

School of Languages and Media Studies

English Department

Bachelor Degree Thesis in Literature, 15 hp

Course code:

Supervisor: Dr. Billy Gray

”That Little Box of Light”:
The Presence of Photography in
John Banville’s *Ghosts*

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BACHELOR DEGREE THESIS

Dalarna University
English Department
Degree Thesis
Autumn 2015

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Introduction

The contemporary Irish writer, John Banville, has written numerous novels that concern questions of selfhood, lack of truth and authenticity. Banville's *Frames* trilogy, composed of *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993), and *Athena* (1995), centres on aesthetic and ethical issues of existence bound up with a troubling connection between image and text, as well as visual and verbal codes. Certainly, these complex interactions in Banville's overall literary oeuvre have been well established by a number of critics. In his article, "Ekphrasis and the Novel: Presence of Paintings in John Banville's fiction", Joseph McMinn maintains that Banville's fiction essentially shows "the dramatic tension between its radical postmodernism, experimental form and its thematic fascination with a representational, humanistic world of painting" (138). The use of paintings presents the possibility for a cure to this "dramatic tension", in which the characters are "caught between the need to speak and the dream of silence" (138). McMinn claims that the pictorial metaphors employed in Banville's fiction often cause a significant moment of epiphany for the focal characters, "when speech is exhausted, and the silent image, often but not always an idealized version of womanhood, becalms the mind of the male gazer" (138). Here, McMinn argues that role of paintings show the underlying theme in Banville's fiction, as "the modern confusion between the natural and the artificial, and the loss of certainty about the real difference" (McMinn 144). In sum, McMinn argues that Banville's protagonists "engage with major philosophical and intellectual ideas of a postmodern age, doing so through the use of classical motifs" (McMinn 139). Francois Canon-Roger in "John Banville's Imagines in *The Book of Evidence*" also refers to this divide where the visual representations "acquire value from their contrast with their

failure of verbal exchanges” as an insight to the sublime through perception (37-8). As a problem of representation and its connection to a postmodern crisis, Elke D’hoker in *Visions of Alterity: Representation in the Works of John Banville* elaborates on the notion that Banville’s unreliable, first person-narrators seek truth through “the process of representing their traumatic past, their tormented thoughts and divided self that is unitary, solid and clear” (2). Mark O’Connell explores this process of representation through the protagonists’ self-obsessive tendencies. In *Narrative Narcissism*, O’Connell puts forth that the literary uses of art function to reflect the characters’ search for identity; consequently, the protagonists in Banville’s fiction “create their narratives in order to see themselves” (145).

Further, Stéphane Jousni claims in “The Icon and the Text: Instability of énonciation in John Banville’s Artistic Trilogy” that the use of pictorial devices achieves a “blurring of codes” and “a play on perspective” that resemble the work of a painter. (135) Additionally, Jousni continues to argue that *Ghosts* “details each and every step of the artist engaged in the act of creation” (Jousni 136). In his article “Well Said, Well Seen: The Pictorial Paradigm in Banville’s Art Trilogy”, John Kenny refers to the motif of photography with emphasis on the photographic vision in Banville’s fiction. This style of writing, Kenny asserts, can be categorised within the realm of ekphrastic literature, since Banville has “repeatedly drawn on direct visual strategies of literary representation” (53). The literary meeting between the image and the word, Kenny argues, finds its primary motivation in the hope that language will “make us see” (53). Certainly, these complex interactions between the icon and the text in Banville’s *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts* and *Athena* has been well established by a number of critics. The role of photography,

however, has yet to be offered an analysis in literary criticism on John Banville's *Frames* trilogy. By exploring photography as motif in *Ghosts*, I set out to ask: How is the prevalent confusion of visual and narrative codes informed and complicated through the motif of photography? And further, how do notions of photography inform the main themes in *Ghosts*, such as the quest for absolute truth, redemption and atonement?

Banville himself has written extensively on photography, showing an avid theoretical awareness of the medium. Furthermore, in a 1993 interview with *The New York Times*, Banville claims that the inspiration to *Ghosts* came from "a black-and-white picture of a group of people in city clothes walking up sand dunes carrying suitcases" (Lesser np). While he first believed it to be a memory from childhood, Banville is later told that he was in fact "remembering newsreels of refugees [he] saw as a child" (Lesser np). Notably, Banville's comment suggests that the photographic medium played a central role in his process of writing *Ghosts*. Concerned with the image and its multiple divisions, *Ghosts* as a literary work shows Banville's keen interest in photography; moreover, the motif of photography interacts with the narrative of *Ghosts*, weaving its way through some of the narrative's main themes, such as memory, the role of art and language, through the means of self-reflective writing.

