



JOURNAL OF NAMIBIAN STUDIES

HISTORY ● POLITICS ● CULTURE

ISSN print 1863-5954; ISSN online 2197-5523

The Non-Existent Mirage: An Aesthetic Study OF Donna Tartt's The Goldfinch

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Abstract

The interplay between literature and visual art has long been a subject of fascination, offering a rich terrain for exploring the intersection of creativity, emotion and interpretation. Donna Tartt's critically acclaimed novel, *The Goldfinch* deals with the world of art that encompasses Fabritius' masterpiece painting "The Goldfinch". The paper employs an interdisciplinary approach to present a new aesthetic encounter for readers, where the realm of visual art is reimagined through the lens of literature. Contrary to traditional cognitivist art theories that often emphasize detached cognitive responses, the paper contends that emotions in art exert a profound influence on individuals. By merging visual art and literature, Donna Tartt's novel bridges the gap between these two mediums and aims to unveil the uncharted territory of emotional resonance. The paper entitled, "The Non-Existent Mirage: An Aesthetic Study of Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*" investigates the recurrence of aesthetic emotions, identifies contributing factors and explores the stimuli that evoke ekphrasis, showcasing the intricate connections between visual arts and literary

expression. This study sheds light on Liliane Louvel's theorising about verbal and visual discourses and meanders through various facets of Louvel's notion of the iconotext and her typology of pictorial saturation to highlight the emphasis given to visual representations in *The Goldfinch*. Moreover, it leans on Norman Bryson's examination of still life painting and on the critical theories of art to evince the aesthetic attributes rendered in Fabritius' "The Goldfinch".

Keywords: Visual Art, Symbiotic Relationship, Aesthetic Sensibility, Illusion, Ekphrasis.

Introduction

The Goldfinch is everything it is purported to be: a taut, fast-paced literary blockbuster which is both euphoric and elegiac. At the narrative's core, Tartt's sumptuously riveting masterpiece is all about Fabritius' stand-alone masterpiece and it is the redolent art that propels the plot. *The Goldfinch* is not *kunstlerroman*, an artist's growth to maturity rather a *bildungsroman*, an art lover's growth to maturity that irradiates on the themes of beauty and art.

French scholar, Liliane Louvel in her seminal work, *Poetics of the Iconotext* propounds the iconotext, a conception which best delineates a zone of contact between image and text. In "Modes of Insertion of the Pictorial: A Text/Image Typology," Louvel formalizes the genealogies of her text-image typology. Drawing upon Genette's theory of transtextuality, Louvel categorizes the genus of visual representations as transpictoriality, interpictoriality, parapictoriality, metapictoriality and hypopictoriality. This paper expounds interpictoriality and parapictoriality in particular as they are explicitly delineated in *The Goldfinch*.

Interpictoriality is a mode of insertion where the image appears in the text as an explicit quotation. It lays stress on the narrative strategies to pick out real works of art in lieu of fictitious works of art. Louvel denominates the image as an extra-text and proposes that the reference to a real work of art has an informative function because "the referential context serves to create the illusion of reality, to

authenticate and ‘anchor’ the text within a ‘real’ easily identifiable space and time for the reader” (Louvel 103). “The Goldfinch” acts as an extra-text and the reference to artworks of Frans Hals’ “Young Man holding a Skull” and Rembrandt’s “The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp” intensify the illusion that the text one peruses is true.

Parapictoriality is yet another mode of insertion where the image appears anywhere besides the actual text. Louvel acknowledges that the book cover which is typically chosen for mercantile purposes by the editor can be explicated if the actual image on the cover is same as that of the pictorial image of the text. This is precisely the case with Tarrt’s novel, the art which is on view through a torn paper wrapping in the cover page is a replication of Fabritius’ “The Goldfinch”. Such rendition evinces mystery and the readers must connect the cover image to the painting that Theo possesses to unravel the mystery. This vouchsafes that there is a link between the outside and the inside, the form and the content, the parapictorial and the inter pictorial.

Following the logic of visual arts, fiction makes use of nuances of the pictorial which patently heightens the correlation between the two distinct mediums: image and text. In order to study these nuances, Louvel asseverates the typology of pictorial saturation. The seven stages of pictorial saturation are painting-effect, picturesque view, hypotyposis, tableaux vivant, aesthetic or artistic arrangement, pictorial description and ekphrasis. Ekphrasis, the last stage of Louvel’s typology is a detailed description of a visual art. It is a classical rhetorical technique in which the text provides a clear reference to a real painting. Here Tarrt’s *The Goldfinch* renders an explicit reference to Fabritius’ masterpiece artwork that appears as an assertive presence in a world of illusion. Tarrt’s use of ekphrasis is highlighted in the extract, “the muted colors bloomed with life . . . the painting seemed transfigured” (252).

