# "WE ARE WATCHING THE PHOTOGRAPH": PÉTER FARKAS'S EKPHRASIS OF JAMES NACHTWEY'S ICONIC PRESS PHOTOGRAPH

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## INTRODUCTION: PHOTOGRAPHY AND EKPHRASIS

Since the revival of the interest in ekphrasis in the second half of the twentieth century by literary scholars, dozens of monographs and thousands of essays have been published around the world on the topic. The explosion of ekphrastic studies in the past few decades can be conceived as evidence of the "pictorial turn"[1] in the humanities, and there is no doubt that images and practices of looking that are presented in a verbalized form in literary texts constitute keys to understanding both the ways of seeing and the significance of the described image in a specific time and socio-cultural context. On the one hand, the ever-growing attention to interart word/image relations and intermedial or transmedial connections has brought about various conceptualizations of literary ekphrasis: These include definitions that go beyond the traditional conception of ekphrasis as the vivid description of an existing, imaginary or now-lost visual work of art; for example, a verbal representation of visual representation[2] or a verbalized response to non-kinetic visual configurations.[3] On the other hand, heightened interest in ekphrastic studies has led to the expansion of the term by scholars in the fields of musicology, film studies, and media studies to cover a set of intermedial phenomena outside literature.[4] Although all these theoretical and disciplinary developments would be worthy of meticulous study, this paper does not aim to give an overview of the actual differences among

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1 W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn," *Artforum* 30, no. 7 (1992): 89–94.

2 James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

3 Claus Clüver, "A New Look at an Old Topic: Ekphrasis Revisited," *Todas as Letras: Revista de Língua e Literatura* 19, no. 1 (2017): 30–44.

4 See Siglind Bruhn, *Musical Ekphrasis: Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2000); Ágnes Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-Between* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011); and Jay David Bolter, "Ekphrasis, Virtual Reality, and the Future of Writing," in Geoffrey Nunberg, ed., *The Future of the Book* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1996), 253–72.

these (and other) contemporary concepts of ekphrasis that to some extent result in the inflation of the term. For my purpose here, it is sufficient to note that throughout my essay I will use the term “ekphrasis” in its narrowest sense, meaning the literary description of an existing, imaginary or now-lost visual artwork or visual representation.

Such massive abundance of ekphrastic studies could not have been possible had the rapid, exponential growth of digital image and multimedia production and distribution not occurred, due to which our contemporary state of affairs is often characterized as a condition of being surrounded and flooded by images. In a cultural and media landscape inundated with images, where digitalized traditional visual artworks and analogue photographs as well as the most banal digital photographs are uploaded each and every day on the World Wide Web in unaccountable numbers, then reused, transformed, and multiplied in myriad derived forms, it might seem somewhat out of date to scrutinize ekphrastic literature. It might seem that the relatively easy digital availability of images causes literary ekphrasis to be redundant, obsolete, even unnecessary, especially in the light of the fact that in earlier visual cultures anteceding digital technologies and mass-produced printing ekphrases to a certain extent served as verbal replacements for existing visual artworks, and oftentimes were created, recited, or read in the absence of their visual subject matter.[5] However, literary ekphrases can carry out an intervention in today’s media environment by reminding the reader of the depicted existing visual artwork or visual representation, activating its conventional, established meanings or attributing new meanings to it, and potentially disclosing prejudices and assumptions that underlie our notions of the visual. Moreover, ekphrases, through their hermeneutical and critical ability to interrogate visual artefacts/representations or to problematize vision itself via focalization, narrativization, and staging acts of viewing, may not only mirror, but also criticize culturally dependent acts of looking, calling into question the power relations encoded into visual representations and vision itself, as well as reinvigorating or modifying cultural practices and knowledge. In short, ekphrases might fortify, but also might challenge and reshape dominant (or conventional) scopic regimes. As Renate Brosch puts it, “[b]y describing the perception of an image that clashes with its conventional interpretation, misreads the content, rearranges the meaning, or invents a new one, ekphrasis can question and subvert dominant ways of seeing. These iconoclastic gestures

[5] Since my aim here is to examine a contemporary Hungarian literary ekphrasis responding to an existing iconic press photograph, I shall not enter into details concerning ekphrases of imaginary or now-lost visual representations. I do think though that these ekphrastic practices, too, may convey or deconstruct meanings, habits of looking, or values and forms of knowledge associated with the particular described visual representation.

contribute to contemporary culture, at one and the same time utilizing and reinforcing the power of images and undermining their acknowledged meanings or messages. It appears that one of ekphrasis's prominent functions in recent literature is to interrogate dominant visual regimes [...]."[6] By unavoidably accounting, either explicitly or implicitly, a process of viewing, ekphrases direct our attention to the affective, cognitive, historical, and social dimensions of viewing pictures, and tend to expose cultural and medial determinants that regulate or influence vision and visibility as well. In this regard, ekphrases again constitute a case of hypermediacy in that they not only make us aware of the workings of the verbal medium, but also offer a metapicture of the performance of the viewing subject's gaze and the scopic regime(s) that impact or even produce it.[7] Thus, far from being merely trustworthy descriptions, ekphrases actively participate in "the politics of images",[8] and their analyses should consider whether the ekphrasis in question reinforces existing dominant, conventional ways of seeing, or calls them into question.

