

## “I’m painting death”

Ekphrasis and Precarious Inspiration in Louise Erdrich’s

*Shadow Tag*

**Kathrin Neis**

Universität des Saarlandes

kontakt@neis-wissenschaft.de

ORCID: 0000-0003-3904-7466

### ABSTRACT:

Today, world literature can be understood as including the literatures of the world, especially those that have been underrepresented before. It may also be associated with other arts such as painting and examine intertextual and intermedial relations to the construct of “the canon”. Therefore, in this essay, I examine the role of ekphrasis in Louise Erdrich’s artist novel *Shadow Tag* (2010) with the help of Laura Eidt’s typology for the analysis of ekphrases in literature and film. In the novel, fictional paintings are depicted as well as real works discussed, amongst others those of George Catlin in contrast to Native American Art. Ekphrasis in *Shadow Tag* is closely related to the often-difficult intra-familial relations, namely between painter-protagonist Gil and his wife and muse Irene. Gil’s artwork in general, and specifically his “America” series are connected to the topic of colonialism, as his paintings evoke images of the exploited indigenous (Native American) body as well as to the topic of gender relations. Gil’s attitude towards his work and his muse shifts between attraction and repulsion, thereby fuelling his painting, whereas Irene experiences a growing discontent. The ekphrases are strongly influenced by the respective narrative focaliser, often to such an extent that depiction and depicted cannot be distinguished. This immanent topic of perception is multiplied in Irene’s writing and the narrative construction of the text.

## **RESUMO:**

A literatura-mundo pode ser hoje entendida como incluindo as literaturas do mundo, especialmente as literaturas que têm sido sub-representadas. Pode também estar associada a outras artes, como a pintura, e examinar relações intertextuais e intermediais para a construção do “cânone”. Assim, examino neste ensaio o papel da écfrase no romance *Shadow Tag* (2010), da artista Louise Erdrich, com a ajuda da tipologia de Laura Eidt para a análise das écfrases na literatura e no cinema. Neste romance, são retratadas pinturas fictícias, bem como são discutidas obras reais, tais como, entre outras, as de George Catlin, em contraste com a Arte Nativa Americana. Em *Shadow Tag*, a écfrase está intimamente ligada às frequentemente difíceis relações intra-familiares, nomeadamente entre o pintor protagonista, Gil, e a sua esposa e musa, Irene. As obras de arte de Gil, em geral, e especificamente a sua série “América”, estão ligadas ao tema do colonialismo, uma vez que as suas pinturas evocam imagens do corpo indígena (nativo-americano) explorado, bem como ao tema das relações de género. A atitude de Gil para com a sua obra e a sua musa oscila entre a atracção e a repulsa, alimentando assim a sua pintura, enquanto Irene experiencia um descontentamento crescente. As écfrases são fortemente influenciadas pelo respectivo focalizador narrativo, muitas vezes ao ponto de a representação e o retrato não se poderem distinguir. Este tema imanente da percepção é desenvolvido na escrita de Irene e na construção narrativa do texto.

## **KEYWORDS:**

artist novel; Laura Eidt; muse; painting; postcolonial; relationship

## **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:**

Laura Eidt; musa; pintura; pós-colonial; relação; romance de artista

Date of submission: 03/07/2022

Date of acceptance: 18/06/2022

## Introduction

Artist novels (*Künstlerromane*) are not only present in literary history but are also experiencing a kind of renaissance in contemporary literature. They deal with the aspects of being an artist; inspiration and the relationship between artist and muse are often of particular interest, thereby shedding light on gender representations. *Shadow Tag* (2010), written by Native American author Louise Erdrich, stands out in terms of its treatment of the complicated collaboration between fictitious painter Gil and his Native American wife Irene which is mainly represented via ekphrasis of his paintings.

The novel is connected to the concept of world literature as inclusive, intertextual, and challenging the canon in several ways: Its writer as well as its protagonists are Native American, thus offering a differentiated perspective on art and colonial history; representing several arts (writing and painting) and referring to the tradition of ekphrasis, *Shadow Tag* is intermedial, while at the same time intertextually discussing works of the canon of Western art and enlarging the (literary) canon itself.

The novel seems particularly suitable for the analysis of ekphrasis, since in addition to the high occurrence of ekphrasis and its close connection to the lives of the protagonists, there is also a contrasting and interaction of the fictional works — so-called *notional* (the term was first mentioned by John Hollander; Cranston, 2011: 212, 217; Heffernan, 2015: 43) or imaginary ekphrasis — with real works of art history. In *Shadow Tag*, Gil's artistic work is predominantly contrasted with the work of colonial artist George Catlin.

Therefore, the focus of this study will be a closer examination of ekphrasis in the novel. In the preceding theoretical section, I will present the analytical approach Laura Eidt developed in her dissertation *Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film* (Eidt, 2008), which is very suitable for this evaluation, and which concentrates on the description and differentiation of four categories of ekphrasis. The analysis of selected ekphrases in the novel will be embedded in its context and concentrate on artistic inspiration. Besides these close readings, I will also look at possible structural and qualitative similarities and differences between notional and real ekphrases.

### 1. More than *ut pictura poesis*: Eidt's typology

Ekphrasis as a literary form has a long tradition and significant representatives (Wagner, 2013: 163). However, until now, theory has largely refrained from specifying the forms or types of ekphrasis. Eidt's aim is to develop an applicable model for analysis of all kinds of ekphrasis in the media and genres of "poetry, novel, drama, and film" (Eidt, 2008: 44). She argues for the creation of her own typology because "[a] definitive systematic model for distinguishing various kinds of ekphrasis is still lacking in the critical literature, although a few scholars have made some first steps in that direction" (38).

