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Remedial Intermediality: Ekphrasis in Sinéad Morrissey's "The Doctors"

1 Ekphrastic poetics and the "paragone"

The idea of a "paragonal" struggle has been repeatedly referred to by critics as a key characteristic of the genre of ekphrasis. "Words and image," W. J. T. Mitchell has claimed, "seem inevitably to become implicated in a 'war of signs' (what Leonardo called a *paragone*) in which the stakes are things like nature, truth, reality, and the human spirit" (Mitchell 1986: 47). When literature responds to visual images, it is hard to avoid a struggle for supremacy or the workings of an implicit teleology: where the image was, the word shall be. Nevertheless, ekphrasis is complicated: as some sort of representation of the visual given is typically enacted, this opens for power relations that can rarely be summarized in simple terms. The ekphrastic poem may seldom describe the image in a totally subservient gesture, but it does not usually erase it either. Yet a suspicious, critical reading will tend to identify some sort of appropriative gesture between the lines of even the most innocuous of ekphrastic poems.

The contrastive attitudes underlying this situation exemplify more general trends concerning the power relations of literary influence. It is no coincidence that important work on ekphrasis was done in the 1980s and 1990s, when literary criticism became increasingly inclined to identify power relations in intertextuality and other relationships of influence. Where Harold Bloom's (1997) anxiety of influence presents a narcissistic process of self-empowerment, correctives such as Christopher Ricks's (2002) view of allusion as being a generous homage to one's predecessors opened up for more mutual relations. A turn from the former to the latter – from appropriation to mutuality – has an obvious ethical attraction, as it potentially brings with it the promise of a movement, within aesthetic practices, from self-regarding acquisitiveness to a more open-handed altruism. In an article entitled "New Ekphrastic Poetics," which attempts to use a collection of essays on French examples of ekphrasis to identify a major sea-change within the genre, Susan Harrow approaches the promise of such a turning of a leaf with infectious enthusiasm. She writes of a "desire to develop the ekphrastic beyond traditional assumptions of linear influence, mimetic translation, and textual incorporation," conceiving of the arts not as rivals but as representative of "reciprocal visual and textual cultures" (Harrow 2010: 257). Whereas she derides traditional conceptions of ekphrasis as being charac-

terized by “imperialism” and “old binaries,” the texts addressed in the volume introduced by Harrow are said to “eschew the struggle for mastery” (Harrow 2010: 257). Ringing in the demise of a traditional view whereby ekphrasis is seen as “writing *on* art, a top-down suggestion that implies that the battle for mastery is already won (by the writer),” Harrow instead celebrates a “more generous lateral engagement” (Harrow 2010: 259). Part of this new openness is, it would seem, a global reorientation of the relationship between words and images. Harrow points to instances of Welsh-French poetry, Franco-Tunisian literature, as well as Western engagements with Chinese drawing, to claim the “inter-cultural implications” of a new poetics that will displace “possession or colonization” (Harrow 2010: 259). Given the French context of Harrow’s article and the volume it introduces, it is perhaps not surprising that Jacques Derrida is invoked – alongside other post-structuralist thinkers such as Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault, and Michel Butor – as an inspiration for her new poetics. At the same time, it is nevertheless somewhat disquieting that such a skeptical, probing thinker as Derrida – who always questioned claims of sudden breaks with tradition – is taken to validate what amounts to a rather simplistic and uncritical heralding of a new beginning.

Derrida’s complex understanding of signification will be important to how this chapter will question the grounds of a new ekphrastic poetics and intermedial relations in the poetry of Sinéad Morrissey. Can poetic ekphrasis be conceived of as a simple celebration of the visual medium’s riches? Or is the coming together of different media – such as literature and visual forms of representation – inherently marked by power relations, even in the apparently most benign and generous situations? Harrow describes the quest for a new ekphrastic poetics as an attempt to “rethink the intermedial relationship” (Harrow 2020: 259). Framing this issue in terms of different media, rather than just visual and verbal representations, may have a variety of consequences. In an influential article, Peter Wagner has conceived of intermediality as a bringing together of linguistic and visual signs within a more or less homogenous cultural system of representation (Wagner 1996: 36). Here the friction and force of all processes of mediation, evident even in Hegel’s totalitarian systematics, risks being erased. Such stakes are, however, tacitly present in Asbjørn Grønstad’s recent formulation of how remediation involves literature in ethical relations with other media. Like Harrow, he opens for a form of mutuality: “At play in acts of remediation is a dialectical force by which the host medium is affected by the remediated work and vice-versa” (Grønstad 2017: 215). The “force” referred to here, however, suggests less than superficially benign relations.

