

# Ekphrasis in Houellebecq's *The Map and the Territory* as *Mise-en-Abyme* and as Metafiction

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In Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Map and the Territory* (2010), the references to visual art, painting, and photography take a central place in the narrative. In addition to the verbal representation of artworks, there is an entire system of commentary, interpretation, and criticism of art. The references to visual art appear explicitly as ekphrases which splice the narrative time and again. The unique nature of ekphrasis in *The Map and the Territory* lies in its representation of art devoid of an origin in the real world; for the paintings in *The Map and the Territory* do not exist in reality but are pure literary paintings, in the full meaning of the word, as the artworks mentioned in the story have an existence restricted to Houellebecq's novel. The article analyses the ekphrases in *The Map and the Territory* and argues that they are a virtual visuality mediated by words, employing solely the *technique* of ekphrasis as an enhancer of meanings in a text and thereby foregrounding its artifice. It further argues that the ekphrases are open to a field of interpretive possibilities by contemporary society, as every ekphrasis features within it subversion and a contemplation on contemporary reality.

*Keywords:* Michel Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, ekphrasis, *Mise-en-abyme*, metafiction

## Introduction

In Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Map and the Territory* (2010), the references to visual art, painting and photography take a central place in the narrative. In addition to verbal representation of artworks, there is an entire system of commentary, interpretation, and criticism of artworks, those created by the protagonist artist Jed Martin. The references to visual art appear explicitly as ekphrases, which splice the narrative time and again. As an intersemiotic transposition, or the verbal representation of a prior visual representation, the aim of ekphrasis is to expand the judgement of value and meanings in the art work and simultaneously to enhance ideas in the text within which the ekphrasis is inserted (Knapp, 2010; Cheeke, 2008; Louvel, 2001).<sup>1</sup> The unique nature of ekphrasis in *The Map and the Territory* lies in its representation of art devoid of an origin in the real world; an

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<sup>1</sup> As a type of verbal description, *ekphrasis* is a rhetorical term that offers not only a description of an artwork but also a modularity of aesthetic structures that transform from one artistic medium to another, with the emphasis being on the transition itself as the aim. As an intersemiotic transposition or the verbal representation of a prior visual representation, the aim of ekphrasis is to expand the judgement of value and meanings in the art work and simultaneously to enhance ideas in the text within which the ekphrasis is inserted as phrased by Stephen Cheeke: "The question central to ekphrasis then—can a verbal representation of a visual representation reproduce the artwork in a meaningful way for the reader?" (2008, p. 168).

ekphrasis of simulacrum. For the paintings in *The Map and the Territory* do not exist in reality but are purely literary paintings, in the full meaning of the word, as the artworks mentioned in the story have an existence restricted to Houellebecq's novel. Thus, the ekphrases in *The Map and the Territory* are, first and foremost, a virtual visuality mediated by words, employing solely the *technique* of ekphrasis as an enhancer of meanings in a text and thereby foregrounding its artifice.

The ekphrases are paintings by Jed Martin, titled: “*The Architect Jean-Pierre Martin Leaving the Management of His Business*”, “*Bill Gates and Steve Jobs Discussing the Future of Information Technology*”, “*Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons Dividing Up the Art Market*”, “*Aimée, Escort Girl*”, “*The Engineer Ferdinand Piëch Visiting the Production Workshops at Molsheim*”, and “*Michel Houellebecq, Writer*”. Added to this are two works not painted by Jed, *The Heroic Fantasy* and the *Kennedy* portrait. It would seem that, in *The Map and the Territory*, the various appearances of ekphrasis serve as a *mise-en-abyme* of contemporary reality,<sup>2</sup> of topics within the diegesis and of meta-fiction, reflecting the construction of the literary text itself. From this perspective we shall seek to follow the dynamics of ekphrasis in *The Map and the Territory*: how the text presents the fictional artworks, imagining them visually and describing them verbally, and how they serve as a *technique* of reproducing and encoding the central subjects in the novel.

