Ekphrasis in the Digital Age: Responses to Image

Renate Brosch
University of Stuttgart

Abstract   This introduction briefly surveys the current expansion of ekphrasis in terms of genres, visual objects, modes of writing, and cues for reader response. Drawing on suggestions from the subsequent individual essays that provide categories for organizing the great variety of ekphrases, such as pictured and picture-less, mimetic and transformed, notional and actual, abbreviated and described, printed and screen, canonical artwork and non-art image, narrative and poetic ekphrasis, the introduction further discusses ekphrastic theories with a specific focus on their relevance to its practices and cultural functions in the present media ecology. Despite its increasing frequency in recent years, theoretical conceptualizations have largely remained committed to traditional paradigms, such as competition ("paragone") and representation (Heffernan 1993: 1). What appears to be wanting is a revival of rhetorical and performative understandings of ekphrasis that can augment theoretical conceptualizations and bring them into line with the participatory and hybrid practices of ekphrasis today. Increasingly, what used to be a central aim of ekphrasis—the description of an artwork—has been replaced by modes of rewriting the artwork and in the process questioning accepted meanings, values, and beliefs, not just relating to the particular artwork in question but referencing the ways of seeing and the scopic regimes of the culture at large. Since these changes in writing and reading practices tend toward increasing the participation of the reader, a more meta-representational and rhetorical conceptualization of ekphrasis is desirable. From a functional perspective, I argue that the traditional purpose of ekphrasis to interrogate ways of seeing has acquired new urgency in today's media landscape.

Keywords   digital media, ekphrastic theory, performative, response

To consider the specifics of ekphrasis at the present time offers a welcome opportunity to review some of the commonplaces that remain tenaciously attached to ekphrasis studies. The most tedious of these is a "narrow notion" (Johnston et al. 2015: 1) of ekphrasis that adheres to its standard definition as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (Heffernan 1993: 1). Many theorists now feel that a critical revision of this limited idea of "representation of representation" is long overdue (Kennedy 2012: 7). Moreover, the narrow concept of ekphrasis foregrounds its intermedial quality by insisting on the binary opposition between two sign systems. In introducing visual culture studies almost three decades ago, W. J. T. Mitchell deconstructed the dichotomy of the visual and the verbal, claiming that all meaning arises from the interplay of the visual and the verbal and that all media are mixed media (Mitchell 1994: 5, 161). If these two modes are always inextricably mixed, then the above definition by James Heffernan is reductive. A broader view of ekphrasis would take account of an expanded domain of visual images available for ekphrastic writing as well as of the fact that it is not a visual representation being represented but the perception of a visual image that is translated into verbal form (Barbetti 2011: 11).

By concentrating on recent instances, the present volume shifts the focus from a difference between sign systems or characteristic features to an interest in adaptive and collaborative processes. It no longer concentrates on representation but rather on cultural performance. This shift in interest and interpretive frame is occasioned partly by the changes in ekphrastic practice due to digital technologies and by the attendant need to revise theoretical considerations. Semiotic or representational considerations are no longer adequate to what is going on in a large and multifarious field and should give way to conceptualizations of phenomena like ekphrasis not as static entities, but as cultural agents with the power to elicit certain effects and to perform certain functions. By understanding ekphrasis as a performative gesture, we can avoid the need to specify and thus to circumscribe the visual content. Such an understanding also productively bypasses the emphasis on representation that was foregrounded in Heffernan's well-known, but increasingly contested definition. A performative approach to cultural analysis in general understands culture not as a container of works and texts but as a fluid network of processes and events made up of embodied practices that impact on society. In other words, this approach avoids a purely media-centered examination and directs attention to what ekphrastic agency achieves for the text, the reader, and the wider cultural field (Brosch 2015).

The articles in the present collection share a broad conception of ekphrasis, expanding it beyond the traditional centrality of visual art and literature.[1] In view of this expansion and the corresponding efforts to expand the theoretical conceptualization, it may be best to imagine a variety of ekphrastic occurrences along a spectrum or range of differing degrees and types of visual input, varieties of reference, and differences in audience address, such as Liliane Louvel's typological contribution provides. David Kennedy's case study of an unusual example also makes suggestions for extending the categories of ekphrasis. Thus, one of the assumptions of the present volume is that enormous changes have taken place in ekphrastic practice since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The variety of instances—in traditional as well as "new" media—makes a comprehensive account in the present format impossible. Instead, we have brought together critical discussions of a wide range of different case studies that diverge in their theoretical assumptions, too. In order to move beyond a limited art-and-highbrow-literature framework, many contributions to this volume adopt a functional approach, as recommended by Gabriele Rippl in a recent handbook on intermediality (Rippl 2015), an approach which explores the cultural work ekphrasis performs in a particular time and space.

