



THE NEW READER'S EYE-SCAN AND THE INTERMEDIAL PROCESSES

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Within the field of meaning (re)production, the newly fashioned media theories have been stemming from Marshall McLuhan's and Mikhail Bakhtin's "hybrids" and generating what we are presently experiencing as flexible theoretical phenomena, exposed to immediate change and constant altering, due to the overflow of media-related materialities. Orbiting the ancient concept of *ekphrasis*, this study aims to immerse the product resulted from the literary description of a work of art in the conceptual works-in-progress known as intermediality and remediation. The aspects directly addressed here are: what is the place of *ekphrasis* within the pertinence axis of intermediality? To what extent can the ekphrastic exercise be considered in terms of remediation? Throughout the study we will be making use of several excursions into the postmodern narrative with the intent to advocate for a reconsideration of the ekphrastic process and for the requirement of a new image-to-text mapping and its outcome in the digital age.

Keywords: *ekphrasis*, hybridity, inter-art poetics, intermediality, remediation, transmediality.

Introduction

One sometimes feels like saying to a work of art, "Good day, Herr self, what kind of necktie did you put on today?", pens down Paul Klee in his *Diaries* (Klee 1992: 170), reflecting on the nature of thought directed towards an artistic representation. When scanning the materiality of an art object, the viewer's instinct is to question and infer the signs before her eyes, acting as part of a visual dialogue, in which the echoing entity conveys meaning through interpretation. When skimming through verbal accounts of the same art object, the reader is confronted with the materiality of words and has to refer to the visual object described by means of recalling or imagining it with the aid of descriptive items. Descriptions of this sort, may they claim accuracy, as in the case of the detailed accounts offered by most art historians, or aesthetic grounds, as in the case of literary *ekphrasis*, seldom benefit from the material presence of the artefact, and may thus lead to varied reactions when subjected to analysis.

On the nature of assigning words to images, there have been many attempts to form notions and concepts, none of which quite as prolific as the ancient rhetoric exercise

known as *ekphrasis*. Having as a central point this symbiotic and protean literary construct, the present paper shall argue the existence of a clear overlapping between the general frame defining the ekphrastic model – the verbal literary representation of a visual representation¹ (Heffernan 1993: 3) that has been canonically attributed with artistic value – and the new concepts of media-philological origin, known as intermediality and remediation, both theoretical propositions dealing with a wide range of crossings between media, from *ekphrasis* to novelization and iconicity. Our attempt will briefly analyse the ekphrastic literary practice on a twofold argumentative structure. The first section will chart the dichotomy overt versus covert intermediality, developed by Werner Wolf in his *Musicalisation of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* (1999), with the intention to demonstrate the specificity of the intermedial phenomenon and the extent to which *ekphrasis* pertains to this particular mechanism. The second section will select from the “remediation” theoretical pattern, as argued by Jay David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, the urgency for immediacy, in trying to establish convergence between the new and the old reader's prospect in relation to media transfers. In short, we will argue that there are grounds for a new perspective on the ancient ekphrastic exercise, as far as postmodern prose is concerned, claiming it as an intermedial phenomenon with a remediating metabolic process (Fig. 1).