As fleshed out above, previous research explores the complexities of Banville's fiction by focusing on issues of selfhood and authenticity, ekphrasis and representation with emphasis on postmodernist and post-structuralist theory. It is perhaps peculiar, then, that photography has gained little attention or acknowledgement in previous critical work and scholarship on Banville's art trilogy. This thesis maintains that the motif of photography is intimately woven into the narrative of the second novel of Banville's art trilogy,

Ghosts. I argue that *Ghosts* both embodies and complicates notions of photography. Through the lens of Roland Barthes' seminal text on photography, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), this thesis explores the narrative of *Ghosts* in light of Barthes' theory of photography. In doing so, I intend to investigate *Ghosts* interactions with photography, through Barthes' exploration of memory, personal history and atonement in his search for the essence of photography. I depart from existing criticism in two major ways; first, I aim to show how notions of photography inform the narrative process in *Ghosts*; and second, through the lens of *Camera Lucida*, I explore Barthes' self-reflexive quest for the essence of photography as an inter-text to the protagonist of *Ghosts*'s own self-aware narrative quest for absolute truth, atonement and redemption. Reading Banville with Barthes, I hope to shed new light on *Ghosts* by analysing some of the aspects of which I find crucial points of comparison between these two texts, *Ghosts* and *Camera Lucida*. Banville employs the device of the *mise en abyme* and the poetics of *ekphrasis* to narrate the confused and complex world of the protagonist and unreliable narrator Freddie Montgomery, the art obsessed murderer from *The Book of Evidence*. Centred on the implications of Freddie's encounter with otherness, *The Book of Evidence* depicts Freddie's murder of a maid, who witnesses as he is about to steal a painting. The ethical problem that *The Book of Evidence* thus deals with is the fact that the painterly subject appears more real for Freddie than the maid. To quote D'hoker, Freddie's act of murder "puts notions of responsibility, respect and retribution at the centre of attention" (146). As a result, the sequel *Ghosts* depicts Freddie's ethical engagement with otherness, narrating his personal quest for redemption and to appease "the hunger only to have [the murdered maid] live and to live in her" (70). In the final passage of *The Book of*

Evidence, the narrative foreshadows Freddie's main motif in *Ghosts*: "It even seemed that someday I might wake up and see, coming forward from the darkened room into the frame of that doorway which is always in my mind now, a child, a girl, one whom I will recognise at once, without the shadow of a doubt" (BE 219). In the first half of *Ghosts*, Freddie resides on an island together with art scholar Professor Kreutznaer and his assistant Licht. Having studied nineteenth century Dutch painting while serving time in prison, Freddie takes on the Professor's study of the mysterious and fictional painter Jean Vaublin, an anagram of the author himself which further complicates the identity of Vaublin. While a little group of "six or seven" (4) castaways come to stay in the Professor's house throughout the course of a day, Freddie's narrative account of these characters is in fact an imaginative response to one of Vaublin's paintings, named *Le Monde d'or*. Explicated in the third part of *Ghosts*, a majority of the castaways appear as idealised versions of themselves on *Le monde d'or*, narrated in the voice of Freddie in a detailed ekphrastic interpretation. Thus, the first half of *Ghosts* is highly unreliable; the castaways, among them a young girl named Flora and an actor called Felix, are narrated as uncanny reflections of Freddie. As D'hoker claims, the third person narrative reveals Freddie's own dreams, desires and memories, suggesting that the castaways are primarily Freddie's own projections (Visions 63). The inability to tell the difference between the original and the imitation is a thematic thread in *Ghosts*, further underlined through the use of unreliable first and third person narrators. In the second part of *Ghosts*, Freddie tells the story of his journey to the island, and then returns, in part four, to the castaways as they are about to leave. In this circular narrative, *Ghosts* centers on a process of creation. In other words, the narrator voice of Freddie recounts the events in a self-

reflexive, ekphrastic manner, which reveals the protagonist's own process of creating the narrative. The literary effect of stillness and immobilisation as present in Banville's narratives recalls paintings, photographs or actors on a tableaux viviant who pose as painterly figurines (Kenny, *Well Said* 167). At the heart of this self-reflective process is the absence and loss of the Freddie's mother, whose death occurs in *The Book of Evidence*. Freddie's mother and in part the murdered maid are significant to the protagonist's quest of redemption in *Ghosts*, which he works through in a surrealist reading of Vaublin's reproductions, his writing of the narrative and in the turning point of the novel: Freddie's meeting with the character of Flora. While the painting in *The Book of Evidence* falsely promises that Freddie has experienced unity and truth through art, "the thing itself, the pure unmediated essence" (*Ghosts*, 85), Freddie yet hopes on the possibility to find the essence of the self through visual otherness. In this sense, both Banville's and Barthes' accounts of the engagement with visual art are grounded in narrative accounts of personal experiences and past wounds. In finding an image representing the essence of a dead or absent one, moments of epiphany and intense recall with the aid of visual art serve a crucial focus of both *Camera Lucida* and *Ghosts*. For Freddie, paintings paired with his confessional writing "are a protest against the erosions of time and the distortion of memory" where his obsession with visual art leads Freddie to "believe in the fiction of spatial transcendence" (McMinn 144). The interaction between remembrance and visual art is explored further in Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, who anchors this "spatial transcends" in images, through Barthes objective in writing *Camera Lucida*: to find the essence of photography. *Ghosts* and *Camera Lucida*

both narrate the process of searching and eventually, but uncertainly, achieving what Barthes calls a superimposition “of reality and of the past” (Barthes 76).