Taking my cue from Emma Kafalenos's contribution, I suggest a simple definition of ekphrasis that is oriented toward present-day practices: ekphrasis is a literary response to a visual image or visual images. This definition eschews the reductive notion of a defining set of formal features. While avoiding iconographic specification, it recognizes what must be acknowledged in the present diversity, that ekphrasis emerges from a mode of articulation and its interaction with an audience—hence, the definition's emphasis on performance and response. At the same time, this definition is able to encompass fully fledged extended instances as well as abbreviated ekphrastic references that emerge as mere traces of a visual art work. It describes a process rather than a one-on-one relation, more specifically a response process that can take a variety of forms and involve a variety of projections. By naming a process rather than a state, it respects the double temporality inherent in ekphrastic references to real historical objects. By emphasizing the performative instead of the mimetic, this definition gestures toward effects at the level of reception and audience, factors that need to be taken into account more than they have been by traditional theories.[2] Such an approach relies on an awareness of the audience that looks both ways: toward the

1. Since each article is preceded by an abstract, there is no need to summarize the individual contributions here.

2. Such an approach was suggested for classical instances of ekphrasis by Simon Goldhill, who concludes that ekphrasis is part of a system that functions "to produce a cultivated and cultured

public domain in which any form of expression must seek resonance as well as toward the experiential reading processes in the response to an ekphrastic text.

To examine this experiential quality means to take into account the persuasive function of ekphrasis, its capacity to appeal to an embodied and emotional response, and thus to consider questions of address and poetic strategy, platforms of transmission, contexts of articulation and effect, just as the writers, artists, and other "producers" of ekphrasis themselves do. For a comprehensive assessment of functions and effects we need to pay attention to response, and this response is first and foremost an embodied cognitive reaction (where the "cognitive" includes not only conscious awareness, but emotional and pre-verbal states as well). However, the analysis of cognitive processes should not be an end in itself, but rather a pathway toward understanding the agency of ekphrasis in the cultural imaginary.

1. Ekphrasis in the Present Media Landscape

It is perhaps a curious phenomenon that ekphrasis exerts a continuing fascination at the present time, even though the prevalence of images in household media would seem to have made description superfluous. The last two or three decades have seen an endless supply and demand of images, whose ready availability on the World Wide Web changes practices and expectations regarding the visual. In 1996 Jay David Bolter claimed that "the breakout of the visual in contemporary prose and multimedia is a denial of *ekphrasis*. Popular prose and multimedia are striving for the natural sign in the realm of the visual rather than through heightened verbal expression" (Bolter 1996: 265). Recalling an older argument put forward by Murray Krieger, Bolter perceives a contemporary dominance of the virtual and the visual. Similarly, Marie-Laure Ryan predicted a few years later that ekphrasis would become redundant: "in an advanced VR [virtual reality] system there will be no need for *ekphrasis*—the verbal description of a visual artwork—because the system will encompass all forms of representation, action and signification" (Ryan 2001: 60–61). However, at the present moment, the reverse is the case: the frequency of ekphrasis has increased rather than decreased in the last two and a half decades. In spite of what is often considered a visual overabundance on the World Wide Web, ekphrastic occurrences are surprisingly

citizen of Empire, who knows how . . . to play the game of competitive self-scrutiny as a performer of culture" (Goldhill 2007: 19).

prevalent in recent novels, poems, short stories, and in drama, with no signs of remission.

Could it be that ekphrasis, far from being a minor and outmoded phenomenon in older literary texts, has acquired a particular relevance to our current cultural debates? One reason to explain the continuing interest in ekphrasis may be the very prevalence of images, given that ekphrasis responds to and participates in the culture of images. Something in ekphrasis must still speak to its recipients in a way that reproductions do not, and that increases their appeal and pertinence. Elizabeth Loizeaux suggests as much when she remarks that the availability of images in the digital age has actually increased their fascination, or at least that of certain kinds of images (Loizeaux 2008: 3). This observation can point two ways: on the one hand, because images are everywhere, to evoke them is to create a shared knowledge platform, from which to open communication. Individual memory has recourse to almost unlimited storage systems nowadays, which make a vast amount of pictorial material recognizable for web users transnationally. This aspect of an enlarged cultural memory of images would explain instances of ekphrasis that facilitate imagination via abbreviation; the mere mention of an iconic image ensures shared visualization. On the other hand, the omnipresence of visual images would suggest that they are a little-valued resource, as is everything that we are free to use without charge or effort. In order to be especially noticed, some surplus or boost is necessary such as a surprising combination of visual and verbal can provide. This second aspect captures a central purpose in ekphrastic writing—the transformation of images to produce a sense of novelty and defamiliarization.

Obviously for recipients in global media society, where images are accessible everywhere, ekphrasis must have different uses than in former times when readers were usually unacquainted with the images described. Today's readerships encounter art descriptions in a situation of the all-pervading availability, proliferation, adaptation, and citation of images. The "new media" circulate content "across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders" (Jenkins 2008: 3). New technological opportunities have brought about new practices and protocols. This is a top-down technology- and market-driven process as well as a bottom-up consumer-driven one (ibid.: 18). Visual and audiovisual products travel around the globe creating migratory images and transcultural horizons of expectation. The consumption of mass media throughout the world greatly influences modes of reception of verbal as well as visual events. In the digital era vastly different media and means of access coexist, while images are constantly morphing, shape-shifting, and moving into new contexts. According to Henry Jenkins, one of the effects of this proliferation is "convergence," that

is, a cultural situation in which producers and users interact in unpredictable ways (ibid.: 3).

Indeed, most commentators have identified interactivity as the distinguishing characteristic of the new media. In computer-generated graphic environments the viewer/user does not simply gaze at a virtual world from outside, but is incorporated into it as an active participant through immersive and interactive elements. In gaming, for instance, such multisensory experiences create habits and expectations in terms of emotional and visual effects, which impact on the dynamic between the viewer/user, the object, and its textual ekphrasis. The change in media practice has brought about a shift in the practice of ekphrasis in the digital age, especially with regard to the inter-action between the image and the viewer. In the most digitally informed examples of ekphrasis, as discussed in Jolene Mathieson's article, the user is asked to take practical action with respect to the text and/or image onscreen.

