



Moi, Ruben, Brynhildur Boyce and Charles I. Arjmstrong (eds). *The Crossings of Art in Ireland*. Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 2014, 311 pp.

This collection, an anthology of essays about intermedial relations among the arts, proves a welcome addition to a field which has increasingly challenged the attention of scholars. The essays' frequent engagement with experimental creations, especially involving the new media, does not exclude attention to canonical works. The book caters to a variety of interests: the connections between Irish art, history and culture_ including the sore issue of the relationship between Eire and Northern Ireland _ as well as theoretical questions and key concepts like ekphrasis. The abundance of details regarding artworks and the Irish context may make severe demands on the non-specialist's attention, an obstacle counterbalanced by the intrinsic interest of the texts and by the editors' Introduction, which underlies the connections among the essays and their theoretical underpinnings. To set the stage, the editors recall the state of flux in the contemporary arts, their continuous exploration of their own definitions and their increasing tendency to intermingle, within the framework supplied by the digitization of media. The essays emphasize the many forms taken by the crossing of the arts across temporal gaps, geographical spaces or contested border zones.

The editors further argue that while dynamics and change may take place at an increasing speed, there is no reason to give up on analytical distinctions. A relevant understanding of the complex imbrications of the differing terrains is indispensable for a reasonable appraisal of the current situation. Processes such as globalization and post-nationalism are only comprehensible within the framework of a historical analysis of the interrelationships between particular places, regions and nations. In fact, Irish crossings issue out of a long tradition of multilingualism and cultural diversity. Contemporary Irish people live in an in-between world, in-between cultures and identities_ a sense of liminality heightened by several circumstances: the complex negotiations concerning the border between Eire and Northern Ireland, large-scale immigration during the period of the Celtic Tiger, and the relationships between the island and the Irish diaspora around the world.

The essays endorse differing methodological approaches, from post-structuralism to a discreet essentialism or historicism. The anthology likewise brings back discussions about other contrasting critical views, including the modernist insistence on medium specificity as against the argument of the arts' need for one another.

The book contains fourteen essays, often combining readings of crossings of the arts and their engagement with political issues. To explore the play by Ireland's leading

contemporary playwright, Róisín's Keys' "Brian Friel's *Performances: Meaning in an Intermedial Play*", draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics. While bespeaking its historical situatedness in the world of the twenty-first century, Friel's play offers a complex interweaving of forms which invites the study of meaning in arts involving two or more semiotic levels.

The political aspects of contemporary Irish life are frontally addressed in Anne Karhio's "Between Text, Video and Performance: Landscape in Pamela Brown's 'Ireland Unfree'". Karhio's analysis of performance poet Pamela Brown's openly polemical and political video poem (available on Youtube, with kinetic typography and music combining with the words and the voice of the poet herself) discusses the poetic persona's claim that, freed from the colonial power and emerging in a post-Troubles society, Ireland continues to be "unfree", owing to dubious religious, political and financial orientations.

A strong political bent likewise marks Brent Sørensen's "True Gods of Sound and Stone_ The Many Crossings of Patrick Kavanagh's *On Raglan Road*", an account of the intertextual web surrounding the 2008 film *In Bruges* by the English-born Irish playwright, filmmaker and screenwriter Martin Donagh. The film, referring to Patrick Kavanagh's poem *On Raglan Road*, traces the various media referred to in the text as well as some recordings of its musicalization. Donagh's film is said to politicize the song, using it to spell out a message against the violence often associated with Irishness in the twentieth century.

Intertextual and political aspects involving films are also dealt with in Seán Crosson's "'All this must come to an end. Through Talking' : Dialogue and Troubles Cinema". The essay asserts that *Hunger*_ a 2008 film by London-born director Steve MacQueen, represents a double departure from cinematic practices: it eschews both popular genre forms like the thriller and melodrama and a long filmic tradition portraying opponents of British rule with familiar negative stereotypes.

An essay which attaches equal weight to political questions and to intermediality is Fionna Barber's "Visual Tectonics: Post-millennial Art in Ireland". The author discusses the use of photography, digital media, performance and installation – which now form the artistic mainstream – in order to analyze the strategies at play in the photographs and videos of Willie Doherty and films by Gerard Byrne, which explore traumatic events like Bloody Sunday and the Troubles. In this connection, the essay mentions the use of radical discontinuities deriving both from Brecht and the Irish conceptual artist James Coleman.

In fact, the consideration of theoretical questions looms so large in some essays that the anthology could be used for the study of different understandings of key notions like ekphrasis. In "John Hewitt and the Sister Arts" Britta Olinder discusses the evolution of the concept. She starts with Leo Spitzer's definition of the genre as "a poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art", moves on to Mitchell's and Heffernan's wider sense of "verbal representation of visual representation" and finally to Claus Clüver's extended definition as "verbal representation of a real or fictitious texts composed in a non-verbal sign system". In a similar vein, Róisín's Keys' text

mentions Clüver's 2007 essay "Intermediality and Interart Studies", foregrounding the author's suggestion that, because of its relation to intertextuality, intermediality holds the potential for a meta-reflexion on problems of mediality or fictionality and related questions. Keys also mentions Peter Boenisch's arguments on intermediality as an effect of perception. Like Róisín's Keys' essay, O'Brien's "A Shabby Old Couple: Seamus Heaney's Ekphrastic Imperative" briefly traces the origin of studies on ekphrasis recalling the traditional definition of the concept as the description of real or imaginary paintings or sculptures. O'Brien moves on to consider what he calls "the fusion of the iconic and the textual" as a mode of access to the Lacanian Real, "an expression referring to the world of feelings, emotions and meanings which lie beneath the symbolic order." O'Brien also introduces the notion of unconscious ekphrasis, which he illustrates with a poem in which Heaney describes a portrait of himself, mentioning a basket not shown in the picture but considered by the artist before painting it. To O'Brien, the absent basket stands for that which, as Jacques Derrida would have it, exceeds the alternative of presence and absence.