***Punctum* and Remembrance**

Before setting out this argument in relation to *Ghosts*, it will be helpful to address briefly Barthes’ concept of the *punctum* in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes divides the affect of photography into two distinct concepts, which he calls the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* is not in the general sense a “study” but the “application to a thing, a taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment” which is the interest that initially draws Barthes’ to photography (Barthes 26). The affect of the *studium* is cultural, the perception of an image that makes the viewer regard general components, such as dress-codes, the setting, or certain gestures. It is the *punctum*, however, that resists all culture and knowledge, and pricks, breaks or punctuates the *studium*. While the viewer seeks out the *studium* of a photograph, the *punctum* “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow” and pricks or pierces the spectator. (27) Barthes concludes that the essence of a photograph is the arrest between past and present, *that-has-been*, at once a presence and an absence. The photograph’s sign is that of death, Barthes infers, in which the *punctum* evokes an intense response that is accidental and provoked by the unconscious reaction to the visual detail that wounds the spectator. (27)

As one of the most influential twentieth-century works on photography, Kathrin Yacavone rightly asserts in her 2012 study *Benjamin, Barthes, and the Singularity of Photography* that Barthes’ concepts of visual representation in *Camera Lucida* “continue to be major points of scholarly and critical references” (2), while the work itself is far

from a conventional text on photographic theory (2). Beginning as a joyful study on seminal photographs, the second half of *Camera Lucida* reveals the key purpose of Barthes' exploration on photography: to work through the loss and absence of his at the time recently deceased mother. A significant moment in the text, Barthes finds what he asserts is the quintessential photograph of his mother, achieving for him a Proustian intense sense of recall that resurrects the essence of her lost being. The photograph of Barthes' mother as a child in a winter garden is left out in *Camera Lucida* on the basis that *the punctum* as a kind of emotional wound only exists for him and could not therefore be visually reproduced.

Yacavone maintains that *Camera Lucida* is an inter-text to Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913). Proust's depictions of intense recall, the involuntary memory, reflect Barthes' hope for a photographic artefact, that is, that the *punctum* of a photograph would have the ability to provoke the same effect of the Proustian involuntary memory. Centrally, this intense recall in connection to Barthes' notion of the *punctum* shows his hope for resurrection of dead loved-ones. The involuntary memory, for Proust, helps him experience the essence of his dead aunt. The *punctum*, for Barthes, helps him at last see the essence of his dead mother. Importantly, Barthes' process is different from Proust's involuntary memory in that Barthes deliberately searches for the experience, as he night after night looks through old photographs under the lamp in his kitchen (Yacavone 35). This difference is important, as it connects Barthes' search to that central to the narrative of *Ghosts*: Barthes' *punctum* is anchored on a tangible object, while the effect is similar to Proust's involuntary memory; it is "an emanation of past reality: a magic, not an art" (Barthes 133). In light of *Ghosts*, the affect of the *punctum* enables the main character,

Freddie, to reach through the other side of the images he studies under the light at his desk, in a similar manner to Barthes. In turn, it is the *punctum* that makes the referents on Vaublin's reproductions to emerge, developing into the central narrative focalised through Freddie's unreliable point of view. This process is centred on his quest for redemption and atonement, and thus shows the significance of the *punctum*: Freddie seeks it out in order to make atonement possible. The *punctum* is significant for Barthes' discovery of his mother in a winter garden setting, as it is for the protagonist in *Ghosts* to find the essential image of the unnamed girl, who Freddie experiences as a brief involuntary memory at the end of *The Book of Evidence*. I shall explore these notions as stages in a process evident in the narrative of *Ghosts* and at last arrive at what I argue is the turning point of the novel, namely, Freddie's encounter with the character of Flora, who materialises into life through the concept of the *punctum*. Freddie himself describes the features of the *punctum* in his reading of Vaublin's paintings. Here, Freddie studies photographic reproductions of Vaublin's fictional work: "What he is seeking here is something intangible, some pure, distilled essence that perhaps is not human at all" (*Ghosts* 126). In a letter, Vaublin further explores this "distilled essence":

the centre of a painting, that packed point of equilibrium out of which element of the composition flows and where at the same time everything is ingathered, is never where it seems it should be, is never central, or obviously significant, but could be a patch of sky, the fold of a gown, a dog scratching his ear, anything. (*Ghosts* 127).

