



FROM VISUALITY TO ACTION: TRACES OF EKPHRASIS IN JOHN GUARE'S *SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION*

Görsellikten Eyleme: John Guare'in *Altı Derecelik Ayrılık* Oyununda Ekfrasis İzleri

Nurten ÇELİK*

ABSTRACT

John Guare's renowned play *Six Degrees of Separation* (1990) exposes the protagonist Paul's endeavour to assert his identity and find a place, by creating false identities, in the world of high-class individuals which is bounded by class, race, and sexual orientation. In delineating his journey into modern American culture, John Guare employs Kandinsky's double-sided painting along with many other artistic devices such as flashbacks, flashforwards, cross-cutting, and different narrative techniques. Kandinsky's painting, which dominates the stage with its slow movement, mirrors the varied aspects of social life where the characters hold no enduring and steady connection with reality. This painting also projects the emotional and psychological dilemma of the characters in the social life where they lose their sense of humanity and moral ideals. In this respect, this paper intends to explore how Kandinsky's ideas of art and his double-sided painting constitute the quintessence of the play, reflecting the materialism of decadent contemporary society and its emotional and psychological impacts on the characters.

Keywords: ekphrasis, Kandinsky, John Guare, *Six Degrees of Separation*, social fragmentation.

ÖZ

John Guare'in ünlü oyunu *Altı Derecelik Ayrılık* (1990), ana karakter Paul'un sınıf, ırk ve cinsel yönelimle sınırlandırılmış üst sınıf bireylerin dünyasında sahte kimlikler yaratarak kimliğini ortaya koyma ve kendine yer bulma çabasını ele alır. Paul'un çağdaş Amerikan kültürüne yolculuğunu betimlerken, John Guare Kandinsky'nin çift-yönlü resminin yanı sıra fleşbek, ileriye atlama, paralel zamanlama ve farklı kurgu biçimlerini kullanır. Yavaş hareketiyle sahneye hâkim olan Kandinsky'nin resmi, karakterlerin gerçeklikle sürekli ve sabit bir bağının olmadığı toplumsal yaşamın çeşitli yönlerini yansıtır. Bu resim aynı zamanda onların insani duygularını ve ahlaki ideallerini yitirdiği sosyal hayattaki duygusal ve psikolojik ikilemlerini ortaya koyar.

* Dr., İnönü University, Department of English Language and Literature, Malatya/Turkey. E-mail: nurten.celik@inonu.edu.tr. ORCID:0000-0001-5185-1786.

Bu bağlamda, bu makale Kandinsky'nin sanat fikirlerinin ve çift-yönlü resminin oyunun özünü nasıl oluşturduğunu ve çökmekte olan çağdaş toplumun materialist anlayışını ve bunun karakterler üzerindeki duygusal ve psikolojik etkilerini nasıl yansıttığını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: ekfrasis, Kandinsky, John Guare, *Altı Derecelik Ayrılık*, sosyal parçalanma.

Introduction

Known as one of the leading figures of American theatre, John Guare gains a worldwide reputation with his seminal work *Six Degrees of Separation* which premiered at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre at Lincoln Center in New York City on May 19, 1990. From the press comes the laudatory acclaim for this novel comedy that won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for the best play of 1990-1991 seasons. The subsequent production of the play at the Royal Court Theatre in London was awarded the Olivier Best Play Award in June 1992. The film version of the play, which was directed by Australian director Fred Schepisi and broadcast at the end of 1993, strengthens its place as John Guare's chief achievement among his magnificent plays, such as *Landscape of the Body* (1977) and *The House of Blue Leaves* (1971) (Turina, 2011: 57).

Though John Guare's plays do not generally receive huge critical attention, they leave their marks on American theatre since, as Bigsby puts it, "[f]ew writers have matched his exuberant inventiveness but few have aspired to, or achieved, the lyrical intensity or intellectual astuteness of a man with a vivid sense of the physical and linguistic possibilities of theatre" (2004: 1). Behind his authenticity and creativity lies his theatrical approach that has been marked by the challenge against the deep-seated conventions of kitchen sink drama. Though inspired by the plays of Marlowe and Anton Chekhov, it is in fact Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* that sparks his idea to start a fight against naturalism. On the surface level, *A Raisin in the Sun* is a realist drama that draws on the struggles of an African-American family against white people who do not allow them to move into their neighbourhood. However, on a deep level, it goes beyond the boundaries of naturalistic drama at the moment when Beneatha and his brother Walter start to dance, and under the enchantment of Nigerian music, they seem to retreat into their past. As Guare points it out, "it was an extraordinary moment when Beneatha imagined her African past. That was the play I wanted to see. It showed me you could take naturalistic theatre