Eidt draws on these existing approaches after analysing and criticising them in detail (38–44). Authors discussed include Gisbert Kranz, Tamar Yacobi, Marianne

Torgovnick, Valerie Robillard, Donna L. Poulton and Heinrich Plett; some of these concepts include intermedial or transmedia aspects. Eidt gives many examples to her explanations, mainly from artist novels and films, but also films by Jean-Luc Godard such as *À bout de souffle*, in which art is not the (main) theme of the work.

Eidt’s model is composed of four types of ekphrasis, which embody “increasing degrees of complexity” (45). More precisely, she writes that: “[...] on the whole, the categories are qualitative more than quantitative, that is, they account more for degrees and kinds of involvement with or of the visual arts in the text or film, rather than for the amount of time a picture is shown or discussed” (45).

She also wants to ensure that the categories are applied to parts of a work and not a single category to a whole text or film, since several types can be found in different places within a single work (45); this idea corresponds well with the approach intended here. Eidt not only thinks it is possible to identify specific functions of a type in a certain context, but also — from a comparatist perspective — to compare these functions in different media or genres (45).

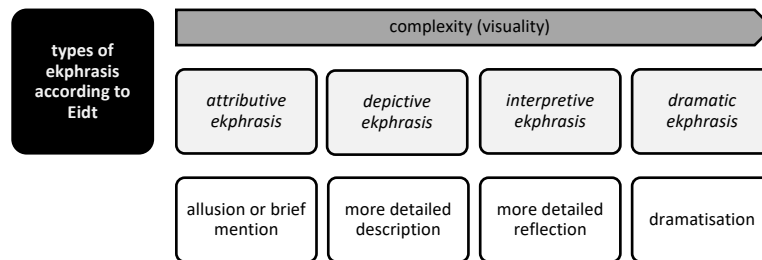
*Attributive ekphrasis* is the simplest level of ekphrasis and refers to a “verbal allusion” or brief mention of one or more works of art in a descriptive or dialogical passage of a text or film without elaborate explanation (46). The works can also serve as “background images or narrative device” (46) and can assume the form of a more general reference to a style or genre (47).

*Depictive ekphrasis* denotes a more detailed discussion, description of or reflection on images than the first type (47), which includes naming and describing “details” or individual “aspects” of the artwork (47), which comes closest to the widespread definition of ekphrasis as ‘verbal representation of visual representation’ (48). Functionally, it takes a “central role for the plot” or the “characterization” of a personage (48). Sometimes, there may be “interference” (a term borrowed from Heinrich Plett), an “intentional conflict between the reception of the original painting [...], and the quotation of the painting and its reception” (50). Often, the depiction is followed by interpretive passages as in the next type (50); i.e., a combination of *depictive* and *interpretive* ekphrasis occurs.

*Interpretive ekphrasis* comprises either the “verbal reflection” on a picture or “a visual-verbal dramatization of it in a *mise-en-scène* tableau vivant” (50). Here, too, the reproduction of details is important, but with a higher “degree of transformation” (50). The reflections often “go beyond its depicted theme” (51); they may be set in connection with the theme of the whole text/film or with its leitmotifs. In a literary text, the description of a scene that corresponds to that of a real painting and thus represents an implicit reference for the reader (“verbal dramatization”) also falls into this category (54). Furthermore, “a higher degree” of “self-reflexivity” in relation to the medium is frequent (56).

*Dramatic ekphrasis* is the “most visual” type, i.e., it “has a high degree of *enargeia*”, that is, it has a higher capability to generate images in the recipients’ minds (56). At the same time, it is a special type: images are staged and brought to life and thus are “even more” prone to “self-reflexivity” than in *interpretive ekphrasis* (56). Entire images or “significant details” are “represented” (56), or else the picture frame is transgressed/broken, analogous to the fourth wall of drama, by pictorial elements or characters, which may also appear in a commentary (57). The type occurs at a

“central” point of the work and over a longer narrative time (57) and exhibits an (even) higher “degree of transformation and additional meaning” (57). In this case, strong “interference” of reception is possible, in that a great discrepancy is created between the “original” reception and “context” of an image and the intended reception within the text (57). This form is only “[r]ecognizable as ekphrasis” to connoisseurs of a work (63), since the original work is not necessarily presented in its original form (e.g., as a painting).



## 2. Ekphrasis and inspiration in *Shadow Tag*

In Louise Erdrich’s novel (Erdrich, 2011),<sup>1</sup> the majority of the ekphrases are *notional* and relate to Gil’s artwork; there are also real ekphrases of paintings by artist George Catlin, who primarily portrayed Native Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Additionally, anecdotes from volumes of Catlin’s letters, which are read by the female muse character Irene and her daughter Riel as well as by Gil, are made the topic of discussion. In the following sections, the ekphrases will be examined separately and later brought together for comparison.

It can be said in advance that *Shadow Tag* has a quite complex narrative construction, which seems to be a recurring approach of Erdrich’s (Boesenberg, 2010: 213 about *Bingo Palace*; Morrison, 2018: 52; Noori, 2010: 92): there are first (*homodiegetic*) and third person (*heterodiegetic*) narratives; moreover, different text forms can be identified. These include two narrative threads concerning a secret blue diary and a “Red Diary” kept by Irene, presumably for the purpose of manipulating her husband (also Hudson, 2013: 17; Noori, 2010: 94); both are told in first person. The third-person narrative, with various characters as *focalisers*, includes mainly Gil’s and Irene’s perspectives, as well as their daughter Riel’s. A plot twist at the end of the novel adds to the complication of events: it reveals the entire narrative to be Riel’s master’s thesis as a creative writer, who, referring to the various source material, appeals to the alleged “gift of omniscience” (Erdrich, 2011: 251) she acquired after the death of her parents.

