' (1831), Mary Shelley gave an account of the initiating moments for her novel *Frankenstein* (1816):

Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and [Percy] Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these ... [t]hey talked of the experiments of Dr. Darwin ... who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion ... [it made me think] perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth. (Shelley 2002: 18)

Shelley goes on to describe how, later during the night, further visualisations developed her thinking about the themes and plot for the work:

Night waned upon this talk, and even the witching hour had gone by, before we retired to rest. When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw – with shut eyes, but acute mental vision, – I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. (Shelley 2002: 18-19)

As the images proliferated to suggest successive scenes and plot action, they also gave rise to possibilities for character psychology and emotion:

Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horror-stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that this thing, which had received such imperfect animation, would subside into dead matter; and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench for ever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life. He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes. (Shelley 2002: 19)

Immersed in her mind's imagery, Shelley is more than inspired, she is horrified – and the fictional setting she has created impinges on her actual surroundings:

I opened [my eyes] in terror. The idea so possessed my mind, that a thrill of fear ran through me, and I wished to exchange the ghastly image of my fancy for the realities around. I see them still; the very room, the dark parquet, the closed shutters, with the moonlight struggling through, and the sense I had that the glassy lake and white high Alps were beyond. I could not so easily get rid of my hideous phantom; still it haunted me. I must try to think of something else... (Shelley 2002: 19)

Thankfully, for readers over the next two centuries, Shelley did not reject the succession of mental images which produced her horror masterpiece:

Swift as light and as cheering was the idea that broke in upon me. "I have found it! What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow." On the morrow I announced that I had thought of a story. (Shelley 2002: 19)

She then tells us: 'I began that day with the words, "It was on a dreary night of November..."'. In this case, the author has made from mental imagery a strongly developed sequence of scenes which are ready to transcribe into a narrative draft. The process is ekphrastic in that she turns visual thinking in her mind into verbal thinking produced as words on the page.

Joan Didion, in her article 'Why I Write', published in the *New York Times* in 1976, focused on 'the act of writing' and said: 'I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means' (Didion 1976). Specifically, what she is 'looking at' are images in her mind. The idea of writing to find out what one is thinking is perhaps unsurprising for the author writing from verbalised thoughts, but it takes on a different dimension when the writer is thinking visually: it strongly suggests an ekphrastic process where the pictorial element provided by the mind is being transcribed into words.

What is going on in these pictures in my mind?

When I talk about pictures in my mind I am talking, quite specifically, about images that shimmer around the edges... You can't think too much about these pictures that shimmer. You just lie low and let them develop. You stay quiet. You don't talk to many people and you keep your nervous system from shorting out and you try to locate ... the shimmer, the grammar in the picture. (Didion 1976, italics in original)

Didion treats her mind-images with care since they are precious resources for her writing. Almost as if they were works of art themselves, she applies a 'Do Not Touch' policy and waits to feel their power growing, as one might do in a gallery confronted by a masterpiece to get maximum value out of the experience. Significantly, she seeks to find in these pictures their word equivalences.

Just as I meant "shimmer" literally I mean "grammar" literally. Grammar is a piano I play by ear... All I know about grammar is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed. Many people

know about camera angles now, but not so many know about sentences. The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind. The picture dictates the arrangement. The picture dictates whether this will be a sentence with or without clauses, a sentence that ends hard or a dying-fall sentence, long or short, active or passive. The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture. *Nota bene.*

It tells you.

You don't tell it. (Didion 1976, italics in original)

Didion's insistence that the angles the writer takes in viewing her mind image dictate her sentence structures, and that her visual-thought arrangements dictate the word-arrangement, reflect Koestler's 'couturier with his fabrics' and the advice given in the Greek rhetoric handbooks. Of course, writers are individuals and one person's process is not necessarily shared by another. But here, it seems, Didion has captured 'the act of writing' in creative forms exactly. How you see it (scene, action, character) in your mind, and how you treat it, drives how you say it in your writing. But this is not an exact science, and is a very individual one: the degree to which you direct the action in the mind-film, or allow it to direct you, is a fascinating part of the uncertainty of writing.