Remediation and intermediality are very much evident in what will be the main focus of this chapter, Sinéad Morrissey’s poem “The Doctors,” published

in 2013 in her volume *Parallax*. The poem contains five stanzas of eight lines each. The opening of the poem brings into focus the historical manipulation of photographs in Stalinist Soviet Union. The middle section combines concrete mentions of particular photographic motifs with a deliberation on the aesthetics of photography and a meditation on purified language, and the poem ends with a vision of "a nation's girls and boys" (l. 38) engaged in continuing the state's practice of editing photographs. My reading will initially dwell on the poem's dealing with a concrete set of historical images stemming from the Soviet Union. In the first section of this chapter, I will identify how the poem enters into a dialogue with a form of historical witnessing that seeks restitution of images and faces erased by history. This dialogue facilitates, in turn, a remedial relationship whereby the iniquities suffered by both photographs and historical individuals can be redressed by poetry. The latter is the focus of the third section of this chapter and involves a traditional appraisal of the image as having a sensory richness and immediacy unequalled by verbal communication. But that originary power is also associated with vulnerability and lack of independence according to a mechanism that Derrida identified as the logic of the supplement (Derrida 1992: 76–109). Already here we can see why a counter-movement will have to be undergone, whereby the poem's embrace of what Harrow calls a "new ekphrastic poetics" is subject to question and doubt. As Derrida pointed out in "Plato's Pharmacy," the *pharmakon* – the supposed remedy – is not immune from contributing to, or exacerbating, the condition it seeks to amend (Derrida 1981: 61–171). In the third and final section of my chapter, the poem's movement towards the others of history, the visual medium of photography, and the Soviet Union, will be seen to come about only through a close interaction with its own historical present, a relentless self-consciousness about its own literariness, and Irish contexts of both literature and politics – including Seamus Heaney's conception of the "redress" of poetry, which we will see influencing how Morrissey configures the remedial logic of her poem. This return is part of a process of re-contextualization whereby the poem's loosening of links to an original historical given brings about a proliferation of possible recastings of its content.

2 Restitution: Stalinism and historical erasure

The opening pages of Sinéad Morrissey's volume *Parallax*, where "The Doctors" is collected, include part of the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of its title word, defining *parallax* as the "Apparent displacement, or difference in the apparent position, of an object, caused by actual change (or difference) of position of the point of observation" (Morrissey 2013: 9). If one applies this to "The Doc-

tors,” the poem does indeed feature an ekphrastic change of perspective, moving from the visual to the verbal. Another form of displacement occurs on the thematic level of the poem, which fastens on the physical doctoring – or “desecration” as it is described in line two – of pictures in Stalinist Soviet Union. The poem itself practices a partial erasure of this historical context: although it is perhaps possible to make the inference based on other parts of the text, only the reference to “the Urals” in the second stanza provides a clear reminder of a specific geographical location. Morrissey has, however, reconstituted the elided context in one of the short, paratextual notes published at the end of *Parallax*, where she explains that “‘The Doctors’ is inspired by David King’s *The Commissar Vanishes* (King 2014 [1997]) – a study of how photographs were systematically falsified in Soviet-era Russia” (Morrissey 2013: 69).

King’s work performs a meticulous act of restitution in restoring original images that were occluded through an unnervingly clinical process of historical erasure. His gesture is one that counteracts a historical act of repression that is part of an encompassing collective trauma. If one compares the poem to King’s book, some concrete images and motifs are recognizable. The reference to someone “who pointed the way / down some rickety steps as though He needed help” (ll. 21–22), for instance, refers to a doctored photograph involving Stalin at the Sixteenth Party Congress in 1930. As King writes, in the original photograph “an attendant is seen pointing his finger, helpfully directing the ‘Boss’ (Vozd), as he was often known. When the photograph was printed in ‘Projector’ magazine [...] soon afterwards, no humble worker was there to tell Stalin where to go” (King 2014 [1997]: 153). Although King includes an image of Lenin relaxing with his sister in Gorki in late August 1922 (King 2014: 108–109), I have been unable to find the specific image involving “Our Great Leader / on holiday in the Urals” in the second stanza. This may either be poetic license or a reference to some other source. But the second stanza’s reference to “one-whose-name-we-dare-not-whisper” who is “idly grinding his teeth / in a dim committee room, his glasses like miniature / headlights reflecting the flash” appears to be based on a photograph taken in the Kremlin on October 17, 1918, where the glasses of Trotsky – sitting a little to the right of Lenin in a crowded room – do indeed cast an eerie glare (King 2014 [1997]: 48–49). Interestingly, the figure of “Our Great Leader” in stanzas two and three appears not to have such a straightforward reference, as it amalgamates images of Lenin and Stalin in *The Commissar Vanishes*.

