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The pot, the vase and the kettle: 'Show not tell' and the role of visual art

Abstract
In this paper I investigate relationships between word-images in fiction and visual images in photography, film and multi-media in order to contribute to knowledge in relation to using 'show not tell' in creative writing. The immediate impetus for the inquiry is pedagogy in terms of my desire to understand the complex role of visual art in teaching 'show not tell' in creative writing workshops. As such, the inquiry concludes with an overview of a university-level creative writing workshop using visual art. While it is perhaps self-evident that visual art and fiction directly and indirectly influence each other, and that all representations are shaped by similar cultural shifts and expectations, less work has been done to show the relationships between different visual art forms and assumptions made about the portrayal of the real in fiction. The article is exploratory in nature and shows that, influenced by different art forms, the desire to 'show not tell' has been connected by writers and critics to the need in various periods to prove social injustice, to depict abstract, internal states, and to provide a sense of mortality, materiality and embodiment in response to modern life.
Key words: visual art, pedagogy, realism, photography, film and multimedia

Word images and visual art

Over the last three years, I have taught 'show not tell' skills to second and third year university students through references to visual art, including photography, painting, drawing, mixed-media and images of sculpture, initially relying on quite conventional practices to engage with the art, such as the writing of ekphrasis. My decision to use visual art as a teaching tool was more instinctive than methodological in that I wanted students to look to the world for their ideas, learn to look afresh, rather than looking inward using familiar ways of seeing. Though some contemporary fiction narratives minimise their use of 'show not tell' making extensive use of 'telling' and of voice, learning to depict scenes and characters as well as drawing on the senses to depict discrete details and objects are still important skills in the novice writer's toolkit. The aim of this paper is to look at how 'showing' in various writers' works has been influenced, directly and indirectly, by the visual arts, and how these influences may have informed shifts in practices of representation in fiction. This two-part article, addressing both theory and practice, is an attempt to develop a clearer understanding of the relationship between word-images and visual art images. My aim is to go beyond a sense of using art in the classroom as inspiration for

writing, and beyond simply recommending what I now think of as 'show not *just* tell' to produce the desired experiential effects. The article overall can be understood to draw on broader debates as to the materialisation or embodiment of language, with 'showing', understood as referencing space, as a slower, more implicit form of witnessing then telling, conventionally associated with the passing of time (Klauk & Koppe 2014).

In workshops, I tell my creative writing students that the 'show not tell' scenes in their writing have the capacity to stand across time, making their writing both sensorial and archival in that such spaces will always be there for the reader to enter, inhabit, see, touch, feel, smell, even taste. As WJT Mitchell from the field of picture theory argues: 'just because images, pictures, space and visuality may only be figuratively conjured up in verbal discourse does not mean that the conjuring fails to occur or that the reader/listener "sees" nothing' (Mitchell 1995: 96). David Lodge refers to this quality of fiction as its 'qualia': its unique capacity to represent 'the specific nature of our subjective experience of the world' (Lodge 2002: 8). Typically understood as an aspect of realism, 'show not tell' representations have varied in intensity and effectiveness over time, not only influenced by different periods' tastes and aesthetics, but also by cultural and social influences on representation. In order to show variations in authors' use and interpretation of 'show not tell', the following discussion examines differences and similarities in three representations of objects: Daniel Defoe's earthen pot, Virginia Woolf's vase and Charles Dickens's kettle.

In the early twentieth-century, Woolf wrote of the aesthetic as well as political virtues of the recurring image of the earthen pot in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Daniel Defoe depicted his earthenware pot seventeen times in his first fifteen chapters, and the image not only emphasized the difficulties of survival, but also correlated with a more complex message. In particular, the image can be considered figuratively and biblically, with humanity as the pot and God as the Potter: 'we are all the Clay in the Hand of the Potter, no vessel could say to him, Why hast thou form'd me thus' (Defoe 1719: 249). On the other hand, reflecting the emergence of the stronger, and prosperous merchant Crusoe, Crusoe's own desire is for strength in that he wants to be the 'Earthen pot that would bear the Fire' (Defoe 1719: 142).

