EKPHRASIS – BETWEEN THE REPRESENTATION OF SPEECH AND THE VERBAL REPRESENTATION OF VISUAL REPRESENTATION

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Abstract: Defining written language as a representation of oral language has been considered as resembling the association of painting and poetry, which has further permitted theorists to focus on the manner visual representations are turned into verbal representations. This represents a definition of ekphrasis set forth by several twentieth-century critics and theorists in their strife for settling down an issue that haunted human mind and perception throughout history: from the doctrine of 'ut pictura poesis' and the simplest meaning of ekphrasis, as a description of a work of visual art, to the subsequent generalizing principle, emphasizing the "still moment" that freezes literature's temporality into the spatiality of the visual representation, ekphrasis appears to be given infinite possibilities.

Keywords: ekphrasis, language, representation, visual arts, literary art.

Theorists have often noticed that writing seems to be the medium of absence and craftiness to the extent to which images are the medium of presence and nature. Meanwhile, at times, poets and rhetoricians have attempted at forging a mixed form of writing that was supposed to encompass both the word and the image, which finally resulted in the theory of matching language and vision. The concept, connected with the rhetoric device of enargeia and assimilated with the pictorialist tradition, was magnificently represented in the nineteenth century by Blake's mixed art of words and images. Blake was singular among the important romantic poets of the period and is acknowledged to have rejected obscurity as the source of the sublime, while making explicit the special relation between image and word as well as his commitment to consider that writing and printing are "media capable of full presence, not as mere supplements to speech." (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1994: 117)

Paralleling the pictorialist tradition and its "aesthetics of visibility", but opposing them, a different nineteenth-century theoretical approach chose to maintain the boundaries between word and image, in its struggle to assert that language is the most suitable medium capable of contriving essences, which cannot be rendered by images.

This antipictorialist shift that was dominant among the nineteenth-century romantic poets praised imagination as the only power capable of transcending "mere visualization". Relying on Burke's essay on the sublime, the antipictorialist tradition rejected language's capacity of creating images in the audience's mind, owing to the fact that language should only confine to the presentation of the incomprehensible, which cannot be visually represented. Its corollary, the "aesthetics of invisibility", is considered to have assumed the superiority of words to images and of oral discourses to the written ones, matching the romantic poets' attempt at integrating oral traditions in poetry, and their apprehension with the printed form of words.

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This two-fold context has established new grounds for the assessment of the relation between the oral and the written language, where written language becomes the representation of speech and a medium in itself.

Defining written language as a representation of oral language has been considered as resembling the association of painting and poetry, which has further permitted theorists to focus on the manner visual representations are turned into verbal representations. This represents a definition of ekphrasis set forth by several twentieth-century critics and theorists in their strife for settling down an issue that haunted human mind and perception throughout history: from the doctrine of 'ut pictura poesis' and the simplest meaning of ekphrasis, as a description of a work of visual art, to the subsequent generalizing principle of Murray Krieger emphasizing the "still moment" that freezes literature's temporality into the spatiality of the visual representation, ekphrasis appears to be given infinite possibilities.

According to W. J. T. Mitchell (1994: 127), these wide perspectives allowed by the apparently endless verbal representations of visual representations are, nonetheless, ruled by three stages that together are considered to transcend the image/ text division and bring to forth an image-text or verbal icon.

Grounding their reasoning on the characteristic elements of the various media and the afferent modes of perception, those who assert the impossibility of ekphrasis are supposed to establish "ekphrastic indifference" as a key term of the approach. Although verbal representations may describe, cite, or invoke their object, nonetheless, they are perceived as incapable of 'representing' their object in the same manner as visual representations do. In short, an ekphrasis appears as impossible to exist. Ekphrasis is consequently ranged among the minor literary genres and attributed a marginal role, consisting in a poem describing a work of visual art, despite the fact that the subject has a long history which can be traced to the shield of Achilles.

In the opinion of Mitchell (1994: 152), this first stage of "ekphrastic indifference" is followed by a second phase called "ekphrastic hope", which relies on the doctrine of 'ut pictura poesis' and the 'Sister Arts', subordinating language to vision, in an attempt to represent, before the mind's eye, places, pictures, or persons: "this is the phase when the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we discover a 'sense' in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do: 'to make us see'." "Ekphrastic hope" is considered to centre around free exchanges between the visual and the verbal art allowing the previously mentioned minor meaning of ekphrasis to develop into a wider and more profound expression that is further assimilated to a "general principle" (Krieger 1994), whose fundamental elements are vision, iconicity, and the "still moment".