and break it open” (qtd. in Urban, 2014: 58). John Guare stands against naturalistic drama in all its aspects in an attempt “to get the play out of the kitchen and hurl it into the Niagara Falls of life” (Cattaneo, 1992: 103). To this end, Guare “breaks the fourth wall, dismantles verisimilitude and in doing so, seeks to ‘earn the truth’”, employing the technique of what Shklovsky calls “defamiliarization”, that is, presenting everyday things in an unfamiliar way (Urban, 2014: 58). As Urban asserts, his resistance to naturalistic drama “‘defamiliarizes’ the American dream and its obsession with celebrity, revealing the cost of a belief in perpetual progress or fame” (2014: 59).

That might be the main point of John Guare’s renowned play *Six Degrees of Separation* which articulates its simmering resentment of the phoniness and insincerity of modern American men mesmerized by the American dream with a focus on the denial of the character Paul who makes up stories to find a place for himself in the materialistic world of others. The play, in Guare’s own words, is “about a group of people telling a story and trying to figure out what happened” (qtd. in Turina, 2011: 58). In other words, the characters struggle to find the truth in the world of the play ridden with ambiguities, lies, and illusions. As Mike Vanden Heuvel aptly observes, the play presents a critical attitude towards bourgeois ethics with its portrayal of the world not in terms of “its laws and regularities, but rather of its perturbations and fluctuations, the constant dynamic of difference that brings out the world’s multiple forms” (2007: 241). The interrelation between materialistic tendencies, ethical concerns, and the multiplied angles of reality has become an issue of interest¹ yet the theatrical devices that Guare utilizes to develop a critical outlook towards the cultural mindset of American people receive little attention. In fact, in endowing his narrative with ideological and cultural matters, Guare, in his delicate manner, utilizes many devices such as “flashbacks, flashforwards, cross-cutting, and simultaneous planes of reality” together with the constantly direct address to

¹ Ana Fernandez-Caparros Turina examines the connection between social fragmentation and reality by referring to the spatial manoeuvres Guare uses in his play and underlines that Guare’s creation of the real, imagined and social spaces crucially reveals and challenges the urbanspace of New York and reconceptualizes the world of the urbanspace where imagination and reality contradict and reinforce each other. See (Turina, 2011). In a similar line, Mike Vanden Heuvel employs information theory to explain how the play questions bourgeois ethics with a portrayal of the world structured upon inconsistencies, fluctuations and irregularities. See (Heuvel, 2007).

the audience, and narrative from different perspectives (Turina, 2011: 58-9) and, most importantly, Kandinsky's double-sided painting. Among all these artistic devices, what feeds into Guare's renewed vision of reality, the complexity and richness of his approach to drama, and his critical stance against the ideological conservatism of the upper class is the ekphrastically integrated art object. In the play, the painting is invigorated as the visual text to be interpreted, constituting one spectacular form of cultural, intellectual and dramatic explorations. Hence, the play requires an ekphrastic interpretation because overlooking or downplaying the relationship between visual and verbal would lead to misinterpretation or missing out on the main critical point of the play.

The relationship between verbal and visual has generated controversy since ancient times, and ekphrasis has been traditionally exercised in many literary works ranging from Homer's *Iliad*, John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" to W.H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts." Ekphrastic writing is mostly associated with poetry in which heroic figures, icons, images, and visuals of art are utilized by the poets to express their powerful feelings and ideas that arise out of them. However, this writing technique has attained widespread usage and has recently become applicable to novels and dramatic works as well. The term ekphrasis has taken divergent definitions and has been used in different ways. Ekphrasis derives from the Greek root *phrazein* meaning "to tell, to pronounce, or to declare" and with the prefix *ek* meaning "out of" or "from" meant originally "a full or vivid description" (Wagner, 1996: 12). Ekphrasis is a term used to define works based on "verbal discourses that directly verbalize one or more visual images" (Eidt, 2008: 9). The conceptualization of ekphrasis in relation to verbal practices and visual materials has been criticized by many critics since they find this relationship too narrow. The traditional association between verbal representation and visual representation has been subverted in contemporary practices; for this reason, critics attempt to redefine and broaden the definition of ekphrasis. Claus Clüver presents a concise definition of the term as "the verbalization of real or fictitious texts composed in a non-verbal sign system" (qtd. in Eidt, 2008: 17). Despite Clüver's expansion of the term by emphasizing the variety of ekphrastic art objects, the term is still limited by its privileging of language or verbal narration. The emphasis on the verbal presentation of the art object may generate problems considering the possibilities of intertextuality in drama, films, and music since in these arts, it is difficult to create and sustain verbal ekphrastic voice and narration. Siglind

