

Ekphrastic Encounters: Word and Image in the Contemporary Illustrated Novel

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Abstract

Ekphrasis, the verbal representation of a visual work of art, has long served as a site where literature tests the limits of its own medium. This paper examines how the contemporary illustrated novel, a hybrid form combining prose narrative with embedded visual art, reactivates and complicates the ekphrastic tradition. Rather than describing a painting from a distance, as classical ekphrasis does, illustrated fiction places image and word on the same page, forcing readers to move between two systems of meaning that neither fully translate nor fully ignore each other.

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Mitchell's notion of the image-text, Heffernan's account of ekphrasis as a form of paragone between the arts, and Krieger's concept of the natural sign, this paper argues that contemporary illustrated fiction does not resolve the historical rivalry between image and word so much as stage it openly, page by page. The illustrated novel becomes a space of productive friction, where visual and verbal narration compete for authority over the reader's attention and where meaning emerges precisely from the gaps between what is shown and what is told.

The paper concludes that this friction, rather than being a weakness of the hybrid form, constitutes its central aesthetic achievement, offering a model for reading that resists the assumption that image and text in combination simply reinforce one another.

Keywords

ekphrasis, word and image, illustrated fiction, visual narrative, intermediality

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INTRODUCTION

When a novel places an illustration beside its prose, it invites a question that goes back to antiquity: can one art form adequately stand in for another. Ekphrasis, understood narrowly as the verbal description of a visual artwork, has traditionally been studied through examples where the art object is absent, and the reader must construct it entirely from language, as in descriptions of Achilles' shield or Keats' Grecian urn. Contemporary illustrated fiction inverts this condition. Here the image is present, printed on the page, and the words surrounding it do not need to conjure it from nothing. This changes the stakes of the encounter between word and image without eliminating the tension that has always defined ekphrastic writing.

This paper treats the illustrated novel, works that integrate original artwork, photography, or graphic elements into a continuous prose narrative, as a contemporary continuation of the ekphrastic tradition rather than a wholly separate form. The central claim is that these works

dramatize, rather than dissolve, the old rivalry between the sister arts, and that this dramatization is what gives the hybrid form its distinct aesthetic power.

THE PARAGONE RESTAGED

Heffernan describes ekphrasis as verbal representation of visual representation, and argues that this relationship is inherently competitive: language seeks to capture, contain, or even surpass the visual object it describes. This competitive dynamic, which Renaissance theorists called the paragone, or contest between the arts, assumed that word and image occupied separate spaces and met only through the mediating labor of description. The illustrated novel removes this mediating labor. The image no longer needs the word to exist in the reader's mind; it exists already, adjacent to the text.

Yet this proximity does not produce harmony. Mitchell's account of the image-text, a composite, synthetic work that combines visual and verbal elements, insists that such combinations are

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rarely seamless. Instead, they expose what Mitchell calls a heterogeneity of representational forms that never fully merge into a single medium. In the illustrated novel, this heterogeneity becomes visible in small, recurring frictions: an illustration that shows a character's face the prose has deliberately left undescribed, a visual detail that contradicts the narrator's account of events, or an image whose stillness interrupts the forward motion of narrative time. These frictions are not failures of coordination between author and illustrator. They are the contemporary form of the paragon, restaged on the page rather than resolved by it.

THE NATURAL SIGN AND ITS LIMITS

Krieger's concept of the natural sign helps explain why readers so readily expect illustration to confirm, rather than complicate, the prose it accompanies. A natural sign is one that appears to resemble its referent directly, without the arbitrary gap between signifier and signified that characterizes language. Images seem to offer this immediacy; readers tend to trust a picture's testimony more readily than a description's. Krieger argues that ekphrastic writing has always exploited this illusion, using the appearance of visual immediacy to lend authority to verbal narrative.

Contemporary illustrated fiction complicates this illusion by making the image an active participant in the narrative rather than a static confirmation of it. When an illustration withholds information the prose provides, or provides information the prose withholds, the natural sign's claim to unmediated truth is exposed as itself a construction, one authored, cropped, and positioned as deliberately as any sentence. The reader who has learned to trust the image over the word must then reckon with the possibility that the image, too, is telling a partial story, shaped by the same narrative interests that shape the prose around it.

Reading in the Gap

The interpretive labor demanded by illustrated fiction, then, is not simply the labor of translating image into word or word into image. It is the labor of reading the gap between them, of noticing

where the two systems diverge and asking what that divergence means. This gap functions structurally in a way that recalls Genette's account of the paratext as a threshold space, a zone of transition and transaction that shapes how a text is read without belonging fully to the text itself. The illustration in a contemporary novel occupies a similar threshold position: neither fully inside the narrative voice nor fully outside it, but a site where the reader negotiates between competing claims to authority.