To develop this idea, the *punctum* also occurs as an animated presence, materialised as blow-flies that “just appear in the light” (129) when Freddie studies Vaublin’s pictures. These blow-flies, then, are alive in the air and, later, “squashed flat [onto the reproductions], tiny black and crimson bursts” (129). Importantly, Freddie recounts that it is the blow-flies he ends up looking at for longer periods of time. These “crimson bursts” recall what Barthes suggests is the ability of the *punctum*. Without the piercing, emerging element of the *punctum*, the depicted referents on a photograph are “fastened down”: “the figures do not emerge, they do not leave” (Barthes 57). Freddie’s imaginative response to Vaublin’s work, then, recalls the concept of the *punctum*; without these “crimson bursts”, Freddie would not have been able to imagine the painterly figures into the vivid narrative in the first half of *Ghosts*. Closely bound up to his task of redemption and resurrection of the dead, Freddie’s moment of epiphany in his encounter with Flora recalls Barthes’ depiction of finding the mother as child photograph in *Camera Lucida*. Thus, Barthes realises in the first half of *Camera Lucida*: “I have to descend deeper into myself to find the evidence of Photography” (Barthes 60).

Lost and Almost Found

The search for redemption, truth, and unity anchored on an image is highlighted in Freddie’s process-centred study on Vaublin. Freddie is “sorting through sources” and “advancing little by little” (34) by looking at reproductions under the lamplight at his desk. As a process, Freddie’s journey to the island centres on a *punctum* moment induced by involuntary remembrance. In the second part of *Ghosts*, Freddie has been released from prison and catches a lift with former prison mate Billy, gets drunk on gin, and

experiences a hallucination. Suddenly, as they drive to catch Freddie's boat, they arrive at Freddie's mother's childhood house by accident. Freddie is transported back in time, as if walking within the stasis of an old photograph. By example, the imagery of the camera sound is significant in the process of reaching through the other side of the imagery of his mother's childhood house. When opening the bottle of gin, Freddie is able to transcend time and space: "I love that little click the metal cap gives," Freddie comments before he journeys into his childhood house, and continues, "like a creature being snapped" (168). The imagery of "click," "metal cap," and "snapped" recalls the action of taking a photograph. For Barthes, the essential organ of the photographer is not the eye "but his finger"; it is this action of the click which Barthes enjoys the most. For Barthes, the photograph signifies death. The only thing he can tolerate in the photographic act, Barthes infers, is the "abrupt click" that reaches through the "layer of the Pose": "I love these mechanical sounds," Barthes similarly infers, as it makes him recall the noise of time. (Barthes 15). For Freddie in *Ghosts*, these sounds, along with drinking, make memories come back and enable access to a place that wounds. As he starts drinking, "an entire world came flooding back, silvery-blue and icily atinkle" (*Ghosts* 168). Proust's involuntary memory, along with Barthes' concept of the *punctum*, then, gives force to Freddie's hallucinatory recollection. A significant detail of this encounter, in stark contrast to his moment of epiphany with Flora, is that Freddie "could not feel the way one is supposed to feel amid the suddenly discovered surroundings of one's past, all swoony and tearful, in a transport of ecstatic remembrance"; instead, he experiences a "glazed numbness" and connects this sensation of being "suspended in some thin, transparent stuff" to another memory: "like one of those eggs my mother used to preserve

in water glass when I was a child” (*Ghosts* 174). The “glazed numbness” highlights that Freddie, like Barthes’, has not yet experienced the climactic effect of the *punctum*. Through a thread of associations, memories, and past wounds, however, Freddie steps into the image of his mother’s house. While walking towards his mother’s house, Freddie encounters a wood-sprite, who appears to be the very incarnation of him. At the same time, the wood-sprite is “a grotesque version” and an “implausible imposter” that solely claims to be Freddie (*Ghosts* 176). In what imitates the photographic act of taking someone’s picture, the wood-sprite “touche[s] a finger to his cap” and “peer[s] up... with half-blind eyes”, which abruptly causes the protagonist to stop (*Ghosts* 174). Emerging in front of his eyes, the wood-sprite does the procedure by touching his finger to the cap again, so that Freddie gains a vision of himself, as if looking at an instantly developed photograph: “I looked after him but saw myself [...] with the neck of the gin bottle sticking out of my pocket” (176). This vision, which he goes on to call an “attack” (177), Freddie later concludes: “*I met Death upon the road*” (183, original emphasis). The vision evokes the similar sensation which Barthes’ experiences when looking at photographs of himself: “when I discover myself [in a photograph], what I see is that I have become Total Image; that is to say, Death in person” (14). In turn, Sophie’s photographic developments are described as “water-sprites,” (178) further connecting this emanation of the protagonist and the sensory imagery to the notion of photography.

