Ekphrasis and Intermediality: Evolving Theories from Humanistic Tradition to Twenty-First Century Aesthetics

ROCÍO MOYANO-REJANO

Abstract: The term ekphrasis is traditionally defined as the verbal description of visual art. However, due to technological advancements, its meaning has expanded to encompass photography, film and digital media. The study of ekphrasis has been advanced significantly by scholars such as James Heffernan and W.J.T. Mitchell, and recent works by researchers including Marie-Eirini Panagiotidou and Asunción López-Valera Azcárate have explored its connections to the *ut pictura poesis* tradition. Rooted in Horace's maxim, *ut pictura poesis* shaped Renaissance art theory by drawing on Aristotle's *Poetics* and rhetorical traditions. It played a pivotal role in the paragone debate, which compared different artistic forms and distinguished spatial from temporal arts. This concept was later formalised by Lessing, yet intermedial studies have revitalised the concept, expanding its analytical scope. The study of intermediality, defined as the interactions among artistic forms, has deepened the relevance of ekphrasis, highlighting its role in contemporary aesthetic experiences. The transition from static images to moving ones exemplifies the evolution of visual representation. This paper offers an integrated synthesis of *ut pictura poesis* and contemporary intermedial theory, providing a framework that clarifies key conceptual overlaps while tracing their implications for twenty-first-century aesthetics.

Keywords: ut pictura poesis, ekphrasis, paragone, intermediality, visual representation, verbal description

1. Modern Theoretical Approaches of Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis gained renewed scholarly attention in the twentieth century, particularly with the rise of intermedial studies within comparative literature. This shift diversified ekphrasis into multiple theoretical approaches, including semiotics, cognitive science, and narrative theory. In conjunction with art history and visual studies, interart and literary criticism redefined ekphrasis in the twentieth century to align with contemporary perspectives, resulting in a wide range of definitions. Without a universally agreed-upon definition, each critic has adapted the term to suit their specific interests and field of expertise.

Leo Spitzer (1887–1960) first defined ekphrasis as "the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art" (207). Spitzer's definition was influenced by Théophile Gautier, who characterized ekphrasis as "the reproduction of perceptible objects d'art through the medium of words" (qtd. in Spitzer 207). Expanding on this, Murray Krieger defined ekphrasis in his seminal work *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, and further elaborated upon this definition, describing ekphrasis as "the imitation in literature of a work of plastic art" (228). Krieger conceptualized ekphrasis as the literary representation of either actual or imaginary visual art, thus broadening its scope. Building upon Krieger's work, James A.W. Heffernan introduced a gendered reading of the relationship

between verbal text and graphic image, arguing that the inherent qualities of images and texts necessitate such an approach. While Krieger and Heffernan explored their ideas within the framework of critical theory, W.J.T. Mitchell examined ekphrasis through the lens of picture theory within visual culture. Mitchell differentiated between various forms of representation, linking the distinction between images and language to the broader dichotomy of telling versus showing, as well as to different sensory channels and modes of experience. By defining ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of a visual representation," (Heffernan 3) Krieger and Heffernan excluded the possibility of an ekphrastic exercise centred on fictitious works of art. Similarly, Mitchell and Heffernan positioned ekphrasis as an inherently oppositional confrontation between verbal and visual elements, a perspective rooted in Lessing's rigid genre classifications. This ongoing scholarly debate reflects the evolving nature of ekphrasis as a critical concept, highlighting its dynamic interplay between literary and visual media.

Mitchell further differentiates between images and pictures, emphasizing the nuanced relationship between visual representation and interpretation. Images encompass a broad spectrum of concepts, including mental representations, optical phenomena, and cultural memory artifacts. These may take the form of ideas, aspirations, or visual impressions constructed in an individual's mind. In contrast, pictures are tangible, material entities such as paintings, photographs, drawings, or digital representations. Ekphrastic texts often focus either on the content of the source medium or on both the content and the medium-specific attributes. The appeal of ekphrasis lies in the latter approach, where language not only conjures the subject matter but also highlights its formal characteristics, such as two-dimensionality, iconicity, and framing. Claus Clüver's expanded definition of ekphrasis, which will be explored in detail in the intermediality section, introduces broader applications beyond visual art.

As discussed above, these critical frameworks laid the foundation for further theoretical developments. While Krieger and Heffernan explored their ideas within the framework of critical theory, W.J.T. Mitchell approached ekphrasis from the perspective of picture theory within the realm of visual culture. Krieger and Heffernan define ekphrasis as the "verbal representation of a visual representation," a definition that unintentionally excludes the possibility of engaging with fictitious works of art as central subjects of ekphrastic writing. Similarly, Mitchell and Heffernan conceptualize ekphrasis as an oppositional confrontation between verbal and visual media, drawing from Lessing's rigid genre distinctions. Within this framework, Mitchell further refines the distinction between images and pictures. Whereas images encompass a broad spectrum of concepts—including mental representations, optical phenomena, and cultural memory artifacts—pictures refer to tangible, material entities such as paintings, photographs, drawings, or digital representations. Ekphrastic texts may focus solely on the content of the source medium or engage with both its content and its formal, media-specific attributes. The latter approach, which highlights characteristics such as two-dimensionality, iconicity, and framing, exemplifies the unique appeal of ekphrasis. John Hollander further refines the concept by distinguishing between "actual ekphrasis" and "notional ekphrasis," a dichotomy that aligns with the classical distinction between *phantasia* and *enargeia*.