Bruhn, in her essay on musical ekphrasis, extends Claus Clüver's definition since ekphrasis denotes nonverbal modes of re-presentation. She redefines ekphrasis as "a representation in one medium of a real or fictitious text composed in another medium" (2001: 559). Analyzing how ekphrasis is applied in films and drama, Laura Sager Eidt states that ekphrastic passages or verbalizations are acted out on the stage and dramatized and for this reason, their verbal nature cannot be utterly obtained (2008: 18). In poems, the whole parts of the poems are composed by an ekphrastic narrative voice, yet in dramas and films, ekphrasis forms particular parts or sequences of the whole work (Eidt, 2008: 22). In order to expand the feasibility and potentiality of ekphrasis in drama and films, Laura Sager revises the definition of the concept as "the verbalization, quotation, or dramatization of real or fictitious texts composed in another sign system" (2008: 19). In this respect, I will use Sager and Bruhn's definitions since they serve my purpose to show that ekphrasis appears in divergent forms that include the physical presence of the visual, its interpretations, descriptions, dramatizations, and quotations and to explore that there is a correlation between the art object's meaning and the playwright's artistic intentions and expressions. To illustrate how ekphrasis variously operates in drama, I will analyze Kandinsky's painting in Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* where its visual appearance on the stage, descriptions, and projections of dramatic action sit well with the playwright's dramatic motivations and intentional judgement.

As Sager and Bruhn state, ekphrasis is not purely verbal yet offers visual patterning to the viewers. Then, it can be stated that ekphrasis is closely related to the act of seeing. Ekphrasis is the invigorating and recreating of mute art objects through verbalization or any other art form. If Laura Sager's ideas of filmic ekphrasis are applied to dramatic ekphrasis, it is worth noting that just like filmic ekphrasis, dramatic ekphrasis prompts the audience and readers to make a comparison between the dramatized representation of the art object and the actual work of art, thus creating "a synthesis of the two images in the viewer's mind" (2008: 19). Dramatic ekphrasis refers to the visual effect on the audience and the audience's perception of the visual art object and the writer's treatment and interpretation of the work of art as well (2008: 19). In this case, in the production and presentation of dramatic ekphrasis, "sight becomes insight, leading to knowledge, procuring the mind to understand both the concrete and the abstract idea" (Uçar, 2021: 610). When viewed in this light, ekphrasis is the intermediality of the effect generated by the work of art and the reception of the viewers, thus, it

invites the combination of visual and intellectual interpretation. That is to say, dramatic ekphrasis prompts the readers' or spectators' mental and visual participation in the process of sight and insight.

John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* draws on and refers to Kandinsky's double-sided painting, and particularly in some scenes of the play, the visual expressiveness of the painting is dramatized and adapted into the dramatic language and action. Paul directly addresses the audience, informing them concerning Kandinsky's painting and his view of an art object. Paul's elaboration on the double-sidedness of the painting at the end of the play concisely conveys the play's depictions of the socio-cultural issues and the actions of the characters. Though it at first glance seems to be an extraneous stage prop, when looked through new lenses, it becomes clear that it is the dominating force, with its slow movements. It serves as a medium to facilitate the comprehension of the multifaceted and intricate facets of social life where materialistic pursuits as well as sexual and racial stereotypes render the characters' lives dysfunctional and unsettled by breaking their ties with reality and distorting the spirit of humanity and a coherent sense of self. Furthermore, the description of the painting at the end of the play presents verbal and visual representations that display the intricacy and complexity of the characters' emotional and psychological experiences. The power of ekphrasis in Guare's play resides in its ability to expose both his theatrical understanding and issues at the heart of the play such as "liberal guilt, racial presumptions, the reality of a divided society, dislocated families, dysfunctional lives, the performatic quality of a supposed real life" (Bigsby, 2004: 41). In this sense, it is important to argue that Kandinsky's painting becomes the intrinsic and central constituent of the play, adding momentum and depth to the play by layering the events with its variety of colours, a symbol of the contrasting phases of life. This paper, therefore, intends to explore how Kandinsky's ideas of art and his double-sided painting contribute noticeably to the fabric of the play and how the art object is used to demonstrate that the characters lose touch with reality under the influence of the materialistic world that robs them of their humanistic and moral traits. This paper also examines how the dual aspects of the painting – its colourfulness and gloominess – disclose the nuance and complicated moral quandaries and emotional conundrums of high-class individuals whose world is beset by the obsession with fame, beauty and materialism.

