Ekphrasis

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Summary

Ekphrasis is a Greek term whose etymological meaning is “to speak out” or “to show in full.” Debates on ekphrasis go back to classical antiquity and Homer’s lines on Hephaestos making Achilles’ shield in Book 18 of the epic *The Iliad* (8th century BCE). Ekphrasis was considered a mode of speaking capable of bringing absent things before the listener’s inner eye by aiming at *enargeia*, a vivid quality of language producing *evidentia* (evidence) and rousing emotions through lively, precise, and detailed verbal descriptions. Over the centuries, the term underwent a considerable narrowing-down of its original meaning and eventually, during the Second Sophistic, came to designate the description of works of art. However, ancient ekphrasis, in the broader sense of detailed and lively description, had a rich afterlife throughout the Middle Ages (e.g., in Geoffrey Chaucer), the Renaissance (e.g., in Shakespeare), Neoclassicism (in Joseph Addison’s essays and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s “Laocoön”), and even into the Romantic Age (e.g., in William Wordsworth and George Gordon Byron). In its narrower sense as verbal representation/evocation of or response to a work of art or visual object, it is a ubiquitous phenomenon in 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-century literature, be it poetry or narrative fiction. Many modernist, postmodernist, and post-postmodernist literary texts are replete with ekphrases, but these ekphrases very often question any mimetic or illusionist aesthetic and no longer exclusively follow the *paragonal* model: instead of competing with one another, ekphrastic word–image configurations are more adequately described as intermedial constellations and collaborations. As a pertinent feature of 20th- and 21st-century poetry and narrative fiction—examples are novels by Julian Barnes, Antonia Susan Byatt, Teju Cole, Siri Hustvedt, or Donna Tartt—ekphrasis has also attracted the attention of literary scholars and theoreticians of culture. Due to the many attempts to conceptualize and theorize ekphrasis, any attempt to give a simple definition will not suffice. In the 1980s and 1990s scholars such as Murray Krieger, William John Thomas Mitchell, and James Heffernan theorized ekphrasis: while Krieger saw ekphrasis as a symptom of the semiotic desire for the natural sign and Mitchell discussed ekphrasis within a *paragonal* framework of socio–cultural power relations, Heffernan defined ekphrasis as the verbal representation of visual...
Ekphrasis (etymologically from the Greek ‘ek,’ “out” and ‘phrasein,’ literally “to speak”) broadly refers to a technique of verbal representation of visual art or the poetic description of pictorial or sculptural work of art. The Latin handbook Rhetorica ad Herennium vividly describes ekphrasis as typically containing a clear, lucid and impressive exposition of the consequences of an act, as follows From Ancient Greek ἔκφρασις (ékphrasis, “description”), from ἐκφράζω (ekphrázō, “I describe”), from ἐκ (ek, “out, ex-”) + φράζω (phrázō, “I explain, point out”). IPA(key): /ˈɛkfɹəsɪs/.

ekphrasis (countable and uncountable, plural ekphrases). (rhetoric) A clear, intense, self-contained argument or verbal description of an object, especially of an artwork. 2004, Daniel Donoghue, Old English Literature, Blackwell Although "ekphrasis" (also spelled "ecphrasis") is a relatively new entry in our dictionary, the practice of using words to comment on a piece of visual art is an ancient one. One of the earliest and most commonly cited forms of ekphrasis occurs in The Iliad, when Homer provides a long and discursive account of the elaborate scenes embossed on the shield of Achilles. The word ekphrasis, or ecphrasis, comes from the Greek for the description of a work of art produced as a rhetorical exercise, often used in the adjectival form ekphrastic. It is a vivid, often dramatic, verbal description of a visual work of art, either real or imagined. In ancient times, it referred to a description of any thing, person, or experience. The word comes from the Greek ἐκ ek and φράσις phrásis, ‘out’ and ‘speak’ respectively, and the verb ἐκφράζειν ekphrázein, “to proclaim or call an