Scholarly definitions of ekphrasis often fail to specify whether the referenced artwork exists, though some texts explicitly engage with fictional works of art, such as the description of Achilles' shield in Homer's *Iliad*. To account for this, Hollander introduces the term "notional ekphrasis," distinguishing it from "actual ekphrasis." The latter refers to texts that describe real works of art, while the former pertains to texts that depict entirely fictional creations. In defining notional ekphrasis, Hollander states, "I shall call 'notional ekphrasis' the verbal representation of a purely fictional work of art…the description, often elaborately detailed, of purely fictional painting or sculpture that is indeed brought into being by the poetic language" (4). Actual ekphrasis engages with real or historically documented works of art, emphasizing a faithful depiction of an existing creation and situating it within a concrete reality. In contrast, notional ekphrasis explores artworks that emerge from an

author's imagination. Both forms of ekphrasis require an assessment of how visual representation interacts with its literary counterpart, reflecting broader twentieth-century trends in experimenting with the boundaries between text and image. The reader's experience of ekphrasis varies accordingly: in actual ekphrasis, the reader assumes the role of an engaged spectator, while in notional ekphrasis, the reader becomes an ekphrastic observer, engaging with an artwork that exists only through language. Drawing from Lessing, Wendy Steiner examined ekphrasis as a bridge between visual immediacy and literary temporality. Wendy Steiner further conceptualizes ekphrasis as "the verbal equivalent of the pregnant moment in art," emphasizing its role in bridging the spatial and temporal dimensions of visual and literary media. While visual art captures a single, distilled moment, ekphrastic texts reanimate that moment by implying preceding and subsequent events, enriching the narrative with context, emotion, and depth.

2. Ekphrasis and Intermediality: The Semiotic Turn

Intermediality, though a relatively recent concept, has been defined in various ways by prominent critics, highlighting its complexity and evolving nature. At its core, intermediality explores how different media interact, communicate, and complement one another in artistic and cultural practices. Lars Elleström conceptualizes intermediality as a "bridge between medial differences" (12), emphasizing its role in facilitating connections across distinct media forms. Expanding on this idea, Irina Rajewsky characterizes intermediality as "media border crossings and hybridization, with a heightened awareness of the materiality and mediality of cultural and artistic productions" (44). Jörgën Bruhn further broadens the scope by defining intermediality as the relationship between intertexts or medialities across a broad spectrum of cultural behaviours (14). Recent scholarly discourse has increasingly categorized ekphrasis as a subcategory of intermediality and intermedial reference (52). This transition reflects a theoretical shift that frames interart studies within the broader context of intermedial studies, acknowledging the complex interplay between literature and other artistic forms.

Claus Clüver broadened the scope of ekphrasis, defining it as "the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system." This expansion enabled scholars to consider literature's depiction of music and other non-visual artistic forms. In the same vein, Clüver's classification of intermedial interactions encompasses three major categories: broad connections, media transformations, and fusions. Through meticulous analysis of these interactions, scholars elucidate the way literature responds to visual and musical expressions, thereby enriching our understanding of interartistic exchanges. Technological advancements, including photography and film, have further transformed the landscape of ekphrastic engagement, thereby necessitating a re-evaluation of its theoretical foundations.

Rajewsky further suggests that intermediality exists "in between" various media forms, creating spaces where overlapping traits and shared experiences emerge. This concept often intersects with transmediality, which focuses on storytelling possibilities that extend beyond the confines of any single medium. While both concepts highlight the fluid interactions between media, transmediality emphasizes the potential for narratives to transcend specific forms, whereas Elleström's perspective on intermediality encompasses a broader spectrum of relationships among various media (511). The dynamic interplay between intermediality and transmediality underscores the evolving nature of artistic expression, suggesting that dissolving traditional boundaries fosters new ways of engaging with and interpreting narratives across media.

As previously discussed, new technologies such as photography and film redefined visual representation and theoretical engagements with ekphrasis. This shift not only altered artistic production but also influenced theoretical perspectives on representation, fostering a reconsideration of how different art forms interact. The expansion of the concept of ekphrasis has been deeply intertwined with the semiotic turn, particularly through Claus Clüver's notion of the ekphrastic referent. No

longer regarded as a purely descriptive exercise, ekphrasis is now understood as a dynamic medium of dialogue that raises critical questions about the boundaries of representation and the intricate interplay between various artistic forms. This paradigm shift reflects a broader destabilization of conventional artistic categories, a phenomenon noted by Carmen Lara-Rallo, who highlights the emergence of a widening relational perspective grounded in semiotic principles (108). The interaction between media is thus not only concerned with the transmission of meaning but also with the complex relationships that shape it across artistic disciplines. Claus Clüver's classification of media relationships provides a useful framework for understanding these intermedial interactions. His model includes broad connections between media, the transformation of one medium into another, and media fusion.

Recognizing the distinct materialities of diferent artistic media is essential to a nuanced appreciation of the arts. Clüver's emphasis on transformation facilitates the study of how literature engages with visual art and film. Recent scholarship has increasingly defined ekphrasis as an intermedial reference and a subcategory of intermediality (52), underscoring the necessity of framing interart studies within the broader context of intermedial studies. This theoretical shift reflects an evolving understanding of how literary and artistic forms intersect, challenging the traditional boundaries that once separated them. By analysing intermedial transformations and considering ekphrasis as a form of intermedial reference, scholars can better understand how texts respond to diverse artistic expressions, thereby enriching interpretations of literary works that incorporate non-literary elements. As previously discussed, the advent of photography and film necessitated a recontextualization of ekphrasis through intermedial and semiotic lenses.