### ***Mise-en-Abyme of Contemporary Reality***

Ekphrasis in *The Map and the Territory* is first and foremost a *mise-en-abyme* of contemporary reality, via its engagement with the art world, especially the logic of the capitalist market. It is not by chance that Houellebecq comments on reality with art, as already in 1998, in his article “L’art comme épluchage” (art as peeling) he maintained art’s value: “l’art contemporain [...] je me rends compte qu’il représente, et de loin, le meilleur commentaire récent sur l’état de choses”<sup>3</sup> (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 68). Engaging with present-day mores and ideology and responding to the culture of late capitalism “is almost exclusively the focus of Houellebecq’s writing” (Sweeny, 2013, p. 43), as many of Houellebecq’s critics have demonstrated.

As an interpretive structure of reality, ekphrasis enables the honing of its socio-economic logic. Within the diegesis art commentators and critics identify Jed Martin’s tendency to document the economy of the capitalist market throughout his entire creative development. This culminated in the prominent “The Professions” series.

Belonging to the professions series is the painting *The Architect Jean-Pierre Martin Leaving the Management of His Business* presents a contemporary profession in an economy which increasingly enables the devotion of both resources and time to the culture of leisure—the architect designs holiday resorts. This portrait is a representation of the socio-economic *Winner*, as an exemplar of the consumer society. A working, creative man who has achieved something—*homo faber*. More so, a man who provides work for others. The composition of the scene, in which his workers sit around him, equates the architect with a prophet (of the consumer society) with his admirers-pupils worshipping him. The reference to the religious painting by real artist Lorenzo Lotto stresses

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<sup>2</sup> The term is employed here in the sense of it as a device “for foregrounding the ontological dimension of recursive structures” (McHale, 1986, p. 124). Brian McHale stresses the three components of *mise-en-abyme*: it is an embedded representation, occupying a narrative level inferior to that of the primary; it resembles some thing at the level of the primary; that which it resembles is a salient aspect, reproduced in the inferior level (1986, p. 124).

<sup>3</sup> The translation is “Contemporary art, I realize that it recently represents, and by far, the best commentary on the state of affairs”.

the pseudo-religious dimension of the scene. The ekphrasis accentuates the sorrow of the protagonist through repetition of the word itself:

His father's eyes, staring just above those present, expressed the desire to gather his team around him for one last time. And a reasonable confidence in the future, but also an absolute *sadness*. *Sadness* at leaving the business he had founded, to which he had given all his strength, and *sadness* at the inevitable: you were quite obviously dealing with a dead man. (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 6, emphasis added)

Le regard de son père, fixé un peu au-dessus de l'assistance, exprimait le désir de réunir une dernière fois son équipe autour de lui, une confiance raisonnable en l'avenir, mais surtout une tristesse absolue. Tristesse de quitter l'entreprise qu'il avait fondée, à laquelle il avait donné le meilleur de ses forces, tristesse de l'inéluctable: on avait de toute évidence affaire à un homme fini. (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 14)

The "sadness", expressed in the picture through several markers, refers to a representation of economic-cultural reality: a sorrow for the withdrawal from creative life; a loss of the weightiness of one who constructs the world, in a world whose ethos is to preserve its market values via the exchange of symbolical commodities.

The ekphrasis *Aimée, Escort Girl*, is another painting in the series of simple professions. The escort girl is represented as a profession, as a commercial activity like any other, such as that of an architect. The fact of including the painting of a escort girl within the framework of the "Simple Professions" series is itself a *mise-en-abyme* of a capitalist ideology that facilitates the utter commercialisation of life. Thus, prostitution, a topos in art and art history, accompanied by implications of social morality or religious sin, is presented here as a legitimate profession. This ekphrasis accentuates how the artist recruits the figurative elements and colours with the aim not only of subverting the traditional representations of the subject of painting, but also and mainly in order to attest to how the pictorial representation captures the essence of the world, its phantasms and values. *Aimée* is presented in a sympathetic and compelling manner, as reflected in the warm colours of the painting,<sup>4</sup> in repeated and positively-charged words in the text:

Treated with an exceptionally warm palette on umber, Indian orange, and Naples yellow. At the opposite extreme of Toulouse-Lautrec's representation of an made-up, chlorotic, and unhealthy prostitute, Jed Martin paints a fulfilled young woman, both sensual and intelligent, in a modern flat bathed in light. (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 74)

