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Ekphrasis Revisited: Crossing Artistic Boundaries¹

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Abstract: In the context of the preeminence of relationality in contemporary literature and criticism, the concept of ekphrasis is undergoing a process of revision that points to the broadening of the scope of the interartistic dialogue, and to the current prevalence of a semiotic turn in the aesthetic and critical appraisal of the arts and their intersections. Nowadays, writers and critics alike are paying special attention to the interdisciplinary potential of literary creativity and theory, going beyond seemingly well-established assumptions such as the notion of the “two cultures”, or the narrow view of intertextuality as a practice restricted to the purely textual medium.

The growing appeal of this cross-boundary perspective is clearly reflected in the changing reformulations of the classical strategy of ekphrasis, which becomes the focus of study of the present contribution. This chapter addresses contemporary revisions of ekphrasis in the context of the interaction between the verbal and the visual as a major ground for the development of interartistic relationships. In the light of this, the critical interest in the confluence between word and image, in the *ut pictura poesis* tradition, will be explored first, focusing then on recent approaches to the ekphrastic strategy that challenge the limits traditionally imposed on the arts.

Introduction

The interaction between literature and other arts has emerged as one of the most prolific and enriching areas of creativity for contemporary writers. Although a long-standing strategy traceable back to classical times, the interartistic dialogue has become nowadays a recurring force in an increasing number of literary works. Challenging well-established notions such as the dichotomy opposing dynamic and static arts, or the idea that intertextuality should be restricted to purely textual works, recent narratives like

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Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), Conrad Williams's *The Concert Pianist* (2006), A.S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* (2009), or Kazuo Ishiguro's *Nocturnes. Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009) attest to this renewed interest in the creative possibilities of aesthetic cross-fertilisation. At the same time, the centrality of artistic referents for contemporary literature has had a parallel in the critical context, as the last years have witnessed the proliferation of studies devoted to intermediality and cross-boundary practices.

What such studies reveal, so my contention goes, is a general tendency to leave aside the traditional concept of *mimesis*, and the division between arts in time and arts in space, as the ruling notions in the relational approach to literature and the arts. Instead, it is possible to argue that this approach tends to be assessed increasingly in terms of a semiotic turn, underlying as well the changing view of intertextuality as a transdisciplinary concept, which implies that the arts should be appraised primarily as sign systems open to cooperative and fertile transpositions.

In the light of this, the present essay focuses on the relationship between the verbal and the visual as one of the most fruitful areas of investigation of interartistic relationality. Such a relationship will be examined through the concept of ekphrasis and the different reformulations it has recently undergone from its simplest definition as the literary –dynamic– evocation of an artistic –static– object. This analysis aims at discovering how the changing conceptualisations of ekphrasis mirror both the ongoing semiotic turn in intermediality, and the current intensification and broadening of the relational dialogue.

The Verbal and the Visual

The critical interest in the interaction between word and image can be traced back to the Renaissance, when the attempt to formulate a Humanist theory of painting evolved into an analysis of the analogies existing between the verbal and the visual. As Rensselaer W. Lee argued in his seminal study *Ut Pictura Poesis. The Humanist Theory of Painting*,² poetry and painting were seen in this period as sister arts that shared a similar nature, content, and goal. This relationship was encapsulated in a series of classical quotations which have become bound up with the interartistic dialogue: Aristotle's claim in his *Poetics* (II.1) that both poets and painters imitate human nature in action, and a fragment from *De Gloria Atheniensium* III where Plutarch describes poetry as a speaking picture, and painting as dumb poetry.

Above all, the most influential quotation for the relationship between literature and painting is the passage in Horace's *Ars Poetica* II that incorporates the *ut pictura poesis* maxim. In lines 361-65, Horace compares two styles of poetry in terms of correspondences with two types of pictures –one to be seen close up and the other from a distance–, but with no explicit reference to the existence of a close analogy between the arts. However, the phrase opening the section ('*Ut pictura poesis: erit quae, si propius stes, / te capiat magis, et quaedam, si longius abstes*') was read as meaning 'as painting poetry shall be', 'poetry resembles painting', and set as an emblem of the word-image dyad.