The methodological legacy of the sister arts concept—particularly the notion of a neutral comparative study of art and literature—has thus been both significantly expanded and critically reassessed, reflecting the ongoing evolution of intermedial perspectives in contemporary scholarship. This reassessment has been shaped by theoretical approaches that interrogate the historical assumptions underlying the study of intermediality, including poststructuralist critiques of representation, semiotic theories of signification, and phenomenological perspectives on aesthetic experience. Scholars have questioned whether a truly neutral comparative framework is possible, arguing that all intermedial engagements are shaped by cultural, ideological, and medial biases that inform how different artistic forms are perceived and interpreted.

In this context, Claus Clüver distinguishes between ekphrasis and adaptation. He defines ekphrasis as the "verbal representation of a real or fictive configuration composed in a non-kinetic visual medium," whereas adaptation involves modifying a source text to accommodate the requirements and expressive possibilities of another medium. While some ekphrastic works engage with readers' experiences of visual images without directly transposing them into the text, others can be analyzed as intermedial translations. This perspective aligns with semiotic analyses that view ekphrasis as an interpretative act in which linguistic signs construct a mediated experience of visual representation rather than a direct reproduction of the visual work itself. Roland Barthes' notion of the "reality effect" and W.J.T. Mitchell's theorization of ekphrasis as a site of "ekphrastic fear" and "ekphrastic hope" further complicate this understanding by highlighting the tension between verbal and visual representation, as well as the potential of language to both approximate and betray the image.

Adaptations, by contrast, entail the transformation of a source text into a different medium, incorporating transmedial elements, which makes them fundamentally transmedial. As a result, adaptations are considered fundamentally transmedial because they operate across multiple forms of media, requiring not just a retelling but also a reimagining of the source material to suit the affordances and limitations of the new medium. This distinction aligns with Linda Hutcheon's definition of adaptation as both a process and a product, emphasizing its dual function as an act of reinterpretation and as a means of engaging new audiences. Theories of transmediality, including Lars Elleström's model of media modalities, further elucidate the ways in which adaptations negotiate the material, semiotic,

and perceptual constraints of different media. In opposition to this, ekphrasis is understood as a monomedial form of intermedial reference, as it remains within the domain of verbal representation while engaging with visual art. However, critics such as James A.W. Heffernan argue that ekphrasis often operates as a form of rhetorical performance rather than mere description, suggesting that the supposedly monomedial nature of ekphrasis is in fact embedded in broader intermedial exchanges. This raises questions about the permeability of media boundaries and the extent to which any form of representation can be strictly confined to a single medium. Thus, while Clüver's distinction between ekphrasis and adaptation remains useful in categorizing intermedial relationships, critical approaches challenge the rigidity of these categories by emphasizing the fluidity of media interactions, the ideological implications of representation, and the interpretative agency of audiences in navigating textual and visual forms.

3. Adaptation, Transmediality, and their Relationship to Ekphrasis

Having outlined the theoretical scope of intermediality, we can now consider its relationship with adaptation and transmediality. Both of these concepts expand our understanding of ekphrasis. Contemporary scholarship continues to redefine ekphrasis beyond its classical limitations. Each scholar has contributed to refining and expanding the concept of ekphrasis, demonstrating its evolution from classical descriptions of artworks to a complex interplay between text and image across various media. Murray Krieger and James A.W. Heffernan initially limited ekphrasis to the 'verbal representation of a visual representation'; while Claus Clüver expanded the concept to include both real and fictional works of art, as well as other non-verbal sign systems such as music. This extension of ekphrasis is in line with the ongoing semiotic turn, a trend that Clüver highlights as central to understanding how different sign systems interact to produce meaning. Consequently, the conventional definition of ekphrasis as a verbal description of visual art has been broadened. The intersection of literature and other artistic disciplines has become a particularly fertile and intellectually stimulating field for contemporary writers. This evolution has led to a subtle broadening of the scope of ekphrastic texts beyond the confines of literary classification, culminating in the emergence of intermedial aesthetic experiences in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This issue will be addressed in detail in the next section on the evolution of the concept. Lara-Rallo (99) observes that contemporary approaches to interartistic dialogue are increasingly analysing the arts in semiotic terms, highlighting their function as sign systems capable of transposing both iconic and arbitrary features across media.

Recent studies integrate ekphrasis into broader intermedial and transmedial frameworks. Many critics have sought to extend the conventional boundaries of ekphrasis, thereby surpassing its classical definition. Martin Knust argues that ekphrasis has evolved to encompass interactions across various media, each with its own distinctive semiotic framework. He suggests that transmediation occurs between a source media product and a target media product, each belonging to distinct media types and organized at different levels of semiotic modality (148). Transmediation highlights the ways in which contemporary ekphrasis signals a transition between verbal and visual modes, underscoring the fluidity of media and their ability to transcend traditional boundaries of form and representation. Others, such as Anne Keefe, contend that ekphrasis entails a confrontation between verbal and visual forms, drawing on Mitchell and Heffernan's interpretations of Lessing's binary oppositions. Keefe emphasizes the tension between these two modes, reflecting W.J.T. Mitchell's argument that the distinction between images and language parallels the broader division between sensory perception and linguistic experience, or, more simply, between showing and telling. However, the expansion of ekphrasis in the twenty-first century has increasingly blurred the distinction between verbal and visual modalities. The arguments put forth by Mitchell and Keefe challenge rigid categorical separations, instead advocating for the interdependence of these media.