As if deliberately seeking a wound, Freddie is “looking for the place that pains” and asserts that he “would have welcomed pain” (176). As he moves past the wood-sprite, Freddie can finally reach the other side of his family home through “a gap in the hedge” described as if “a fissure had opened up” (177). Recalling the *punctum* that pricks or

pierces the viewer, Freddie is able to “reach through the jagged whole [...] of the other side” (179) and thus climb into his own past. As Freddie walks into the childhood house, he retrieves a suitcase. Its connection to the photographic imagery can be seen in the action described as the narrator finds and opens it. First, it “snap[s] up with a noise like pistol shots”, and second, it evokes “a pallid sigh of the past” (181). In turn, the action captures his image: “I saw myself, kneeling down with my case before me” (181). As a sensory echo, also Licht’s experience of “a bang of flash of white light, like a pistol being fired inside his skull” (108), shows a connection to the camera that exists inside and outside of the characters’ experience of reality (108). In the family house, Freddie is looking for something that he then through the action of the suitcase seems to retrieve. This is when he leaves with the suitcase and can then continue his journey to the island.

The visit to the mother’s childhood home emphasises that Freddie is looking for an image. It further emphasises the quest for a true picture of oneself or a loved one. The protagonist rhetorically asks what he is looking for: “Myself still, the dried spoor of my tracks?” (186), where “myself” and “still” are not separated by a comma, suggesting that it is the still, true image of himself that he is looking for. Additionally, the wood-sprite is shown to have failed to produce a satisfactory representation of Freddie. This image of himself seems to be grounded in childhood. True, the protagonist is a murderer, invested in coming to terms with notions of his dark, troubled self. However, when he is looking “for the smallest trace of [his] past selves lurking here” (181), he thinks of the prospects of finding it: “Surely somewhere between that blameless past and this grim present something snapped” (181). It implies that the question has less to do to with figuring out the transition of innocence to guilt, and more to do with finding evidence of the

innocence to his “blameless past” (181). The use of “snapped”, also suggests that it is linked to the photographic act, related to Sophie in chapter one, and thus, what the protagonist is looking for is an image from the past – a photograph.

The search for a photograph of the self, highlights Felix’s urging Sophie to photograph the professor: “Maybe you will make him famous again?”, Felix comments, and holds an invisible camera in front of him: “Snap-snap, yes?” (62). Sophie takes photographs of the professor’s desk, of which only the professor can hear and enjoy “the grainy slither of the shutter working”. As Freddie is a mirror image of the professor himself, his wish to be “galvanised into light” suggests that he has a desire to be photographed. Like Sophie, he wishes, the rhythm of the phrases and the use of punctuation suggesting the snapshots of a shutter, “to stop; be still; to be at piece” (57). When the narrator of *Ghosts* steps out of his mother’s place, he brings the suitcase. The next day on his way to the island, this scene is emphasised with its contrasts between light and dark. As the narrator carries the suitcase, Freddie describes this daylight world with a photographic metaphor, as “a developed print of last night’s heartsick negative” (199). The development as a process of absence makes the coming narrative in an infinite play of representation.

For Barthes, the photograph of his mother as a child, which he refers to as the winter garden photograph, links most photographic theory to Barthes’ autobiographical narrative in *Camera Lucida* with death and mourning. If *Camera Lucida*’s first half is “a search for the phenomenological essence of photography” (Yacavone 163), the first part of *Ghosts* can be read similarly as a search for the phenomenological essence of the lost one, linked to the “girl” who might step out of “a darkened room” in *The Book of Evidence*. The

other half of *Camera Lucida*, Yacavone maintains, “is primarily a Proustian search for the essence of the mother’s identity” (163). There is a link here, Yacavone maintains, between Barthes’ experience of the mother and the Proustian involuntary memory. From a playful study of photographs through Barthes’ concepts of the *studium* and *punctum*, the second part, as he finds the essential photograph of his mother as a little girl in a winter garden, “moves towards an existentially and ethically motivated redemption of the other” (Yacavone 164). This quest seems to be intimately bound up with Freddie’s own task of atonement, the loss and absence of his mother, and his encounter with Flora.

Memory and Redemption

Freddie fails to find a causal “link between the artistic imagination and the ethical engagement with the world outside of the self” (O’Connell 428). In other words, Freddie is able to create a vivid narrative out of the painting in *The Book of Evidence*, but not out of an existing human, such as Josie Bell. In this sense, Freddie in *The Book of Evidence* fails to see the other; in *Ghosts*, however, he seeks to come to terms with the ethical aspects of this. However, in *Ghosts*, there is a realisation that the ethical engagement with the world outside the self exists within the realm of representation; in this case it is bound up to the reproductions by Vaublin. These, in turn, seem to have a prominent significance for Freddie, to his task of atonement and working through the deaths in his life. Thus, Freddie’s view that “the phenomenology of art” can be enabled “by the imagination’s active interiorization of the outside world” provides a hope that representation can bring atonement to things done in the past (Kenny 102). In *Ghosts*, however, the human losses in Freddie’s past, occurring in *The Book of Evidence*, cannot be resurrected in their flesh

