

# ■ Chiaroscuro Narrative in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*

Chi-min Chang  
University of Taipei

## Abstract

*An Artist of the Floating World*, written by Kazuo Ishiguro, is narrated by a Japanese artist of the floating world, Ono, who encounters the undercurrents of social judgments and critiques owing to his turning away from Japanese traditional painting, ukiyo-e, to propaganda paintings before WWII. The artist's reminiscences and struggle with the past manifest the entanglements between artistic endeavors and war-incurred socio-political oscillations. Interestingly, pivoting on the historical dissensus over artistic manifestations before and after WWII, the narrative constructs a distinct space of light and shadow that resembles the chiaroscuro technique in painting. Yet more than a mere contrast between light and shadow, Ishiguro's narrative presents a dynamic and compelling interplay between the said and the unsaid, as the invisible intriguingly looms over the visible, and silence often speaks more powerfully than words. Importantly, the chiaroscuro narrative illuminates the intricate relationships between art and politics, shaped by shifting political concerns and transitions in history. The narrative, which traces how art forms like ukiyo-e are politically intervened in and reoriented throughout Japan's history, mirrors Jacques Rancière's argument in *Mute Speech*. Rancière observes that the interplay of light and shadow in narrative bespeaks a kind of historical truth by not only lifting the barrier

---

**Chi-min Chang** is a Professor in the Department of English Instruction at University of Taipei, Taiwan. Her primary interest in research is mainly contemporary historical fiction. Her articles, published in journals such as *Concentric*, *Ex-position*, *Wenshan Review*, and *Tamkang Review*, primarily investigate how literary narratives renegotiate historical memory by reframing major events, including WWII, the JFK assassination, the 9/11 attacks, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts.

(Received 31 October 2024; Accepted 7 November 2025)

that separates facts and fiction but also unveiling a unique texture of historical narrative. And the texture, marked by the entanglements between politics and art, profoundly reflects Ishiguro's peculiar perspective of history, one that aligns with the Buddhist concept of the "floating world."

**Keywords:** Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World*, chiaroscuro narrative, art and politics, ukiyo-e

## Introduction

*An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) is the second book of Kazuo Ishiguro's trilogy along with *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989). These three novels, as Ishiguro says, show subtle and profound concern with "people who go wrong in life in some way, who take wrong turns in life" during WWII (Wong 188). *An Artist of the Floating World* explores an artist's confrontation with his past mistakes in turning away from ukiyo-e to propaganda painting that supports Japan's military expansion in Asia. Notably, underlying the artist's intriguing and ambivalent sentiments in confronting his mistake is a distinctive historical perspective that reveals a profound and ongoing reflection on the relationship between art and politics in pre- and post-war Japan. Ishiguro's language not only deciphers the complex feelings of the artist, Ono, toward his errors but also enables an in-depth exploration of the entanglements of art and politics before and after WWII.

As the novel centers on the confrontation of errors in post-war Japan, Ishiguro presents a vision of history that foregrounds the relationship between the past and the present, hinging on the reminiscences of the past in the present. Breaking down the presupposed linear temporality, the perspective of history enacts a dynamic sense of time in historical narrative. Ishiguro's historical narrative in a sense aligns with what Walter Benjamin argues in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," that "[t]o articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (255). Benjamin's moment of danger derives from his peculiar concept of time in history. In contrast to historicism that is based on Kant's concept of causal progression through a homogeneous, empty time, Benjamin argues that history is time "filled by the presence of the now" (261),<sup>1</sup> indicating an intriguing combination of the present (now) and the past (then). Notably, the now-time (Jetztzeit) forges moments of tension and danger,<sup>2</sup> which impact and even disrupt the continuum of history. Hence,

---

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin's notion of time reacts against that of Immanuel Kant, who observes that time is "the empty, homogeneous succession, which only later the subject fills in with information" (Torbidoni 161). In Kant's perspective, even though individual subjects fill time with its content, what Kant foregrounds is that there is a regular course in time. He claims that "what meets the eye in the individual subjects [an einzelnen Subjekten] as confused and irregular yet in the whole species [*an der ganzen Gattung*] can be recognized as a steadily progressing though slow development of its original predispositions" (qtd. in Torbidoni 162).

<sup>2</sup> Jetztzeit, vital to Benjamin's notion of history, refers to "a notion of time that is ripe with revolutionary possibility, time that has been detached from the continuum of history. It is time at a standstill, poised, filled with energy, and ready to take what Benjamin called the 'tiger's leap' into the future"

owing to the inherent conflicts and danger underlying the intriguing relationship between the present and the past, history, for Benjamin, involves not only the reconfiguration of the past but, more importantly, serves as “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (Benjamin 263). History, then, can be reconfigured and re-unraveled in revisiting the immanent conflicts residing in memory.

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, the tensions between the present and the past are conspicuous as the story pivots on the artist’s reminiscences and confrontation with the past error concerning his supporting Japan’s Imperial forces and military action with his painting. Yet, his error is not only a betrayal of the Japanese people<sup>3</sup> but also an artistic deviation as he breaks away from the artistic convention of ukiyo-e. The confrontation is triggered by the artist’s concern that the error may be a considerable hindrance to his daughter’s marriage. Hence, in order to minimize the possible impact of what he did on his daughter’s forthcoming marriage arrangement, the artist finds it inevitable to confront and reflect upon his past. Notably, confronting the error proves especially difficult for him. On the one hand, it involves more than personal repentance—it is a reckoning with public condemnation, whether explicit or implied. On the other hand, he remains internally conflicted: although he feels guilty over the suffering and death owing to the war, he remains convinced that his actions were driven by good intentions.

As the artist narrates the novel in the first person, his struggle is particularly evident in the inconsistencies and omissions of his recollections of the past and the way he addresses the mistakes. The unreliable narrative then becomes a central focus of critical analysis. The inquiry ranges from psychological interpretation to textual analysis, aiming to uncover the nature and effects of the

---

(“Jetztzeit”), implying great tension and potential power of change embedded in the now-time.

<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Germany’s evident and ongoing contrition, Japan holds a rather different perspective towards its responsibility and role in WWII. Thomas U. Berger argues that, unlike Germany’s focus on the crimes it had committed against others, Japan’s primary concern was with “the crimes that had been committed against the Japanese people *by their own military*” (4, emphasis original). That is, instead of denying the brutality in the war, Japan’s official historical narrative attributes the brutality of the war to Imperial forces (Berger 123-24). It is found that most of the official narratives of the Japanese state and the collective memory after 1945 see the Japanese more as victims than victimizers (Berger 123). Putting the blame on Japan’s Imperial army indicates its separation of the Imperial military operation from the general citizens in Japan. Japanese people after WWII thus revealed feelings of remorse for the depredations against the local civilian populations rather than for the millions of non-Japanese who lost their lives or suffered during the war (Berger 155-56). Berger’s argument significantly accounts for the domestic antagonism toward the Imperial forces as well as those who were involved with Japan’s military invasion. Importantly, it explains why the artist in Ishiguro’s novel is compelled to face public anger and condemnation for Japanese casualties in WWII, including those of his own wife and son.

narrative unreliability. Zuzana Fonioková observes that Ono's unreliable narration, which makes him a selective narrator, stems from his attempt to evade regrets about the past and from the fear of the past's impact on his daughter's marriage (141). Amalia Călinescu, drawing on Maurice Halbwachs's theory of memory, argues that Ono's unreliable account of the past is a manifestation of his trauma, which results in his misreading or underreading the events or things in the past (8). Extending the psychological interpretation of the unreliable narration, Laura Karttunen sees Ono's narration as part of the textual effect by means of James Phelan's arguments on the distinction between narrator function and disclosure function which respectively refers to the narrator's "reporting, interpreting, and evaluating" and "the (implied) author's need to inform the authorial audience of something" (4). She maintains that the inconsistency of Ono's narrative illustrates "how the emotional state of the present gives rise to certain kinds of versions of the past" (14). Notably, while the critiques of Fonioková, Călinescu, and Karttunen highlight the narrator's evasion or intervention in the past, what remains underexplored is the unsaid underlying the narrative unreliability.

