

P H D - T H E S E S

**THE FICTIONS OF EKPHRASIS.**  
(THEORETICAL, HISTORICAL AND DISCIPLINARY SHIFTS  
IN THE THEORETICAL DISCOURSES OF EKPHRASIS)

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## The Topic of the Dissertation

Although it is evident that the term *ekphrasis* has its origins in the Antiquity (it is first mentioned by Dionysios of Halicarnassos, but it very rarely appears before the 3-4th century A. D.) and till its revival at the end of the 20th century it has emerged sporadically mainly in rhetorical taxonomies, the mysteries of the concept have never been so many times and in so many ways examined like nowadays. The utterance that the topic rejoices in a kind of renaissance in our days is a commonplace of the pertinent secondary literature. The keen scholarly interest in ekphrasis manifesting principally on an international level is due on the one hand to the determinative contributions of Leo Spitzer, Murray Krieger and W. J. Thomas Mitchell, on the other hand to the criticism of representation of poststructuralist theories and the turning of the literary criticism towards questions of mediality and cultural studies. At the same time this vivid interest (the number of papers and books concerning ekphrasis has raised to a power during the nineties and is still multiplying) developing in the discourses of the humanities is not at all independent of either the cultural and technological change defined as the end of the Gutenberg Galaxy (Marshall McLuhan) or literary culture (Hans Belting), visual or media culture, or the paradigm shift labeled after Rorty's linguistic turn by W. J. T. Mitchell the pictorial turn (and by Gottfried Boehm the iconic turn). This paradigm shift which naturally brings with itself not only methodological changes but also new research areas actuates on Hungarian literary criticism too, its principal impact being the endeavour of changing the text-based paradigm into a medium-based one.

If cultural, disciplinary and academic changes head from words to images, from textual immanence to social and cultural practices then one cannot find a more up-to-date research topic than ekphrasis. But the naturalness of the research area does not mean that the corpus of research or the ekphrasis itself would be clearly defined. On the contrary, the popularity of the ekphrasis brought with itself the dissemination of the term's meanings. Not only it is not self-evident what falls within the term's cognizance, but the theoretical or historical traditions and perspectives through which we attribute this denomination to various cultural products are also incoherent.

Viewed from the perspective of the respective Hungarian secondary literature the ekphrasis seems a clearly defined hermeneutical and analytical concept: the inland, principally interpretive critical works collude in the meaning of ekphrasis as 'description of pictures'. However, there appear extremely chaotic states on the international level. Studying the considerable amount of critical works examining ekphrasis one can only be sure of one

thing: these studies unite rather in the name of the term and often the corpus of texts than the concepts or approaches of ekphrasis. The (foreign) uses of the term in these days are so stretched, that if one would like to be accurate and traceable he or she should denote the term at each of its uses with the name of the respective literary scholar, art historian, media or culture researcher. Thus, raising the question of 'what is ekphrasis?' is highly relevant. According to my knowledge our inland literary criticism has scarcely dealt meticulously with that problem, especially with regard to the latest scientific results.

In connection with the vexedness of ekphrasis the dissertation opts for the ekphrasis' figurativity. It suggests that the contradictions and turbulence of the traditions and corpuses denominated with ekphrasis – namely the ekphrasis understood as lyric genre, topos, trope, figure, representation, imitation, description, principle of literature's plasticity, narration, intermediality, iconic literature, prosopoeic monologue, metapoetics - could be clarified by colluding the concept of ekphrasis as rhetorical figure. The figurativity of ekphrasis is on the one hand backed up with the analysis of its role in the long tradition of rhetorics. On the other hand its status as rhetorical figure is underpinned with the presentation and criticism of the developments of ekphrastic studies in the last two decades. I mainly focus on two distinct facts in analyzing the latest scientific results. While studying ekphrasis before the second half of the nineties mainly meant the examination of epic and lyric traditions, lately drama and literary works in prose have been added to the research area. Moreover in the 2000' studies we can observe that the term transgresses the discourses of literary criticism and art history and it functions as synonymy to intermediality (see Siglind Bruhn's musical ekphrasis, Ágnes Pethó's film ekphrasis, Monica Prendergast's performance ekphrasis and David Jay Bolter's concept of ekphrasis which signifies the word-image relations in cyberspace). Although the ekphrasis in its literary studies context is often conceived as a minor but stable lyric genre, its occurrence in all three modes or its definitions and the variability of the corpuses marked by them stand against its differentiation as genre.

My examination of the history of rhetorics deals also with the fact that the comprehension and usage of the term has been narrowed with the regard to its semantic aspect since the Antiquity. While the concept of ekphrasis of ancient rhetorics emphasizes the quality and mode of the speech or the affective reaction of the audience and not the topic of the speech, the modern, 20th century concepts stress the referential aspect of ekphrasis (work of art; visual representation). The dissertation states that the observed shift in the comprehension and usage of ekphrasis can be explained by the excursion towards visual

culture, the paradigm shift entitled „the pictorial turn” (Mitchell). (The dissertation does not undertake the detailed mapping of the respective transformation in the history of humanities.)

