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Ekphrasis of the default mode: Simulating past, future and fictional worlds

Abstract:
Perspectives on ekphrasis theory are advancing cognitive approaches. Despite this, the science of the brain's default mode network rarely emerges in cognitive literary studies or ekphrasis discussion. When left unfocused, the brain in its default mode tends to ruminate on the past, speculate about the future, daydream about unlikely events and analyse the meaning of what others might say or think. The memory-imagination system, also referred to as "mental time travel", helps us construct simulations of past, future and/or fictional events. This essay proposes an understanding of ekphrasis which engages activities of mental time travel and simulation to help render experience in the minds of readers/writers. This paper does not venture into the neuroscience debate, but rather, it explores the brain's default mode in the contexts of ekphrasis criticism and cognitive literary studies. I refer to Jessica Au's novella *Cold Enough for Snow* (2022) to illustrate examples of ekphrasis writing which – through the depiction of art, objects and images (imagined or real) – engages the systems of mental time travel and simulation to interpret complexities of the world and help render perceptual experiences in the narrative imagining.

Biographical note:
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"To see a World in a Grain of Sand"
– William Blake (1863)

Introduction

Discussions on the theory and practice of ekphrasis are well travelled across disciplines, with the majority of criticism focusing on creative writing, especially poetry, composed in response to the visual arts and other media. Definitions of ekphrasis – popular in modern critical discourse in the last century – are confined to a poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art, the verbal representation of a visual representation or words about an image (Johnston et al., 2015, p. 1–2; R Webb, 2009, p. 1). More recently, scholars have advanced interpretations of ekphrasis in broader and more fluid terms, reaching beyond the parameters of modern theorisation. Multidisciplinary approaches on imagination and memory are bringing new and established scientific perspectives into dialogue with literary studies and theories of artistic production (Carroll et al., 2020, p. 31; Richardson, 2015, p. 225, 2018, p. 207; Zunshine, 2015, p. 257–273). Researchers are converging on the notion that imagination sits at the very heart of human cognition, but despite this, imagination remains an underappreciated dimension of cognitive phenomena (Ball, 2021; Richardson, 2015, p. 225).

Neuroscientific research has shown that the human brain in its default mode tends to ruminate on the past, speculate about the future, daydream about unlikely scenarios and dwell on the true meaning of what other people might say or think (Richardson, 2015, p. 230). The science shows that activities of the brain's default mode network help us interpret the complexities of the world – past, present, future or fictional events – and can even support the "mental rendering of experience" (Addis, 2020, pp. 252–253). It is widely acknowledged within the field of cognitive science that memory and imagination are closely related neurocognitive systems, if not one and the same process, demonstrating a fluidity between past, present and future representations (p. 238). Our minds are engaged in an almost continuous stream of simulation; we create scenarios about our past and future or someone else's, and at times, within entirely fictional worlds (p. 239). Given the close association of imagination with creativity and fiction, the phenomenological experience of the brain's default mode represents an important area for cognitive literary studies and ekphrasis theory. This essay does not venture into the neuroscience debate, but rather, it considers the science of the brain's default mode in the contexts of ancient, modern and contemporary ekphrasis criticism, and cognitive literary theory. This paper considers the extent to which ekphrasis, especially in stream of consciousness prose, interacts with the activities of the brain's default mode. The proposal is that the exercise of writing or reading ekphrastic prose – including literary responses to visual works of art, other images and everyday objects – engages the processes of mental time travel and simulation to help construct narrative imaginings and render perceptual experiences in the minds of readers and writers. The discussion turns to Jessica Au's novella *Cold Enough for Snow* (2022) to draw on compelling examples of ekphrastic composition which, through

interactions with artwork, images and objects, renders experience of simulations and mental time travel in stream of consciousness prose.

