

Panel 26

Ekphrasis, Narrative Experiments and New Ways of Seeing

Art Historian as Intermedia:

The Ekphrastic Reconciliation in 21st Century British Fiction

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Although the (re)definition of ekphrasis in literature since the 20th century seems to have experienced an odyssey, traveling “back and forth” from different historical times and cultural spaces, it still speaks to the intermedial relationship between word and image. The dynamics of this relationship is illustrated by the interactions between author, reader and the depicted agents in the literary works. Recently, in contemporary British fiction, the art historian is a crucial figure that encapsulates this interaction on account of the advancement of media, along with social debates about avant-garde art. Meanwhile, ever since the term intermedia was coined by Dick Higgins, who was inspired by Fluxus in tune with the counterculture and anti-authoritarianism, in the 1960s, the discussion about the performativity of reflection in medium has paid greater attention to the ideological (de)construction of it. As a cultural authority who occupies an in-between position, to bridge the gap between word and image, as well as between the art world and ordinary life, the role of the art historian is undergoing socio-cultural changes, particularly in the contexts of class and power, that may be revealed through art. Through the analysis of media theories and the images and intermedial functions of characters who are art historians in *Tiepolo Blue* (2022) and *The Caledonian Road* (2024), this article argues that the ekphrastic writing of twenty-first-century British fiction refers to a reconciliation between the contemporary context of word-image cultures and the historical idea of art as a response to the precarity of society.

Biography

Zhenghao Liang is a postgraduate student at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China. He is currently in his second year in a master program of English literature and theory. His research interests include the intermediality of contemporary British poetry and fiction, particularly the study of ekphrasis.