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The Limits of Looking: Conceptualising the Frame in Ann Quin's *Berg* and Christine Brooke- Rose's *Out*

Hilary White

“Thinking the frame teaches us that everything is
framed, visibly or not, even thinking itself — all
the more thinking the frame.” (Jean-Claude
Lebensztejn 1994: 118)

Introduction

- 1 The experimental British writers Christine Brooke-Rose and Ann Quin developed a heightened interest in visuality from the 1960s, which, in their early works manifests as a thematization of vision, whilst in later works provoking more overt visual experiments with typography and illustration. These novelistic experiments with visual technique take place within a wider context of increasing interdisciplinarity within art forms over the course of the 1960s and 70s, which a cross-investigation of visual arts and literary experimentation helps to reveal. This article will consider the motif of the frame — conceived of as a device which isolates and presents that which falls within its bounds — in two post-war novels, Brooke-Rose's *Out* and Quin's *Berg* (both 1964), as a means of drawing parallels between experimental literature and conceptual art during the 1960s, using Phillip King's *Window Piece* (1961) as my main example from the visual arts. In the novels, the frame functions as shorthand for issues of presentation, representation, vision and the way that sight fails us — for instance, when we neglect to account for positioning, for how that alters our perspective. In fact, the detailed depiction of physical positioning is usually suggestive of the implications of social positioning, more obviously in *Out* because of the ways in which it attempts to upend the naturalisation of a class structure based on racial difference. As Donna Haraway

writes, “an optics is a politics of positioning” (1988: 586), denying any supposed ‘innocence’ or objectivity associated with the perceptual process of seeing, of the images which are seen. Both *Out* and *Berg* make some attempt to address the politics of positioning, showing awareness that vision is not neutral or innocent. Brooke-Rose does this by reversing the racial hierarchies that were prevalent in 1960s Europe in *Out*: the “colourless”, having fallen ill in the wake of a nuclear event known as the “displacement”, come to form an ineffectual servant class for the wealthy upper classes, whom Brooke-Rose has made African in the novel. Brooke-Rose’s reversal is not as attuned to social positioning as she might want, with the non-white characters still very much othered in the writing (thus betraying Brooke-Rose’s own positioning, and failure to see); however, *Out* does work to reveal and interrogate the ideological as well as visual/aesthetic consequences of ‘framing’ and ‘positioning’. Quin’s *Berg* makes clear the limitations of any individual’s perspective, utilising long-running associations with the frame and the window, sight and seeing, to create a situation in which Berg’s expectations of his own vision and his actual short-sightedness are farcically exaggerated. The language of vision, visibility and even the visual arts (with the motif of the frame) are thus used in both novels to highlight issues around perspective, subjectivity and contingency to the reader, and ultimately to undercut the very idea of seeing clearly in these narratives.

- 2 *Berg* and *Out* form a complementary pair in terms of thinking through issues of perspective. *Berg* — with its egotistical protagonist, central to the narrative world — calls up associations with single-point perspective, a system of pictorial representation highly convincing in its accuracy, devised for painters by Leon Battista Alberti in 1435. Especially pertinent is the fact that the techniques of this representational system — naturalistic, ‘truthful’, and monocular — were historically reserved for important figures like kings. *Out*’s fractured, multi-perspectival narrative figures a more impersonal, (supposedly) subject-less position. The perspectival situation in this novel can usefully be compared to that of cubist art, not unified in any idea of a coherent subject with a straightforward monocular viewpoint — and the ‘frame-breaking’ nature of this type of representation (where a frame connotes a singular perspective) — and also resonates with the clipped editing techniques and repetitious imagery of New Wave cinema. I take a recurrent image from each of the novels, both images which are, or which contain, frames: in *Berg*, conveniently that of a window frame, in Berg’s cramped temporary lodgings, his view out onto the streets of the seaside town in which the narrative takes place. In *Out*, the framing device employed is one which exemplifies the text’s interest in complexity, combination and interwoven patterns — a ‘natural’ frame formed by the overlapping branches of various trees, characteristically viewed from several angles, sometimes simultaneously. Through close attention to passages in which these images occur, I will draw out the assumptions made by — as well as those dismantled by — the novels in question about sight and seeing. Both *Berg* and *Out*, in varying ways, suggest the difficulty — even the impossibility, and certainly the undesirability — of remaining within predetermined frames.

The Frame (I)

- 3 A frame separates, isolates, sections off — or limits — some element within the visual or discursive field, at the same time *presenting* that element, focusing the viewer’s vision

on it, designating the element as in some way important. This is the frame at its most straightforward, its most 'transparent': "What's inside is art, what's outside is not", as Vona Groarke writes, questioning the simplicity of that traditional formulation (2016: 12). My investigation of the frame draws on Jacques Derrida's and Judith Butler's accounts of how the frame constructs meaning as it presents images or ideas: as Butler puts it, "[t]he frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality" (2016: xiii). To question the frame, in visual or linguistic representations, becomes a means of questioning the act of representation itself, and because of the normative character of the frame, a means of questioning convention — or, as Jean-Claude Lebensztejn puts it: "Interfering with the frame means interfering with Art" (1994: 130). Gertrude Stein summarises artistic experimentation in the early 20th century in this vein: "A picture remaining in its frame was a thing that had always existed and now pictures commenced to want to leave their frames and this also created the necessity for cubism" (2012: n.p.). The use of the word "want" gives the pictures desire, possibly agency, makes them (like) subjects, and thus suggests a bridge between aesthetic and social frameworks: the pictures desired the freedom of being unframed, recognised the restrictions placed on them by the rigidity of frames (and categorisations of all kinds). This brings us to the revolutionary potential of "breaking the frame", of interrogating the conventional structures and frameworks of presentation, in the post-war period. As Lucy Lippard writes, "it was usually the form rather than the content of Conceptual art that carried a political message. The frame was there to be broken out of" (1997: xiv). Formal experiment meant direct questioning of conventional structures — aesthetic, social and political — for many of these artists, in the typically optimistic tenor of 1960s utopianism.