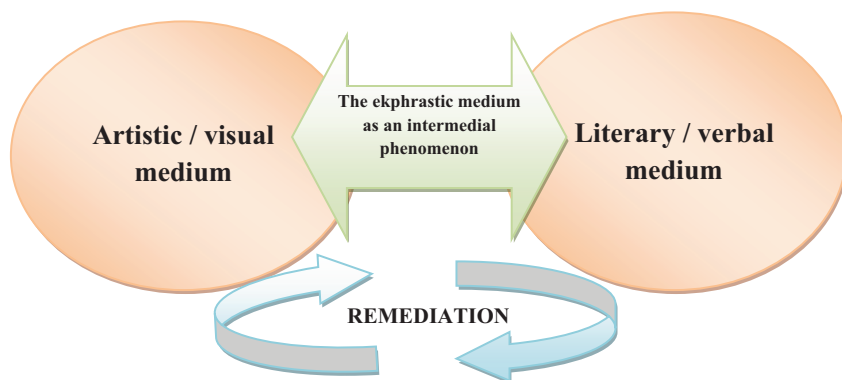


Fig. 1. The ekphrastic medium

It starts out as a simple rhetorical exercise, practiced and inserted in the *Progymnasmata* manual of eloquence. At this stage, *ekphrasis* constitutes a mere training ground with discursive intention (Aélius Théon 1997), and its equivalent in the Latin texts is *descriptio*. The following stages of progress, the Aristotelian *mimesis* age, the *Ut pictura poesis* doctrine and the humanistic aesthetics of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, marking the evolution of the *Sister Arts* poetics, foreshow two main characteristics in the ekphrastic model: its (debatable) imitative quality and its dual correlation.

¹ We favor James A. W. Heffernan's definition of *ekphrasis* for its wider degree of generality, yet we will also take into consideration for this present essay, definitions argued by Murray Krieger in his acclaimed works on the concept.

The latter reflects the logocentric nature which brings about the potential to claim the ultimate role of embodying icon into word. Although not trying to chart herein its historical development, we must note the duality mirrored in its very genesis. Both rhetoric and literary, this duality renders the concept so complex that among its practitioners throughout the ages, from Homer in ancient epic verse to Michael Ondaatje in post-modern prose, the reader can identify the ones that merely *transcribe* the object and the ones that *prescribe* an interpretation, their view on the object, with the intent to recreate it. *Ekphrasis* is thus situated beyond metaphor, claiming to position the artefact before the reader's eye, to consequently produce a new and original form of immediate knowledge. The ekphrastic act does not deal with imitating art by means of describing, but with imitating its already mimetic quality. It desires to paint the artefact, to produce an intermediate grasp not of the object, but of its fictionalized form.

In search of a deeper, more congruent form, the present day studies on the subject have underlined its intermedial quality, situated at the junction point between the visual medium and the verbal one. All intermedial phenomena are perceived as breeches between and among sign-worlds and are thus prone to the formation of new genres, new media. Considering this ekphrastic attribute of residing in-between, we formulate the first line of reasoning: within the various settings of ekphrastic symbiosis, there is a certain boomerang effect at the level of description. The primary medium, of the artefact is missing; therefore, the secondary, verbal medium takes over with the promise to convey the structure and meaning of the visual. Owing to its more tangible nature it mirrors back and sends the reader to the visual item described. In some cases, as the following example will show, the reader of *ekphrasis* has not yet come in contact with the work of art, and so the second medium assumes a guiding role to the future viewer.

The passage that supports our argument is an excerpt from A. S. Byatt's novel *Still Life*. The setting is the Post-Impressionism Gallery, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1980 and the character in view, Alexander Wedderburn, a playwright with an obsessive focus on Vincent van Gogh. At first glance, the life in words may seem still, yet the experience transferred into fiction relates directly to the reader of *ekphrasis* and the reaction s(he) can convey when the previous readings are mentally juxtaposed to the artefact. Is it therefore possible to consider as valid an *ekphrastic frame of mind* at the level of its fictional outcome?

“On one long wall hung a row of Van Goghs, including an Arles ‘Poet’s Garden’ he hadn’t seen before, but recognized <...> from charged descriptions in the painter’s letters. He sat down and saw a bifurcated path, simmering with gold heat round and under the rising spreading blue-black-green down-pointing vanes of a great pine, still widening where the frame interrupted its suspended thickness. And beyond, green, green grass and **geraniums, like splashes of blood**” (A. S. Byatt 1986: 2).