Since the digital era has produced unprecedented levels of interactivity with onscreen events, the obsolete notion of a (passive) consumption of mass media must be abandoned. Interactivity entails a new power over the image by the viewer who can no longer be termed a recipient or consumer, but must be understood as an agent in the interrelation: "In the past it was possible to talk about paintings in terms of what the paintings did or did not represent. Representation linked cultural production to processes of creation and inten-tion" (Burnett 2007: 310). This persists, but more sophisticated forms of participation have become common, allowing viewers, users, and gamers to immerse themselves in a fictional world and to move around in it. In the field of media art, the traditional triad of artist, object, and recipient is replaced by the creator, an interactive process and the participant audience. These practices encourage people to trust their own imaginative strategies (ibid.: 331).

Participation in games, hypertexts, and social media has radically changed our relationship with texts, too, as we encounter the possibility of auton-omous text production or algorithmic production of fictions (Gervais 2013: n.p.). In globalized media culture images proliferate; they transcend histori-cal periods by living on and joining new contexts from a different temporal origin; they travel across borders and become part of different cultures. The amorphous and ephemeral kinds of images that our media make available have little to do with a picture in the sense of a finished artifact. The potential transformation and distortion of images has a parallel in the demise of the permanent and fixed text as salient features of our current cultural communi-cation. The copresence of still or animated images has become a standard feature of our experience of texts onscreen, as has the presence of distracting elements with little or no connection to texts and images being viewed. Media

users encounter texts in the worldwide accessibility of the web where they can end in the mixing pot of a hypertext or be connected with sound, images, and links to informational databases, thus offering choices of transmission and digression. Multiple and indeterminate links rather than linear progression structure reception in the new media. It stands to reason that the random and digressive receptive behavior encouraged by the World Wide Web promotes different forms of attention as well as different forms of vying for attention. In short, the current media landscape encourages increasing production of multimodal hybrids and more participatory modes of addressing the audience.

As Tamar Yacobi puts it, the digital availability of images "significantly expands the possibilities of word-image relationships," weakening the long-term dominance of the quoting verbal frame over the visual import and improving ekphrastic freedom (Yacobi 2013: 17). It seems to be a widespread feature of ekphrasis in the digital age that great liberties are taken in referencing the visual, especially when the verbal text is accompanied by illustrations. Danuta Fjellestad's contribution to this volume investigates how these "assemblages" test the limits of ekphrasis. Media-savvy audiences are more willing to work creatively with limited material and to make far-reaching connections. Mats Jansson shows in his contribution how readers become active participants in making sense of computer-mediated text-image combinations. Due to the influence of digital media, the opposition between what is seen and what is imagined may be fading as viewers become habituated to virtual reality (Lindhé 2015: 7). Recent ekphrastic writing often empowers the viewer to hijack images from their global and temporal migration and insert them into a different context that modifies or alters their meaning. Ekphrasis can create productive misreadings of visual images, changing the value and meaning of images in relation to social settings and circumstances. Far from being just faithful descriptions, ekphrases exploit the "polysemy of images" to become active players in the game of establishing and changing values (Kafalenos 2012: 27).

Nobody knows how many billions of images are uploaded every day. The internet has multiplied visual events exponentially and the resulting hyper-saturation may have diminished images' capacity to affect viewers. In a scenario of omnipresent images, where traditional works of art as well as the most banal pictures are reproduced in endless variations and adaptations, it seems somewhat anachronistic to speak of the power of the image. Ekphrastic writing offers surprising possibilities for compensating for the diminishing effect of media. It can perform a conservative intervention in the present media ecology by recalling an image to memory and reviving cultural knowledge. It can also transform an image to engage in meaningful ways with the

present. In this way, ekphrasis can adapt, recalibrate, and recreate the read-er's knowledge. It may be advisable to conceptualize ekphrasis as dialogic exchange and interaction, in which different reading frames and world pic-tures are correlated.

2. Theorizing Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis theory in the past remained notoriously detached from theoretical advances in other areas of literary and cultural studies, neglecting some important developments in visual culture studies, postcolonial theory, and cognitive literary studies. Gabriele Rippl's article in this collection redresses the customary inattention to postcolonial fiction in ekphrasis studies. The need for a theoretical reconceptualization is aggravated by some common misconceptions and misplaced emphases. The first problem is the myopic focus on semiotic difference in traditional theories. Ever since Lessing's ratio-nalist intervention against the *ut pictura poesis* tradition, emphasis has been placed on the difference in sign systems and the contrast between the visual and the verbal. Lessing initiated an enduring binary between the two modes that has since been prominent in explanations of ekphrasis.