- 4 The 1960s is rife with examples of visual artists who were rethinking the entire concept of the frame, what constitutes art and reality (and what — if anything — separates them), from painters to sculptors to land artists making site-specific artworks. David Mellor writes that:

The period was already framed by the TV screen and, to a lesser extent, the cinema screen. Whether it was possible to gain access to an actual world beyond this media 'spectacle', an access to the life-world and the ground of existence, concerned several artists. At times the metaphoric media frame became a literal one. (Mellor 1993: 61-4)

- 5 The continuity implied by the frame here, between Classical Art and Television, is especially pertinent. In a media-saturated age, frames are particularly ubiquitous, invisible through their omnipresence, and consumers continually in danger of becoming oblivious to frames, of taking the view through their TV screen for something natural. Written in 1967, Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* claims: "when the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings" (2014: ch. 1). In Debord's view then, beyond perhaps the artists Mellor writes about, there is no real "life-world" to access, for the images are themselves "the real".
- 6 From the work of 1960s artists including Sol LeWitt (see *Wall Structure*, 1963), Pauline Boty (see *It's a Man's World I & II*, 1963-5), Jo Baer (see *Brilliant Yellow #9*, 1964-5), Eva Hesse (see *Hang-Up*, 1966), Gerhard Richter (see *Window*, 1968), and Jan Dibbets (see *Perspective Correction* series, 1967-9), we can see how the frame becomes a focal point in this period.¹ For now, I'll focus on just one exemplary piece, Phillip King's *Window Piece* of 1961 (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Phillip King, *Window Piece*, 1961

Credits : WikiArt, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/phillip-king/window-piece-1961>

- 7 King's minimalist sculpture thematises looking, seeing and framing, emptying the frame of content; alternatively, it makes the content random, arbitrary, or replaceable — and necessarily so, as the piece moves between galleries. Thus, the frame itself becomes the focus. King opts to include the frame within the artwork — and since arguably the artwork contains nothing but the frame, the viewer has to consider the act of framing, containing, isolating the contents, of *choosing* what is to be contained within the frame. The content of the frame alters depending on the position of the artwork and the position of the viewer, the closeness and the angle from which it is viewed, playing with the idea that what falls inside the frame is important, has been selected; it also grants the power of selection (within limits) to the viewer, rather than the artist. What remains unchanged here in terms of more traditional pictorial art is the presence of the frame itself: the convention of framing, the normative function of the framework, the way in which the content of the frame is isolated from the rest of the view, designated as somehow different from what lies outside. However, the sculpture is free-standing, a trait which would seem to relate it more to the frame of a television set than the traditional frame around a painting. Furthermore, the bevelled edges slope inwards towards an interior rectangle which is both part of and separate from the hole through which the framed contents can be seen, reinforcing the visual relation to a television set, although never separating it completely from the appearance as a window, thus conflating visual cues signalling the 'artistic' and the 'natural', similarly to how Debord's statement above conflates images and the real. The piece is intensely self-reflexive — interested in the convention of framing, the function and purpose of the frame, and less so in 'what is framed' — a quality typical of

conceptual artwork and experimental writing, which routinely question the nature and conventions of their own construction.

The Frame as Limit: Single-point Perspective and *Berg*

- 8 Quin's first published novel, *Berg*, also subtly synthesises the lineage and associations of the traditional frame in order to provide a commentary on the processes of artistic representation in a contemporary context. The novel details a son's (Berg's) return to his Brighton home, in disguise, with a plan to murder his father; the ensuing narrative is a simultaneously theatrical and mundane version of the Oedipus story, which turns on the paranoiac, obsessive and comically inept attempts of Berg to gain control of his situation. The narrative proper of *Berg* opens with a frame, that of the "[w]indow blurred by out of season spray" (Quin 2013: 1). A fitting introduction to the narrative style of *Berg*, itself a mix of first-, second- and third-person narration, a muddle of tenses and agency (sometimes people act on inanimate objects, sometimes vice versa), the opening framing device is "blurred". This first sentence thus indicates two things, at least: the narrative which follows, like any artwork, is selective — and self-consciously so. Furthermore, the conventionally transparent framing device, the window, is compromised in its functionality, the images visible through its façade somewhat obscured. The epistemological consequences of this impaired act of visual perception are indicative of what is to follow, and not particular to the sense of sight: the acquisition of knowledge is limited aurally as it is visually in *Berg*.
- 9 Berg's capacity for knowing is inevitably restricted, relying as he does on glimpses and overheard conversations for much of his information, as well as occupying a theatrical world in which disguises are fairly common (and windows, or scenes, are framed by curtains). The first sentence — itself a (narrative) frame of sorts, placed in the position of an epigraph — reveals the linguistic nature of Berg's disguise: "A man called Berg, who changed his name to Greb, came to a seaside town intending to kill his father. . . ." (Quin 2013: n.p.). Disguised as an anagram, a simple reversal of his own name, Berg's fictional status (as a linguistic construction) is advertised from the outset; the disguise is lent narrative credibility, however, in that enough time has passed that Berg's father will not recognise his adult son — another indication of how visual perception can be limiting, if one's knowledge of what one sees is also limited. Fundamentally, the linguistic disguise entails a visual disguise (playing on the fact that all visual elements of a novel are, for the most part, necessarily filtered through language, existent only in language) — already in *Berg*, the two modes of representation are completely intertwined.
- 10 The window is one detail — along with the partition — that is recurrently referred to in the narrative of *Berg*, hence seeming to focalise the narrative at the points it appears.² It does this most obviously because the amount that can be seen through it is limited, unlike the boundless arena in which Berg's thoughts play out. Thus it both anchors the narrative to a (relatively) fixed point and focuses on a manageable segment of the scene outside. Notably it also extends Berg's vision beyond the walls of his room, to the dancehall and the streets below — thus extending but simultaneously limiting his scope, an arbitrary selection of what the full street scene has to offer. In Leon Battista Alberti's 15th-century system of single-point perspective, the window is symbolic of the transparency with which painting (specifically history painting) accurately represents