For the sake of a mirrored physiognomy of the same painting in words, we also give the account found in the Arles pages of Gogh's diary (1888–1889). The painter's account appears to relate exclusively to the visual items that form the composition, rendering the visual object manifest to the reader without digressions:

“Now imagine an immense greenish-blue pine, spreading its branches horizontally over a bright green lawn, and gravel splashed with light and shade. This very simple patch of garden is brightened by beds of **geraniums, lead orange** in the background under the black branches. Two figures of lovers in the shade of the great tree; size 30 canvas” (Stone, I.; Stone, J. 1995: 534).



Fig. 2. Vincent van Gogh. *Lovers: Poet's Garden IV*. October 1888, oil on canvas, currently in a private collection

Both the novel and the diary excerpts are verbal accounts of the same painting *Lovers: Poet's Garden IV* (Fig. 2) (Arles period, 1888), still the first one presents a fictional character who has previously come across the second ekphrastic model in its written form and who, at the narrating time, the year of 1980, is sitting in front of the frame and comparing the outcome of his former “imagining-with-the-aid-of-words” of the visual form on display. The first account “sees”, whereas the second invites to “imagine”. Moreover, A. S. Byatt's character gives the reader a very important clue linked to the nature of the ekphrastic medium. S(he) is assured that Alexander “recognized” the painting from a previous close-reading of Gogh's letters to his brother Theo. This is, notwithstanding, a case of positive mirroring, a case where *ekphrasis* has presumably conveyed the meaning and transferred the visual form into the verbal system. But, as language labels visual items, so we reconsider the two previous accounts by taking note of a small difference in the wording attributed to the image. Per whole, the two seem to follow closely the order of the pictorial display, minus one last remark in the first passage that weighs heavily on any pursuit of purity in the ekphrastic detail. Gogh's geraniums are lead orange, Alexander's, however appear to

the “eye” “like splashes of blood”. It is here that our twofold possible position reveals itself. The simple transcription of the visual is made obvious in the most part of the description, in both cases. Yet, the last interpretation of the flowers illustrates exactly the divergent nature of prescribing in *ekphrasis*. By means of an introspective lining, A. S. Byatt’s character is later on presented to the reader as seeing-in and taking more from the visual context than transcribed:

“Sometimes he still saw the brushstrokes, as it were, in this naked way, so that his earlier thoughts of this garden had to be undone, <...> the vulgar idea of blood splashes washed off the notation of geraniums. But it couldn’t be done. Language was against him, for a start. Metaphor lay coiled in the name sunflower, which not only turned towards, but resembled the sun, the source of light” (A. S. Byatt 1986: 6).

The same examples build the argument for an intermedial theory with direct application on *ekphrasis*. At the point where the inter-art studies seem to be too general to satisfy the need for explaining particular phenomena, Wolf’s arguments in *Musicalisation of Fiction* offer a more coagulated theoretical version for the newly formed notion of media-philological origin. Intermediality is defined as “the participation of more than one medium of expression in the signification of a human artefact” (Wolf 1999: 1) which seems to follow the pattern of intertextuality, with the distinction that the latter is monomedial in structure: text-within-textual frame. There is also evidence to the fact that the intertext is presently perceived as an intra-medial phenomenon. Due to a certain shortage of terminological precision, all research concerning the intermedial occurrences fails to distinctly delineate particular issues. In Wolf’s undertaking, we firstly point out the theorist’s preference for the medium as an aesthetic context, conveying artistic messages. What chiefly interests us in the case of *ekphrasis* is the distinction theorized in the opposition overt (direct) intermediality – covert (indirect) intermediality. In cases that fall under the heading of “overt”, all media concerned are present as separate entities, in one form or another, revealing a multi-medial formation (as in theatre performance – the visual, verbal, music-sound elements). The covert paradigm, on the other hand, relates to individual phenomena where only one medium is apparent, indirectly referencing a second one.