Ekphrasis criticism: Ancient, modern and contemporary contexts

It is well documented that the definition of ekphrasis in ancient and medieval contexts embraced a much broader rhetorical approach than it does today (Atherton & Hetherington, 2023, p. 83; R Webb, 2009, p. 5). Modern interpretations of ekphrasis tend to focus on a textual fragment that engages with a visual work of art; ancient traditions placed more emphasis on the faculties of memory and imagination (R Webb, 2009, p. 10). Ruth Webb draws attention to the ancient Greek rhetorical handbooks known as the *Progymnasmata*, which define ekphrasis as "a speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes" (2009, p. 14). These handbooks promote the linguistic quality of *enargeia* or "vividness" of language to appeal to the emotions and imagination of an audience (p. 2, 10). Mary Carruthers explains that in medieval monastic rhetoric, *enargeia* was applied not only to bring an ekphrasis to life, but to move a composition along; an artistic work or composition was to be "experienced as a journey", if not ubiquitously, through a path of mental wayfinding (1998, pp. 80–81, 116–118). Medieval teachers of rhetoric described this compositional flow as *ductus*, or the mind navigating its way through a composition, such as a route through Scripture or liturgical prayer (p. 61, 77) [1]. In the monastic setting, rhetorical practices of ekphrasis were dedicated to helping the devout imagine and conjure an image of the invisible God in the mind's eye. The audience was often asked to recall other images (painted icons of holy figures) and literary texts (parables and Scripture) from their mental gallery of stored information to help them create a narratorial picture in the mind (pp. 3–9, 72–75) [2]. This exercise of associative cognition involves weaving together various elements of experience – such as thoughts, images and emotions – to create the perceptual experience of seeing within an inner world (Ball, 2021). In this sense, imagining is an act of simulation; the mind is writing compositions all the time and the narrative response is arguably an ekphrasis of the mind.

In contrast to ancient and medieval rhetorical traditions which engage the functions of memory and imagination, 20th century ekphrasis theory is primarily focused on poems about visual works of art or images (Freiman, 2017; Heffernan, 1993, p. 2–3; Johnston et al., 2015, p. 1–2). The critical contributions of Murray Krieger and WJT Mitchell were more often directed at the friction between the absence and presence of the ekphrastic object, and the impossibility or ambivalence of the associated literary response (Krieger, 1992, p. xvi–xvii; Mitchell, 1995, p. 152, 156). John Hollander introduced the variant of "notional ekphrasis" to describe poetic compositions about imagined or fictional works of art, recalling the earliest ekphrastic poetry in the works of Homer and Virgil (1988, p. 209). Mitchell would later argue against the effectiveness of Hollander's distinction of notional ekphrasis, stating that "in a certain sense all ekphrasis is notional", involving a creative response which seeks to displace the object or make it disappear in favour of the ekphrasis (1995, p. 157, n19). From the viewpoint of James Heffernan, ekphrasis is largely focused on the "verbal representation of a visual representation", along with the power of language "to fix, excite, amaze, entrance, disturb, or

intimidate the viewer" (1993, p. 3, 7). Such theoretical commentary remains predominantly concerned with words on the page in response to artwork and in relation to the tension between visual and verbal representations.

More recently, discussions of ekphrasis are emphasising greater fluidity and interaction of ekphrastic spaces which reflect heightened awareness of intermedial experiences (Brosch, 2018, p. 226; Kennedy, 2018, p. 321). David Kennedy and Richard Meek attribute the evolving model of ekphrasis to a collaborative exchange of various encounters which is less concerned about the struggle between word and image (Kennedy & Meek, 2019, p. 1–24). Renate Brosch also discusses the extent to which ekphrasis has expanded its reach into different modes of writing, including revivals of rhetorical and performative ekphrasis – a phenomenon which is blending temporal contexts and cultures (p. 226, 230). Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington argue for a more fluid and dynamic understanding of ekphrasis, with a focus on the multiple and indeterminate perspectives created by ekphrastic poetry. They suggest ekphrasis is increasingly being discussed in terms of "relatively unfixed and more-or-less equal exchanges" which in turn provides opportunities for writers to suggest new or different ways of viewing artwork or reading texts (Atherton & Hetherington, 2023, p. 83–84; Bilman, 2013, p. 4; Keefe, 2011, p. 145). According to Atherton and Hetherington, poetic ekphrasis exists in a liminal and transitional space of ambiguity and doubt, involving "a push and pull" and "a simultaneous journeying away from and towards" representation and understanding (2023, p. 90). In their argument, ekphrastic poetry is destabilising because it asks the reader to question the ways in which individual perspectives of the gaze are informed by multiple, fragmented perceptions (p. 85, 95).

