

# A Theoretical Perspective on Ekphrasis

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The paper explores the most dominant theoretical approaches concerning ekphrasis, emphasizing the progress made over the centuries in refining the concept and pointing out the achievements and the limitations in ekphrastic theory.

Keywords: poetry, painting, ekphrasis, power of narration, power of resistance



Several issues have been raised based on the pervasiveness of the narrative into the ekphrastic poem: Krieger, on the one hand, considers that ekphrastic poetry is related to freezing the temporal dimension into space, whereas Wendy Steiner, in her study on *Pictures of Romance: Form against Context in Painting and Literature* (1988), contends that ekphrasis is the verbal equivalent of the “pregnant moment” in art (13-14). What she understands by the pregnant moment in visual art is the stillness of a point which implies what comes before that moment and what is to follow it.

Heffernan departs completely from these views by upholding the idea that ekphrasis is dynamic and that the narrative vein is taken from the pregnant moment of visual art which is in such a way processed as to “deliver from the pregnant moment of visual art its embryonic narrative impulse.” That is why he refers to ekphrasis as being “dynamic” and “obstetric” (Heffernan 1993: 5).

Heffernan feels compelled to give further explanations to justify his point of view according to which he does not support the idea that a picture cannot tell a story or that pictures differ tremendously from texts in that texts tell more comprehensive stories and paintings do not. His point of interest is not related to what pictures can or cannot do but rather

what ekphrasis does with visual art. In order to support this point of view he gives the example of Yeats’s poem “Leda and the Swan” in which such a text does not tell a self-sufficient story, and Gainsborough’s painting *Two Shepherd Boys Fighting*, where the painting tells a self-sufficient story.

A more nuanced explanation given to the narrative power of ekphrasis is provided by Gerard Genette, who considers ekphrasis to be more a description than a narration. He defines narration as a depiction of people and objects in movement, whereas description is based on depicting people and objects standing still. Ekphrasis therefore falls into the category of description rather than narration, as it depicts fixed forms and objects. Moreover, Genette considers that narration is time-oriented whereas description suspends time, it is space-oriented and thus, he contends, it serves as “a mere auxiliary of narrative,” as “the ever-necessary, ever-submissive, never-emancipated slave” (Genette 1982: 136, 134).

Heffernan domesticates the theory propounded by Genette in stating that ekphrasis is not submissive at all but, on the contrary, it is “the unruly antagonist of narrative, the ornamental digression that refuses to be merely ornamental” (Heffernan 1993: 5). If we



agree to the view according to which ekphrasis is a detachable fragment that can be moved from one work to another, then we also need to clarify in what ways ekphrasis has a say in the movement and the meanings of the narratives in which it appears.

Genette himself admits that there is no real demarcation line between narration and description, as they cannot be kept apart, mainly because there is no such thing as pure description (purged of any narration). The implication here is that, in a particular passage, either narration or description predominates and that due to the precarious boundary between narration and description, ekphrasis cannot be said to be pure description or to hinder narrative progression.

Page Dubois offers a theory of ekphrasis that is more relevant when introducing the epics of Homer and Virgil. In her opinion, ekphrasis “is a narrative poetic discourse that purports often to be a model, or icon, literally, of the past and future structures in the interest of explaining what they were, what they will be, by representing them in relation to an enlightening narrative discourse, the progress of the hero” (Dubois 1982: 4). Ekphrasis, she adds, is spatio-temporal revealing “as a coherent synchronic model, the shape of time for its audience” (7-8). If the definition suggested by Dubois is limited to Homer’s or Virgil’s worlds, we need to understand what triggers its resistance over time: from classical antiquity to the present day. As it is a verbal representation of visual representation, we might easily infer that ekphrasis participates in a contest between various modes of representation: between the power of narration and the fixed image’s power of resistance.

Svetlana Alpers, in an equally pertinent study, “Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Representation” (1976), argues in favor of description with a suspension of narrative action in the works of leading seventeenth-century realist painters—Velasquez, Rembrandt, and Vermeer, only to see description reappear in the late nineteenth-century French realist art with names such as Courbet and Manet, for instance. She holds that the seventeenth-century Italian art critic Bellori was right in considering Caravaggio’s art highly descriptive and lacking the narrative dimension.