On the basis of these ideas, the Humanist theory of painting developed by establishing certain common principles underlying visual and verbal arts. First, the

² Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis. The Humanist Theory of Painting* (New York and London: Norton, 1967).

mimetic principle, stating that the aim of poetry and painting is the ideal imitation of human nature. Secondly, the need to combine didactic and playful purposes in both poetic and pictorial creativity, and finally, the assumption that geniality for poets and painters alike lies in the knowledge of passions, and in the ability to portray them. The acknowledgement of such principles resulted in the perception of painting and poetry as equal arts open to fruitful interconnections, a notion that remained unchallenged until the eighteenth century. As a matter of fact, although already in 1651 Leonardo da Vinci's *Trattato della Pittura* had claimed that painting is superior to poetry,³ it was not until the publication of Gotthold E. Lessing's *Laokoön – oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766)⁴ that the foundations of the *ut pictura poesis* theory were violently shaken.

In this influential work, Lessing draws a boundary between painting and poetry, stressing that painters and poets must restrict themselves to their own imitative devices: if the object of painting should be the representation of physical beauty, poetry has to avoid the description of natural objects. Moreover, Lessing made one of the earliest distinctions of the arts based on semiotic criteria, foregrounding at the same time the opposition between arts in time and arts in space. According to him, arts must be kept separate because painting uses iconic signs, rendered with colours and forms in space; poetry, in contrast, relies on arbitrary signs, which consist of sounds produced in time.⁵ This distinction has exerted a tremendous influence on interartistic criticism, a field in which *Laokoön* has historically occupied a central position.

³ Leonardo da Vinci, *Tratado de Pintura*, trans. by Ángel González García (Madrid: Ediciones Akal, 1993).

⁴ Gotthold E. Lessing, *Laocoonte*, trans. by Eustaquio Barjau (Madrid: Editorial Tecnos, 1990).

⁵ It is quite remarkable that the semiotic principle used by Lessing to sever the links between the arts, based on the confrontation of iconic (pictorial) and arbitrary (poetic) signs, has emerged in the last years as the core notion in the theoretical assessment of relationality and interdisciplinarity. As will be discussed below, current approaches to the interartistic dialogue share a similar tendency to explore the arts in semiotic terms, emphasising their quality as sign systems with multiple possibilities to transpose their iconic and arbitrary features.

Its centrality can be seen reflected in the refutation of Lessing's dichotomy as recently as the 1980s. In 'Intertextuality and Visual Poetics' (1988), Norman Bryson challenges the division between arts in time and arts in space by describing the glance as a dynamic activity: images –and therefore pictures as well– are not static, finite or complete, but find themselves immersed in a process of diachronic intersection with other images, from the past, present, and future:

In a classical conception of the image such as Lessing's, the image inhabits a stable location in a single place; it is a permanent or synchronic form. In the alternative view of the image which I am briefly exploring here, each of those classical fixities is unsettled. [...] each image, interpenetrated by the images of past and future, reflects all other images from its own standpoint, so that the splendor of tradition is multiplied *ad infinitum* in a panoramic spectacle of simultaneous mutual reflection. [...] Within the boundary of the individual image, each glance of the viewer across its surface reflects the sum of previous glances upon the present image, as well as all the images to come.⁶

In its rejection of the traditional view of images as static objects, and consequently of the alleged antagonism of the arts, Bryson's contention brings to the fore the prevalence of the relational dialogue nowadays. There is an increasing tendency for writers to develop interartistic and intermedial links that challenge the traditional boundaries dividing literature from other arts and fields of knowledge. In the context of the verbal and the visual, and recalling Bryson's attention to the image and the glance, a growing number of contemporary works transpose to words the aesthetic contemplation of paintings, as well as the emotions and reactions awakened by this visual exercise. If Michael Frayn's *Headlong* (1999) revolves around an artistic mystery that recreates Pieter Bruegel's pictorial atmosphere and iconography, one of the climactic moments in

⁶ Norman Bryson, 'Intertextuality and Visual Poetics', *Style*, 22.2 (1988), 183-93 (pp.185-86).