As far as literary studies relating to ekphrasis go, one can observe that the interaction between ekphrastic text and painting constitutes a frequently examined research topic, while the intermedia relationship between ekphrastic literature and sculpture, or literary ekphrasis and photography has been more rarely studied.[9] One of the rare exceptions dealing with the latter understudied issue is Andrew D. Miller's monograph *Poetry, Photography, Ekphrasis. Lyrical Representations of Photographs from the 19th Century to the Present,* in which the author, leaning on Bakthin's chronotope theory and various approaches to the medium of photography, differentiates nine types of lyrical ekphrases of photography,[10] one of them being the ekphrasis that describes an iconic photograph

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6 Renate Brosch, "Ekphrasis in the Digital Age: Responses to Image," *Poetics Today* 39, no. 2 (2018): 225–43, 239–40.

7 On ekphrasis as verbal hypermediacy see Orsolya Milián, "Remediation and Mediamachia in Ekphrases," *Primerjalna književnost* 42, no. 2 (2019): 15–34, accessed August 18, 2022, https://ojs-gr.zrc-sazu.si/primerjalna_knjizevnost/article/view/7476/6964.

8 See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago / London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

9 Given the global popularity of ekphrasis as a research topic, it is somewhat surprising that the study of cinematic ekphrasis has only begun in the past few years. See especially James A. W. Heffernan, "Notes Toward a Theory of Cinematic Ekphrasis," in Stefano Ercolino et al., eds., *Imaginary Films in Literature* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016), 3–17; and my essay "'One Centimetre of Real Poetry and Three Thousand Metres of Silliness' – Silent Movies and Hungarian Ekphrastic Poetry" (forthcoming in the volume: Ágnes Bakk et al, eds., *Intermedial Encounters*).

10 These are the following: the ekphrasis of the cicerone, the snapshot elegy, the suppressed ekphrasis, ekphrases of iconic photographs, the ekphrastic calligram, the anti-ekphrasis, the speaking photograph, ekphrases of the photographed self (i.e. "shadows of the former self"), and ekphrases of photoshopped

representing either an historical event or a famous personage. Andrew D. Miller argues that in such ekphrases, "[the] speaker departs from the private realm of the snapshot into a public forum, in which his or her impressions of the image must be weighed against the photograph's cultural – even pan-cultural – significance."[11] According to Miller, iconic photographs operate in the dimensions of visual cultural memory, abstraction, and symbolism. Since iconic photographs, especially the shocking or traumatic ones that confront us with atrocities and the suffering of human beings, are typically globally known, force us to think about the responsibility to care about the recorded event, make us empathize with the suffering of others, or convey "seemingly universal truths",[12] they become pieces of our reality and our personal and collective memory. Such photographs become collective "markers of shared cultural experience",[13] insofar as they create a shared, possibly global "iconological knowledge",[14] and their ekphrases "describe what we might term a shared sight, in that their speakers share the same mental image with their readers, and, often times, readers come to the photographic image with a shared understanding of its cultural significance."[15]Therefore ekphrases that depict iconic photographs initiate dialogues between the represented viewer's subjective visual experience and a shared collective memory as well as between the photograph of the specific event and the abstraction brought about by it through the spectator's affective, cognitive, and ethical responsiveness. In these terms, such ekphrases treat their visual subject matters as images that mark "the rite of passage into a culture that is not local but global."[16]

It is well-known that in recent decades the ethics of taking photographs of other people's suffering or the relationship between the photographer and the photographed person have become subjects of debate. Many arguments have been raised concerning the photographer's ethical dilemma whether to intervene or to document, the appropriation of other people's pain, the aestheticization of suffering, and the stereotypization and

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images. Cf. Andrew D. Miller, *Poetry, Photography, Ekphrasis: Lyrical Representations of Photographs from the 19th Century to the Present* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), especially 5–8.

[11] Miller, *Poetry, Photography, Ekphrasis,* 6.