Naturally, the variability of the definitions and uses of ekphrasis is not interesting in itself or in observing and explaining its scientific 'trendiness'. The usage, creation and modification of definitions play a determinative role in creating literary or art historical narratives, canons and corpuses. For example, the *Eighteenth Book of The Iliad, The Shield of Achilles* is conceived as the beginning of ekphrastic tradition which according to Page Dubois takes towards Spenser but according to James A. W. Heffernan takes towards the American postmodern poetry. Grant F. Scott differentiates the 'classic' era of ekphrasis from Homer to Keats and apprehends Romantic ekphrases as examples of a self-standing genre. Wendy Stiener utters that the „topos” of ekphrasis originates in Lessing's *Laokoön*, while Svetlana Alpers argues that Vasari's ekphrases have started a new pictorial genre. Moreover, some art historians tend to derive the academic discipline from Philostrate's *Eikones*. The dissertation's – at first sight fairly provocative – title, that is *The Fictions of Ekphrasis* refers to these scientific obscurenesses and its some times highly polemic character would like to enhance that mentioning fictionalization is not fictitious at all. Following the changes in the apprehensions and usage of the term means not only the detection of how scientific super constructions, popular expressions and theories determine narratives of literary or art history, our conception of literature or description of current technical media, but also the demonstration of reinterpretation and rewriting of the traditions of the past in order to legitimize and activate a term with obscure significations. For example, it becomes obtrusive through reading theoretical approaches to ekphrasis that its users mistake in alluding to the ancient or later rhetorical tradition.

The systematic, all inclusive procession of the narratives of ekphrasis in art history, the history of rhetorics, literature and literary criticism or (as a cause of the latest developments) musicology, film and media studies obviously cannot be a one-man's work. Thus, the present work presents segments cut from the branches of theoretical discussions of ekphrasis.

Although I always keep count of the historicity of the term, the chapters of the dissertation do not add up into a linear, causal, totalized concatenation. They rather create some connections and knots which might constitute a net in which the ekphrasis can be examined. In place of an encyclopaedic set of ideas I focus on groups of problems. On the one hand I seek the answer for the question 'What is ekphrasis?'. On the other hand, through the examination of the various concepts of ekphrasis I point out some major shifts of emphases.

These shifts take from the history of rhetorics to the (principally formalist and cultural studies) concepts of literary criticism; in the history of rhetorics from the apprehension of ekphrasis as having its main topic anything (actions included) to its conception narrowed to description, then to the description of works of art or the verbal representation of visual representations; the term's rhetorical meaning to its comprehension as a device of intermediality. In the examination of theories I try to count also with the disciplinary fields on which the given concept appears (e.g. rhetorics, theory or history of genre, theory of media, etc.) and the impacts which these 'commitments' have on ekphrasis or the corpuses marked with it.

Thus, the main topic of the dissertation is reading the theoretical approaches to ekphrasis. My work is lead by to two aims. On the one hand it is necessary to effectuate a clarifying work that would make more effective this highly used term for *literary criticism*. On the other hand the dissertation presents the discursive strata superimposed upon the expression and the abuses or counterfeits thus created. In addition, two chapters of the dissertation constitute of case studies that (analyzing the ekphrases in Barthes's S/Z and Burwick's reading of de Quincey) present two specific reading practices of ekphrasis: the direct transfiguration of language/word into image and the experience drawn in ekphrasis used in the explanation of the word-image relation of the ekphrasis or the performance of the rhetorical figure.

### **The Aims and Methods of the Dissertation**

It stands to reason that the huge quantity of concepts of ekphrasis demands the mapping or narrowing of the term's definition. The dissertation claims to summarize and criticise the major concepts of ekphrasis through which a necessary definition might be worked out.

The net of ekphrastic theoretical concepts at present weaves around three main knots. Thus the ekphrasis is 1) description of works of art; 2) verbal representation of visual representation; 3) any type of intermedial transgression. These three dominant concepts are highly disputable mainly because none one them warrants for the term's heuristic value or clarified and effective usage. We should take into account that 1) our concept of art and work of art has broadened so much that practically anything may become a work of art if some interpretive community legitimizes it as such. 2) Conceiving ekphrasis as verbal representation of visual representations means that the circle of phenomena that might be marked with it becomes very elastic (according to this one might denominate the titles of

paintings or film as ekphrases). 3) It is highly problematic that in both cases (e. g. the ekphrasis as verbal representation of visual representation and ekphrasis as intermediality) the border between calligram and ekphrasis disappears. Furthermore, if we accept Siglind Bruhn's suggestion that even the musical adaptations of literary works or paintings are ekphrases, then the ekphrasis loses its medial specificity. Thus it cannot be conceived as either a literary genre or a rhetorical figure but it would signify almost any transposition of art or medium.

