

Articles

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FOR AN EKPHRASTIC POETICS OF VISUAL ARTS AND REPRESENTATIONS

Abstract: The essays uses the Greek term ekphrasis, as it was conceived by the rhetoric tradition of Homerid descent, and puts it into a transdisciplinary context. Ekphrasis and ekphrastic poetics is transferred into the field of contemporary arts of representation and is used mainly as a concept to describe an interpretation tool. The key question of the essay is how can we speak about cinema, photography, theater and all the other visual narrativities, without losing significations? The author suggests that there should be a continuous conversion and reconversion of the term ekphrasis for the benefit of the the „Sister Arts”, one that allows a wider interpretation range, one that puts language and vision together. Ekphrastic poetics is a way to open the visual arts to all the new forms of expression, like the cinema of reality, visual anthropology and the urban theater representations, all of them means of translating daily life into artistic production.

Ekphrasis is a term used in early Greek rhetoric and it comes from the combination of the Greek „ek”, meaning „out” and „phrasis” meaning „to speak”. In this sense, *ekphrasis is the mere effort do describe visual works, to present in words something that is mostly imaginary, or represented in images.* Simply put, it means to represent in words something that is represented visually.

Some visual art specialists, like Nelson Goodman have expressed their mistrust in the relevance of the interpretative action itself – while not for the term ekphrasis – due to their disbelief in the relevance of verbal and textual description. For them, no verbal representation can represent the object on the same level, and with the same value as the visual representation. Describing reality, contouring it may not compete with the visual presence of the individual before of the pictures themselves (Goodman, 231).

Some other art critics have put under scrutiny the impact of such a word. W.J.T.

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VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY RESEARCH
AND THE CINEMA OF REALITY

Mitchell (Mitchell, 1995) has coined the word ekphrasis within its narrow significations, in connection with the basic poetic function (Mitchell, 153). Here ekphrasis is the „voice“ of the work of art, otherwise inexpressive. Thus ekphrasis gathers all the rhetoric efforts to depict artistic expression into mental images. On the other hand, taking over the signification attributed to the word by Murray Krieger (Krieger, 1967, later developed in Krieger, 1992), ekphrastic poetry engulfs all the productions of imaginary worlds, into a general doctrine of rhetoric, as a principle of reconstructing rationally something that is not subordinated to literary (that is textual interpretation).

For Krieger this „general principle of poetics“ restricts ekphrasis to the literary cannon, while for Heffernan ekphrasis is a representational function of art and poetry, the narrative response to pictorial products (Heffernan, p. 5).

On the positive evaluation of the term, one that abandons the literary component, we have a couple of practical definitions. One acception of ekphrasis was provided by James A.W. Heffernan (Heffernan, 2004), allowing us to move from one artistic period to another. For him ekphrasis is nothing but the art of putting into words the works of art, of transforming into a verbal representation something that belongs to the visual representation (Heffernan, p. 3). Expressing something silent into something verbal (or written) is similar to the contraction of the term in the classical notion of „*prosopopeia*“ – the

technique of having silent objects express themselves in the absence of the author.

But ekphrastic thinking should allow us to do more, while it makes possible the movement from one visual representational art to another. So basically when we discuss ekphrasis, we need to respond to the key question of all art criticism and of all media critics as well. How do we speak about cinema, photography, theater and other visual narrativities without losing their initial „aura“?

The term ekphrasis in and by itself provides one such possible answer to this question.

Between being a minor poetic function and having an all powerful universal function of rhetoric end, ekphrasis is a term not only applicable to all art history, as W.J.T. Mitchell has described it, and not an all inclusive word, as it is for Krieger.

Ekphrasis is a transcultural form that allows reading and including visual arts and their close connected domains. John Hollander, in his article on „The Poetics of Ekphrasis“, (Word and Image 4, 1988, cited by Mitchell 1994), distinguishes between a „notional“ ekphrasis, one that means the depiction of works of art that do not exist anymore, and an ekphrasis of the widely known objects of art – an ekphrasis of the present objects and one of the not visible objects. For Peter Wagner (Wagner, 1996) ekphrasis is a „visual poetics“ that is to say a narratology of the arts.