Twentieth-century ekphrastic theory continued to be haunted by binary oppositions: between sign systems, visual and verbal capacities, art and pop-ular culture, private and public, cooperation and competition, stasis and movement, fantastic and realistic, actual and notional, female and male, identity and alterity, permanence and transience. In semiotic parlance the difference arises between symbolic and iconic signs, or between conventional and "natural" representations, or between temporal and spatial arts. While it often pays lip service to the presumed equality between the parts, ekphrastic theory commonly emphasizes the competition between two representative modes, attributing to it an inherent tension (Kneale 2010: 189). The view of the sign systems as two competitors vying for power informs James Heffer-nan's concept of ekphrasis as "paragone," notwithstanding his equalizing definition of it as representation of representation (Heffernan 1993: 1). By reducing visual characteristics to the model of language, structuralist and semiotic approaches partake of the same implicitly logocentric emphasis on difference (cf. Clüver 1997: 26).[3]

Whether they result from the premise of interart rivalry or that of semiotic differences, these dichotomies in ekphrastic theory are reductive and unhelp-

---

3. James Elkins recognizes the power of images and the "failure of words to come to terms with them" (Elkins 1998: 2). Yet, he views ekphrasis as a textual version of "retroactive performa-tivity," that is, a deferred reaction to core images that asserts textual authority by rearranging their meaning and redefining their appeal for contemporary audiences.

ful in dealing with the huge variety of phenomena. Attempts to theorize the separateness of the visual and verbal testify to Western ideological commitments rather than provide insight into a fundamental difference (Johnston et al. 2015: 4). These notions are grounded in implicit assumptions about an ideal purity in either sign system, which can only be explained as a historical heritage of the conceptual distance between word and image erected in the modern age (Boehm 1995: 26). Like all binary oppositions, these breed inequalities between their respective poles by aligning them with hierarchical and powerfully gendered values (Hedley 2009: 24). As Mitchell has shown, they carry a residue of the iconophobic foundation of Western aesthetic theory that identifies the image as the Other of propositional rationality (Mitchell 1986: 46). Initiating visual culture studies' focus on implicit power relations in theory and practice, Mitchell stressed the inherently textual nature of ekphrasis and the concomitant subordination of the images to verbal frames (ibid.: 3).[4] Hence to play down semiotic difference in theoretical conceptualization cannot mean to deny that word and image have historically been accorded different weight and value, typically mapped onto sexual and social difference.

Historically, the word was ennobled by its association with scripture as opposed to the inherently deceptive image. Bruce Holsinger observes that ekphrasis has strong claims to being "the most narcissistic mode of literary discourse" since it constitutes "a mode in and by which literary language gazes at the visual as a lens upon the beauty of its own performance" (Holsinger 2005: 75). Ekphrastic writing, especially when it engages with canonical art objects, often reinstates the traditional hierarchies between the verbal and the visual in order to question or criticize the value-laden beliefs associated with them. One of its most powerful instruments lies in exploiting the contrast between two different forms of expression to symbolize or evoke alterity and Otherness. The ekphrastic encounter can be used to stage a conflict or an attraction between unequal parts and to comment on the cultural inheritance of inequality.

Theoretical logocentrism is no longer adequate to contemporary media culture's displacement of the privileged position of the text. This is evident in the innovative poetics at the core of the intermedial poetry interpreted by Jessica Bundschuh in this volume. The enduring tradition of more or less

4. In proclaiming the "pictorial turn," Mitchell in the 1980s assumed that with the acceptance of semiotics, the visual and the verbal would be regarded on a basis of equality, that interpretation would be concerned with images as much as with texts, and that the visual would be accorded the same amount of weight and significance in analysis. In fact, the establishment of visual culture studies as a separate academic field of cultural studies was largely a reaction against the enduring privilege accorded to texts and verbal representations.

disguised hierarchy cannot do justice to the plurality of imagistic and pictorial contributions to today's multimodal hybrids. Instead, one can conceive of ekphrasis as a complex interactive process of cooperation. Supplementing the ideas of opposites and competition with one of collaboration can help us update Mitchell's unfinished project. According to the insights of neuroscience, words and images are alternative but interacting cognitive strategies. The writer, the text, the image, and the reader participate in this cooperation, though none of them singly determines the outcome. Rather, the interaction must be appreciated for its ability to give rise to an epistemological blend, a "pictorial third" that emerges through the three-way interaction (Louvel 2010: 230). This ekphrastic blend or "third" converges in the performative deictic gesture with which ekphrasis stages an imaginative gaze to make something visible that was not visible before (Boehm 1995: 30). Its second-order seeing acts persuasively on the individual visualization and, at the same time, exposes the cultural determinants that distribute visibility and opacity. These qualities of ekphrasis rest less in its ability to represent than in its ability to move its audience (Johnston et al. 2015: 6).

An "affect-oriented" rather than "object-oriented" approach to ekphrasis recalls classical Greek and Roman rhetoric, which was interested in producing immediacy (Cheeke 2008: 3). The Greek word "ekphrasis" comes into regular usage after its treatment in the Early Empire *progymnasmata*, where it was an exercise in vivid presentation of not only visual art objects, but all sorts of things, such as people, places, and animals (Koelb 2006: 2). With the help of these elementary rhetorical manuals, students practiced the technique of *prosopopeia*, good oratory (ibid.: 4). Its aim of *enargeia* goes back to Simonides's and Horace's *ut pictura poesis* claim: the power of images is to be replicated in the response to words.

Hence, in classical rhetoric the affective goal of *energeia* can be arrived at through vivacity or *enargeia*, which produces an emotional effect in the recipient, who is made to see what is being described. What mattered to the ancients was "heightened and credible immediacy" (ibid.: 4). Indeed, the ancient court speeches for which these categories were developed aimed to turn the assembled citizens into secondary witnesses. The key rhetorical idea is to make things visible, and for orators ekphrasis always had the broader meaning of enabling the audience to imagine something (Goldhill 2007: 3). It is exactly in this imaginative effect that Ruth Webb discovers the enduring analogy between ekphrasis and the visual arts: they are alike in what they achieve; they "have the power to create an illusion of presence . . . together with an awareness of absence" (Webb 2009: 194). As specified by Longinus, the rhetorical skill of illusion and semblance that can bring something vividly before the eyes is a power to "persuade" and "enslave" (cf. Goldhill 2007: 4).

