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## Epistemology of digital *ekphrasis*. An introduction

### Abstract

*The paper relies on the idea that the context of the digital art world is the main place to observe the formation of a new ekphrasis and, at the same time, of new media. Hence it means digital ekphrasis as a productive tension, capable of generating communication through a medium-medium relationship.*

### Keywords

*Digital art world, New media, Ekphrasis*

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The status of *ekphrasis* – or, more generally, the topic of the relationship between text and image (cfr. Boehm-Pfotenbauer 1995) – has, in recent decades, been declined, mainly through a series of debates on the heterogeneity and continuities between the media registers involved. The liveliness and richness of this debate and the geographical range of the discussion played a major role in showing the power of contemporary visual culture (Cometa 2020; Pinotti, Somaini 2016), and provided an essential input for the “pictorial turn” theorized by W. J. T. Mitchell (Mitchell 1994: 83-107).

Yet, the *ekphrasis* belongs, by its very nature, to one of those domains of mediality that have always been located in a middle ground, which, instead of being a kind of free zone in which the most complete indistinctness and neutrality reigns, turns out to be a space rich in tensions and unexpected relations. Word and image relate to each other in a manner that we might call harmony between opposites, a tension necessary to render the complexity of reality. It is an approach of continuous and necessary redefinition of the boundary, so as to account from time to time for the positions gained by the exchanges between verbal and visual, but also by the repositioning of new objects of analysis.

*Ekphrasis*, however, is not only the name of an interaction, by virtue of which each medium (writing and image) seeks its other in order to expand, complete or, even, correct itself. It is as if, in dealing with such a dynamic and elusive concept, we are inevitably facing what we, today, call art. Obviously, the relationship between *ekphrasis* and art is by no means always guaranteed, and yet it seems all the more necessary if we think that that of *ekphrasis* is essentially a concept coming from rhetoric (Pfisterer 2019: 99); that is, from the tradition of thought that, perhaps more than any other, has influenced the way we speak about and understand the arts. We read images and, in general, artistic media constantly establishing a possible connection with their translatability in linguistic-cognitive terms. This phenomenon is evident, even before within the art history faculties, in the academies of fine arts, where, since time immemorial, the work of artistic production, even in the practical teachings of painting, sculpture or photography, is not (or cannot?) be separated from its verbal discussion and evaluation. In doing so, *ekphrasis* becomes a kind of moment that is not at all incidental to our perceiving and producing art, but rather, perhaps, foundational, both from a disciplinary and, above all, from an operational point of view. If this were the case, then we would have *ekphrasis* not so much where images and words more or less

peacefully meet and intersect, but rather where we go in search of the conditions of possibility of art as a salient moment of a mediatic tension.

Reading *ekphrasis* today in the wake of such a rhetorical tradition, whether one accepts the constitutive reference to art or not, is thus to attend to the form in which media interact with each other, constantly renegotiating their boundaries. With the rise of digital technologies, precisely where writing, or better: forms of writing, would seem to have (definitely) taken over from the image, making any discourse on *ekphrasis* all but superfluous, we are witnessing precisely an interesting turn of events. Through Smart Phones and Apps of different nature and purpose we are observing an increase in interactions between tactility and visibility, between hand (Ruf 2014) and eye, through which the basal media (image, text, sound, number and gesture: Venus 2014: 215-21) undergo remarkable forms of hybridization, losing their identity in turn. One cannot speak of the domain of writing or language without automatically meaning a medium that has largely transcended the formalist image-text dichotomy that, from Lessing to Greenberg, has dominated much of the Western tradition. In multimodal Artificial Intelligence, as Hannes Bajohr has pointedly shown, the image-text relationship undergoes, for example, a “collapse” (Bajohr 2024), in that the text no longer represents the image, but performs it.

If we grant legitimacy to this hypothesis, then the question also arises, whether, in the context of the digital, not only is an *ekphrasis* in fact possible, but also, more generally, a relationship of distinction between media and their possible unambiguous identification beyond their being testimony, trace or relict of a communication that has taken place or is possible. It seems, in other words, that the digital, as if it were an entirely new media matrix, offers itself, today, as the main place to observe the formation of a new *ekphrasis* and, at the same time, of new media. Digital *ekphrasis* as, then, a productive tension, capable of generating communications through a medium-medium relationship.

There are attempts to answer such questions in the following issue of “Studi di Estetica”.

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