the visual elements of a scene. Single-point is a form of perspective in which a view recedes to a single vanishing point, designedly, to please the viewer, who resultantly is placed at the centre of an imaginary panorama. As Nicholas Mirzoeff outlines, “Alberti’s famous image of a history painting being the view seen through a window at once suggests a transparency but also a fixed boundary to the image” (2009: 28). The window frame or the picture frame decisively closes and contains the image. Berg is not the artist here, but the viewer, which has important ramifications when considering who would traditionally view paintings employing single-point perspective. As Mirzoeff describes, single-point perspective was historically “avoided for figures except where it was clearly the King that was to be the viewer” (2009: 38), because of the (self-) importance this singular, monocular vision imposed on the perceiver. In Quin’s novel, Berg’s pseudo-omniscience, entirely by his own imagination, grants him a similar singularity of vision — singularity which is always associated with authority, power and mobility (or lack thereof).

- 11 The text consistently undermines Berg’s authority, however, by showing Berg’s reading of events to be false. He certainly imagines himself in a position of centrality, of significance, most obviously of importance — a sort of central figure in a panopticon arrangement, a figure of whom Foucault writes: “He is the individual who looms over everything with a single gaze which no detail, however minute, can escape” (1991: 217). Berg assigns himself this central position, notably also the position of the important viewer in the system of single-point perspective; the long-running associations between centrality, individuality, vision and power are clear. Ultimately Quin shows this positioning up to be a false presumption on Berg’s part: the superior power he derives from his supposed position of importance is totally imagined. And, characteristically of Quin’s humour, it does change depending on his mood:

He yawned, stretched; the music distracted, he went to the window. A microscopic eye upon a never-changing scene, except perhaps the weather. Youths nonchalantly leaned from the windows, behind them twisting shapes of couples could be seen, and as from a [sic] umbilical cord Berg strung himself through their weaving arms and legs. An eye, then two, stared across. He pulled the curtains, and leaned against the wall, choking over a cigarette. Gradually he calmed down, and pushed his face against the window. Another eye gazed as through a telescope, held his own, then fell. He faced the room. Why get into such a state, just because someone had seen him, surely there was nothing to fear, nothing to be ashamed of? (Quin 2013: 5-6)

- 12 The “never-changing scene” goes some way towards explaining why the appearance of the window tends to focalise and order Berg’s thoughts, while the “microscopic eye” suggests that Berg assigns himself the larger macroscopic scale, carrying associations of a superior importance and power. While from Berg’s perspective he is of course the larger figure, the very reference to the microscope actualises (in language only, admittedly) the scale discrepancy that in reality is only perspectival or positional. Later in the passage, “[a]nother eye gazed as through a telescope”, maintaining the scale discrepancy assigned by Berg’s earlier analogy, even though imagining the other eye’s point of view, Berg assumes the planetary position, is still the larger body. The scale discrepancy is naturalised for Berg here, as he comfortably assumes the position of the larger, more significant or important, body. Berg’s concern about being seen is explicable within the narrative — he has arrived undercover, intending to kill his father. This response of Berg’s suddenly switches the power relations: even though it is unclear who exactly is looking at Berg, and irrespective of what they might intend by

that looking, the situation of being looked at is enough to place Berg in a position of weakness.³

- 13 The final chapter of *Berg* consists solely of the following paragraph:

A window just cleaned. Above the sea, overlooking a town, a man motionless, bound by a velvet-covered couch, and a woman, whose hands flutter round a butterfly brooch. They stare at a piece of wood, five foot by seven, that shakes now and then — an animal thumping its tail. . . . (Quin 2013: 168)