A.S. Byatt's *A Whistling Woman* (2002) is presided over by the protagonist's reactions as she falls asleep during her contemplation of Johannes Vermeer's *View of Delft*:

And woke, and for a moment did not know where she was. She was in a calm place where golden buildings stood above dark water, where the sky was blue and still, the stone was pink, time was very quietly arrested. She stared at the *View*, which has the quality of being so wide that the eye must travel along it to see it. She saw it as though she was in it, and saw, simultaneously, the perfect art with which each element had been considered, and understood, analysed geometrically, chemically, so that the colours could be reconstructed, and harmonised.⁷

Subverting traditional hierarchies of the arts, like Da Vinci's *paragone*, as well as dichotomous models such as Lessing's, contemporary literature and criticism favour the performance and discovery of interartistic exercises. Nowadays, interdisciplinarity lies behind a significant number of critical and theoretical publications that focus on artistic cross-fertilisation, including among others international journals like *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal / Visual Enquiry* or *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, and publishing series such as 'Word and Image Interactions' or 'Cultural Interactions: Studies in the Relationship between the Arts'.

At the same time, the current prevalence of the 'relational nexus' existing among the arts⁸ can be seen reflected in the proliferation of narratives that put into practice the two major strategies in the *ut pictura poesis* tradition. These strategies comprise the formal fusing of the visual with the verbal into the organic whole of visual literature, and the thematic verbalisation of the visual under the form of ekphrasis. First, visual literature

⁷ A.S. Byatt, *A Whistling Woman* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002), p.418.

⁸ Rui Carvalho Homem and Maria de Fátima Lambert, Introduction, in *Writing and Seeing. Essays on Word and Image*, ed. by Rui Carvalho Homem and Maria de Fátima Lambert (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), pp.11-22 (p.13). In the opening section of this recent volume on artistic interaction, the editors convincingly argue that nowadays there is a tendency to favour the liminal, the hybrid, and the relational, together with "[c]ross-boundary concepts and a general querying of any constructs and practices that rest on a presumption of self-containment" (p.11).

has historically permeated poetry in the multiple visual and graphic devices of the *carmen figuratum*, including anagrams, acrostics, palindromes, and caligrams, those object-shaped poems so cherished by both English metaphysical and European early-twentieth century poets. Nowadays, visual literature is exerting a growing appeal in the narrative context, with the interest awakened by the graphic novel and such best-selling titles as Pulitzer-prize winning *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, by Art Spiegelman, and Marjani Satrapi's *Persepolis*,⁹ to cite just some of the most influential works since the 1980s.

Like the traditional *carmen figuratum*, the graphic novel is an intermedial expression, which challenges artistic and disciplinary boundaries in its bringing together different discursive constituents (word and image) which cannot be separated. Indeed, the concept of intermedia differs from that of multimedia in that the components of a multimedial work like the opera can be disentangled and analysed separately (music and libretto) as autonomous and coherent artistic forms; in contrast, intermedial works like caligrams or graphic novels operate as indivisible units in which the disappearance of one element implies the destruction of the work as a whole.¹⁰ Moreover, the intermedial relies on a process of semiotic interaction, since each artistic medium 'mediates on the basis of (meaningful) signs (or sign configurations), with the help of suitable transmitters for and between humans'.¹¹ This approach enhances once again the view of arts as sign systems that lies behind the semiotic turn, a perspective significantly embraced by Eric Vos in his description of visual literature:

⁹ Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* consists of two parts, "My Father Bleeds History" (1986) and "Here my Troubles Began" (1991), which were first published in a single volume in 1996. Marjani Satrapi's *Persepolis* was published in four volumes between 2000 and 2003, comprising "The Story of a Childhood" (Volumes 1 and 2) and "The Story of a Return" (Volumes 3 and 4).

¹⁰ Eric Vos, 'The Eternal Network. Mail Art, Intermedia Semiotics, Interarts Studies', in *Interart Poetics. Essays on the Interrelations of the Arts and Media*, ed. by Ulla-Britta Lagerroth, Hans Lund, and Erik Hedling (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997), pp.325-36 (p.325).

¹¹ Jürgen E. Müller, 'Intermediality. A Plea and Some Theses for a New Approach in Media Studies', in Lagerroth and others, pp.295-304 (p.297).