In an article, “When a Mirror is Warped: The Benefit of Applying Transitional Space and Play in a Cultural Context” Bonnie Bright avers that the image and nature are the two stimulating factors which she conceives as transitional space. Bright sets forth that, “Dialogue and

interaction with images create narratives in which an individual can locate herself, can test options and integrate outcomes in relationship to the image. Imaginal work allows more digestive space to work with the connection; more “play” space” (Bright 7-8). “The Goldfinch” acts as a transitional space for Theo, an illusionary zone between reality and fantasy. The painting that is woven in and out of the narrative of the text reminds him of his mother, Audrey Decker. Theo acknowledges that giving in to the world of fantasy, the transitional space is the only feasible way for him to pull through the catatonic state of despair.

And as much as I'd like to believe there's a truth beyond illusion, I've come to believe that there's no truth beyond illusion. Because, between 'reality' on the one hand, and the point where the mind strikes reality, there's a middle zone, a rainbow edge where beauty comes into being, where two different surfaces mingle and blur to provide what life does not: and this is the space where all art exists and all magic. . . . And just as music is the space between notes . . . so the space where I exist, and want to keep existing, and to be very frank I hope I die in, is exactly this middle distance: where despair struck pure otherness and created something sublime. (863)

The extended quote delineates the therapeutic power of art that enables Theo to dwell in the transitional space in which illusion renders tranquility to his soul. With regard to *The Goldfinch*, the title represents both the painting by the Dutch artist Carel Fabritius and the novel by American author Donna Tartt, or in more abstract terms the image and the text becomes “a permeable zone of contact” (Louvel 2) as in Louvel's terminology.



Fig.1. Carel Fabritius. The Goldfinch. 1654, Mauritshuis Museum.

The priceless Dutch masterpiece which is the guiding spirit of the book depicts a life-sized bird, perched presumably on its feeding box to which it is fettered by a delicate string. Fabritius' painting is adjudged to be an exceptional case of paintings of similar subject matter because unlike birds in genre paintings, landscapes and still life, the Goldfinch bears a resemblance to a lifelike portrait rather than the common representation of birds. The bird constrained by the narrow parameters of the canvas is depicted so realistically that the painting can be denominated as an illusionistic realism. Fabritius' still life art is a classic *trompe l'oeil* image, a seamless illusion of reality. The painting is a serene study of inured incarceration and the narrator is fettered to it just as the veristic Goldfinch is fettered to its perch. Horst, a black market art dealer opines that,

I know the theory of The Goldfinch, I'm well familiar with it, people call it *trompe l'oeil* and indeed it can strike the eye that way from afar. . . . True: there are passages worked like a *trompe l'oeil*... the wall and the perch, gleam of light on

brass, and then... the feathered breast, most creaturely. Fluff and down. . . . But Fabritius... he's making a pun on the genre... a masterly riposte to the whole idea of trompe l'oeil... because in other passages of the work—the head? The wing?—not creaturely or literal in the slightest, he takes the image apart very deliberately to show us how he painted it . . . very abstract. Which is what makes him a genius less of his time than our own. There's a doubleness. You see the mark, you see the paint for the paint, and also the living bird. (649)

The aforementioned excerpt acts as a self-referential commentary on the painting itself. Horst concedes that the painting is a masterpiece of trompe l'oeil technique, an illusionistic device that in French means, 'deceive the eye'. "The Goldfinch" which is remarkable for the aesthetic idiosyncrasies that it possess is one of the artist's only works that outlived a catastrophic detonation in Delft. The vicious explosion sabotaged other evidence of the artist's genius and originality that augments the painting's rarity and worth as a coveted and precious object.

Fabritius' "The Goldfinch" is presumably conceived as an illusionistic art that appears exceedingly veristic. It is a typical instance of Dutch still-life at its apex and its fragility adds poignancy to the art. Still life painting encompasses complex messages encapsulated in the sort of objects arrayed ranging from spooking skulls to delicate butterfly. "The Goldfinch" is a still life painting and it is not flabbergasting how the painting correlates with Theo's life and his narrative. Still life painting freezes life and stresses temporality which is limned through the extract: "Time that doesn't move, time that couldn't be called time. And trapped in the heart of light: the little prisoner, unflinching" (744). The narrator is emotionally attached to the painting that he even discerns similitude between his mother and the little bird.