(...) traitée dans une palette exceptionnellement chaleureuse à base de terre d'ombre, d'orange indien et de jaune de Naples. Aux antipodes de la représentation à la Toulouse-Lautrec d'une prostituée fardée, chlorotique et malsaine, Jed Martin peint une jeune femme épanouie, à la fois sensuelle et intelligente, dans un appartement moderne inondé de lumière. (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 122)

Despite the erotic subject, more than anything else *Aimée* resembles an ordinary girl. This representation contrasts that hinted at by a reference to Toulouse Lautrec: Lautrec is an artist of the night-life, in the less

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<sup>4</sup> As explained by Michel Pastoureau (2008), colours bear complex and ambivalent values, varied and occasionally contradictory. Also, the use of colours is always cultural and ideological, indicating "the economic, political, social and symbolic challenges inscribed within a specific connection" (p. 17). Hence, the colours in the ekphrasis of *Aimée* could be perceived in one way as a positive representation and in the other way judged negatively. For example, the colour orange represents concomitantly health and vitality but also infidelity and greed. The yellow is ascribed to light, gold, honey, and concomitantly to degenerate passion and the prurient. The Naples yellow, composed of lead and sulphur, is considered, nonetheless, a stable chestnut shade, belonging to the warm colours connected to nature and simplicity, but also to rejection of the joys of earthly life. Finally, white, a synthesis of all the colours, symbolising the (divine) light, pure, a-temporal; but also symbolising loss.

salubrious quarters of the city, in which ostensibly unlawful activities take place. Aimée, however, is presented in daylight, her portrait is neither grotesque nor morbid but, rather, she is healthy and sensual, and she is located in an apartment in the very proper and bourgeois 17th *arrondissement*. The escort girl presents a respectable and accepted profession. Aimée's portrait in the main captures the spirit of the times with her utopian sexuality. She reflects an ideal *philanthropie amoureuse* of our sex-soaked world, an age controlled by experiences and leisure, as well as by consumerism and profit.

The prostitute and the architect, or the banalization of the working girl and the deification of the *homo faber*, become a mirror of society and a reflection on it.

Some of the ekphrases exceed being frozen images and present dynamic episodes, such as *Bill Gates and Steve Jobs Discussing the Future of Information Technology* and *Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons Dividing up the Art Market*. These are paintings termed by the art historian Wong *Business Compositions*, "a series centred on confrontations and encounters"<sup>5</sup> (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 73). In them, the ekphrasis is not only a *mise-en-abyme* of our society, but also its hyperbole. These paintings of real-life figures not only present contemporary celebrities, wealthy, and influential, but they also depict winners in the fields in which they are involved. The painting *The Bugatti Car*, in its full title *The Engineer Ferdinand Piëch Visiting the Production Workshops at Molsheim*, presents an emblem of consumer culture, a Bugatti car; and again an image of a winner in the capitalist game, a luxury car manufacturer and a creator of work places, Ferdinand Piëch, who is a figure in the real world. The intertextual nature of the picture, nonetheless, subverts the scene of victory of the conquering individual.

The ekphrasis presents a composition, a panoramic landscape, and palette of colours identical to that of the school of Socialist Realism fictional painting *Forward to Irrigated Rice Growing in the Province of Hunan*,<sup>6</sup> in which Mao Zedong is surrounded by happy villagers. The Bugatti painting suggests a similar composition: "The wide V-shaped formation of the small group of engineers and mechanics following Ferdinand Piëch on his visit to the workshops"<sup>7</sup> (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 124). On the face of it, these would seem to be two totally contrasting works: one, propaganda; the other, pure art. One, represents village culture, the other, the industrial world; one represents Communist ideology, the other an example of capitalism. However, this series of dichotomies becomes subverted when their common denominator of Mao and Ferdinand Piesch becomes clear; despite each one representing a different ideology, both are tyrants, administrating their subordinates with an iron fist. Both ideologies are based on the requirement to achieve production quotas and a demand for productivity. In the Capitalist version, they who cannot reach the quota are punished by being fired; while in the Communist version their fate is harsher, although in both cases failure by the worker is conceived as a mark of disgrace and sinful doing. Thus, *The Engineer Ferdinand Piëch Visiting the Production Workshops at Molsheim* is an ironic painting: just as the happy villagers surrounding Mao camouflage their poverty, which is the *absent cause*<sup>8</sup> of the communist ideology, so too does the ekphrasis of *Piëch* hide the truth that no-one wants to acknowledge: namely,

<sup>5</sup> "La série des compositions d'entreprise, axés sur des confrontations et des rencontres" (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 121).