Visual literature would then be the result of implementing this so-called “iconic” quality of visual representation in a verbal, literary context. [...] visual literature integrates a self-motivated, hence iconic, hence characteristically visual manner of representation in verbal semiosis, the latter purported to be based on arbitrary semiotic conventions.¹²

Changing approaches to ekphrasis

Together with visual literature –in which the images from the visual medium should keep their iconic quality in the verbal medium–, the other major strategy in the *ut pictura poesis* tradition, ekphrasis, has strongly re-emerged in contemporary fiction. Recent novels such as Deborah Moggach’s *Tulip Fever* (1999) or Will Davenport’s *The Painter* (2003) revolve around the verbal visualisation of paintings and artistic objects, both factual and fictional. Likewise, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), by Tracy Chevalier, is based on the ekphrastic assimilation of Vermeer’s works and pictorial principles, as attested in passages like the protagonist’s climactic reflection on the title-picture:

The painting was like none of his others. It was just of me, of my head and shoulders, with no tables or curtains, no windows or powderbrushes to soften and distract. He had painted me with my eyes wide, the light falling across my face but the left side of me in shadow. I was wearing blue and yellow and brown. The cloth wound round my head made me look not like myself, [...] The background was black, making me appear very much alone, although I was clearly looking at someone. I seemed to be waiting for something I did not think would ever happen.¹³

¹² Eric Vos, ‘Visual Literature and Semiotic Conventions’, in *The Pictured Word*, ed. by Martin Heusser, Claus Clüver, Leo Hoek, and Lauren Weingarden (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), pp.135-47 (p. 137-38).

¹³ Tracy Chevalier, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (London: Harpercollins, 2000 [1999]), pp.202-203.

Here, the detailed description of the compositional elements of Vermeer's enigmatic portrait exemplifies the centrality of ekphrasis in the current interartistic drive. Characterised in its simplest definition as the verbal evocation of an artistic object, or 'verbal pictorialism',¹⁴ the ekphrastic device has enjoyed a dominant position among the figures of speech communicating visual impressions —*illustratio*, *evidentia*, *demonstratio*, *descriptio*, and *hypotyposis*— since classical times. Some of the earliest examples of this strategy are the depiction of the shield of Achilles in Book XVIII of the *Iliad* –with Homer's meticulous evocation of the two cities wrought on the shield by Hephaestus–, and Virgil's description of the Trojan wars represented on the walls of Juno's temple in Book I of the *Aeneid*.

In British literature, probably the best-known ekphrastic poem is 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1819), where John Keats's apostrophe to the 'sylvan historian' that tells 'a flowery tale' renders in words a 'leaf-fringed legend' of 'marble men and maidens'.¹⁵ More recently, ekphrasis pervades the critical and narrative work of A.S. Byatt, who has acknowledged her delight in exploring 'that element in the visual which completely defeats language':¹⁶ in her short story 'Christ in the House of Martha and Mary' (1998) fictionalises the circumstances surrounding the composition of Velázquez's painting of the same title, making its characters alive,¹⁷ Byatt's latest novel, *The Children's Book* (2009), brims with profuse and minute visualisations of artistic objects:

¹⁴ Claire Preston, 'Ekphrasis: Painting in Words', in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, ed. by Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander, and Katrin Ettenhuber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.115-29 (p. 117).

¹⁵ John Keats, *Poetical Works*, ed. by H.W. Garrod (London: Book Club Associates, 1979).

¹⁶ Boyd Tonkin, 'Interview with A.S. Byatt', *Anglistik*, 10.2 (1999), 15-26 (p.17).

¹⁷ A.S. Byatt, 'Christ in the House of Martha and Mary', in *Elementals. Stories of Fire and Ice* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), pp.217-30. In the Acknowledgements section of the volume, Byatt herself has described the story as an "ekphrastic tale", which presents the verbal transposition of the artwork from the character-sitter's perspective, like Chevalier's novel (p.229).

