

Panel 22

Ekphrasis and the Pictorial in 20th-21st Century Fiction

Blue As A Poetic Way of Seeing: Chromatic Narratives and Intermedial Dialogue between Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* and the Abstract Artist Joan Mitchell

Jiangmei Ouyang

Nanyang Technological University

Does color have life? Does it have the ability to think like human beings? And what would it say if it could speak? The advent of synthetic dyes in the nineteenth century broke the high wall erected by expensive natural pigment minerals, ushering people into a world of visceral viscosity. We now live in a high-technology age where hundreds, or even thousands, of different hues rush to our eyes every day. Color impacts our vision in such a concrete and vivid way, yet it can easily elude our words when we try to describe it. Therefore, it unavoidably brings us to this question: how can language capture something as changeable yet ever-present as color?

This paper argues that American writer Maggie Nelson's autofiction *Bluets* (2009) embodies a painterly quality that mirrors Abstract Expressionist Joan Mitchell's painting philosophies, shedding light on new formal and thematic possibilities in the literary exploration of color. This paper builds its theoretical framework with reference to the painterly techniques proposed by intermediality critic Liliane Louvel and Susan Harrow. By exploring the interart dialogue between the visual and the verbal, the paper further illuminates how language, via its black-and-white medium, brings chromatic visual immediacy to readers. Furthermore, situated within the context of a "pictorial turn" (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 4), this paper seeks to contribute to scholarly discourse on how contemporary literature adapts to, and reflects, the growing predominance of visual culture, and elucidate on the dynamic interplay between textual and visual modes of expression in the digital era.

Biography

Jiangmei Ouyang is a PhD candidate at Nanyang Technological University. Her academic interests include images and words, intermediality, ekphrasis, aesthetics, and anything about art and narrative in contemporary literature. She actively participates in academic conferences and aspires to deepen people's understanding of the relationship between the infusion of art and literature through her research.