Consistent with Lodge's sense of the word-image as qualia, Defoe's pot was as tangible and significant to Woolf as it had been once for its eighteenth-century readers.In accord with the modernists' general preference for sparing use of detail and evocative imagery – think of the sparse, but vivid and sensory object that is 'The Red Wheelbarrow' by William Carlos Williams (1923) – Woolf uses Defoe's pot to criticise the 'profusion of detail' that she associates with such late nineteenth-century writers as Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and HG Wells. She accuses these writers of being 'materialists ... guilty of spend[ing] immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring' (Woolf 1953: 105). Her argument is that excessive use of image and detail reduces imaginative possibilities. The risk for Woolf is political: the reader may be convinced that the world is so solid and immovable, so fixed in its ways that it can never change. Her firm conclusion is that in these authors' works: 'Life escapes' (Woolf 1953: 149). This recognisably modernist view is echoed in TS Eliot's desire for a poetic language that Douglas Atkins has described as both 'literal and figurative' (Atkins 2013: 9). Atkins shows that such a language for Eliot contrasted with the tendency of the Romantics to empty out the real: the problem being 'the object ceased to exist' (Eliot 1998: 136). The language of the Romantics, Eliot said, produced 'a shortcut to the strangeness without the reality, and it leads its disciples only back upon themselves' (Eliot 1998: 18).

Woolf points out that, though Defoe wrote of his earthen pot sparingly, it was an important symbol because, as a detail, it convinced the reader of Crusoe's plight: 'Defoe, by reiterating that nothing but an earthenware pot stands in the foreground, persuades us to see remote islands and the solitudes of the human soul' (Woolf 1953: 58). For Woolf, because Defoe's style is deceptively plain, he is able to convince the reader that: 'Death does not exist. Nothing exists except an earthenware pot. Finally … we are forced to drop our own preconceptions and to accept what Defoe himself wishes to give us' (Woolf 1953: 55). The impression left is of Defoe the Potter attempting to shape the perceptions of his readers, as if they too were earthen pots.

What Woolf describes is the power of fiction to set up and convince of alternative realities, other worlds that transport through the use of a well-placed detail that might persuade the reader to enter a different world or/and accept a different viewpoint. On this basis Woolf praises the Russian playwright and novelist Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883) for producing 'scenes attached to one another by the feelings common to humanity' creating 'a world able to exist by itself' (Randall & Goldman 2012: 389). Woolf's own writing has been similarly praised for producing 'a formally self-contained world which critiques common-sense realism' as I explain below (Randall & Goldman 2012: 19).

Influenced by eighteenth and nineteenth-century realist writings, the modernists evoked everyday scenes that shaped as well as were shaped by characters' unconscious, subjective selves. It this evocation that Woolf seeks in her own use of detail, observing: 'Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small' (Woolf 1953: 195). The object that draws the eye in her last novel *Between the Acts* (1941) is a single vase whose depiction emphasizes the emptiness of its surrounding space. Woolf uses the containing/container images of both room and vase to depict life itself as a vessel holding the emptiness that is death:

> Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what it was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the distilled essence of emptiness, silence. (Woolf 2014: 36)

In the paragraph, the vase appears mid-paragraph in a clear action-orientated phrase, as such both vase and phrase – 'a vase stood in the heart of the house' – stand apart, as does 'The room was a shell'. Both phrases clear a space within and around them. The depiction produces a satisfying, mutually-informing sense of the relationship between existence and non-existence, marking out the passing of time and the approaching of death with the repeated tolling of 'empty' and 'silent'; 'emptiness, silence'.

In the field of film, Sergei Eisenstein claimed that nineteenth-century literary realism, focussing on Dickens's work in particular, informed his film techniques. He makes particular mention of a depiction of a kettle in Dicken's work as the film equivalent of the close-up that draws the reader into the story. In the short work 'Cricket in the Hearth' (1845), Dickens's first line, 'The kettle began it!', draws the reader into a noisy, curious and disputed story. In the opening garrulous scene, the story refers to some kind of singing race between the humming kettle and the singing cricket, introducing a story of magic and comedy involving multiple identities, confusion and love. The narrator's account, he confesses, is disputed – 'Don't tell me what Mrs. Peerybingle said. I know better' – and on the same (first) page, he declares, 'how is it possible to begin at the beginning, without beginning at the kettle?' (Dickens 2009a: 161). The rhetorical proposition, put to the reader by an unreliable narrator concerns a story that has yet to unfold and prove itself as a worthwhile read but by the end

of the story, the kettle is again associated with the importance of home – 'oh how the kettle sings' (209) – in this sense, the kettle and its associated domesticity both introduce and frame the story.