This thematic convergence remains central to intermedial discourse. This phenomenon reached its zenith in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with the advent of intermedial aesthetic experiences. The fundamental methodological legacy of the sister arts concept – particularly the notion of an objective comparative study of art and literature – has been both reinforced and challenged. Lara-Rallo contends that contemporary approaches to interartistic dialogue exhibit a propensity to examine the arts in semiotic terms, accentuating their nature as sign systems with the capacity to transition between iconic and arbitrary qualities (99). Critics have sought to expand the traditional boundaries of ekphrasis, moving beyond its classical definition. Knust proposes that ekphrasis has evolved from a conventional, one-sided verbal depiction of a static visual object into a process of transmediation between a source media product and a target media product, each belonging to different media types and structured at various levels of semiotic modality (148). This broadened interpretation of ekphrasis underscores the dynamic interplay between diverse media, each characterised by its own unique semiotic frameworks. The concept of transmediation explores how contemporary ekphrasis represents a transition between semiotic modes of verbal and visual expression, emphasizing the fluidity of media and their ability to transcend boundaries of form and representation.

4. Typologies and Models of Ekphrasis in Contemporary Criticism

These evolving definitions and media relationships have inspired new typologies of ekphrasis, which attempt to capture its diversity in practice. The study of ekphrasis has evolved significantly over time, with scholars proposing various typologies and classifications to account for its complexity and intermedial nature. These frameworks, developed across different theoretical traditions, illustrate the expanding scope of ekphrasis from a strictly literary phenomenon to a dynamic form of intermedial reference. One of the foundational contributions to the typology of ekphrasis comes from John Hollander, who, in "The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art" (1995) introduces three primary categories. He differentiates between actual ekphrasis and notional ekphrasis, and introduces unassessable actual ekphrasis, which applies to works of art that once existed but are now lost or untraceable. Hollander's distinctions emphasize the varying degrees of referentiality in ekphrastic texts, highlighting the interplay between representation and imagination.

Building on Hollander's framework, Peter Barry, in his paper "Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis" (1999), further refines these categories by introducing additional subcategories. He distinguishes between closed and open variants of actual ekphrasis. The closed type describes works that do not explicitly reference a real event or witnessed object but instead focus on a subject observed by the speaker. A key example of this form is W.H. Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts* (1938). In contrast, the open type refers to actual, real-world scenes, as exemplified in William Blake's "The Tyger", which simultaneously alludes to Blake's engraving and to a living tiger. Regarding notional ekphrasis, Barry introduces two further subdivisions: the fictional variant, which describes a non-existent but realistic artwork, such as the portrait in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess", and the conceptual variant, which describes an imaginary object that transcends the capabilities of a real art form, as seen in Auden's "The Shield of Achilles".

In the late 1990s, Tamar Yacobi introduced a heuristic differentiation based on the numerical and relational structure of ekphrasis. She critiques Hollander's model for its exclusive focus on one-to-one relationships between text and image, proposing instead four types of ekphrastic relations: one-to-one, where a single image corresponds to a single ekphrastic response; one-to-many, in which a single image inspires multiple literary interpretations; many-to-one, where multiple images are condensed into a single ekphrastic response (cumulative ekphrasis); and many-to-many, which accounts for instances where multiple artworks inspire multiple literary interpretations. Yacobi's model expands the analytical possibilities of ekphrasis by demonstrating its potential for multiplicity in both textual and visual engagement. Around the same time, Valerie Robillard develops an

intertextual typology of ekphrasis in *Pictures into Words* (1998), introducing two distinct models: the Scalar Model and the Differential Model. The Scalar Model, based on Manfred Pfister's theories of intertextuality, categorizes ekphrasis according to six key aspects: communicativity, which concerns how explicitly the artwork is marked within a text; referentiality, which assesses the degree to which the poet engages with the artwork; structurality, which examines the syntagmatic integration of the pre-text into the target text; selectivity, which addresses the adaptation of historical or stylistic features; dialogicity, which considers semantic tension between the text and artwork; and autoreflexivity, which focuses on the text's self-awareness of its engagement with visual sources. Meanwhile, the Differential Model differentiates between depictive ekphrasis, which closely aligns with traditional representation; attributive ekphrasis, which acknowledges an artwork without direct description; and associative ekphrasis, which incorporates indirect or interpretive interactions with visual sources.

In the 2000s, Liliane Louvel categorizes ekphrasis based on explicit visual references, implicit artistic interplay, and critical engagement with imagery. In *Poetics of the Iconotext* (2011), Louvel introduces the concept of transpictoriality, which encompasses three interrelated subcategories: interpictoriality, referring to the explicit presence of an artwork within a text; parapictoriality, describing the interplay between textual and visual elements without direct quotation; and metapictoriality, where the text critically engages with or comments on the image. Additionally, Louvel categorizes ekphrasis based on pictorial saturation, ranging from minimal visual allusions to full-fledged ekphrastic descriptions. Her typology extends further to include eleven subcategories of ekphrasis, among them narrativizing ekphrasis, which embeds an artwork within a narrative; hermeneutic ekphrasis, which offers an interpretative approach to visual works; monumental ekphrasis, which commemorates lost or historical artworks and subversive ekphrasis, which challenges traditional representations of visual art.

