

Panel 11

Intermedial Narratives: Bodies and Voices

Intermedial Reconfigurations:

Maggie O’Farrell, Agnolo Bronzino, and Robert Browning’s Dramatic Dialogue

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Drawing from Hegel, Bakhtin, and Didi-Huberman, this essay examines the ways in which the “dramatic” dialogue that contemporary British novelist Maggie O’Farrell engages in with 19th-century British poet Robert Browning and 16th-century Italian painter Agnolo Bronzino reconfigures the generic borders between art, poetry, drama, and fiction. Through a mise en abyme of Browning’s 1842 poem “My Last Duchess,” itself supposedly based on Bronzino’s 1560 *Portrait of Lucrezia de Medici*, O’Farrell chooses to focus not so much on the Duke of Ferrara – whose insane jealousy and psychopathic personality gradually emerge through Browning’s famous dramatic monologue – but on the Duchess herself, who died in real life at the age of sixteen. Playing with the concepts of “underpaintings” and “overpaintings,” O’Farrell presents us with an ekphrasis of “the painting behind the painting” as we attend, in words, to the actual making of the “marriage portrait” commissioned by the Duke. Moreover, by choosing to represent Lucrezia as an (unrecognized) artist herself, having to fight for her life by painting over her own miniature pictures, O’Farrell adds yet another layer of intermedial complexity as she stages the duality between the visible and the sensible, the muzzled mind and the desiring body. Through a clever – and sinister – interplay with Browning’s opening lines, “That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive,” the multi-layered, palimpsestic narrative orchestrates a series of textual and pictorial (dis-) and (re-) incarnations which culminate in the theatrical twist ending and challenge the novel’s generic, aesthetic, and cultural boundaries.

Biography

Laurence Petit is Associate Professor of English at Université de Montpellier Paul-Valéry, France. She has published extensively on the relation between text and image in contemporary British fiction. She has edited or co-edited ten collective works on the interaction between literature and the visual arts and is the translator of Liliane Louvel’s *Poetics of the Iconotext*.