Recognising the influence of nineteenth-century literary realism on film is also to recognise that other artistic representations influenced, in turn, the writing of authors such as Dickens. For example, in the quote below from Dicken's *Sketches by Boz*, the reader sees, hears, smells and can almost touch the dirt and chaos of Covent market in London in the 1830s (with the text's wonderful juxtaposition of the men boasting and the donkeys braying):

> The pavement is already strewed with decayed cabbage-leaves, broken hay-bands, and all the indescribable litter of a vegetable market; men are shouting, carts backing, horses neighing, boys fighting, basket-women talking, piemen expatiating on the excellence of their pastry, and donkeys braying. ('The Streets – Morning' [1836], Dickens 2009b: 48)

Such detailed realism is also evident in the artwork *Old Covent Garden market* (1825) produced some eleven years earlier by draughtsman and lithographer George Scharf. Scharf also depicts the early morning chaos of the London food market without particularly negatively portraying the people working there. As in the quote above, in the painting both viewers and workers look upon the shopping gentry, placed slightly to one side with a wide space cleared around them.
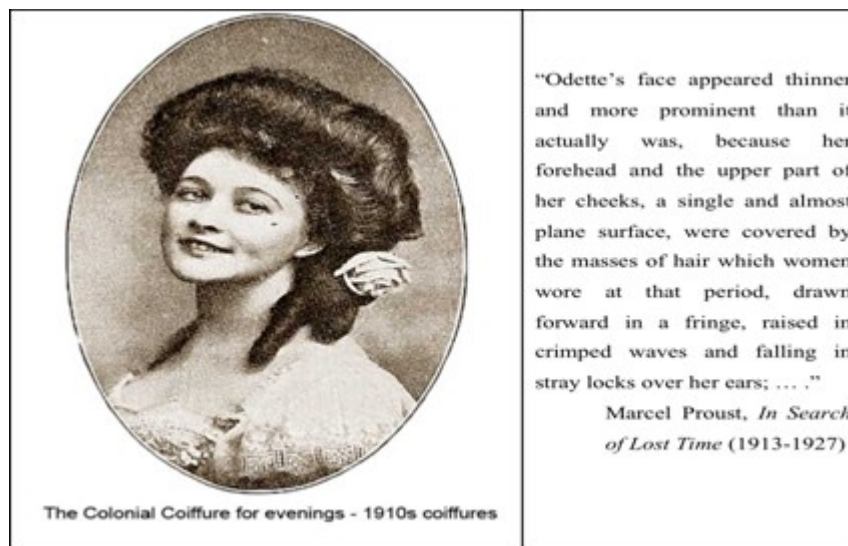

A reviewer from the *London Review of Books* commented on the similarities of Dickens's and Scharf's London in 1987:

> Scharf's London of course is Dickens's London too. One can easily imagine them, unknown to each other, repeatedly passing on the streets and loitering to take in a new sight, each storing up the characteristic particulars of a given locale, Scharf with sketch-pad in hand, Dickens with its equivalent in his absorbent senses and memory. (Altick 1987)

It matters not whether Dickens knew of or had seen Scharf's work, for the period's word-images and visual art forms were informing and responding to the same complex cultural environment, and therefore indirectly influencing each other.

Before setting out the insights of other critics on the relationship between fictional representations and visual art forms, I offer another example, similar to the above, by perhaps contentiously pointing out the synergy between Marcel Proust's detailed realism and nineteenth-century portraiture, even perhaps nineteenth-century magazine advertising. Below, on the left, is a model displaying a new hairstyle from *McCall's Magazine* in 1910. The text describes her hair as being in the 'Colonial [style] with hair loosely drawn back from the face, coiled low on the head and with curls artistically falling over her shoulder'; the advertisement has appropriated the familiar oval frame of portraiture. On the left is Proust's description of Odette's hair in *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927). His text complements the image and text of *McCall's Magazine* and presents both fashion and illusion as complementary facets of Odette's image (Proust 2014: 225). In effect, Proust points out that Odette's hair makes her appear thinner than she actually is and therefore she is both unlike herself, while being like all other women (in her adherence to the hairstyle fashion). Proust's focus on her head and hair in order to depict her character, also links his description to portraiture, which in turn has been linked to realism in that mimesis, in contrast to idealism in this period, arguably allowed 'the bourgeoisie [to] reidentify what constitutes social and moral value' (Elliot 2012: 269). Again, even though the French Marcel may never have seen a copy of the English *McCall's Magazine*, it is possible that his images were informed by similar influences on the period's advertisements.