Taking into consideration that

1) ekphrasis nowadays is used for denominating not only visual phenomena carried by media of static or moving images but also verbal descriptions of music;

2) the tradition of the history of rhetorics and the necessary differentiation of the rhetorical figure we should keep its descriptive character;

3) no description lacks performativity insofar as language rather creates and posits than represents, and according to this language concept the punctuality, 'realism' or 'truth' of an ekphrasis is slightly essential or undecidable;

4) although the ekphrastic speaker often depicts the effects of the visual representation instead of meticulously describing it, he or she always takes into account the borders between media or the transgression of these borders. Ekphrasis and ephrasis might be differentiated exactly by the ekphrasis' speciality of indicating the medial or discursive otherness;

5) indicating medial otherness in itself does not give enough stability to ekphrasis. Thus it is a necessary precondition that the mentioned medial other should carry an intentional object;

6) the generic variability of ekphrasis resists its differentiation as genre;

the dissertation apprehends ekphrasis as a rhetorical figure that depicts a representation appearing in a medium different than the verbal in a way that the other's representational character and its medium or material appearance is always mentioned.

The definition implies that ekphrasis may be present in lyric, epic and dramatic texts. Since the differences among ekphrases appearing in philosophical, literary, art historical or critical, etc. works are not linguistic but institutional, the above mentioned definition denominates the so-called critical ekphrases too.

Paul de Man's rhetorical reading is the main reading strategy of the dissertation insofar as the „close reading” of some theoretical works I concentrate upon tropological organizations and the shifts of language. This methodology is used mainly in the first and the third chapter, but it is vindicated also in the analysis of the contradictions of theoretical works. The

dissertation has a metacritical character much grateful also to Foucault's discourse analyses, Hayden White's philosophy of history, Mitchell's critical iconology and Belting's critic of art history.

### **The Structure of the Dissertation**

The dissertation consists of four chapters, each of them beginning with a short introduction and ending with a short summary. The first chapter entitled *The Suppressed Figure* reads Barthes' *S/Z* focusing on Barthes' reading of the ekphrasis in *Sarrasine* and his concept of ekphrasis in *S/Z* and other critical works. I detect that his interpretation works against his theory of the plurality of meaning and that this contradiction comes into being through Barthes' misreading of the verbal 'citation' of a painting. I also discuss the transparency of ekphrastic language, a concept highly predominant in the respective secondary literature. The covertly or explicitly posited mimetic relation between image and text in ekphrasis is often comprehended as an unproblematical translation where the text might be unobstructedly converted into its 'origin'. These comprehensions of ekphrasis are based upon the stable, single and obtainable meaning.

The dissertation (principally in its first chapter) shows that while reading ekphrasis even theories originating in textual immanence undermine their own theses. They not only tend to approach the text from something outside of it, but they use the gained single signified as a control of the text's truthfulness. My metacritical analyses detect that reversing the text into one specific visual object gives way to the correction or rewriting of the primer text or the creation of obscure historical hypotheses. These critical works not only claim for the „punctuality” or „faithfulness” of ekphrasis to its visual referent, but also detect its 'false' aspects. Understanding ekphrasis would thus mean getting back to the pre-existent image (see the debates upon the shield of Achilles or the discussion of Hollader's and Kibédi Varga's concepts of ekphrasis).

The second chapter entitled *The Newly Found Term* follows the thread of Barthes' one inaccuracy, namely the mingling of 20th century and antique concepts of ekphrasis. The chapter starts from the various readings of *The Shield of Achilles'* ekphrasis and then it turns to discussing the ekphrasis as commented in the antique progymnasmata and compares them to its definitions created in the 20th century. Examining some grand narratives based on the generic concept of ekphrasis I criticise the generic character of ekphrasis. I also discuss theories that try to redefine the term but tend to a devaluation of ekphrasis.

The third chapter entitled *Allegorical Figures* I read Frederick Burwick's reading of Thomas de Quincey's opium visions. According to Burwick the ekphrasis is a basic element in de Quincey's respective works. I focus upon the role that two mythical figures (that is Pygmalion and Medusa) play in Burwick's interpretation. They are used in order to describe to linguistic performance of ekphrasis and also create a strong connection with Mitchell's determinative work entitled *Ekphrasis and the Other*. Similar to the first chapter I examine the contradiction which ekphrasis creates in Burwick's reading. He transforms his interpretation of de Quincey into the definition of ekphrasis, substantiating it as a paradoxical constellation of two controversial operations. But the allegory used undermines this concept of ekphrasis.

The fourth chapter entitled *The Ekphrasis in Art History, Musicology, Media and Film Studies* offers a partial discussion of the roles played by ekphrasis in the discourses mentioned in the chapter's title. The examination of the concepts of ekphrasis in art history focuses on the question of interpretation vs. source research in order to discuss (again) the „realism” and „faithfulness” of ekphrasis as discussed in literary criticism. Considering the appearance of ekphrasis in Media and Film Studies or Musicology means taking into account the latest developments in ekphrastic theories. In this respect I observe how ekphrasis tends to become a synonymy for intermediality.

## **Publications with Regard to the Dissertation**

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### ***Essay***

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