Another incisive contributor to analysis of visualisation in the creative writing process was Italo Calvino. In 1984, in the lectures he prepared for delivery at Harvard University, he described his process of conceiving and developing a story:

For me, then, the first step in the conception of a story occurs when an image that comes to mind seems, for whatever reason, charged with meaning, even if I can't explain that meaning in logical or analytical terms. As soon as the image has become clear enough in my mind, I begin developing it into a story, or rather the images themselves give rise to their own implicit potentialities, to the story they carry within them. Around each image others come into being, creating a field of analogies, symmetries, juxtapositions. At this point my shaping of this material – which is no longer purely visual but conceptual as well – begins to be guided by my intent to give order and sense to the story's progression. Or, to put it another way, what I'm doing is trying to establish which meanings are compatible with the general design I want to give the story and which are not, always allowing for a certain range of possible alternatives. At the same time, the writing, the verbal rendering, assumes ever-greater importance. I would say that as soon as I begin to put black on white, the written word begins to take over, first in an attempt to match the visual image, then as a cohesive development of the initial stylistic impulse, until little by little, it rules the whole field. Then it is the writing that must guide the story towards its most felicitous verbal expression, and all that's left for the visual imagination is to keep up. (Calvino 2016: 109-10)

Calvino's lecture on 'Visibility' in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988) is a tour de force in analysis of the ekphrastic aspects of the creative writing process. In a richly analytical work, his summation is contained in this statement:

Let's say that various elements come together to form the visual part of the literary imagination: direct observation of the real world; phantasmal and oneiric transfiguration; the figurative world as transmitted by the culture at its various levels; and a process of abstraction, condensation, and interiorization of sensory experience, which is as crucial for visualizing as it is for verbalizing thought. (Calvino 2016: 116)

Analysing Calvino's 'Visibility' lecture in light of recent developments in neurological science and brain-scanning, Skov et al say:

...neither visual imagery, nor the ability to represent visual images in a linguistic form, can be said to be uniquely creative phenomena; both mechanisms are commonly employed in everyday communication. What sets some types of visual imagery and linguistic representations apart as "imaginative" or "creative" must be a qualitative difference: some verbal images are more "meaningful", "difficult", or "exciting", than others, and some linguistic representations are more "successful" or "poignant" than others. We may therefore speculate that both visual imagery and linguistic formulation are rooted in general neurocognitive mechanisms, and that some external "executive" mechanism (or mechanisms) is capable of influencing these processes. (Skov et al 2007: 192)

For teaching and learning creative writing skills, this is a highly useful statement. It suggests that the way we see normally and translate those mind-images into everyday words, is part of the key skills in the writing process. But the value-added factor the writer provides, over and beyond normal seeing, is the "'executive' mechanism' which manipulates the image on the mind-screen.

Conclusion

In this article we have allowed writers to speak at length about their experience of visual and verbal thinking while writing. It is appropriate therefore to end the discussion with a quote from Australian novelist Sue Woolfe's book-length exegesis *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady* (2007) which, in fact, got us both started in pursuit of the relevance of ekphrasis to the contemporary writer. In her work (which examines how she wrote the novel *The Secret Cure*, 2003) Woolfe says:

...I wondered whether the creation of fiction is more complex than commonly considered, which is that a writer imagines a scene, as anyone else might do, and, with a few adjustments to allow for a conscious manipulation of image and perhaps a tweaking of character, reports it... This notion that writing is a form of reportage links with the notion that imaginative ideas, those tools essential for the writer's trade, are a form of retrieval of knowledge. (Woolfe 2007: 22)

We agree. What we retrieve in writing creatively are the knowledge-laden images that flash onto our mind-screens. Brilliantly, they lend themselves to our ability to coax or push them into fiction. We relay to others what they generously provide to us.

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