[12] Ibid., 142. According to Miller, Nick Ut's photograph *The Terror of War,* also known as the *Napalm Girl* (1972), which shows a group of terrified children running from a napalm attack, among them a naked nine-year-old girl (Kim Phúc) screaming in pain for help and running toward the camera, reaches beyond the particular recorded event and achieves a level of abstraction: "It functions iconically, making not one memory of *a* war, but a prototypical, essential and collective memory of *all* war." (Ibid., italics in the original.)

[13] Ibid., 138.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 138–39.

[16] Ibid., 142.

domination of others via photography (this will be covered in more detail in the next section). When a writer creates an ekphrasis responding to an iconic press photograph that bears witness to violence or suffering, these issues inevitably become even more complex. In this regard, Sarah Holland-Batt notes that "[in] seeking to respond and 'lend a voice to suffering,' the ekphrastic poet risks not only crassness or sentimentality, but charges of unethically appropriating the image for their own artistic effect and gain, and of attempting to monolithically impose meaning onto the image."[17] These "charges" are connected to the questions of whether the ekphrasis omits stereotypes about distant others, entices compassion for human suffering, or facilitates critical reflection. In other words, such ekphrases may attract sensitive cultural, aesthetic, and ethical questions such as: In what ways does an ekphrasis engage with the suffering of others? What types of narrative techniques, viewpoints and framing devices does an ekphrasis use when approaching an abject or traumatic photograph? What kind of scopic regime does it convey or criticize?

My paper addresses these questions via the case study of Péter Farkas's *Creature*,[18] a Hungarian novelette published in 2009, which unfortunately has not been translated to English yet. Farkas's short novel includes an ekphrastic response to James Nachtwey's iconic press photograph *Famine Victim in a Feeding Center* that documents a Sudanese victim of the 1993 famine, while it incorporates some motifs from Kevin Carter's photograph *The Vulture and the Little Girl* (1993) as well. However, since my focus here does not lie on the photographs themselves but on the ekphrastic encounter between an iconic photograph and a literary narrative, in the next section I shall only make a few remarks about the genre of photojournalism – specifically the photojournalistic representations of African famines – , and the ways of seeing and responding to photographs of human suffering.

## THE PHOTOJOURNALISTIC ICONOGRAPHY OF AFRICAN FAMINES

When an ekphrasis describes an existing, imaginary or now-lost visual artwork or visual representation, the theoretical and historical traditions of the particular medium of the image, as well as its representational conventions, are either invoked in its textual discourse or are associated by the reader. Photography, which has interacted and competed with literature in numerous ways since the moment of its invention in 1839, is an en-

[17] Sarah Holland-Batt, "Ekphrasis, Photography, and Ethical Strategies of Witness: Poetic Responses to Emmett Till," *New Writing* 15, no. 4 (2018): 468.

[18] Péter Farkas, *Kreatúra* ["Creature"] (Budapest: Magvető, 2009), all translation are mine.

thralling case in point, because although most of us are aware of the fact that both analogue and digital photographs are produced through various creative, modifying processes (for instance, subject matter selection, composition, viewpoint selection, framing, cropping, montaging, retouching, and, more lately, using photo filters or deepfake technology, etc.), our trust in the evidentiary nature of photography still persists today. In many ways, we still depend on the indexical and documentary functions of photography in society,[19] and news photographs, just as private family photographs, are for the most part still perceived as factual bearers of reality that are more accurate than any other form of media. Needless to say, this perception of photography echoes influential theoretical approaches in the realist conceptual tradition within which photography was considered an objective, almost perfect mirror of reality.[20] More recent conceptualizations of photography tend to expose the artificiality of the photographic medium and emphasize its complex relationship with reality; thus, the "myth of photographic truth"[21] has become an object of thorough critique, too. Perhaps here it will suffice to quote Susan Sontag's less referentially-oriented concept of analogue photography from her second book on photography *Regarding the Pain of Others*: "photographs [are] both objective record and personal testimony, both a faithful copy or transcription of an actual moment of reality and an interpretation of that reality."[22]

Perhaps it goes without saying that we expect different levels of mimetic accuracy from different types or genres of photography. Traditionally, besides documentary photography, photojournalism, which has gained legitimacy through its ability to bear witness to historical events, has been the photographic genre most strongly associated with mimetic objectivity. Photojournalism, which has its roots in 19th-century war photography,[23] is a photographic means of real-life reportage that frequently accompanies written

[19] To take a banal example: Many official documents, such as identity cards or passports, still rely on the evidentiary nature of photography in that they depend on photographs in order to prove one's identity. On the debate over 'authentic' referentiality as a distinguishing quality between analogue and digital photography see Jens Schröter, "Analogue/Digital: Referentiality and Intermediality," *Kunstlicht* 32, no. 3 (2011): 50–7.