Overall, the novel shows an increase in drama, which is explicitly reflected in the structural design, consisting of five parts that become gradually shorter and more dramatic, plus a kind of epilogue titled “Riel”, which suggests a reference to the structure of a drama and thus has an additional self-conscious effect. Scott

<sup>1</sup> The results presented here partly stem from my original research for an unpublished paper for a seminar about artist-muse-relationships held by Dr. Claudia Schmitt at Saarland University in 2016.

Morrison states that “[T]his meta-narrative style [...] imitates Native American storytelling” (2018: 52).

Therefore, when analysing any text passages, it is important to keep an eye not only on the character who is supposedly narrating/focalising them, but also on this “meta-narratrice” Riel, and even to consider the events recounted from her point of view under the aspect of unreliable narration.

## 2.1 Irene, Gil, and the “America” series

### 2.1.1 The “America” series, (mainly) as viewed by the painter

The first mention of an Irene portrait occurs early in the novel, when Gil is working on it (Erdrich, 2011: 5). A little later, Gil’s work is described as following:

Irene America was over a decade his junior and had been the subject of his paintings in all of her incarnations—thin and virginal, a girl, then womanly, pregnant, naked, demurely posed or frankly pornographic. He’d named each portrait after her. *America 1. America 2. America 3. America 4* had just sold in six figures. If only he’d kept some of the earliest, the best portraits. They were selling for more. The series was becoming famous, or was already famous. Before Irene, he’d painted landscapes, reservation scenes that reminded people of Hopper. He’d been called a Native Edward Hopper—irritating. (8)

In this quotation, we get a first overview not only of the artist’s “*America*” series, but also of his renown and the financial profitability of his works, which seems to be steadily increasing and is important to him.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Irene’s great importance becomes clear, as she apparently triggered the turn to portraiture. The mention of Hopper, in the manner of *attributive ekphrasis*, creates an image of Gil’s earlier style, while the summary of Irene’s various modes of representation, although also evaluative, which is characteristic of *interpretive ekphrasis*, is rather sketchy and therefore cannot have an immediate visual stimulating effect, as would be expected of this type.

Nevertheless, the ekphrasis hints at the question of Irene’s often drastic portrayal. The novel’s defining theme of the complicated relationship and its possible (quite ambivalent) effects on Gil’s art are also illustrated by these thoughts attributed to Gil: “But now he was losing confidence and control. His paintings were hiding from him because Irene was hiding something” 9). Gil “arranges her with no thought of anything other than the portrait, his portrayal of her life. He never asks, ‘How would you like to be painted?’” (Noori, 2010: 93).

Morrison, who reads the novel in the light of Frantz Fanon’s three stages of “the evolution of national cultural identity” (Morrison, 2018: 48) in (post-)colonial contexts, links Gil to “the colonist archetype” (49), deriving his wealth from the portraiture, “the exploitation of his wife” (49).

---

<sup>2</sup> Later, there are further references to the financial aspect of Gil’s art (e.g., Erdrich, 2011: 98, when he wants to sell some paintings at the birthday party for his wife).

The following quotation represents a crucial passage within the text, specifically for understanding the relationship and Gil's art — albeit, of course, with the caveat of unreliable narration:

Once upon a time she had been eager to sit for him. There had been a soft electric quality, a constantly changing force field, between them while he painted. Gil had given his entire attention to *her youth* first, but after that he *devotedly* painted *the effect of experience on flesh*. The imprint of his own mouth on Irene's mouth. *Age, time*. Snow slipping off a tree limb until it crashed whitely down. Irene's *weary softness* after giving birth. Her breasts, hot with fever as her milk came in, swollen to a gorgeous size and so sensitive that her milk let down at the lightest touch. She'd nursed in his studio, naked, with pillows to prop the baby, and he'd have two paintings going, one for each side as she changed. That was *happiness*. After the babies became toddlers, then small children, he painted her body as it drew back into itself and toughened. For a time, he'd abandoned her and painted other subjects. But he'd been working on a *mythic level* with the portraits—her portrayals immediately *evoked problems of exploitation, the indigenous body, the devouring momentum of history*. More than that—he'd progressed to a technical level that allowed him an almost *limitless* authority. Abstract expressionism had been the *tyranny* of the day, but he'd stuck defiantly with figurative painting and now his control of old master techniques *looked almost radical*. Irene's distance aroused in Gil a desolate craving. Her secrets drove him to a manic despondency in which he began to do the best work of his life. No matter what *her sin*, he believed he saw her with pure eyes. People called him a *charming hypocrite*, but in his art, he only wanted to *get at the truth*. So how could he blame her body, he thought, painting himself in the picture like Velázquez, like Degas *creeping up on* a prostitute in her bath. If his brush were merely the eyelash of a cat and he had one canvas to work on for the rest of his life, it would be a painting of Irene. (Erdrich, 11–12; my highlighting)

It is already apparent here that the ekphrastic passages in *Shadow Tag* are difficult to separate from statements about Irene and her effect on Gil's art; they alternate and are interwoven. The quotation can be understood as a kind of summary of the artist's work with Irene, in which fragmentarily, individual modes of portraiture are highlighted, although it is hard to identify individual works or even to make a clear distinction between the indication of a *sujet* and Irene's poses or physical states. Common to the representations is not only Irene as subject, but primarily her body, her corporeality, as the centre of all the pictures. Furthermore, there is enigmatic phrasing where it is unclear whether it could be metaphorical, such as the "falling snow" (11).