According to Wayne Booth, a narrator is "*reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), and *unreliable* when he does not" (158-59). Rebecca Suter maintains that the unreliable narrator in *An Artist of the Floating World* reflects Ishiguro's deliberate intention to delegate to the reader "the responsibility of choosing whom to believe, and by extension of establishing what is the 'truth' behind the story" (78). Suter's argument is sensible to an extent; however, the ethical ambiguity underlying Ishiguro's narrative is not fully addressed.

Considered from a different angle, the narrative's implicit historical vision—or what remains unsaid—assumes critical importance, especially since *An Artist of the Floating World*, as a historical novel, is structured around an unreliable narrator.<sup>4</sup> This unreliability not only challenges the reader's ability to discern historical truth. Moreover, it highlights the narrative's profound investment in what is left unspoken, which is pertinent to Ishiguro's preference for

---

<sup>4</sup> Historical narrative is the reminiscences, rethinking, reflection, and even reconfiguration of the past. Hayden White contends that historical narrative, far from neutral or objective, "entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications" (ix). Since the second half of the twentieth century, historical narratives often focus on individual reminiscences, reflections, and accounts in contrast to those of the collective, exemplified by W. G. Sebald's *Vertigo* (1990), *The Emigrants* (1992), and *The Rings of Saturn* (1995). Hence, the reconstruction or deconstruction of the past in fiction becomes an act of re-imagination, reflection, or interrogation rather than an attempt to achieve a more accurate representation of it.

language that conceals more than reveals. Ishiguro states: “I quite like language that suppresses meaning rather than language that goes groping after something that’s slightly beyond the words. I’m interested in speech that kind of conceals and covers up. . . . I do like a flat, plain surface where the meaning is subtly pushed between the lines rather than overtly expressed” (qtd. in Chang). The statement implies that what he truly intends to convey emerges from the tension between what is said and what remains unsaid. Ishiguro’s fascination with such a peculiar language for writing echoes what Wolfgang Iser claims: “it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism” (284). Marked by the gap between words and meaning, between the said and the unsaid, Ishiguro’s language also arouses critics’ interest and investigation. Yet, concerning the unsaid in Ishiguro’s language, critics like Timothy Wright regard it as a restraint in expression in Japanese culture owing to its hierarchies and rituals, indirection, and silences (77). Similarly, Rebecca L. Walkowitz observes that Ishiguro’s “strategies of description and narration seem to imitate the characteristics of the place and people represented,” illustrated by “the apparent Englishness of *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and the apparent Japaneseness of *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *A Pale View of Hills* (1982)” (1049). Undeniably, there are cultural elements in his language, but Ishiguro says that it is “not just a case of stoicism, it’s a different language, a different way of conveying emotion. I enjoy creating effects, emotional intensity and tensions in my writing through what is left out.” Ishiguro calls it the “language that hides” (qtd. in Kelman 51). More significantly, his writings aim to transcend cultural or ethnic boundaries and share “some more abstract vision of life and the world” with his readers (Wong 175). Thus, the investigation of the unexpressed or hidden in Ishiguro is crucial to grasp the historical vision or perspective in Ishiguro.

Language that conceals or covers up is particularly prominent in Ishiguro’s historical narratives, especially evident in Ishiguro’s first three novels. These three novels, set around the time of WWII, do not aim to present evidence or assemble facts to support specific or official views of historical events. That, he says, is the work of historians. For him, as a novelist, writing history serves to illuminate a truth that is “an appeal for companionship in experiencing life” rather than a presentation of scientific or socio-scientific truth (qtd. in Wong 177). Hence, it is essential to explore Ishiguro’s language that unravels moments of tension and unfolds the unknown and the unsaid in history. More importantly, as the story pivots on the artist’s deviation from artistic tradition to supporting military aggression, this investigation helps disentangle the intricate relationship between art and politics, illuminating a rarely explored historical

dimension.

Concerning Ishiguro's language that hides, Peter Sloane observes that "[e]ach of Ishiguro's novels has at its centre a fact that is unuttered, and unutterable, but which gradually seeps through his narrator's tightly knit prose." (Sloane 38). The silence in Ishiguro's work shows that "[l]anguage plays only a small role in communication, much of which is tonal, gestural. . . . many of Ishiguro's characters develop 'understandings,' communicating, or at least believing they are communicating, through a series of subtle unspoken codes" (Sloane 38-39). Sloane is insightful in detecting the special language of silence conjured up in Ishiguro's writings. However, how these unspoken codes manifest and how these gestures and tones are shaped remain obscure.

To probe into Ishiguro's language that conceals, I find Jacques Rancière's argument of writing inspiring and conducive, as he highlights the paradoxical attributes of historical narrative in explicating how the silenced or the unsaid is embedded in writing. In challenging the scientific approach of French historiography after WWII, Rancière observes that it is literature that enables history to be a discourse of truth (Watts 104, 108). But what makes literary writing a discourse of historical truth and restores the voice that is silenced? According to Rancière, things possess obstinate silence to expressivity; they "exceed the power of words to name or evoke them in any absolute way." (Ross 135). Moreover, writing is simultaneously mute and talkative, as "it sets off anywhere at all, without knowing to whom it should and should not speak" (qtd. in Davis 110). It "exceed[s] the authority of those who speak the meaning of the meaningful things" (Ross 135), suggesting the latent potential for meaning to be inferred. The power of literary language thus intriguingly lies both in the muteness of things and the excess of words. Historical narrative, to Rancière, is then a forceful attempt to "restore, to account for, and to remain open to the 'excess of language' . . . that academic disciplines and forms of science have often silenced" in history (Watts 111).

Prominently, despite the muteness of things and the excess of words, it is the writer's style, which is an absolute way of seeing things or the world, that enables the re-vision of the unknown or unsaid in history. To Rancière, "[t]o write is to see, to become an eye, to put things into the pure medium of their vision, *that is*, in the pure medium of their idea" (*Mute Speech* 116). It is by means of writing style that words can be "freed from the forms of presentation of phenomena and linkage between phenomena that define the world of representation" (*Mute Speech* 117). It evokes what is unsaid or unseen, reconfiguring the distribution of what is sensible as exemplified by Jules Michelet's style in writing French history. Rancière elaborates that "when he [Michelet] related

the revolutionary festivals in the small villages, he enthusiastically referred to the testimonies written by local orators. . . . He conveyed what was speaking through their *speeches*: the voice of the soil at harvest time, or the mud and the clamor of the industrial city's street" ("The Politics of Literature" 18). Michelet's writing remolds what can be seen and said in historical narrative, enacting the new politics of literature "which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them" ("The Politics of Literature" 10).