The Colonial Coiffure for evenings - 1910s coiffures

"Odette's face appeared thinner and more prominent than it actually was, because her forehead and the upper part of her cheeks, a single and almost plane surface, were covered by the masses of hair which women wore at that period, drawn forward in a fringe, raised in crimped waves and falling in stray locks over her ears; … ."

Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927)

The 'pictorial turn' in fiction, also broadly associated with nineteenth-century realism, has been linked by critics to the post-1890 advent of photography and to early film (Armstrong 2002; Spiegel 1976). In her analysis of the influence of photography on writing, Nancy Armstrong asks of this period in which pictures were becoming 'ubiquitous': 'why did pictures begin to speak louder than words?' (Armstrong 2002: 6). One relevant issue is that, up until the mid-nineteenth century in Britain, visual communication was important in the context of limited literacy. In 1820 only 53% of British people could read, rising to 76% in 1870 (Broadberry & O'Rourke 2010: 232). Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, the novel had been read alongside the popular and widespread use of images in print journals by artists and engravers, such as William Hogarth in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. The Hogarth image below shows a man of means at an open window. His music practice has been interrupted by, and is contrasted to, the sights, sounds and smells of the street, presenting a blurred line between public and private space. It is an image that mirrors the work of the novel, which was increasingly circulating images of

personal life in a degree of detail not experienced by the public before.

In the preface to the first publication of *Oliver Twist* (first serialised 1837-1839), Dickens acknowledges the influence of Hogarth's images on his writing, using the verbs 'to paint' and 'to draw' in his discussion: 'I had never met (except in Hogarth) with the miserable reality. It appeared to me that to draw a knot of such associates [thieves] ... to paint them in all their deformity ... would be a service to society' (Dickens 2012: xiii).

Armstrong argues that, by the 1850s, 'fiction was already promising to put readers in touch with the world itself by supplying them with certain kinds of visual information' and that as such 'fiction equated seeing with knowing' (Armstrong 2002: 7). Her argument is that, in the nineteenth century, a stock of images, informed by the work of writers, engravers, artists and photographers created a recognisable visual economy for readers over time. Just as stories have always done, whether scrawled on cave walls, or whispered in one's ear, the reader/onlooker's experiences is influenced as he/she is persuaded by the apparently real as to what her experiences, memories and visions had actually been, and might be again. In this sense, images in the visual arts and in fiction have always shaped history through the production of specific representations, in contrast to the more chaotic, ephemeral, debateable, interruptible and changeable experiences lived each day. The power of the kettle, the vase, and the earthen pot is in part that they all resonate because they denote the fixed and familiar, and therefore also suggest the surrounding chaos and uncertainty:

> It's a dark night, sang the kettle, and the rotten leaves are lying
> by the way; and, above, all is mist and darkness, and, below, is
> mire and clay; and there's only one relief in all the murky air;
> and I don't know that it is one, for it's nothing but a glare; ...
> you couldn't say anything was as it ought to be. (Dickens 2009:
> 163-164)

Armstrong argues that photography in the nineteenth century came to be so associated with mimesis, the truth and the real that many authors of fiction (she mentions Dickens, the Brontes, Lewis Carroll, H Rider Haggard, Oscar Wilde, DH Lawrence, EM Forster, and Virginia Woolf) were obliged to draw on its conventions, either to represent the true and the real in their work, or to work against such representations: 'Visual culture supplied the social classifications that novelists had to conarm [strengthen], adjust, criticize, or update if they wished to hold the readership's attention' (Armstrong 2002: 3). As discussed, Woolf's work excels in its use of the well-placed, evocative object, and in *Mrs*

Dalloway reader interpretation is linked to visual consumer culture in the famous scene in which the onlooker/reader slowly discerns the advert for 'Kreemo' being spelt out by an overhead plane. Giving the example of Alfred Stieglitz's photographic work (1864-1946), Armstrong points out that modernist abstraction in art and writing also came to influence photography, and Stieglitz and others eventually 'assumed that the art image had to reveal properties of the subject concealed beneath its surface' (Armstrong 2002: 248).