Using Eidt's system, the more verbal, descriptive, and enumerative passages already mentioned can be identified as *depictive*, while those in italics can be identified as subjective *interpretive ekphrasis*. These primarily address the pictorial statement as well as the general interpretation of Gil's work in postcolonial terms such as exploitation of indigenous people and their bodies. Furthermore, we find some reflections on technical aspects of painting, but they remain abstract; although Gil's mastery of the technique is mentioned, which authority made this evaluation remains obscure: it could be Gil's point of view via (free) indirect discourse, the opinion of the narrative "super-ego" Riel, or also the communication of a widespread public opinion about Gil's art.

On the one hand, the comparisons with famous painters characterise Gil (*depictive ekphrasis*). Similar to Velázquez, who painted himself into the mirror of a

picture in *Las Meninas*, Gil literally seems to be an artist strongly concerned with his self-image. The mention of Degas, who depicted women in apparently unobserved intimate bathing scenes, “creeping up on a prostitute in a bath” (12), at the same time makes Gil seem to equate his model with a prostitute. This enforces Morrison’s notion of the exploiting artist, using the model “as a resource” (2018: 49). On the other hand, the original pictures are evoked without having to give details (*attributive ekphrasis*).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the last sentence of the quotation — if understood as a genuine statement by Gil — emphasises the closeness between Irene and his art while at the same time pointing out its obsessive character. Interestingly, the conviction conveyed here that the tense relationship with Irene enhances artistic creation is in contradiction to Gil’s previously quoted statement (“Once upon a time” [Erdrich, 2011: 11]); thus, he seems more unpredictable. The language used in this passage shows a predominantly elliptical sentence structure with rather short sentences, which creates the impression of associative thought; the introductory phrase is typical of fairy tales, but also casts doubt on the following idealisation of earlier stages of the artist-muse-relationship and could originate from Riel’s narrative.

### 2.1.2 “America”, as viewed by Irene

In accordance with the complex narrative construction, there are other characters in *Shadow Tag* besides the painter who reflect on the paintings. Of particular interest are statements by Irene. These are often related to reflections on her marriage; for example, in her “Blue Notebook”: “You<sup>4</sup> have painted me for nearly fifteen years. In that time, I have had secrets. I have let them rest like dragonflies on the surface of my body. Once, you even painted an elaborate, transparent, veined wing on my inner thigh and I thought — he sees!” (17).

Following Eidt’s model, such less detailed description can best be called *attributive ekphrasis*; nevertheless, it has great potential to generate imagery, since the combination of a dragonfly wing with a female thigh creates a surreal impression that the reader must inevitably picture. Gil, who symbolically expresses his wife’s inner thoughts in his painting, seems to possess an uncanny intuition. There is a similar strange connection between Gil’s art and her thoughts later on (48–49).

Another example of Irene’s perception of her husband’s works is found in a *heterodiegetic* passage:<sup>5</sup>

a glossy catalogue from Gil’s gallery in Santa Fe: thirty portraits of Irene America, as well as smaller black-and-white images of earlier portraits. There were lists of reproductions of the big pieces. Gil’s beloved doors. She had allowed him to paint her on all

<sup>3</sup> To “see” them, however, the reader must be familiar with the works or be willing to research them.

<sup>4</sup> Irene addresses her husband directly in her secret diary kept in a safe deposit box.

<sup>5</sup> This may be judged as less reliable, whereas Riel at the end describes her mother’s diaries as authentic materials (Erdrich, 2011: 251), which is why they could be accorded a higher degree of credibility. However, it should be noted that due to the uncovering of Riel’s role only at the very end of the novel, to call the narration unreliable is — strictly speaking — only possible in hindsight; there are hardly any explicit textual signals (Tarbet, 2014: 88; except see Erdrich, 2011: 59, 102).



fours, looking beaten once, another time snarling like a dog and bleeding, menstruating. In other paintings she was a goddess, breasts tipped with golden fire. Or a creature from the Eden of this continent, covered with moss and leaves. He'd done a series of landscapes, huge canvases vast with light, swimming Albert Bierstadt or Hudson School replicas, in which she appeared raped, dismembered, dying of smallpox in graphic medical detail. She had appeared under sheaves of radiance, or emerging from the clay of rough ravines. [...] *Some were starkly sexual, stirringly tender. Others were such cruel portrayals that her eyes smarted and her cheeks burned as if she'd been slapped. She had a gloating, cavernous, hungry beauty in some. On others she was a guileful thing, greedy or possessed of a devious sweetness that she found hateful.* Her stomach turned over. (30–31; my highlighting)

Here, as before, we find various ways of depicting Irene that cannot be assigned to individual images and seem to merge into one another; the enumerations and plural form enforce this impression. The passage can be roughly divided into a *depictive* part, which is characterised by the description of the portrayals, and a part with *interpretive ekphrasis*, where Irene's personal evaluations predominate. The allusions to Albert Bierstadt and the Hudson River School can be understood as additional *attributive ekphrases*, providing a "background" for the reader's imagination.