Ishiguro's writing in *An Artist of the Floating World* features an interplay between light and shadow, resembling the chiaroscuro technique in painting. Ishiguro's seeing painting skills as a profound and potential means of writing can be traced back to his reading of Marcel Proust. In studying Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Ishiguro came to the revelation that a writer, like a painter, "might choose to place shapes and colours around a canvas" (Ishiguro, "Kazuo Ishiguro"). Yet, it is not picturesque or ekphrastic writing that makes Ishiguro's narrative distinct. Instead, paralleling the way Modernist writers employ the techniques of visual artists to give impressions rather than adhere to realistic portrayals (Sloane 32-33), Ishiguro marks the language that hides in his textual canvas and fashions an intriguing space of light and shadow, evoking what is unsaid and unseen in *An Artist of the Floating World*.

The following investigation of Ishiguro's language in *An Artist of the Floating World* mainly focuses on two aspects. One examines how Ishiguro distinguishes his writing of history through a chiaroscuro narrative, and the other explores how his chiaroscuro narrative unveils the entanglements between politics and art in pre- and post-war Japan.

## I. Chiaroscuro Narrative

The space of light and shadow that features in Ishiguro's writing in *An Artist of the Floating World* is originally an artistic skill, known as chiaroscuro, a compound of "chiaro," meaning light, and "scuro," dark, in Italian. The Baroque painter Rembrandt used the skill for "a remarkable psychological effect" in *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632) and *The Night Watch* (1642), while Romanticists like J. M. W. Turner and John Constable adopted chiaroscuro to enhance emotional intensity ("Chiaroscuro").

The literary application of chiaroscuro, especially its optical effect, is particularly evident in the art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Donald A. Ringe observes that James Fenimore Cooper uses the contrast of light and

shadow to embellish settings, develop action, and convey themes, contributing to the aesthetic dimension of his work (357). Jonathan Reeve argues that writers like Charles Dickens and George Eliot use chiaroscuro in a metaphorical or symbolic manner to foreground the gloomy or dark side of social life or reflect the duality of imagination and reality. More specifically, Tom Avitabile sees the significance of chiaroscuro in literary characterization. The ratio of light to dark is key to imbuing character portrayal with intrigue and profundity. The discussion of literary chiaroscuro continues to evolve as visual imagery is integrated into contemporary writing. Ermelinda Luzi investigates W. G. Sebald's chiaroscuro technique underlying the black-and-white photographs in *The Rings of the Saturn* (*Die Ringe des Saturn*) that act as "a way to preserve and bring back the memory of the dead" (3). Anne-Julie Debare also examines chiaroscuro in *The Rings of the Saturn* but sees the distinct technique used in the intriguing and ambivalent narrative, unveiling Sebald's idea that "nothing can eschew obscurity. . . the idea of perfectly shedding light on reality and thus both figuratively and literally attaining full understanding of the world is but an illusion, a mere effect of perspective" (128). These critics' investigations manifest that the application of chiaroscuro in literary creation, which is far from rare, designates either a kind of emotional expression or metaphorical language, referring to the persistently unknown or obscure.

In contrast, chiaroscuro in Ishiguro's narrative features a dynamic relationship between light and dark. It is Ishiguro's particular way of seeing things or the world, manifesting how the interplay between light and dark elicits the meaning or idea that remains otherwise concealed or uncharted. It intensifies the gravity of the setting, heightens the tension amongst the characters, and, most of all, unfolds the intrigue of the relationships between art and politics in history.

Ishiguro's chiaroscuro narrative creates multiple layers of resonance, unveiling a unique manner to see the contrast between light and shadow. Notably, the space of light and shadow in the setting highlights the lively and vibrant voice inherent in things themselves, as illustrated in Ono's portrayal of the corridor and the pleasure district in the wake of WWII. As described at the beginning of the novel, the corridor of Ono's house, once picturesque before the war, is now abandoned; there are "large gaps in the ceiling, shielded from the sky only by sheets of tarpaulin." Yet, Ono finds "the sunlight pouring through the tarpaulin in tinted shafts, revealing clouds of dust hanging in the air as though the ceiling had only that moment crashed down" (12). The sunlight coming through the ruined ceiling resembles a witness to war atrocities as the vibrant clouds of dust evidence the constant and vivid presence of the war in the present. Likewise, Ono's account of the post-war district around Mrs. Kawakami's

bar, Migi-Hidari, epitomizes Japan's desperate struggle against the devastating toll of the war. This area, which used to be a flourishing and boisterous heaven of pleasure for artists and businessmen, has become graveyard-like, marred with broken windows, collapsed roofs, and heaps of rubble and debris. The war carnage is vividly reincarnated in two columns of smoke rising from the rubble of the area like the "pyres at some abandoned funeral" (28). Yet, amidst the desolate and bleak scene is the bar which is "lit up by warm, low-hung lights" (26). The bar with the lights exudes a feeling of warmth and coziness, acting as persistent resistance against the haunting horror and dismay of the war. The narrative, marked by light and shadow, turns into a glimpse at the crevices, suggesting both the indescribable catastrophe of the war and the relentless struggle in the war-torn wasteland in post-war Japan. Significantly, the portrayal of the corridor and the pleasure district, more than a description of physical condition, is a lively inscription of war atrocities, illustrating Rancière's notion of the silent arising from the excess of language.

Moreover, Ishiguro's chiaroscuro narrative, building on the portrayal of the post-war scenes, corresponds to Rancière's stress on the physical elements of the narrative. The physical scenes, to Rancière, "not only portray the setting of an action but also set in place a world of visibility in harmony or in rupture with the relationships established between things and words" (*The Edges of Fiction* 15). Such a relationship is instantiated by the dungeon window in Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* (*La Chartreuse de Parme*) that makes possible the unlikely encounter between the book's two protagonists, Fabrizio and Clélia. The window contributes to "new affects, muddling the hierarchy of passions, the aetiology of their causes, the forms of their expression and their assignation to this or that social condition" (*The Edges of Fiction* 16). In the same manner, the physical settings of Ishiguro's chiaroscuro narrative illuminate the otherwise unknown or uncharted tensions underlying Ono's talks with his father and his sensei Mori-san by rendering subtle and unspeakable twists in what is said and seen.

The reception room where Ono's father talks to him is crafted as a space of light and shadow, suggesting a turbulent strain in their relationship regarding Ono's choice to be an artist. The reception room at the center of the house is a place "to be revered, a place to be kept unspoiled by everyday trivialities, reserved for the receiving of important guests, or else the paying of respects at the Buddhist altar" (41). Ono is forbidden to enter the room until he is twelve, an age at which he is expected to engage in the family business. As Ono recalls, in the center of the floor of the reception room is a single tall candle whose lights leave the rest of the room in darkness, while behind his father are a Buddhist

altar and a few hangings adorning the alcoves, subtly manifesting his father's unchallengeable power. Notably, the candle, creating a backdrop of light and shadow, intensifies the unnerving tension underlying the seemingly plain and casual dialogues. Ono remembers the first meeting with his father in the reception room, where his father takes out small, fat notebooks from his "business box" and talks with a measured and grave voice about things that are beyond the understanding of a twelve-year-old boy. Even though what Ono says is no more than "Yes, indeed," he feels much dread in every "business meeting" with his father. The dread arises not only from the laconic and strained dialogues but from the setting in which he is positioned as the one expected to inherit the responsibilities of the family.