It [the candlestick] was dully gold. It seemed heavy. It stood on three feet, each of which was a long-eared dragon, grasping a bone with grim claws, gnawing with sharp teeth. The rim of the spiked cup that held the candle was also supported by open-jawed dragons with wings and snaking tails. The whole of its thick stem was wrought of fantastic foliage, amongst which men and monsters, centaurs and monkeys, writhed, grinned, grimaced, grasped and stabbed at each other. A helmeted, gnome-like being, with huge eyes, grappled the sinuous tail of a reptile.¹⁸

This detailed evocation of the so-called ‘Gloucester Candlestick’ takes place in the context of the South Kensington Museum, origin of the Victoria & Albert Museum. The choice of such an institution as the setting for the ekphrastic exercise is particularly revealing because most of the instances of verbal visualisations in the novel are associated with the art of collecting and exhibiting:

There were various clusters of pots. The central exhibit was a group of vessels – bowls, jars, tall bottle shapes, with formally abstract glazes, many of them with a dull hot red like molten lava at the base, bursting into a sooty black layer on top of which raged a kind of thin sea of sullen blue with a formal crest of white foaming shapes rearing and falling. Other pieces had intricately random glazes that raced and climbed and plunged and scattered like forces driving in the glassy curls of wild sea water.¹⁹

The renewed interest in the creative potential of ekphrasis is being paralleled by a growing number of theoretical publications on the subject since the 1990s. One of such works is Murray Krieger’s *Ekphrasis. The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992),²⁰ where

¹⁸ A.S. Byatt, *The Children’s Book* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2009), p.5.

¹⁹ Byatt, *The Children’s Book*, p.511.

²⁰ Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis. The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1992). Together with Krieger’s study, other recent monographs on ekphrasis include James A.W. Heffernan’s *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), Grant F. Scott’s *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts* (Hanover: University Press of Virginia, 1994), Mack Smith’s *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), Stephen Cheeke’s *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), and Laura M. Sager Eidt’s *Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008).

this scholar starts from his earlier definition of ekphrasis as ‘the imitation in literature of a work of plastic art’, to argue that the ekphrastic principle ‘may operate not only on those occasions on which the verbal seeks in its own more limited way to represent the visual but also when the verbal object would emulate the spatial character of the painting or sculpture’.²¹

The characterisation offered by Krieger ought to be analysed from several points of view. On the one hand, and like James A.W. Heffernan’s description of ekphrasis as ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’,²² it does not explicitly acknowledge the possibility of having a fictitious work of art as the object of the ekphrastic practice. This is a crucial question because many of the artistic creations evoked in ekphraseis do not exist except in their verbal depictions, as in the prototypical example of Homer’s evocation of the shield of Achilles. This object is mentioned in the course of both Krieger’s and Heffernan’s studies, but its fictitious nature is not as overtly taken into account as in Amy Golahny’s definition of ekphrasis as a ‘text that expresses the poet-reader-viewer reaction to actual or *imagined* works of art’.²³

On the other hand, another striking aspect of Krieger’s characterisation is that, although it is aimed at widening the applicability of the ekphrastic concept, in effect it limits the range of objects of ekphrasis to visual works of art. In this sense, Krieger’s emphasis on the distinction between the verbal and the spatial –like his earlier use of the expression ‘plastic arts’– asserts the supremacy of the interaction between literature and painting over any other type of artistic cross-fertilisation, by presupposing that non-visual arts have no ekphrastic potential. This assumption, which underlies Heffernan’s

²¹ Krieger, pp.265, 9. Significantly, both approaches focus on the mimetic dimension, as they emphasise processes of ‘imitation’ and ‘emulation’.

²² James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.3.

²³ Amy Golahny, *The Eye of the Poet: Studies in the Reciprocity of the Visual and Literary Arts from the Renaissance to the Present* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1996), p.13; emphasis added. Like Golahny, Claire Preston has also highlighted how the ekphrastic exercise does not need any actual physical referent (p.120).

and Golahny's definitions as well, has been challenged by some recent attempts at broadening the narrow conception of ekphrasis as a device restricted to the dialogue between word and image.