Morrissey’s use of the imagery of the book is both flexible and far-ranging. Another concrete visual trigger is identifiable at the end of the next stanza, which speaks of the cropping of an image featuring “a handful of survivors ranged around a chess table” (l. 24). Coupled with the next stanza’s reference

to "the power to transform a conspirator into a pillar" (l. 29), this alludes to a 1908 image of Lenin, Maksim Gorky, and other Russian expatriates in Capri. As King points out in his discussion of the various versions of this image, one of the doctored renderings has Vladimir Bazarov replaced by a "ghostly pillar" (King 2014 [1997]: 24). After the picture was taken, Bazarov became a political opponent of Lenin – and was both expelled from the party and incarcerated for his views. As such, he is only one of thousands whom the authorities tried to erase from the historical record. At a political level, the "doctoring" that Morrissey addresses is thus linked to the ways in which information is filtered and revised in a totalitarian society.

Writing from a contemporary U.S. perspective, W. J. T. Mitchell has recently observed:

The main weapon of terror is the violent spectacle, the image of destruction, or the destruction of an image, or both, as in the mightiest spectacle of them all, the destruction of World Trade Center, in which the destruction of a globally recognizable icon was staged, quite deliberately, as an icon in its own right. (Mitchell 2011: 64)

As the Stalinist manipulation of photographs and paintings was, in many cases, rather crudely executed, leaving behind an open wound or blot in the visual image, it too can be said to have provoked the disciplining fear of terror through the creation of paradoxical images that represent the very power to destroy the image. One of the key characteristics of a totalitarian society is that new generations are indoctrinated through the careful handling of propaganda and air-brushed versions of historical narrative. David King is alert to the pedagogical dimension of this process:

In schools across the country, children were actively engaged by their teachers in the "creative" removal of the denounced from their textbooks. The writer Sylvia Darel recounted her childhood in a Soviet classroom: "We loved dipping our fingers in the inkwell filled with diluted soot and were sometimes overzealous. I once inked out Comrade Kaganovich himself because his name sounded like an exiled one to me. I was lucky that I was only eleven years old." (King 2014 [1997]: 10–12)

As Kaganovich was a doctrinaire figure and an insider throughout Stalin's reign, Darel's testimony not only mocks the internalizing of the visual discipline of the era, but also alludes to its terror-evoking threat. The final lines of Morrissey's "The Doctors" echo this anecdote, imaging a "nation's girl and boys" who have "their fingers stained with soot" as they deface images (ll. 38 and 39).

Collective trauma is here experienced as something internalized and insidiously routine. The importance of this image for Morrissey can be gleaned by the

fact that she effectively uses it in another poem in *Parallax*. In “Shadows,” the speaker imagines: “I could be a dissident in a textbook in Soviet Russia / discovered after the print run / and painstakingly blackened out by each teacher” (Morrissey 2013: 13). The difference between the two poems’ treatment of what is more or less the same motif is nevertheless significant: “The Doctors” starts and ends with schoolchildren, as even the first stanza describes the photographs as “naïve as schoolchildren” (l. 4) before embarking on an extended conceit. In this respect, the poem elaborates upon what is only a passing reference in King’s book. Here a more local context is at work, drawing Morrissey’s poem back from Soviet images to an Irish, and literary, influence.