In addition to the business meetings, the contrasting light and shadow in the reception room make vivid and acute the discrepancy between the said and the unsaid in Ono's father's talk. The disparity is evident in another talk in the reception room when his father intends to have him abandon painting. The talk is not only a detour from his father's intention but the evocation of the unsaid on the occasion. In the beginning, Ono's father asks if his mother is under the mistaken impression that he wants to pursue painting as a profession. Without offering any explanation, Ono simply replies, "Naturally," seemingly showing his agreement with his father's statement. His father then asks him to fetch his mother and bring all his paintings to him. When his mother arrives, his father asks Ono again if his mother had misunderstood that he chose painting as a career path. Ono lowers his head and remains silent while his mother replies for him, "I'm sure it's just a childish whim of his," which is a twisted confirmation of what Ono and his father just clarified. His father then argues that artists "inhabit a world which gives them every temptation to become weak-willed and deprived," with which his mother agrees. Later that night, Ono smells something burning in the dark and asks his mother if his father had burned his paintings; his mother denies it, dismissing the smell as the product of his imagination (46-47). The contrast between light and shadow in the reception room interestingly reflects the dissonance between what is revealed and what is really intended and done.

Importantly, the interplay between the said and the unsaid in the reception room displays not only the tension between father and son but also the suppression of Ono and his mother under patriarchal authority and the societal disdain for painting and art. Nevertheless, the contrast between light and shadow is dynamic, reflecting Ono's latent and persistent resistance against his father, as he tells his mother that "[t]he only thing Father's succeeded in kindling is my ambition" (47). Ono's words, on one level, allude to the candle in the recep-

tion room and the fire with which his father burned his works; on another, they suggest how his father's fire further fuels his passion for painting, implying his desire to challenge his father's authority. The interaction between light and darkness in Ishiguro displays how the invisible looms over the visible and how the unsaid overturns the said. Ishiguro's chiaroscuro narrative prominently demonstrates "the power of speech that brings it into existence, the movement of life, the gestures of an oration" (Rancière, *The Flesh of Words* 3).

Ishiguro's chiaroscuro narrative that marks the tensions between the young and the old, the authoritative and the subservient, is also obvious and distinct in Ono's talk with his sensei Mori-san when Ono decides to break with ukiyo-e and dedicates himself to creating artwork for Japan's military expansion. The talk takes place in a pavilion one evening in which Ono lights one lantern after another as the gardens around them "had become still and silent, steadily faded into darkness." With the light of the lanterns, what Ono sees is only "the silhouette of Mori-san outlined against the sky, gazing at the view" (176). Casting his eyes into the dark, Mori-san, like Ono's father, detours what he intends to say. He begins the talk by telling Ono that he has taken some of Ono's paintings because he wants to know the paintings he was doing, to which Ono expresses his gratitude. Then, "Mori-san remained silent . . . There was a strange mixture of light in the pavilion as the sky continued to set and I lit more and more lanterns. But Mori-san's figure remained in silhouette, leaning against a post, his back to me" (178). Clearly, Mori-san's constant facing of the dark insinuates his strong disapproval and even anger at Ono's abandoning the traditional painting of the floating world. But more importantly, the pavilion, where light and shadow interplay, reveals Mori-san's unyielding insistence that Ono remain faithful to artistic tradition. Even though Mori-san says that it is fine for young artists to experiment with painting skills, he asks Ono to give him the rest of his paintings, just as his father did before. But this time, Ono bravely refuses and declares:

I have learnt much in contemplating the world of pleasure, and recognizing its fragile beauty. But I now feel it is time for me to progress to other things. Sensei, it is my belief that in such troubled times as these, artists must learn to value something more fragile than those pleasurable things that disappear with the morning light. (179-80)

The contrast between light and shadow, the said and the unsaid in the talk with Mori-san, different from that with his father, marks distinct twists in the way the said and the unsaid act upon each other. For one thing, the light is lit by Ono himself, unlike the candle kindled by his father; for another, Ono's explicit statement makes even more audible Mori-san's intention despite his deliberate

reticence. In addition, the contrast is enhanced by Ono's lighting up the lanterns one after another as the darkness descends during their talk. The pavilion, as the space of light and shadow, highlights the impassable divide between the power of the authoritative and the traditional and the intention of the young and the new. Yet, when an artist like Ono believes it is important to pursue something more meaningful than ukiyo-e in pre-war Japan, it is worth investigating what compels him to make such a decision that ultimately becomes a major error he must confront after the war. This investigation of the unsaid underlying his decision essentially unveils a distinct dimension of Ishiguro's perspective of history—the intricate relationship between art and politics in history.

## II. The Relationships Between Art and Politics in the Chiaroscuro Narrative

The chiaroscuro narrative is Ishiguro's "absolute way of seeing" the intricate and profound relationship between art and politics in pre-war and post-war Japan. As Rancière argues, "[t]o write is to see, to become an eye, to put things into the pure medium of their vision, that is, in the pure medium of their idea" (*Mute Speech* 116). Notably, the absolute way of seeing things is a way in which the meanings or ideas of the things stem from how they are expressed rather than presented. And what is to be examined is how Ishiguro distinguishes his vision of history by unfolding the entangled relationship between art and politics in his chiaroscuro narrative.

The entanglement between art and politics, lying at the heart of Ono's conflict between adhering to the tradition of ukiyo-e and taking responsibility for socio-political crises, comes to the fore because of the marriage arrangement of Ono's second daughter, Noriko, in the wake of WWII. Noriko's previous marriage arrangement is brought to a halt by the sudden withdrawal of Miyake, the one who was supposed to marry Noriko. Not knowing the exact reason, Setsuko, Ono's elder daughter, surmises that Miyake's withdrawal is closely related to Ono's pre-war propaganda paintings. Those paintings after WWII are regarded as a dire betrayal of artistic tradition and, more gravely, as what contributed to the deaths of numerous Japanese, including Ono's wife and son. Setsuko thus intimates that Ono should take "precautionary steps" for Noriko's coming miai (marriage meeting). In response to his daughter, Ono at first replies, "I'm not sure I follow you. I was not aware we had anything to hide" (49). But right after that, Ono reminisces about his meeting with Miyake as well as a talk with his son-in-law, Suichi, indicating his inner conflict over his propaganda painting. He then proactively visits his friends and students who, he assumes, may be

inquired about his daughter and her family.

Ono's ambivalence and conflicts indicate Ishiguro's way of seeing the intertwined relationships between art and politics in history. But what makes Ishiguro's way of seeing "absolute" or unconventional? Without following the linear or cause-and-effect narrative of history, Ishiguro foregrounds the temporal discrepancies and social collisions in his chiaroscuro narrative, as manifested in Ono's exchange with Miyake and his son-in-law, Suichi. Mulling over the possible reasons for Miyake's sudden withdrawal, Ono supposes that their encounter at a tram stop one week prior is the very factor that "had helped bring about the withdrawal" (54). On that day, Miyake tells him that the president of his parent company, which produces household goods, had committed suicide "as an apology on behalf of us all to the families of those killed in the war." While Miyake expresses his admiration for what the president did, Ono argues that for such a great person to give up life in this way is a waste. Miyake then refutes the point, saying that they were the people who led the country in the wrong direction and that "they should acknowledge their responsibility. It's cowardice that these men refuse to admit to their mistakes. And when those mistakes were made on behalf of the whole country, why then it must be the greatest cowardice of all" (55-56). Miyake's argument strikes a nerve with Ono, as it implicitly accuses him of evading responsibility for the war. Similarly, when Ono asks Suichi about his anger at the funeral of Ono's son, who had died in the war, Suichi, who had also been on the battlefield but fortunately survived, tells Ono that his brother-in-law's death was pointless and unnecessary. He castigates those culprits who sent these young men to die but now lead good lives. At the end of the conversation, even though Suichi "turned back to the darkness outside," Ono is sure that Suichi is saying, "To my mind, that's the greatest cowardice of all" (58), implying the unsaid is heard. The unsaid heard by Ono indicates his ambivalence over what he did in the past. More clearly, the unsaid may not be what Miyake or Suichi intends to convey, but it clearly reveals Ono's inner struggle with the guilt over the past.