[20] Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* is a classic example of the realist tradition of photography theory. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

[21] Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*: *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York / Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17.

[22] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 26.

[23] According to Derrick Price, "[t]he American Civil War (1861–5) was the first to be photographed extensively throughout its duration, and in which photography was seen not only as providing realistic images

news stories, and has been traditionally characterized with impartiality, objectivity, and timeliness. In many cases, photojournalists not only aim at recording and mediating domestic or remote significant events, but also at raising concern and provoking action for social change.[24]

Over the years, photojournalistic representations of atrocities and human suffering have given rise to a number of ethical and theoretical debates including whether some photojournalistic practices are producing images of domination and exploitation, and whether photojournalism is capable of revealing the causes for the documented event and of surpassing voyeurism. The aestheticization of other people's tribulation, that is to produce stylish artistic photographs of victims, has also caused much controversy. As Susan Sontag summarized it so neatly in her often-cited passage, "In this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture's status as a document. The photograph gives mixed signals. Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, What a spectacle!"[25] Sontag's point is that photographs are almost inescapably aestheticized, either by the intentions of the photographer to create art or by the way they are exhibited (for instance, in a museum or an art gallery). A most serious critique formulated by Sontag against photographical images of cruelty, suffering, and degradation is that they are "to a certain degree, pornographic"[26] in that they reduce individual people to objects, and assault the viewer with spectacles that may induce shock, compassion, concern, and pleasure, but may also cause detachment from the recorded event. In her previous book *On Photography,* Sontag had pointed out that photographs of suffering may raise awareness for underrepresented atrocities and may move their viewers to compassion or action, however, their "shock effect" might wear away if someone is repeatedly exposed to them. Thus, they do little to encourage long-term ethical engagement or critical introspection, and ultimately lead to "compassion fatigue",[27] that is the inurement, anesthetization, and desensitization

of the struggle, but also as 'news'." (Derrick Price, "Surveyors and Surveyed: Photography Out and About," in Liz Wells, ed., *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 82.

24 For more on this topic, see Liam Kennedy, "Framing Compassion," in Wells, *Photography Cultures Reader,* 141–52.

25 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others,* 76–7.

26 Ibid., 95.

27 The phrase "compassion fatigue" was originally coined in 1992 by Carla Joinson to describe caregiver burnout; the term was expanded by Susan D. Moeller in order to denote a state of apathy provoked by overexposure to images of suffering in the media. See Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York / London: Routledge, 1999).

of the spectator. In Sontag's words, "[t]he same law holds for evil as for pornography. The shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings, just as the surprise and bemusement felt the first time one sees a pornographic movie wear off after one sees a few more. [...] The vast photographic catalogue of misery and injustice throughout the world has given everyone a certain familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem more ordinary – making it appear familiar, remote ('it's only a photograph'), inevitable."[28] In her book *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*[29] Judith Butler shares to some extent Sontag's reservations concerning the effects of photographs documenting other people's pain in that in her view, too, overexposure to sensationalist photography and spectacles of suffering may diminish the spectator's ethical and compassionate responsiveness. However, exploring the ways in which state authorities and the media "frame", that is regulate representations of war, atrocity, and torture, she points out how these "frames" always partly fail. Given that photographs do not merely reflect, but actively interpret the world and potentially alert us of their medial determination, they draw our attention to the inevitable gap between the represented and the unrepresented, encouraging us to ask about what is left out of the frame of the photograph and how the photograph is framed by the media and state institutions or NGOs.

By this interest in what is *not* shown, the spectator's attention may turn to the regulatory regimes and representational scopic regimes photographs are embedded in.[30] Western photojournalism of so-called "third world countries", particularly the Western photographic imagery of African famines that has shaped Western or even global Northern conceptions of the African continent, constitutes a fascinating case in point, since it brings into light some ideological specificities of Western – or global Northern – photojournalism. Surveying the photojournalistic iconography of African famines in Western mass media since the humanitarian crisis in Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War (1968–1970), David Campbell identifies a photographic scopic regime, a set of well-established photographic techniques and visual motifs that have been used recurrently in Western media coverages of food crises and famines in Africa. He notes that, in general, photojournalistic representations of African famine have ceased to evolve between 1968 and 2003, and have predominantly relied on recycling visual tropes or stereotypes, especially

[28] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2005 [1977]), 15.

[29] See Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London / New York: Verso, 2010), esp. 63–100.

