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Ekphrastic Transformations of the Nude in Pedro Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In* and Nuala Ní Chonchúir's *Nude*

Abstract: Since its first mention in the first century CE, the concept of *ekphrasis* has been through a long history of redefinition and expansion. I argue that *ekphrasis* may be understood as a dynamic multifaceted concept sensitive to changes in material-discursive practices. This essay aims to provide a new angle on the old concept by exploring contemporary literary and filmic *ekphrasis* in the light of new materialist theories. Through an analysis of *ekphrasis* in Pedro Almodóvar's film *The Skin I Live In* and Nuala Ní Chonchúir's short story collection *Nude*, this essay makes two points: firstly, the ekphrastic transformations of paintings bring out the dynamic nature of representational practices and posit representations as phenomena in the ongoing process of their materialization; secondly, the shift of perspective brought about by *ekphrasis* disrupts the familiar pattern of the visual consumption of the female form by foregrounding the embodied experience of objectification.

Keywords: Dynamic, ekphrasis, new materialism, the nude, transformation

The term *ekphrasis* has a long history dating back to antiquity. Since its first mention in the first century CE, the notion of *ekphrasis* has been changing, developing, and expanding increasingly.¹ First, I will provide an overview of the changing usage of the term from antiquity to the present and show that the development of the concept of *ekphrasis* is entangled with changes in material-discursive practices. Second, I will contribute to the present discussion on *ekphrasis* by addressing the following research questions: how does contemporary *ekphrasis* transform existing artworks, particularly those portraying the female body? What is the function of such ekphrastic transformations, and how do they address the entanglement of representational practices and material phenomena?

In my analysis, I apply new materialist thinking and the theoretical framework of “mattering,” which places the emphasis on “matter’s capacity to matter.”² As Karen Barad puts it, “Matter and meaning are not separate elements. [...] Mattering

1 Sager Eidt 2008, 16–17.

2 Jones 2018, 245.

is simultaneously a matter of substance and significance.”³ For Barad, meaning is not only entangled with matter but also “made possible through specific material practices.”⁴ Within new materialist theory, matter and meaning, nature and culture, the material and the discursive exist in entangled, co-constitutive, and dynamic relations.⁵ Following Barad’s “diffractive methodology,”⁶ I consider *ekphrasis* in the light of understanding of new materialism, while simultaneously exploring material phenomena in the light of understanding of representational practices. The diffractive reading of contemporary ekphrastic works – Pedro Almodóvar’s film *The Skin I Live In* (2011) and Nuala Ní Chonchúir’s short story collection *Nude* (2009) – aims to provide a deeper understanding of the entangled relations between ekphrastic practice, representational phenomena, and material processes.

Toward a dynamic concept of *ekphrasis*

If in antiquity the term *ekphrasis* was used in the framework of rhetoric to denote “a speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes,”⁷ in the twentieth century, it was introduced into modern literary theory as “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art.”⁸ Along with the growing popularity of the concept of *ekphrasis*, some scholars expressed the need to expand its definition beyond a description of an artwork. James Heffernan proposed to broaden the understanding of *ekphrasis* by suggesting a definition which is commonly used in modern literary theory: “the verbal representation of visual representation.”⁹ The medium-based approach to *ekphrasis*,¹⁰ in turn, extended the concept from the field of literary theory into the realm of intermedial practices. In short, from antiquity to today, our understanding of *ekphrasis* has gradually evolved from a rhetorical device to a wide array of intermedial phenomena, including not only descriptions of paintings and sculpture but also the integration of photography, film, and digital media in literary works.

3 Barad 2007, 3.

4 Barad 2007, 148.

5 Van der Tuin 2018, 277.

6 Barad 2007, 30. Barad uses the term *diffraction* to describe a method for rethinking and theorizing relationships between theories, phenomena, and practices whereby concepts and approaches are read “through one another” instead of being defined against one another.

7 Webb 2009, 1.

8 Spitzer 1955, 207.

9 Heffernan 1993, 3.

10 Grishakova 2010; Elleström 2014; Rippl 2018.

Johanna Hartmann suggests that the constant development of the concept of *ekphrasis* is due to the dynamic nature of the cultural environment.¹¹ Some of the recent changes in ekphrastic theory and practice may be explained by increased exposure to images and the subsequent shift toward the importance of images in modern culture that W.J.T. Mitchell theorized as “the pictorial turn.”¹² With the wide access to images through online sources and reproductions, lengthy vivid descriptions of artworks have become unnecessary,¹³ and *ekphrasis* today may be reduced to a short reference.¹⁴ As Renate Brosch observes, “*ekphrasis* responds to and participates in the culture of images,” whose development is fueled by technological progress.¹⁵ Technology spurs the proliferation of images, while *ekphrasis* engages with images that flow, multiply, and find various materializations across different media. The continuous development of ekphrastic theory and practice is, thus, entangled with the ongoing material processes of media and technological evolution. *Ekphrasis* may, then, be seen as a dynamic multifaceted concept sensitive to changes in material-discursive practices.