Progressively, ekphrasis is being examined in terms of cognitive approaches during the exercise of artistic discovery and creation in which imagination, emotion and memory are at the heart of the ekphrastic response (Freiman, 2020). According to Marcelle Freiman, ekphrasis writing contains "implicit and unstated association and processes" in the space between the engagement with art, object and the act of composition. Freiman reflects on her own ekphrastic poetry writing which, in her experience, evokes a strong response to the materiality of the object in the sensory and visual imagination. Freiman illuminates the research of David Kirsh, which focuses on the importance of imagination for the modern mind in comprehending the physical manipulation of artefacts, such as archaeological objects (Freiman, 2020; Kirsh, 2010). Kirsh's research is placed within the context of artificial intelligence and virtual simulations, and Freiman considers the way in which objects can be integrated into mental and imaginative functions which become somewhat "virtualised in the mind" (Freiman, 2020). Freiman (2017) also considers the fracturing impact in her own ekphrastic writing process, including the "fragmented temporalities of experience" and "associative leaps" away from the object and towards other subjective internal meanings and feelings. This essay is particularly interested in these insights on virtual mental simulations, fragmented temporalities and associative leaps which, in the theory of the brain's default mode, intersect the memory-imagination cognitive system.

Nigel Krauth and Christopher Bowman also shift the perspective of ekphrasis writing to a cognitive model. In their claim, ekphrasis is not restricted to a visual work of art inspiring a textual work, but rather, it is an integral part of the writing process itself (2018, pp. 12–13). They consider cognitive scientists such as Roger Shepard who showed that when a writer undertakes an ekphrastic exercise, a neurological transfer takes place between the image in the brain and the actual words expressed, initially by an inner voice (Kosslyn, 1983; Krauth & Bowman, 2018, p. 22; Shepard, 1978). In fact, the brain activity associated with internal visualising correlates with that of language production and may use the same neural representations, therefore providing the key to how image generation and words are linked in the creative process (Krauth & Bowman, 2018, p. 21; Skov et al., 2007, p. 186). In their assessment, the ekphrastic process is inherent to writing literary prose, given the way that the pictorial element provided by the mind is transcribed into words: "When you imagine an action scene for transposing into fiction, you see it on your mind-screen" (p. 24–26). Therefore, the transcription process involves verbalising visualised scenes and is connected to the exercise of writing ekphrasis – a performative act of projecting a narrative from imagery into words (Koestler, 1989, p. 180; Krauth & Bowman, 2018, p. 24). In the view of Krauth and Bowman, ekphrasis is engaged as part of this cinematic process in the brain when thoughts are transferred to sentences on the page (2018, p. 24). Using cognitive science to support their proposal, their argument provides new directions and interpretations of ekphrasis which might be referred to as ekphrasis of the mind. This essay suggests that their continuist model of ekphrastic thinking intersects with the science of the brain's default mode.

The brain's default mode network and narrative imaginings

Studies on the brain in its default mode – when it is in a state of repose or not responding to external stimuli – first came to light in the early 21st century when Gordon Shulman and colleagues noted that patterns in the human cerebral cortex were consistently reduced in activity involving goal-directed tasks compared with a resting state (Buckner et al., 2008, p. 1–38; Raichle et al., 2001, p. 676–682; Shulman et al., 1997, p. 648–663). The default mode network was discovered by accident, and for many years it was largely overlooked and regarded as a passive state during which the brain was not doing anything in particular (Buckner, 2012; Carroll, 2020, p. 38). The brain's default mode functions can be summarised as a group of mental activities which include ruminating on the past, planning for the near or distant future, fantasising about unlikely events and dwelling on the true meaning of what other people are saying, thinking or doing (Richardson, 2015, p. 230). Joseph Carroll argues that three core processes of imagination – mental time travel, simulation and perspective taking – form the basis for more specialised forms of imagination, such as "dreaming, mind wandering, autobiographical narratives, counterfactual thinking, fantasizing, moral reflection, comprehending narratives, and producing intentional fictional constructs" (2020, p. 38). Suddendorf and Corballis have been instrumental in defining mental time travel as the imaginative temporal continuum which allows humans to project themselves forwards or backwards in time, re-experience the past and pre-experience the future (1997, pp. 133–167,

2007, p. 299, 301). Carroll maintains that mental time travel is the basis for "the conscious awareness of personal identity as a continuous stream of experience over time", where mental time travel is to simulation "as movies are to photographs" (2020, p. 38). Underpinning mental time travel and perspective taking is simulation – a cognitive process which is understood to be a "mental representation" and prerequisite to all human imaginative experience (Buckner et al., 2008, p. 1–38; Carroll, 2020, p. 38; Schacter, 2018, pp. 256–272). Mental time travel and simulation are of particular interest to this paper, especially the visual and verbal modes of thinking and the construction of fictional scenarios.