<sup>6</sup> Based on one of many similar compositions in Chinese propaganda art such as *The Long March*—a propaganda poster showing the public's love for Mao Zedong. See <http://chineseart.co.uk/author/paulharris/page/3/>.

<sup>7</sup> "La formation en V large du petit groupe d'ingénieurs et de mécaniciens suivant Ferdinand Piëch dans sa visite des ateliers" (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 200).

<sup>8</sup> We use Louis Althusser's elucidation of the term *absent cause* as signifying history, in order to make it a point that history is screened by ideology. Thus, history is inaccessible to us and can only be approached by textual forms (Althusser, 2008).

of the tyranny of the market forces and of their leaving many behind; that of the losers in the capitalist game.<sup>9</sup>

The Bugatti painting glorifies the Winner, much like the propagandist social-realist painting that glorifies Mao. Like all other winners in the capitalist culture, Ferdinand *Piëch* is conceived of as divine.<sup>10</sup> Within the diegesis, it is art critic Patrick Kéchichian who contends that in our society deity has shifted from religion to consumption:

Being himself [Ferdinand Piëch] both a true man and a true God, he had come to fore working mankind the sacrificial gift of his burning love. In the posture of the mechanic on the left leaving his workstation to follow the engineer Ferdinand Piëch, how could you not recognize [...], that of Peter as he put down his nets at the invitation of Christ? "Come, I will make you a fisher of men." And in the absence of the Bugatti Veyron 16.4 at the final stage of manufacture, he spotted a reference to the new Jerusalem. (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 24)

Lui- même vrai homme et vrai Dieu, il était venu offrir à l'humanité laborieuse le don sacrificiel de son ardent amour. Dans l'attitude du mécanicien de gauche quittant son poste de travail pour suivre l'ingénieur Ferdinand Piëch, comment ne pas reconnaître, insistait-il, l'attitude de Pierre laissant ses filets en réponse à l'invitation du Christ: « Viens, et je te ferai pêcheur d'hommes »? Et jusque dans l'absence de la Bugatti Veyron 16.4 à son stade de fabrication ultime, il discernait une référence à la Jérusalem nouvelle. (Houellebecq, 2010, pp. 201-202)

The Bugatti painting is not unlike the composition of the Architect Jean-Pierre Martin, which similarly staged a scene in which the architect, as the central figure, was placed in a religious environment. The comparison between capitalism and religion in the novel persists in many of the ekphrases that stage a religious reference for the business man, be he an engineer, an architect or an artist. It is repeated also in the *Kennedy* ekphrasis; although this is not one of Jed's works but a painting that decorates the exit hallway from an airport, it features the American President John F. Kennedy as an American prince, in a nation that is a symbol of capitalism. The ekphrasis specifically contrasts this painting to that of the Catholic Pope (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 83), as if to emphasize by yoking them together the pertinence of the comparison between two holy men who have switched hegemony.

The ekphrasis *Bill Gates and Steve Jobs Discussing the Future of Information Technology* develops a dithyrambic dimension, a eulogy to the Californian landscape, a region considered as "the most advanced part in the world":

Through the bay window behind them could be made out a landscape of meadows, of an almost *surreal* emerald green, gently descending to a line of cliffs, where they joined a forest of conifers. Farther away, the Pacific Ocean unfurled its *endless* golden-brown waves. On the lawn, some young girls had started a game of Frisbee. Evening was falling, *magnificently*, in the explosion of a sun that Martin had wanted to be almost *improbable* in its orangey *magnificence*, setting on northern California, and the evening was falling on the most advanced part of the world. (Houellebecq, 2011, pp. 118-119, emphasis added)

<sup>9</sup> This can be surmised from the reference to the negligible cost of creating the picture ("a tiny price—no more than the price of paper" (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 124) "un prix dérisoire—le prix d'unepapierusage", (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 200) and the astronomical price paid for it; and the invisible market forces seem no less arbitrary and tyrannical.