[30] As far as regulatory systems are concerned, one could investigate diverse state, military, and media regulations, or read up on the codes of ethics implemented by various NGOs and associations of photographers.

the "portraits of lone children and women in distress."[31] According to Campbell – at this point leaning on an Oxfam report –, the dominant Western or global Northern iconography and stereotypical visual strategy employed to represent African famine victims can be summarized as follows: The photographed subject is shown as a passive victim "through a de-contextualized concentration on mid- and close-up shots emphasizing body language and facial expressions. The photos seemed mainly to be taken from a high angle with no eye contact, thus reinforcing the viewer's sense of power compared with their apathy and hopelessness."[32]

In such framing, within which the camera acts as a means of symbolic control, complex and difficult lives are simplified into images of lone, isolated people portrayed as passive sufferers,[33] rather than individuals capable of acting independently, while the photograph itself is devoid of any explanatory context as if it were produced in a socio-cultural vacuum in which "indigenous social structures are absent and local actors are erased."[34] Campbell criticizes images that convey negative stereotypes of the global South and strengthen paternalistic, neo-colonialist approaches to African famine victims, or even to Africa as a whole. He argues that the "structuring of the isolated victim awaiting external assistance is what invests such imagery with colonial relations of power."[35] This neo-colonial power relationship between the photographer and the photographed subject can be summarized in the following binary oppositions: active viewer vs. passive viewed one, 'predator' photographer vs. exploited subject, civilized vs. savage, developed vs. underdeveloped; in short, "an adult and superior global North"[36] vs. "an infantilized and inferior global South."[37] The photographic representations of African famine sufferers as isolated victims without agency reinforce colonial narratives in that they maintain an oversimplified image of Africa as the location of desolation, misery, and helplessness, homogenizing a continent home to one and a third billion of people living in fifty-four sovereign countries into a "zone of despair."[38]

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31 David Campbell, "The Iconography of Famine," in Geoffrey Batchen et al., eds., *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 80.

32 Ibid., 86.

33 The mother-and-child dual portraits, which often reutilize the Pietà composition, constitute another photojournalistic cliché.

34 Campbell, "Iconography of Famine," 83–4.

35 Ibid., 84.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 85.

Since my attention here is directed towards the ekphrastic verbalization of James Nachtwey's photograph *Famine Victim in a Feeding Center* (1993) by Péter Farkas in his novelette *Creature,* I do not undertake to go into details about the ethical implications of the relationship between the photographer and the photographed subject. I shall only briefly mention that another photograph, that is Kevin Carter's *The Vulture and the Little Girl* (1993), which has been an inspiring source not only for the ekphrastic fragment that will be analyzed later on in this paper but also for the whole chapter that comprises it,[39] had provoked ethical debates that were focusing on the role of the photojournalist, and on the subjugating and exploitative nature of his photograph.[40] An ekphrasis that responds to such a controversial image may inherit the polemic context of the photograph or the cornerstone issues raised in the ethical debates surrounding it, and this fact may influence the evaluation, even the interpretation, of both the ekphrasis per se and the racial and cultural Other represented in it. But first, before turning to the analysis of the ekphrasis of Nachtwey's photograph, let me briefly introduce Péter Farkas and his novelette *Creature*.

## PÉTER FARKAS'S *CREATURE*

Born in Budapest in 1955, Péter Farkas has started his literary activity by publishing in samizdat in the late seventies. In 1982 he immigrated to Germany; today he lives in Cologne. His essayistic hypertext novel *Golem (Gólem),* written continuously between 1997 and 2005, and consisting of 700 passages and 5974 hyperlinks, is considered the first significant Hungarian hypertext fiction. He became known to larger audiences with his third novel *Eight Minutes* (*Nyolc perc,* 2007), a harrowing story of an elderly couple suffering from dementia. His novelette *Creature* (2009), which describes the physical and mental demise of three human lives in detail, takes the theme of people facing an existential crisis one step further in that the three chapters of the short novel place at the center of their narratives the suffering, deteriorating human body that experiences boundary situations. Each of the three self-contained chapters of the novelette explores

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[39] The first chapter *(hunger)* of Péter Farkas's *Creature* features a vulture as its nonhuman main character. Farkas states on his authorial website that "[w]hile writing the first chapter of *Creature,* Kevin Carter's photograph (Pulitzer Prize, 1994) was also continuously (consciously or unconsciously) running in my brain." "Notes", Péter Farkas's authorial website, accessed April 2, 2022, https://interment.de/farkas peter/kreatura/jegyzetek.htm.

