EKPHRASIS – A SUGGESTION OF PARALLEL READING "TEXT-IMAGE"

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Résumé: L'article essaye de donner réponse à la question suivante : qu'est-ce qu' un ekphrasis?, tout en énumérant une série de définitions données jusqu'ici à l'ekphrasis. L'article commence par quelques considérations générales sur la relation entre l'œuvre d'art littéraire et celui visuel. Ensuite, il y a un encadrement chronologique et étymologique du terme/concept d'ekphrasis. Une place spéciale est accordée à quelques théoriciens de l'ekphrasis, tels que: Murray Krieger, Linda Hutcheon, A. W. Heffernan, Dan Grigorescu, Erwin Panowsky. L'ekphrasis n'est pas la seule modalité par laquelle on associe la littérature à la peinture, mais il y a aussi d'autres alternatives: la picturalité et l'iconicité. Au niveau narratologique/méta-narratologique/métanarratif, il implique également la complémentarité des concepts de trans-textualité, transposition, intertextualité, commuabilité (Kristeva, Gennette, Baudrillard). Ces trois techniques ne s'excluent pas ; au contraire, elles interactionnent, collaborent dans l'acte de lecture et d'interprétation. L'ekphrasis est l'art de décrire des œuvres d'art, la représentation verbale d'une représentation visuelle.

Keywords: intertextuality, ekphrasis, metanarrative, trans-textuality, transposition, interchangeability

The literary and the visual art have emerged from a common origin/source.

From the first pages of his book, *Alchimia mileniului*,[1] Mircea Muthu emphasizes the fact that there are still a lot of common features beyond the differences between *word* and

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[1] Mircea Muthu, *Alchimia mileniului*, Bucureşti, Editura Cartea Românească, 1989

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representation, between the *linguistic* and the *iconic* sign theories taken over and further elaborated on the trends set by DuBois, Lessing, Susanne K. Langer.

Language functions according to the principle of *double articulation,* as Martinet has pointed out. The minimum unit of the first articulation is the moneme, while that of the second articulation is the phoneme. If one applies a reductive assumption at the language level, we reach the first articulation –the monematic one, which consists of an association between a signifier (*signifiant,* a vocal expression) and the signified (*signifié*, a semantic content)-be it a word, a root, an affix, thus the minimal level of units endowed with meaning.

Furthermore, this layer can be submitted to a new analysis when the signifier (but not the signified) of a moneme is articulated into a necessarily sequential series of distinctive units, the phonemes. The second articulation, the phonematic one, is represented by the smallest linguistic meaningless units, the letters proper, which constitute the alphabet of every language. What is important in this description of the linguistic sign is the fact that phonemes, which are infinite in number, preserve their own identity within the linguistic text, being identifiable each and every time during speaking or writing. Each moneme and phoneme corresponds to a choice on the part of the speaker/listener. While the phoneme fulfils the distinctive function, the moneme is endowed with the significant function, in which different linguistic messages are differentiated from each other. That is why the unity that characterizes every language, used by a cultural *socius,* can be explained in its linguistic practice.

In the visual area, things look a little bit different. If we take into consideration the structure of the visual sign, as for example - a figurative painting, the analogy with the

linguistic text is possible just to a certain point and it is quite risky in respect of its final consequences.

Leaving aside the non-linearity of pictorial "text", we can say that in the field of vision there is an iconic ensemble, very similar to the linguistic continuum, which can be divided into elements of iconicity corresponding to the linguistic s*emantem*, the minimal semantic features, the morpheme and the word. This analogy can go even further, since those ultimate "pictorial morphemes" can be analysed at the level of those units which lack iconicity, corresponding to linguistic phenomena, and which are the lines, surfaces and colours.