The Function of Kandinsky's Double-sided Painting in *Six Degrees of Separation*

Kandinsky, with his iconoclastic ideas, theory and notable paintings, is widely deemed as an eminent painter in the modern cultural world, taking a unique place: “the place of an artist alien to vanity and with a desire to shock the viewer; the place of a master inclined to constant and concentrated meditation, to unswerving movement towards synthesis of the arts, to the quest for more perfect, ascetic and strict formal systems” (Guerman, 2015: 11). Kandinsky achieves a significant breakthrough in the modern arts with his strong opposition towards the notion of reality since “the working of the inner need and the development of art”, in Kandinsky’s case, “is an ever-advancing expression of the external and objective in the terms of the periodic and subjective” (Kandinsky, 2015a: 97). Expanding upon this view, it is noteworthy to state that as a product of the individual artist, art is a medium to express the outer world subjectively and intuitively. It is this view that Guare embraces to alter his stance against the representation of reality on the stage: “Theatrical reality happens on a much higher plane. People on a stage are enormous, there to drive us crazy. I love actors who can do that” (Cattaneo, 1992: 99). As a playwright, he endeavours to “break the domination of naturalism and get the theatre back to being a place of poetry, a place where language can reign” (1992: 102). Viewed in a certain light, Kandinsky and Guare’s aspiration to call the pre-established notion of reality into question cannot be overlooked. They attempt to turn upside down the known, familiar understanding of what is real or unreal and thus, go beyond the established boundaries of definite and certain meanings, the traditional perception and treatment of the real or truth. That being the case, it is hardly surprising that Kandinsky’s painting on the stage externalizes the world of Guare’s play in which the characters, unable to cope with the realities of their times, escape from their troublesome lives into the realms of illusion and dreams.

Kandinsky’s painting, firstly seen revolving slowly high over the stage as the stage directions indicate, is painted on either side of the canvas in two radically different styles; one side is “geometric and somber” and the other side is “wild and vivid” (1992: 11). Below are the paintings seen in the production of *Six Degrees of Separation*; on the left is geometric and dark and on the right is wild and colourful:

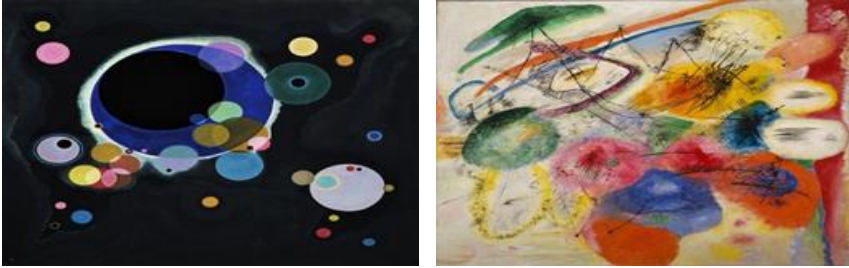


Fig. 1. Several Circles, 1926, Fig. 2. Black Lines, 1913.

When the play starts, Flan and Ouisa Kittredge, the wealthy art dealers, tell how they are deceived by Paul, a compulsive liar. When they are about to leave the house for dinner with their close friend Geoffrey, a white South African businessman, a young black man in blood intrudes into their apartment, claiming that he is a friend of their sons, Talbot and Woody from the Harvard and that he has been mugged. Later on, Paul asserts that he is the son of Sidney Poitier and promises others, in return for their help, parts in his father's new film, *Cats*. The others show their sympathy and love towards Paul who prepares a delicious meal and gives a nice tirade regarding imagination with references to Salinger, Beckett, Freud, and Jung. This bright atmosphere is distorted when Ouisa discovers at night that Paul is having sex with a male in her daughter's room. After they recover from this sudden shock, Kittredge's close friends Kitty and Larkin appear on the stage and reveal that they were fooled by Paul in the same way. Dr. Fine is another victim for Paul to bamboozle. Paul goes further to trick Elizabeth and Rick into believing that he is the son of Flan Kittredge, who marries his mother and dubs her later and asks them for money to go to see his father. Despite Elizabeth's resistance, Rick and Paul withdraw all the money and waste it at the Rainbow Room, and at the end of the night, they have a sexual affair. Unable to face Elizabeth and to cope with his mistake and the feeling of degradation, Rick commits suicide. The driving force behind the actions of those beguiled by Paul is their strong desire to take part in his father's film, that is, the desire to become famous. They find no traces of who this kid "bulldozing his way into their lives" is, yet towards the end of the play, it is discovered that Paul got all the detailed information regarding their lives from Trent Conway, a former friend of their sons, now studying at MIT (1992: 39).