William Butler Yeats’s “Among School Children” is an underlying intertext here, but Yeats’s poem differs from Morrissey’s in trying to formulate a positive alternative to limiting educational practices, where “body is not bruised to pleasure soul” (Yeats 1997: 221). Morrissey’s, on the other hand, is less forthcoming with an affirmative ideal. Yeats begins where “The Doctors” ends – with an encounter with schoolchildren submitting to a new, repressive, and disciplinary regime. Where Morrissey’s children cut and paste, Yeats’s learn to “cut and sew, be neat in everything / In the best modern way” (Yeats 1997: 221). The latter activity is presented with wry humor, but nevertheless the children’s cuts and sutures are to be read as transgressions committed against the traditional sacredness of the living body, where the “body is not bruised to pleasure soul.” In Yeats’s poem, historical distance and deprivation is conquered (among other things) by a transcendent image, whereby the poet’s long-lost love suddenly “stands before me as a living child.” In “The Doctors” the living children are on the contrary transformed into automatons of repression and perpetrators participating in a large-scale trauma, ensuring the more-or-less total erasure of whatever does not fit in with the party line. Morrissey has formulated an inversion of Yeats’s revelatory images: while Yeats’s most celebrated poetic visions seek to enact the sudden manifestation of images before (in the words of “The Second Coming”) “darkness drops again” (Yeats 1997: 190). Morrissey here is interested in a kind of institutionalized fall into darkness that obstructs access to the human visage.

3 Remedies: The ethics of intermediality

“The Doctors” suggests something approaching an ontology of photography. This is particularly evident in the second stanza’s thesis of the medium’s “inherent generosity of outlook” (l. 10). This enthusiastic response to photography might strike one as counter-intuitive, given that the medium often is interpreted as

being factual in a cold and unimaginative manner. The way Morrissey's poem addresses photography entails that it is not merely an instance of ekphrasis but also one that scrutinizes intermedial relations between literature and another medium. Where others have seen in photography an automated, curtailed response, Morrissey's poem identifies an inherent, overflowing richness. If one couples this with the second line's previously mentioned use of the word "desecrating," one can see photography being imbued with an almost religious sense of divine immediacy in "The Doctors." The image is radically inclusive, and to tamper with its gifts is akin to a form of heresy or sacrilege. The perspective is here related to Susan Sontag's thesis that photographs of suffering might approach the status of "objects of contemplation to deepen one's sense of reality; as secular icons" (Sontag 2003: 107).

Morrissey's poem suggests that photography is linked with the sacred prior to any sense of suffering or deformation. There is perhaps something a little hyperbolic going on here. One possible reading is to interpret "The Doctors" as implicitly linking communism's dealings with photography with its stance on Christianity. Another option, however, is to see this in light of the poem's handling of the ekphrastic poem's traditional trap or lure of staging a paragonal contest between word and image. It is also interesting to compare the motifs of sacredness and generosity with the quick reference early in the poem, previously mentioned, to how the photographs are "naïve as schoolchildren." If "The Doctors" presents an attack on the image, then one way of avoiding a surreptitious amplification or echoing of that attack is to perform a kind of eulogy to the resources of photography and the visual sense. One might think of the Victorian cult of the Angel of the House as a kind of compensatory act of putting woman on a pedestal, which of course is a gesture that can only be fully interpreted in the context of the real marginalization of women. Victorian women were of course also seen as both naïvely childlike *and* elevated beings.

As scholars such as Heffernan, Hollander, and Cheeke have pointed out, the figuration of the visual as feminine is a staple of much ekphrastic poetry. Morrissey's poem ends with a specific reference to "women's faces" being covered by "black balloons" (l. 40). David King's book of photographs has several such images, where the heads of dissidents and out-of-favor communists are obliterated by rather violent means. There is one of Djakhan Abidova, an Uzbekistan party figure who fell from grace after being named during the third Moscow Show Trial in 1938 (see King 2014 [1997]: 177). It has a form which might indeed suggest a balloon. Most such images are, however, of males, so Morrissey's gender reference needs to be framed as a selective, strategic intervention. It appears at the end of what is presented as a final afterthought of visual destruction: "And should anyone be missed – turning up / in textbooks before the grave extent / of

their transgression's been established" (ll. 35–37). The use of the word "missed" is poignantly ironic here, not only indicating that these women have, for a moment, been overlooked by the ideological *autodafé*, but also tacitly acknowledging that they will go "missing" from the official history. Perhaps also the more general, casual eradication of women from the "textbooks" of history is hinted at here, a form of silencing that goes beyond what we normally classify as totalitarian regimes.