[40] For a summary of this debate see Wai Kit Ow Yeong, "'Our Failure of Empathy': Kevin Carter, Susan Sontag, and the Problems of Photography," *Think Pieces: A Journal of the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2014): 9–17, esp. 11–2.

the outer limits of the human condition: They speak of distressing and miserable, almost subhuman states of existence. Thus, the first chapter *(hunger)* recounts the last moves of an anonymous, emaciated famine victim in an unspecified African village; the second chapter *(solitude)* dramatizes Paul Celan's lonely road to suicide in Paris; and the third chapter *(fear)* narrates the forced taking of Friedrich Hölderlin to a psychiatric clinic in Tübingen.

In a strict sense, the book edition of *Creature* contains just one and only one photograph: the author's portrait is displayed on the back blurb, in accordance with the publisher's publishing practice. However, all three chapters were inspired by various types of existing still images that relate to the corporeal and mental conditions named in the chapter titles. The blurb of the novelette emphasizes that "an image and a person relate to each of the chapters", and also features a link that leads to Péter Farkas's authorial website[41] where further hyperlinks can be found that point to webpages displaying the particular images. These images act as sources of inspiration both for the narrative and the descriptions of the novelette's main characters: *(hunger)* is based on James Nachtwey's photograph *Famine Victim in a Feeding Center; (solitude)* leans on a series of photographs taken by Péter Farkas in Paris while tracing the final walk of Paul Celan (from his Parisian flat at Avenue Émile Zola 6 to the foot of the Mirabeau Bridge on the Seine); and *(fear)* draws on the bestial screaming figure in the right-hand panel of Francis Bacon's triptych *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944). However, the novelette does not only rework the three visual representations mentioned in its blurb but also weaves a dense and complex web of allusions to the fine arts, photography, and film. To mention a few, in *(hunger)* Farkas borrows the nonhuman protagonist, that is the vulture, from Kevin Carter's photograph *The Vulture and the Little Girl;* the chapter *(solitude)* incorporates a short ekphrasis of George Seurat's painting *The Bridge at Courbevoie* (1886–1887),[42] as well as of a photograph documenting the mass execution of Jews in Liepāja (Latvia) in 1941,[43] while it also alludes to Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1966); and the last chapter *(fear)* includes the descriptions of, among others, antique and modern busts.[44]

As it might be clear from this enumeration of intermedial references – far from being exhaustive –, the blurb only mentions the most significant visual sources of inspiration. But, by specifying the crucial visual sources of the novelette and by featuring the link to

41 Péter Farkas's authorial website, accessed April 2, 2022, https://interment.de/farkaspeter/kreatura/kreatura.htm.

42 Farkas, *Kreatúra,* 64–5.

43 Ibid., 69.

44 Ibid., 103.

the author's website, the blurb seems to cut short the ekphrastic play between the reader and the text in the sense that it 'unifies' and solidifies the elements of the novelette's ekphrastic passages into specific pictures (or, in the case of Farkas's photographs of Celan's final path, a series of photographs). On the one hand, the author's website, which provides hyperlinks to each one of them, offers a clear-cut solution to the visualization of the ekphrastic objects, hence potentially resulting in the narrowing of meanings.[45] On the other hand, since the author's website also presents authorial notes that reveal many more intermedial and intertextual connections and thus further enrich the meaning potential of the text, this hypertextual and multimedia environment built around the book may trigger the opposite process, the proliferation of meanings and interpretations, while it may also call into question our traditional notion of the medium of the book (i.e. the book as a closed object).

Hungarian critics unanimously agree that Péter Farkas's *Creature* is a difficult reading because of the grievous themes covered by its complex mesh of motifs, repetitions, intertextual and intermedial allusions, and shifting viewpoints mediated by a writing style characterized by strikingly dispassionate micro-realism at times and highly elevated poetic discourse at other times. The text of the novelette is considered difficult in itself, and further difficulties arise from the "attachment" of the authorial website to it in the blurb. Though the abundance of notes and hyperlinks on the author's website can be helpful for readers who do not recognize intertextual or intermedial allusions, this digital addendum to *Creature* can also cause readers to feel lost or lose interest in navigating this complex multimedia space, and can ultimately lead them to abandon any meaning production activity. The following excerpt from a Hungarian review of *Creature* exemplifies precisely such a discouragement effect: "At the same time, this method puts the reader in an intertextual space where the new associative connections attached to the already overloaded conceptual network of the three chapters completely rule out the possibility of comprehension."[46]

## "THE TOPOGRAPHY OF DESTRUCTION"[47]: PÉTER FARKAS'S EKPHRASIS OF JAMES NACHTWEY'S ICONIC PRESS PHOTOGRAPH

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45 Naturally, this only happens if the reader will visit the website and clicks on its hyperlinks.