As understood from the well-knitted yet intricate plot, Guare depends upon illusions rather than reality, that is, as Dr. Fine accentuates in the play, "[t]here are two sides to every story" (1992: 38). It does not seem strange

considering the fact that there exists no longer one stable truth, seeing that the notions of self and reality are completely distorted in the materialist world, and thus there cannot be found any link between self and individuals and between individuals and society. In the play, the characters, who get stuck in the limited scope of their world, cannot comprehend the reality beyond their perception. Each character thinks that the dreams and illusions that encapsulate their lives are real without noticing that they are imprisoned in the dreamy and delusionary world. In this regard, it is worth noting that reality is not presented as something stable, fixed, and unchanging; yet, it is completely contorted and slanted under the desires and prejudices of the characters that do not show any enthusiasm to dig deeper into the meaning of their life and world. That the thin line between reality and illusion is blurred creates repetitive cycles of order and disorder, regularity and irregularity, meaningfulness and senselessness. At this point, Kandinsky's painting, which appears at the beginning of the scene, is of paramount importance in understanding the multifaceted nature of the story of the play. This painting functions as a metaphor for "the necessary, dynamic, and to some degree unpredictable relations that exist between order and disorder, static and message, difference and repetition" (Heuvel, 2007: 235). It is indispensable for the structure of the play since it foreshadows the complicated events and acts as a visual stimulus for the bogus and chimeric world of the characters based on irreconcilable and contradictory situations and ideologies.

Though Guare's play seems to be frivolous, shallow, and superficial, in the depth analysis of the play, it becomes noticeable that behind the illusionary world lies a hidden meaning. What Guare successfully fulfils in his play is the very thing that Kandinsky embarks on in his art of painting. Important to the view of Kandinsky, who is not interested in the surface reality in his works, is that art should reflect and represent a true yet hidden reality – the process he explains through the concept of 'internal necessity'. Kandinsky gives a succinct definition of the term in his seminal work *Concerning the Spiritual in the Art*: "The artist is the hand that purposefully sets the soul vibrating by this or that key. Thus it is clear that the harmony of colours can only be based upon the principle of purposefully touching the human soul. This basic secret we shall call the principle of internal necessity" (2015a: 160). In achieving the internal necessity, the art object becomes a key device for touching the human soul: "It is clear that the choice of object that is one of the elements in the harmony of form must be decided only by a cor-

responding vibration in the human soul” (Guare, 1992: 18). As inferred from the quotation, the main condition of internal necessity is touching on the human soul and what leads to internal necessity in the art of painting is the use of colours with great dexterity in perfect harmony. If this term is applied to drama, internal necessity occurs when the playwright can affect the human soul with the skilful implementation of any device at his disposal and conveying moral messages explicitly or sometimes obliquely. Bigsby asserts that Guare as “[i]nitially a comic writer, a *farceur*”, is seen as “deflecting his moral concerns into extravagant physical actions or dispersing them in a deluge of language and bizarre plotting” (2004: 1). However, when his plays are put under scrutiny, it is obvious that the comedy and farce provided by unusual events and extreme actions function to present the corrupted world in which human relations and dreams totally fail. As film director Louise Malle alleges in the foreword of his collection of Guare’s early works, comedy plays a significant role in exposing human misery:

Guare practices a humor that is synonymous with lucidity, exploding genre and clichés, taking us to the core of human suffering: the awareness of corruption in our own bodies, death circling in. We try to fight it all by creating various mythologies, and it is Guare’s peculiar aptitude for exposing these grandiose lies of ours that makes his work so magical. (1982: viii).

One may trace that this is the same thing that happens in *Six Degrees of Separation* where comic events lead to the recognition of the emotional and spiritual sufferings of the characters. In the play, the action turns from “the absurdly comic and pathetically disorienting crass materialistic world of the art of the deal to the unexpected pathos of Ouisas’s epiphany about the potential of shared humanity, Guare’s black comedy comes into its own by depicting modern society as a neurotic circus and simultaneously a vale of tears” (Plunka, 2002: 201-2). Within the comic absurdities of the materialistic world, Ouisa gains awareness into their hollow life deprived of human feelings and emotions when Paul shows them humanity with a strong wish to become a part of their family, despite the fact that their children want to keep their distance from them:

Ouisa He wanted to be us. Everything we are in the world, this paltry thing – our life – he wanted it. He stabbed himself to get in here. He envied us. We’re not enough to be envied ... He did more for us in a few hours than our children ever did. He wanted to be your child. Don’t let that go. He sat out in that park and said that

man is my father. He's in trouble and we don't know how to help him (1992: 61).