Irene again emerges as the focal point of all the paintings; common themes are her physicality, sometimes drastic, and the problem of the exploitation of the indigenous population. According to Morrison, Irene "allows it [these violent depictions] because of her dependence on Gil for financial, social, and familial stability" (2018: 50). At times, the description is reminiscent of paintings by Frida Kahlo who also showed the maimed female body, but in an act of self-empowerment. Irene's perception is primarily characterised by rejection and disgust, which even expresses itself in a physical reaction that surprises her (Erdrich, 2011: 31). It is also significant that she only allows herself a closer look at the catalogue after her husband's breach of trust ("reading her diary [...], and all the rules were broken" [31]). By writing her diaries, Irene tries to regain power (Morrison, 2018: 52), but, as Hudson argues, "she and Gil are both caught up in the story she has created" (2013: 19). Finally, it will be Riel who, symbolising the "hybridized generation" (Morrison, 2018: 49), truly 'writes back', "takes control of the story and escapes its power" (Hudson, 2013: 37).

The extent to which Irene struggles with her portraits — then "mounts her resistance with her two diaries" (Morrison, 2018: 50) — is illustrated by statements such as:

Her name was now a cipher joined to simulacra. And the portraits were everywhere. By remaining still, in one position or another, for her husband, she had released a double into the world. It was impossible, now, to withdraw that reflection. Gil owned it. He had stepped on her shadow. (Erdrich, 2011: 39)

The indigenous belief in the shadow's significance is addressed several times in the novel (see also Erdrich, 2011: 40 and the chapter about Catlin; Noori, 2010: 91), but furthermore, on a more abstract level, it is transferred to the couple's marriage, and Irene's posing for her husband is questioned.

Together with her half-sister May (a painter), Irene comments ironically on Gil's often sexually exploitative depictions (Erdrich, 2011: 69), but at the same time

hopes that May understands “that Irene was not the image — either heroic or degraded — that her husband painted” (75), she does not want to be the “double” (39). Elsewhere, she describes herself to a gallery visitor as “[f]ast food” for Gil (91), having found her depictions shameful to older Native American viewers (90). Since looking at the catalogue, she is aware that she is seen as “utterly exposed, through Gil’s eyes” (90) by everyone; so, the significance of the male gaze on the female body is another important aspect in the novel.

## 2.2 The “snake” paintings

The ambivalent effect of the relationship on Gil’s art is also evident when an argument with Irene and the words “*snake, poison*” (23) trigger a concrete idea for a painting in him (22–24), the creation of which is discussed several times in the further course of the novel. Gil’s initial thoughts, after he has imagined the picture-to-be “until it became definite and filled his mind” (24), are as follows: “The snake, the poison, the hatred. He was thinking those things. Gil’s hatred was a useful fuel, it cinched his focus and brought clarity. Where was the truth? The panel was an open question” (24). Here, hatred of Irene seems to be the drive of his artwork; a little later, he generalizes the subject to a misogynic stereotype: “the lurching woman, the fallen woman, the woman he was picking up and setting on her feet, the woman falling again. All of this was in the figure of Irene” (25).

Later, the painting process is taken up again and linked to reflections on the relationship:

Gil was working out the paintings, the colours, the emotion, and as he did he was happy. He did not feel alone when he was working. Even when things weren’t going well otherwise, he could paint. It didn’t even matter if Irene was angry. In fact, it was better. When they were happy, when he could count on her quotidian devotion, the paintings seemed to veer into insipidity. He had to wrestle with contentment. As she moved away from him emotionally, the paintings grew fiercer. They came alive with longing. He painted his pain, her elusiveness, his grasping clutch, her rejection, his bitter hope, her sullen rage into the pictures. He’d become aware that the worse things were between them, the better his work came out. It did not yet occur to him to wonder whether his suspicions about Irene were also a method of pushing her away from him, so that he could feel her absence, and in turn feel an aching desire out of which he could make his art. (81)

This quotation seems at first to be a rendering of Gil’s thoughts about his work and its relationship to Irene, whereby once again the notion of inverse proportionality prevails. There are many interpretative phrases containing the emotions and statements the artist wants to convey with his work, although their graphic realisation is left out.

On closer inspection, however, at least the last sentence of the quotation cannot be read as a (free) indirect discourse communicating the character’s thoughts. The preceding text signal “It did not yet occur to him to wonder” rather points to a *zero-focalised*, omniscient narrator — to the “meta-narratrice” Riel — and thus not only lets the preceding sentences appear less credible, but rather offers to read them as

explanations Riel has arranged after the fact for her parents' behaviour (also Hudson, 2013: 36). This is a rare shift of narrative focus *within* a passage. As in the whole novel, readers need to reconstruct the relationship between artist and muse on their own.

The same can be said about the other passages describing the aforementioned “snake” painting. When Gil believes that the serious complications in their relationship, which include Irene’s manipulations concerning the paternity of their three children, have made him progress, Irene seems taken with the work: “he could see in her face she was touched by the intolerable longing in her portrait, and something else. It is masterful, she said at last. One of your best” (Erdrich, 2011: 159). This is followed by what appears to be their relationship in a nutshell: an artistic exploitative act by Gil, who paints Irene in a helpless situation, having fallen asleep drunk (160). At the same time, this appears to be foreshadowing the rape that will presumably take place later (221). Furthermore, this painting anticipates their mutual death, emphasising death: “The picture was disturbing. The energy fueled by his longing seemed to have turned negative. No matter what he tried, how he changed it, Irene looked dead” (98).<sup>6</sup>

As events and their “co-dependence” (Morrison, 2018: 51) escalate, there are fewer and fewer mentions of Gil’s art: a brief viewing of the abovementioned painting by Gil (Erdrich, 2011: 193–194), during which — another foreshadowing — he injures himself, signs it in blood and refers to it as “the last portrait he would paint of her” which would sarcastically “become worth a lot of money, in time” (194); furthermore, the viewing of Gil’s portraits by the eldest son Florian on the internet, followed by an argument with his mother about her lack of resistance against the exploitation (195–197). Then, there is Gil’s lack of understanding for Irene’s concern about the possible effect of the paintings on the children, when he utters the telling words: “No one here gets out alive” (197–198), until Gil finally gives up painting after his breakdown (242).