The invention of cinema was a significant technological innovation that prompted another conceptual change: the notion of *ekphrasis* was expanded to include the intermedial integration of paintings into film – *filmic ekphrasis*.¹⁶ Ágnes Pethő argues that *ekphrasis* in film “may be seen in parallel with the re-mediatational logic of traditional literary *ekphrasis*.”¹⁷ In this essay, I adopt this broader view of *ekphrasis* as encompassing remediation of images across different media, including literature and film. My approach is informed by Lars Elleström’s notions of “transfer” and “transformation,” which imply the relocation of media traits among different media and the alterations that result from such media transfers.¹⁸ Media transfers and transformations involve the alterations of four media modalities: the material, the sensorial, the spatiotemporal, and the semiotic modalities.¹⁹ Taking Elleström’s approach as a point of departure, I regard ekphrastic transfers of paintings to literature and film as transformative processes. In what follows, I introduce two types of ekphrastic transformations: *unfamiliar double* and *art-work animation*. The case studies – *ekphrasis* in Almodóvar’s film *The Skin I*

11 Hartmann 2015, 114.

12 Mitchell 1994, 11.

13 Karastathi 2015, 97.

14 Rippl 2018, 267.

15 Brosch 2018, 229.

16 Sager Eidt 2008, 18.

17 Pethő 2011, 48.

18 Elleström 2014, 3.

19 Elleström 2014, 37.

Live In and Ní Chonchúir's short story collection *Nude* – engage with the portrayal of the female body in art, namely in nude paintings. I will show that the transformations of artworks question and reorient the tradition of nude painting in manifold ways, from bringing out the material and dynamic nature of representational practices to foregrounding the embodied experience of objectification.

From form to matter

"The nude remains the most complete example of the transmutation of matter into form," argues Kenneth Clark in his seminal work *The Nude*.²⁰ The "geometrical discipline" of art, he goes on, has the capacity to transform the "vulgar" and "unruly human body" into harmonious and orderly form.²¹ The idea that form is superior to and prevails over matter is prominent in the Western philosophical tradition, which is largely rooted in Platonic rationalism.²² For Plato, the material world is a mere shadow of the ideal realm of forms and ideas. The ideal female form has been reproduced and celebrated in painting for centuries. As a result of the ubiquity of the nude in Western visual culture, the transfer and transformation of nude paintings became prominent in contemporary ekphrastic works – both literature and film.

Pedro Almodóvar's film *The Skin I Live In* features the story of a plastic surgeon and bio-scientist Robert Ledgard, who cultivates transgenic skin and performs a skin replacement surgery on a character called Vera. Being given new skin, Vera remains under the constant surveillance of Robert and is kept in his estate as a captive. The image on Robert's screen, which he uses to watch Vera, strangely recalls Titian's painting *The Venus of Urbino*. I propose to call this type of *ekphrasis* an *unfamiliar double*. It includes literary descriptions or filmic images that strangely resemble existing artworks. The word "unfamiliar" conveys the effect of defamiliarization that such *ekphrasis* creates: the transformation of an existing artwork makes the familiar (e.g., a recognized painting) strange.

The transfer of the nude figure from the medium of painting into the medium of film transforms the painterly ideal into a moving image of a living material body. In terms of form and matter, the contrast between the two images deserves special attention. Let us take a closer look at the painted Venus. Lynda Nead argues that both the tradition of nude painting and the discourse on the nude often draws

²⁰ Clark 1984 [1956], 27.

²¹ Clark 1984 [1956], 71.

²² Nead 2001 [1992], 23.

on a dualistic paradigm that privileges the nude (the ideal) over the naked (the actual): “The transformation from the naked to the nude is thus the shift from the actual to the ideal – the move from a perception of unformed, corporeal matter to the recognition of unity and constraint, the regulated economy of art.”²³ The binary opposition of the naked and the nude, Nead notes, “is associated with a number of other oppositional pairings,” in which culture, ideas, reason, and art are related to masculinity, whereas nature, matter, passion, and obscenity are tied to femininity (14). Thus, the idealization of the nude body in art not only signals the departure from the actual world of the body but also reinforces the dualisms of male and female, culture and nature, mind and body, ideas and matter, subject and object.

