

Original Paper

“Ekphrasis”: A Study of Transmedia Narrative in the Works of

A.S. Byatt

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Abstract

With the development of transmedia research, many writers begin to pay attention to the comparison and transformation between literature and other artistic media, and practice it in literary creation. Contemporary English novelist A.S. Byatt is one of the practitioners of transmedia literary creation. Through the use of “ekphrasis”, she skillfully and naturally integrates the art work into the literary creation, making the text have a visual effect. This paper takes A.S. Byatt’s three short stories Christ in the House of Martha and Mary, Art Work and Rose-Colored Teacup as examples to explore the ekphrastic re-creation of paintings, sculptures and pottery in her works, and then analyzes the deep connotation brought by the ekphrasis between different artistic media to literary texts.

Keywords

A. S. Byatt, Ekphrasis, Transmedia narrative

In recent years, with the rise of intermedia research, many writers and scholars have begun to pay attention to the comparison and transformation between literature and other artistic media. Transmedia criticism has become a new perspective of the humanities, and has gradually expanded into a broader “cross-art poetics”, and its core concept “ekphrasis” has also become a research hotspot.

As one of the most influential contemporary British writers, A. S. Byatt (1936-) has always been at the forefront of literary innovation. Her use of transmedia narration in the novel, on the one hand, reflects her love for visual art and the style of many famous artists, on the other hand, also shows her continuous innovation in the expression technique of post-modern novels. This paper focuses on the transmedia re-creation involved in Byatt’s three short stories, discusses the connection and interaction between novels and art works, and then analyzes the deep connotation brought by the “ekphrasis” between different art forms.

1. Analysis of the Concept of “Ekphrasis”

The word “ekphrasis” originally comes from the Greek word “ekphrazein”, and “ek” in it means “come out”, and “phrasis” means “speak, say”, thus the word ekphrazein means “speak out”. Originally a rhetorical term, ekphrasis refers to “a vivid description of people, places, buildings, and art works, heavily used in poetry in the late and Middle Ages”. However, with the development of interdisciplinary and transmedia research in recent years, its scope has become more and more extensive. For the definition of ekphrasis, there are different opinions in the academic circles. Professor Long Diyong of Southeast University pointed out that the evolution process of the meaning of “ekphrasis” can be roughly divided into three stages: First, in the rhetoric context of the Western classical period, ekphrasis was regarded as a rhetorical technique. Later, due to rhetoricians’ preference for plastic arts and later European scholars’ attention on texts describing visual artworks, ekphrasis had a specific description object and was gradually regarded as a rhetorical text describing visual arts. Since the middle of the 20th century, ekphrasis has been regarded as a type of literature that writes about artistic works (mainly visual arts), and has gradually acquired independence and autonomy.

Thus, it can be seen that the connotation of ekphrasis has become broader with the development of cross-art research in the past half century. In this paper, the connotation of “ekphrasis” comes from the explanation of scholar Ou Rong. She pointed out, “ekphrasis in the modern sense represents the organic transformation between different artistic media, and each transformation will incorporate new elements of the creator. Based on this, we can reasonably explain many transmedia creation phenomena such as ‘Ekphrasis for poetry’ that from image to language, ‘Ekphrasis for painting’ that from language to image, and ‘Ekphrasis for dance’ that from language to dance”. Similarly, Qiu Hemin also explained from the four levels, indicating that ekphrasis not only included the contemporary category of language presentation of visual works of ekphrasis, but also expanded its classical category, which was more in line with the contemporary interdisciplinary grand narrative context. Therefore, this paper discusses the transmedia narrative in Byatt’s works with the help of the concept of “ekphrasis”.

2. “Ekphrasis”: Transmedia Narrative in Byatt’s Works

In the field of literature, “ekphrasis” mainly refers to the “literal representation” of visual images such as works of art in literary works, which can refer to the literal depiction of real works of art by language, as well as the visual images created by writers through imagination. The transmedia narrative forms in Byatt’s works are diverse, including the description, fantasy and artistic creation of artistic works such as painting, sculpture and pottery. Byatt realized the innovation of literary creation technique and form through the ekphrastic re-creation of artistic case.

2.1 *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary—Ekphrasis from Painting to Text*

Byatt’s short story *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* is the final story in his collection *Elements: A Tale of Fire and Ice*. In this story, Byatt rewrites Velasquez’s classic painting of the kitchen scene, “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary” (1618, Figure 1). It is worth mentioning that this painting is

not simply reproduced as an illustration; Instead, a detail in the painting about “Still Life and fish” (Figure 2) was chosen as the frontispiece, pointing to this painting by Velasquez.



