

## WRITING ABOUT WHAT WE SEE: EKPHRASIS TODAY

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**Abstract:** Visual media presents us with an opportunity to enter into the written scholarly discussions about an understanding of the paradox that what is seen and what is written are different representation. In this paper I investigate the importance of audience today; I discuss how global communications via new media challenges traditional views of the concept of an audience. I look at how communication is now from one to many, from many to many and from one to one, and how this challenges the term 'audience' with 'users'. This paper enters into the scholarly debate about how interactivity in new media places singular interpretive actions by individuals at its center rather than as the more traditionally peripheral audience. In doing so it suggests that existing audience theory can and should be extended in regard to new media audiences, players or users. This paper also discusses how audience theory remains apposite when it adapts and changes.

**Keywords:** *visual media, audience, new media, audience theory.*

### INTRODUCTION

Today we live in a very visual world. We are surrounded by signs from billboards to television, from cinema to gaming, from art to graffiti, from ebooks to interactive multimedia and from still photography to 3 dimensional experiential photography. One thing, however, that all media have in common is that they are all written about as we use ekphrasis: language at the service of vision. Yet such words cannot bring the actual visual before us: 'Words can "cite" but never "sight" their objects' (Mitchell 1994:3). It is not to be thought that the art/visual talks for itself in words rather than images, but rather that the person viewing the art/visual describes it in a different but complementary medium. This could best be described as 'the discourse of viewing' (Goldhill 2007:2), that may also be called ekphrasis. In critiquing and analysing the seen, we

question the visual representation and enter in this paper into scholarly discussion about the seen and/or about describing the seen in words.

Human interaction is the basis of all communications, and discourse is central to this. From earliest times, such discourse was essentially person to person: as well as talk, there was dance, body decoration, song, cave, sand and ash paintings, live entertainment oral histories, lores, laws and legends, and ceremonies. Speech and interactions were the main factors in communication and obviously this meant that the tyranny of distance held sway. Once this distance was overcome by print communications, time and space began the long period of shrinkage which has resulted in the communications age and the dominant electronic culture.

### **Ekphrasis: writing about what we see**

Cultural narratives define both our lives and ourselves argues Robyn Fivush (2010); and this is also true of visual cultural narratives. Visual texts arise from and reside in networks of meanings that are culturally learned. They are thus inevitably involved in the power relations that surround both the commercial production and the personal consumption of images. Visual narratives are involved in the representation of culture as are the words that describe them.

Originally, ekphrasis had a singular meaning about witty poetic representations of the visual that is best described as the language we use to describe the seen (Goldhill 2007). It is now more broadly how the image relates to what is written about it, and vice versa (Francis 2009). So today it is used more broadly to describe how we write about what we see and how we place what we see into words so as to make a further narrative of meaning. We write about what we see for many reasons, but perhaps the dominant reason is that print is a powerful and far-reaching tool that is readily available both on paper and online.

Whilst it may well be argued that Ekphrasis is based upon the illusion that we can depict the seen in text, it remains the most dominant way of communicating visual experiences away from their presence. It is 'as much a venture into descriptive narrative as into description per se' (Elsner 2002: Intro). Such ekphrasis provides us with creating a sense of wonder about a given visual and bringing the seen to the imaginations of others to whom it is not necessarily available. It provides tools for the dissemination of critical analyses of a visual work or experience as well as conveys and shares the immediacy of the

visual being experienced and the emotive responses called upon to the visual experience.

Such critical analyses inevitably involve an understanding of the pleasure of reading both the written and seen texts, an understanding that writing about the seen is always a personal act of translation. In interpreting and critiquing visual texts, we build a bridge between the seen and the imagined as evoked through words, we analyse a visual world dominated by the seen so as to understand the gap between the seen and the described. Thus: 'The reality referred to and promised by but never accessible in itself through ekphrasis may be said to stand (depending on the interests of the listener or reader) for a reality beyond the social and material world of our actual lives' (Bartch & Elsner 2007:vi). Nowhere could this be more true than in new media interactive visual texts.