It was a small picture, the smallest in the exhibition, and the simplest: a yellow finch against a plain, pale ground, chained to a perch by its twig of an ankle. . . . I stepped back, to get a better look. It was a direct and matter-of-fact little creature, with nothing sentimental about it; and something

about the neat, compact way it tucked down inside itself—its brightness, its alert watchful expression—made me think of pictures I'd seen of my mother when she was small: a dark-capped finch with steady eyes. (29)

The comparison between the two are cyclical throughout the novel which signifies the narrator's affinity for the art. Theo's attachment to Fabritius' painting can be expounded considering Hans Belting's observations about visual studies. Hans Belting, a German art historian in his seminal work, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* avows that the image is more than a product of perception and underscores that apprehending of any image from the outside world is never only an action produced by one's perception. The protagonist's perception of the world is altered by "The Goldfinch" which becomes a lens through which Theo perceives the world as a still life. Belting propounds that,

We endow pictures with personal meaning, pass them through the filter of what might be termed our personal censorship. As perceived pictures they turn into remembered images that henceforth become part of the archive of our memory. When external pictures are re-embodied as our own images, we substitute for their fabricated medium our own body, which, when it serves in this capacity, turns into a living or natural medium. (16)

The purloined painting acts as a transitional object for Theo that allows him to maintain the illusion of his mother's presence. Theo's act of linking "The Goldfinch" with his defunct mother makes the art a kind of living medium.

At the art gallery, Theo gazes at "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp," an astounding work of art by Rembrandt. Tartt exquisitely renders the ekphrastic description of Rembrandt's painting through Audrey Decker. Looking upon the painting with close precision Audrey divulges that "Everybody always says this painting is about reason and enlightenment, the dawn of scientific inquiry . . . Weird glow coming off it, do you see? Alien autopsy, almost. See how it lights up the faces of the men looking down at it? Like it's shining with its own light source?"

He's painting it with that radioactive quality because he wants to draw our eye to it – make it jump out at us" (27).



Fig. 2. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp. 1632, Mauritshuis Museum.

The painting limns a startling veristic scene in which Tulp demonstrates the anatomy and function of the wrist and fingers' flexor muscles. Rembrandt has portrayed "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp" so realistically that it looks like a static portrait of an experienced anatomist teaching his inquiring attendants.

The painting-effect, one of Louvel's typology of pictorial saturation is employed in the following excerpt. Theo's visually saturated pictorial descriptions of the female character Pippa depicts the talented flautist as a portrait rather than a real person,

Terrified she was going to catch me staring, unable to wrench my eyes away, I watched her studying my iPod with bent head: ears rosy pink, raised line of scar tissue slightly puckered underneath the scalding-red hair. In profile her downcast eyes were long, heavy-lidded, with a tenderness that reminded me of the angels and page boys in the Northern European Masterworks book I'd checked and rechecked from the library. (429-430)

Louvel posits that the painting-effect is an allusion without any direct reference to a painting; it "functions also at the

level of the character, who serves as a mediator for the reader by inscribing aesthetic impressions in the text” (Louvel 91). Theo, the narrator of *The Goldfinch* acts as the mediator between the readers and the text. His aesthetic impressions of Pippa are inscribed in the mind of the readers as they visualize the talented flautist through the frame of Theo’s gaze.

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy concerned with identifying the clues within artworks that can be used to comprehend, judge and defend judgments about the art. This paper sheds light on the aesthetic theories of imitationalism, formalism and emotionalism as these critical theories of art take into account the aesthetic idiosyncrasies present in Fabritius’ “*The Goldfinch*”.

Some aestheticians and art critics propose that the paramount aspect of a work of art is the realistic presentation of subject matter or the literal qualities. The literal qualities are the realistic qualities that appear in the subject of the work and the theory which lays stress on the importance of the literal qualities of art is known as imitationalism.

Audrey Decker, Theo’s mother avows that “Such a mysterious picture so simple. Really tender—invites you to stand close, you know? All those dead pheasants back there and then this little living creature” (30). The life-sized *Goldfinch* seems poised to seduce its viewer and looks as if a real bird perched against a cream-colored wall. In an article, “A filched finch that never really takes flight – *The Goldfinch* reviewed” Sophie Barling avers that “A painting such as *The Goldfinch*, so remarkable for its illusionism, its tricking of the eye, which makes us feel we are looking at a real bird on its perch; this is art very convincingly imitating life” (Alexander). The art featuring the *Goldfinch* fettered by a small string offers a compelling look at the artist’s prodigious talent. “Fabritius takes such care to portray the bird so lifelike, endowing this modest subject with all his skill and talent. He carries this off with such artistry that it transcends the experience of daily life” says Victoria Sancho Lobis, curator of the exhibition “*Rubens, Rembrandt and Drawing in the Golden Age*” (Alexander). The remarks of

Audrey, Barling and Lobis exemplify the realistic presentation of “The Goldfinch” and substantiate the theory of imitationalism.