Morrissey cannot, of course, change the fates of the many who lost their lives, and the poem is also devoid of a roll call that might function as a kind of compensatory inscribing of the erased back into history. There is no possibility of undoing the acts of defacement that erased the faces of Abidova and others; poetry simply does not have such restitutive power. As a response to collective trauma, "The Doctors" does not adopt a straightforwardly therapeutic position. Although some of the ethical force of the poem might be gleaned from the pathos of the erased human visages – one thinks of Levinas's formulation of the responsibility owed to the face – words cannot reverse this historical violence. There is, however, a kind of remedial intermediality at work – a kind of compensatory concern for the medium of photography, whereby poetry is being deployed as a source of redress for the other artistic form. With the term "redress" I allude to Seamus Heaney's 1989 lecture as a Professor of Poetry at Oxford, "The Redress of Poetry," which remains one of the most influential formulations of a poetics for the Northern Irish Troubles. There, Heaney spoke of poetry's ability to provide "redress" in the sense of reparation or restoration. Including references to Eastern European poets and the Gulag, he referred to poetry's capability of providing a "glimpsed alternative" to an oppressive situation, "a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances" (Heaney 1995: 4).

If there is such a glimpse in Morrissey's poem, it is mainly of what has been erased and excluded from the visual library of history. It mentions the officials and family members whose presence has been surgically removed from the photographic record. Heaney does, however, have a double sense of "redress" in his talk. He not only refers to poetry as an "agent for proclaiming and correcting injustices" but also provides a defense of what he calls "poetry *as* poetry," with its ability to "set it up as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means" (Heaney 1995: 5). This latter dimension explains why Heaney, in another text (the poem "Out of the Bag"), has playfully interpreted the term "poeta doctus" – which really means "learned poet" – to refer to a form of doctoring that provides "the cure / By poetry that cannot be coerced" (Heaney: 2001: 7). Heaney's "redress of poetry" is thus also a defense of poetry's autonomy, a kind of care for the self, or self-doctoring, of poetry. Here one can compare his stance with that of Morrissey's poem, which not

only deals with the loss of images, but also – particularly in the fourth stanza – elaborates upon a kind of implicit poetics or ethics of poetic language: “It is addictive,” she writes, “the urge to utter a language / both singular and clean” (ll. 27–28). This ironic extrapolation of a kind of purified language has of course historical precedents, including for instance the Newspeak of Orwell’s *1984* as well as Louis MacNeice’s critique of modernism.¹ Most important, in our context, is how one here can identify a counter-movement to the elevation of the photograph in “The Doctors,” a kind of rebound where the poet tries to extrapolate a literary lesson outside of the purely visual language of the photograph. By entering into a remedial relationship with photography’s desecrated images, the poem embraces a stance that is neither “singular” nor “clean.” Poetry becomes a thoroughly mediated form, ready to dirty its hands in the ethical business of witnessing the desecration and coercion subjected upon both another medium and the victims of history. The resulting remediation is, however, something markedly different than the restitutive desire for the resurrection of lost images or subjectivities.

4 Recontextualizations

Once one has moved from the apparent immediacy of the face and image to the more generalized landscape of mediation, then the multiplicity of the poem’s range of meanings becomes evident. The way in which the defaced image is supplemented by a multiplicity of words and contexts can be exemplified by the work of Jacques Derrida. In “Restitutions,” an essay included in *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida traces the complex stakes involved when two authorities – a philosopher, Martin Heidegger, and an art historian, Meyer Shapiro – sought to identify the true ownership of the boots depicted in a painting by Vincent Van Gogh. These acts of identification were experienced by both parties as a “debt or duty” to “speak the truth in painting” (Derrida 1987: 282). Derrida wrote of how Shapiro – provoked by what he took to be Heidegger’s erroneous identification of the boots as belonging to a rural peasant – sought to return the boots to their truthful origin in a determinate subjectivity: Shapiro believed the boots were Van Gogh’s own. In the process, Derrida implies, the art historian

¹ See MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*, which criticizes modernism while making an alternative “plea for *impure* poetry, that is, for poetry conditioned by the poet’s life and the world around him” (unnumbered preface).

sought to “snatch” the pair of boots from “the common discourse of the common enemy” of Heidegger’s right-wing, rurally fixated ideology (Derrida 1987: 273).