When Eisenstein first pointed to the influence of nineteenth-century novels on the making of films in 'Film Language' (first published in 1936) he noted:

> An analysis of the very lenses employed in filming these shots, and their use along with camera-angles and lighting, all deriving from the demands of the style and the character of the film's content, would serve as an exact analogy to an analysis of the expressiveness of phrases and words and their phonetic indications in a literary work. (Eisenstein 1957: 120)

Later in 'Dickens, Griffith and Film Today' (first published in 1944), he suggests that 'the secret' of Dickens's writing is its 'extraordinary plasticity' and 'optical quality':

> The characters of Dickens are rounded with means as plastic and slightly exaggerated as screen heroes of today. The screen's heroes are engraved on the senses of the spectator with clearly visible traits, its villains remembered by certain facial expressions, and all are saturated in the peculiar, slightly unnatural radiant gleam thrown over them by the screen... It is absolutely thus that Dickens draws his characters – this is the faultlessly plastically grasped and pitilessly sharply sketched gallery of the immortal Pickwicks, Dombeys, Fagins, Tackletons, and others. (Eisenstein 1957: 208)

Also examining the close relationship between fiction and film, Alan Spiegel puts a different yet related argument: the imperative of nineteenth-century realist novels 'to see', through drawing on the senses, was an essential part of the realists' emphasis on social reform. To show the need for reform, the image must produce evidence, not only of an era, but also of a particular character's reality, existence and sensibility as they moved through certain political, cultural and social conditions. In *Madame Bovary* (1856), Flaubert's eye was ''pitiless' and 'exact', according to Spiegel, because he live[d] in an unstable society' (Spiegel 1976: 18). The task for such realists, in Spiegel's view, was not only to convince the reader but to lay the evidence before them: 'where an earlier novelist could simply tell his story, Flaubert must now prove it moment by moment, must provide a continuing demonstration of the palpable certainty of his characters and events' (Spiegel 1976: 18). Spiegel shows the novelists observing as the visual artists might: James Joyce stares at 'a lamp for a full half-an hour' in 'a display of 'descriptive lust' (Speigel 1976: 4); Vladimir Nabokov watches through 'a big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye'; Henry James says: 'Above all, I see – ' (Speigel 1976: 184), while Guy de Maupassant, advocates the use of detail to give life to objects:

> His eye selects unerringly, unscrupulously, almost impudently – catches the particular thing in which the character of the object or the scene resides, and, by expressing it with the artful brevity of a master, leaves a convincing, original picture. (Speigel 1976: 4)

The role of the gaze has been much discussed in contemporary theory and Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes* (1994) usefully draws on this work to address the dominance of the ocular in Western culture and language. After examining the work of a number of influential European writers and theorists (including Henri Bergson, Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida), he concludes that notwithstanding these theorists' crucial insights: 'vision and visuality in all their rich and contradictory variety can still provide us mere mortals with insights and perspectives, speculations and observations, enlightenments and illuminations, that even a god may envy' (Jay 1994: 594). Although this may seem to be a romanticised, longing look back at the nineteenth century, it is important in understanding the continuing role of 'show not tell' in contemporary fiction. Both the role of vision and the role of social reform continues to inform works of contemporary fiction, as well as publishers' and judges' expectations and the granting of literary awards. For example, in the 2011 list of short-listed contenders for the Miles Franklin award, the judges state that in Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*, 'we *see and feel* the hardship, tragedies and aspirations of the settlement and at the same time we are transported into the mystical and spiritual life worlds of Wabalanginy and his people' (*Miles Franklin Literary Award* nd). In the same year, Roger McDonald's *When Colts Ran* is said to '*illustrate* poignantly the way the optimism and confidence of rural Australia in the middle of the twentieth century slipped away and how family experience, class and social expectation shaped communities' (*Miles Franklin Literary Award* nd, my emphases). Such descriptions connect the role of images in the writing of fiction to promoting and defending issues of social injustice; in other words, they both evoke and convince readers of other possibilities.

Spiegel cites *Madame Bovary* as the breakthrough novel in terms of the influence of film because, unlike earlier character depictions, Emma Bovary is seen before she is known: she 'materializes before us' as a living being before the reader knows anything of her character (Spiegel 1976: 19). In contrast to earlier novels, the reader only discovers who Emma Bovary is, when other characters do (that is, via their varied judgements). This contrasts, Armstrong points out, with earlier writers such as Jane Austen who 'rarely asks us to infer the truth of a character from his or her visible attributes' (Armstrong 2002: 124).