Consequently, the ekphrastic model falls under the category of covert intermediality where only one medium is apparent. Our premise follows here a second line: if any type of covert intermediality “necessarily implies a relationship between a dominant and a non-dominant medium” (Wolf 1999: 42) then, in the case of *ekphrasis*, the prevailing medium takes over completely and assumes the difficult task of referencing with the promise to make the reader “see” and “recognize” a certain artefact. There is a certain gap at the level of this statement, as it involves no degree of purity from the part of the reader. The aesthetic effect may be different for the reader that has never come in contact with the work of art before the description and the one that has already seen it and encompasses the reading as a mere wording of the image s(he) had previously contemplated.

As our research follows closely the inner-dynamic of narrative microstructures, we find Irina O. Rajewsky’s theoretical proposition on the same intermedial patterns and

occurrences to be very helpful in the media-philological field. Having as a starting point the same basic dichotomy announced by Wolf, the schemata proposed by the author reveals three major subcategories of intermedial construction: *medial transpositions* (adaptations, novelizations and so forth), *media combinations* (opera, film, theatre) – this category is perfectly overlapping Wolf's overt intermediality and the last category, the one that interests us, in particular, *intermedial references*, in the case of which “the media product uses its own media-specific means, either to refer to a specific, individual work produced in another medium <...>, or to refer to a specific medial subsystem” (Rajewsky 2005: 53). The two attempts to centralize intermedial phenomena are in no way comprehensive, yet they have a very important role in underlining the imperious need to form a general diagram where intermediality can act as an umbrella term and, through a broad or narrow sense, separate, differentiate and single out all its possible systems.

To both theoretical strategies presented before, we attempt an addendum that aims at the conspicuous nature of aesthetic experience and the valid point of the reader-as-a-medium. Our third line goes as follows: if we assume the existence in the ekphrastic *atelier*, comprising optional entities like: the author of the text at the base of the painting, the painter and his vision, the painting as a whole, the author of *ekphrasis*, the ekphrastic moment and the reader at the end of the representational chain, all interweaving in a single perspective, then the latter should be perceived in his possible instances of both media aware and unaware. An instructed reader may have the image already formed in front of the ekphrastic paragraph acting as an illustration to the text, whereas the one that has not come in contact with the visual frame described, will have a totally different approach on the description. Furthermore, in the technological era, we may state that the Internet renders most of the readers media-aware and the artefacts fully comprehensive in the shape of digital copies. In conclusion to this train of argumentation we have to emphasize in the definition of *overt intermediality* respectively that of *intermedial references* the material presence of a single medium in the case of *ekphrasis*.

An illustrative example that completes our addendum, although not of literary origin, comes from the reaction of Sigmund Freud in his essays involving psychoanalysis and art. In search of the artist's intention when creating a work of art and having already seen Michelangelo's statue of Moses (1515), Freud attempts to compare the descriptions of the same artefact in the texts of several historians and realizes that every account of the statue is seen differently, at the same time not coincidental to his own recollections. In Freud's case, we are dealing with both the creator of *ekphrasis* that prescribes a better description, and with that of a critical reader of ekphrastic variants.

We have thus far argued the new intermedial theoretical position given to the ekphrastic model. The argument to follow will consider two perspectives on *ekphrasis* in order to attain a better convergence towards a theory of remediation within the

inner structure of the model. To do so, we will start by entering a second literary excerpt from Ondaatje's acclaimed novel *The English Patient*. The setting in this case is the church of San Francesco, Arezzo (Figs. 3–4) and the ekphrastic paragraph focuses on several scenes from Piero della Francesca's fresco *The Legend of the True Cross*:

“Looking up with service binoculars in **the Gothic church at Arezzo**, soldiers would come upon their contemporary faces in **the Piero della Francesca frescoes. The Queen of Sheba conversing with King Solomon. Nearby a twig from the Tree of Good and Evil inserted into the mouth of the dead Adam**” (Ondaatje 2004: 74).

