FROM EKPHRASIS AS ICON TO THE ORGANIC FORM AND DIGITAL EKPHRASIS

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Abstract: The separation of signs into sensible and intelligible, with the first ones used by visual arts and the second ones by verbal arts, made possible the dissociation between natural signs and arbitrary-conventional signs. It appeared that, with a view to represent an object, which could be identified with its existent correspondent (as in representational visual arts), no difficulties were to be encountered; therefore, a related, unambiguous process was expected to be dealt with in the representation of objects by words seen as the embodiment of enargeia. Renaissance witnessed the setting forth of an ekphrastic theory that focused on enargeia as the equivalent of imitation, with a twist: ekphrasis appeared to have shifted from the representation of sensible reality (as pictures do) towards the representation of intelligible reality. The understanding of the representation as 'image' or 'icon' did not require the imitation of external reality, anymore. Subsequently, modernism went even further and asserted that all the arts – visual arts included – operated as linguistic signs and demanded interpretation. The mimetic function of all the arts is thus considered to require its subordination to the conventions that determined the manner of creating and perceiving them. The signs of all the arts, visual arts included, acquire, with modernism, an arbitrary and conventional character. Further, twentieth century brought under debate the notion of digital ekphrasis, which attempts at shifting the focus from the verbal representation of a visual representation towards the corporeality of the work and the receiver's multisensory experience with that work.

Keywords: ekphrasis, natural/arbitrary sign, icon, organic form, digital interface.

In the opinion of certain theorists (Krieger, 1992: 114), spoken and written word stirred, over the centuries, discussions that focused on words as "magical instruments", which resulted into an alternative type of ekphrastic theory. It is considered that the Renaissance critic, Jacopo Mazzoni, had started his theory of ekphrasis from the concept of enargeia, which he considered to be the equivalent of imitation, though, with a significant difference: that of representing images of a particular type, which were attributed the appellation of icons/ idols. The assertion, in fact, set forth the making of an ekphrasis out of translating enargeia into a specific verbal device, and Mazzoni empowered the narrative poem (an alternative to Plato's characteristic of the drama) with the capacity of carrying out the shift: the poet, who still created verbal representations that resembled the images created by the painter, did not address to the sensible experience anymore but to intelligence, through the use of poetic metaphor. Mazzoni appeared to have given verbal art the endless possibility of making use of verbal imagination, as his understanding of the representation as 'image'/ 'icon' did not require the imitation of external reality.

It has been inferred (Krieger, 1992: 120) that Mazzoni's call for images in a narrative poem is not to be read as a call for the presence of the object of representation; instead, it is viewed as a way of enabling the poet to manipulate his verbal images in a manner that resembles the painter's forging his visible images while, nonetheless, addressing to the intelligible realm and not to the sensible one.

Mazzoni (1983: 85-6) ultimately identified poetry with the representation of the fabulous and assimilated the 'credible' with the rhetoric. Although both poetry and rhetoric were imitations and represented 'verisimilar' images, rhetoric was understood as displaying only credible representations, while poetry was perceived as representing "the credible as marvellous",

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irrespective of its truth or falseness. In accordance, the realm of the credible came to incorporate new dimensions and ekphrasis surpassed the impulse of functioning as a verbal imitation of a picture, by escaping its dependence on the natural external sign and appropriating verbal inventions:

"… the credible insofar as it is credible is the subject of rhetoric and the credible insofar as it is marvellous is the subject of poetry, for poetry must not only utter credible things but also marvellous things. And for this reason when it can do so credibly, it falsifies human and natural history and passes beyond them to impossible things." (Mazzoni, 1983: 85-86)

Krieger pointed out that, in order to reach independence from representing "historical reality or like-historical reality", Renaissance critics, Mazzoni included, asserted that the epic had to arouse wonder in the audience as poets cannot be constraint in inventing fictitious representations. Consequently, mimeticism (as a faithful copy of a natural sign) tended to be replaced by "fictitious imitation".

It has also been asserted that Mazzoni's "verbal images" (for instance, the description on Achill's shield) were metaphorical representations, not mimetic descriptions, and determined in the audience "the illusion of the absent visual image of the object as if it were present", opposing to the visual image, which gave the "illusion of the absent object as if it were present." (Krieger, 1992: 138) The theory has been acknowledged by critics as having opened the path for the multiple-reading and interpreting of the verbal art. 'Ut pictura poesis' shifted from representing sensible reality (as pictures do) towards representing intelligible reality. Accordingly, it has been asserted that the word art addresses to the 'mind's eye', which makes possible the capturing of the intelligible, by human mind that relies, at its turn, on interpretation and re-interpretation in order to thoroughly reflect that intelligible reality.

The concept of ekphrasis understood as a verbal representation of a visual representation is thus considered to have acquired a different characteristic: representation no longer reflects sensible reality/ sensible objects, as visual arts do, but develops into a representation of intelligible reality/ intelligible objects that becomes primordial in the case of the word art.