Ono's struggle unfolds in the dissonance between his words and his feelings. Acting as if he is irrelevant to the situation they discussed, he ascribes both Miyake's and Suichi's arguments to the disturbing character of the younger generation. However, the tension reaches its peak after his foiled endeavor to visit his former student, Kuroda. Ono and Kuroda were estranged due to their divergent political stances. Before the war, while Ono decided to engage himself in propaganda for Japan's military expansion, Kuroda remained committed to conventional painting, leading to his imprisonment and being labeled a traitor. After the war, even though Kuroda had been released and is now teach-

ing in college, the pre-war divergence distances them from each other. Even when Ono pays deliberate visits to him for Noriko's marriage arrangements, Kuroda declines to meet him.

These young men's arguments and reactions reveal Ono's twisted feelings over the past, but the final straw is Noriko's marriage meeting with Taro Saito and his family. The tension is pushed to the limit when Dr. Saito, Taro's father, mentions that he and Ono have a mutual acquaintance, Mr. Kuroda, who is now a college teacher of Mitsuo, the younger son of Dr. Saito. Ono is deeply shocked at Mitsuo's connection with his former student. Though Taro Saito tries to change the topic of the conversation at this critical moment, Ono, assuming that Mr. Kuroda must hold grudges against him, unexpectedly confesses that

There are some who would say it is people like myself who are responsible for the terrible things that happened to this nation of ours. As far as I am concerned, I freely admit I made many mistakes. I accept that much of what I did was ultimately harmful to our nation, that mine was part of an influence that resulted in untold suffering for our own people. I admit this. (123)

While Ono acknowledges his mistake, Taro again tries his best to mellow the atmosphere by claiming Ono is being unfair and too harsh on himself. Likewise, Ono's elder daughter Setsuko, after knowing what her father said in the marriage meeting, is worried that he might follow the steps of the president of Miyake's parent company or Yukio Naguchi, who committed suicide for the composition of the songs promoting aggressive military action. Setsuko thus tells Ono that "Father's work had hardly to do with these larger matters . . . Father was simply a painter. He must stop believing he has done some great wrong" (192-93). Hence, just as Setsuko adeptly urges Ono to take preemptive measures for Noriko's marriage, her dismissal of his painting as politically inconsequential reveals the intrigue of Ishiguro's chiaroscuro narrative. While she wants Ono to grasp the unspoken implications of his propaganda painting in relation to Noriko's failed marriage arrangement, she paradoxically convinces him that his painting bears no connection to Japan's wartime atrocities.

The twist in Setsuko's language, in a way, echoes the conflict between Ono's acknowledgement of the mistake and his self-defense for the propaganda painting. While admitting his wrongdoing before the war, Ono declares, "My paintings. My teachings. As you see, Dr. Saito, I admit this quite readily. All I can say is that at the time *I acted in good faith*. I believed in all sincerity I was achieving good for my fellow countrymen. But as you see, I am not now afraid to admit I was mistaken" (123-24; emphasis added). The clear dissonance between his acknowledgment of the fault and the belief in the righteousness of his actions profoundly blurs the distinction between right and wrong. Nonetheless,

the contradiction in his words invites greater speculation. To decipher Ono's paradoxical statement about his shift from ukiyo-e to propaganda, it is crucial to examine the unsaid of ukiyo-e within Japan's historic-political context in this novel.

Ukiyo-e,<sup>5</sup> a prominent form of Japanese art, evolved under Japan's socio-political changes and the influence of Western art. It originally derived from Buddhist concepts about life, representing the "floating world" in its prints. Originally, this art form is a combination of uki for sadness and yo for life, reflecting "the Buddhist concept of life as a transitory illusion [and] involving a cycle of birth, suffering, death and rebirth" as conceived in Japan's Heian Period (794-1185) ("Ukiyo-e Japanese Prints"). The genre derives from a kind of woodblock printing that began to be used in sacred Buddhist texts in the seventh century and flourished during the Tokugawa period (also called the Edo period) (1603-1867). Yet, there is a shift in its meaning in the Edo period, which is a period of isolationism and relative peace, during which "the Tokugawa regime segregated society into four classes: warriors, farmers, artisans, and—at the bottom of the heap—merchants" (Department of Asian Art). Yet, seeing the rise of the chōnin<sup>6</sup> in the Edo period as a threat to the social order, the shoguns, the military government "created licensed pleasure quarters within the confines of the Yoshiwara district" (Lim) for them. Thus, instead of referring to the lament for fleeting life, ukiyo takes on the meaning of celebrating "the joys of life, and the secular world of pleasure and entertainment" (Ellis 702). Notably, owing to the political intervention, ukiyo-e embodies the paradox of the art form, reflecting both the transience of life and the pursuit of pleasure in the floating world.

Another impact on the development of ukiyo-e is Japan's increased contact with the outside world. In the mid-nineteenth century, after the opening of Japan to the West, ukiyo-e had a large impact on Western Impressionists like Vincent van Gogh and Claude Monet.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the influence flowed the

---

<sup>5</sup> Ukiyo-e, an art genre that uses woodblock printing, is a collaboration of four persons: the artist, carver, printer, and publisher. The artist designs and draws the artwork in ink on paper; the carver carves the design; the printer applies pigments to the woodblocks and makes prints; the publisher coordinates with the artisans and markets the works ("The Floating World of Ukiyo-E").

<sup>6</sup> The chōnin refers to a class of townsmen that emerged in the early years of the Tokugawa period; they were mostly merchants as well as some craftsmen and artisans ("chōnin").

<sup>7</sup> In 1853, when Japan was forced to open its door to the West in the wake of American Commodore Matthew Perry's arrival at Tokyo Bay, which ended Sakoku (Japan's isolationism), the exchange between Japanese and Western cultures was vigorous and impactful. "Japanism" was the term used to describe the Western craze for Japanese art from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Impressionists in Europe were particularly impressed by ukiyo-e prints; they adopted the subjects, compositions, and colors of those prints. Monet even mentions that without Japanese prints, it would be impossible for us to "juxtapose on canvas a roof which was bright red, a wall which was white, a

other way as well. Japanese art incorporated Western painting skills as Japanese art looked for new subjects and techniques. That is why ukiyo-e artists began using subjects and skills like still-life, portraiture, and abstract composition (Gentles 16).