In her opinion, painting, by its very nature, is descriptive as it is a spatial and not a temporal art and Bellori’s comments reflect the Renaissance commitment to narrative art which “continued to challenge ambitious artists well into the nineteenth century” (*New Literary History* 16). She understands Horace’s famous dictum *Ut pictura, poesis* as an “argument not for pictorial poetry but for narrative painting. Even Lessing, in his famous essay delineating the limits of the arts, does not rule out narrative in art but is at pains to specify the conditions under

which painting can narrate while remaining true to its descriptive strengths” (16).

Alpers contends that, in ancient art and the art of the Renaissance, imitative skills were directly connected with narrative action, as means to an end and “on this was based the notion of the appeal of art” (17). Critics in the Renaissance agreed that passions were made visible through the movements of the body (or the movements of the soul). Gombrich also suggests, in *Art and Illusion* (1960), that “the very perfection of imitation in ancient and Renaissance art was in order to achieve the end of intelligible and convincing narratives” (129).

One of the most important arguments set forth by Alpers in her study is that if in the Middle Ages art was meant to impress common people by the use of pretty colors and did not address intelligent minds by the use of narrative action, seventeenth-century art witnesses a shift in focus in this respect: namely, the concerns, effects and appeal that were based on color in art played a new role in the works of some artists in that they gave the upper hand to the mind in viewing a work of art and no longer to the senses. Therefore, Alpers subscribes to Bellori’s bafflement at the reversal of priorities in Caravaggio’s works: description to the detriment of narrative action.

When introducing nineteenth-century French realist painting, Alpers suggests that the descriptive characteristic is typical of the quality of modern life. She considers two art critics’ opinions on the descriptive nature of the work of art close to the turn of the century. One is Michael Fried, who holds the belief that avant-garde French painters such as Courbet and Manet deliberately employed a different pictorial strategy, as it was meant to emphasize a departure from the representation of action to an acceptance of the new artifice of representation typical of modernism.

The second critic quoted in Alpers’s study is T. J. Clark, who contends that the freezing of narrative action by turning to description is typical of the quality of modern life (qtd. in Alpers 18). Alpers’s conclusion regarding the works of seventeenth-century realist painters is that Caravaggio’s, Velasquez’s and Vermeer’s foregrounding of descriptive details at the expense of narrative action emphasizes their allegiance to imitation rather than to narration. Rembrandt, she contends, upheld the idea that narration understood in Renaissance art terms was impossible (24).

The French critic and theorist Roger de Piles was the first who tried to understand what had happened in seventeenth-century realist painting by calling into question the concept of color. Color was perceived as an ornament of art, on the one hand, and as a basis of imitation, on the other hand, with no narrative end in view. He frequently refers to Rembrandt and Caravaggio, for instance, as being the seventeenth-

century colorists who invite viewer participation. One must, however, remember that, in those times, praising a painter for his use of colors was as if one had offered a consolation prize for those artists who were not able to narrate in their paintings:

De Piles is the first critic to link up in a positive and powerful way the two traditional aspects of color: (1) its link with imitation and (2) its powerful appeal to the eyes. In arguing that imitation leads to a desired end of fooling the eyes and calling on the viewer, de Piles validated imitation in a new way by tying it to a desirable and newly defined end of art. He is thus able to give full recognition and full weight to the representational power of the work of art as such. (Alpers *New Literary History* 28)

Despite the fact that de Piles eulogizes Rembrandt, he still remains faithful to Rubens for his artistic eloquence, adherence to the Renaissance hierarchies, both social and pictorial, and the preeminence given to narrative action in the Renaissance art.