<sup>10</sup> This equation between capitalism and priesthood is reprised many times in the novel. Houellebecq's approach recalls Walter Benjamin's analysis and forecast of contemporary culture, according to which capitalism substitutes religious theology. Benjamin claims in "Capitalism as Religion" that "One can behold in capitalism a religion, that is to say, capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worried, anguished, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion" (Benjamin, 2014, p. 259). Raised to the level of theology, capitalism becomes the defining factor in categorizing and evaluating human behaviour and aspirations. Benjamin detects that the characteristics of the religious structure of capitalism make it practically omnipotent: Capitalism has no dogma yet venerates utilitarianism; capitalism is extreme in its exertion of perpetual worship; and, finally, capitalism engenders blame without repentance, capitalism's authority is unequivocal and their prophets revered.

Par la baie vitrée derrière les deux hommes on distinguait un paysage de prairies, d'un vert émeraude presque surréel, descendant en pente douce jusqu'à une rangée de falaises, où elles rejoignaient une forêt de conifères. Plus loin l'océan Pacifique déroulait ses vagues mordorées, interminable. Des petites filles, au loin sur la pelouse, avaient entamé une partie de frisbee. Le soir tombait, magnifiquement, dans l'explosion d'un soleil couchant que Martin avait voulu presque improbable dans sa magnificence orangée, sur la Californie du Nord, et le soir tombait sur la partie la plus avancée du monde. (Houellebecq, 2010, pp. 192-193)

This landscape has an exceptional attraction, even transcendental and beyond human understanding, with Gates and Jobs as its paragons and as heightening the way in which one should read the description. The perfect landscape reflects the two viewpoints regarding capitalism, as detailed in the ekphrasis. One is that of Gates, for whom the landscape represents "his faith in capitalism"<sup>11</sup> (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 118) and in the mysterious "invisible hand"<sup>12</sup> (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 118); as though one can see in this fascinating landscape a reflection of capitalism, to the extent that it can be grasped in the perception of its economic success. The other viewpoint is that of Jobs, who is more doubtful in regard to capitalism precisely because of the invisible hand and lack of certainty, reminiscent of "one of those travelling evangelists who, on finding himself preaching for perhaps the tenth time to a small and indifferent audience, is suddenly filled with doubt"<sup>13</sup> (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 118).

The landscape transmits a message of the ungraspable, the beauty of the sunset is defined as "almost impossible". On the one hand, the perfection attributed to California is symbolised in the overall beauty of the landscape; while on the other hand, the setting of the day is an image of cultural decline, anticipating future events in the novel.

As *mise-en-abyme* of contemporary society the ekphrases in *The Map and The Territory* contain an element of lamentation, or second thoughts, on the capitalist world. Every ekphrasis features within it subversion and a contemplation on contemporary reality, The ekphrastic images harness the representation of consumer culture and its subjects to the palpable and the somatic, in line with contemporary culture which privileges the visual as the dominant medium and mode of representation.

### Ekphrasis as Metafiction

Ekphrasis is an inherently self-reflective poetic mode (Knapp, 2010, p. 362; Sager Eidt, 2008, p. 56) since by definition it draws attention to the medium and foregrounds its artifice and textual composition. The fact that in *The Map and the Territory*, the ekphrases have no source in extra-textual reality and whose entire existence depends on literary verbal description, resolutely leads towards this uniquely metafictional theme. Thoughts about representation are central to the *The Map and the Territory*, as reflected already in its title and inferred in the heading of Jed's exhibition "The map is more interesting than the territory" (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 45). This heading is a takeoff on Alfred Korzybski's renowned determination that "The map is not the territory; abstraction derived from something is not the thing itself".<sup>14</sup> This declaration determines that one should not confuse between the model and the reality that the model seeks to reflect; that the real precedes perception and

<sup>11</sup> "il réaffirme sa foi dans le capitalisme" (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 191).