"This is the moment/point where disjunction interferes, cancelling the bases of the entire analogy, it is the fact that the raw material of painting cannot be organized into a system of finite elements, recognisable and identifiable as such in any figurative elements, as those of the letters in the alphabet or as the linguistic phenomena, which are finite in number in any linguistic performance/act"[2]. There have been many attempts to also create a visual code, starting with the finite number of colours of the solar spectrum, or associating the chromatic system with the vowel and consonant system, but the outcome did not reach the level of generality valid in an artistic socius, in a certain epoch. But what is generally and unquestionably proved is that each fragment of a line, each shadow or shade if removed from the original context of a pictural ensemble, loses that specific identity, being incapable of reiterating the same value along the numerous "texts" in the semiotic system of plastic arts. Due to its *dual* structur*e, the linguistic sign* could not be transformed into a mere mental image. On the contrary*, the plastic/visual image* is based firstly on representation, on a sensitive mode of associating

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[2] Gabriel Liiceanu, *Încercare în politropia omului i a culturii,* Bucure ti, Editura.Cartea Româneasc , 1981, p.101

the chromatic impulses. Those were some of G. Liiceanu's amendments following Covin's theories.[3]

Another theoretician who continues the direction explored by Covin is the Romanian critic Mircea Muthu[4]. Covin proved that in painting the relation signifier - signified is a tautological one and that there is no arbitrarity between the graphic element and its significance, conventionalized throughout usage, as in the case of language. M. Muthu makes a second distinction between the iconic and the visual sign, namely that in the plastic art there is no pre-established code for transmitting/conveying and interpreting the artistic message/information; it is the signifier proper that generates its own code and the transformation too.

The paradox consists in the fact that even if the writer seems to have more freedom in choosing his material than the painter does, he is more restrained by conventions, in the same way the reader is, as compared to the one who contemplates/ gazes at the plastic work of art. If we add Lessing's argument – the linearity, discursiveness of language and the simultaneity of image, we have the complete picture of the anticipated tendencies of exemplifying the plastic phenomenon by means of the linguistic one. Even if they evolved according to their own laws, establishing different connections (of parallelism, opposition etc.), the literary and the visual arts have emerged from a common origin.

The writers could take advantage of the painters' conquests/discoveries, and the other way round, thus managing to increase their independence. The social recognition of some autonomous areas of production goes hand in hand with the utterance of some specific principles of

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[3] M. Covin, *À la recherche du signifiant iconique,* în *Revue d'estetique*, 4, 1972, *apud* Gabriel Liiceanu, *Încercare în politropia omului i a culturii,* Bucure ti, Editura.Cartea Româneasc , 1981, pp. 95-99

[4] Mircea, Muthu, *Alchimia mileniului*, Ed.Cartea Româneasc , Bucure ti,1989, p. 44

perception and interpretation of the natural and social world (and so do the literary and artistic representations regarding the given context), giving birth to a new perspective, a new way of perception, the aesthetic perception.

According to this new view, the principle of creation is the representation proper and not the object that was represented. The concept of art acquired new dimensions beginning with the 19th century, escaping from the ethical principles, from the servility of politics or of any other kind. Art became self-sufficient, following two main coordinates: it is either a particular type of the rational dialogue with the world or quite the opposite, the irrational itself. Beyond the experimental value of the works of art, the dialogues image-word are still going further.

As the 19th century progressed, the exercise of artistic freedom became fundamental to progressive modernism. Artists began to seek freedom not just from the rules of academic art, but also from the demands of the public. Soon it was claimed that art should be produced not for the public's sake, but for art's sake. Mircea Muthu wonders if during this Alexandrine century we are not witnessing a perpetual attempt of re-syncretisation.[5] All these "merges" stand as rudiments of interdisciplinary approach. The concept of ekphrasis seems to be one of the answers to the interdisciplinary interpretative approach in the dialogues between literature and painting. The contest between the painter and the poet is an old one, recorded first in a saying attributed by Plutarch to Simonides of Ceos: "Painting is silent poetry; and poetry is painting with the gift of speech."