In this regard, Paul becomes the key figure in Ouisa's intellectual and psychological change on the grounds that he is "an effective con man because he is merely mirroring American values and falling prey to the myth of American Dream" (Plunka, 2002: 199). Paul, a young and poor outsider who intrudes into the lives of the wealthy American family, Dr. Fine's house, and the lives of Elizabeth and Rick, distorts and subverts reality so as to produce his own version of the truth in order to gain acceptance in the materialistic world. In this sense, Paul functions as an information seeker and producer who brings a different layer of reality to the unreal and ephemeral world and a kind of order and reason to the disordered world which puts a clear-cut distinction between people in terms of class differences. As Mike Vanden Heuvel states, Paul "forces the existing social system to experience a decline into disorder and into a temporality that both destroys an existing equilibrium and possibly gives birth to a complex, emergent system of meaning and relations" (2007: 237-8). Paul's presence is a prerequisite for Ouisa to profoundly grasp the miserable condition of her society living under the fallacy of the American dream. As Ouisa personally experiences, in a dehumanized society blinded by materialistic greediness, individuals are led to a stalemate where they lose their humanity, their connection with reality, their selves and others. In such a society, it is seen that true human relations prove to be a mirage, and people turn out to be two-faced and insincere. In this respect, the double-sidedness of the painting represents the situations of human beings. Materialism turns out to be a contagious disease that spreads rapidly, infecting the soul and minds of people and keeps its presence steady and still. The same point is highlighted by Kandinsky:

This all-important spark of inner life today is at present only a spark. Our minds, which are even now only just awakening after years of materialism, are infected with the despair of unbelief, of lack of purpose and ideal. The nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, is not yet past; it holds the awakening soul still in its grip. Only a feeble light glimmers like a tiny star in a vast gulf of darkness. This feeble light is but a presentiment, and the soul, when it sees it, trembles in doubt whether the light is not a dream, and the gulf of darkness reality (Kandinsky, 2015b: 11).

Having gained a brief glimpse into the cruelty and hollowness of society where most people are imposters and tricksters and human relations are “reduced primarily to disposed anecdotes”, Ouisa holds onto the moment in which she has experienced human feelings (Plunka, 2002: 201). Angered by her husband’s ignorance of Paul’s heart-breaking situation, she says:

And we turn him into an anecdote to dine out on. Or dine in on. But it was an experience. I will not turn him into an anecdote. How do we fit what happened to us into life without turning it into an anecdote with no teeth and a punch line you’ll mouth over and over for years to come? And we become these human juke boxes spilling out these anecdotes. But it was an experience. How do we keep the experience? (1992: 61-2).

On that note, Ouisa gets a sense of recognition into the corruption of modern society in which human relations are spoilt and deteriorated. Kandinsky’s double-sided painting which contains opposing features is important to reflect Ouisa’s paradoxical situation. Ouisa is experiencing a dilemma for she is oscillating between what she feels internally and the conventions that society imposes upon her. Her chaotic situation is made more explicit through the double-sided painting. One side of the painting is settled, ordered, and even and the other side of the painting is chaotic, uneven, and turbulent. As the painting shows, life itself is a struggle between order and chaos (Urban, 2014: 70).

While John Guare’s play divulges the disconnection in society, it presents a more interesting case, that is, a satire on liberal guilt, which reinforces the duality of exclusion and inclusion and connection and disconnection. Reflecting on the issues of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*¹, the play shows how a homosexual black boy cannot take his place in the world of affluent white people (Stockton, 2009: 192). Paul, an outsider, who strives to assert his identity and his place in the world of white people, de-

¹ It is a comedy-drama film directed and produced by Stanley Kramer and written by William Rose. It stars Spenser Tracey, Katherine Hepburn, and Sidney Poitier. Kramer’s dedication, to-get-her with the talent and reputations of Tracey, Hepburn, and Poitier, became “one of the box-office successes of 1967” (Vera & Gordon, 2003: 88). It was nominated for ten Academy Awards and won two awards in the categories of Best Actress and Best Original Screen Play. The film draws on the love between a black man and a white woman and interracial marriage which was not legal in the USA until 1967. The film suggests that “there is no racial divide that cannot be bridged in the course of a day by a meeting of open-minded whites and blacks of good will” (2003: 89).