What can be productively recuperated from these ancient notions for a functional-operational approach today is the idea of giving readers and audiences their due as embodied, sensual, and emotional participants in the ekphrastic interaction.

Before the enormous increase in instances of pictured ekphrasis and the general access to images that our media provide, John Hollander proposed a distinction regarding the reality status of the visual object of ekphrasis, which is either real and existing outside the text or imaginary but visualizable. He called the corresponding types "actual" and "notional" ekphrasis (Hollander 1995: 7). Notional ekphrasis—that is, description of imagined art—was practically the only form found in literature until techniques of reproduction and opportunities for public display became common.[5] These historical changes notwithstanding, Hollander regarded the two forms as operating on different ontological levels: actual ekphrasis references the real, notional ekphrasis, by contrast, belongs to the category of the imaginary; its invention of an image to be visualized in the reader's mind partaking of the same dependence on context and convention that any fictional world-making does. Hollander did not mention the possibility of a zone of overlap when works of art have been lost or become inaccessible and an earlier description written from direct experience is now notional in effect. In light of ekphrasis's long tradition of circumventing the attempt at verisimilitude, Hollander perhaps overstated the difference, which appears less pertinent to the current media landscape.

In contrasting "printed ekphrasis" with "computer ekphrasis," Cecilia Lindhé suggests that it is no longer appropriate to maintain Hollander's ontological separation between notional and actual ekphrasis. The blurring of boundaries is particularly evident in VR environments where the performative element can be acted out in live interactions and where viewers are involved spatially and not just visually (Lindhé 2015: 10). The current ubiquity and familiarity of certain images will aid visualization by providing prototypes for evoking images even in nonspecific description. Like actual ekphrasis, notional ekphrasis is dependent on cultural memory and the storehouse of images that corresponds to it in the individual mind. But neither need respect the schemata and prototypes they evoke; they may also question or subvert them.

The obsolete definition of ekphrasis as "the literary description of works of visual art" (Bolter and Grusin 2000: 45) derives from a mistaken identification

---

5. A verbal treatment of identifiable paintings became expedient with the display of pictures in public exhibition spaces after the founding of the Royal Academy of Art in 1768 and the birth of the public museum. The invention of photography and effective print reproduction later increased the frequency of such appeals to the readership's prior knowledge and memory (Heffernan 1993: 93).

of ekphrastic writing with description. But this notion falls short of the diversity of phenomena labeled ekphrasis, not only in the present day. It does not make sense to think of ekphrasis as a purely descriptive mode. This conception resulted from a convenient transfer of the distinctions in sign systems to distinctions in style or mode of expression. Accordingly, from the idea that ekphrasis is committed to representing a preexisting visual object, it followed necessarily that it is primarily descriptive and hence a static element in an otherwise dynamic narrative.[6] Lessing's preference for poetry as a narrative art proceeded from the temporal restraint in painting established in the Renaissance that prohibited figural simultaneity and hence pictorial narrativity, on the assumption that in a picture "we are observing a scene through the frame from a fixed vantage point at one moment in time" (Steiner 1988: 23).[7] This convention—better known under the label of linear perspective—was naturalized by viewers in the Western world. It was Murray Krieger in particular who imported Lessing's distinction into twentieth-century theory, regarding ekphrasis as a response to pictorial stasis that creates an arrest or "still" point in an event-driven narrative (Krieger 1992: 266).[8] John Hollander also claimed that ekphrasis aspires to a pictorial stasis contrasting with the temporal succession of verbal art (Hollander 1995: 6).

In recent theories, critics have regarded the descriptive function of ekphrasis as largely displaced by more complex and reflexive purposes. For Paola Spinozzi, ekphrastic passages should be conceived as sites of narrativity from which rewriting and replotting begins (Spinozzi 2006: 230). The Renaissance reduction of visual representation to a single moment, which Lessing took for granted, liberated ekphrastic writers to invent new plots that enlarge the meaning and emotional effect of pictures. And this narrative strategy is still relevant in an era of global hypervisuality as it can offer a space of resistance to dominant visuality from the viewer's perspective (Brosch 2008: 195). However, narrativity is not the only mode of ekphrastic expression, and it is certainly less prominent in poetry than Spinozzi's argument about ekphrasis existing "in symbiosis with narration" suggests (Spinozzi 2006: 229).

6. Recent narratology rejects such a conventional understanding of description as the delineation of a static object because it is more often than not impossible to disentangle narrative and descriptive elements. Description should be redefined as including narrative and interdependent with narrativity (Friedmann 2005: 194).
7. Because of the prohibition on the repetition of figural subjects, artists had to invent forms like frieze, triptych, narrative path, or comic strip in order to achieve narrativity. And spectators had to learn the imaginative response to these single-moment-images, to read a single scene in the projective manner described by Lessing. They learnt, in other words, to see a depiction of momentariness through the lens of narrativity (Steiner 1988: 21).
8. In a later book, Krieger takes a different approach by claiming that ekphrastic language can satisfy the human desire for a natural and unmediated sign (Krieger 1992: 110).