The notion of ekphrasis in film is developed in Seán Crosson's essay, especially the use of images in Steve Macqueen's *Hunger*, which, according to the essayist, encourages the audience to respond in a manner comparable to that inspired by ekphrasis. Crosson contends that "scholars have expanded their understanding of the concept to include film and the manner through which it may represent other arts, possibly even enhancing or transforming them through its visual representation".

Brent Sørensen's "True Gods of Sound and Stone – The Many Crossings of Patrick Kavanagh's *On Raglan Road*", controversially defines ekphrasis simply as translation from one medium to another. He proposes that certain images in *In Bruges*, which he considers commentaries on a song used in the film, should be read as counter-ekphrasis, that is, "the use of pictures about words and music".

Another essay including long considerations on ekphrasis is Charles I. Armstrong's "Proud and Wayward: W.B. Yeats, Aesthetic Engagement and The Hugh Lane Pictures". Returning to the relationship between literature and painting, as in W. J. T. Mitchell's account of the paragonal struggle between the arts, the text insists that a more open-ended and nuanced critical reading should be made possible by allowing the ekphrastic element to interact with its contextual frame.

Ruben Moi's "Verse, Visuality and Vision: The Challenges of Ekphrasis in Ciaran Carson's Poetry" argues that Ciaran's oeuvre has been almost exclusively studied in relation to the theme of war and violence in Northern Ireland. The essayist tries to make up for this fact by focusing almost as much on the concept of ekphrasis as on Carson's oeuvre. To Moi, ekphrastic elements support and supplant the shape and significance of traditional forms, giving a visual sense to the traditional intellectual tracing of intertextuality. According to the essayist, in his poems, as in his novels, Carson tends to experiment with ekphrastic crossovers in a larger format, which demands an expansion of the concept. From a mere representation of objects, Moi claims, the concept should

include hermeneutic speculation and meditations upon historical circumstances and biographical facts.

Another group of essays shifts the emphasis from the analysis of the concept to the use of ekphrasis in specific texts, starting with Yeats' influential precedent. Charles I. Armstrong's "Proud and Wayward: W.B. Yeats, Aesthetic Engagement and The Hugh Lane Pictures" brings to the fore the institutional stakes of Yeats's ekphrastic poem "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited" highlighting the aesthetics and power relations in the poet's dealings with art.

The title of Stuart Sillars' "James Barry's Shakespeare Paintings" speaks for itself. The essay interprets two eighteenth-century paintings inspired by Shakespearean texts produced for the Dublin Shakespeare Gallery: *King Lear weeping over the body of Cordelia* and *Iachimo emerging from the chest in Imogen's chamber*.

Britta Olinder's "John Hewitt and the Sister Arts" explores the way the poet represents his impressions of and ideas about painting and sculpture in poetry. Of special interest is Hewitt's ekphrastic counterpart (with the addition of the words "October 1954") to the title of Yeats's "The Municipal Gallery Revisited". Hewitt's poem illustrates what Elizabeth Bergam considers the tendency of ekphrasis to open into history'.

In "A Shabby Old Couple': Seamus Heaney's Ekphrastic Imperative" Eugene O'Brien argues that Heaney's most telling poems draw on the ekphrastic dimension, as "Summer 1969" (a poem on the violent reaction from the Royal Ulster Constabulary against the civil rights protests in Northern Ireland) based on Goya's "The Shootings of the Third of May".

Joakim Wrethed's "A Momentous Nothing': The Phenomenology of Life, Ekphrasis and Temporality in John Banville's *The Sea*" stands out as a study of ekphrasis in a prose work. The critic illustrates the narrator's general painterly vision by quoting descriptions in the novel *The Sea* which are clearly remindful of Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's frescoes and of Pierre Bonnard's and Vermeer's paintings.

It would be vain for a short review to try to do justice to the richness and scholarship of *The Crossings of Art in Ireland* or to end this survey without signaling the importance of the anthology for the discussion of a particularly significant phase in contemporary Irish literature. Modern and avant-garde Irish poets are prototypical border-crossers. Yeats's synaesthetic combinations in poems like *Leda and the Swan*, *Lapis Lazuli* and *the Municipal Gallery Re-visited* as well as his essays provide a point of departure for painterly poems prolonged via Louis MacNeice and John Hewitt to Paul Durcan, Ciaran Carson, Paul Muldoon, Miriam Gamble, Medbh McGuckian and beyond. Besides, inspiration goes both ways. Irish visual artists often take their cue from literature, beyond the standard form of illustration, as exemplified by the painters Louis le Brocquy, Edward McGuire and Jeffrey Morgan – a cross-fertilization not without precedent, as shown by James Barry responding to the art of Shakespeare as early as in the eighteenth century.

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