

Sofie Behluli, PhD Thesis Abstract

Visuality and Materiality in the Contemporary North American Novel

Since notions of ‘truth’ and ‘subject’ were deconstructed and grand narratives were abolished during postmodernism, the driving force of my PhD project is to investigate how North American literature, which is inherently engaged in cultural processes of meaning-making, has dealt with this destabilization of meaning. Many influential contemporary writers – e.g. Jonathan Franzen and Siri Hustvedt – have turned their back on the ‘cerebral aesthetics’ and never-ending postmodernist play, signaling a move towards a new period in which concepts of the body, the senses, materiality or community experience a revival. Researchers in the humanities have pronounced the ‘visual turn’, the ‘material turn’ and are currently investigating ‘post-postmodernism’. I would like to examine how these different aspects are connected in the contemporary North American novel, while keeping the digital age and its repercussions on concepts such as Benjamin’s ‘aura’ and original vs. (digital) reproductions in mind.

This inherently interdisciplinary PhD project is grounded in literary research and centers on the close and wide reading (Hallet 2010) of novels by Donna Tartt, Siri Hustvedt, Anthony Doerr, Philip Roth, and others. The tools from the field of intermediality and materiality studies are best suited to tackle this intersection of literature, art history, the material world and visual phenomena. Amongst other concepts and ideas, I want to focus on the ancient concept of ‘ekphrasis’ – the verbal representation of a visual representation (Heffernan 1993). The results I have yielded so far by analyzing Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch* (2013) suggest that ekphrasis has acquired a presence-creating and aura-enhancing function (cf. Walter Benjamin’s concept of ‘aura’, 1935), among many others. In my PhD project I wish to expand the corpus and to investigate questions such as why materiality in literature has become so important in our digital age, or why there are so many ekphrases in an era where images are ubiquitous and easily accessible on the World Wide Web.