In contrast to Titian’s painting, the transformed image of Venus in *The Skin I Live In* portrays an ideal form which is imposed on a material human body. By bringing bodily materiality into focus, *ekphrasis* challenges the dualistic perception of the world in a new materialist vein. In Almodóvar’s film, ideas and matter, culture and nature, human and non-human technology are not opposed but entangled. Vera’s transgenic skin is both a culturally significant element and a material substance. For Barad, matter is not fixed or passive but “refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization.”²⁴ In the film, the materialization of the ideal beauty is a process that involves the changing materiality of the body and is made possible through material-technological practices akin to biological arts. Biological arts is a recently developed artistic practice where artists use living biological organisms and systems that are altered through the means of technological biology; working with DNA as an “artistic medium,” artists manipulate life itself and thereby go beyond traditional procedures of artmaking.²⁵ Scientific practices, which involve dynamic engagement with the material world, are rather a “matter of intervening” than “representing.”²⁶ According to this line of thought, bio-artists intervene into and reconfigure the material world.

Like in biological arts, biotechnology in *The Skin I Live In* may be viewed as part of the artmaking process. Robert is a bio-scientist and an artist at once: he manipulates a corporeal organism to create an ideal female form. The centuries-long aspiration for the ideal form, which is manifested in and sustained by the persistent representation of the much-painted Venus, takes a “material turn,” where the corporeal body simultaneously becomes an object of art, sight, and scientific manipulation. The ekphrastic transformation of the familiar image brings out

²³ Nead 2001 [1992], 14.

²⁴ Barad 2007, 151.

²⁵ Catts 2018, 66–67.

²⁶ Barad 2007, 54.

the dynamic nature of representational practices and posits representations as phenomena in the ongoing process of their materialization. The changes in representational practices are, in turn, entangled with the development of new technologies. Technology also serves to turn the female objectification in art into embodied practice. Being under constant camera surveillance, Vera experiences objectification by the artist with her living body. The controlling discipline of technology is twofold: on the one hand, technology regulates bodily appearance by manipulating matter; on the other hand, filming technology is used to impose a controlling gaze on the body. Robert's biotechnological practices, thus, serve to enact the objectification of both the body and matter.

Matter is, however, not fixed or passive: the capacity of skin tissue to heal and repair itself is crucial to the processes of plastic and biotechnological surgeries that Vera undergoes. Drawing upon Butler's and Barad's theories of performativity, Nancy Harding et al. introduce "flesh as an agentive actor," arguing that bodily matter "agentively participates" in processes of materialization.²⁷ Vera's skin is agentive in that it actively partakes in the materialization of the Venus-like trans-human being. The passivity of the material body is furthermore challenged when the body reveals its capacity to react back: Vera resists objectification and escapes from Robert's estate at the end of the film. The body acts and is enacted within dynamic material processes. The transfer of the painting into the medium of film foregrounds the material, dynamic, and embodied nature of contemporary representational and biotechnological practices. Thus, *ekphrasis* here demonstrates the capacity to address the past and present at once: by evoking the existing painting of Venus, the unfamiliar double serves to challenge past representations of the nude; at the same time, the ekphrastic image addresses contemporary material procedures of artmaking as well as the changing role of the artist, who performs a multiple role of a scientist, a media creator, and an observer.

Nudity as process

The ekphrastic transformation of the image also brings the creator/onlooker into the picture and thereby turns the observer into the object of the gaze. Similarly, the shift of perspective in Nuala Ní Chonchúir's collection of short stories *Nude* serves to challenge the fixed observer-observed duality in the tradition of nude painting. The description of a portrait in the making in "Unmothered," for in-

27 Harding et al. 2021, 1–6.

stance, places the figure of a male artist under the scrutinizing eye of a female protagonist and pushes the observer into the position of the observed:

Your husband paints your portrait in the garden. You are naked, standing in the grass, and every breeze makes your skin prickle. You close your eyes against the sun and feel dizzy when you open them again. ... You look at your husband. His brushstrokes are meditative, small; you strain your ears to hear the slap of brush on canvas – nothing. Sniffing deep on the warm, grassy summer smells, you shut your eyes tight.²⁸

The description not only disrupts the familiar pattern of the visual consumption of the female form but also foregrounds the multi-sensory embodied experience of the model. The focus here is on the senses of the lived body: the touch of wind on skin, the feeling of dizziness, the smell.