Among them, one of the most enlightening studies is Claus Clüver's 'Ekphrasis Reconsidered. On Verbal Representations of Non-Verbal Texts' (1997),²⁴ which starts from the difficulties associated with finding an English equivalent to the German concept of *Bildgedicht* or picture poem. As Clüver argues, the translation of this notion as 'iconic poem' implies an erroneous turn towards visual literature in the sense of the *carmen figuratum* tradition, while the term 'ekphrastic poem' entails a semantic curtailment of the original meaning and applications of the *Bildgedicht* due to the limited scope of the concept of ekphrasis. In the light of this situation, Clüver proposes a reconceptualisation of the ekphrastic strategy that departs from Heffernan's definition of this device as 'the verbal representation of visual representation', which poses several problems derived from the description of the ekphrastic referent as 'visual representation'. Although already a reformulation of Heffernan's earlier and more restrictive characterisation of ekphrasis as 'the verbal representation of graphic representation',²⁵ the idea of 'visual representation' still denies ekphrastic possibilities to those artistic objects that are not representational or mimetic, including architecture and non-figurative sculpture and painting such as Malevich's and Mondrian's works.

²⁴ Claus Clüver, 'Ekphrasis Reconsidered. On Verbal Representations of Non-Verbal Texts', in Lagerroth and others, pp.19-33.

²⁵ James A.W. Heffernan, 'Ekphrasis and Representation', *New Literary History*, 22.2 (1991), 297-316 (p.299). As Clüver points out, a remarkable aspect of Heffernan's revision of ekphrasis from "Ekphrasis and Representation" to *Museum of Words* is his inclusion of critical studies and reviews of artworks, alongside literary creations, among the potentially ekphrastic texts (Clüver, p.22). This view of the ekphrastic possibilities of critical works has recurred in Heffernan's contribution to *Writing and Seeing*, where he suggests that "[t]o talk about abstract art, even in rigorously formal terms, is to begin the work of translating it into words" (James A.W. Heffernan, 'Speaking for Pictures: Language and Abstract Art', in Carvalho Homem and Lambert, pp.25-44, p.44). Heffernan's choice of abstract art in this essay, which aims at showing the permeability of the line between abstraction and figuration, is particularly appealing in the context of his denial of ekphrastic potential to non-figurative art in *Museum of Words*, as examined later.

In the light of this, Clüver has proposed a definition of ekphrasis that takes Heffernan's view of 'the verbal representation of visual representation' as its starting point, leaving the first clause of this characterisation intact ('ekphrasis is [a] verbal representation'), but introducing a drastic change in the second: 'visual representation' is replaced by 'a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system'. Therefore, Clüver's description –which in its final form reads '[e]kphrasis is the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system'–²⁶ manages to cover all kinds of ekphrastic objects: actual or invented, visual or non-visual, artistic or ordinary. This implies an effective broadening of the concept of ekphrasis that meets the current critical and theoretical challenges posed by the interartistic dialogue, and which emerges as a prototypical example of the contemporary tendency to revise and expand the ekphrastic strategy itself, as well as its potential referents.

In this sense, apart from innovative approaches to ekphrasis in the context of its classical restriction to word and image interactions –such as Garrett Stewart's 'reverse ekphrasis' or 'painted literary experience'–,²⁷ in general there is a sustained effort to explore the possible applications of ekphrasis beyond the limits of the verbal and the visual. As Paola Spinozzi has put it, since postmodernism there has been a shift in emphasis from the 'content of ekphrasis' to 'ekphrasis as container',²⁸ opening up new perspectives on the operation of this strategy in different arts, discourses, and fields. One of such arts, traditionally considered to be devoid of denotation and mimetic

²⁶ Clüver, p.26.

²⁷ Garrett Stewart, *The Look of Reading. Book, Painting, Text* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p.86. Starting from a conceptualisation of ekphrasis as "the transcribed *experience* of a nonverbal artifact" (p.82), Stewart focuses on painting to explore the visual evocation of the verbal text. He develops the notion of 'reverse ekphrasis' to apply it to those pictorial works that articulate 'the painted experience of reading' (p.82).

²⁸ Paola Spinozzi, 'Ekphrasis as Portrait: A.S. Byatt's Fictional and Visual *Doppelgänger*', in Carvalho Homem and Lambert, pp.223-31 (p.223).

possibilities –and hence with no ekphrastic potential in conceptualisations such as Heffernan’s–, is music, which has lately attracted much creative and critical attention.