<sup>12</sup> "main invisible" (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 191).

<sup>13</sup> "un de ces évangélistes itinérants au moment où, se retrouvant pour la dixième fois peut-être à débiter ses prêches devant une assistance clairesemée et indifférente, il est tout à coup envahi par le doute" (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 192).

<sup>14</sup> See Alfred Korzybski (1933). *Science and Sanity: An Introduction of Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. Institute of General Semantics, pp. 747-761.

representation. In contrast to this, Jed's exhibition title determines that the map is more interesting than the territory, inferring the obliteration of the distinction between source and image and suggesting that the question of discerning the real from its representation is obsolete. Indeed, in the postmodern hyperrealist world, the connection between image and reality is rendered dubious and it is often impossible to know whether the image represents reality or is a simulacrum. Along this line, we suggest that the ekphrases in *The Map and the Territory* address the question of representation and acquire a clear-cut metafictional nature.

Firstly, the ekphrases reflect how worlds on paper are constructed. In regard to the selection and composition when transferring a literary narrative to painting, it was the German philosopher Lessing who has remarked already in the 18th century that the painting, in its compositional simultaneity, of necessity requires one *single moment* of the plot, and thus must choose the most indicative moment, from which one can understand what preceded it and what followed (Lessing, 1992). Houellebecq employs the same poetical logic with the extensive incorporation of ekphrases into *The Map and the Territory*. Ekphrasis in principle manifests the charged "one single moment" perception, in that in every transition between the visual and the verbal the entire narrative event is united in time and space, and in which the different layers of meaning are uncovered. The insertion of ekphrases at significant points in *The Map and the Territory* serves as a metafictional device that draws our attention to how meaning in fiction is generated. Those segments in which Houellebecq turns to ekphrasis are in fact translating the temporal narrative flow into the spatial static scene, and then re-translating the spatial visual into words. This process provides a concise example of the *single moment* necessary in order to unravel the novel's structure of ideas. In transferring part of meaning production from the narrative flow to the ekphrastic description, Houellebecq stresses the aesthetics of the medium and the poetical principle of constructing significant moments of intertwinement of all the levels of the narrative and its meanings.

Ekphrasis as metafiction reveals itself in a second dimension of *The Map and the Territory*, one involving the greater context of literature. Many of the ekphrases in the novel are presented as direct quotes taken from various critiques written on Jed Martin's oeuvre. In other words, instead of a first degree ekphrasis, transmitted by the narrator, the ekphrastic description is an appropriation from what a critic saw in the painting. Hence, the ekphrasis moves even further away from the non-existent source: When mediated by the critic, the ekphrases are already a third-degree reality. For example, the ekphrasis *Bill Gates and Steve Jobs Discussing the Future of Information Technology* is quoted in full from the article written Houellebecq's avatar, the character Michel Houellebecq, for the catalogue of Jed Martin's exhibition. This theme is also repeatedly emphasized by the recurrent references that "Houellebecq stresses"<sup>15</sup> or "insists" (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 116) upon. Furthermore, the description is followed by an interpretation of the artist's work (pp. 116-119):<sup>16</sup> in his article (pp. 116-119), Houellebecq categorises Jed Martin (claiming he is an ethnologist and not a political commentator), relates him to the tradition of art (the Expressionists), compares him to other artists (autodidact), employs pertinent terminology to discuss Martin's art (committed art), analyses his work (maintains that Martin describes a world rather than interprets it), and exemplifies his arguments (with the picture of Gates and Jobs).

The character Houellebecq, as the critic, is also able to perceive in the painting the elements found in its background and bring them to the fore (Houellebecq stress in the catalogue that while Jobs loses to Gates in a

<sup>15</sup> "souligne Houellebecq" (Houellebecq, 2010, pp. 188, 192-193).