“The young Sikh sapper put his cheek against the mud and thought of **the Queen of Sheba's face, the texture of her skin**. There was no comfort in this river except for his desire for her, which somehow kept him warm. He would pull **her veil off her hair**. He would put his right hand between **her neck and olive blouse**” (Ondaatje 2004: 74).

“Holding on to it, he stepped off the balcony into the darkness, and the old man was simultaneously swung up, hoisted up fast until, when the sapper touched the ground, he swung idly in midair within three feet of **the frescoed walls**, the flare brightening a halo around him. Still holding the rope the sapper walked forward until the man swung to the right to hover in front of *The Fight of Emperor Maxentius*. <...> Five minutes later he let the man down. He lit a flare for himself and hoisted his body up into the dome within **the deep blue of the artificial sky**. He remembered its **gold stars** from the time he had gazed on it with binoculars. <...> He was now aware of the depth of this church, not its height. The liquid sense of it. The hollowness and darkness as well. The flare sprayed out of his hand like a wand. He pulleyed himself across to **her face, his Queen** of Sadness, and his brown hand reached out small against **the giant neck**” (Ondaatje 2004: 76).

One might ask how does a reader know s(he) is in the presence of *ekphrasis* in these narrative-descriptive scenes? What makes reference directly to the visual data concerned? The length of the paragraph cited is far superior and with good reason, as with the postmodern author, ekphrases seem to have taken a turn for fragmentation and selective referencing. Throughout literary history, accounts on art have been keen on rendering the detailed versions of the artefact, yet, at this point, it is no longer the image that is central to the pursuit of the narrative, but the effect that parts of it have on the construction of the diegesis. Ekphrastic techniques are used by Ondaatje selectively to render what Heffernan pointed out to be the gendered gaze, the male gaze upon the feminine beauty represented in the fresco, “striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space” (Heffernan 1993: 1). The narrative is no longer stopped to make space for the descriptive moment, to freeze time and space, but it proves to fit perfectly in the three-dimensional dynamic, emphasised by verbs of movement.

Furthermore, we are dealing in this instance with a focalized view of the artefact (Figs. 5–6). Firstly, through service binoculars, and secondly through the halo of a bright flare in constant movement, opening and closing intervals and forms, as the body is transported through the space in the Cappella Maggiore.



Figs. 3–4. Piero della Francesca. *The Legend of the True Cross*.
Fresco episode in San Francesco Cathedral, Arezzo, c. 1452–1466



Figs. 5–6. Piero della Francesca. *The Legend of the True Cross*.
Fresco detail in San Francesco Cathedral, Arezzo, c. 1452–1466

At length, both examples here prove useful in underlining the mechanics of remediation and its double logic as presented by Bolter and Grusin. Remediation projects rivalry and a paragonal dynamic between and among old and new media. It can be applied to all media in existence from the human body itself to written manuscripts, architectonic spaces and computer-based materialities. It entails that at any given time, a new medium will represent the same content with the promise to better the outcome of the former one. As for *ekphrasis*, it is debatable that the word-based medium in print or any other form was meant to be better than the one of visual origin. It is more a case of remediating for the sake of bringing forth the artefact, at a time when museum displays were not as easy to see, when art was not visible to all, but a luxury kept in private collections and reserved for the fortunate ones. In present times, one might ask if *ekphrasis* is not redundant or misplaced when any reader can find online, at any time, a more or less pertinent reproduction of the artefact described.