Flaubert's innovation indirectly complements the work of the philosopher Adam Smith who argued for the need to strengthen the relationship between the imagination and social reform in order to build sympathy. Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) has recently been described as told in 'short vignettes' with vision as its ruling metaphor and appearing to some as a descriptive work: 'something more properly taken up by novelists' (Fleischacker 2015). In this work Smith stresses the need for 'the imagination to place ourselves in his [the subject's] situation' in order to

> enter as it were into his body and become in some measure him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (Smith 1761: 3)

This oblique but important reference to the substantiality and materiality of the body brings me to the final art form considered as an influence on the word-image in fiction. In the journal *TEXT*, Anna Gibbs has called for a closer examination of what the information age means for teaching creative writing in the university, arguing for greater collaboration between writers and visual art (Gibbs 2011). In this context, there is research that suggests how the Internet might be influencing the 'show not tell' style of writing. These arguments are different but related in the sense that while Gibbs shows the need for post-

Internet writing to take on a greater materiality through collaboration with artists; the research discussed below suggests that the Internet may be influencing a greater taste in book readers for materiality, in particular via increased Gothic-style representations of embodiment.

In her analysis of the influence of multimedia on contemporary fiction, Linda Badley observes that multimedia has influenced the growth of popular genre writing, in particular, the sensational genre of horror. The target audience for horror stories she describes as those 'X-generation readers brought up on fantasy, role-playing, and computer games' (Badley 1996: 4, 11). It is this group, she argues, who look to fiction both for ideas, and for visceral effect. She shows that writers such as Stephen King and Anne Rice have been particularly successful in addressing the needs of this 'postliterate' era (Badley 1996: 2). King has expressed the importance of his writing to our era in this way: horror fiction 'is necessary … not only for people who read to think, but to those who read to feel'. For Badley, King's 'moral' work is to connect 'those who read to feel' to a 'mad century' that 'races towards its conclusion … ever more ominous and absurd' (Badley quoting Stephen King 1996: 4). King's perspective is important here in that, complementing Woolf's own sense of the entwining of life and death, he suggests his writing is all about the taboo subject of death, which he wants his readers to experience as real.

Reading such authors' work in relation to 'the image-based economy of the 1980s and the multimedia of the 1990s', Badley describes them as translating the 'old psychology' of the Gothic novel into visceral, textual affects, by 'appeal[ing] to somatic memory, ... us[ing] typography iconographically, subverting print and textuality while incorporating multi-media and hypertextual effects' (Badley 1996: 12). Such effects, she argues, effectively collapse 'distinctions between self and world, body and mind, media culture and human reality, live and recorded [stories]'. King's work, in particular, 'textualizes aural, visual, and kinetic sensations, alludes to icons from film, television, and advertising, and narrates in a voice that readers 'experience' rather than read. He literalizes the notion of the text as a body and the body as a text' (Badley 1996: 11). In effect, Badley argues, the horror genre privileges the sensibility of the body over the rationality of the mind. This conclusion, however, unnecessarily bifurcates body and mind and, in this sense, King's own observation about his work is more useful: this is a genre for those who both think and feel.

Ralf Hertel, in *Making Sense: Sense perception in the British novel of the 1980s and 1990s* (2005), asks a question that is quite different to that posed by Armstrong's earlier 'Why do pictures start to speak louder than words'. Hertel asks

> From where does literature obtain this power to turn mere letters into vividly experienced worlds? How can it present verbal universes to us in such a lively way that we almost believe we perceive them through our own senses? (Hertel 2005: 191)

The question takes us back to the images of the vessel: Defoe's earthen pot, Dickens's kettle and Woolf's vase and Eliot's call for a poetic language that is both literal and figurative. Badley's argument about the gothic-aspect of horror stories reminds us again of the embodied materiality of language and Mitchell's observation, in picture theory, that: 'things … have 'lives of their own' as animated, vital objects' (Mitchell 2005: 194). Mitchell is referring to the 'Magical pictures and animated objects' of 'Balzac, the Brontës, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry James' and he notably adds '...the gothic novel' (Mitchell 2005: 31). In the depiction of the vivid object, the eye is not only drawn to what the author wishes us to see, but also, to what Walter Benjamin observes, that 'the gaze is

returned' by things which themselves look back and shape their observers (Benjamin 2003: 173). This is what Armstrong alludes to in her argument that both art and literature produce a stock of images for reading the world, for telling us what it is that we see each day. In this sense, the reader of horror is perhaps the necessary corollary of the numb observer of the nightly news, with the viscerality of the horror genre bringing readers back to 'scalp-tingling, glowing life' (Badley 1996: 1).