### 2.3 The “Lucretia”

Prominent within the novel features an ekphrasis that links a real painting — Rembrandt’s *Lucretia* — with a painting of Gil’s and that is at the same time an interpretation of the couple’s life together and foreshadowing of their end, symbolising their “symbiotic” (Morrison, 2018: 51) relationship *in nuce*.

After explaining Gil’s infatuation with the painting as well as the story according to Livy of Lucretia, who stabbed herself out of despair over her forced surrender to a rapist (Erdrich, 2011: 54), it is said:

---

<sup>6</sup> Compare when Gil, in a discussion about kitsch, self-referentiality and mirroring, states his main topic as: “I’m painting death” (95). There is another short ekphrasis of the painting, which focuses on the sexual aspect: “In that picture, Irene had turned away; she was hunched over something, hiding it. She was glancing at someone just out of the frame. Her hand was between her legs. She was doglike, he thought, guarding her little bone, her sex. As if he wanted to steal it!” (132). Once again, Gil’s jealousy and the status of the relationship play a decisive role.

Rembrandt painted Lucretia three times. One of the paintings is lost. Another depicts Lucretia just before she plunges the knife into her heart. The Lucretia in Minneapolis has already committed the violence to herself and still clutches the stained knife. Her dressing gown is soaked with blood, the gossamer clings *hauntingly* to her skin, her spirit *dissolves* her features in a muted blaze, *violently alive* even as she drains of life. Gil watched Lucretia's eyes *brimming with transcendent shock*. Her eyes had been filling with tears since 1666. There was *immense tenderness* in her gaze. A sorrow that could shake Gil. Some mornings he sat on the bench and his eyes, too, welled and his vision blurred. He'd often wondered what the Lucretia looked like. Once, he'd painted Irene as Lucretia. In the portrait, Irene also wore a look of *unutterable sadness*. The look of a woman *so deeply shamed, and so in love*, that she *could not bear to live with the stain between herself and her husband*. In the painting, Irene was clothed like the Lucretia, in blood and rust. Her right hand also gripped a cord slender as *the life that was left in her*. But instead of a knife in Irene's other hand, Gil had painted a bottle. (54–55; my highlighting)

This quotation has a very central function in the work: it not only combines a real and a *notional* ekphrasis, which is singular in the novel, but also reveals a parallelism: both ekphrases contain elements of *depictive ekphrasis*, concerning primarily the appearance and position of the women, and of *interpretive ekphrasis* (italicised). The interpretive passages about Rembrandt's painting seem to be attributable to Gil, who is looking at the painting. The transfer of this interpretation to his own depiction of his wife is crucial to the understanding of the relationship. Image and person of Irene overlap, creating ambiguity; Gil seems to have projected his interpretation of the real painting into a wishful imagination about the behaviour of his portrayed wife.

The exchange of the knife for the (wine) bottle in the last sentence, in addition to being a reference to Irene's drinking problem, is a variation of the immediately preceding scene where it was revealed that in all his drawings the youngest son Stoney, who is also artistically gifted, has shown his mother with a wine glass in her hand as if being a part of her body (53).

To sum up, one could say that more than the artist's (or the muse's) perspective can be observed here. Even considering that there is a “meta-narratrice” which causes uncertainty concerning the reliability, in any case, Gil's art is shown from diverse perspectives. His own views about his art and about the influence his relationship has on his artistic inspiration appear contradictory, while Irene's attitude reflects increasing rejection. Their relationship is so closely interwoven with art that it seems impossible to distinguish causes and effects. Thus, ekphrastic passages function to a particular extent as a means of illustrating intra-familial processes and, by alluding to the omnipresent themes of exploitation, corporeality, sexualisation, and death, anticipate the dramatic events when Gil drowns himself and Irene dies following him (247).

#### 2.4 George Catlin and Native Art

The artist whose life and work, along with Gil's, is discussed most extensively in *Shadow Tag* is George Catlin, “the nineteenth-century painter of Native Americana” (7). Irene, history scholar, is writing her dissertation on Catlin. Gil disapproves of Catlin's work, as becomes clear at the beginning:

Perhaps she was suffering from academic frustration? Losing her mind—over George Catlin’s earnest depictions of people who, Catlin absurdly claimed, feared he could take their souls. No. Not with that clumsy brushwork. Gil himself could not bear to look at Catlin’s work. The tragic irony of it offended him. And for Irene, a poor excuse. (7)

Gil, who has difficulties appreciating such art (37–38), here justifies his aversion with the subject and Catlin’s poor painting technique; however, it is also possible that he rejects Catlin’s work because of Irene’s interest in it. Ironically, Gil himself acts similar to Catlin in painting Irene.