In *Museum of Words*, James A. W. Heffernan examines the "poetics of ekphrasis" in an artfully constructed sequence of textual readings that mediate word and image. Ekphrasis, the rhetorical description of a work of art (real or

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[5] *Ibid*., p. 49

imagined), is a minor genre with a very long history indeed. During much of this long history it is perhaps more accurate to speak of ekphrasis as a device or rhetorical mode, since it is often encountered as an excursus within the larger traditional genres whether in verse or prose. Thus the locus classicus for all subsequent translations of a visual work into a verbal form is Homer's extended description of the creation of a new shield by Hephaestus for Achilles in the eighteenth book of the Iliad (18.468-608). The term *ekphrasis* had been mentioned since the 2nd century A.D. in Rhetorics, as a reference to "a very lively description". In the 3rd century it defined "the description of a visual work of art"*[6]* , but it is not confined to this only. In 1715 we have the first record of the term in English as the "simple statement or interpretation of a thing".*[7]* In the year 968, in a Rhetoric textbook, it referred to "an autonomous description, which sometimes was of an ordinary object, and which could be introduced into a discourse, in a place that suits it."[8]

There are very few dictionaries which contain the term. Among them there is the 1968 edition of *Oxford Classical Dictionary,* with the meaning of "a rhetorical description of a work of art". Etymologically speaking, *Ekphrasis* comes from the Greek words *ek* (out) and *phrazein* (to tell, declare, or pronounce), and originally meant "to tell in full." Alternatively spelled *ecphrasis*, it is a term used to denote poetry or poetic writing concerning visual arts, artistic objects, and/or highly visual scenes. (Tracy Clark, *Ekphrasis:*

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[6] Bartsch, Shadi, *Decoding the Ancient Novel : The Reader and the Role of description in Heliodoruand Achilles Tacitus*, Princeton, Univ. Press, 1995, p. 9, n.32, *apud* Dan Grigorescu , *Povestea artelor surori*, p. 8

[7] James A.W.Heffernan, *Museum of words : The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery,* Chicago, The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993, n.2, p. 9 *apud* Dan Grigorescu , *Povestea artelor surori*, p. 8

[8] Richard Lanham, *A Handbook of Rethorical Terms,*Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1968, p. 3, *apud* Dan Grigorescu, *Povestea artelor surori*, p. 8

An extended definition). It also meant "to step outside the discourse, to explain everything in detail, to describe, even to draw".

Murray Krieger (*Ekphrasis, The Illusion of the Natural Sign)* was one of the theoreticians who brought up *ekphrasis* from a particular literary modality ("a classical genre") to a literary "principle". For him, ekphrasis is a "general principle of poetics, of every single poem", proclaiming the idea of its *integrity* (e.g. Keats' *Ode to a Grecian Urn)*. A pictorial poem "engages compositional strategies, which are equal but not dependent on the painting itself". The poet *reads* the work of art as such, he does not contemplate it as if it was a still object; he goes beyond the surface, to the pictorial aesthetic generated by the painting or sculpture.

Dan Grigorescu gives his own definition for *ekphrasis* as "the verbal representation of a visual representation". At the International Congress of Poetics at Columbia University in 1986, Linda Hutcheon, a well-known critic of the literary phenomena of the last decades, presented a paper with the title *The Postmodernist Ekphrasis*, where she applied the concept to some of the postmodernist techniques, such as: the insertion of newspaper articles into Julio Cortazar and John Fowles' novels. In a PhD paper, presented at Rice University, Texas, *Figures in the Carpet The Ekphrasis Tradition in the Realistic Novel*, *ekphrasis* was defined as "the insertion of a work of art, visual or verbal, into another work of art" (quoted in Heffernan[9]).

Thus *ekphrasis* is a suggestion of parallel reading "text-image" that some literary or plastic works can challenge/involve. But it is not the only modality of associating the literary and the plastic art, the verbal and the

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[9] James A.W.Heffernan, *Museum of words : The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery,* Chicago, The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993, n.2,p. 191, *apud* Dan Grigorescu , *Povestea artelor surori*, p. 13

visual; there are two other modalities, *picturality* and *iconicity*.