The compelling research of neuroscientist Donna Rose Addis theorises that central to the simulation system is the "mental rendering of experience" which allows us to project the self into the past, future and/or imagined worlds to comprehend the complexities of the present (p. 233–234, 254). According to Addis, the brain's simulation system uses its facility of association to create "fictional worlds", including weaving together various elements of experience into a richly woven tapestry (2020, p. 252, 254; Ball, 2021). Addis extends the theory of the brain's simulation system by suggesting that memory and imagination are the *same* process, supported by the same neurocognitive system, referred to as "constructive episodic simulation" (2020, p. 253). As Addis explains, irrespective of whether one is remembering or imagining, the brain's simulation system acts on the same information, drawing upon a continuous stream of internal experience and incoming sensory information (p. 234, 252). Science writer Philip Ball observes that the phenomenon of simulation allows us to produce "a coherent and rich experience from only partial information, filling the gaps so effortlessly that we don't even know we're doing it" (2021). Ball suggests that we "crave narratives that help us make sense of the world", and that we unconsciously and effortlessly revise the details until the story works (2021). In this way, imagination is a normal function of what we do all the time, a quality which makes us human. Ball deftly extrapolates that perhaps we should have instead called ourselves "*Homo imaginatus*" (2021). Such an approach is reminiscent of Mark Turner's theory that the human mind is fundamentally literary and its capacity to construct narrative imaginings is an instrument of everyday thought (1996, p. v, 4–6). Ball also postulates that the simulation process acts like "a kind of internal movie", filled with not only sound and action, but emotional responses and interpretations. We might recall the observations of Krauth and Bowman who describe ekphrastic writing as a "cinematic process" during which thoughts are transferred to sentences on the page (2018, p. 24).

The simulation process interacts with unstructured associative memory in the brain's default mode network. Dorthe Berntsen theorises that involuntary and autobiographical memories of past events come to the mind spontaneously when attention is "nonfocused", involving "little executive control" (Berntsen, 2021; Berntsen & Hall, 2004, p. 790). Sometimes involuntary autobiographical memories are activated in response to concrete situational cues. Berntsen (2021) cites one of most famous memory experiences in 20th century literature to explain this phenomenon – the madeleine cake episode in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (2010 [1913–1927]). Upon tasting a madeleine cake dipped in tea, olfactory and gustatory

senses trigger childhood memories for the protagonist and a series of ruminations project him into past and fictional worlds (Proust, 2010, vol. 1, p. 51, 53, 60). A compelling example of the narrative effect of associative memory occurs with Proust's metaphor of memory as a rope when the character moves between sleeping and waking in the middle of the night:

> I was more destitute than the cave-dweller; but then memory – not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived, and might now very possibly be, would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not being. (vol.1, p. 4)

Turner argues that Proust uses the object of the rope to present the effect of memory on his mind as a story, which he then uses as a device to help his mind move from one state to another (1996, p. 45). The event portrays a constructive episodic simulation. The evocation is underpinned by the memory-imagination system. In the same episode involving the rope, the narrator describes the way his mind is projected between past and future worlds: "in a flash I would traverse centuries of civilisation, and out of a half-visualised succession of oil-lamps, followed by shirts with turned-down collars" (Proust, 2010, vol. 1, p. 4). The object that triggers associative memory is used as a channel for mental time travel and for rendering experience in the mind. In this sense, the writing is a cognitive mode of ekphrasis.

In more recent times, we have seen an increase in fluidity and dynamism of ekphrastic spaces encompassing variable and unfixed perspectives. The brain's simulation system uses its facility of association to create fictional worlds, including weaving together various elements of a multisensory experience. As the research shows, mental time travel is underpinned by simulation. A key function of this simulation system is the mental rendering of experience. This paper argues that ekphrasis can help to embody, enrich and sustain the mental representation of experience.

