## "'In the beginning is the shape': Maths, Aesthetics, and Narrative Form in John Banville's Novel Kepler", The Common Denominator - A Postgraduate Conference in British Cultural Studies, University of Leipzig, 20-22 March 2014

In reading John Banville's science tetralogy it soon became apparent to me that his biographical novel *Kepler* (1981) serves as a prominent example of proposing what Brendan McNamee has termed "the similar nature of scientific and artistic pursuits" (McNamee, 2005). It is well known that the historical counterpart of the eponymous hero was a Lutheran and a Neoplatonist for whom phenomena of the universe could be explained by pointing to underlying mathematical regularities. His fictional twin, a picaresque hero and a scholarly tramp (Fiorato, 2007), is also eager to assert the existence of a harmonious cosmos, whose aesthetics invites comparison to a work of art. While it is true that Banville's Kepler repeatedly testifies to the primacy of the shape, it is the author's fictionalized biography that finally establishes a close affinity between the mathematical, the aesthetic and the narrative form. Set in the early history of modern science, the novel thus creates a formal space where different structural devices and a variety of telling references to numerical quantities can be identified.

This paper will address a number of interrelated questions. Are the correspondences between mathematics, aesthetics and narrative structure an expression of some arid formalism or do they contribute significantly to the readers' understanding of Kepler's achievements as a scientist? In a similar vein, what is the epistemic advantage of this novel when compared to non-fiction accounts of paradigm shifts in science? Given that the aesthetic is part of mathematical thinking (Sinclair et al., 2006), to what extent does its narrative equivalent support the major thematic polarities of harmony and disorder, mind and matter (McNamee, 2005), scientific and poetic knowledge, insight and error or incompleteness (Firestein, 2012)?

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