Taking the performative conception to its logical conclusion means, however, that the dialectic of movement and arrest must retain some validity. Although Lessing's and Krieger's binary opposition between still art and dynamic literature — and by analogy between description and narration — has to be abandoned, there remains an important dimension of ekphrasis where the idea of a narrative pause is valid and significant, namely on the level of individual readerly experience. In its conspicuous staging of an observer's gaze, the performative function of ekphrasis appeals to the reader's processing imagination in a way that suspends attention — an effect that surely plays a role in its current resurgence.

At the level of individual response, the processing of texts involves embodied, quasi-sensory visualizations that can be related to the separate brain areas for action-perception and object-perception respectively (Clark 2008: 2). Visual elements in texts appeal to embodied experience, they are anchored in sensori-motor perceptions of the real world, and their reception recalls the experiential parameters of perceptions in everyday life. Ekphrastic practices tend to integrate and promote contrasting forms of response to visual images. Prominent among these is a focus on a series of emotional reactions characterized by visual absorption and arrested attention, such as wonder, joy, surprise, and awe. It appears that ekphrasis works for the reader by harnessing both the power of the still image and that of dynamic imaginative visualization, since both are effective strategies of capturing attention. Introducing a narrative into the presentation of a visual object utilizes the appealing qualities of stories, that is, it prompts a dynamic visualization that mobilizes the image imaginatively, yields immersive experiences, and gratifies readers' desire to make an image their own through embodied imagination. Another option of ekphrastic writing is the production of startling images that freeze or at least slow down the flow of the receptive process and gratify the reader's desire for close scrutiny and control. Though ekphrasis utilizes both these options and is able to combine them, thus mobilizing the projecting imagination and evoking the framing control, it is freeze-frame images that may be able to make a more lasting and memorable impression on the reading mind. Especially for contemporary readers used to the dizzying electronic speed of digital information, the contemplative mental space created by an ekphrastic slow-down of narrative pace may offer an imaginative enhancement.

In short, ekphrasis prompts visualization processes on the part of the reader. On the one hand, this means that it triggers mental images that are anchored in sensori-motor perceptions of the real world and can therefore elicit an enactive, emotional response. The capacity to visualize relies on the experiential parameters of actual orientation in the real world. It is nourished

by the recollection of images resulting from sensual perception that are stored in the writer and reader alike (van Eck 2015: 35). On the other hand, visualization is grounded in cultural knowledge, a knowledge stored in the mind in visual schemata and scripts which are automatically recalled when making sense of a text. This aspect of visualization links it to the cultural visuality in which each individual participates; it has political implications because meaning-making is an activity that always occurs within a preexisting social field and within actual power relations (Brosch 2013). In analyzing ekphrastic writing, it is advisable to consider how it aims to manipulate embodied responses in its efforts to dramatize a moment of viewing. But it is just as crucial to scrutinize critical responses, since ekphrasis typically interrogates culturally determined habits of seeing.

Both appellative and critical responses help furnish contemporary ekphrasis with a continued attraction at a time of ubiquitous availability of images. An affective embodied resonance can be effectively cued by suggesting a mood or feeling associated with the visual object. Ekphrasis often does this by inserting an emotionally affected observer confronted with sparse but carefully selected details, which serve as building blocks for a personal vision. Most ekphrastic passages do not tell us so much what an image looks like exactly as describe its affective impact in order to provide tinted lenses that may color our own visualization of it. It may be impossible to match the transparency of computer images and video games, but literary writing can activate a mode of visuality that is emotionally rather than sensuously vivid. This goal of ekphrasis, whether pursued by purely textual means or complemented by illustrations, aims at creating emotional effects that would be difficult to replicate by purely visual means.

Ekphrasis's most appealing strategy is "writing seeing." Emma Kafalenos refers to this aspect of it in her contribution to this volume, which expands her earlier explanation of the inevitable misrepresentation of ekphrasis by including what she calls "perspectival montage." As Simon Goldhill puts it, what is dramatized in ekphrastic poetry is a moment of looking in which description is subordinate to the "work of responding" (Goldhill 2007: 2). This emphasis on the performance of a gaze seems to me an important addition to the concept of ekphrasis. This conceptualization is supported by Jas Elsner who understands ekphrasis as both an enabler and an occluder: it enables "in helping the viewers it is training to see," and it occludes "in the veil of words with which it screens and obscures the purported visual object" (Elsner 2007: 68). Given ekphrasis's "self-awareness of both these qualities (enabling and occluding), then one might say that its true subject is not the verbal depiction of a visual object but, rather, the verbal enactment of the gaze that tries to relate with and penetrate the object" (ibid.: 68).