The render of ekphrasis in *Cold Enough For Snow*

Jessica Au's award-winning novella *Cold Enough for Snow* (2022) represents a lyrical wandering through fictional landscapes of imagination and memory. The novella is written in the narrative style of stream of consciousness and draws upon artwork and quotidian objects to render experiences of the world and human relationships. On the surface, the novella presents a passive travelogue of a mother and daughter on a short visit to Japan; apparently sharing each other's company by visiting galleries, churches, enjoying meals together, engaging in conversation and recounting memories and experiences. Despite the impression of companionship, much of the exchange between mother and daughter remains unspoken and exists only in the mind of the unnamed narrator. Au avoids conventional structures of plot, character and temporal structures, such as chapters and sections, and instead invokes traces of experience through metonymic thinking and a simmering sense of uncertainty. The interiority of the narrative, perhaps more closely characterised as a stream of observations, replicates the system of the brain's default mode, including mental time travel and simulation. In certain

episodes of ekphrastic writing, the narrator projects herself beyond the present into past and future worlds and conceives fictional scenarios in the mind's eye.

Ekphrasis of the mind and streams of thought

Au's narratorial eye is carefully drawn towards the smaller moments of perceptual experience, such as gestures, details and objects in favour of the more prominent presence of things. According to Jen Webb, the sense of drifting in Au's narrative stream is a thoughtful drifting, not an oneiric one, "characterised by an intense focus on what most of us mostly ignore – the utterly quotidian" (J Webb, 2022). Webb reflects on the narrator's ability to recount such details with precision, "as though she is looking for somewhere to locate her own cares, working out how and what to be in the quotidian world, and how to love effectively" (J Webb, 2022). The considered approach to seeing emerges in the narrator's descriptions of ordinary events and things, such as watching rain fall: "It left a fine layer of water on the ground, which was not asphalt, but a series of small, square tiles, if you cared enough to notice" (Au, 2022, p. 1). The narrator places emphasis on observing the finer details with care and gives the impression of seeing through the zoom lens of a camera: "I recognised the form of everything – buildings, overpasses, train crossings – but in their details, their materials, they were all slightly different, and it was these small but significant changes that continued to absorb me" (p. 3). In some instances, the narrator's seeing of things is purely internal – a fictional construct which blurs the boundaries between the imagined and real. An example of this occurs when the protagonist is walking with her mother through a park, and as she adjusts the exposure of her camera, she falls back with her "eye to the viewfinder" (p. 6). This is directly followed by a description of the park scenery: "Inside, the park was vast, with a dark canopy and winding paths. It was the way I had imagined parks to be in my childhood, wooded and dim and wet, a world within a world" (p. 5). In this fragment, the narrative reverts to an imagining, the way she had "imagined parks to be" in her childhood, and her mind has constructed "a world within a world". Recalling Addis' theoretical framework, the process of remembering is subserved by simulation and mental time travel to project the self beyond the present into past and "fictional worlds" (2020, p. 252). The simulation process fills in gaps of perception. This exercise is manifest in Au's descriptive account of the park:

> A series of small streams wound their way through the trees and crossed and separated and crossed one another again. Flat stones broke the water, like tiny gorges or mountains, and here and there were small, narrow bridges, the kind you often saw in postcards or travel shots of the East. (Au, 2022, p. 5)

This passage begins by describing the visual characteristics of the scenery before pivoting to the imagery of postcards and travel photographs. The narrative is referential and associative, calling upon other imagery in the mind to deepen the render of the perceptual experience by imagining postcards and photographs. This exercise of composition is an ekphrasis. The intermedial process was well understood in medieval and ancient derivations of ekphrasis. As mentioned earlier, the orator and audience were often encouraged to use their mental gallery

of images to complete a narratorial picture. In Au's depiction of the park, the audience is invited to participate in rendering a picture in their minds by drawing upon other mental images.