Figure 1. Velasquez, “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary”, 1618

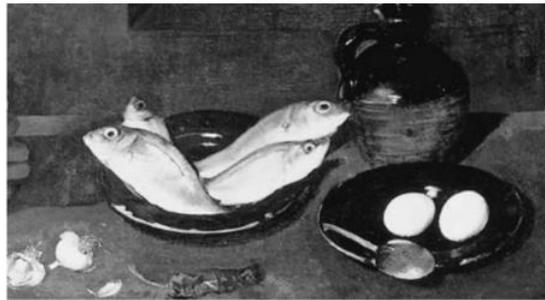


Figure 2. Illustration of the Frontispiece of the Short Story *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* by Byatt

In Byatt’s story, the young painter is a friend of the maid, Canthson. The heroine, Dolores, is a plain-looking, bad-tempered cook. Sunday was the worst day for Dolores because there was always a party at the host’s house after Sunday Mass, a constant supply of delicacies was necessary, and Dolores, a cook, was often forced to run errands herself, for which “she was resentful, grumbling, and complaining.” She was not jealous of Miss Conchita, but “wanted a real life, time to think, not to be bossed around all day.” Just as Dolores was feeling angry, the young painter began to praise her for being a real artist, which she thought was his mocking of her. So the painter told Dolores the story of “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary” in the Bible. Just as Jesus patiently taught Martha in the story, the painter plays the role of Jesus’ sermon, teaching Dolores how to love life. Dolores listened thoughtfully, her eyebrows twisted together, and retorted: “That’s easy to say; But there are always people who are destined to serve, but have no choice, no opportunity for that good fortune.” Canthson told her not to commit blasphemy, and tears filled Dolores’ eyes. “It is not a matter of learning to accept God’s plan for us, but of learning how not to worry too much,” the painter comforted. “Cooks, like painters, perceive the essence of all things; They do not observe appearances with their eyes alone, but use all their senses of taste, smell, and touch. God has given these senses to us for a purpose.” To the

painter, Dolores' frown was a powerful force in itself. He asked Dolores to be his model to help him finish the painting of "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary". A few months later the painting was completed. Dolores looked at herself in the picture quietly for a long time. Then her frown loosened, her eyes gleamed with pleasure, and her young voice sounded clear. Canthson and the painter smiled with relief.

In this short story, Byatt uses the painting "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary" to recreate it through vivid ekphrasis, obtaining the effect of presenting visual art with words. In the novel, Byatt's description of color, light, line and form reflects her profound knowledge of visual art, and her description of Dolores is almost from the perspective of a painter. Byatt writes heavily about the "beauty of strength" that Dolores shows in her desire for equality and independence. To the "painter", Dolores' anger shows power, and she is a power. It is true that the difference between man and man is not in serving and being served, nor in being pampered and toiled, but in being interested in the world, or in being worried and bored.

By skillfully integrating painting skills into literary narrative, Byatt integrates the fluidity of light and shadow, the relativity of color, and the visual nature of environmental description into the shaping of characters. The grasp of the color and volume sense of still life samples such as whitebait, egg and garlic makes readers have a sense of intuitive appreciation of oil painting. In short, Byatt has successfully integrated classic paintings into the fantasy of the story and the language of the novel, making the written description of the novel a compelling visual effect.

2.2 Art Work—Ekphrasis from Sculpture to Text

As a novelist, Byatt also has a strong appreciation of art. In 1993, she published a collection of short Stories, *The Matisse Stories*, which reflects her unique post-modern creative skills and artistic concepts. In *Art Work*, the second story of the collection, Byatt inserts paintings and sculptures into the narrative in the form of visual text, highlighting the interweaving of art works with culture and identity, and then uses text as the carrier to explain that the creation of art works is not related to class, gender or color rules, and art should come from life and return to nature.