One of the art works I have used in the creative writing workshop is Tracey Moffatt's *Something More #1* 1989, an image that evokes a collage of film stills speaking of various interlinked Australian historical narratives of racism, the treatment of women, Asian migration and the role of alcohol. Moffat's work has been associated with an 'Aboriginal Gothic (Clark 2013), and as turning '…the everyday, the commonplace … [into] the stuff of Gothic' (Turcotte 1998: 11). In the workshop, I have discussed this artwork in relation to demonstrating multiple genres at play, and to discuss creative writing as a play of representations. This intellectual argument was about representation without adequately addressing the long historical association between word image and visual image, between realism and social reform, between the vivacity of the Gothic and the capacity of the object to shape its own realities. Defoe's pot, Dickens's kettle and Woolf's vase all have different resonances for readers, and all were produced under different influences; lone images standing out against the rush of stimuli encountered every day. This accords with Georges Perec's insistence in the early 1970s that a well-chosen detail has the power to directly counter what he termed 'event-driven news'. Such news he said has the potential to dull the imagination and make viewers blind to the ordinary and the everyday. His advice to writers was to not only experiment with form, but to observe and focus on detail in order to bring the narrated scale of events down to eye-level for the reader to better see the world they (and we) live in (Perec 1998).

A moment in the workshop

One of the reasons for using visual art in university-level workshop was the desire to give students new perspectives, and to take them away from overly-familiar ways of writing, thinking and reading. I wanted the students to look outwards, away from the production of their own, often intense, interior monologues, to encourage them to discuss, as a group, different ways of representing a range of experiences. My initial instinct was simply that the focus on visual art would introduce a range of different topics, issues and stories, as well as facilitate discussion of a range of issues in relation to representation.

In the classroom on an unusually wet day in Perth, a work of art was displayed on a large screen. I had written the unit so that the art would facilitate a range of exercises including practising observation, analysis and discussion, broadening and deepening vocabularies, facilitating poetic imagery, understanding the role of body language, increasing awareness of the poetics of space and time; gaining insights into the complex relations of self and Other; acquiring sensitivity to different genres and to the ethics of representation. Each week had begun with a discussion of a particular painting, sculpture image, or photograph. Earlier in the semester, there were exercises in ekphrasis, its meaning limited to developing word-image descriptions of the artwork (other definitions exist, of course, including responding to art intellectually). In John Updike's writings on various art works, students found examples of both creative and analytic ekphrasis writing (Updike 2001: 2). Before long it was clear that one of the immediate and practical advantages of using visual art to teach creative writing was an improvement in ways of seeing, discussing and observing. On this rainy day,

Paul Gauguin's *Under the Pandanus* (1891) offered the opportunity to discuss writers' representations of culturally and racially different others.

After a discussion of theories of Self and Other, we all gazed at the screen. Then, the only Indigenous student in the class spoke up and observed that the dark patch at the feet of the two young people, situated front and centre, looked like the remains of a cooking fire. We all leaned forward to see. That no-one else had seen this aspect of the painting enhanced a discussion of cultural blindness; the visual art itself had facilitated a discussion of seeing itself as cultural. As Richard Siegesmund in his work on visual research points out:

> The ethical context of how an image was created and how it is presented for viewing is now a major concern in the analysis of any image… Who is taking this image? Why is this image being taken? Who is being framed? Who is telling the story of what is represented in the image? (Siegesmund 2008: 941)