The belief of indigenous people alluded to in this quotation that part of their soul is lost through their likeness, is not only arguably held by Irene, but also appears in various anecdotes about Catlin told throughout the novel. The “game” of manipulation between Irene and Gil seems to continue when Irene tells anecdotes she has read in the course of her research in a modified, often more tragic form to Gil, who then rereads them himself to find out that they happened differently; this also is the case with an anecdote about the strange connection between the illness of a young woman called “The Mink” and her portrait painted by Catlin (44–46).<sup>7</sup> Gil then seems to be prompted by his wife’s behaviour to reflect on his art and their relationship (46).

In fact, the majority of mentions of Catlin and his work are not actual ekphrases of his paintings, but rather anecdotes; they illustrate what is happening in Irene and Gil’s family. Riel, who is increasingly enthusiastic about all things American Indian, reads about the painter (60–62). In a conversation, Gil compares himself to Catlin and initially criticises the latter’s paintings as “all alike” (123), only to praise him immediately afterwards in a state of artistic self-doubt (123–124).

One of the only two actual ekphrases of Catlin’s work again takes up the story of “The Mink” and is by far the most extensive. It is told in third person, but without a clearly distinguishable *focaliser* or context:

The story of The Mink, which Irene had falsified, was part of another story, much longer and more complex. In the same year, 1832, Catlin had painted a Dakota chief who possessed considerable force of character. Little Bear was painted in profile, which gave his rival, the dishonorable Sunka, or The Dog, an excuse for hurling at Little Bear a grave insult. The other half of Little Bear, said Sunka, was no good, worthless, shameful. He was but *half a man*. Their fury turned deadly and Little Bear was hit by a gun blast to that very side of his face that Catlin had not depicted. Little Bear died of his dreadful wound, and The Dog was hunted down and slain by warriors faithful to Little Bear. The *strangeness* of the story lies in the *profil perdu*, the lost profile, which both *inspired and predicted the actual loss of the man* and was *for Catlin but an instinctive aesthetic choice based on whim, an artist’s fancy, or boredom perhaps at having made so many similar full-face portraits*. Catlin’s painting aroused suspicion, *caused death*. The tribes Catlin visited were artistic and produced extraordinary objects, including pictorial art. Mahtotohpa, Four Bears, presented George Catlin a buffalo robe upon which the chief had painted the deadly exploits that composed his life story. *The paintings were complex, symbolic, dramatic, exquisite*. They were also one-dimensional and contained no shadows. In addition to so many other European inventions [...] Catlin brought shadows. *Because of the shadows, his paintings had the direct*

<sup>7</sup> In Catlin’s Complete Works, there is one portrait of a Mandan girl with the designation “Mint” (“George Catlin — The Complete Works”).

*force and power of the supernatural, the dream replica, the doppelgänger. It was as if a sudden twin had been created right before the subject. A twin that seemed to live and breathe and follow one with his eyes and yet was motionless.* The paintings were objects of veneration and of fear. Some swore uneasily that those who allowed their portraits to be painted, eyes open, would not lie peacefully after death, as some aspect of their beings would live on, staring out at the world. Others, disturbed that Catlin painted buffalo and took them away with him in his portfolio, tied his actions to the increasing scarcity of the herds upon which their lives depended. *So it was, the images stole their subjects* and, for the rest of the world, became more real, until it *seemed they were the only things left.* (140–141; mainly my highlighting)

The story of Little Bear’s image, together with the mention of other anecdotes, makes up a large part of the quotation, while the actual ekphrastic portions are comparatively small. Judging from the degree of its detail, they would have to be called *attributive ekphrasis*. Alongside the framing story, however, there are larger interpretive passages (italicised) that refer not only to Catlin’s possible motivation for choosing the profile, but — concerning his paintings in a more general way — also relate to the strange connection between tragic events and Catlin’s previous pictorial representation. Moreover, it is no coincidence that these again recall the connection between Irene and Gil’s paintings; together, they form a context of meaning where Catlin’s paintings and the associated events mirror the narrative events.

In addition, there is another ekphrasis: the mention, description and evaluation of a painted buffalo cloak, i.e., Native American art, is contrasted with Catlin’s way of painting. The absence of shadows is emphasised, recalling the belief in their magical function and the doppelgänger motif also important for Irene. Within the quotation, the question of the *focaliser* remains diffuse: while the interpretative phrases at the beginning can be understood as a neutral rendering of various opinions, the last statements create the impression of belonging to a specific and even higher narrative authority. Linguistically, this passage also has an elliptical sentence structure with partly associative thought; in the *interpretive ekphrasis* parts, an accumulation of associative enumerations of adjectives or noun groups can be observed.

In contrast, the second ekphrasis of Catlin artwork is clearly assigned to the character Riel. In the context of her reading activities on Native American culture, it states:

She spoke the names of the people whose portraits appeared in Catlin’s exhibitions: The Constant Walker, Little Stabbing Chief, Whirling Thunder, Swimmer, Soup, Fire, Sturgeon Head, Wild Sage, Rotten Foot, Blue Medicine, No Heart, The Steep Wind, The Mink, Long Finger Nails, Broken Pot, Mint, Double Walker, Black Drink. (156)

This is merely a list of the names of the portrayed persons without more precise information about the appearance of the pictures, i.e., *attributive ekphrasis*. However, since it can be assumed that some of the names are aptronyms (telling names), even the mere mention can create mental images, as is presumably the case with Riel. By speaking their names, she might try reinstating their power.