Picturality tries to represent the world, using different techniques such as: cutting up/out, underlying details, collages, compositional skills, but they do not represent genuine paintings. Iconicity refers to any resemblance, being it "natural" or "motivated", between the signifiers and the signified they represent. Such examples are Apollinaire's *Calligrammes, concrete poetry,* certain types of syntax. Iconicity does not aim to represent a painting, it only borrows the shape /the graphic of paintings to represent the natural/real thing.

Iconology (*eikon* and *logos*) as the science of image is bounded to the apparition of Cesare Ripa's encyclopaedia of human figures endowed with distinctive attributes, which represent/embodied philosophical and moral ideas, and other general notions as vices, virtues, human passions.[10]

Ekphrasis is the third approach in associating literature and painting, but it differs from the other two by being the *embodiment of the representation itself.* The three modalities do not exclude one another, but on the contrary they complete one another. The work of art represented by ekphrasis must in its turn, represent, using the instruments of visual art, an image where the viewer is to recognise a subject; a story, a portrait, a sight. Dan Grigorescu makes a very important remark that for a poem to be ekphrastic, it must start from a painting, and not from an amazing engineering work, not from the object/thing, using the example of Brooklyn Bridge made by Hart Crane.

He also states that ekphrasis is an intermediary description of the second degree. The reason of his statement is an ekphrastic definition from 1973, when the ekphrastic researches/studies are at their best, when the ekphrastic

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[10] Liiceanu Gabriel, *Încercare în politropia omului si a culturii,* p. 132

language identifies itself with a language of representation in order to represent another language, left unchanged since Homer. Unlike the encounters of verbal and visual representation in "mixed arts" such as illustrated books, slide lectures, theatrical presentations, film, and shaped poetry, the ekphrastic encounter in language is purely figurative. The image, the space of reference, projection, or formal patterning, cannot literally come into view. The *classical ekphrasis* worships the ability of the artist and the marvellous verisimilitude it manages to create. The *postmodern ekphrasis* undermines the very concept of verisimilitude (e.g. John Ashbery's *Self –Portrait in a Convex Mirror*).

Ekphrasis initiates "a contest between the two rival modalities of representation: the dynamic force of the narrative word and the stillness of fixed image (its paragonal energy). Ekphrasis not only speaks about a work of art, but also on its behalf, and sometimes it even addresses it. That is why sometimes it initiates a revolution of the image against the word, the antagonism of the verbal representation and the visual one. So, it unveils a profound ambivalence of the relation toward the visual arts, a fusion of iconography with iconophobia, between veneration and suspicion. *"To speak" about a painting figure in words* means to evoke its power, to impress, to fascinate the "spectator/ viewer", even if there is quite a struggle for the language to keep this power under control.

Ekphrasis can be traced back 3,000 years ago, to Achilles' shield in Iliad. Sometimes the pictorial model can be the product of the poet/writer's imagination (Homer, Vergilius - Eneid, Shakespeare, Dante, Wilde) and there is also the reverse side when the sculpture has been/could have been in front of the poet's eyes (Keats, Shelly, Dostoievsky, Chevallier, Vinea). When the model exists, we have the chance to understand how the poem re-creates, in its own language, the visual image, how the writer actually tries to

impose the supremacy of the word upon the image created by the painter. It is another manner of interpreting/understanding the Horacian *ut picture poetis,* different from that pinpointed by iconology.

This relation image-word is not something that happens unexpectedly, no matter how strong the impression is when contemplating the painting you have in front. According to Krieger's theories, there are three stages of the *ekphrastic fascination*: indifference, hope and fear.

The indifference grows out from a commonsense perception that ekphrasis is impossible. Ekphrasis is then a curiosity. It is the name of a minor and rather obscure literary genre (verbal representation of visual representation). Then *hope follows*, the phase when the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we discover a 'sense' in which language can do what so many writers wanted it to do, "to make us see".