Following this lead, I would exclude the pure semiotic dimension of ekphrasis and its functions as rhetorical instrument for imaginary purposes. Neither is it a sheer

linguistic principle, intervening on the art object, nor can it be a limited approach to visual representations. Ekphrasis includes all forms of narrativities of the visual (the representations being numberless), and it is not only descriptive, but also a form of storytelling of everything that is „made visible“. Ekphrasis means, not only literary, but practically, to fully express, that is to go beyond all that is visible and everything that is explicit.

In order to understand this conceptual movement we need to go back to the Shield of Achilles, from the homerid poem, where we find the quintessence of an ekphrastic visual object – what can be called the multilayered signification and transmission of visual signs. In the eighteenth book of the Iliad, an ekphrastic object is presented as a sign created by an absent Author (in the case of the Shield by the goddess, to be given to the hero), manufactured by another (the god Haphaistos) and used by another receiver (by the hero himself). Bu the ekphrastic conversion continues since the object has a secondary function (as used by the muses to inspire Homer) and reused by this „secondary“ user to depict it to the readers, as a third party (Homer presents it in words to the Illiad reader). More deeper, on another level, the shield is a representation of power, of personal power and of the attributed (symbolical) power, moment where an ekphrastic interpretation allows the coexistence of all the interpretations of the various levels of interpretation. This multiple faced ekphrastic action and its disponibility

continues at the inter-textual level, because later we have Virgil’s account of the Iliad and even later Dante’s description of the Purgatorio, where he shows us the plurivalent nature of ekphrastic action and interpretation.

So, ekphrastic multi-layering is possible in the material sense also; the shield is both sculpture, theatrical representation, a picture in time, a literary support, artistic form and intertextual object, a multilayered signification producer. Ekphrasis is for me such a term, bringing together several forms of visual representation and allowing the „reader“ to use language in order to generate the interaction between all the forms of analysis. What I propose is a continuous conversion and reconversion of the term for the benefit of the „Sister Arts“, one that allows us to put language and vision together. More so since these related arts have opened to new forms of expression, like the cinema of reality, visual anthropology and the urban theater representations, all of them being contemporary means of translating daily life into artistic production. Nowadays visual arts have more siblings and a simple relationship between literature, rhetoric and pictorial representation is not enough any more.

Ekphrasis as a function of visual anthropology

On one hand visual anthropology has transformed picture making into an autonomous research method, by which the recording of the gestures of the human beings in their urban rituals or the visual

recording of popular culture artefacts represents an instrument of keeping our collective memory. The production of images, as a narrative form, is recording life into a reproducible reality, that can become an art form. I see visual anthropology as one of the utilitarian functions of ekphrasis. Visual anthropology, once it abandoned the „primitivist“ view of classical anthropology and the acknowledgement that – because all cultures are part of the modern world – they do not form isolated, self-contained entities, it allows a form of applied anthropology, one that was looking for communities that provided the opportunity for fieldwork, communities being in close connection with the anthropologist and the team of students.

This means that we can focus on local, small groups, not only exotic communities (like Innuits for Boaz), and by this to find our own „primitives“ and to actively interpret their objects and visual manifestations. This approach allows the experience of smaller-scale studies, focused on individuals, common objects and on their ways of expressing their own life histories, specific social contexts (such as marketplaces, gangs, shopping centers), residential units, and workplaces (as for Kemper, 1996), all integrated into a description that goes beyond the simple field notation.