<sup>16</sup> See typological categorization of ekphrasis suggested by Valerie Robillard in Dolbec, 2005, p. 29.

game of chess, according to the arrangement of pieces on the board, he could in one move have completely reversed the situation). Hence, by depicting ekphrases thrice removed the metafictional intention is revealed, since it draws our attention to the extent at which an understanding of an artwork depends on critical mediation and how external rhetoric influences the audience's understanding of the work.

Understood this way, our earlier reading of the *Gates and Jobs* painting as a *mise-en-abyme* of the contemporary, capitalist *par excellence*, society, is not necessarily the result of an inherent aspect within the work itself, but the conclusion at a second-level reality mediated by a critic. Hence, in the Bugatti ekphrasis, it was art historian Patrick Kéchichian who generally introduced the metaphor of the employing man as God, whose flock is “working mankind” (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 124). Similarly the ekphrastic phrase “Bill Gates appears as a creature of faith”<sup>17</sup> (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 118), which continues the religious metaphor referring to the prophets of capitalist culture, is revealed as an interpretation by the commentator and not necessarily present in the work itself. In general, everything that we see in the *Gates and Jobs* ekphrasis is simply what the critic saw in it:

Two convinced supporters of the market economy; two resolute supporters also of the Democratic Party, and yet two opposing facets of capitalism, as different as a banker in Balzac could be from Verne's engineer. *The Conversation at Palo Alto*, Houellebecq stressed in his conclusion, was far too modest a subtitle; instead, Jed Martin could have entitled his painting *A Brief History of Capitalism*, for that, indeed, is what it was. (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 119, emphasis in the original)

Deux partisans convaincus de l'économie du marché; deux soutiens résolus, aussi, du Parti démocrate, et pourtant deux facettes opposées du capitalisme, aussi différentes entre elles qu'un banquier de Balzac pouvait l'être d'un ingénieur de Verne. *La conversation de Palo Alto*, soulignait Houellebecq en conclusion, était un sous-titre par trop modeste; c'était plutôt *Une brève histoire du capitalisme* que Jed Martin aurait pu intituler son tableau ; car c'est bien cela qu'il était, en effet. (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 193)

The critic draws a map for understanding the territory; once his reading begins circulating, it simultaneously expands and restricts the understanding of the art work. Since from then on, the painting *Gates and Jobs* will be understood through the map drawn by the critic, it turns out that the map even precedes the territory, in that the critique determines the very understanding of the work. As metafiction, the ekphrases in *The Map and the Territory* are more than a mere transposition of image into words but draw attention to the mediation between the artistic representation and its reception among the readers and to the para-literary aspects of creating value in a literary work. The role of the critical work is indispensable in creating an enduringly, even perpetually, valuable artwork.

### Conclusion

Both aspects of ekphrasis in the novel collide and are behind the apotheosis of the book—the murder of Houellebecq in order to obtain the portrait *Michel Houellebecq, Writer*. The ekphrasis of the portrait, which is presented as the peak of Jed Martin's work by the art historian Wong, cites researchers and art historians (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 114), who all admire its artistic feat. The metafictional dimension of the ekphrasis overlaps the commentary on contemporary society via *mise-en-abyme*: in the capitalist economy the fate of the

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<sup>17</sup> “Bill Gates apparaît comme un être de foi” (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 191).

artwork is determined by its consumer market value (see Bauman, 2009, p. 208). The art critics who recognised the value of the painting placed it high on the scale of prestige, increased demand for it, turning it into a consumer product and delineated its importance in the sales, profit and rating systems—making the theft of the painting, and the consequent murder of its owner, worthwhile. The episode, thus, reinforces the suggestion that in the *third-spirit* of capitalism the map has switched places with the territory: it is symbolic of the fact that in the hyperrealist world, in which images substitute reality, one craves the representation and eschews the real.

Our point of departure was that the ekphrasis in *The Map and the Territory* is far from constituting a trivial reference, but presents a mutual relationship with the narrative and thematics, isolating and emphasizing significant details concomitantly on both levels. With ekphrasis, Houellebecq comments on contemporary society as well as on the literary medium. The ekphrases participate in advancing an all-encompassing fan of narrative themes and ideas, since its use suggests a logic of superimpositions rather than an additive one. The discrete layers of the ekphrases enter into a dialogue with the others to map out a complex territory.

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