It is also the moment when ekphrasis ceases to be a special or exceptional moment in verbal or oral representation and begins to seem paradigmatic of a fundamental tendency in all linguistic expression. This is the point in rhetorical and poetic theory when the doctrines of *ut pictura poesis* and the Sister Arts are mobilized to put language at the service of vision. Ekphrasis may be even further generalized, as it is by Murray Krieger, into a general "principle" exemplifying the aestheticising of language in what he calls the "still moment".

But the "still moment" of ekphrastic hope quickly encounters a third phase, which we might call the "ekphrastic fear". The ekphrastic fear is the moment of resistance or *counter-desire* that occurs when we sense that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually. The difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than a natural fact that can be relied on.

The interplay of those three moments produces a pervasive sense of ambivalence, a visual "encounter with another person".[11] It is as if we have a metapicture of the image/text encounter, where the word and the image are not abstractions of general categories, but concrete figures, characters in a drama, stereotypes in an allegory or interlocutors in a complex dialogue.

Dan Grigorescu poses a question: "What is it in ekphrasis that makes it an object of utopian speculation, anxious aversion, and studied indifference? How can ekphrasis be the name of a minor poetic genre and a universal principle of poetics? The answer lies, according to him, in the network of ideological associations embedded in the semiotic, sensory, and metaphysical oppositions that ekphrasis is supposed to overcome. In order to see the force of these oppositions and associations, we need to reexamine the utopian claims of *ekphrastic hope* and the anxieties of *ekphrastic fear* in the light of the relatively neutral viewpoint of ekphrastic indifference, the assumption that ekphrasis is, strictly speaking, impossible".[12]

From the *semantic* point of view, from the standpoint of referring, expressing intentions and producing effects in a viewer/listener, there is no essential difference between texts and images and thus no gap between the media to be overcome by any special ekphrastic strategies. Language can stand for depiction and depiction can stand for language because communicative, expressive acts, narration, argument, description, exposition and other so-called "speech acts" are not medium-specific, are not "proper" to some medium or

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[11] C.E. Lessing, Laocoon, 1776 traducere de Ellen Frothinggham, New York, Noondey, 1963 p. 68-69, *apud* Dan Grigorescu , *Povestea artelor surori*, Bucure ti, Editura Atos, 2001, p. 78

[12] Dan Grigorescu, *op. cit*., p. 78

other. One can make a promise or threaten with a visual sign as eloquently as with an utterance.[13]

In the light of such theories, the concept of *ekphrasis* also suffers some mutations. Ekphrasis, in this sense, belongs to Kristeva's "productivity' as the central notion of a new mode of semiotics, where she views writing as a process of significance rather than a medium within which the meaning is secured and established. Now is the moment when new concepts interfere to support the ekphrastic theories, such as: *transtextuality, transposition, intertextuality,* or in McHale's terms *"transworld migration"*.

In *Pictura prerafaelit sub semnul narativului[14]*, Ileana Marian makes a very competent and detailed analysis of the Pre-Raphaelits' works, using as basic concepts for an interdisciplinary approach terms such as: *transtextuality*, *transposition*, *intertextuality* and of course, *ekphrasis*.

Gerard Genette proposed the term "transtextuality" as a more inclusive term than "intertextuality" (Genette 1997). He listed five subtypes: *intertextuality*: quotation, plagiarism, allusion; *paratextuality*: the relation between a text and its "paratext" - that which surrounds the main body of the text - such as titles, headings, prefaces, epigraphs, dedications, acknowledgements, footnotes, illustrations, dust jackets, etc.; *architextuality*: designation of a text as part of a genre or genres (Genette refers to designation by the text itself, but this could also be applied to its framing by readers); *metatextuality*: explicit or implicit critical commentary of one text on another text (metatextuality can be hard to distinguish from the following category); *hypotextuality* (Genette's term was *hypertextuality*): the relation between a text and a preceding "hypotext" - a text or genre on which it is based but