The stream of consciousness in Au's prose cultivates a sense of fluidity of time. Such a continuum of experience is characteristic of the brain's simulation system in the default mode. The reader follows the narrator and her stream of thoughts as she takes a solitary hike through mountains near Osaka. On one of the trails, she describes having an out-of-body extra-temporal experience: "I disappeared in and out of the forest like a character in a book" (Au, 2022, p. 81). This piece of enigmatic writing offers an ethereal quality to the notion of presence in the novella. The characters of the mother, sister and narrator appear and vanish between intervals of thought, memory and imagination. In terms of the ekphrastic exercise, the narrator has extended herself to "a character in a book" and in her mind, she is observing herself in a third-person, omniscient way, projecting herself beyond the self. Throughout the experience of the hike, the past, present and future become blurred into one imagining, and at times, it is difficult to distinguish between her present solitary trek and another one taken in the past with her boyfriend Laurie (p. 82–84). She enters the scenery like a fictional character and describes seeing a dog watching her pass by "from a house high up on a hill", perhaps gesturing toward the space between them (p. 81). In that moment of thought, her meditation pivots to her mother, as though her reflections have become blurred into the landscape. The narration then projects to a future scenario – perhaps with the anticipation of loss, grief and passing of time – where she imagines herself and her sister in her mother's flat. Au emphasises that the protagonist had never seen the flat before and is faced with the task of "sorting through a lifetime of possessions, packing everything away" (p. 81). The prose illustrates a simulation of the mind which helps her to build a picture of a place she has "never seen", along with the objects she would find there: "private things like jewellery, photo albums and letters" and "bills and receipts, phone numbers, an address book, the manual for the washing machine and dryer" (p. 81). The depiction extends to the personal objects she might discover in her mother's bathroom: "half-used glass vials and containers of her perfume and creams, signs of her daily rituals that she did not like anyone else to see" (p. 81). The internal simulation acts like an ekphrasis of the mind, and by weaving together thoughts, images and feelings, the writer sustains the experience of a fictional world. We are reminded of medieval forms of ekphrasis, which were envisioned as tropes of vision with the purpose of rendering the unseeable, such as pictures of saints and holy figures existing in an invisible realm (Carruthers, 1998, p. 222). The medieval practice of *ductus*, or compositional flow, helped a person navigate the ekphrasis as though they were following signposts through a trail of thought (p. 222). In a similar approach, Au invites the reader to follow the narrator along the course of her ambulatory thoughts. This is perceptible when she visits a museum and describes the architectural features and artefacts as she moves from room to room. She observes the surfaces of the museum as being "cool and quiet, with uneven wooden floors and large dark beams", noting that you could still see "the old house that the building had once been", alluding to the transience of time and shadowy remains of the past (Au, 2022, p. 9). She projects her own imagining onto the space of the museum, noticing that the windows were an extension of the visual experience itself: "Through

the windows came a soft, milky light, like that through a paper screen" (p. 9). The entire space of the exhibition blurs into one visual encounter – an ekphrastic one – manifesting in the way peripheral surroundings enter the narrative to depict the museum's artefacts. For example, the image of her mother appears and disappears in and out of vision, gesturing towards distance and time passing: "I had been aware of my mother behind me, pausing where I paused, or moving quickly along when I did. But soon, I lost sight of her. I waited briefly in the last room on the ground floor to see if she might reappear" (p. 9). The reader may question the physical presence of the narrator's mother throughout the narratorial account, given her appearance is often portrayed as a memory or an imagining. When the narrator moves upstairs, she notices a room "where a screen had been pushed back, and which overlooked a peaceful garden with stones and maple trees, the leaves of which were turning red" (p. 9). The pushed back screen reveals another image in the exhibition and extends the scopic vision to its external peripheries. Upstairs, the protagonist enters an area which houses long hanging fabrics and the narrative develops into an ekphrastic composition. The different sizes of the fabrics are observed – some were so long "their tails draped and ran over the floor like frozen water" and their patterns were "as beautiful as the garments in a folktale" (p. 10). The use of the word "folktale" encourages an intertextual proposition, and in the absence of other details, the reader is once again invited to reconcile the gaps in the ekphrasis by recalling images from their mental gallery. The ekphrasis moves into a different mode of thought as she discerns the "translucency of the overlapping dyes", which reminded her of "looking upwards through a canopy of leaves" (p. 10). This observation leads to an episode of mental time travel which sparks an associative memory: "They reminded me of the seasons and, in their bare, visible threads, of something lovely and honest that had now been forgotten, a thing we could only look at but no longer live" (p. 10). The ekphrasis shifts its focus onto how the fabrics make her feel and unlocks an anticipation of loss, perhaps of her mother passing away. The image, or "a thing we could only look at", has now been forgotten, is no longer living and is only visible in a photograph, museum or memory. The ekphrastic encounter acts like a portal for seeing into a different time and place:

> Wasn't it incredible, I wanted to say, that once there were people who were able to look at the world – leaves, trees, rivers, grass – and see its patterns, and, even more incredible, that they were able to find the essence of those patterns, and put them to cloth? (p. 11)

The object becomes opaque in the moment of imagining. The protagonist is transported to an inner fictional world. The narrative attempts to experience the imagery of the fabrics through the eyes of others who belong to a different time in the past. The ekphrastic render of this experience is a simulation – a projection of self beyond the present.