While authors like Conrad Williams or Kazuo Ishiguro set the musical referent as the core of novels and short story volumes such as *The Concert Pianist* (2006), or *Nocturnes. Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009), several critical voices are claiming a rightful place for music in relational studies, as attested in recent essay collections like *Literature and Music* (2002) and *Phrase and Subject. Studies in Literature and Music* (2006).²⁹ This is being accompanied by deliberate attempts at explicitly acknowledging music both as an ekphrastic object –when musical compositions or even ballets are represented in a verbal text–, and as an ekphrastic discourse –in those musical pieces that evoke literary, pictorial, or any other kind of aesthetic stimuli, as in Claude Debussy’s or Olivier Messiaen’s works–,³⁰ to the point that a new concept of ‘musical ekphrasis’ or ‘melophrasis’ has been coined. As its creator, Rodney S. Edgecombe, defines it, melophrasis stands for ‘any verbal effort to evoke the experience of externally apprehended music’,³¹ and so it comprises the evocations of both imaginary, abstract music, and actual, heard music. From these two main classes, roughly corresponding to the ekphrasis of fictitious and real objects, Edgecombe develops a systematic typology that reveals the creative and critical potential of musical ekphrasis, and signals above all the current prevalence of an intermedial and interdisciplinary approach to ekphrasis that challenges its traditional relegation to the limits between the verbal and the visual.

²⁹ Michael Meyer, ed., *Literature and Music* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002); Delia Da Sousa Correa ed., *Phrase and Subject. Studies in Literature and Music* (London: Legenda, 2006).

³⁰ These two dimensions of the ekphrastic potential of music have been carefully examined in Siglind Bruhn, ‘New Perspectives in a Love Triangle. “Ondine” in Musical Ekphrasis’, in Lagerroth and others, pp.47-60.

³¹ Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, ‘Melophrasis. Defining a Distinctive Genre of Literature / Music Dialogue’, *Mosaic*, 26.4 (1993), 1-20 (p. 2).

Conclusion

The current broadening of the concept of ekphrasis goes hand in hand with the contemporary relevance of the semiotic turn, a process highlighted in Clüver's description of the ekphrastic referent as 'a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system'. The characterisation here of the media of ekphrastic objects as 'non-verbal *sign* systems' recalls Müller's focus on *semiotic* interaction when analysing the intermedial, and Vos's emphasis on the transference of *iconic* qualities in visual literature, as discussed above, while connecting at the same time to the perception of the *arbitrariness* of the image as the key to the unity of the arts.³²

In this context, it should be noted that ekphrasis, which borrows its descriptive terms *thick* and *thin* –to allude to heavily or lightly detailed evocations– precisely from semiotics,³³ has been identified as a site for the enactment of the two processes associated with the semiotic turn: on the one hand, the questioning of the mimetic or representational principle as the ruling notion in the appraisal and classification of the arts, as endorsed by Da Vinci's *paragone*; on the other, the revision of the dichotomy between arts in time and arts in space, as established by Lessing's *Laokoön*. According to Spinozzi, ekphrasis challenges both the ontological status of representation, and the division of dynamic and static arts,³⁴ an opposition that has been repeatedly scrutinised in the last years. Together with Bryson's aforementioned depiction of the gaze as a dynamic activity, Mieke Bal's revealingly entitled essay 'Sticky images: the foreshortening of time in an art of duration' (2000) characterises the dichotomy image-

³² José Jiménez, 'The Root of Forms', in Carvalho Homem and Lambert, pp.389-98 (p.397).

³³ Preston, p.117.

³⁴ Spinozzi, pp.224, 229.

space vs. text-time as ‘quite obviously false’, as Bal explores a wide range of images that evolve in time, being embedded in temporality.³⁵

The destabilisation of the principles traditionally presiding over the relationships between the arts has been paralleled by the widening of the relational perspective in terms of the semiotic principle. The view of arts, discourses, and media as sign systems open to fruitful interactions and transpositions has resulted not only in the consolidation of classical dyads like the verbal and the visual one, but also in the broadening of traditional strategies like ekphrasis. Changing approaches to this concept signal the rich and inspiring potential of the interartistic, intermedial, and transdisciplinary dialogue nowadays, as we move from *ut pictura poesis* towards *ut musica poesis* and beyond.

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³⁵ Mieke Bal, ‘Sticky images: the foreshortening of time in an art of duration’, in *Time and the Image*, ed. by Carolyn Baily Gill (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp.79-99 (pp.78, 80).

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