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[13] Games A. W. Heffernan, *op. cit.* , p. 306, , *apud* Dan Grigorescu , *Povestea artelor surori*, Bucure ti, Editura Atos, 2001, p. 80

[14] Ileana Marin, *Pictura prerafaelit sub semnul narativului,* Prefa de Dan Grigorescu, Editura Meridiane, Bucure ti, 2003, p. 80

which it transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends (including parody, spoof, sequel, translation). To such a list, computer-based *hypertextuality* should be added: text which can take the reader directly to other texts (regardless of authorship or location).

Intertextuality refers to far more than the "influences" of writers/texts on each other. Intertextuality is a key concept in our approach, as defined by Kristeva, combining Saussurean and Bakhtian theories, and it points not only to the way texts echo one another, but also to the way discourses or sign systems are represented in one another so that meaning in one kind of discourse is overlaid with meanings from another kind of discourse. (Berce, 2002: 24). What interests us here is the concept of transposition, used by Kristeva to circumscribe the transgression of the textual surfaces (phenotext – surface structure, genotext – deep structure). By transposition, Kristeva refers to the passage of one sign system to another which involves an altering of the thetic position, the destruction of the old position and the formation of the new one. (Kristeva, 1984: 59). So, I will apply the notion of "transposition" in the ekphrastic approach, in relation to the new articulation of the artistic discourse, the passing of parts of discourse from one system to another, as for example, from the literary text to the plastic area, or viceversa.

Dan Grigorescu summarizes his studies about the ekphrastic phenomenon from a semiotic perspective into several conclusions. First, he concludes that "there is no difference between text and image, semantically speaking".[15] The other lesson is that there are important differences between visual and verbal media at the level of sign-types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions.

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[15] W.J.T.Mitchell, *Ekphrasis and the Other*, University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 702, *apud* Dan Grigorescu , *Povestea artelor surori*, Bucure ti, Editura Atos, 2001, p. 45

The mystery is why we have this urge to treat the medium as if it were the message, why we make the obvious, practical differences between *these* two media into metaphysical oppositions which seem to control our communicative acts, and which then have to be overcome with utopian fantasies like ekphrasis.

Perhaps ekphrasis as a "literary principle" does the same thing, thematising "the visual" as opposed to language, "a threat to be reduced" *(ekphrastic fear)*, "a potential same-to-be" (*ekphrastic hope*), "a yet-not-same" (*ekphrastic indifference*). The ambivalence about ekphrasis, then, is grounded in our ambivalence about other people, regarded as subjects and objects in the field of verbal and visual representation. Ekphrastic hope and fear express our anxieties about merging with others. Ekphrastic indifference maintains itself in the face of disquieting signs that ekphrasis may be far from trivial and that, if it is only a sham or illusion, it is one which, like ideology itself, must be worked through. This "working through" of ekphrastic ambivalence is, as Krieger suggests, one of the principal themes of ekphrastic poetry, one of the things it *does* with the problems staged for it by the theoretical and metaphysical assumptions about literature, the senses and representation that make up ekphrastic hope, fear, and indifference.

We go back again to M. Muthu[16], who speaks about Solomon Marcu's preliminaries related to "the intertextuality of the visual", where he differentiates between the *homogeneous intertextuality* ("the interaction of a visual work of art with another visual work of art") and the *heterogeneous intertextuality* ("the interaction of a visual with the non-visual").

The conclusion is that in the *act of the ekphrastic reading*, the reader combines the two types of intertextuality,

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[16] Mircea Muthu, *C lcâiul lui Delacroix, ed. cit*., p. 10

but the literature reader tends to focus more on the direction of what Solomon Marcus calls *heterogeneous intertextuality,* regardless of which intrusion it encounters, either that of the book into the realm of the visual, as a fundamental motif, or the reflection of the painting/visual into the literary universe.

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