As mentioned earlier, ekphrasis affects not only the individual reader's supplementary imagination, but also addresses a cognitive framework that is not entirely personal and subjective but composed of the semantic memory of visual images that proliferate in a particular culture. Especially when it deals with canonical works of art, ekphrasis runs up against a cultural paradigm that cannot be overestimated, namely the gaze of art appreciation practiced in the museum since the eighteenth century. As evaluated by Norman Bryson, Western classical perspective constructed a type of gaze that negated and suppressed the embodied subjectivity of the viewer and devised a concept of subjectivity that depended on "objective" spectatorship. According to Bryson, this type of gaze appropriates and penetrates the seen object while remaining aloof in order to extract a "second surface" of meaning from behind the appearance of visual art (Bryson 1983: 96). This mode of seeing is a discursive and pictorial construction, as far removed from the experiential embodied reality of perception as possible. Yet, in spite of its critical rejection, ekphrastic writing has made pervasive use of the "vigilant, masterful" Cartesian gaze with its arrested vision (ibid.: 96), in order to stage and address patriarchal and imperial ways of seeing in Western culture.[9] This model of seeing, derived from the legacies of art history, has dominated Western culture for so long that ekphrastic writing can depend on its being ingrained knowledge. In commenting on the gaze *within* painting, writing *about* painting can wield a powerful weapon of anti-hierarchical argument (Elsner 2007: 109).

The staged gaze in ekphrasis, by directing the affective subjectivity of a viewer toward a chosen object, frames and guides the reader's/visualizer's interpretive gaze. In this way standard constructions of viewing are often violently disrupted and disturbed. Frequently the imagined observer explicitly refuses to be a representative of conventional ways of seeing and rejects his or her culture's evaluative norms. As numerous studies of classical, medieval, and modern ekphrasis have argued, ekphrastic writing has always included a transformational element, whether deliberately or not. The particular tension and unresolvability inherent in ekphrasis predestines it for intervention into conventions and habits of seeing. Today's breakdown of boundaries between high and low and the skepticism about the validity of a canon has further promoted transformative ekphrastic writing. By describing the perception of an image that clashes with its conventional interpretation, misreads the content, rearranges the meaning, or invents a new one, ekphrasis

9. As Emily Troscianko points out, the tendency to conceptualize visual and imaginative experience as pictorial is an enduring and deep-rooted one. Any attempt to undermine the gaze must rely on its familiarity and entails the danger of perpetuating it (Troscianko 2013: 57).

can question and subvert dominant ways of seeing. These iconoclastic gestures contribute to contemporary culture, at one and the same time utilizing and reinforcing the power of images and undermining their acknowledged meanings or messages.

It appears that one of ekphrasis's prominent functions in recent literature is to interrogate dominant visual regimes: "Literary allusions to pieces of visual art necessarily carry, in their very structure, a highly charged self-reflexive potential" (Klarer 2005: 133). The meta-representational potential that ekphrasis inherently possesses predestines it to disclose the values, belief systems, and assumptions underlying our concepts of the verbal and the visual and, in particular, to shed light on the historical and cultural contingency of ways of seeing, as self-reflexivity can help unravel the status of the visual in a literary culture. It may even contribute to an ethical reconceptualization of seeing as "intersubjective" and "interpersonal" instead of governed by Western imperial and patriarchal power structures. Deploying the subversive potential of ekphrastic meta-representation, feminist literature and postcolonial writing have exposed and rejected the Othering gaze of existing power structures. Ekphrastic writing can stage ways of seeing through subaltern perceivers; it can create a distinctive female aesthetic that rejects the patriarchal gaze (Hedley 2009: 25), and it can turn the colonial gaze so that Eurocentric visual practices are negated (Rippl 2015).

Any assumed position of power over the production of visuality is subject to constant struggle and renegotiation. Ekphrasis can be a means of intervention in this ongoing power struggle. Writers "resort to it to get the image to speak to their own preoccupations" (Hedley 2009: 17). Through their particular agendas, ekphrastic writers construct alternative projects for seeing, attempting to activate images in order to denaturalize and estrange them, often in a way that is humorous and disconcerting at the same time, producing new modes of imaginary perception. They can sketch out a new interplay between what we obstinately refuse to see and what we desire to see. Thus they make the reader confront perceptions of what is customary, normal, and taken for granted as well as desirable or disturbing.

In performing these tasks, ekphrasis can be not only transformative but transgressive. Its descriptions of seeing, its delineation of gazes open subjectivity out into a social world. Ekphrastic writers can transform a personal perspective on an object into a new public context of value (Loizeaux 2008: 5). Hence, ekphrasis is performative not just on the individual but also on the social level. By making ways of seeing visible, thereby challenging cultural conventions of seeing, ekphrasis can become ethical or political. According to David Kennedy, this tendency is complemented by readers, who want ekphrasis to function as moral prolepsis by addressing the anxieties of the

present moment (Kennedy 2012: 4–5). The global spread of digital mass media allows previously marginalized groups to participate in this process (Goshe 2011: 17–18). In the global interconnectedness of the digital age, ekphrasis can transcend the limited boundaries of nation or social group. It remains for us critics to do it justice with an ethical criticism and theory.