and blood. Understanding this, Freddie turns to a kind of responsibility in the face of death: “There is an onus on us, the living, to conjure up our particular dead... there is no other form of afterlife for them than this; that they should live in us and through us. It is our duty” (*Ghosts* 168). It is possible to infer that *Ghosts* involves a working through of Freddie’s mother’s death and absence, a grievance that he never resolves in *The Book of Evidence*: “I can’t believe that she is gone. I mean the fact of it has not sunken in yet” (*BE* 101). Further, the task of atonement for his murder is implicitly connected to the mother’s death: “Now perhaps I have a similar task to perform. For they told me today my mother has died.” (*BE* 89). In *Ghosts*, by extension, the death of the mother seems a latent response that is directly and indirectly highlighted through Freddie’s imaginative response to Vaublin’s reproductions. Indirectly, this imagery of the mother manifests itself through the crew of castaways on the island. One example is a scene between Sophie and the Professor, in which a surreal and muted dialogue takes place. As if they speak from two remote places, the Professor and Sophie’s dialogue can be read as a kind of isolated monologue. Thus, the Professor infers that Flora reminds him of “someone... Dead... My mother” (71-72). Also, as the Professor sees Flora for the first time, the Professor asks “[w]ho is that?” as if pointing to a picture: “Suddenly the image of his mother rose before him. He saw her as she had been when he was a child, turning from shadow into light” (44). Throughout these memories, however, the face of the loved one is always missing. Upon remembering being abandoned by her father Sophie “could not remember his face now” (58). Freddie is often dreaming of his mother, and wakes to find his “mother too gone from [his] side now” and then cries “like a child” (29). On another occasion, Freddie dreams of his mother but adds that “[s]he was never nothing at all like

her real self as I recalled it” (29). And even as Freddie thinks all day about his mother, a recent dream, he recalls, was about his father. This inability to see the loved one’s face is connected with the failure to again experience their being. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes searches through photographs of his personal past, but is never able to recognise his mother’s past self, her essence. Also in dreams, Barthes experiences the not fully realised emanation of the lost one: “I often dream about her... but it is never quite my mother” (Barthes 66). Then, as he sorts through photographs of his mother without “finding” her, each failed effort of recognition forces him to “reascend, straining towards the essence, to climb back down without having seen it” (66). This search is seen, as mentioned above, in the second chapter of *Ghosts* as the protagonist climbs down the stairs of his childhood home. In the first part it is also seen as the characters’ fall into their past, looking for that essence of the lost other.

Rooms are recurring imagery in *Ghosts*, symbolising the possibilities of resurrection and creation. As if in a constant process of narrative creation, Freddie’s covert, third person narration of the characters shows how they walk in and out of rooms, twisting and turning on doorknobs, while subsequently function to highlight Freddie’s own consciousness and inability to separate the boundaries between the external and internal world. For Freddie, his imagination is associated with “torture chambers” (178), as “the shadowy vault of [his] own skull” (164), while the hallucination in his mother’s house took him to a “white chamber” (178). Likewise, Freddie’s narrative creation of the castaways begins as they “wade through the shallows to get to the shore” (4), alluding to Sophie’s photographic process in her darkroom where she “watch[es] the underwater figures darken and take shape, swimming up to meet her” (56). The symbol of rooms in

Ghosts is the means through which Freddie is able to create his narrative. Centred the meeting between text and image, Sophie's sense of the camera as a means of making sense of the world is in stark connection to Freddie's use of language and his role as the all-seeing and self-proclaimed "Little god" (5) of *Ghosts*. The world, for Sophie, must be "filtered through a lens" in order to be real: "How clear and small and perfectly detailed everything looked inside that little black box of light!" (56). The attempt of language is to create the effect of a photograph; like the "detailed figurines, animate yet frozen in immobility" (95) on *Le Monde d'or*, Freddie narrates the castaway characters by employing the technique of a camera and the affect of a photograph.

In this blurring of codes, Freddie and the characters that he narrates exist outside and inside of this "little box of light". One of the castaways, Alice, is photographed by Sophie and "pictures the film rolled up tight inside, with her face printed over and over" (45). At once inside and outside the box, "with ash-white hair and black skin, strangely staring out of empty eye-sockets", Alice senses in the external that "something approach[es] in the shadowed, purplish air and touch her"; meanwhile, Hatch is described as having "violet eyes" and a sensation of things spinning around, while Sophie is "winding the film in her camera" (46). As if stepping inside black boxes, darkrooms and light chambers, *Ghosts* invites the reader to climb into the "up-ended box of black darkness" and, like the vision of the photographic eye itself, "glide through... with a blindman's feathery touch" (128). In turn, Freddie's ghostly presence as the narrator, along with Vaublin's recognition of a double who could "reproduce with perfection his work" (128), evoke a sense of being captured and looked at by the invisible presence of a hidden camera. Walking into these dark rooms of introspection, Croke "imagined himself as they would see him, a shining