Expanding the discussion to filmic ekphrasis, Laura Sager-Eidt (2008) adapts Robillard's classification to cinematic contexts. She introduces four types of filmic ekphrasis: attributive, which refers to the artworks without explicit discussion; depictive, which provides direct descriptions or reflections on images; interpretative, which extends beyond simple verbalization by analysing the artwork's significance; and dramatic, which transforms the artwork into a visual narrative, often obscuring its original source. Sager-Eidt's classification underscores how ekphrastic engagement extends beyond literature and into moving-image media. That same year, Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux presents an alternative framework, identifying six ekphrastic tropes in twentieth-century poetry: internal stillness, inspired by Keatsian aesthetic contemplation; into history, where the artwork serves as a portal to the past; in the museum, which explores the contemplative nature of viewing art in institutional settings; the narrative, which constructs a story around an artwork; tutelary function, which interprets ekphrasis as an educational or instructive tool; and talking pictures, which metaphorically "animate" silent works of art.

Recent scholarly works have examined the legacy of *ut pictura poesis*, highlighting its continued relevance in interdisciplinary studies. Notable examples include the essay collection co-edited by David Kennedy and Richard Meek, *Ekphrastic Encounters: New Interdisciplinary Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts* (2019); Marie-Eirini Panagiotidou's *The Poetics of Ekphrasis: A Stylistic Approach* (2022); and the co-edited volume by Asunción López-Valera Azcárate, Miriam de Paiva Vieira, and Jørgen Bruhn, *The Palgrave Handbook of Intermediality* (2024). These works reflect the growing interdisciplinary emphasis on ekphrasis, integrating literary, visual, and intermedial perspectives while demonstrating ongoing scholarly engagement across various media and disciplines. David Kennedy offers a fresh perspective on ekphrasis, moving beyond the traditional paragone of the arts. He defines ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of an encounter with a work of art in the form and conventions of another medium." This definition emphasizes intermedial communication and interaction between artistic forms rather than their opposition.

Similarly, in her 2022 book *The Poetics of Ekphrasis: A Stylistic Approach*, Marie-Eirini Panagiotidou develops a framework for understanding ekphrastic responses by identifying four key qualities: representation, which underscores the strong representational nature of ekphrastic texts; narrativization, which explores the impulse to situate an artwork within a contextual framework; transposition, which highlights the ways in which readers are invited to partake in the ekphrastic experience; and collaboration, which emphasizes the relationship between author, text, artwork, and reader. In her analysis, Panagiotidou defines ekphrasis as a process of portraying or narrating a work of art (85). She argues that representation and narrativization should not be seen as opposing forces but rather as interconnected dimensions of ekphrasis that manifest to varying degrees within a given work.

The relationship between ekphrastic representation and narrative has often been framed as a stark opposition, with some critics suggesting that ekphrasis serves merely as embellishment rather than contributing to narrative progression. However, by viewing representation and narrative as distinct yet interwoven elements, it becomes possible to analyse them as complementary aspects of ekphrasis rather than mutually exclusive forces. Panagiotidou argues that considering these elements as interconnected but distinct levels of ekphrasis enables a more nuanced exploration of their manifestation within a text (85). She also highlights that earlier critics, including Murray Krieger and John Hollander, associated mimesis with ekphrasis, emphasizing its function in creating vivid, descriptive imagery that allows readers to visualize the depicted subject. In contrast, James A.W. Heffernan contends that narrativization should not be restricted to the realms of narration or description alone. Instead, he advocates for conceptualizing ekphrasis as a hybrid form that integrates both elements, thereby expanding its interpretative scope. Panagiotidou defines narrativization as the process of structuring and communicating a narrative through ekphrasis. Consequently, rather than being positioned in direct opposition to representation, narrativization coexists with it, manifesting to varying degrees across different texts.

As previously stated, Panagiotidou's hybrid model demonstrates how ekphrasis synthesizes description and narrative. Instead, it can be understood as a hybrid form that incorporates elements from both categories. Panagiotidou introduces the concept of narrativization, defining it as the process of constructing and conveying a narrative through ekphrasis. This perspective challenges the assumption that narrativization and representation are inherently opposed. Rather, it acknowledges their coexistence within a text, with varying degrees of emphasis. Some works may lean more heavily toward representation, while others may foreground narrative construction. This interplay can even occur within a single text, where certain sections prioritise narrative while others emphasize description. Similarly, the concept of collaboration can be examined through the lens of intermediality, focusing on the dynamic relationship between word and image. This shift in perspective highlights the scalar nature of collaboration, where ekphrastic poetry operates along a continuum—from subtle allusions to full integration of text and image. In graphic poetry, words and images deliberately merge to create immersive, multimodal experiences that challenge traditional paragone perspectives, which historically positioned words and images in opposition. By drawing on insights from multimodal stylistics, cognitive poetics, and semiotics, this analysis explores how text, image, typography, and graphic elements intertwine to reinforce the dialogic and symbiotic relationship between verbal and visual modes.

4.1. Ut Musica Poesis *or The Relationship between Literature and Music*

The relationship between literature and music, often termed *ut musica poesis*, remains a growing field of study. Critic W.J.T. Mitchell has called for a re-evaluation of conventional ekphrastic discourse, arguing that it tends to neglect the temporal and expressive characteristics inherent in music. In response, Claus Clüver has proposed an updated definition of ekphrasis, characterizing it as "the verbal representation of a non-verbal sign system." This revised definition demonstrates a growing

interdisciplinary approach in contemporary ekphrasis, by incorporating auditory and musical elements. In his essay "Going Too Far with the Sister Arts", W.J.T. Mitchell highlights that discussions on artistic interactions have predominantly focused on literature and painting, often neglecting music (1). This omission stems from the complex interplay between music and literature. On the one hand, music shares a fundamental temporal nature with literature, its status as a performing art, and its reliance on pauses and punctuation, creating structural parallels between the two forms. On the other hand, music presents a challenge in terms of meaning, as it is frequently regarded as lacking denotative and mimetic potential, instead prioritizing expression over representation. Although all the arts may aspire to the condition of music, when engaging in argumentation, poetry and painting have historically assumed a dominant position.