The illusion of the art gallery and museum experience is projected onto ordinary places, and in this way, Au extends the ekphrasis to the quotidian. At one point in the novella, the protagonist is house-sitting for a lecturer, and as she enters the house, her eyes roam over the surfaces as though examining works of art in a museum: "In the daylight I could see how high the ceilings

were, the sun streamed through certain windows and hit the walls, like the bare alcoves of a contemporary museum" (Au, 2022, p. 32). She speculates that the objects and artwork in the house were things carefully chosen by the lecturer and brought back from her travels. This activity of simulation helps her to build a profile of the lecturer: "every object spoke in some way about the lecturer, or her family, about the choices they had made, and what they felt to be the purpose of their lives" (p. 33). The ekphrasis acts as a vehicle for discovery to resolve gaps in knowledge. This activity of wayfinding shares characteristics with the brain in its default mode – imagining the past, interpreting the present and speculating about the future. In another memory event, the narrator recycles a story about her uncle whom she had met a few times in Hong Kong as a child. She remembers him as being "quiet and slim, with the bookish air of the university student he has never been" and with an appearance that resembled the "Chinese film stars of the thirties and forties" (p. 42). In this constructive episode of simulation, the narrator imagines a picture of a "Chinese film star" of the 30s and 40s to reconstruct a mental image of her uncle's appearance. This approach is ekphrastic and uses both memory and imagination in the same process. Similarly, the narrator describes childhood memories of seeing family photographs of her mother and uncle living in Hong Kong: "I'd looked at them often as a child, listening to the stories that went with them, fascinated by the spots of colour that sometimes caught there, like a drop of oil in water, burning a bright hole in the surface" (p. 6). In this fragment, the narrator presents an ekphrastic response to the perceptible features of the photographs, such as the discolouration and marks, and imagines hearing the stories which accompany the pictures at the same time. As discussed earlier, the ekphrastic exercise involves the transfer of an image from the mind's eye to words which are expressed initially by an inner voice; respectively, the reader translates words into images (Krauth & Bowman, 2018, p. 22). In simpler terms, the ekphrastic process in the mind draws on both verbal and non-verbal modes of operation (p. 22).

In an interview in 2023, Au acknowledges that she uses ekphrasis as a fictive device throughout her novella to give readers space to consider their own perspectives and speculation: "I suppose I was drawn towards impressionism and ekphrastic thinking more broadly, and wanted to preserve the idea of interpretation, and to make room for the reader" (McIntosh & Au, 2023). In terms of impressionism, Au challenges the reader to question different perspectives of seeing the world and its objects. A compelling example of this occurs when the narrator imagines moving between rooms in her apartment and tries to remember her impressions of its spaces when viewed from different angles: "From any room, you were always seeing the suggestion of another, as in a painting where the subject gazes into a mirror, looking at something just out of sight" (Au, 2022, p. 73). The different perspectives and refractions offered by the narrative create space for the reader to imagine the missing pieces and rebuild an image in the mind. Au's impressionistic brushstrokes therefore invite an ekphrastic response (both in the narrative and in the reader's mind). Another instance of impressionism is discernible in a scene when the protagonist wanders the aisles of a bookstore. The bookstore is lit by a milk-glass globe which gives "the impression of a large candle", and the gaze is directed to a book of impressionist paintings as the narrator ponders the work of the artists. She then provides an

ekphrastic response: “they had given only the vaguest impression of mountains and beaches, roads and cliffs and lakes, in such a way that everything seemed formless, or ghostlike, lifted perhaps from a memory” (p. 20). The ekphrasis points to the blurred lines between imagination and memory. Au (2022) explains in an interview that she was “thinking about ekphrasis” in the novella as a way for her character to explore her feelings and relationships and to understand life: “the idea of art trying to depict life, while at the same time of us trying constantly to understand life through art – that circular, recursive relationship” (Au & Laguna, 2022). An example of this occurs when the protagonist compares the writing process to the underdrawings of old paintings in which “one could discover what was called a *pentimento*, an earlier layer of something that the artist had chosen to paint over” (Au, 2022, p. 95). She concludes that “writing was just like painting” and that the creative process involves different versions of conception, with the writer being able to “go back and change the past” and make things not as they were, but as they wished they had been (p. 96). The comparison of writing with painting directs close attention to the art of ekphrasis. The narrator goes onto to say to her mother that “it was better for her not to trust anything she read” (p. 96). This sentiment recalls Ball’s observations that we crave narratives that make sense of the world, and we unconsciously and effortlessly revise the details until the story works (2021). The ekphrastic exercise weaves together various elements of experience into a tapestry. This, put simply, is the literary mind.