### **Discourse through written communications**

As societies became more complex, written communications began to occur, so that the need for face to face discourse was less important. Such interactions emphasised the inwardness of authorisation and control of communication as storage: the closed book is a good metaphor for this, as are the chained libraries and bibles held by church authorities. The utilisation of moveable type for multiple printings moved western culture into the orderly, the sortive, the taxonomic which has led to industrialisation and cultural dominance through colonisation. Rather than doing or displaying things, we began to write about them.

We have moved on to represent our experienced world through photographs, drawings, artistic

endeavours, T.V., the cinema and utilising interactive multimedia. Of course, we also write on, about and alongside those representations. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the camera and movie camera have introduced into our lives new ways of seeing the world and extended ways of living our own lives through mediated experiences. With the introduction of 'talkies' in the 1930's, of television in the 1960's, and of computers in the 1990's, words related to visuals have become every-day. This has been emphasised in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the increase in digital visualised communications (Hobbs 2004; Cho et al 2009), particularly interactive visual experiences.

### **Writing what we see**

Why do we choose to write about visual experiences, and how do we write about what we see? The visual world surrounds us in both formal representations such as architecture, art and interactive multimedia, and in nature itself including people, animals and the environment generally. There are clearly many ways that we can write about what we see as we move through our built and natural environments (Buell 2009; Elsner. 2010).

In writing about what we see on/in multimedia and its elements, we can ask and seek to answer questions about interactivity, virtuality, three dimensionality and immediacy, and how they provide challenging components to critique or describe (Harrow 2010).

Modern eurowestern multimedia means that there is a generational change from print to becoming also very highly visually literate. Today, modern media and multimedia act to extend our life experiences, enabling us to participate in something bigger than ourselves alone as individuals. Indeed, we lead multiple

virtual or possible lives through the mediated experience rather than the first-hand one. This emphasises further the more traditional sense of being lost in a book.

We have become familiar with watching a movie on TV or online, and this experience is different from suspending disbelief in the dream experience of the cinema, where you share your inner imaginative life with strangers in an external environment. In cinematic movies, visual action reveals character, but the cinematic action itself and the act of being in a darkened theatre with strangers sharing a dream experience reveals as our own and others' thoughts, feelings, plans and so on through the plotline and the characters' personalities. Today we have moved on to digitised new media and we see that computers, e-watches and mobile phones are pervasive; alongside their powerful influence is that of gaming.

Are mobile phones and games 'amusing ourselves to death' as the American critic Neil Postman asserts? Certainly they provide another form of the 'culture industry' that seeks only to make money while pretending to extend our worlds.

Multimedia devices provide entertainment through interactivity within virtual realities, but do they stifle interactivity with people? Postings such as Facebook spaces offer global relationships as well as local social units or urban tribes; we are bombarded with information related to news from citizen journalists as well as traditional ones, and there are multiple platforms for work information. How do we write about the visuals that occur online?

### **Gaming**

In gaming, the goal is to capture a huge global audience of the young street-smart and cool market for online

games playing. At the same time, the new wireless technologies make mobile consoles able to be accessed without any national legal control much less parental control. The borderless world of the internet makes virtual gaming communities unreachable as far as regulations are concerned.

In 2003, according to Douglas Lowenstein President of the American Interactive Digital Software Association, the average age of a computer gamer was 29 years with the most passionate being in their early 20's and male; 17% were over 50 years of age and women of over 18 years made up 26% of the gamers.

Many new games aren't about violent power (now about 15%), but about social dynamics, with the player acting in a 'god-like' manner. Today, there is also more co-operative play, in games that are massively multiple player role playing games such as 'Every Quest'. They are aimed at both male and female gamers. Games where societies, cultures and people are constructed are called 'god-games'. They act to build and construct through endless possible permutations that permit multiple combinations. Such games are based on strategic thinking and planning, involve creative input and laterality as they invent open-ended universes that aren't constrained by narrow rules or actual realities (Heffernan 2004. Pop 2010).

Interactivity for Rob Cover (2004) 'achieves a new stage in the democratisation of user participation with the electronic game'. It signals, he states, a need for scholars to form new theories about textuality and discourse as 'the author-creator function and the audience-user or recipient, can be said to be engaged in a struggle for control over the text in terms of participation, co-creation, transformation and

distribution' (n.p). It is, then, a concern of controlling the narrative in a non-linear text that is not presented to the user as finished but that invites multiple possibilities of immersive interactive play. Indeed, Cover describes this as 'the author-audience struggle', and agrees that it is not new to scholarship.