velops a self-identity that is not stable but continually fluctuates. By creating a new identity as the son of Sidney Poitier, Paul attains acceptance into the world of Ouisa and her family, denied to him since it is constructed and limited by the perpetual maintenance and practice of the conservative rules of the dominant high-class culture. When Ouisa enters Paul's room to check if he is fine after being stabbed, she realizes that he had sexual intercourse with a street hustler, and they banish Paul. By claiming a false identity as a friend of Dr. Fine's son from the boarding school, Paul enters the house of Dr. Fine, and when Dr. Fine realizes that Paul is lying to him, he reports to the police for Paul's arrest. Later, Paul dupes Elizabeth and Rick into thinking that he is the son of Flan, who rejected him, and that he needs some money in order to meet his father. Rick takes all the money out of the account and spends a great night with Paul, which culminates in their sexual union. Elizabeth goes to the police for Paul's arrest because of his theft and Rick's suicide. All these events show that it is not possible for Paul to stick to his true self in a materialistically and sexually constructed society, and accordingly, he is ostracized from it. When looking at the power dynamics between the rich and the poor and the homosexual and the heterosexual, Paul's banishment strengthens and solidifies the place and position of the rich and heterosexual individuals in society, which yields to the exclusion and marginalization of the nonconformists. The cultural paradigms that operate to exclude Paul take on a racial dimension. Paul intrudes into Kittredge's house under a false name. His attempt to move beyond the borders restricted to him signifies the transgression of the culturally constructed notions defining normativity in terms of race. Being searched by the police because of the accusations, Paul tells Ouisa on the phone that he cannot resign himself to the police because they will kill him since he is black. This situation gives audiences and readers a sense that Paul's life worsens since he is doubly oppressed just because of his skin colour. In this respect, it is important to state that Paul's insistence on creating impossible identities for himself is related to the fact that he internalizes a distorted perception of sense because of his class, race, and sexual orientation. His claim to be the son of Sidney Poitier signifies his effort to render his worthless existence meaningful and valuable. Paul's predicament of restoring his identity reveals both the fluidity of racial and sexual self-identification. Thus, Guare presents a critique of the racially biased attitude and conservatism of white people as well. In this way, the play presents binary oppositions such as

homosexuality versus heterosexuality, white versus black, rich versus poor, and real versus fictitious.

Guare offers a way out for modern men to escape from the bog of materialism, that is, “the spiritual commitment to find the “six degrees of communication” that unite humanity” (Plunka, 2002: 199). In the play, Paul in his own way starts a rebellion against the lack of passion and communication in society and he emphasizes that in order to connect with humanity, people should use their imagination and give value to experience rather than replace them with anecdotes. Paul underlines that people have the potential to use their imagination to avoid the negative effects of the modern American world, the modern man’s nightmare:

It’s there to sort out your nightmare, to show you the exit from the maze of your nightmare, to transform the nightmare into dreams that become your bedrock. If we don’t listen to that voice, it dies. It shrivels. It vanishes. The imagination is not our escape. On the contrary, the imagination is the place we are all trying to get to (1992: 37).

Within the limitless boundaries of his imagination, Paul creates for himself different identities to continue his struggle to gain acceptance in a society in which individuals ignore and are isolated from each other. In other words, Guare “poses the existentialist dilemma of how individuals in contemporary society can maintain a sense of dignity and humanism despite a ubiquitous fraudulence that characterizes American culture” (Plunka, 2005: 352). Then, it can be alleged that Paul’s effort to attain dignity and humanism in society fails in avoiding fraudulence because he cannot keep his integrity as his identity is built upon deceptions and lies. Paul’s final words “The Kandinsky. It’s painted on two sides” are very significant to explore the real meaning of his experience (1992: 63). Like Kandinsky’s painting, which revolves slowly at the end of the play, Paul’s attempt, as Turina elaborates, “is both “wild and vivid” in its display of imagination, yet it is dark and “somber” in its lack of honesty” (2011: 71). Despite Paul’s failure because of his dishonesty, his imaginative power does not prove to be futile in that it causes a drastic change in Ouisa’s perception of the world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, John Guare’s play *Six Degrees of Separation* problematizes many issues ranging from materialism, the American Dream, isolation, dysfunctional families, imagination, homosexuality, and the clash between