Certain critical opinions set forth in the twentieth century pointed out that, during the last two centuries, a series of theories appeared to express their interest in the renewal of the conception of form, placed under the auspices of imagination and related to the doctrine of 'organicism'. Philosopher August Wilhelm Schlegel (1906: 42-7), displaying his considerations upon Shakespeare and Coleridge in his essays, asserted the "organic form" as the guiding line of Shakespeare's mastery. The stress was laid on an internal code of poetry that grows with the verbal creation and obeys, meanwhile, certain inner formal controls, which were also internally developed:

"The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material; … The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life is, such is the form. Nature, the prime genial artist, inexhaustible in diverse powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms." (Schlegel, 1906: 42-7)

According to Krieger, the theory of organic form conceived poems as natural objects endowed by their human creators with a formal completeness that proved to manifest in endless forms. Consequently, based on that concept, representation appeared to have moved off the natural-sign tradition, which was directed from the outside milieu towards its human mind image; instead, human mind was emphasized as the "prime form-maker", while the work of art ceased to be the imitation of an existing natural shape. Furthermore, the work of art was given the characteristics of a biological entity. Different, both from the conception of the natural sign and from the vision of nature that speaks through the poet, the hereby theory assimilated the making of poetry with the creative impulse in nature, which generated infinite biological forms. As enforced by Krieger, "the organic metaphor" shifted "the poem into its own sort of natural sign" (Krieger, 1992: 201) and eventually resulted in a spatial fixity that supplanted the temporality of literature.

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Accordingly, the modernist theories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, relying on the "organic metaphor" theory, attributed to language both a temporal dimension shaped by experience and a spatial form arising from the form-making capacity of the human mind. This two-fold characteristic of language as a medium of poetry determined the leading position of poetry among the arts, stated by the modernist theories; and, with the verbal art acquiring the status of model, visual arts were then required to emulate the former's two-sided semiotics, in an attempt at determining them to give away literal mimesis (merely reproducing objects). The new theoretical approaches went even further and asserted that all the arts – visual arts included – operated as linguistic signs and demanded interpretation.

The mimetic function of all the arts is thus considered to require its subordination to the conventions that determined the manner of creating and perceiving them. The signs of all the arts, visual arts included, acquire, with modernism, an arbitrary and conventional character. Language comes to be regarded as bearing in itself both temporality, emerging from experience, and spatiality arising from organicism and leading to a formalism that perceives the work of art as a thorough system of inner connections.

And, in asserting this demand of subordinating all mimetic impulse to the conventional character of all arts, emphasis is laid, subsequently, on the role of the reader/ audience, whose task is to focus on the devices employed by the arts in order to create patterns, which are going to be perceived by the readers. Once having become conscious of such devices, the audience is no longer tricked by what exhibits itself as if it were a natural sign. (Gombrich, 1959: 305-6) Owing to such considerations, even still-life paintings appear to have ceased being perceived as imitations or substitutes for reality; they become illusions made possible by their own medium.

The notion of arts' illusionary medium was further related to the spatial dimension of poetry, which it determines, resulting in what Krieger (1992: 213) defined as the "integrity" of the poem, resembling that of an object produced by the plastic arts. Nonetheless, space in poetry seems not to be defined in conformity to the visual features, but "as taking up its own place", owing to a different use of language (identified with the medium for poetry) that stills arbitrary signs into a spatial configuration (scarcely able to be represented visually), which is the poem itself. And in doing that, the poem that imitates the condition of the sculpture or painting as a physical art object – and not as an external object – becomes the "ultimate ekphrasis". Understood as a "verbal emblem", ekphrasis could then be defined as a poem that imitates the completeness of form of its visual object of imitation, by seeking its own form:

"The emblem is the ultimate ekphrasis, as natural-sign mimesis – even of works of the visual arts – was not. In the ekphrastic emblem what is to be imitated is not just an object external to the poem, as the individual work of sculpture or the painting was the object of imitation for the ekphrasis in the most literal use of that term… What is rather to be imitated is the status of sculpture or painting as a physical art object. That status is achieved for the poem by its making a claim to an integrity like that of an object created by the plastic arts, an integrity marked by the wholeness of that spatial character which results from the exploitation of a sensuous (or an illusionary sensuous) medium. The poem, then, would, …, imitate the spatial object by being one too." (Krieger, 1992: 226)

The role of the receiver/ audience is once again emphasized by twentieth-century experience with verbal and visual representations, when, in accordance to Cecilia Lindhe (2013:18), the notion of digital ekphrasis was brought under debate and mainly understood as basically attempting at shifting the focus from what has been termed by Heffernan as the verbal representation of a visual representation towards the corporeality of the work and the receiver's multisensory experience with that work. The concept has been traced to the ancient condition of ekphrasis, relying upon the notion of 'immediacy', which is further perceived as a characteristic of electronic literature. Ruth Webb, in *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuation in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (2009: 195), also cited by Lindhe (2013: 18) and referring to the rhetorical descent of ekphrasis, assumes that ekphrasis and enargeia imply live, effective interactions occurring between speaker and

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receiver and reminds the latter's participation in the course of events, allowing a reconsideration of ekphrasis in terms of interaction and proximity.

The pregnant role of both the visual and the verbal attributed to rhetoric in Antiquity, its sense of performance as well as the emphasis on audience seem to find their present-day counterpart in digital interactive installations: "Rereading the printed *ekphrasis* by way of the ancient emphasis on *enargeia* and the immediacy of the rhetorical multisensory situation, and further taking into consideration the dependence upon physical interaction of digital works, the process of visualization, or differently put, the constant tension between presence and absence together with physical interaction, becomes the constituting factor of *ekphrasis*. … the digital interface as a critical lens could renegotiate rhetorical and aesthetic theories, but also offer new ways to think about the specificity of print – for example, to see the printed codex as an interactive object rather than a static artifact." (Lindhe, 2013: 21)

In the opinion of Lindhe, digital ekphrasis appears to be defined as a complementary concept, which, far from denying modern and post-modern theories on the subject, aims at setting forth fresh approaches, encompassing both nowadays technology and general cultural and aesthetic practices, whose meanings would be accordingly enriched. The insistence on immediacy, orality, and tactility comes out of the digital interface that "encourages the spectator to touch the artifact and thus positions the entire body as essential for the experience and interpretation of the artwork." (Lindhe, 2013: 2).

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