### **Print: a powerful communication tool**

Visual representations speak for themselves: we are very familiar with the saying that one picture is worth a thousand words. We do not have to follow an imperative of redescribing the seen in words. At the same time, there is a strong relationship between visual and verbal representations (Hollingworth 2005). For example, millions of words and many books are written about art. Artists themselves long to understand their work through verbal descriptions as well as the intrinsic visual representations themselves. Vincent van Gogh provides strong insights into this in his letters to his brother about his art works:

'At present I absolutely want to paint a starry sky. It often seems to me that night is still more richly coloured than the day; having hues of the most intense violets, blues and greens. If only you pay attention to it you will see that certain stars are lemon-yellow, others pink or a green, blue and forget-me-not brilliance. And without my expatiating on this theme it is obvious that putting little white dots on the blue-black is not enough to paint a starry sky'

We write about what we see because print remains the dominant communication tool even on the internet (Kavoori & Chadha 2009). Print has had a very real influence on the cultural mindset not only of Europeans but on the ways in which post-industrial capitalism has developed into the

dominant (almost sole?) cultural model up to today (Hollingworth 2005). Print made discourse very inward and subject to an authority. The individual can use the book or online information in print anywhere and at any time within reason to be instructed, to gain information, to have knowledge and opinion delivered to the reader.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins is also engaged in describing the visual in his written works:

'Drops of rain hanging on rails etc. seen with only the lower light rim like nails (of fingers). Screws of brooks and twines. Soft chalky look with more shadowy middles of globes of cloud on a night with a moon faint or concealed. Mealy clouds with a not brilliant moon. Blunt buds of the ash. Pencil buds of the beech. Lobes of the trees. Cups of the eyes, gathering back the lightly hinged eyelids. Pencil of eyelashes. Juices of the eyeball. Eyelids like leaves, petals, caps, tufted hats, handkerchiefs, sleeve's, gloves. Also the bones sleeved in flesh. Juices of the sunrise. Joins and veins of the same. Vermilion look of the hand held against a candle with the darker parts as the middles of the fingers and especially knuckles covered with ash' (Gerard Manley Hopkins *The Penguin Poets*)

### Visual experiences

The pictorial represents a voyage of the imagination as we enter into the representation seeing it not as canvas or an epad but as an experience in which we are involved: 'we do not see paintings, as much as we see *according to them*' (McGilchrist 2001: 183). Visual experiences lead us beyond the media in which they exist to the world that they picture. The human imagination can also evoke a pictorial element through verbal description. As Ian McGilchrist says in

his discussion of the role of the relationship of the hemispheres of the brain: language is 'a living something that allows us to move through it and beyond...'

The visual, then, can be presented within the verbal albeit through 2 different codes of knowing. Simon Goldhill calls this 'the language of sight' (2007:6).

For Gregory Ulmer (1985) new technologies provide a new form of textual discourse that he calls *electracy* because it is as important and powerful as literacy and numeracy.

### Words and visuals

Contentiously, art history is described by Jas Elsner as *ekphrasis* because it '...represents the tendentious application of rhetorical description to the work of art (or to several works or even whole categories of art) for the purpose of making an argument of some kind to suit the author's prior intent' (2010:11). For him 'the description of objects' acts to 'conspire to translate the visual and sensual nature of a work of art into a linguistic formulation capable of being voiced in a discursive argument' (12). Thus, writing about what we see can be called 'a descriptive fiction' that makes a visual object falsified:

...the conceptual apparatus into which the object has been rendered, and its transformation from a thing that signifies by volume, shape, visual resonance, texture into one that speaks within the structures of grammar, language, verbal semiotics (call it what you will) and can be appropriated to numerous kinds are quite simply vast. In fact, they are so vast that the truly responsible viewer might balk at the prospect of so falsifying the object by the act of its verbal rendition' (12).