Music is often referred to as a "sister art" in discussions of literature, painting, and other creative forms. Its uniqueness lies in the way it transcends the confines of form—unlike visual art or literature, which rely on concrete images, words, or narratives, music operates largely in the realm of sound and time, engaging the audience's subjective imagination. Rather than depicting specific objects, stories, or scenes, music evokes emotions, moods, and mental pictures without the use of tangible or verbal representations. Walter Pater's famous assertion—"All art aspires to the condition of music"— captures this idea. For Pater, music represents the purest form of artistic expression because it is abstract, free from representational duties, and its effects are experienced intuitively and personally rather than rationally or intellectually. Other art forms, Pater believes, strive for this non-representational purity and direct emotional impact that is unique to music. This view positions music as an ideal that other arts may imitate—seeking to move beyond the limitations of form, genre, and content, and to communicate profoundly through rhythm, tone, and resonance. In practice, this concept has influenced the development of literary styles (such as Symbolism or lyric poetry), abstract visual art, and even experimental film, all of which aim to elicit responses that are less about what is shown or said and more about how it feels.

Literature, grounded in language, depends on semantic referentiality and explicit meaning, whereas music is often perceived as an expressive rather than a representational art. Furthermore, distinctions between words and images have traditionally been framed in binary opposition, contributing to hierarchical perceptions of artistic forms. During the Enlightenment, for instance, music's supposed inability to imitate nature led to its exclusion from the prestigious category of Beaux Arts. This marginalization, however, overlooks the intrinsic emotional and structural parallels between music and verbal arts. Despite these challenges, comparative studies have illuminated the intricate dialogue between music and literature. Notable examples include analyses of musical patterns in Alejo Carpentier's *El acoso* alongside Beethoven's "Third Symphony" or the structural parallels in Robert Browning's poetry, both of which underscore shared principles of rhythm, punctuation, and form. Such intersections reveal the potential for deeper interdisciplinary engagement, even as literature and music maintain distinct communicative modalities. Consequently, Claus Clüver's reformulation of Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis encompasses a diverse range of ekphrastic objects— whether visual or auditory, artistic or ordinary—thereby integrating music into the broader discourse of intermediality.

5. Reverse (Visual) Ekphrasis: Visual Art as Response to Text

The challenge of transposing a visual text into a written form stems from the fundamental differences between the semiotic systems of language and visual communication (Goodman 1992). Nelson Goodman posits that language operates in a linear and sequential manner, relying on meaning, whereas visual texts depend on spatial and symbolic cues. Reverse ekphrasis—the process of representing a visual text through language—requires the reinterpretation and reimagination of the original text's linearity within the simultaneity and holistic representation characteristic of visual media. As Claus Clüver argues, one of the most significant challenges in translating a poem into another

verbal system arises from the codes and conventions embedded in the literary system that produced it, as well as its reception (59). Similarly, reverse ekphrasis functions as a dialogic process in which verbal and visual elements engage in a reciprocal relationship. This process is more than a transfer of meaning; it transforms the source material, generating a new work that echoes yet reinterprets it. The interaction between these two systems becomes a site of negotiation, where meaning is shaped by the creator's interpretive lens.

When analysing the process by which a literary source is transformed into a visual target, the primary focus should be on the conversion process itself (Hulea 2019). Lavinia Hulea identifies a tripartite structure in reverse ekphrasis, consisting of: (1) the linear reading of the source text, allowing the painter to grasp its denotative and connotative meanings; (2) the conversion of the literary source, which involves adjusting the temporal and spatial dimensions of the text to configure the target representation; and (3) the substantiation of the conversion, wherein pictoriality is attributed to the target text through stylistic references specific to the visual medium (Hulea 304). The conversion phase in reverse ekphrasis is underpinned by a complex cognitive and interpretive process undertaken by the visual artist. This stage establishes an initial framework for identifying both the shared conceptual elements and the structural divergences between the literary source and its visual counterpart. According to Hulea, once a visual target text is created, it becomes an independent artistic entity, distinct from its original source. This independence is rooted in the target text's unique artistic characteristics, distinguishing it from a mere derivative or interpretive reproduction. However, this autonomy introduces challenges, particularly in that the relationship between the target text and its literary source may become ambiguous, potentially diverging from the original context or intended meaning (Hulea 305). The processes of reframing and destabilization play a crucial role in this transformation: while reframing maintains a connection to the original artwork, destabilization can transcend this connection entirely, resulting in a new creation that evokes a wholly distinct aesthetic and interpretive experience. Notably, the distinction between these two processes is not always clearly defined.

In the broader context of reverse ekphrasis, the process inherently intertwines the literariness of the source text with the pictoriality of the target text. This infusion of pictoriality does not occur as a subsequent or separate stage; rather, it emerges from the moment the visual artist begins the conversion process. As a result, the iconic sign of the final artwork is shaped by this dynamic interplay from the outset, merging literary and visual elements into a cohesive artistic composition. The outcome of reverse ekphrasis is thus the creation of a new work of art with its own distinct characteristics and artistic integrity. Importantly, the reversed ekphrastic transpositions should not be regarded as visual target texts that are subordinate to their literary sources (Hulea 305). Instead, they should be recognized as autonomous artistic creations, each possessing intrinsic aesthetic and interpretive value.