- 14 Now “cleaned”, the window is finally transparent. But the direction of viewing has been reversed: we are now looking inwards, at Berg and Judith, as they stare at the partition between the rooms. The reader/viewer has assumed the position of power — and note the filmic manner in which the reader assumes the position of viewer focused on a visual image framed by the window. There is a voyeuristic element to the looking here, as there often is in *Berg*, and by drawing attention to the reader’s position of voyeur at the end, Quin provokes a retrospective questioning of the reader’s position — as possible voyeur — throughout. Notably, the power derived from looking in a voyeuristic sense is devoid of interaction, of direct contact with the situation being observed, but revolves around the direction of the gaze: of looking without being seen.⁴ The text of *Berg* has been preparing the reader for this kind of crossing from the outset — hence the seeming ease of shifting the narrative perspective, from inside to outside, Berg to reader, and so on — by its lack of fixity of speaking/thinking subject, the divide between speaking and thinking itself, shifting pronoun usage — a further indication that what is seen and how it is interpreted is so much a matter of positioning, of placement within the framework or environment. The clarity of the newly cleaned window does little to clear up the ambiguities of the narrative; ending with an ellipsis, projecting into an unknown but presumably circular series of future events (Berg’s father has seemingly returned to the hotel, in disguise). *Berg* synthesises various types of narrative and imagistic frames, creating a structure of frames within frames, demonstrating a continual concern for heightened forms of artifice and theatricality within literature, as well as containment, a certain kind of closure: how the frame of the novel seems to contain a finite amount of elements which can be reversed or reshuffled — a technique taken to its extreme in Brooke-Rose’s *Out*, which obsessively repeats statements and descriptions, reordering them to form new syntheses.

- 15 *Berg* introduces us to the limitations of individual perspective and the construction of reality through the motif of the window frame, which, since Alberti’s systematisation in the 15th century, has been culturally embedded as representative of ‘truth’ and transparency. The significance of the frame here being fixed should not be overlooked: like the cinema screen, elements move within the stationary parameter of the window, in keeping with the plentiful allusions to conventions of film noir in the text (aesthetic and thematic emphases on shadow and light, secretive characters, limited viewpoint for the reader provided by a first-person narrative). In *Berg*, there is little veracity to be had by the characters in the narrative, which is a maze of misdirection and misread signals. Berg himself appears ridiculous: figured like a king surveying his lands from his tiny room through his dirty window, he is a parody of the observer-god figure he aspires — and seemingly at times believes himself — to be. Berg’s egotism is a significant feature of his characterisation, demonstrated again and again throughout the narrative:

Shadow that over-ruled cracks in the pavements, a distorted double face in the windows. [...] I take, I see, I subject my own mediocre self into something big. Berg

walked away from the reflection that threw a superficial slant on the growth that had formed inside. (Quin 2013: 25)

- 16 The order of “I take, I see” suggests Berg’s self-centredness, such mastery that allows him full access to and understanding of the world, and also suggests that he takes first, processes later. Subsequently, the use of “subject” as a verb is telling; Berg’s subject-formation seems to be built upon this process of projection, of making himself larger, more omnipotent. Grammatically strange, the phrase indicates that Berg deems himself to be in control of his identity. The distortion seems to misrepresent his internal self, the use of “growth” naturalising it somewhat, although growth has positive and negative, tumorous, associations; his distaste at what he deems to be inside evident through the terms “mediocre”, “growth”, and his turning away from the vision — skewed, but only superficially, by the distorted, duplicitous reflection. Berg is wracked by self-doubt throughout the narrative, represented frequently in terms of looking, through his near-constant anxiety about being watched, and judged. Quin plays with all the associations with vision and power, using them constantly to undermine Berg, to show how little vision and power Berg actually has. In doing so she undermines the connection between power and vision itself, highlighting the unreliability and short-sightedness of the perspective of any one person, underscoring the discrepancy between what an individual actually sees and what they think they see: how vision is always an act of interpretation, and frames are never exactly arbitrary.

Framing Complexity: Multiple Perspectives in *Out*

- 17 Whereas Quin’s window-frame carries connotations of transparency and therefore veracity (and its opposite), as well as a monocular and highly selective viewpoint, Brooke-Rose’s ‘natural’ frame seems more informed by 20th-century scientific developments. Brooke-Rose makes recourse to a different systematics of reality and its truthful representation, via science, but with similar purpose to Quin’s: to explore the subjectivity of seeing, the exploitation of systems of representation by those in positions of power, and to upend the natural-artificial dichotomy. As well as considerations of optics and the biology of seeing, Brooke-Rose touches implicitly or explicitly upon the theory of relativity, quantum physics, and the sciences of chaos and complexity. Additionally, the frames formed by the trees (which will be the focus of this section) in *Out* are multiple, ‘arbitrary’ — although selected by the viewer, and fixed in language — and, unlike Berg’s window, are part of the image they frame. In *Out*, Brooke-Rose indicates quite literally the impossibility of keeping the observer out of the frame (and the human scientist out of the interpretation of phenomena), as her perspectival shifts — the point of seeing is often repositioned within the same description — literalise the relativity of observation: how the experience of phenomena can differ vastly based on the position of the observer. Brooke-Rose applies this relativity of observation and power to the social field by reversing European racial hierarchies within the narrative (with problematic ease), which is set in an indeterminate location in “Afro-Eurasia”. The naming of the event which causes the “colourless” to become an underclass — “the displacement” — itself suggests the cruciality of position to interpretation. The narrative of *Out* centres on a sick male (‘colourless’) protagonist, reliant on state-supplied “dole-pills” and subsequently work from his wife’s rich employer, Mrs. Mgulu. This protagonist’s perceptive faculties are so obscured as a method of relaying what Adam Guy describes as “a narrative so

preoccupied with seeing — and its failure to do so — that it constantly strains, failingly, to see itself seeing” (2016: 942), that they call into question the very possibility of accurate sight and objective vision.