Following this line of argumentation, Alpers admits that it is quite difficult to say what the nature of nineteenth-century paintings with a similar visual appearance is, as compared to the nature of seventeenth-century paintings. What is clear, apparently, is that representation was perceived in the seventeenth century as the making of an artifice. Velasquez, Vermeer, Rembrandt were most probably the precursors of modernist painters, with whom color, not the individual, is the reality represented. Alpers's study foregrounds the thesis that pictorial description was perceived in its incipient phases as early as the seventeenth-century, in the works of Caravaggio, Rembrandt, and Vermeer, the master colorists of that age.

Alpers claims that the way they looked at color, namely as being an ornament and an adjunct to imitation rather than to narrative, brings them very close to the nineteenth-century realist French writers, whose representations were exclusively based on color and not on the individual. Alpers admits, however, that it is quite difficult to firmly state that it was color that brought seventeenth-century realist painters close to nineteenth-century realist French artists, particularly because there is no sure way of knowing how life was represented truly as it is "almost impossible to account for what they [the paintings] are about" (Alpers *New Literary History* 37).

Another critic and poet, Peter Barry, speaks of the "finely graded alternatives" of ekphrasis (*The Cambridge Quarterly* 155). Departing from John Hollander's classification of ekphrasis into "notional" and "actual", Barry further subdivides it into categories that support the idea that ekphrastic poetry is "at

present such a thriving sub-genre" (155). Barry starts with Hollander's definition of "actual ekphrasis" in which a genuine work of art is being described or addressed (Hollander 1995: 4), as is the case of W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts", for instance, but adds that actual ekphrasis can be further subdivided into "closed" and "open" variants. The closed type of actual ekphrasis presents the object in a frame, as in Auden's poem, which makes it quite clear that it is not introducing a real event but rather recounts what is seen in Peter Breughel the Elder's painting "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus".

In the open type of actual ekphrasis the object presented is "unframed" and therefore it can be taken as a description of an actual scene and not as a mere representation of that scene. It is the case of William Blake's poem "Tyger", particularly because it can be read as if it were describing a tiger in the jungle even though it represents both Blake's engraving and some of the paintings he had seen at Burlington House. Barry points out the fact that in the closed kind of ekphrasis its object tends to be explicit whereas in the case of open ekphrasis its object tends to be implicit (156). Barry admits the fact that in practice the most challenging examples of actual ekphrasis do not strictly observe this classification into open and closed but are located somewhere in between.

As for notional ekphrasis, Barry departs from Hollander's definition, that is "the verbal representation of purely fictional works of art" (4), and further subdivides notional ekphrasis into "fictional" and "conceptual". Fictional ekphrasis refers to purely imaginative descriptions but in "realist" terms and Barry gives the example of Browning's poem "My Last Duchess", where a duke describes a fictional work of art (a painting) but in realist terms. Conceptual ekphrasis presents an imaginary object with "supra-realist" features which no real art object could have" (Barry *The Cambridge Quarterly* 156). It is the case of Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn", where the frozen images embossed on the urn are seen in movement through the poet's artistic skills. The object represented, adds Barry, is conceptual, "one which not only doesn't but also couldn't exist" (156).

Barry also contends that there is a cross-influence between open actual ekphrasis and conceptual notional ekphrasis, as the most interesting examples of ekphrasis seem to be touching on both these types of ekphrasis. Barry concludes his theoretical preliminaries with a pertinent observation on the relationship between ekphrasis and reality. His point is that "ekphrastic poetry seems to embody an acknowledgement of the unbridgeable hermeneutic gap between poetry and the real, which is what makes it so fascinating", and adds that poetry alone cannot deal with reality itself but only with representations of reality.



A similar idea based on the fact that words will never be perfect equivalents for visual images is discussed by Gary Shapiro, in his study “The Absent Image: Ekphrasis and the ‘Infinite Relation’ of Translation” (2007). Shapiro quotes Foucault who, in an analysis of *Las Meninas*, proposes that there is an “infinite relationship” between words and visual images and that “it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say” (qtd. in Shapiro 13).

Shapiro repositions some of the French philosophers who have shown an interest in this relationship between images and words. They are Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard, and Shapiro suggests that the reader should look at them not as enemies, but as thinkers of this “infinite relationship” that implies translation from the visual to the verbal but also makes this translation or transposition practically impossible. One point of departure in this endeavor is to understand that this translation is not unfaithful to the original but, rather, as Borges noticed, that the original is unfaithful to the translation (Borges 1999 [1922-1936]: 239).