Although “The Doctors” does not attempt a full restitution of the subjectivity of the images of those marginalized or executed during Stalinism, it too manifests a responsibility or “duty” to make amends for an obliteration of the underlying subjectivity of the image. In the absence of a restitution of the obliterated faces and images, the poem seeks to redress matters on a generic, intermedial level. This supplementary gesture provides, however, no simple consolation or resolution. The open-endedness of the poem can be compared to the effects of the “detachment” Derrida detects in Van Gogh’s painting (Derrida 1987: 283). According to Derrida, Shapiro is – like Heidegger before him – subject to “a sort of excess of interpretation, a supplement of reading” (Derrida 1987: 268), whereby it becomes impossible to perform a restitution of the image to a simple origin.

One of the ways in which such “excess” comes to light in “The Doctors” is the manner in which the text resonates with many other of Morrissey’s poems. Notably, “Flu,” in her preceding volume of poems *Through the Square Window* (2009), depicts a sick speaker struggling with related Russian imagery: “Anastasia’s chocolate frown. Lenin on his stack. / Lily Brik with her horseshoe teeth and headscarf” (Morrissey 2009: 43).² The speaker refers to these and other images as “unreadable scenes,” thematizing both the epistemological and historical challenges offered by photography. In *On Balance* (2017), the poem “Colour Photographs of Tsarist Russia” addresses Prokudin Gorsky’s early experiments with colour photography, pondering over the surprising effect of discovering “so much colour [...] / where we least expect it” (Morrissey 2017: 46). How photography can communicate the unpredictable strangeness of the past, which always has more vitality than our reductive comprehension, is an important theme in both of these poems.

Implicitly, “Colour Photographs of Tsarist Russia” acquires pathos from the fact that Tsarist Russia was so decisively cast aside by the imminent revolution, and these poems – as well as several others by Morrissey on Russian matters – show a persistent engagement with history. At the same time, though, it is possible to read “The Doctors” and Morrissey’s other related poems as indirectly dealing with the Northern Irish conflict. “The Doctors” is not a straightforwardly allegorical work of poetry, as the parallels between the totalitarian state of Soviet Russia and modern Northern Ireland are not sufficiently clear and systematic for

² The sixth line of the poem refers to a book titled *A Century of Russian Photographs* as its source. No such publication exists, however, making it likely that a variety of sources have been used.

such an effect. Yet, the poetry evokes a looser set of analogies. There is, for instance, a parallel between the situation described in the poem and the way in which the strong dividing lines between sectarian communities have led to a form of a silencing of alternative and impure visions of identity. More compellingly, perhaps, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 has been interpreted as an institutional act of historical amnesia. As Graham Dawson has pointed out, although encouraging the warring parties to be positive and to look hopefully to the future might be taken as sound advice, the actual rhetoric of reconciliation in Northern Ireland can be seen as demanding "a forgetting of the past," which "amounts to a denial of the psychic and political realities of those communities most affected by the war" (Dawson 2007: 61). A concrete example of how such "denial" functions with regard to visual images can be found in contemporary Northern Irish photography. Colin Graham has written perceptively about how Eoghan McTigue, for instance, has created images of whitewashed walls that previously featured partisan images of the communities that were in conflict. As Graham writes, McTigue "pursues the visual blankness of walls which are in the process of being repainted," thus highlighting the "defacing of the 'traditional murals' [...] at that awkward moment when the choice seems to be one between the horrors of the Troubles and the 'new dawn' of the Peace" (Graham 2013: 173).

The visual purges of the Soviet Union thus find an echo of sorts in the post-agreement context in Northern Ireland. Yet the drawing of such parallels does not fully exhaust the riches of "The Doctors," as the poem is not simply a historical document. Earlier on in this chapter, it was remarked how Morrissey muted the historical particulars of the Soviet history of doctoring images. While Stalinism worked with "scissors, / nail files, ink and sellotape," the poet too transforms the historical given: details are omitted, names are erased, and different images are blurred into one another. The elision of any concrete mention of figures such as Trotsky, Bazarov, and Abidova – let alone the whitewashing of walls and history in contemporary Belfast – has the effect of making the poem's appropriate contextual frame fuzzy. This can be interpreted in paragonal terms, as minimizing the poem's dependence on its visual basis and instead emphasizing the autonomy of the text. Pursued further, the poem's use of a kind of cut-and-paste technique, whereby several images are edited and conflated, tacitly acquires an uncanny similarity to the Soviet techniques of visual repression. The guilty conscience, as it were, of this ekphrastic poem may be that Morrissey the poet cannot quite fully distance herself from the defacing schoolchild tracing black balloons over the faces of others. Rather than being herself "a dissident in a textbook in Soviet Russia" (as imagined in "Shadows"), the poet might be cast as an accomplice of the measures perpetrated by totalitarianism. Ironically, the

denunciation of “a language / both singular and clean” cannot vaccinate the poet of committing impositions of her own. As Anne Karhio has shown in her reading of this poem’s deployment of space, poetry cannot “simply offer truth, innocence or transparency” (Karhio 2015: 240).