- 18 The trees are introduced early, at the beginning of the second ‘chapter’ (as with *Berg*, unnumbered) of *Out*:

Here however the fig-tree’s thick grey twigs poke upwards into the sky. The branches bearing them are contorted, like the convolutions of the brain. The darker grey trunk leans along the edge of the bank at an angle of forty degrees, inside which, from a standing position, the road may be seen. One of the branches sweeps downwards out of the trunk, away from the road, forming with the trunk an arch that frames the piece of road within it. The thick and long grey twigs on this down sweeping branch grow first downward also, then curve up like large U-letters. (Brooke-Rose 2006: 22)

- 19 The focus on visibility and sight means the description is full of intricate visual detail, regardless of any narrative importance that might be attributed to the objects described, as one might expect from a more conventional, realistic narrative. Incidentally, the detail expended on this description (this being just the second paragraph of seven, which in total extend over three pages) highlights the inadequacy — or certainly inefficiency — of the linguistic medium for the purpose of describing visual perceptions. Details might be noticed in sequence, but each visual detail noticed would register itself instantaneously if seen instead of described linguistically. The use of “contorted” and “convolutions” signals complexity, calling up the complicated natural forms of fractal geometry (forms like fractal branching), a field of mathematics yet to emerge in 1964. The attention to multiple perspectives within the same view complicates the idea that vision necessitates a consciousness, that a description of seeing means that *someone* sees. In representing the branches from the street, but also revealing that the street can be seen from within the “angle of forty degrees” the trunk forms with the bank, Brooke-Rose decentres the description: rather than focalise the language through a specific character, she represents various impressions simultaneously, some of which might be seen and some merely ‘known’ to be true, and not necessarily by the same person, thus lending a sort of impersonality to the narrative which suggests an attempt at objectivity, but results mainly in indeterminacy.
- 20 The influence of the *nouveau roman* — via techniques like the narratorless present-tense, obsessive description, attempts at objectivity, and so on — has been picked up on by most of Brooke-Rose’s critics, though, after *Out*, Brooke-Rose was careful to distance herself from the movement in her personal and critical writing. In an article entitled “The Vanishing Author”, Brooke-Rose claims that “Robbe-Grillet has reduced the author to a mere ‘camera-I,’ a mere register” (1961: 26), as if the narrator is a focal point only, emptied of personality and subjectivity — or, maybe more aptly, subjecthood. *Out*’s focalizer seems a much less efficient recording device than this description of a Robbe-Grillet narrator suggests, considering the reams of text it takes to render a visual impression. Natalie Ferris relates this nervy accumulation of detail to the act of framing itself, and to Brooke-Rose’s own emphasis on the selective qualities of framing, writing that, “Brooke-Rose introduces, to an obsessive degree, the potential for greater insight, making anxious moves between what could be near or far” (2018: 237). No matter how wide the frame is cast, it never *completes* the image, or frames a ‘whole’: there is always more to be seen, perhaps in the detail, perhaps beneath the

surface. As Brooke-Rose herself writes: "Doubt in the validity of appearance has of course become endemic, indeed, epidemic, in our time" (1965: 407). In its exhaustive description of visual detail, Brooke-Rose emphasises in *Out* the impossibility of objective representation — as well as the impossibility of accurately representing visible reality in language.

- 21 In her reading of *Out*, Deborah Malina presents the narrator as a "focalizer-framer" ("for to focalize is to frame", she writes), seeing systems as "frameworks of understanding" and systematisation as frame-construction (or sense-making). For this reason, in Malina's view, it is "painful" for the narrator to be rendered frameless, to lose the ways to make sense of his environment: she claims that "*Out* stresses the psychic violence inflicted by both the construction and deconstruction of hierarchies" (2002: 69-70). Malina's analysis hinges on positioning the narrator of *Out* as framer, making sense (or rather failing to make sense) of his surroundings. Because of this positioning, the frame comes to symbolise stabilisation above all else — a seeming containment of supposed chaos — though Malina is in general attendant to the dual function of framing, "the manner in which the frame constructs the framed" (2002: 70). On my reading, however, *Out* demonstrates the ways in which material — visual or otherwise — refuses to be framed, with the repeated description of the trees continually undercutting itself, setting up an iterative cycle of revisioning which can be compared to *Berg*'s circular depiction of unknowability. Visual information rendered earlier is retroactively shown to have been provisional, an interpretation or hypothesis:

It is not true that the mimosas cannot blossom while the fig-tree looks blasted. The small nodules just visible on the straight long twigs of the fig-tree may already represent the first, January round of buds, the edible ones which do not produce leaves and fruit. Therefore the mimosas could just be in bloom. Unless of course the fig-tree does not look as blasted as all that. The nodules could already be the buds that produce leaves and fruit, in which case the problem does not arise. (Brooke-Rose 2006: 23)

- 22 Beginning with a negation — "[i]t is not true" — and containing multiple qualifiers — "may already", "could just", "[u]nless of course", "could already", *etc.* — this passage makes a mockery of truthful and masterful expression. Nothing can be said with any certainty because there are so many contingencies affecting the outcome; the result is this anxious accumulation of potentialities. Seeing, then, is certainly not something to be relied upon in *Out*.
- 23 These texts defamiliarise the most mundane images, calling attention to how they are formed, and indeed how they are interpreted. As such, in *Out*, a description of the minor character Mrs. Ned is really a description of *how* she is seen. I intend both meanings, the physical act of looking at her, and the conclusions arrived at by the unknown observer:

The rectangular frame of the verandah is itself still held in the rounded frame formed by the line of the eyebrow and the line of the nose, to the left of the nose with the right eye closed, to the right of the nose with the left eye closed; below, there is the invisible but assumed line of the cheek, which becomes visible only with a downward look that blurs the picture. The frame of the verandah expands beyond the rounded field of vision as Mrs. Ned grows unmistakably into Mrs [sic] Ned, who is ironing in the small front room. [...] She is cut across the chest by an oblong bar of light refracted in the glass. The frame of the verandah engulfs as Mrs. Ned looks up and smiles, with eyebrows raised perhaps more than is necessary for the occasion. (Brooke-Rose 2006: 29-30)

- 24 This description takes its time, careful to detail the ways in which Mrs. Ned is being represented so as to highlight the perceptual and interpretative processes in place, the fact that this is neither a static nor an innocent image. At every stage of the process, interpretations are being made — by the unknown observer, and in turn by the reader — resulting in a great accumulation of assumptions and conclusions surrounding the figure being represented. The mechanics of seeing are quite self-evident in this paragraph, clearly signposted at every point. More insidious are the power relations encoded in this act of visual perception, the kinds of violence implicit in this anonymous observer's representation of Mrs. Ned. The verandah forms a frame through which the image is viewed, in turn framed by the facial features of the observer — making clear that the representation is in this case the result of a human processing the visual imagery, and also making clear the impossibility of keeping the observer out of the frame, in the most literal of fashions (and, by extension, how every image is in effect 'framed' — selected and interpreted by the observer). *Out* demonstrates that all acts of looking are embodied and subjective — and thus presumptuous, prejudiced. This passage also indicates in the most literal sense how easily perspective is altered on a purely physiological level: the image shifts depending on which eye is closed and which left open. The resultant monocular vision does not alter discernibly in content, although simple, 'factual' information about the image (where the verandah is located) is altered by the basic movement of closing one eye, demonstrating the contingency on which all acts of visual perception rest. If the observer makes their cheek visible, the picture is blurred: a literalised demonstration of the notion that one cannot see everything clearly at once (or keep the observer out of the frame). Focusing on one element in a situation obscures the others.
- 25 There is a measure of violence implied in the act of looking, the way the body of Mrs. Ned is split, then framed, while the observer is at a complete remove, coolly detached from the object of observation. Mrs. Ned is not after all being "cut through the chest", but the violence of the language, and the casualness with which it is delivered, suggest something of the power relations in play here: Mrs. Ned is a woman, and here part of the racialised underclass which Brooke-Rose has made white. The use of violent language to describe a 'harmless' situation suggests the situation is not in fact harmless, that there is a power dynamic in play in this act of looking (which is one-way), that the observer wields a certain power over the observed, and perceives without participation, from a distance, themselves unobserved. Even as the image returns to normality — with Mrs. Ned no longer cut in half — the impact of the violent terminology lingers, demonstrating that even when a situation is reframed, it carries traces of its original framing. In reversing the typical European racial hierarchy, Brooke-Rose is ostensibly trying to point out the arbitrariness of hierarchical structures and the play of power within them, and the inseparability of position and power; however, the ease with which she depicts the reversal suggests a social relativity that elides the historical circumstances which caused the imbalance in the first place. Brooke-Rose is in general attentive to the ways in which position affects perspective — except in certain cases where it is her own position, and the whiteness of her own gaze, to be considered.
- 26 *Out* plays with the social implications of visual terms, as well as their most literal interpretations as spatial coordinates. In the tree-frame passage analysed previously, the image exceeds its frame (comparable to the conditions rendering Stein's "necessity

for Cubism”), an effect both of the complexity of the image, and of the focalizer’s inability to fix it — or frame it — in language. *Out* depicts various forms of looking technology alluded to or explicitly present in the novel: from still cameras to movie — and roving — cameras suggested by the narrative techniques, to the assorted ‘scopes’ which reveal detail at unprecedented levels of scale or depth. The novel interrogates the limits of looking with the aid of these technologies: how the limits shift as new technologies become available, how the limitations of human capacities nonetheless impact upon the interpretation of data. The act of looking in *Out* is inevitably a matter of interpretation on the part of the viewer: “A microscope might perhaps reveal animal ecstasy among the innumerable white globules in the circle of gruel, but only to the human mind behind the microscope” (Brooke-Rose 2006: 15). Seeing further or more deeply does not necessarily bring clarity, or anything approaching ‘truth’, and *Out* is continually attuned to the ways in which positioning — both spatial and social — affects what one can see.

The Frame (II)

- 27 Looking forward to 1978, when Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* appeared in French, Derrida writes *around* (not 'on') the subject of Art, framing the subject in four points — with 'around' harbouring its own suggestions of framing, and enclosure. His frame is riddled with holes, composed of "unframed fragments", and literally framed gaps in the text (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Detail from Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* [1978], 1987, p. 22

Sections of the text include framed gaps.

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- 28 This perforated frame, with permeable borders, signals a rethinking of the conception of disciplinary and intellectual mastery and the ability to contain, an undercutting of old faith in the frame, in the capacity to frame. And thus it seems — in its peculiar awareness of its limitations — a framing structure akin to those represented in *Berg* and *Out*. Derrida introduces the frame through the concept of the *parergon*, broadly meaning supplementary structure (the frame is one of several possible parergonal structures; the colonnade surrounding a building would be another):

[...] the insistent atopics of the *parergon*: neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work [*hors d'oeuvre*], neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work. It is no longer merely around the work. (1987: 9)