At the beginning of *Art Work*, Byatt paints Matisse's "Tranquil Dwelling" with delicate brushstrokes. However, the "Tranquil Dwelling" of the artistic family constructed by Byatt's imagination is not really quiet, but hides the subtle relationship between characters and the fierce conflict of artistic concepts. Robin, the host of the family, is a neo-realist painter, but he is self-styled and clung to conventions, and his paintings have not been recognized by the painting community. Robin admires Matisse and appreciates the power of harmony reflected in Matisse's oil painting "Luxury, Tranquility and Pleasure", but when he imitates Matisse's painting, his paintings seem thin, powerless and absurd. In sharp contrast to Robin, Mrs. Brown, a maid without formal art training, is a person with a strong ability to capture color and creativity. She is not constrained by any academic theory and looks for inspiration in daily life, just like Matisse in real life. Her brilliant use of colour and exquisite sense of collocation gave her work the effect of a Matisse-like, dazzling decorative painting, and eventually beat out Robin's

painting with a soft sculpture, “Creation of a variety of materials”, entered the art gallery that Robin had dreamed of but failed to achieve.

Mrs. Brown’s soft sculpture is a combination of different materialsconsists, which consists of a dragon and a locked woman. The dragon lay strangely, “reminiscent of myriads of black, shiny, pointed feet, with a raised chin, and a shaggy beard and teeth made of shaggy hair and broken hairpins.” The woman “had a cubist appearance, mixed with certain characteristics of Diana of Ephesus” and even “carried a male figure hidden in a crevice in the rock”. Mrs. Brown’s sculptures form a continuum in which life and death, motion and silence, male and female, with every detail revealing “her astonishing instinct for creating new striking visual effects and arrangements”.

To Debbie and Robin, Mrs. Brown seems to lack aesthetic taste, but she has her own ideas about colors: “orange and pink are too harsh, blue and green can’t be used together, purple and scarlet can’t appear at the same time, and so on. If you ask me, these colors are created by God, and God has incorporated them into everything he has created, so it is reasonable to exist.” This is a simple view of natural art, which is quite different from Robin’s artistic expression of emphasizing color rules and pursuing light and shadow effects. By describing the successful entry of Mrs. Brown’s sculpture into the exhibition hall, Byatt intends to explain her agreement with Matisse’s artistic thought that art is based on the intuition of nature, “this intuition is an understanding of life, and the artwork created according to this idea is a sample of the emotion it expresses”. Mrs. Brown created “beauty” from waste, and the subject matter was conceived in her daily life. Life is the source of life for art, and the vitality of art comes from the creative expression of things that naturally exist in life. Byatt uses this story to express his idea that “the source of art is ultimately life itself”. The eternity of art not only requires the creators to adhere to their own ideals, not succumb to the superficial “popular culture”, but also to come out of the closed “ivory tower art” and constantly draw food from the true nature of life.

2.3 Rose-Colored Teacups—Ekphrasis from Pottery to Text

In addition to the ekphrasis re-creation of painting and sculpture, as a feminist writer, Byatt is also good at writing about the changes and development of women’s thoughts by means of cross-media narration. For example, in “Rose-colored Teacups” (*Sugar and Other Stories*, 1992), she centers her narrative on a ceramic artwork called “Rose-colored Teacups” and uses symbolism and metaphor heavily. It expresses women’s persistent pursuit of breaking the fetters of traditional life and seeking new life values.

“Rose-colored Teacups” begins with a still life sketch in colorful words, in which three women are in a darkened room. They appear indistinctly in the painting as silhouettes, but recede from the painting; The only thing visible in the painting is “a rose-colored teacup”. The teacup was from Veronica’s mother’s old college friend, a reminder of a better time for her generation. “Six pink teacup with petal-shaped saucers sparkled with a rosy glow. The dazzling glaze and intense pink interweave in the sunlight to form a blue, black, white and gold light”. But Veronica, who was young at the time, did not like the cups, did not like the rose color, and the petal-shaped saucer was particularly outdated to her.

So when she accidentally broke the cup, the mother's face was full of anger and disappointment. In a dreamlike state, Veronica's daughter destroys the family's old sewing machine, a wedding gift from her late mother and a link to Veronica's memories of her mother's generation. She was about to get angry with her daughter when she heard her mother's scolding voice after she broke the rose-colored teacup. Veronica turns from anger to contemplation, recalling the conflict she had with her mother when she was young, and then realizes that "she cannot replicate that anger on her daughter Jane".

In fact, whether "sewing machine" or "rose-colored teacup", they are deep metaphors of traditional female life. Teacup is a boudoge elegant life necessities, rose is a symbol of feminine softness, considerate. Therefore, the "rose-colored teacup" in the novel highlights the reality that women are tightly bound by family duties and the shackles imposed on women by the patriarchal society. The breaking and destruction of "sewing machine" and "rose-colored teacup" represents, to some extent, the awakening and self-realization of women, who break tradition and seek new ways of life. Jane represents a new generation of women who are open-minded, despise tradition and enjoy the convenience of modern technology. She had gone out of her room, out of the confines of her home. At the end of the story, Veronica sees her daughter's smiling face filled with "pure joy, hope, almost satisfaction", which indicates her understanding of her daughter and her breakthrough from the traditional restrictions.