46 Benedek Ficsor, "Lábjegyzetek a könyv halálához," *litera.hu,* accessed April 5, 2022, https://litera.hu/magazin/kritika/labjegyzetek-a-konyv-halalahoz.html.

47 Farkas, *Kreatúra,* 27.

The ekphrasis of James Nachtwey's iconic press photograph is the most extensive, two-page long ekphrasis in Péter Farkas's *Creature*. As mentioned above, the first chapter *(hunger)* draws on both James Nachtwey's and Kevin Carter's photographic portraits of Sudanese famine victims, however, the author describes in detail Nachtwey's photograph only.

The plot of *(hunger)* can be summarized in short as follows: in an unspecified but ominous place in Africa, an emaciated man crawls on all fours from one village hut to another; his senses and his mind barely work; he does not even remember his own name, though some memories of his past flash in his brain. The final path of the anonymous man – one of the "creatures" of the novelette – will end in stomach-turning scenes: subhuman living conditions will drive him to child cannibalism, and finally, he will perish because of an attack of a vulture that starts gorging on his still-living body. We follow the story from three points of view: the viewpoint of the vulture that is circling high in the sky, then lands on top of a pile of debris, and ultimately attacks the crawling human; the viewpoint of the man who is crawling and dragging on the ground; and the external focalization of a heterodiegetic narrator who shifts viewpoints when describing the frozen moment of time captured in Nachtwey's photograph.

From a tropological perspective, the narrator of *(hunger)* dehumanizes and objectifies the human protagonist by way of using predominantly animal or mechanical metaphors and similes when describing the main character's appearance and behavior: "naked, battered body, damaged to the bone. Like an enormously magnified stick-insect sticking out of the ground",[48] "he has become a grazing beast",[49] "dragging slowly, he crawled forward in the sand like a crocodile",[50] "he had a hard time orienting himself, because he saw everything from the viewpoint of a four-legged animal",[51] "he surveyed his surroundings with the eye of an animal",[52] he became "an organic shell wobbling to-and-fro",[53] "his extremities moved like parts of a separate, insensitive mechanical structure."[54]

At first glance, the ekphrasis in *(hunger)* seems to unfold illogically with respect to focalization and diegetic coherence. The first sentence of the ekphrasis clearly indicates the interruption of the story, the occurrence of the description, and the evocation of the visual medium within a textual milieu: "A perfectly composed still image in a narrow black

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48 Ibid., 5.

49 Ibid., 13.

50 Ibid., 15–6.

51 Ibid., 16.

52 Ibid., 17.

53 Ibid., 29–30.

54 Ibid., 33.

frame, which has been cut out from the scenery and which follows the rules of the golden ratio."[55] However, the sentence that precedes the beginning of the ekphrasis makes both its focalizer and focalized ambiguous: "And suddenly the creature saw himself from the outside."[56] Based on this sentence, the reader could conclude that the human protagonist will become the implied viewer and the narrator of the ekphrasis,[57] which would mean that a shift is taking place from external to internal focalization. But the second sentence of the ekphrasis brings about another sudden change of focalization and narrative person/voice – as compared to the immediate context of the ekphrasis, and to the whole text of *(hunger)* –, in that the third-person limited narration shifts for the first time into an anonymous first-person plural narrative voice, or collective narration: "we are watching the photograph."[58] Since the "creature", the anonymous human protagonist of this chapter has already been constructed by the narrator as a "rotting body"[59] without thoughts and in a state of weakened self-awareness, and since the focalizer occurring in the opening lines of the ekphrasis is capable of performing complex thinking processes, and approaches the photograph with professionalism (for example, he or she analyzes the rules of the golden ratio, and the diagonal structure, the light-shadow conditions, and "perfect" composition of the photograph), it is impossible to believe that the ekphrasis would mediate the viewpoint and the visual experience of the "creature." Accordingly, the above-cited sentence – i.e. "the creature saw himself from the outside" –, and the empty line following it, designate an intra-narrative breaking point, from where we part from the viewpoint of the famine victim on the point of death.

Nevertheless, it is still questionable to whom we should attribute the words commenting on the photograph and the act of looking staged by them. It is worth highlighting the fact that the "we" voice, that is the collective narrator, occurs on one occasion only in the novelette, namely the ekphrasis on Nachtwey's photograph. Apart from this, the narrator maintains his distance from the events recounted throughout this chapter, just as he does throughout almost all the whole novelette.[60] The collective nature of the narrator reveals itself in such phrases as "we are watching", "our gaze", "we have seen this

55 Ibid., 27.

56 Ibid.

57 The first ekphrastic sentence sounds as if it were uttered by an expert art critic, and not by a physically and mentally degraded person.