This negotiation resists closure. Readers accustomed to conventional illustration, which typically confirms and decorates a scene already described in words, must adjust their expectations when the image argues with the text rather than agreeing with it. This adjustment is itself part of the aesthetic experience the form offers: a training in reading skepticism, in treating both word and image as partial, motivated accounts rather than transparent windows onto a single represented world.

Historical Antecedents: From Homeric Description to the Illuminated Page

The impulse to place image and word in productive tension did not begin with the contemporary novel. Lessing's eighteenth-century treatise on the limits of painting and poetry already insisted that the two arts were fundamentally incompatible in their basic materials, poetry unfolding in time through a sequence of words, painting occupying space through a single, simultaneous arrangement of forms. Lessing's argument was prescriptive as much as descriptive: he warned poets against overloading verse with static visual catalogues, and warned that painters who tried to depict narrative sequence within a single frame would produce confused, unreadable compositions. This insistence on separate domains set the terms for centuries of debate about whether word and image could ever meet without one discipline compromising the other.

Medieval illuminated manuscripts offer an instructive counterexample to Lessing's later strictures, since marginal images, decorated initials, and miniature scenes were routinely

interwoven with sacred and secular text long before the novel existed as a form. These manuscripts did not treat image as subordinate illustration of a fixed verbal meaning; marginalia frequently commented on, undercut, or extended the text in ways later readers have found genuinely interpretive, closer to marginal argument than decoration. The contemporary illustrated novel, in this light, is less an unprecedented hybrid than a return, in a secular and mass-produced context, to a much older manuscript culture in which text and image were never fully separated to begin with. What changes across this long history is not the basic fact of combination but the degree of narrative and psychological complexity the combined forms are asked to carry.

Nineteenth-century serialized fiction, published with commissioned illustrations appearing alongside newly written chapters, occupies a middle position in this history. Here, illustration typically functioned to confirm and popularize the text's most dramatic moments, offering readers a visual anchor for scenes intended to provoke strong feeling. The contemporary illustrated novel departs from this earlier model precisely at the point of confirmation. Where the serialized illustration reassured readers that they had understood a scene correctly, the contemporary illustration is far more likely to unsettle that understanding, introducing ambiguity rather than resolving it.

Case Considerations: The Graphic Memoir and the Illustrated Literary Novel

Two related but distinct contemporary forms illustrate how this unsettling function operates in practice: the graphic memoir, in which image and word share panel space throughout, and the illustrated literary novel, in which prose remains the dominant narrative mode and images appear more sparingly, often at chapter breaks or moments of thematic weight. In the graphic memoir, the tension Mitchell describes as heterogeneity is continuous and constitutive of the reading experience; readers learn from the first page to expect divergence between caption and panel, between what a narrating voice claims to remember and what the drawn image chooses

to show or withhold. The memoir form intensifies the stakes of this divergence because it invites readers to treat the withholding as psychologically motivated, a visual analogue of repression, avoidance, or selective memory, rather than a purely formal device.

The illustrated literary novel handles this tension more sparingly but often more pointedly, because each image arrives against a backdrop of extended, image-free prose and therefore carries disproportionate interpretive weight. A single illustration placed at a chapter's end can retroactively reframe pages of preceding description, revealing that the narrator's account and the visual record diverge in ways the prose alone gave no indication of. This delayed, occasional use of image produces a different rhythm of attention than the continuous interplay of the graphic memoir, but it rests on the same underlying principle: the image is never merely decorative confirmation, and its rarity in these novels makes its arrival a moment demanding the reader's fullest interpretive engagement rather than a passing visual pause.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary illustrated novel does not settle the ancient contest between word and image so much as give it a new stage. By placing visual and verbal narration side by side rather than asking one to stand in for the other, these works recover the productive friction that classical ekphrasis, working through absence and description, could only approximate. What emerges is a mode of reading attentive to gaps, to the places where image and text refuse to align, and to the interpretive work required to hold both accounts in mind at once without letting either claim final authority over the other.

Future criticism of the illustrated novel would benefit from moving past the assumption, still common in casual reviewing, that illustration in fiction is primarily a marketing device or a nostalgic gesture toward childhood picture books. The theoretical resources already available in ekphrastic criticism, Mitchell's account of the image-text, Heffernan's paragon, Krieger's

natural sign, and Genette's paratextual threshold, are sufficient to support a more rigorous formal vocabulary for this hybrid mode. What this vocabulary reveals, above all, is that the meaning of an illustrated novel cannot be located in either its prose or its images considered separately, but only in the negotiated, often unresolved space between them.

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