In this sense, a new context for visual anthropology was provided at the turn of the twenty-first century. This key moment in the development of visual anthropology was preceded by some important publications in the late 1990s

(e.g. Banks and Morphy 1997, MacDougall 1998), and between 2000 and 2001 a series of new books, articles and websites about visual anthropology and ethnography came into the public domain. Between them these texts have considered the history of visual anthropology (e.g. Ruby 2000, Grimshaw 2001, cited in „Visual Anthropology Review“ 17(2) 2001 2) and suggested a means by which visual methods of research and representation might play a fuller role in ethnography as a whole (Pink 2006, Edgar forthcoming) and as an opening to other functions of anthropology.

The photographic component of visual anthropology

Another level is the photographic component of ekphrastic interpretation. Although Roland Barthes in his article from 1961, 'Le message photographique', has put photography among the „unspeakable“ visual arts, photography is turning, more and more, into one of the most commonly used instrument to generate self identity in the contemporary social structures. Ekphrastic intervention on photographic images gives them voice and power within the area of social relevance. A „still“ image, suspended in its own aesthetic function is hard to be put into words, but a photographic depiction of objects and people in a reality that ceases to exist generate ekphrastic power. Visual recording of „anthropological facts“, that is of the human manifestations, is not just a practical activity, with an exclusively technological component, but also a space

for human sciences dialogue. In this respect the most developed field of research – from the stand point of researching human activities by means of visual technologies – remains visual anthropology. As it was created and structured by Alfred Cort Haddon, Baldwin Spencer, Franz Boas, Marcel Griaule, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, visual anthropology was generated by the association between the technologies of recording culture with the interest for the social rituals of all the “manifestations of humanity” (according to Sol Worth, 1980). Visual representation of what humanity is, by means and techniques specific to photographic or cinematographic documentary, a basic instrument of qualitative research. Applying these methods within the field of the arts of the spectacle has become a research necessity.

Ekphrastic approach on theater and theatrical representations of reality

Theater, on the other hand, can be opened to an ekphrastic dimension, deeper than the mere theatrical criticism or depiction. By this I mean that contemporary theater deals with the transdisciplinary nature of all contemporary “visual recordings” of reality, visual anthropology, the theater of the daily life, video arts and so on. In our post-modern societies the power of image narrativity has engulfed most of the “ceremonial” forms of humanity in the urban space, starting with dance and street theater, all of the performance arts, urban arts, popular culture and so on; but, in the same time, it entered the intimate

space, by means of visual autofictions, videoblogs, and so on. So urban arts and culture involve the participation of every individual and its daily existence within the visual field, which means an almost physical presence in media and cultural activities belonging to the arts of the spectacle. Moving from “primitive cultures” as study object towards studying “urban culture” means the changing of the very understanding of the life of individuals considered to be “marginals”. The studies developed by Robert Park, E.W. Burgess and the Chicago University School made possible the creation of specialised centers, like the one that functions in the United States, in Philadelphia, since 1969 (The Center for Urban Ethnography), that allows the interest for groups considered to be at the “outskirts” of society, for ethnic communities or for other social parts of urban life – to be researched by means of cinema techniques and by other arts of the spectacle.

Personal testimonies of individuals (from disenfranchised or minority groups) can become the basis for self representation in a dramatic mix, one of ekphrastic relevance. Theatrical performances based on personal experiences, recorded on video and/or with the use of the technical means of cinema, photography and other visual media, may further develop our understanding of the relationship between the object viewed and the subject that sees.

The term is designed to put into place the means to include an all engulfing art form, for instance the act of ethnographic

study with the theatrical representation and the photographic recording, to introduce video camera in the process of recording social spaces otherwise inaccessible to „public viewing”, spaces like night asilums, shelters for people with social problems, prisons etc. (One of the exemples here being the movie made by Frederick Wiseman: „TiticuttFollies”), an approach that allows the treatment of such „sensible” subjects from a far more deeper sense than a simple sociological or psychological stand-point, but also from their multiple visual and textual relevance. The theatrical experience can contain elements from docudrama and melodrama, from oral history and personal accouts, using, for example, the technique of Augusto Boal, to try to generate a social change by means of the arts of the spectacle, and not a simple „interpretation” of the visual.