In many passages of *Cold Enough for Snow*, the process of seeing into an inner reality is consistent with the immersive qualities of an ekphrastic encounter and a *katabasis* – the ancient literary tradition of a descent into a mythical underworld or other realm of consciousness [3]. Au explains the process of seeing beneath the opacity of an object in an interview in 2022, suggesting that it helps “to reconcile an inner world” and allows residing “in spaces longer than ordinary time permits”, something she describes as being a form of catharsis (Au & Laguna, 2022). This is demonstrated by the narrator during her solitary hike of the mountains when she decides to leave the road to follow a divergent trail.

> In some places, the path was like a corridor, surrounded by trees on either side, tall and spirit-like, swaying around me as if to a sound I could not hear. The earth smelt cold and rich, like the bottom of a well, and the path wound steeply upwards, wet and muddy in places. (Au, 2022, p. 80)

The depiction of the well and the trees swaying – “spirit-like” and ghostly – develop the sense of an unearthly realm in the style of a *katabasis* (p. 80). The narrative time in Au’s novella is often asynchronous, fluid and blending into one state of consciousness. As Gretchen Shirm observes, “the text follows the ebb of the narrator’s thoughts and memories, traversing present, immediate and distant past fluidly and there is a sense of it constantly looping back on itself” (2023). This bending of time challenges us to approach different ways of seeing, and to question the truth of what the narrator “sees” or describes. To this extent, we might question the existence of the mother and the ghostly interactions with her throughout the narrative. We might speculate whether the trip was ever a reality, or rather a process of simulation. The ekphrasis in Au’s stream of consciousness is often stimulated by photographs, images, artwork

and objects which help her main character explore feelings, relationships and the complexities of the world. Au uses the cognitive facility of association to construct a fictional world by weaving together different threads of experience into a richly woven tapestry. The stream of consciousness reflects the temporal continuum of speculation about the character's past and future. Au challenges the reader to participate in an ekphrastic exercise to fill in the gaps of perception.

Conclusion

Neuroscience informs us that when the human brain is in repose or unfocused, it is anything but idle. Rather, it is engaged with remembering past events, interpreting present complexities, speculating about future scenarios and inventing fictional worlds. The science shows that regardless of whether one is remembering or imagining, the brain's simulation system uses the same neurocognitive system. Emerging theories suggest that mental time travel is underpinned by the mental rendering of experience, understood to be the prerequisite for all imaginative experience. The proposal is that the exercise of writing or reading ekphrastic prose – including literary responses to visual works of art, other images and everyday objects – engages the processes of mental time travel and simulation to help construct narrative imaginings and render the mental representation of experience. In other words, ekphrasis can help enrich, sustain and embody the experiences of mental time travel – including past, present, future and/or fictional worlds. Given the close proximity of imagination and memory with any fiction writing exercise, it is impossible to ignore the scientific research of the brain's default mode and associated responses of readers and writers. In the famous words of the Romantic mystic, painter and poet, William Blake (ca 1804–1810): "The Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself" (Blake & Bloom, 1982, p. 132, line 32).

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Notes

[1] The medieval model of memory was understood to contain mnemotechnical *loci* (locational cells) or mental places which were perceived as being necessary for remembering and thinking (Carruthers, 1998, p. 10–14).

[2]. See also Maguire (1996, p. 3). The Byzantines surrounded themselves with their saints, invisible but constant companions, whose bodies were made visible by dreams, visions and art.

[3] The ancient literary tradition of *katabasis* is typically associated with the descent of a living person into a mythical underworld, or psychic unconscious in the tradition of the Homeric *Odyssey*. It is also characterised as a descent into memory involving some kind of trial or confrontation, and a subsequent ascent and transformation into knowing or seeing (Clark, 1979, p. 32; Falconer, 2021, pp. 203–205).

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