man, floating in the midst of light” (125). The imagery of being photographed and transported into the dark room, Croke experiences “as if a door had slammed shut inside his head” (125). The effect of being transported inside the camera evokes a memory for Croke: “suddenly he was a child again” and the old, dying man climbs “down the narrow stairs” of his consciousness as “years falling away” and shouts: “Mother! Hold me!” (126). The very literal sense of descending into the past by looking at pictures, Croke explains to the other castaways as a violent fall: “Bang, down my arse” (126). In sum, then, the symbolic use of rooms in *Ghosts* – as boxes, lavatories, or cameras – are places of blindness and enlightenment, death and creation, recalling the *camera obscura* and *chambre lucida*¹.

Reproduction

Flora’s dream in chapter one gives further cues to Barthes’ concepts of photography in *Ghosts*. In her dream, Flora encounters a reproduction of *Le monde d’or* and climbs inside the figure of Pierrot, who appears to represent Freddie. In her dream, this figure has “turned into a hollow tube of heavy cloth” through which Flora ascends and “fits her own face to [Pierrot’s face] and looks out through the eyeholes” (64). In this way, Flora hides her face inside the already masked figure. Consequently, the figure of Flora is not, like the other castaways, represented on *Le Monde d’or*. Through an X-ray photograph, Freddie narrates in the voice of an art scholar, the face of a woman is shown underneath

¹ It is perhaps noteworthy that the original title of Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* is *Chambre Lucida* in French, while the juxtapositions between light and dark rooms in *Ghosts* can be associated to the former photographic devices, such as the *camera obscura*. Importantly, the English translation of the Latin word “camera” is “room”.

the face of Pierrot, connecting Flora's dream to the visual representation of *Le Monde d'or*.

Flora's absence of *Le Monde d'or* can be analysed in light of Barthes' engagement with the winter garden photograph in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes' argues that the *punctum* of the mother-as-child photograph could not be reproduced. Referring to the subjective feature of the *punctum*, Barthes infers that for anyone else, the mother-as-child photograph would only be interesting as a *studium*. In light of the winter garden photograph's absence in *Camera Lucida*, Flora's invisibility on *Le Monde d'or* must be understood in terms of Freddie's climactic encounter with her, in which Flora is narrated to appear as a singular being, an essence which is the central quest in *Ghosts*. In connection to Barthes' *punctum* experience when finding the winter garden photograph of his mother, Freddie discovers and experiences the image of Flora in a similar manner. As it is not reproduced among the other printed photographs catalogued in *Camera Lucida*, the existence of the winter garden photograph remains unknown. Citing from Barthes' diary, however, Yacavone suggests that the photograph in fact existed. Here, Barthes writes: "this morning, painfully returning to the photographs, overwhelmed by one in which *maman*, a gentle, discreet little girl..." (164). Yacavone's citation from Barthes' diary intertextually connects the event to the moment of epiphany in *Ghosts*. When Freddie himself finally arrives at the singular image of Flora, recalling the girl or child which he has been looking for, he narrates the event similarly to Barthes: "This morning, not half an hour ago, I, that is Flora and I, that is Flora, when I . . . Easy. Go easy. What happened, after all, except that she began to talk?" (164). Freddie goes on to describe the beginning of an ordinary morning at the table on which he daily studies

Vaublin's reproductions. With the book in his hand and "a mug of strong tea", his mind is "rummaging through its own thoughts". Syntactically ambiguous, Freddie "poured [Flora] out a mug of tea." (164) The description of his mind as "rummaging" on its own, expresses the individuality of the mind in relation to involuntary memories. In this significant moment in which Flora "began to talk" Freddie mentions "something about a dream, or a memory, of being a child", but emphasises that "the content was not important to either of us" (165). Here, Flora appears as "all of a piece, solid and singular" as a "pure and present noun": "No longer Our Lady of the Enigmas, but a girl, just a girl." (167) Flora is often called Mélisande, the woodland creature in Debussy's tragic opera. Both Freddie and the character of Felix call out this name in desperation for he is not able to possess her. Flora "the innocent, pure clay awaiting a grizzled Pygmalion to inspire it with life" (Ghosts 70) recalls the myth of Pygmalion, where the sculptor falls in love with his own creation, a statue. The innocence can also be explored in terms of Barthes' experience with the winter garden photograph; here, Barthes seeks innocence in its etymological sense: "I do not harm" (*Camera Lucida* 75). Both Barthes and Banville reach for the myth of Pygmalion to make a silent object speak. The detailed use of ekphrasis conjures up the essentiality of Flora through an intense experience of the *punctum*.