Ekphrasis and the rhetoric of cinema

The cinema of the reality has put together a new field of visual production that was at the interesection between documentary jurnalism, photography, urban anthropology, the theater of reality and many other artistic activities like visual sociology, cultural studies, the movie theory, the history of photography and the studies on urban performance arts. Starting with the “observational” cinema (as described by Peter Ian Crawford, 1992, p. 77), the „literary” translation of a culture from the ethnographical practices was slowly substituted – in the XXth century ethnography – by strategies of

representation that belong to cinema as an art. „Representing culture”, a fundamental objective of qualitative research (see James Clifford 1997, p. 19), does not belong strictly to sociology based research, with heavily quantifiable data, but also to each and every form of picture production. Ekphrastic approach is, in this sense, a „thicker” recount of reality, in the very sense Clifford Geertz has put it.

The problems of urban cinematographers, including the basic techniques of *cinema-vérité* (as practiced by Jean Rouch), elements from direct cinematography (with exemples from Richard Leacock or D.A. Pennebaker productions), the rhetoric of movies like those of Roberto Rossellini and the italian film school (de Sica, Visconti, Passolini), all of these issues have applyable consequences into the contemporary visual production and interpretation.

These specific techniques, which have narrowed the borders of documentary movies and fiction cinema, have elaborated an entire art of “history recording”, by means of cinematographic instruments, and they are wide opened to discussions and, more, to practical exercises in an ekphrastic approach. Viewing and commenting visual products of the neo-realism “cinema revolution”, and productions belonging to docufiction from Scandinavian and Danish moviemaking (Lars von Trier being one of them) or projects like “Blair Witch Project” can represent a basis for coments and discussions moving beyond simple „literary translation”.

Observational cinematography, the language of “*cinéma-vérité*”, “direct cinema”, the new “mockumentaries”, social documentaries (developed by Barbara Kopple and continued in the United States by the „Michael Moore phenomenon”), are interpretative contexts where video documentary is converging with visual autofiction, where the techniques of modern cinema allow the expansion of the limits between fiction, art film and the recording of reality. Following the concept of “*cinéaste plongeur*” (as defined by Edgar Morin), the visual producer dives into life only to gather the depths of reality by participation. Here ekphrastic involvement means not only the involvement of artists and producers of visual materials into everyday reality, but also the mutual action of the reader/viewer. Since the fundamental concepts of urban cinematography have their roots in the trans-cultural role of observational cinema, this allows the participants to develop their own personal approaches to visual production.

One of the main objectives of describing the term ekphrasis in such a way is to develop a method and a practical way to apply multiple interpretations and reactions within the field of all the arts of the spectacle – cinema, urban theater, all other image productions like photographic, video arts and so on. One central level of ekphrastic approach is that it enables us to use pictures to describe and interpret human behaviour

and of turning these pictures into another level of interpretation. For instance, in theatrical representation, body language elements, body movements in public space, analysing gestures and emotions as well as other „visible” aspects of urban culture, can become fundamental manifestations of cultural expressions. At their turn, these manifestations would further be processed and included in other artistic forms, themselves „readable” and subject to several readings. The description of the ways images and other visual media (photography, film, video camera generated images or other ways of image recording), which offer pictoriality and life to ethnographic information can be put into place within a secondary transformation, are very useful in the development of a social group memory and in the artistic understanding.

As a methodological end, the term ekphrasis allows an approach that integrates all the research methods in the field of qualitative studies (coming from phenomenological thinking, psychoanalytical approaches and so on) and will generate illustrative contexts for developing personal and practical knowledge of the visual works. This means a cooperation among specialists from various fields of the arts of the spectacle, of anthropology and of cinema and television production, all making possible an interdisciplinary dialogue, so necessary for the specific practices of these domains.

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