We can take issue with Elsner's argument is that the attempt to describe

in words what is represented visually is 'inevitably a betrayal', for verbal descriptions of the visual are able to be seen as complementary rather than as betraying the artistic realisation of one through utilising the other. Is there a false dichotomy here? Clearly the seen differs from what is written about seeing it, but the intentions of each action are intentions of definition, of understanding.

The earliest representations of language are still recorded in the ancient cave drawings across the world. Elements of dance and song, of ritual performances and beliefs, are also forms of discourse. Dramatic representations of reality meant that the religious plays and liturgies, sermons and publications were a very important 'mediated experience'. They took the congregation from their everyday life and enabled them to experience other 'higher' ideas and ideals.

### **Mediated experiences**

In the dominant western culture in which we live, and which is growing globally, it was the invention of moveable type that began the 'mediated experiences' we have come to enjoy through print. Of course, it was first envisaged by the inventor that moveable type would spread Christianity by enabling everyone to own a bible. Less religious people soon saw its market opportunities in printing cheap newspapers. These often contained serial stories that were later sold as books. Cheap books containing biographies, stories about the European 'discoveries' of the colonies, and expositions about proper social behaviour were also printed in large numbers.

It is easy to see why so many pamphlets and books were published about, for example, Captain Cook's voyages. The imaginary 'mediated

experience' of circumnavigating the world and building the empire was something few people could do in reality. The publication to a broad audience of creative writing such as short stories and novels is relatively recent. There was an upsurge in such publishing in the nineteenth century. This has been slightly diminished since the spread of cinema, T.V. and computers as modes of delivering 'mediated experience' quickly, easily, cheaply and in an entertaining fashion. Reading about what is visual provides us with multiple lives and experiences that would otherwise be inaccessible.

### **The book**

The book is an outstanding technology. It's compact, being able in many cases to be fitted in the pocket or held quite comfortably in the hand. It can be stored: the thin spine gives it an easy access as well as a small amount of storage. It contains a great deal of information in a small space: the typography ensures its readability; there are references and cross-references, bibliographies and blurbs; pictures, graphs and diagrammatic representations. The reader can enter and exit at will and make connections within the book and between books which are quite individual. The book is information waiting to be turned into knowledge by the reader. This has been made even more explicit by the ebook.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, discussions about the book by such thinkers as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, and, have led us to question the nature of meaning and discourse. Roland Barthes, for example, sees the book as:

...not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the

Author-god' but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture (Barthes, 1977: 142-143).

Helene Cixous says of the writing of prose, of very words themselves, that they are reliable only in so far as they support a certain cultural power structure related to (by) the masculinist hegemony:

'What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their churches were to crumble? If it were to come out in a new day that the logocentric project had always been, undeniably, to found (fund) phallogocentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself? Then all the stories would be told differently, the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies, another thinking, as yet not thinkable, will transform the functioning of all society (Cixous, 1988:361).

Jacques Derrida, too, asks that we question the hitherto culturally unquestionable power of textuality and discourse, and most especially the empowerment of the AUTHORitative text over the reader's writing of it: 'I will not work very hard to compose the thing, it is a rough draft of confused tracks which I leave in their hands. Certain ones will put it into their mouths, to identify the taste, sometimes to spit it out with a grimace, or to gnaw at it, or to swallow it in order to conceive, even, I mean, a child (Derrida, in Ulmer 1985:ix).

Thinking such as this has paved the way for both print and electronic textuality to be intellectually understood. These theorists have shown the difference between the word (sign) and its meaning (signification). In doing so there has been a problematising of the very nature of authority itself. Discourse is shown to be evanescent rather than definitive, authority is shown to reside in the reader rather than the author. Barthes's famous essay 'The Death of the Author' tells us that in all forms of discourse the author as God is dead.

### **The power of print**

We write about what we see because print is still the most powerful of communication tools. Print has had a very real influence on the cultural mindset not only of Europeans but on the ways in which post-industrial capitalism has developed into the dominant (almost sole?) cultural model of the late 20th century. Print made discourse very inward and subject to an authority. The individual can use the book anywhere and at anytime within reason to be instructed, to gain information, to have knowledge and opinion delivered to the reader. It also made it extremely commercial: industries of printing, publishing, selling, creating, education and information grew. So discourse was no longer public, first-hand, open and personal conversation or the consultation of chained books in public places like churches. After the sixteenth century, it was seen as extremely one-sided: the author informed the reader.