As Yacavone infers, Barthes shows a "personal and emotional engagement with images" (Yacavone 7). Having searched through his photographs night after night, Barthes finds at last the winter garden photograph. Discovering the photograph, Barthes is "gradually moving back in time with [his mother]" until he finds the mother's true, essential self through the image of a little girl. The encounter is marked by the affect of

sudden memories: “photography gave me a sentiment as certain as remembrance”, of a lost face, and quoting Proust, he continues, “whose living reality I was experiencing for the first time, in an involuntary and complete memory” (Barthes 71). For Barthes, the *punctum* of a photograph as the object of the Proustian remembrance marks “*the impossible science of the unique being*” (Barthes 71, original emphasis): I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother... ‘Not a just image, just an image,’ Godard says. But my grief wanted a just image, an image which would be both justice and accuracy – *justesse*: just an image, but a just image. (69-70). The parallel between Freddie’s “but a girl, just a girl” and Barthes’ “just an image, but a just image”, points to Banville’s ekphrastic writing, which is an investigation towards a sense of unity and coherence. Likewise, Barthes’ experience of photography evokes the hope for continuation also in the face of death: “for love, the Good, Justice, Unity” (Barthes 94). As Freddie watches Flora, he feels as if everyone is ‘changing themselves instead to what they were, no longer figment, no longer mystery, no longer part of [his] imagining (*Ghosts* 147). Similarly, as Barthes’ finds the winter garden photograph, he puts forth: “what I see is not a memory, an imagination, a reconstitution”, but “reality as a past state: ‘at once the past and the real” (Barthes 82). Similarly, the point with Freddie’s significant encounter with Flora, he infers, is not that the image of Flora is amazing – but that “she was simply there” (147). At the end of his meeting with Flora, Freddie asks: “And I, was I there amongst them at last?” (147). Barthes, too, asks when confronted with a photograph: “Maybe I was there?” (Barthes 87). The question is possible, Barthes’ suggests, because a photograph, unlike a painting, is able to “ratify what it represents” (Barthes 87). The ekphrasis in narrating Freddie’s encounter with Flora and *Le monde*

d'or is the attempt of language to authenticate itself. In seeking the effect of a photograph, the scene achieves for Freddie an incarnation, close to the religious notion of resurrection, “a certificate of presence” (Barthes 87) in which “the present feeds on the past, or versions of the past” (*Ghosts* 146) and becomes “an emanation of *past reality*” (Barthes 88). These two moments of epiphany — Freddie with the image of Flora, and Barthes with the photograph of his mother — show, to quote Yacavone in her exploration of Barthes, the “result of the complex relation between perceiving and remembering, with emphasis on lived history and its narrative transformation into writing” (9). In other words, the encounter with otherness through representation is depicted in *Ghosts* as a *punctum* moment, in which the absent or dead other, as Barthes maintains, begins to speak. The *punctum* of a photograph achieves the same affect in Freddie’s reading of Vaublin’s reproductions: it is “the attempted saving of the past, the lost and the dead” (Yacavone 7).

Conclusion

Ghosts puts questions of copy and original, the search for unity, truth, and the saving of lost time, as central motifs for the narrative. In turn, it evokes a mediation on the meeting between classical representations of art and modernity, classical paintings and the uncoded presence of photographic reproductions. In front of Flora, as the songless Mélisande who begins to speak, Freddie “hold[s] out his arms toward the possession of the image” (Barthes 144) in the same way that Barthes reaches towards his mother through the mother as child photograph (Barthes 144). In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes’ asserts: “I am Golaud exclaiming “Misery of my life!” because he will never know

Mélanide's truth. (Mélanide does not conceal, but she does not speak. Such is the Photograph, can cannot *say* what it lets us see.)" (Barthes 100). In the fourth and final part of *Ghosts* which is a kind of reverse, negative image to the first part, Freddie exclaims: "*Mélanide, Mélanide!* I still had, still have much to learn. I am, I realise, only at the beginning of this birthing business" (*Ghosts* ccxI). These interactions between icons and text, the visual and verbal, and the phenomenology of photography and representational paintings, are occurring subjects in Banville's *Ghosts*. The castaways, along with the protagonist, show the longing for the mother, the feminine, and the painful work of mourning for the loss and absence of their particular dead. *Ghosts*, then, is a search for finding accommodation for the gaps between self and other, presence and absence, that-has-been and images of the present. If Banville "uses the trope of painting to dramatize the quest for a real self" (McMinn 141) in *Athena*, the last novel of the trilogy, the motif of photography in *Ghosts* dramatises the quest for a real self and the possibility to resurrect the lost and the dead. Photography as an analogy to the creative process and the quest for the self and other show that Barthes' *Camera Lucida* is notably present in Banville's *Ghosts*, which calls for, I suggest, a reading that extends the narrow scope of this thesis.

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