As far as “the double logic of remediation” is concerned, the projection follows two principles. On the one hand, the principle of *hypermediacy* “offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as windowed itself – with windows that open on to other representations or other media” (Bolter, Grusin 1999: 34). *Immediacy*, on the other hand idealizes “the belief in some necessary contact point between the medium and what it represents” (Bolter, Grusin 1999: 28), while conjuring the desire for the medium to disappear and make the experience of being directly in contact with the content, unmediated. Of the two logics, the first one is present in the Western visual representation in juxtaposed media like the European cathedral, comprising other media as stained glass, statues, inscriptions, and in the example above, frescoes decorating the architectural space. The second one is deeply ingrained in the ekphrastic genealogy. To prove this, we follow the argumentation for the ekphrastic principle in Krieger’s book *Ekphrasis and the Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992). In his endeavour of shaping the ekphrastic illusion and divulging the two impulses found at the level of the reader, Krieger keenly argues that through *ekphrasis* we intend to “recover immediacy of a sightless vision built into our habit of perceptual desire since Plato” (Krieger 1992: 10). It is the desire to come directly in contact with the artefact that the reader experiences with *ekphrasis*. Whether this desire can be presently fulfilled in an unmediated way, is still open to discussion, yet, through the literary description, immediacy can be attained only up to a point, as language is in disadvantage when trying to emulate the visual.

To end our argument in line with the previous observations, we can state that within the semiotic walls of the ekphrastic *atelier*, there is a pattern of remediation at the very centre of the illusion formed to indulge the reader. There is at first the painter that remediates a thought onto a canvas², conveying his interpretation and perception of the subject. The painting is seen by the author of *ekphrasis* that remediates it onto the paper support, may it be in manuscript or electronic form, at the same time prescribing his own experience of the artefact. If, in addition to this basic transposition,

² In terms of the ekphrastic subject, we chose the painting in our example. The range of artefacts is known to be so wide that it basically covers all artistic forms from sculpture to buildings and illuminated manuscripts.

we also consider art as experience and the human mind as medium, the remediating process will have an exponential increase and, in time, all representational forms will be filtered by means of remediation.

Conclusions

In the closing line for this brief attempt to analyse the ekphrastic model, we reiterate the need to observe and reconsider this literary (here) artifice of rhetoric origin with the intention to salvage its outcome from a mere descriptive technique with little value in the body of the narrative, and to enable it through the new means offered as solutions by theorists of intermediality and remediation. Our aim here was to briefly reflect on the ekphrastic medium as a covert intermedial phenomenon with a remediating inner process, and to identify, by relying on two literary excerpts, certain reactions of the reader when in contact with the verbal outcome of visual origin. *Ekphrasis* has been subjected to various exploratory efforts, all intended to fence it in, to categorize and validate its structure, but, given the vast amount of literary examples that fall under the heading of “ekphrastic form”, to say nothing of theories that consider it the very principle of art history, all accounts proved to be just fragmentary and selective. It is improbable that, in the near future, a fully accounted theory of *ekphrasis* should ever be shaped, yet we can adapt it in research and bring it up-to-date in different instances, as authors, art historians and critics will continue using it both as technique and literary concept.

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NAUJOJO SKAITYTOJO AKIS-SKAITYTUVAS IR INTERMEDIALŪS PROCESAI

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Santrauka

Reikšmės (re)produkcijų lauke naujamadės medijų teorijos, kilusios iš Marshallo McLuhano ir Michailo Bachtino „hibridų“, lemia tai, ką nūdien patiriame kaip lanksčius teorinius fenomenus, atvirus staigiems pokyčiams ir nuolatinėms permainoms, esant medijų skleidžiamos informacijos perviršiui. Šis tyrimas, telkiamas apie senąją *ekphrasis* konceptą, siekia įtraukti meno kūrinio literatūrinio aprašymo rezultatus į konceptualų procesualumą, dar vadinamą intermedialumu ir remediacija. Čia tiesiogiai aptariami šie aspektai: kokia *ekphrasis* vieta tikėtinoje intermedialumo ašyje? Kokiame kontekste ekfratinė praktika gali būti svarstoma remediacijos terminais? Tyrime padarysime keletą ekskursų į postmodernųjį naratyvą, siekdami persvarstyti ekfratinį procesą, naująjį teksto vertimo vaizdu reikalavimą ir jo rezultatus skaitmeniniame amžiuje.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *ekphrasis*, hibridiškumas, tarpmeninė poetika, intermedialumas, remediacija, transmedialumas.

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