In the end, a third stage of ekphrasis, called "ekphrastic fear", comes out of the acknowledgement that no differences could be perceived between the visual and the verbal representation and that the "imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually" (W. J. T. Mitchell 1994: 155). Such an acknowledgement should be, nonetheless, resisted, as the exchanges between the two arts are feared to express a rather obscure status, which could only be counterbalanced by solid delineations of the two manners of representation. The third phase of ekphrasis appears to have direct determinations exactly upon the elements praised by the second phase (iconicity, vision, and the "still moment"), which become void of significance and come to be regarded as deceitful illusions. The attempt at constructing an ekphrasis through textual renderings of images, capable of functioning as

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"windows onto reality", is no longer acclaimed and the conversion of the verbal art into an iconic spatiality, specific to the visual arts, starts to be assumed as obsessive.

In the opinion of W. J. T. Mitchell (1994: 157), the dual character of ekphrasis, as it comes out of the three-phases approach, asserting, for instance, the condition of ekphrasis both as a minor poetic genre and as a universal principle of poetics, should be reassessed in terms of "otherness", which he defines, with reference to ekphrastic poetry, as the texts' meeting with their "semiotic others", that is with the visual arts' modes of representation. And, according to the theorist, these elements of "otherness", represented by the antagonist cluster of terms proposed by semiotics, supporting the existence of oppositions separating the two media, fail, in fact, to operate clear distinctions between the symbolic, temporal, conventional, and aural features that exclusively characterize the literary medium and the iconic, spatial, natural, and visual features that represent only the visual arts medium. Moreover, such oppositions should be analyzed in terms of their relations with the context of their occurrence.

Consequently, in language, the "ekphrastic encounter" involves a formal patterning (image) that is impossible to literally materialize: instead of revealing its presence, the "other" is constraint to a fictive presence which, nevertheless, is required to shape the structure of its verbal counterpart (through the vividness of description or enargeia, for instance).

The assertion of this type of representational issues and sign understanding is considered to represent the core of the ekphrastic hope which, in the opinion of Krieger (1992: 107) converts "the transparency of … verbal medium into the physical solidity of the medium of the spatial arts."

On the contrary, the partisans of the ekphrastic fear have asserted that, although ekphrastic poetry is able to "speak to, for, or about works of visual art" (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1994: 158), the visual object, which ekphrastic poetry refers to, should not be perceived as affecting the verbal structure of the poem or, to put this in other words, ekphrasis is not entitled to a special condition, owing to the fact that the descriptions of works of visual art do not differ from the descriptions of other objects and, accordingly, ekphrasis may be perceived as a general form of description.

Nonetheless, the ekphrastic issue is considered as originating in the misunderstanding of both the media of representation and the meaning of texts and images, which results in a malfunctioning that considers the medium as if it were the message. The assumptions that traits, such as spatiality or corporeality, are specific only to the visual arts, while narration and argumentation exclusively belong to the literary art, should be re-evaluated from a semantic point of view. Furthermore, certain theorists have asserted the idea that the effects operated by the visual art works and texts on the viewer/ reader (listener) are quite similar, so that the speculations regarding the necessity of distinctive ekphrastic devices, required with a view of annihilating the differences between the two media, is pointless. In terms of reference, intention, and effects, the two media share common grounds that are determined by the condition of their traits, which appears not to be medium-specific: pictures, for instance, are also able to "tell stories" while texts may, at their turn, depict spatiality.

It has also been pointed that, although texts and images appear not to exhibit a considerable semantic difference, the verbal medium is significantly different from the visual medium in terms of materials, forms and institutional traditions.

The previous considerations on ekphrasis involve relations between a speaking subject and a seen object that have emerged as a three phase verbal representation of a visual representation. Meanwhile, theorists have emphasized that ekphrasis can also be analyzed from

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the perspective of the relations established between the speaker and the audience. In the opinion of Mitchell (1994: 164), ekphrasis places the speaker in the middle of the axis that displays, at one of its poles, the ekphrastic object and, at the other one, the audience (listener/ reader). And, in the case when "ekphrastic hope" is achieved, the audience manages to "see" the object of ekphrasis, a process that appears to turn the bipolar axis mentioned previously into a "triangular relationship", displaying both the "conversion of the visual representation into a verbal representation" and "the reconversion of the verbal representation back into the visual object in the reception of the reader."

The fundamental idea that such considerations on ekphrasis involve is that, far from being a minor genre or an ornamental characteristic of literary texts, ekphrasis may claim the position of a principle, attempting at revealing the semiotic and perceptual contradictions characterizing verbal representations in relation with visual art, which could be ultimately assimilated to "otherness" and which, in order to show this "otherness", rely both on the subject matter and on the type (painting, engraving, urn, etc.) of the visual representation.

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