Like the visual artist, the writer must also decide who will see, who will know, who will speak and who will act, with the reader having a key role. Creative writing can therefore be considered as 'an art that uses the most common of communicative tools … deliver[ing] an artistic vision with the most everyday medium' (Siegesmund 2008: 114). In this unit, the use of visual art allowed for language itself to be discussed as a medium, challenging common sense use and emphasising language as a subtle, powerful and varied tool for the construction of image and meaning. The notion of language as an evocative and powerful medium, with stories and images built brush-stroke by brush-stroke, had the effect of slowing down the usual student rush to familiar plots. Language, rather than narrative (introduced later in the unit), became the central focus of the workshop. In front of the week's art students enhanced their skills in seeing as much as in imagining, as they were asked to sit quietly and observe details, colours, shapes, shadows, different evocations, symbols, points of view, objects, landscape and layouts, as appropriate: *What connections are being made in this art work and how are texture, height, weight, space used in the work?*

Another week, sitting before the warm, resonant colours of Mark Rothko's *Orange, Red and Red* (1957), a number of students wrote stories based on emotional experiences. These students were then directed to produce a second draft in which their emotional 'tellings' were crafted through reference to objects, details and scenes. In such ways the students learnt to think outside the space of their own interiority, using the sensory world as a pathway into their experiences, and into the experiences of their readers. Often students (like ourselves) tend to view their more negative experiences in familiar, fixed ways

(such experiences might include binge drinking, drugs, sexual abuse, mental instability, dysfunctional families, overwork and poverty). In the visual art-informed, creative writing classroom, such over-familiar narratives were regularly enlivened and challenged as students sat before an artwork that, in discussion and later in their work, produced different contexts and worldviews. In many instances, a simple change in tone (colour, voice, focus) was all that was necessary to produce a small but important shift in perspective.

It was not all positive. Before the visual achievements of the art, steps taken by students sometimes faltered. They sometimes assumed that being visual meant layering thick descriptions into their work. Interpreting 'working with images' as including slabs of flat description meant that common criticisms in the work-shopping process were that pieces were 'too wordy'; there was 'too much description to wade through'. This presented an opportunity to ask what work the description was doing. As Gérard Genette observes in *Narrative Discourse* (1972): 'Description typically 'stops' or arrests the temporal movement through the narrative; it 'spreads out the narrative in space' (cited in Mitchell 2005: 194). They began to see that large blocks of description slowed their work down particularly when descriptions were applied with a minimal use of the senses. The spatiality inherent in all description was effectively pulling against the temporal forward motion of their narration. Another initial perception of the students was that the focus on visual art tended to favour more poetic writing. This had to be countered in the structure of the unit, making sure that examples from novels and short stories showed the power of the well-selected detail.

The feedback from the students suggests that they respond well to the discussions of the art, and the role and production of 'show not tell'. One student observed that the use of the visual art gave her confidence; it gave her something to say and think about in terms of what and how she saw things. It felt like they were beginning to develop an understanding of language as art with the capacity to open up a myriad of images, perceptions and meanings. One benefit I had not anticipated was the extent to which the use of visual art would overcome the common student perception that one needed inspiration and/or talent to write creatively, an idea commonly expressed as 'I don't know what to write about' or 'I can't write in the classroom'. The visual art each week gave the students plenty to write and talk about. Gibbs says of writers as a group that they 'seem to be more attached than contemporary artists to the idea of the freedom of the imagination and the autonomy of the artist as an expressive subject'. Drawing on the work of Alberto Manguel, she refers to the reader as shaped by the practice of silent reading, which historically led to the production of appropriately solitary spaces for both writing and reading. Looking at visual art with the students, I realised that such creative writing teaching implicitly challenges the long-held Romantic ideal of the writer as a solitary, creative figure. In the visual art-informed workshop at least, we were, as writers, indirectly and momentarily, challenging such conventions by working together, recognising the synergies between art and writing, collaborating in our reading and ideas, and discussing the challenges of representation as well as the shared world outside of ourselves as a group.

And what of the often forgotten experience of the creative writing lecturer? My experience of displaying images of visual art and discussing them with the students in the workshop, felt quite different to earlier workshops where creativity and creative ideas seemed like closely guarded secrets. The difference in the creative writing and visual art workshop felt tangible, visceral and refreshing as if a window had been flung open and a breathing, moving animal had entered the room: we all stared. I moved away from centre stage and went to the back of the room to see the artwork more clearly. A nearby student took a deep breath; one young woman cocked her head onto one side, literally

changing her perspective. A man leant forward and squinted his eyes; a woman leant back, as if taken aback, staying there rocking on the chair's back legs. The silence grew filling our eyes and ears, then slowly and steadily we began to talk.

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