By depicting the different meanings of "rose-colored teacup" in three generations, Byatt explains the attitudes of women in different times to traditional constraints. When Veronica was young, she broke not only a pair of teacup, but also the shackles of the family to women. The sewing machine damaged by her daughter Jane was also a symbol of the awakening of female ideology in the new era. Veronica was scolded and scolded by her mother for accidentally breaking a teacup, and when the sewing machine was damaged by her daughter, Veronica knew that she "could not copy that anger to her daughter Jane". The difference in the attitude of the three generations towards "old things" is the best portrayal of the gradual awakening of female consciousness.

3. The Significance of "Ekphrasis" in Literary Creation

Byatt is both a writer and an art critic. Her ekphrastic transmedia narrative is reflected in her works in different periods. According to Byatt, the use of visual artistic expression is not the ultimate goal of literary creation, but the essence of literature is the carrier of thought. Therefore, the transmedia narrative in Byatt's works is not only a literal description of visual art, but also reflects his literary creation view.

First of all, Byatt's use of ekphrasis helps the reader's imaginative construction of the text. The inheritance and departure of writers from other artistic themes show that the mutual reference between different artistic media is not the exact copy, but the integration of personal thoughts on the basis of the original work, so as to produce new works. In *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, Byatt's clever rewriting of classical painting makes a clear distinction between re-creation and simple reproduction:

“The artist must imitate what is inside things, what speaks to us through form, image and symbol, which is the spirit of nature... Only then is it possible for the artist to create in the object something truly natural, and ultimately something truly human.” This “natural thing” has an independent spirit different from the original art, and can stimulate the imagination of the reader to a great extent. Therefore, the real artistic crossover is to encourage readers to fully mobilize their senses as a whole to perceive text and painting, text and sculpture, so as to obtain an aesthetic experience of “blend in with each other”.

Secondly, as an art critic, Byatt describes a large number of visual artistic works in literary works through ekphrasis, which makes fictional literature also have the function of art criticism. In other words, many of Byatt’s works are not only pure literary reading, but also excellent works of art criticism. For example, in the short story *Art Work* mentioned above, she explores the question of which is right and which is wrong between high art and practical art, classic art and popular art, and then explains her own art criticism point by modeling the artistic pursuit of a domestic maid: Life is the source of life of art, and the vitality of art comes from the creative expression of things that naturally exist in life. The development of art needs to come out of the closed “ivory tower art” and constantly absorb nutrients from life.

Finally, the use of ekphrasis not only enhances the readability and visibility of the text, but also promotes the transmedia communication of contemporary art and literature. One of the salient features of contemporary mass media is the flourishing of visual arts, such as film and television, drama, painting, sculpture and so on. Therefore, in contemporary British literary works, the visual expression of literature appears more and more in the post-modern texts, which not only reflects a cultural view and aesthetic of contemporary British writers, but also reflects a trend of their exploration of novel development in the post-modern context. They regard the text as a canvas for describing impressions, and skillfully embed their thoughts and feelings into the text creation, which promotes the transmedia transformation and re-creation of literature to other arts.

The value of literature comes from its ability to satisfy the emotional and spiritual needs of its readers. The use of ekphrasis can undoubtedly stimulate the reader’s reading emotion and enhance the aesthetic experience. Therefore, ekphrastic transmedia narrative not only reflects a new trend of contemporary literary creation, but also a choice for readers. As Professor He Chengzhou pointed out, “Transmedia art, as an event, not only has an impact on the process of artistic creation and works of art, but also can act on specific social and cultural situations and have a transformational impact on reality.”

4. Conclusion

Through the use of “ekphrasis”, Byatt skillfully and naturally integrated artistic works such as painting, sculpture and pottery into literary creation, which greatly enhanced the appeal and visual effect of literary works. At the same time, the ekphrastic re-creation also makes literary works more in line with the current cultural characteristics of interdisciplinary and transmedia, and more in line with the

aesthetic acceptance of contemporary readers. This paper holds that, from the perspective of study on “ekphrasis”, the exploration and analysis of the transmedia narrative and cross-artistic transformation in Byatt’s works will be of great benefit to our understanding of the changes in the creative methods of contemporary English literature, the innovation of theme presentation and the development of aesthetic pursuit.

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