Works Cited

Barbetti, Claire
   2011 *Medieval Visions: A New Discussion of Interarts Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
Boehm, Gottfried
   1995 "Bildbeschreibung: Über die Grenzen von Bild und Sprache." In *Beschreibungskunst—Kunstbeschreibung*, edited by Gottfried Böhm and Helmut Pfotenhauer, 23–40 (Munich: Fink).
Bolter, Jay David
   1996 "Ekphrasis, Virtual Reality, and the Future of Writing." In *The Future of the Book*, edited by Geoffrey Nunberg, 253–72 (Berkeley: University of California Press).
Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin
   2000 *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
Brosch, Renate
   2008 "Empowering the Spectator: Ekphrasis as Strategic Response to the Power of Images." In *Symbolism: An International Annual of Critical Aesthetics* 8: *Ut Pictura Poesis: Literature and Painting*, edited by Daniela Carpi, 179–196 (Brooklyn: AMS Press).
   2013 "Reading and Visualisation," *Anglistik* 24: 169–80.
   2015 "Images in Narrative Literature: Cognitive Experience and Iconic Moments." In *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature, Sound, Image, Music*, edited by Gabriele Rippl, 343–60 (Berlin: De Gruyter).
Bryson, Norman
   1983 *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press).
   2001 "Introduction: Art and Intersubjectivity." In *Looking In: The Art of Viewing*, edited by Mieke Bal, 1–40 (London: Routledge).
Burnett, Ron
   2007 "Projecting Minds." In *MediaArtHistories*, edited by Oliver Grau, 309–38 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
Cheeke, Stephen
   2008 *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).
Clark, Andy
   2008 "Perception, Action, and Experience: Unraveling the Golden Braid?" *Neuropsychologia* 47, no. 6: 1460–68.
Clüver, Claus
   1997 "Ekphrasis Reconsidered: On Verbal Representations of Non-Verbal Texts." In *Interart Poetics: Essays on the Interrelations of the Arts and Media*, edited by Ulla Britta Lagerroth, Hans Lund, and Erik Hedling, 19–34 (Amsterdam: Rodopi).
Elkins, James
   1998 *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
Elsner, Jas
   2007 *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

Friedman, Susan Stanford
    2005 "Spatial Poetics and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." In *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, 192–205 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing).
Gervais, Bertrand
    2013 "Is There a Text on This Screen? Reading in an Era of Hypertextuality." In *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, edited by Susan Schreibman and Ray Siemens (Oxford: Blackwell), digitalhumanities.org/companion/view?docId=blackwell/9781405148641/9781405148641.xml&chunk.id=ss1–5–3.
Goldhill, Simon
    2007 "What Is Ekphrasis for?" *Classical Philology* 12: 1–19.
Goshe, Bishnupriya
    2011 *Global Icons: Apertures to the Popular* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).
Hedley, Jane
    2009 "Introduction: The Subject of Ekphrasis." In *In the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*, edited by Jane Hedley, Nick Halperin, and Willard Spiegelman, 15–40 (Newark: University of Delaware Press).
Heffernan, James A. W.
    1993 *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashberry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
Hollander, John
    1988 "The Poetics of Ekphrasis," *Word and Image* 4: 209–19.
    1995 *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
Holsinger, Bruce
    2005 "Lollard Ekphrasis: Situated Aesthetics and Literary History," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35: 67–89.
Jenkins, Henry
    2008 *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press).
Johnston, Andrew, Ethan Knapp, and Margitta Rouse, eds.
    2015 "Introduction." In *The Art of Vision: Ekphrasis in Medieval Literature and Culture*, 1–16 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press).
Kafalenos, Emma
    2012 "The Polysemy of Looking: Reading Ekphrasis Alongside Images in Calvino's *Castle of Crossed Destinies* and Vargas Llosa's *In Praise of the Stepmother*," *Poetics Today* 33, no. 1: 27–57.
Kennedy, David
    2012 *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing).
Klarer, Mario
    2005 "Ekphrasis." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan, 133–34 (London: Routledge).
Kneale, J. Douglas
    2010 "The Translation of Feelings: Ekphrasis in the Work of W. G. Sebald." In *Rewriting Texts—Remaking Images: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Leslie Boldt, Corrado Federici, and Ernesto Virgulti, 187–97 (New York: Peter Lang).
Koelb, Janice Hewlett
    2006 *The Poetics of Description: Imagined Places in European Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
Krieger, Murray
    1992 [1967] "Ekphrasis or the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laokoön Revisited." In *Ekphrasis. The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, 263–88 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).

Lindhé, Cecilia
    2015 "A Visual Sense Is Born in the Fingertips: Towards a Digital Ekphrasis," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 7, digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/7/1/000161/000161.html.
Loizeaux, Elizabeth Bergmann
    2008 *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
Louvel, Liliane
    2010 *Le tiers pictural: Pour une critique intermediale* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes).
Mitchell, W. J. T.
    1986 *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
    1994 *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
Rippl, Gabriele
    2015 "Postcolonial Ekphrasis in the Contemporary Anglophone Indian Novel." In *Handbook of Intermediality*, edited by Gabriele Rippl, 128–55 (Berlin: De Gruyter).
Ryan, Marie-Laure
    2001 *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
Spinozzi, Paola
    2006 "Ekphrasis as Portrait: A. S. Byatt's Fictional and Visual Doppelgänger." In *Writing Seeing: Essays on Word and Image*, edited by Rui Carvalho Homem and Maria de Fatima Lambert, 223–34 (Amsterdam: Rodopi).
Steiner, Wendy
    1988 *Pictures of Romance: Form against Context in Painting and Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).
Troscianko, Emily T.
    2013 "Reading Imaginatively: The Imagination in Cognitive Science and Cognitive Literary Studies," *Journal of Literary Semantics* 42: 181–98.
van Eck, Caroline
    2015 *Art, Agency, and Living Presence: From Animated Image to Excessive Object* (Leiden: Leiden University Press).
Webb, Ruth
    2009 *Ekphrasis, Imagination, and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate).
Yacobi, Tamar
    2013 "Ekphrastic Double Exposure and the Museum Book of Poetry," *Poetics Today* 34, no. 1: 1–52.