Shapiro suggests a diachronic look at ekphrasis pivoting on the idea that there is always a split between image and text, the visual and the verbal, a split that renders itself quite obvious when a text “dwells on the very absence or the dimension of absence in the work that it addresses” (Shapiro *Journal of visual Culture* 14). He suggests an analysis of ekphrasis starting as early as Homer and his description of Achilles’s shield in book 18 of the *Iliad* and moving on to the French philosophers, who dwelt on the issue of ekphrasis.

His theory rests on the assumption that ekphrasis came into being because the objects were not visible to the reader or listener. He speaks metaphorically about this absence calling it blindness and in this respect he quotes Derrida who, in *Memoirs of the Blind*, considers that drawing is itself blind; as an act rooted in memory and anticipation, drawing necessarily replaces one kind of seeing (direct) with another (mediated). Ultimately, he explains, the very lines which compose any drawing are themselves never fully visible to the viewer since they exist only in a tenuous state of multiple identities: as marks on a page, as indicators of a contour.

Lacking a “pure” identity, the lines of a drawing summon the supplement of the word, of verbal discourse, and, in doing so, obscure the visual experience. Consequently, Derrida demonstrates, the very act of depicting a blind person undertakes multiple enactments and statements of blindness and sight.

Michel Foucault understands to deal with this split between images and words in a pictorial context in his analysis of Magritte’s *This Is Not a Pipe*. He cautions us against making too flimsy a connection between art (or language) and the physical realm. On the one hand,

the viewer is quite aware that one is not looking at a pipe but rather at the picture of a pipe. On the other hand, the word *pipe* under the thing is a word that corresponds through form and structure to things one normally identifies as pipes.

For Foucault the painting is an occasion to explore the space dividing “linguistic signs and plastic elements” (Foucault 1972: 53). In Foucault’s opinion there is no connection between the title of the painting and the painting as such, between signifier and signified. Therefore he concludes: “Nowhere is there a pipe” (29). What we are left with, Foucault thinks, is an absence, and the absence is the message.

In his discussion of Magritte’s painting Foucault deploys the “archeological method” which is accurately defined in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*:

In analyzing a painting, one can reconstitute the latent discourse of the painter; one can try to recapture the murmur of his intentions, which are not transcribed into words, but into lines, surfaces and colours; one can try to uncover the implicit philosophy that is supposed to form his view of the world. It is also possible to question science, or at least the opinions of the period, and to try to recognize to what extent they appear in the painter’s work. Archaeological analysis would have another aim: it would try to discover whether space, distance, depth, colour, light, proportions, volumes and contours were not, at the period in question, considered named, enunciated, and conceptualized in a discursive practice; and whether the knowledge that this discursive practice gives rise to was not embodied perhaps in theories and speculations, in form of teaching and codes of practice, but also in processes, techniques, and even in the very gesture of the painter. It would not set out to show that the painting is a certain way of ‘meaning’ or ‘saying’ that is peculiar in that it dispenses with words. It would try to show that, at least in one of its dimensions, it is discursive practice that is embodied in techniques and effects. (193-94)

As he suggests, the archaeological method is not about the intentions of the painter, or the meaning that can be derived from the text or about cultural influences. It is rather supposed to reveal a level of “unspoken order” as Foucault describes it in *The Order of Things* (1970), the gap between a culture’s self-reflexive laws and the fundamental codes and practices of that culture (xx). This unspoken order can be examined by looking at the way a culture defines itself: how it organizes and classifies institutions; how institutions in their turn organize and classify; what it chooses to call things.



This archeological method was employed by Foucault in his major works when examining concepts of madness, medicine, discipline, insanity, etc. In this study, Foucault uses the same kind of analysis but restricted to the work of a single painter (with some references to Kandinsky and Klee). What is at stake in this study is the very notion of ekphrasis, the transfer from image to word, since the work under discussion begins to write its own commentary.