58 Farkas, *Kreatúra*.

59 Ibid., 6.

60 The first-person travelogue in *(solitude)* constitutes an obvious exception to this.

a thousand times before", and "turning her back to us."[61] This first-person plural narrative voice seems to refer to, or even create, a virtual community of the spectators of the photograph, and the implied readers of the novel. In this respect, the collective narrator of Farkas's ekphrasis speaks of the "shared cultural experience" and "shared sight" discussed by Andrew D. Miller, that is to say, the "we" voice could potentially be attributed to the global audience familiar with James Nachtwey's iconic press photograph. However, the utterances that describe, recreate, and interpret the photograph are extremely problematic, since they represent the photographed subject as un-human or subhuman through the many descriptions of him as animal (for instance, "he seems more like an animal, a kind of insect, than anything else"[62]), as mechanic (for instance, his lower tibia are compared to "hammer handles"[63]), and as inanimate object (for instance, his spine is compared to a "geological fossil"[64]). The "we" voice displays this dehumanizing viewpoint and description, devoid of human empathy, as belonging to an undefined audience that watches the photograph; thus, the first-person plural narrative voice attributes such wording and viewing attitude to a collective gaze. Ádám Gaborják has already pointed it out that the collective narrator's way of seeing can be identified as the viewing activity performed by a stereotypical Western or global Northern neo-colonial gaze.[65] Though the ekphrasis undeniably leans on (neo)colonial photographic scopic regimes, I somewhat hesitate to identify its collective focalizer as an allegory of the (neo)colonial gaze, especially since some of the above-mentioned metaphors and similes, such as "stick-insect" or "crocodile", are later on used in connection with Hölderlin and Celan as well, and thus they create a community of destiny among the male protagonists of the novelette.

As shocking as the descriptions of the photographed famine victim are, the ekphrasis lays emphasis on the technical and compositional details of the photograph as well as the act of viewing it; in this sense, it does not seem to naively (re)present an act of looking. One could even argue that this method of "writing seeing", which deliberately reenacts a Western or global Northern anesthetized voyeurism or "compassion fatigue", serves an instructive or critical purpose. In my view, the collective focalizer of Farkas's ekphrasis consciously performs a certain estrangement or detachment from the photographed subject in order to mirror the disconnectedness or apathy with which we even-

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61 All quotes from Farkas, *Kreatúra,* 27–8.

62 Ibid., 28.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ádám Gaborják, "A másik teste?" *Élet és Irodalom* 55, no. 3 (2011), https://www.es.hu/cikk/2011-01-23/gaborjak-adam/a-masik-teste-.html.

tually look at news photographs documenting the suffering of distant others. One specific textual excerpt seems to echo Susan Sontag's warning that overexposure to images of suffering may desensitize our capacity for compassion – "although we have seen this a thousand times before, yet it seems completely unreal"[66] – but by mentioning the spectator's distress or dismay it also implies that (iconic) photographs of violence or suffering may still induce shock and concern.

The narrator's numbness dominates the ekphrasis on Nachtwey's photograph, as well as the whole story-world of *(hunger);* the detached heterodiegetic narrative voice, the seemingly apathetic "we" voice, and the objectifying and dehumanizing rhetorical tropes underscore the fact that empathy and compassion have almost completely disappeared from this diegetic world.[67] However, the complete lack of compassion in *(hunger),* just as the dispassionate voice of the collective narrator and the play on the (neo)colonial gaze in the ekphrasis, are deliberately used narrative devices put at the service of alienating readers from such acts and wordings of viewing photographs that record human suffering, while at the same time making readers critically aware of our desensitization or compassion fatigue regarding distant events or suffering people and their visual representations.

To put in a nutshell, instead of merely naively reproducing and reinforcing either (neo)-colonial ways of viewing or compassion fatigue, in construing the photographic object through the voice and the viewpoint of a collective narrator representing a stereotypical Western or global Northern way of seeing, and incorporating Western or global Northern representational conventions and modes of reception of iconic news photographs of African famine victims, Péter Farkas's ekphrasis exposes the otherwise perhaps unnoticed workings of scopic regimes that impact both photography and its practices of reception. Farkas's ekphrasis, without being tendentious, and far from being sentimental, stages and interrogates a specific act of viewing photographs that document human suffering. By making a viewing practice visible, this ekphrasis challenges our conventional practices of looking – or at the minimum it inspires us to take a reflective look at our own visual situatedness.

66 Farkas, *Kreatúra,* 28.

67 Even the only possible source of help (the woman) is moving away into the distance.