6. Concluding Remarks

The concept of ekphrasis has long shaped discussions on aesthetic and philosophical thought, particularly in relation to the interplay between words and images as fundamental instruments of humanistic intellectual life. Historically, Horace's dictum sought to explore the distinctions between verbal and visual forms, a framework that later critics, including Lessing, W.J.T. Mitchell, and Heffernan, interpreted as an inherent struggle between textual and visual elements. This perspective often framed ekphrasis as a site of conflict, where verbal and visual arts compete for representational authority. However, contemporary approaches increasingly reject this adversarial model in favor of intermedial studies, which emphasize interaction and collaboration between artistic forms.

As outlined earlier, ekphrasis has undergone substantial definitional broadening, from classical paradigms to intermedial and semiotic frameworks. While early scholars such as Murray Krieger and Heffernan confined ekphrasis to the "verbal representation of a visual representation," Claus

Clüver expanded its scope to include real and fictional works of art as well as nonverbal sign systems, such as music. This broader conceptualization aligns with the semiotic turn in contemporary criticism, which emphasizes the interplay of diverse sign systems in meaning-making processes. As a result, ekphrasis is no longer seen as a static descriptive practice but as a dynamic and evolving mode of artistic engagement. The increasing intersection of literature with other artistic disciplines has stimulated new critical inquiries, particularly in the context of twentieth- and twenty-first-century intermedial aesthetic experiences. This shift has prompted scholars to move beyond traditional comparative studies of art and literature toward a semiotic analysis of artistic interactions, as suggested by Lara-Rallo.

Recent scholarship has further extended the boundaries of ekphrasis, redefining it as a transmedial phenomenon that operates across different semiotic frameworks. Martin Knust conceptualizes ekphrasis as an interaction between distinct media types, highlighting the fluidity of semiotic modes in artistic representation. Transmediation, in this context, reflects how contemporary ekphrasis facilitates transitions between verbal and visual expressions, demonstrating the permeability of artistic forms. While some scholars, such as Anne Keefe, maintain that ekphrasis involves a confrontation between verbal and visual modes, this perspective is increasingly challenged by intermedial theorists. Mitchell's argument that the distinction between images and language corresponds to broader sensory and cognitive differences—between showing and telling—suggests that these modes are interdependent rather than oppositional. In the past, the relationship between word and image on this site was one of conflict. However, contemporary perspectives increasingly emphasize its intermedial potential. While early scholars such as Krieger and Heffernan limited ekphrasis to visual representation, Clüver's expansion into non-verbal sign systems, including music, aligns with the semiotic turn in literary criticism.

Building on this premise, scholars such as Lars Elleström, Irina Rajewsky, and Jörgen Bruhn advocate for intermediality as a framework for understanding artistic communication. This perspective underscores how different media complement rather than compete with one another, reinforcing a shift from artistic rivalry to collaboration. Within this intermedial paradigm, the scope of ekphrasis has expanded to encompass a broader spectrum of artistic interactions, strengthening its role in fostering dialogue across disciplines. In the twenty-first century, intermedial studies further challenge traditional artistic divisions by positioning ekphrasis as a dynamic mode of interartistic engagement. By integrating narrativization and representation, contemporary ekphrasis fosters immersive, multisensory experiences. As interdisciplinary research continues to advance, ekphrasis remains a critical framework for understanding the evolving relationships between literature, visual arts, and other artistic media.

University of Málaga, Spain

Works Cited

Barry, Peter. "Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis." *The Cambridge Quarterly,* vol. 31, no. 2, 2002, pp.155–65. www.jstor.org/stable/42967819.

Behluli, Sofie and Gabriele Rippl "Ekphrasis: Intermedial and Anglophone Perspectives". *The Palgrave Handbook of Intermediality*, edited by Jørgen Bruhn, Asun López-Varela Azcárate Miriam de Paiva Vieira, 2024, pp. 47-71.

Bruhn, Jørgen and Beate Schirrmacher. "Intermedial Studies". *Intermedial Studies. An Introduction to Meaning Across Media*, edited by Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirrmacher, 2021, pp. 3-27.

Bruhn, Jørgen, Anna Gutowska, Emma Tornborg, and Martin Knust. "Transmediation." *Intermedial Studies: An Introduction to Meaning across Media,* edited by Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirrmacher, 2021, pp. 61-138.

Bublíková, Štìpánka. "Ut Pictura Poesis: Visual Poetics of Pre-Raphaelite Art." Master Theses, Palacký University Olomouc, 2013.

Clüver, Claus. "Ekphrasis Reconsidered: On Verbal Representations of Non-Verbal Texts." *Interart Poetics: Essays on the Interrelations of the Arts and Media,* edited by Ulla-Brita Lagerroth, Hans Lund, and Erik Headling, 1997, pp. 19-33.

—. "A New Look at an Old Topic: Ekphrasis Revisited." *Revista Todas as Letras* 19, no. 1, 2017, pp. 30-44.http://dx.doi.org/10.5935/1980-6914/letras.v19n1p30-4

—. "On Intersemiotic Transposition." *Poetics Today*, 10, no. 1, 1989, pp. 55–90. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1772555.

—. "Intermediality and Interart Studies". *Changing Borders: Contemporary Positions in Intermediality*. 2016, pp. 19:39.