Some aestheticians and art critics favor a theory of art known as formalism, which holds that the paramount aspect of a work of art is the effective use of the principles of art to achieve an overall unity. They believe that an effective design relies on how well the artist has arrayed the colors, lines, textures, shapes, forms and space relationship used in the work.

“The Goldfinch,” a modest image painted on board is a breathtaking example of Fabritius’ gifts as a creator of visual illusion. The painting’s appeal is strikingly illusionistic and the background is both coloured and textured in cream-colour to sustain the illusion that the painting one gazes is real. The painting is marked by Fabritius’ delicate use of cool colour harmonies and his unerring handling of a loaded brush. The dimensions of “The Goldfinch” are 34 cm x 23 cm and the shapes employed here are geometric, an elementary cross-hatch of horizontals and verticals. Andrew Graham-Dixon, a British art historian asseverates that:

Fabritius painted colour and form as they are defined by light . . . The painting of the dappled patch of cream-coloured wall against which the goldfinch perches on its stand is a miracle of shadow play. Accents of light on the semicircular bars of the bird’s perch, on its feet, and on the rings of its metal chain are created with the thinnest threads of white pigment. A shadow in the lead-tin yellow feather of its wing has been created by the expedient of dragging the butt end of the brush through the still-wet paint. (Graham-Dixon)



Fig. 3. Marthe Bijman. Line of beauty. 2013.

The “line of beauty” is a theory in art or aesthetics that describes an S-shaped curved line or a serpentine line appearing within an object as the boundary line of the object. According to this theory, serpentine lines signify liveliness and excite the attention of the viewer, as contrasted with straight lines, parallel lines or right-angled intersecting lines which signify stasis, death or inanimate objects. The liveliness of the painting is exemplified in the cited extract, “It was real; I knew it, even in the dark. Raised yellow streak of paint on the wing and feathers scratched it with the butt of the brush” (653).

The reference to “the line of beauty” runs throughout the novel as an expressed desire to stare at, take in and possess. Theo enunciates that “I knew how to draw people’s attention to the extraordinary points of a piece . . . drawing a finger down an exquisite cyma curve (which Hogarth himself called “the line of beauty”)” (442). “Even though a copy Proust was able to re-dream that image, re-shape reality with it, pull something all his own from it into the world. Because—the line of beauty is the line of beauty”

(733). The cited excerpts hint at “the line of beauty” underscored in *The Goldfinch*.

Emotionalism is an aesthetic and critical theory of art that focuses on the expressive qualities, or the feelings and ideas communicated to the viewer by a work of art. John Crowley, director of the film, *The Goldfinch* is persuaded by the allure of “*The Goldfinch*” and he concedes that the power the painting emanates cannot be conveyed in the film. He further expounds that, “You are convinced that it’s actually breathing. That there’s a tension in it. It looks like it’s about to take flight from that perch and the chain will rattle. It’s almost saying, Don’t judge me. If you think I’m to be pitied, so are you” (Alexander). Crowley’s remark on the painting vouchsafes the expressive nature of the painting and the message that the image conveys.

If a painting really works down in your heart and changes the way you see, and think, and feel, you don’t think, ‘oh, I love this picture because it’s universal.’ ‘I love this painting because it speaks to all mankind.’ That’s not the reason anyone loves a piece of art. It’s a secret whisper from an alleyway. Psst, you. Hey kid. Yes you . . . —a really great painting is fluid enough to work its way into the mind and heart through all kinds of different angles, in ways that are unique and very particular. Yours, yours. I was painted for you. (849-850)

The aforementioned excerpt explicitly delineates the powerful magnetism of art. In essence, Tartt’s passage eloquently conveys the idea that the power of art lies in its ability to engage individuals on a personal and intimate level, going beyond universal appeals to create a unique and deeply resonant connection between the viewer and the artwork.

Tartt’s engrossing novel is a meditation on the transcendent power of art and beauty. The title and the very premise of *The Goldfinch* are image-centric, underpinned by Theo’s fixation with the painting of the bird. “*The Goldfinch*” in all its mysterious majesty and timeless beauty soothes the writhing loneliness of Theo’s life and renders a semblance of stability. The elegant prose interwoven with multiple

themes highlight the eternal nature of a truly sublime art. This thematic fusion and artistic confluence of creative mediums elevate the visual and aesthetic sensibilities of the readers.

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