The shift from representational to experiential²⁹ may also be traced in Ní Chonchúir's "Roy Lichtenstein's *Nudes in a Mirror*: We Are Not Fake!," a short story which is based on an actual incident that took place at an art exhibition in Australia: a woman stabbed Lichtenstein's *Nudes in Mirror* with a knife.³⁰ In Ní Chonchúir's story, the nude figures are brought to life: they observe the visitors of the gallery and holler to each other when it is empty. The story is narrated by the forefront figure, who, speaking for both portrayed women, describes the stabbing episode from her perspective:

We are so glad that Roy isn't alive to see what's happened to us because, oh my Lord, he would die. Yes, we're comic-strippy – not exactly *The Rokeby Venus* – but we are of-our-time, same as old Mrs. Rokeby. ... And, we are not pleased that some weirdos want to get at us because we are undressed. And that there are fancy-schmanzies who think we're dumb because we were modelled from models.³¹

I propose to call this type of *ekphrasis artwork animation*. It includes literary and filmic *ekphrasis* that bring existing and fictional artworks to life, as if by magic. As a result, the portrayed figures come to life and start moving or may even step out of the frame. In new materialist terms, the transformed painting in Ní Chonchúir's story exhibits what Jane Bennett calls *thing-power*: "the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of inde-

²⁸ Ní Chonchúir 2009, 14–15.

²⁹ By the shift from representational to experiential, I mean that the focus of the description is on the experience of objectification rather than on the peculiarities of representation (e.g., form and composition).

³⁰ *BBC News* 2005.

³¹ Ní Chonchúir 2009, 88.

pendence or aliveness.”³² The female figures in nude paintings are often “asleep, unconscious or unconcerned with mortal things”; such portrayal facilitates “undisturbed and voyeuristic enjoyment of the female form.”³³ The artwork animation transforms the passive figures into lively beings and gives voice to the female experience. By doing so, *ekphrasis* disturbs the pleasure of the visual consumption of the passive female form.

This type of *ekphrasis* involves the alteration of the spatiotemporal modality: unlike the medium of painting, the literary work mediates a temporal flow of experience. The transfer of the nude from nontemporal to temporal mode allows Ní Chonchúir to not only animate the unconscious figures but also convey the continuous embodied experience of objectification. For the nude figure, the constant objectification is an everyday routine experience. Temporality is crucial to understanding the entanglement of particular representational practices and the phenomenon of objectification at large. The repeated production and consumption of nude representations are temporal material processes whereby the phenomenon of body objectification becomes habitualized. Remarkably, the above passage also alludes to Velázquez’s *Rokeby Venus* and thereby addresses the whole tradition of the nude, which spans through centuries. In their essence, the nude figures in Lichtenstein’s painting are the “same as old Mrs. Rokeby.”³⁴ Numerous nude paintings, from Velázquez’s *Rokeby Venus* to Lichtenstein’s *Nudes in Mirror*, serve as the material means and records of the ongoing phenomenon of body objectification. The idea of sameness and repetition is, thus, conveyed through *ekphrasis* on many levels.

The ekphrastic transformation of the nude also serves to bring into focus the sense of disembodiment that the repeated practices of body objectification may induce in those objectified. The nude figure feels alienated from her stabbed body, which she observes from the outside: “I look down at my canvas; the wounds are long and threaded, I am cut from boob to belly. A flap of canvas falls forward like a lolling tongue.”³⁵ The sense of the otherness of the body is entangled with the ongoing representational practices which posit the nude body as the object of sight. Nudity is not a form but a process. The repeated production and consumption of nude representations are dynamic material phenomena which involve the continuous objectification of female bodies. The body is, however, not a passive surface but an agential force that can resist objectification. The nude in the story expresses strong discontent with the way the “undressed” figures are per-

³² Bennett 2010, xvi.

³³ Parker/Pollock 2013, 116.

³⁴ Ní Chonchúir 2009, 88.

³⁵ Ní Chonchúir 2009, 90.

ceived and treated by gallery visitors.³⁶ The nude figures also resist the imposed passivity and silence by using their voices. Hence, the artwork animation in Ní Chonchúir's story brings to the fore the dynamic relational entanglement of representational practices, the experience of objectification, and resistance to it.

Both in Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In* and in Ní Chonchúir's *Nude*, ekphrastic transformations of the nude expose and reconfigure the workings of representations. *Ekphrasis* not only serves to scrutinize fixed visual representations but also disrupt the familiar pattern of the visual consumption of the female form by foregrounding the embodied experience of objectification. Apart from addressing particular images, *ekphrasis* interrogates representational practices at large. Representations are not static objects but dynamic phenomena in the ongoing process of their materialization: the repeated production and consumption of images are temporal material processes. *Ekphrasis* has the capacity to foreground the material and dynamic nature of representational practices and challenge dualistic thinking, particularly the divides between body and mind, nature and culture, matter and meaning. Ekphrastic works may, therefore, serve as powerful tools for (re)shaping our understanding of art and the world, the world which is continuously in the making. As a concept, *ekphrasis* is dynamic in its adaptation to changes in material-discursive practices and environments, which are, in turn, closely entangled with the ongoing material processes of media and technological evolution. The continuous development of ekphrastic theory and practice is, thus, a relational dynamic process that is inextricably linked to material phenomena of the changing world.

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