Elleström, Lars. *Beyond Media Borders, Volume 1. Intermedial Relations among Multimodal Media.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

—. *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Heffernan, James A. W. "Ekphrasis and Representation." *New Literary History* 22, no. 2, 1991, pp. 297–316. https://doi.org/10.2307/469040.

—. "Ekphrasis: Theory". *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature – Image – Sound – Music*. Ed. by Gabriele Rippl, 2015, pp. 35-50.

—. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Hollander, John. *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Huitink, Luuk. "Enargeia, Enactivism and the Ancient Readerly Imagination". *Distributed Cognition in Classical Antiquity*. Ed. by Miranda Anderson and Douglas Cairns, 2018, pp. 173-193.

Hulea, Lavinia. "Ekphrasis and Reversed Ekphrasis as Adaptation Processes." *Journal of Romanian Literary Studies* 6, 2015, pp. 939–944, https://www.ceeol.com/content-files/document-457057.pdf.

Jakobson, Roman. "A Postscript to the Discussion on Grammar of Poetry." *Diacritics* 10, no. 1, 1980, pp. 21–35.

—. "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation." *On Translation*, 1959, pp. 232–239. https://philpapers.org/rec/JAKAPT.

Kalafenos, Emma. "The Polyphony 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, 2003, pp. 27–57.

Keefe, Anne. "The Ecstatic Embrace of Verbal and Visual: Twenty-First Century Lyric beyond the Ekphrastic Paragone." *Word & Image* 27, no. 2, 2011, pp. 135–147. https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2010.516891.

Kennedy, David, and Richard Meek. "Introduction: From Paragone to Encounter." *Ekphrastic Encounters: New Interdisciplinary Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts*, edited by David Kennedy and Richard Meek, 2019, 1:24.

Krieger, Murray. Ekphrasis. *The Illusion of the Natural Sign.* Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.

Lara-Rallo, Carmen. "Ekphrasis Revisited: Crossing Artistic Boundaries." *Relational Designs in Literature and the Arts: Page and Stage, Canvas and Screen*. Ed. by Rui Carvalho Homem, 2012, 97–108.

Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Translated by Sir Robert Phillimore. Macmillan Company, 1874.

Loizeaux, Elizabeth Bergmann. *Twentieth-century Poetry and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Louvel, Liliane. *Poetics of the Icontext, Introduction by Karen Jacobs and Translation by Laurence Petit*. Ashgate, 2011.

—-. "Types of Ekphrasis: An Attempt at Classification". *Poetics Today* 39, no. 2, 2013, pp. 245–263. https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-4324432.

Meisel, Martin. *Chaos Imagined/: Literature, Art, Science*. Columbia University Press, 2016.

Mitchell, W. J. T. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. University of Chicago Press, 1986.

—. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. University Chicago Press, 1995.

—."Going Too Far with the Sister Arts." *Space, Time, Image, Sign: Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts*, edited by James A. W. Heffernan, Peter Lang, 1987, pp. 1-15

Panagiotidou, Maria-Eirini. *The Poetics of Ekphrasis: A Stylistic Approach.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

Rajewsky, Irina O. "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality". *Intermédialités* 6 (2005): 43–64. https://doi.org/10.7202/1005505ar. Accessed 14 January 2025.

Rensselaer W. Lee. *Ut Pictura Poesis. The Humanistic Theory of Painting.* Norton, 1940.

Robillard, Valerie. "In Pursuit of Ekphrasis: An Intertextual Approach". *Pictures into Words. Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis,* edited by Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel, VU University Press, 1998, pp. 53–72

Ruskin, John. *Modern Painters.* Harvard University, 1843.

Sager Eidt, Laura M. "Methodology". *Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film*, 27–63. Brill, 2008, pp. 27–63

Sheppard, Anne. *The Poetics of Phantasia. Imagination in Ancient Aesthetics*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

Silver, Larry. "Step-Sister of the Muses Painting as Liberal Art and Sister Art". *Articulate Images: The Sister Arts from Hogarth to Tennyson*, edited by Richard Wendorf. University of Minnesota Press, 1983, pp. 36–69.

Spender, Stephen. "The Pre-Raphaelite Literary Painters". *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, 10, 2001, pp 27–35.

Spitzer, Leo. "The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' or Content vs. Metagrammar." *Essays on English and American Literature*. Princeton University Press, 1962, pp. 67–97

Stallknecht, Newton P. and Horst Frenz. *Comparative Literature, Method and Perspective*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1961.

Stewart, Garrett. "Reverse Ekphrasis". *The Look of Reading. Book, Painting, Text*. University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Wendy Steiner. *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relations between Modern Literature and Painting*. University of Chicago Press, 1982.

—. *Pictures of Romance: Form Against Context in Painting and Literature*. University of Chicago Press, 1988

Stephen, Michael. Homer, *The Iliad*. Second Edition. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Wang, Bowen. "Reformulating the Theory of Literary Intermediality: A Genealogy from Ut Pictura Poesis to Poststructuralist In-Betweenness". *The Palgrave Handbook of Intermediality*, edited by Jørgen Bruhn, Asun López-Varela Azcárate Miriam de Paiva Vieira, Springer Nature, 2023, pp. 339–365

Webb, Ruth. *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*. Routledge, 2016.

Yacobi, Tamar. "Pictorial Models and Narrative Ekphrasis." *Poetics Today*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1995, pp. 599–649. https://doi.org/10.2307/1773367.

—. "Ekphrastic Double Exposure and the Museum Book of Poetry." *Poetics Today* 34, no. 1 (2013) 1–52. https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-1894487.