Ono's Sensei Mori-san's cautious pursuit of new ideas and Western influence reveals the hidden politics in ukiyo-e. As a master of ukiyo-e, Mori-san is oblique in practicing new devices. His portrayal of "a kneeling woman seen from a peculiarly low point of view" is novel to his pupils as it conveys greater respect and significance for the depicted female figure. His pupils regard it as Sensei's attempt to liberate them from the arbitrary and confining habits of traditional painting (139). In addition, he abandons "the use of the traditional dark outline to define his shapes, preferring instead the Western use of blocks of colour, with light and shade to create a three-dimensional appearance." His experiment with colors to capture the feel of lantern light becomes a hallmark of his work as "a lantern would always figure somewhere in the picture, by implication, if not in actuality" (141). With these innovative painting techniques, he is known as "the modern Utamaro."<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, Mori-san's innovation is different from that in Western art, which has foregrounded creativity and originality since Kant (Kozbelt and Durmysheva 24). Richard Lane argues that tradition is the most dominant element of Japanese art. "However great and original the artist, we can always trace quite clearly his origins and indebtedness to earlier masters . . . he is judged almost as much for his mastery of traditional styles as for his original contribution to his own school" (qtd. in Kozbelt and Durmysheva 27). That is why, despite Mori-san's originality in painting, the convention of ukiyo-e is well preserved as he follows "the traditional device of expressing emotion through the textiles which the woman holds or wears rather than through the look on her face" (Ishiguro, *An Artist* 141). The ingenious fusion of tradition and innovation turns into an obfuscating feature of Japanese artists since breaking away from tradition is regarded as severe disloyalty or betrayal. That accounts for Mori-san's reticence when he displays his new works to his pupils. In Ono's memory, Mori-san is always silent while the pupils ponder and argue about his works. Adhering to the foundations of tradition, Mori-san is ambitious but discreet in taking every novel step. Mori-san's strategic transformation of artistic convention significantly

---

green poplar, a yellow road and blue water." Van Gogh admits the great influence of Japanese prints on his work, saying, "[i]n a way all my work is founded on Japanese art" and calls the impressionists "the Japanese French" (qtd. in Darling-Wolf 17).

<sup>8</sup> Utamaro (1753-1806) is one of the greatest ukiyo-e printmakers and painters, especially well known for the portraits of sensuous female beauties ("Utamaro").

implies how art acts as a subtle form of political agency in history rather than merely a manifestation of Japanese stoicism.

Other than following Mori-san's measured innovation within the artistic convention, Ono's divergence from ukiyo-e is driven by socio-political situations. It is a political cause promoted by Matsuda from the Okada-Shingen, a group that recruits artists to produce "works of genuine value in these difficult times," in contrast to the greedy businessmen and politicians who hoard most social resources and leave the general public in unbearable poverty before WWII (172). What should be noted is that Ono, in response to Matsuda's idea, tells Matsuda solemnly that "[a]n artist's concern is to capture beauty whenever he finds it . . . if the Okada-Shingen is as you claim it is, then it seems to me ill-conceived indeed. It seems to be founded on a naïve mistake about what art can and cannot do" (172). Persisting in social judgment of what art should be in pre-war Japan, Ono's perspective reflects how art is viewed from the end of the eighteenth century to the 1920s, prior to the rise of Marxian criticism. This aesthetic idea regards art as a domain separate from that of morality, philosophy, science, and propaganda (Singer 343-44). But Ono's visit to Kogane Street, a place of poverty and squalor, compels him to reconsider the true purpose of art. There, he is taken aback by the sight of three poor boys with scowls on their faces standing in front of a squalid shanty hut—a scene that confirms Matsuda's conviction that art should serve as a meaningful aid to the nation. The scene then becomes the central image of Ono's propaganda painting *Complacency*, which depicts the boys wearing "the manly scowls of samurai warriors ready to fight" and holding "their sticks in classic kendo stances" (168). Yet, behind the three boys is an obscure image of three fat, well-dressed, apparently decadent-looking men chatting and laughing in a bar, referring to covetous businessmen and corrupt politicians. These two images ironically echo the words placed respectively on the left-hand and right-hand sides of the painting—"Complacency" and "But the young are ready to fight for their dignity." Another of his paintings is *Eyes to the Horizon*, a reworking of *Complacency*, in which the three poverty-stricken boys are replaced by three stern-faced soldiers with rifles in their hands, their eyes cast towards Asia; the words on the two sides are "Eyes to the Horizon" and "No time for cowardly talking. Japan must go forward" (168-69).

Ono's propaganda paintings suggest another layer of depth in Ishiguro's chiaroscuro narrative. With a view to urging young people to join the military action in support of Japan's imperial ambitions in Asia, Ono's paintings, more than defying the conventional idea of art, contribute to countless deaths. Japan's military defeat reveals that the political intention and intervention underlying

Ono's work are both an aesthetic betrayal and an ethical error.

Political intervention in art has a long history in Japan, particularly evident in the Muromachi period (1336-1573), the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1574-1600), and the Tokugawa period (1603-1867, also known as the Edo period). The Muromachi period was "a time of prolonged civil unrest, remarkable social fluidity, and creativity," in which "[t]he military rulers attempted to establish their legitimacy through the patronage of the arts. They assiduously promoted Zen Buddhism and Chinese culture in opposition to the aristocratic preference for indigenous styles" (Ulak). Another form of political intervention in art was done by a class of politically powerful merchants in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Azuchi-Momoyama period and the Tokugawa period. Different from the traditional subjects of Japanese art which evolved around Japanese history, literature, and the ruling class, ukiyo-e in the Edo period turned to the portrayal of female beauties and the scenes of the pleasure districts—subjects particularly appreciated by the merchant class ("Intro: Pre-history and Emergence of Ukiyo-e"). The patronage of the military rulers and the merchants' preference for the paintings of the floating world reveal the close connection between art and politics, in the sense of maintaining Japan's sovereignty. Nevertheless, what is particularly noteworthy is the Buddhism embedded in ukiyo-e and its re-orientation in the Edo period due to the emergence of the *chōnin*.

The re-direction of the ukiyo-e in the Edo period does not sever its ties with the Buddhist idea. Instead, ukiyo-e in Edo Japan paradoxically consists of two layers of meanings: the transience and emptiness of life and the pursuit of worldly pleasures. The paradox is not only conceptually grasped but empirically felt, as the *chōnin* "have been plagued by the feeling that their lives were meaningless and unchanging. This is reflected in some of their poems"<sup>9</sup> (Szczepanski). Hence, the twisted idea of ukiyo, formed in the long-term political interference in Japan's art history, is an implicit and inherent feature of ukiyo-e.

The historical development of ukiyo-e in Japan prominently illuminates where and how Ono's "good faith" (123) can be anchored. In one aspect, as the paintings of the floating world carry the deeply ingrained Buddhist notion that life is inevitably transient and full of sorrow, artists like Ono cannot be immune to or totally ignorant of the ennui and plague underlying the pursuit of worldly

---

<sup>9</sup> The ambivalent feeling of ukiyo-e is manifested in poems like "Ariwara no Narihira," which reads: "Because they fall we love them—the cherry blossoms. In this floating world, does anything endure?" The poem is regarded as "the epitome of Ukiyo in Edo Period Japan—the beauty of impermanence, the thrill of transience, and the meaningless existence of the individual" (Lin).

vanity. This feeling, strengthened by the poverty and squalor of Kogane Street, initiates Ono's deviation from the ukiyo-e tradition, a deviation which, he believes, substantially promises a better future. Amid the destitution of pre-war Japan, Ono is convinced that painting should convey substantial ideas or visions, rather than merely pursue beauty and technical perfection. Hence, even though his paintings are dismissed as propaganda, and he is regarded as responsible for war casualties, Ono still believes that they are done "in good faith." This idea echoes Irving Singer's belief that the aim of an artist is no different from that of the philosopher, moralist, or propagandist because "they are all interested in effectively communicating something . . . they all have to make some effect upon a receptive organism" (354). That may explain why Ono's apologetic statement, on the one hand, admits his mistake and, on the other, ascertains how he engages in propaganda in "good faith." Ono's conflicting statements about the error, resembling the interplay of light and dark, instigate sophisticated speculations of political intervention in/of art.