- 29 Derrida thus describes how the frame becomes part of the artwork — “no longer merely around” it — and how it both separates the artwork from what is ‘outside’ (although spatial terms like these lose their meaning and their use when boundaries are accepted as ambiguous, imagined or at the very least permeable), and makes the artwork ‘happen’, or ‘function’. Within Derrida’s account, frameworks let things appear, but at the same time they shape what they are letting appear — which is a similar bind to the way *Berg* and *Out* present processes of vision within their narratives. Attentive to the ways in which external frameworks might shape the images being produced by the consciousnesses within these narratives, Quin and Brooke-Rose depict the perceptual processes of looking and seeing as overtly influenced by both interior and exterior factors, knowledge from multiple sources — thus anticipating the intellectual and theoretical interrogation of the frame in the decades to come, the early strain of which is epitomised by Derrida’s 1978 work on the visual arts. These literary texts enact the impossibility of framing, as their environments and images refuse to be framed, spill outside of frames, or prove the instability of the frame, just as Derrida’s *Truth in Painting* enacts the impossibility of writing authoritatively or thoroughly on/about the subject of Art (or anything). Likewise, King’s 1960 *Window Piece*, in its appearance as a free-standing sculpture with nothing inside, interrogates its own status as a frame (an empty and moveable structure), a work of art, a piece of visual culture referencing contemporary media and the ‘classical’ arts simultaneously, thus doing similar theoretical work within a different medial framework. Framing *Berg* and *Out* with visual art and visual theory, while limiting the focus and the fields with which these expansive novels are in contact, has hopefully provided an insight into how fundamental the experiments with visuality are to their narrative and social worlds.

Conclusion

- 30 The frame serves as a point of convergence between the visual experiments of novel writers in the 1960s (and beyond) — including B.S. Johnson’s experiments with typography, cut-outs and the book format, and engagement with cinema and painting by other contemporary authors like Anna Kavan and Eva Figs — and those of the simultaneously burgeoning field of conceptual art, functioning as it does in both the visual and discursive realms (thus signalling the intermingling of those realms). This interdisciplinary focus on the frame is a useful method of approaching works in this period because it hinges on an interrogation of how the works approach issues of representation, containment and even normativity — of conventions both artistic and

socio-political — thus carrying the potential to reframe these authors' works as theoretical interventions in their own right. I am considering the bracket of conceptual art quite loosely, so that it can encompass pieces like King's *Window Piece* which prefigures work more usually recognised as Conceptual Art (primarily from the mid-1960s onwards — and notably with groups like Art & Language, increasingly incorporating linguistic elements into the visual arts, further challenging disciplinary bounds). King's sculpture shares with Conceptual Art its broad intellectual content, its departure from the visible into the realm of ideas, and its focus on the issues and processes surrounding its own construction. This article has shown how novels by Quin and Brooke-Rose present various uncertainties around vision, visibility and (re)presentation, in working with a kind of unspoken 'language' of looking. *Berg* uses culturally embedded associations between looking and truth, transparency or visibility, as well as associations between vision and power, to signal the ways in which its protagonist isn't exactly the clearest of sight (or mind). *Out* presents the opposite extreme: anxious in its attempts to record, doubtful of its (or anyone's) capacities to frame even the simplest of subjects, the novel shows us how every act of vision is a construction: everything is framed, even the frame itself, and there is no separating vision from power. Between the solidity of Quin's window frame (a rigid structure with an inside and outside, albeit the view in or out is easily blurred, depending on the weather) and the mutability of Brooke-Rose's tree-formed frames (which change depending on the season, or the hypotheses of the unknown focalizer), lies a conception of the frame outside the traditional structure: less masterful in its containment, less determinate in its separation of what lies outside its boundaries from what is represented within.

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NOTES

1. Not for the first time, of course; Stein comments on the importance of the frame (and of breaking it) for the conditions of cubism in her writing on Picasso, quoted above. Piet Mondrian famously painted his frames to extend the surface of his canvas and eliminate any obvious perimeter around them. In the 1960s, Robyn Denny's paintings of portals, windows and doors, Jeremy Moon's grids and geometric overlays, and specific works like Anthony Caro's *The Window* (1966-7) demonstrate the broad investigation into the parameters of sight within the fields of painting and sculpture — at the same time that conceptual art was being characterised as resolutely anti-visual, frequently turning to language as its object, and what was to be framed

(see Sol LeWitt's 'Sentences on Conceptual Art' from 1969, and pieces like *Objectivity*, 1962). In both cases, visibility and visual perception are under intense interrogation, whether implicitly or explicitly.

2. In this sense, Quin's window performs similarly to Virginia Woolf's use of the window motif as emblematic of a character's 'outlook' in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), the first section of which is titled 'The Window' (and which engages explicitly with the visual arts through the character of Lily Briscoe, a painter). Woolf's principal characters, in turn, approach the window, describing what they 'see' (sometimes interspersed with thoughts and memories), with these digressive sections effectively epitomising their characters (for example, Mrs Ramsay's optimistic proposal that they might visit the lighthouse if the weather improves, an ultimately empty, but compassionate, promise) (Woolf 1998: 5).

3. This situation of being looked at also closely resembles Jean-Paul Sartre's classic philosophical account of shame in *Being and Nothingness*, in which a man peering through a keyhole at someone realises they are actually looking at him, and so he becomes the object of their gaze, as Kaye Mitchell discusses in *Writing Shame: Gender, Contemporary Literature and Negative Affect* (2020: 4). Shame is, for Sartre, "recognition of the fact that I am indeed the object which the Other is looking at and judging" (1956: 350).

4. Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* (1955) depicts a similarly distorted observational lens to Quin's *Berg*, with its protagonist frantically remembering minute details about a day on which a girl was killed, blurring the boundary between factual reality and imagination — thus assuming a voyeuristic position in relation to his own history, a situation relevant to many of Quin's narratives, particularly *Passages* (1969).

ABSTRACTS

This article will consider the motif of the frame — conceived of as a device which isolates and presents that which falls within its bounds — in two experimental British post-war novels (Christine Brooke-Rose's *Out* and Ann Quin's *Berg*, both published in 1964) as a means of drawing parallels between experimental literature and conceptual art in Britain during the 1960s. I argue that Brooke-Rose and Quin develop a heightened interest in visibility in the 60s, which, in the early works examined here manifests as a thematization of vision, and in later works provokes more overt visual experiments with typography and illustration. These novelistic experiments with visual technique take place within a wider context of increasing interdisciplinarity within art forms over the course of the 60s and 70s, which a cross-investigation of visual arts and literary experimentation helps to reveal. Quin's *Berg* and Brooke-Rose's *Out* form a complementary pair in terms of thinking through issues of presentation and representation. *Berg* — with its egocentric protagonist and the window frame through which he views the outside world — calls up associations with single-point perspective, the development of this perspectival technique in the history of painting (especially the fact that the technique was historically reserved for 'important' figures like kings). *Out*'s fractured, multi-perspectival narrative, on the other hand, resonates with cubist art and contemporary developments in cinematic editing (the techniques of the French New Wave), presenting a 'natural' frame formed by the overlapping branches of trees, underlining the text's interest in visual patterning and complexity. Using Phillip King's *Window Piece* (1961) as my main example from the visual arts, I discuss the reconceptualization of the frame by the experimental writers and artists of the period, looking

forward slightly to Jacques Derrida's conception of the frame in *The Truth in Painting* (1978), which signals a loss of faith in intellectual and disciplinary mastery. Derrida's writing 'around' Art — with connotations of both enclosure and obliqueness — and his purposefully perforated frame which does not seem designed to *contain* anything, are akin to Quin's and Brooke-Rose's novels, whose frame motifs — rather than containing the images they are presenting — serve to problematise the idea of strict boundaries, borders, and in a more abstract sense, of remaining within presupposed categories of definition in general. As such, the novels end up enacting a sort of theory of their own, a theory of limits with bearing on both aesthetic and social contexts within their narratives.

Cet article examine le motif du cadre - conçu comme un dispositif qui isole et présente ce qui se trouve à l'intérieur de ses contours - dans deux romans expérimentaux britanniques de l'après-guerre (*Out* de Christine Brooke-Rose et *Berg* d'Ann Quin, tous deux publiés en 1964) afin d'établir des parallèles entre la littérature expérimentale et l'art conceptuel en Grande-Bretagne dans les années 1960. En effet, Brooke-Rose et Quin développent un intérêt accru pour la visualité dans les années 60, ce qui, dans les premiers ouvrages examinés ici, se manifeste par une thématisation de la vision et, dans les ouvrages ultérieurs, provoque des expériences visuelles plus explicites avec la typographie et l'illustration. Ces expériences romanesques avec des techniques visuelles s'inscrivent dans un contexte plus large d'interdisciplinarité croissante au sein des arts au cours des années 60 et 70, ce que révèle une enquête croisée sur les arts visuels et l'expérimentation littéraire. *Berg* de Quin et *Out* de Brooke-Rose forment un binôme complémentaire en termes de réflexion sur les questions de présentation et de représentation. *Berg* - avec son protagoniste égocentrique et le cadre de la fenêtre à travers laquelle il regarde le monde extérieur - évoque des associations avec la perspective à point unique, le développement de cette technique de perspective dans l'histoire de la peinture (en particulier le fait que cette technique était historiquement réservée aux personnages "importants" comme les rois). Le récit fracturé et multiperspectif de *Out*, quant à lui, fait écho à l'art cubiste et aux développements contemporains du montage cinématographique (les techniques de la Nouvelle Vague française), en présentant un cadre "naturel" formé par les branches d'arbres qui se croisent, soulignant l'intérêt du texte pour les motifs et la complexité visuels. En utilisant *Window Piece* (1961) de Phillip King comme principal exemple tiré des arts visuels, je me penche sur la reconceptualisation du cadre par les écrivains et artistes expérimentaux de l'époque, en anticipant légèrement sur la conception du cadre par Jacques Derrida dans *La Vérité en peinture* (1978), qui signale une perte de foi dans la maîtrise intellectuelle et disciplinaire. L'écriture de Derrida "autour" de l'art - avec des connotations de clôture et d'obliquité - et son cadre délibérément percé qui ne semble pas conçu pour contenir quoi que ce soit, s'apparentent aux romans de Quin et Brooke-Rose, dont les motifs de cadre - plutôt que de contenir les images qu'ils présentent - servent à problématiser l'idée de limites strictes, de frontières et, dans un sens plus abstrait, le fait de rester dans des catégories presupposées de définition en général. En tant que tels, les romans finissent par énoncer une sorte de théorie qui leur est propre, une théorie des limites qui touche à la fois aux contextes esthétiques et sociaux au sein de leurs récits.

INDEX

Keywords: Brooke-Rose Christine, Quin Ann, experimental writing, vision, visuality, visual art, conceptual art, frame, framing, experimental literature, history of art

Mots-clés: Brooke-Rose Christine, Quin Ann, écriture expérimentale, vision, visuel, art visuel, art conceptuel, cadre, cadrage, littérature expérimentale, histoire de l'art

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