Rather than transparency, we have refraction or parallax, as the poem invites interpretive displacement through changes in perspective. As argued above, there is no doubting Morrissey’s strong interest in Russian history and photography, and at a certain level “The Doctors” works perfectly fine, like many of Morrissey’s texts, as a kind of poetical equivalent to a historical novel: It provides a vivid immersion into the world of the Stalinist purges and into the fates of citizens who often had little choice but to internalize the totalitarian methods of Stalin’s regime. At the same time, the pull of the poet’s contemporary context can be read as also leading to a hermeneutical dialogue between her own historical horizon – including the post-agreement context of Northern Ireland – and that of Soviet Russia.³ Another contextual frame is also at hand if one reads the poem as tacitly commenting on the contemporary vagaries, spanning the globe rather than merely just Russia or Northern Ireland, of the internet and digitalization. The *Parallax* volume ends with a poem entitled “Blog,” which comments rather ironically on internet dating. Reading between the lines, “The Doctors” may suggest that we are all being schooled in a regime of digital reproduction where concerns with ethics and authenticity all too easily fall by the wayside. As W. J. T. Mitchell has pointed out, the invention of digital media has created images that are “violent dismemberments of the biopicture” in the sense of veridical representations of life. These images “can be cloned indefinitely and circulated globally” (Mitchell 2011: 99). If the “proper parlance” of our virtual lives is inherently related to the desecration of images executed by the accomplices of Stalinism, this should be cause for concern.

The indefinite cloning and circulation of digital images is only the last of a series of frames that have been encountered in this chapter, making sense of how Sinéad Morrissey’s poem “The Doctors” engages with visuality. While digital images, Russian history, the Northern Irish conflict and poetry’s own self-reflective processes are all centrifugal processes spiraling out of the “excess” of this poem’s encounter with images, the photographic images that were first disfigured and then recovered by David King’s *The Commissar Vanishes* provide a centripetal focus and starting point. The latter might be also said to be the material from which the poem creates the open-ended forms of the former. Even while the

3 On the hermeneutical dialogue of horizons as a framework for interpreting literature, see for instance Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*.

poem seeks remediation, redress, and restitution, it creatively transforms and prolongs the injury documented by King. The trauma continues and is repeated. While the remediation in "The Doctors" seeks to understand and contextualize the transgressions of the past, it is nevertheless a necessarily melancholy and guilt-laden effort, since the terror of the images it engages with cannot be laid to rest or transcended in one fell swoop. Similarly, the apparent internationalism of the poem is shadowed by more local concerns, as Morrissey's consistent concern for Russian history cannot be completely disentangled from aesthetic debates (involving, for instance, Heaney and Yeats) of a more local nature.

This chapter started with a look at Susan Harrow's conception of a "new ekphrastic poetics," and there, of course, intercultural relations were of primary importance. The interpretation given of "The Doctors" has also indicated other problematic aspects of this poetics. Just as Morrissey's speaker cannot leave behind her complicity with historical violence, a new ekphrastic poetics cannot leave behind intermedial violence. The very act of entering into a remedial relationship with photography and photographs involves the speaker in a gift economy, where even the call for an unconditional generosity towards and care for the other cannot prevent ambiguity and transgression. The complexity of this relationship of remedial intermediality has been analyzed in this chapter, which has negotiated on the one hand between the restitutive desire to acknowledge and restore the face to its untouched state before historical violence, and the proliferating excess of interpretive frames opened up by the poem's detachment from any immediate context on the other. The intertwined nature of these aspects shows that ekphrasis is not a concern simply isolated from others, but rather operates in manifold interaction with other literary devices and stances. The subtlety of Sinéad Morrissey's verbal art allows us to enter into this complexity, as well as into a web of historical complicities, even as we feel the tug of desire for simpler and more immediate relations.

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