Concerning the intricate relationships between art and politics in *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro comments that Ono's "political values have proved as transitory as the values of the 'Floating World' itself" (qtd. in Sexton 31). This statement in a way contributes to the critiques that see Ono as an unreliable narrator. The critic Bruce King comments that he is "a cunning nationalist," who knows how to "adjust his manner to a new age, and makes us wonder if indeed he is not also an Artist of the Floating World, someone who in his own way has enjoyed the pleasures of his time" (207-08). Even though King regards Ono as an opportunist, this may not be entirely true, considering his brave defense of his colleague, Tortoise, who is accused of being slow and lazy while working in Master Takeda's studio.

Unlike King, Charles Sarvan contends that the novel displays the paradox of history. The paradox corresponds to the idea of impermanence, as "those who were loyal during the War are seen by the new generation as traitors who misled the world; conversely, the traitors of yesterday are now perceived as wise, courageous and truly patriotic" (95-96). Distinct from Sarvan, Kallie Szczepanski contends that the transience of Ono's political ideals echoes the Buddhist idea of the ukiyo, which denotes "the endless cycle of rebirth, life, suffering, death, and rebirth" and "the illusion of everything." Nonetheless, what Ishiguro unfolds is not only the original idea of the floating world in Buddhism but a rarely heard voice in Japan's history of WWII, related to inevitable conundrums amidst the political and artistic transitions. While Ono re-orientes his artistic devotion to the so-called better future, the consequences of what he does are unforeseeable, as Sarvan claims that "one does not, and cannot, know finally and fully . . .

[even though] things are articulated, they are not articulable" (100). The intrigue underlying Ono's addressing his mistake brings to light the unsaid and the invisible in historical processes. The chiaroscuro narrative concerning Ono's struggle, more than an evasion of political responsibility, is a manifestation of the fleeting nature of art and its inevitable entanglements with politics in history, transcending any aesthetic or ethical judgment or formulaic convention. As Wright argues, "the true subject of the novel, is really not Ono at all, but rather the workings of history itself" (62-63).

## Conclusion

Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* features a chiaroscuro narrative. Going beyond Japanese stoicism and restraint, Ishiguro's narrative highlights the dynamic interplay between light and shadow, the said and the unsaid. It is reflected in the physical setting, the conversations among the characters, and, most of all, the intriguing relationship between art and politics. The chiaroscuro narrative that embodies the language that hides serves to articulate his distinctive historical perspective.

By means of the chiaroscuro narrative, Ishiguro crafts a distinct texture of historical narrative. His distinct way of construing history in terms of its relationship between art and politics, in one aspect, displays what the artist Ono encounters before and after WWII. More prominently, it delves into the political intervention of/in art, constantly altering and twisting what can be seen and perceived in history. More significantly, Ishiguro delves into the ephemerality underlying the politics of/in art, revealing otherwise overlooked nuances of history. The Buddhist idea of *ukiyo*, mirroring the transience of politico-historical contexts, makes explicit Ishiguro's significant and dynamic perspective of history. Even though the aesthetic and ethical turns reveal how Ono, inevitably (re-)contextualized within history, candidly moves forward with its changes, this does not indicate that Ono is merely an opportunist or speculator. Instead, Ishiguro's narrative signifies that what is seen and said in history cannot be judged from the surface level, as observed by Wright that underlying the banal everyday life is an invincible power that can only be conveyed "by indirection, dissemblance, projection, concealment, silence, and anamorphosis" (61).

Importantly, the chiaroscuro narrative of history in this novel resonates with the characteristic of twenty-first-century historiographical novels as the latter "seek[s] the relationship with the historical experience that escapes them, and it is this relationship, expressed not in words but in shaped failures of expression, that determines the ethical textual of their historicism" (Boxall 79).

Depicting what the ukiyo-e painter goes through during WWII, Ishiguro's chiaroscuro narrative in *An Artist of the Floating World* distinctively portrays an artist's experiences in history, granting access to the invisible and unsaid concerning the intricate relationships between art and politics and, more importantly, the impermanence of the floating world.

## Works Cited

- Avitabile, Tom. "The Shadow Knows: The Secret of Chiaroscuro Writing." *Mystery Writers of America*, 20 Feb. 2017. <https://www.mwamy.org/2017/02/the-shadow-knows-the-secret-of-chiaroscuro-writing/>. Accessed 11 May 2024.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, 1968, pp. 253-64.
- Berger, Thomas U. *War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II*. Cambridge UP, 2012.
- Booth, Wayne. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. U of Chicago P, 1983.
- Boxall, Peter. *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge UP, 2013.
- Călinescu, Amalia. "An Artist of the Floating World: An Interdisciplinary Perspective." *HyperCultura*, vol. 10, 2021, pp. 1-15, *HyperCultura*, <https://litere.hyperion.ro/hypercultura/wpcontent/uploads/2022/04/Amalia-Calinescu.pdf>. Accessed 11 August 2024.
- Chang, Elysha. "A Language that Conceals: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro, Author of *The Buried Giant*." *Electric Literature*, 27 Mar. 2015, <https://electricliterature.com/a-language-that-conceals-an-interview-with-kazuo-ishiguro-author-of-the-buried-giant/>. Accessed 7 May 2024.
- "Chōnin." *Britannica*, 26 Sep. 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/chonin>. Accessed 15 June 2024.
- Darling-Wolf, Fabienne. "Japan's Global Resonances: From Ukiyo-e to La Nouvelle Manga." *Manga, Comics and Japan: Area Studies as Media Studies*, edited by Jaqueline Berndt, Orientaliska Studier, 2018, pp. 15-27. *TIDSKRIFT.NU*, <https://orientaliskastudier.se/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Fabienne-Darling-Wolf-Japan%E2%80%99s-Global-Resonances.pdf>.
- Davis, Oliver. *Jacques Rancière*. Polity, 2010.
- Debare, Anne-Julie. "A Fellowship of Imaginations: Sebald's Aesthetics of Chiaroscuro in *The Exquisite* by Laird Hunt." *Contemporary Writers Reading Literatures of the Past*, edited by Anne-Laure Tissut and Léopold Reigner, Centre d'études sur les modes de la représentation anglophone, 2017, pp. 117-32. *Représentations dans le monde anglophone*, <https://publications-prairial.fr/representations/index.php?id=1586&file=1>. Accessed 14 June 2024.
- Department of Asian Art. "Art of the Pleasure Quarters and the Ukiyo-e Style." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Oct. 2004, <https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/art-of-the-pleasure-quarters-and-the-ukiyo-e-style>. Accessed 14 June 2024.
- Ellis, James W. "The Floating World of Ukiyo-e Prints: Images of a Japanese Counterculture." *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2019, pp. 701-18. *SSRN*, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3450060>. Accessed 14 June 2024.
- "The Floating World of Ukiyo-E." *Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/ukiyo-e/intro.html>. Accessed 14 June 2024.
- Fonioková, Zuzana. "The Selective Narrator: Construction of the Past in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*." *Brno Studies in English*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2007, pp. 133-42. *Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts Masaryk University*, <https://digilib2.phil.muni.cz/sites/default/files/pdf/104435.pdf>. Accessed 14 June 2024.