Gary Shapiro opines that descriptions of works in the absence of the image have been a constant practice ever since the Greek antiquity and continuing in contemporaneity. His main focus is on French philosophers who showed an interest in this relation between image and word but who have been indicted for reducing this experience to that of the linguistic text. His suggestion is that these French philosophers's approaches to the visual should be understood as "explorations of the necessary distance in the translation (in one direction or the other) of word and image" (Shapiro *Journal of Visual Culture* 19).

One of the philosophers Shapiro introduces is Jacques Derrida. His observations seem pertinent to the extent to which in his long "polylogue for n+1 female voices," entitled "Restitutions of the Truth in Painting," Derrida submits for exploration the analyses of Van Gogh's painting of two peasant shoes by philosopher Martin Heidegger and art historian Meyer Schapiro.

Derrida proves that the two ekphrastic speakers tried to subscribe the painting to their own projected meanings. He also contends that there is a general tendency on the part of traditional philosophical aesthetics to subordinate visual or spatial arts to language, a tendency that he sees augmented in hierarchical classifications of the kind made by Hegel and Heidegger, which privilege poetry as the principal form of art. He claims that there is a "fraudulent conspiracy" between traditional questions such as "What is art?" and these hierarchical classifications.

He contends that if a philosopher doesn't understand to transform/destroy this question he has subordinated the whole of space to the realm of the logos: "when a philosopher repeats this question without transforming it, without destroying it in its form, its question-form, its onto-interrogative structure, he has already subjected the whole of *space* to the discursive arts, to voice and the *logos*..." (qtd. in Shapiro 20).

Derrida is keenly interested in exploring the linguistic bias of the two thinkers, Heidegger and Schapiro, as made evident in their analyses of Van Gogh's painting. Heidegger, on the one hand, seems to employ conventional ekphrasis when saying "this picture spoke" in describing the world and earth of a peasant woman wearing a pair of shoes; Meyer

Schapiro, on the other hand, refers to the peasant shoes as belonging to the artist as such.

What Derrida is trying to do here is not to introduce a third interpretation of Van Gogh's painting; neither is he keen on emphasizing that the meaning of the painting is quite indeterminate; rather, he poses the question of what we are doing when we think we are verbalizing a work of art. The form of dialogue or rather polylogue chosen by Derrida contributes to the inquiry, as he is not imposing a master voice or a discourse in his study.

Jean-François Lyotard, another French philosopher, seems equally interested in analyzing the relationship between the visual and the verbal. In his book *Discours, figure* (1985 [1971]), he argues that the figural and linguistic dimensions are mutually irreducible to one another and must be understood in terms of their chiasmatic interchanges. As he suggests in *The Differend* (1988 [1983]), phrasing is the key issue of philosophy: how does one understand to speak or respond to a discourse or significance that is totally different from one's own, a discourse that may contest the claims and orientation of one's own form of utterance? In other words, ekphrasis poses the following question: how can we phrase or respond to something that is mute and transcends language? Lyotard's dialogues of *Que peindre?* (1987) concern the possibility of speaking in the presence of the visual.

This possibility of speaking in the presence of the visual is explored by Lyotard in his dialogues where he examines the works of three painters: Adami, Arakawa, and Buren. Adami seems to reduce the image to minimal, cartoon-like shorthand; Arakawa's works contain stenciled lettering and geometric figures whereas Buren's paintings consist of regular stripes of two regular colors that seem to frame, mark, ornate or sometimes simply disfigure a number of public spaces. One might think that painting is on the way to being translated into a code of standardized image (in Adami's case) or pedagogic puzzles and riddles (Arakawa) or decorative border (Buren).

Lyotard contends that if artists perform their own translations from the visual to the verbal, this does not and cannot say anything about the success or completeness of such translations. The "infinite relation", as identified by Michel Foucault, between language and painting acquires a different meaning from individual to individual. There is no unique perspective on art, Lyotard explains, but rather an intertwining and occasional conflict between the linguistic and the visible. In this respect, Foucault is right in saying that translation is an infinite relation between the visual and the verbal.



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