In summary, Catlin’s work, although the subject of Irene’s dissertation, features significantly less prominent than Gil’s. Its main function is presumably to

provide a contrast to Gil's art and at the same time reflect diegetic events, especially concerning Native American identity by means of the eponymous shadow motif.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the occurrence of real and *notional* ekphrasis in the artist novel *Shadow Tag* with special focus on the process of artistic inspiration. To this end, the theory of ekphrasis in literature and film developed by Laura Eidt in her dissertation was first summarised in such a way that it could be applied to the analysis of the text. Central elements of her theory are the four types of ekphrasis: *attributive*, *depictive*, *interpretive* and *dramatic ekphrasis*, which represent increases in the degree of detail, visuality and the extent of individual interpretation.

In *Shadow Tag*, the complex narrative situation requires to bear Riel in mind, who at the end of the novel is unmasked as the “meta-narratrice”. Nevertheless, several characters can be identified in the novel whose perspective is at least suggested in ekphrases. The focus of the analysis was on the artist protagonist Gil and his wife and muse Irene.

When examining the depiction of Gil's fictional works, it became apparent that most of them are initially described and interpreted only in the plural as part of the “America” series named after Irene, from both Gil's and Irene's point of view. Here, combinations of *depictive* and *interpretive ekphrasis* predominate and often concentrate on showing the way in which Irene is represented. While Gil seems torn between trust and mistrust in his wife and paradoxically experiences positive and negative effects on his art in both, an increasing aversion to her often exploitative images can be observed in the passages dealing with Irene's perception, which is also connected to the shadow/doppelgänger motif also alluded to in the title.

Two of Gil's paintings, which he paints during the recounted time, are presented in greater detail. The ekphrases are almost exclusively from his point of view. They symbolise the escalation of the relationship in that they are increasingly enriched with death metaphors.

The works of George Catlin, on whom the couple's opinions diverge, have a contrasting function: Irene writes her dissertation on him, whereas Gil rejects his work on principle. Most of the passages concerning Catlin, however, turn out to be anecdotes rather than ekphrases. In the passages that are actually ekphrastic, we find a connection between the depicted and subjective interpretations concerning the belief in doubles; thus, they primarily mirror the situation of the marriage and allow deeper reflection. A similar function can be observed in the combination of real and *notional* ekphrasis of Rembrandt's *Lucretia*, which represents the relationship in a nutshell.

The ekphrastic passages are characterised by associative thought and elliptical sentence structure. In accordance with the tense relationship, the interpretations of the pictures show an increase in drama. Irene is so much at the centre of Gil's artwork that in the ekphrases, it is often impossible to distinguish between the real and the depicted Irene, picture and interpretation, epitomising the blurring of original

and “double”. According to Eidt, this could even be termed *dramatic ekphrasis*, especially since the narrative *focaliser* often is hard to determine.

As a result, it can be said that the novel shows an accumulation of ekphrases which are closely connected to the relationship of artist and muse. Eidt’s categories allow an exact description. Since often many paintings are described together, visuality is a label worthy of discussion; in any case, it depends on individual mental imagery and knowledge of canon. Basically, the paper shows that ekphrasis is present even in contemporary literature as well as it contributes in many — often subtle — ways to illustrating the novel’s overall themes and motifs, especially when post-colonial and gender issues are thus closely intertwined.

## Works Cited

- BOESENBERG, Eva (2010). “Geld und Geschlecht im U.S.-amerikanischen Gegenwartsroman. Beiträge zu einem kulturwissenschaftlichen Verständnis ökonomischer Dimensionen von Männlichkeit und Weiblichkeit”. *Gender and Economics. Feministische Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, edited by Christine Bauhardt and Gülay Caglar. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, pp. 193–217.
- CRANSTON, Judy (2011). “Longing for the Lost: Ekphrasis, Rivalry, and the Figuration of Notional Artworks in Italian Renaissance Painting”. *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, vol. 27, n. 2, pp. 212–219.
- EIDT, Laura M. Sager (2008). *Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film*. Brill.
- ERDRICH, Louise (2011). *Shadow Tag*. Harper Perennial.
- “George Catlin — The Complete Works.” *Georgecatlin.org*, 2002–2017, <https://www.georgecatlin.org/the-complete-works.html> (2022/09/23).
- HEFFERNAN, James A. W. (2015). “1. Ekphrasis: Theory”. *Handbook of Intermediality. Literature – Image – Sound – Music*, edited by Gabriele Rippl. De Gruyter, pp. 35–49. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110311075-003> (2022/09/23).
- HUDSON, Brian Jason (2013). *Family Narratives and Self-Creation in Louise Erdrich’s The Plague of Doves and Shadow Tag*. Texas State University. <https://digital.library.txstate.edu/handle/10877/4534> (2022/09/23).
- MORRISON, Scott (2018). “Defining Hybridity: Frantz Fanon and Post-Colonialism in Louise Erdrich’s *Shadow Tag*.” *The Pegasus Review: UCF Undergraduate Research Journal*, vol. 7, n. 1, Jan., pp. 47–52. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/urj/vol7/iss1/5> (2022/09/23).
- NOORI, Margaret (2010). “Review: *Shadow Tag*.” *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 22, n. 2, Summer, 89–96. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.5250/studamerindilite.22.2.89> (2022/09/23).
- TARBET, Robert Christopher (2014). *Games Without Winners: Considerations of Identity in Louise Erdrich’s Shadow Tag*. Texas State University. <https://digital.library.txstate.edu/handle/10877/5348> (2022/09/23).
- WAGNER, Hans-Peter (2013). “Ekphrasis”. *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie: Ansätze – Personen – Grundbegriffe*, edited by Ansgar Nünning, 5th, updated and enlarged edition. Metzler, pp. 163–164.



© 2022 Kathrin Neis

Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).