- Gentles, Margaret O. "Modern Japanese Prints." *The Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly*, vol. 53, no. 1, 1959, pp. 13-17. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4120570>. Accessed 14 June 2024.
- "Intro: Pre-history and Emergence of Ukiyo-e." *Virmuze*, <https://virmuze.com/m/ukiyo-e-pictures-of-the-floating-world/x/intro-pre-history-and-emergence-of-ukiyo-e/>. Accessed 25 June 2024
- Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *New Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1972, pp. 279-99. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/468316>. Accessed 25 June 2024.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *An Artist of the Floating World*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Kazuo Ishiguro: Thatcher's London and the Role of the Artist in a Time of Political Change." *The Guardian*, 24 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/24/kazuo-ishiguro-my-turning-point-reading-proust-on-my-sickbed>. Accessed 10 May 2024.
- Jetzzeit. *Oxford Reference*, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100020224>. Accessed January 21 2025.
- Karttunen, Laura. "A Sad Monologist: Unreliable Reporting of Dialogue in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*." *Literary Linguistics*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1-16. *Literary Linguistics*, <https://doi.org/10.15462/ijll.v5i2.59>. Accessed January 21 2025.
- Kelman, Suanne. "Ishiguro in Toronto." Shaffer and Wong, pp. 42-51.
- King, Bruce. "The New Internationalism: Shiva Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta, Timothy Mo and Kazuo Ishiguro." *The British and Irish Novel Since 1960*, edited by James Acheson, Palgrave MacMillan, 1991, pp. 192-211.
- Kozbelt, Aaron, and Yana Durmysheva. "Lifespan Creativity in a Non-Western Artistic Tradition: A Study of Japanese Ukiyo-e Printmakers." *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2007, pp. 23-51. Sage Journal, journals. <https://doi.org/10.2190/166N-6470-1325-T341>. Accessed January 21 2025.
- Lim, Ching Yee. "The Pursuit of Pleasure: How the Floating World Defined Edo Japan." *The Collector*, 18 Mar. 2022, <https://www.thecollector.com/edo-japan-ukiyo-floating-world/>. Accessed 15 June 2024.
- Lotha, Gloria, et al. "Chiaroscuro." *Britannica*, 3 Sep. 2007, <https://www.britannica.com/art/chiaroscuro>. Accessed 11 May 2024.
- Luzi, Ermelinda. *The Chiaroscuro Technique in the Works of W. G. Sebald*. 2017. U of Toronto, PhD dissertation. *TSpace*, <https://utoronto.scholaris.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/5d9e6b86-4a60-46a8-8839-9d1ffd9757ae/content>. Accessed 11 May 2024.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Edges of Fiction*. Translated by Steve Corcoran, Polity, 2020.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Flesh of Words*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell, Stanford UP, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Mute Speech*. Translated by James Swenson, Columbia UP, 2011.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Politics of Literature." *Substance*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2004, pp. 10-24. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3685460>. Accessed 11 May 2024.
- Reeve, Jonathan. "Detecting Literary Chiaroscuro in Eliot, Dickens, and other Victorian Novelists." *Jonathan Reeve: Computational Literary Analysis*, 2 Mar. 2015, <https://jonreeve.com/2015/03/detecting-literary-chiaroscuro/>. Accessed 11 May 2024.
- Ringe, Donald A. "Chiaroscuro as an Artistic Device in Cooper's Fiction." *PMLA*, vol. 78, no. 4, 1963, pp. 349-57. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/461247>. Accessed 11

May 2024.

- Ross, Alison. "Expressivity, Literarity, Mute Speech." *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*. Edited by Jean-Philippe Deranty, Routledge, 2014, pp. 133-50.
- Sarvan, Charles. "Floating Signifiers and *An Artist of the Floating World*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1997, pp. 93-101. Sage Journals, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002198949703200108>. Accessed 11 May 2024.
- Sexton, David. "Interview: David Sexton Meets Kazuo Ishiguro." Shaffer and Wong, pp. 27-34.
- Shaffer, Brian W., and Cynthia F. Wong, editors. *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*. UP of Mississippi, 2008.
- Singer, Irving. "The Aesthetics of 'Art for Art's Sake.'" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1954, pp. 343-59. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/426977?seq=1>. Accessed 11 May 2024.
- Sloane, Peter. *Kazuo Ishiguro's Gestural Poetics*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.
- Suter, Rebecca. *Two-World Literature: Kazuo Ishiguro's Early Novels*. U of Hawaii P, 2020.
- Szczepanski, Kallie. "What Was Japan's Ukiyo?" *ThoughtCo*, 6 Oct. 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-was-japans-ukiyo-195008>. Accessed 2 July 2024.
- Torbidoni, Juan Manuel. "Blasting the Continuum of History: Walter Benjamin's 'Now-Time' and the Recovery of Experience." *Thémata. Revista de Filosofía*, vol. 63, 2021, pp. 154-73, <https://doi.org/10.12795/themata.2021.i63.09>. Accessed 28 June 2025.
- "Ukiyo-e Japanese Prints." *The Art Story*, <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/ukiyo-e-japanese-woodblock-prints/>. Accessed 14 June 2024.
- Ulak, James T. "Muromachi Period." *Britannica*, 7 Feb. 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Muromachi-period>. Accessed 25 June 2025.
- "Utamaro." *Britannica*, 13 Oct. 2009, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Utamaro>. Accessed 20 June 2024.
- Walkowitz, Rebecca L. "Ishiguro's Floating Worlds." *ELH*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2001, pp. 1049-76. JSTOR, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236764477\\_Ishiguro's\\_Floating\\_Worlds](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236764477_Ishiguro's_Floating_Worlds). Accessed 25 June 2025.
- Watts, Philip. "Heretical History and the Poetics of Knowledge." *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*. Edited by Jean-Philippe Deranty, Routledge, 2014, pp. 104-15.
- White, Hayden. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1987.
- Wong, Cynthia F. "Like Idealism is to the Intellect: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro." Shaffer and Wong, pp. 174-88.
- Wright, Timothy. "No Homelike Place: The Lesson of History in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2014, pp. 58-88. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43297947>. Accessed 25 June 2025.

# 光影敘事：石黑一雄《浮世畫家》 的明暗書寫

張期敏

臺北市立大學

## 摘要

石黑一雄的《浮世畫家》描述一位日本「浮世」畫家小野，因二戰前放棄日本傳統浮世繪，投身政治宣傳繪畫，而在戰後陷入社會批評和道德審判的陰影中。小說藉由畫家在回憶過往時的內在矛盾與掙扎，揭示戰爭與藝術引發的社會政治動盪，及兩者間的複雜關係。有趣的是，基於日本二戰前後藝術表現的歷史分歧，這本小說構築出一個如同繪畫「明暗對照法」（*chiaroscuro*）的光影敘事空間。其獨特之處在於，石黑一雄的光影敘事所呈現的，不僅僅是單純的明暗對比，更是一種「說」與「未說」之間的獨特變動關係，如：「看不見的」意義常伴隨著「可見的」事物存在，而「沉默」往往比「言辭」更具體有力。石黑一雄利用明暗光影敘事，更深入闡釋在歷史過程中，政治考量和權力變化如何形塑藝術美學價值和判斷的流變。

《浮世畫家》對政治介入並重新定位浮世繪價值和意義的描寫，正呼應賈克·洪席耶（Jacques Rancière）在《沉默的言說》（*Mute Speech*）中對歷史的解讀——敘事中的光影交織，不僅打破事實與虛構的界線，更展現出歷史敘事的獨特質地，進而揭露另類的歷史真實。值得注意的是，由藝術與政治交錯的歷史敘事肌理，深刻地反映石黑一雄獨到的歷史觀點——一種近似佛教「浮世」哲思的美學實踐。

**關鍵字：**石黑一雄、《浮世畫家》、光影敘事、藝術與政治、浮世繪