reality and illusion to white liberalism and racism. Looking at the multiplicity of the topics, it is important to state that Guare aims to reveal the realities of the modern world in all its aspects. Guare's using Kandinsky's ideas of art and the inclusion of the painting in the play leave room for strident criticism of touchy subjects that are of particular interest to society. In this way, Guare also offers moral messages to readers or audiences and touches on the human soul, that is, achieves the internal necessity that lies at the heart of Kandinsky's works. In this respect, as Unhae Langis aptly observes, art objects in the play are "emanations of the human soul", revealing the multivalent narratives of human nature rooted in situations and relationships that constitute their social lives and their sense of identity (2011: 86). What is more striking is that Guare's aesthetic combination of verbal and visual enables him to create the dichotomy of reality versus illusion, truth versus inaccuracy, and clarity versus ambiguity. In the play, the situation of being in-betweenness achieved through Kandinsky's painting is maintained after the play ends since one is left to wonder what has happened to Paul and how Ouisa continues her life. One thing that remains clear in the minds of the audience and readers is Kandinsky's painting, leading us to unveil the realities of our lives and of our society hidden under the illusions that we have created or are created for us. In this respect, Guare revitalizes and refashions the painting by narrating verbally what the painting visually signifies, and thus, elicits a strong emotional response from the readers or audience with a visual, verbal, and critical representation.

References

- Biggsby, Christopher (2004). *Contemporary American Playwrights*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Bruhn, Siglind (2001). "A Concert of Paintings: 'Musical Ekphrasis' in the Twentieth Century". *Poetics Today*, 22(3): 551-605.
- Cattaneo, Anne (1992). "John Guare: The Art of Theatre IX". *The Paris Review*, 125: 69-103.
- Eidt, Laura M. Sager (2008). "Toward a Definition of Ekphrasis in Literature and Film". *Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film*. New York: Rodopi.
- Guare, John (1992). *Six Degrees of Separation*. New York: Lincoln Center Theatre.

- Guerman, Mikhail (2015). *Vasily Kandinsky: 1866–1944*. New York: Parkstone International.
- Heuvel, Mike Vanden (2007). “From Paradise to Parasite: Information Theory, Noise, and Disequilibrium in John Guare’s *Six Degrees of Separation*”. *Interrogating America Through Theatre and Performance*. Eds. William W. Demastes & Iris Smith Fischer. New York: Palgrave, 233–242.
- Kandinsky, Wassily (2015a). *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. USA: Sheba Blake Publishing.
- Kandinsky, Wassily (2015b). *Kandinsky*. USA: Parkstone Press International.
- Langis, Unhae (2011). “The Aest/ethics of Imagination and Deceit in Guare’s *Six Degrees of Separation*: A Foucauldian–Aristotelian Reading”. *Pivot: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies and Thought*, 1(1): 84–106.
- Linne, Larry G., & Sitkins, Patrick (2013). *Brand Damage: It’s Personal!* Bloomington: Author House.
- Malle, Louis (1982). *Three Exposures: Plays by John Guare*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Plunka, Gene A. (2002). *The Black Comedy of John Guare*. Newark: Delaware UP.
- Plunka, Gene A. (2005). “John Guare and the Popular Culture Hype of Celebrity Status”. *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*. Ed. David Krasner. Malden: Blackwell, 352–369.
- Stockton, Kathryn Bond (2009). *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham and London: Duke UP.
- Turina, Ana Fernandez–Caparros (2011). “The Geography of Imagination: Urban Mapping of Social Networks in John Guare’s *Six Degrees of Separation*”. *South Atlantic Review*, 76(4): 57–74.
- Uçar, Asya Sakine (2021). “A Painting and A Slave Ship: Ruskin’s Visual Narrative On Turner”. *Söylem Filoloji Dergisi*, 6(3): 609–618.
- Urban, Ken (2014). “John Guare.” *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary American Playwrights*. Eds. Martin Middeke and others. London: Bloomsbury, 58–75.
- Vera, Herman, & Gordon, Andrew M. (2003). *Screen Saviours: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wagner, Peter (1996). *Icons–Texts–Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality*. Berlin: Gruyter.

Visual Sources

Figure 1: “Several Circles.” 1926. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. <https://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-49.php>

Figure 2: “Black Lines.” 1913. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. <https://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-34.php>

The following statements are made in the framework of “COPE-Code of Conduct and Best Practices Guidelines for Journal Editors”:

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethics committee approval is not required for this study.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The author has no potential conflict of interest regarding research, authorship or publication of this article.