The utilisation of print to describe the visual is an act of translating one medium into another. Verbal descriptions of the visual are an act of interpretation by the writer of what has been viewed. Elsnar describes this act of

interpretation and translation as based on an assumption that verbal text can represent the visual. For him, ekphrasis is 'an act of betrayal' (2007:13), an 'appropriation of the object for ends that suit the interests of the interpreter...' (22). The story of the visual told through other media, however, can be seen otherwise, for any mediated representations are appropriations and translations whether in art, mass media or virtual reality. Indeed the very term 'virtual reality' displays how the act of seeing and doing is able to be made through multimedia translations.

### **New media**

New media opens up opportunities for new scholarly research into media relationships that are of digital non-linear and interactive form. User participation is increasing its extent into everyday activities such as, for example, driving a car; finding one's way; playing interactive 3D games and discoursing with friends locally and globally. Clearly, the relationship between authorship and audience is significantly different when the user participates in the activity in ways that were denied by previous technologies. The user enters into and can transform the interactive text.

This new form of personalised authorial discourse inevitably involves social change. As users we are involved in what Sonia Livingstone calls 'the wider ecology of communication' (2015:np). She sees this as involving us in a move beyond the yardstick of face-to-face communication to the adoption of 'a multi-and trans-cultural gaze' that understand the audience complexity without polarizing past communication techniques and 'today's more dispersed, participatory, globalized, peer-to-peer social media. She asserts that this is

necessary as 'polarizations of the "then" and "now" kind, especially those that bracket history as "how things were before now" rarely enrich our understanding of social change'.

### **Audience & Audience Theory**

In considering the new media interactive role of the audience, we can see how theoretical prisms can alter and change, and do not need to be defended as static. This period of new media development of 3D interactivity has led to the 'end of the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another' (Carpentier 2011:520).

### **The current ideal audience**

Today the imagined audience, the ideal audience brings us to a new mental construction of an interactive audience. That brings about an apparently paradoxical situation of Audience Autonomy. This means that the audience participates in the mediated experience rather than being given information. New media, then, has changed traditional views of audience and hence has added dynamic new possibilities for audience theory. It has moved from a realisation of the passive audience in the sender-messenger-receiver model, where the audience is the final point of the message to an introduction of the active audience that participates in the online media production interacting with the media content.

This offers audience theory a number of new ways in which to develop understanding of methodological perspectives that develop as global communications offer



new ways to interact with creativity. This is particularly evident in the field of journalism as well as media research.

Mass communication is shown as very personal, subjective and singular in many digital interactions. The new media user has different work to do as an interactive audience.

### Conclusion

Theoretical perspectives provide us with scholarly critical tools that enable knowledge to be taken forward as well as to be built. Bryan Turner (2010) says that 'social theory provides the necessary analytical and philosophical framework which the social sciences can develop. Social theory both sustains the achievements of the past, notes needs and limitations of the present, and points the way to future research issues and questions' (1).

Cultural theories such as audience theory offer us prisms that enable us to magnify our societal and cultural practices, views and metanarratives. These are too often taken for granted even in our scholarly analytical work. By identifying their existence, we can begin to understand how they are constructed and empowered. We can ask about these cultural metanarratives why are they seen as 'normal; what group benefits from such 'norms' and what group is locked out through the unscrutinised application of such 'norms'?

Identify through such theoretical prisms as audience theory the ways that cultural metanarratives contribute to the welfare of certain groups or even individuals in our society also involves us in identifying their the negative correlative. That is, in bringing into focus the ways that they act against other groups or individuals or groups. These cultural givens, when read against,

provide the focal point that highlights the cultural metanarratives that enable dominant social practices and expectations: they inevitably influence scholarship.

Reading against these 'givens' benefits scholarship by highlighting the ways in which societies operate. New media offers challenges and opportunities to writing about what we see (Harrow 2010; Cunningham 2007). Visual media, then, not only presents us with an opportunity to enter into the written scholarly discussions about an understanding of the paradox that what is seen and what is written are different representation. It also emphasizes the importance of audience today when global new media challenges traditional views of the concept of an audience.

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