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## Revisiting Ekphrasis: The Early Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur.

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Revisiting *Ekphrasis*: The early Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Paul  
Ricoeur. Gronnigen, Holland, June 2013.

The work of Paul Ricoeur has been hugely influential in recent years for literary theory, his works of the late 1980s and 1990s have revolutionized the way in which narrative is understood as key tenant to the construction of narrative identity and the narrative self. In particular *Time and Narrative* has become a part of the literary canon of a texts for the study of narrative in the modern novel, especially. *Metaphor and Narrative* have been largely accepted as the way in which Ricoeur approached Aesthetics and Aesthetic experience. However, with recent debates about the role of ‘the visual’ and the nature of visual semiotics in contemporary Critical Theory- Critical Theory taken in a wider sense than that of the Frankfurt school Critical Theory, Critical Theory which embraces post-structuralism and contemporary philosophy- it is an opportune moment to revisit Paul Ricoeur’s earlier work to investigate possible contributions of hermeneutic phenomenology to the development of a fresh approach to this debate in contemporary Critical Theory, a criticism which would attempt to go beyond the predominant mode discourse of visual semiotics, where communicability is restricted to the speaking signs. While as Mieke Bal has convincingly argued that the process of semiosis is capable of embracing the verbal and visual practices of the sign, it is necessary for the purposes of this paper to revisit the fundamental relationship between word and image. The notion of Ekphrasis has a specific historical trajectory, from the Greek ek and phrasis, literally to ‘out’ ‘speak’, to ‘speak out’ to name an object to the “verbal representation of visual representation” from James Heffernan (1991)<sup>1</sup>. Plato in Phradreus

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<sup>1</sup> See Ekphrasis and the Other, footnote p.152, This definition of ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of visual representation” is also the basis for James

alludes to the comparison between writing and images as Ricoeur points out in his prelude entitled 'History Remedy or Poison?' to Part II of *Memory, History, Forgetting*, ..writing is compared to painting whose works present themselves "as if they are alive", "it continues to signify the same thing forever". Painting and writing continue to signify the same thing forever. It worth noting the interesting analysis that more recently Bernard Stielger has given to the notion of the *pharamkon*, where the traditional interpretation of Plato rejecting writing is revisited to show that writing as a *pharmakon* enables thought, that hypomnesis enables anamnesis. For Bernard Stiegler if writing is to be truly pharmacologic, the 'cure' has to be acknowledged, writing has to contain, along with its toxic aspects highlighted by Jacques Derrida, a therapeutic aspect. Therefore, within the history of philosophy the relationship between painting and writing is present from the Greeks onwards- they both signify the same thing forever.

In our case Ekphrasis the speaking out or the naming of the 'object' will be taken here as 'object of art', 'a work of art'. I shall return to the notion of 'object' or 'objective of art' towards the end of this presentation when I will interrogate the work of a contemporary artist Tino Shegal whose work raises the very question of the notion of the 'object' in the work of art. Nonetheless, for the moment it is necessary to point out that in the history of Ekphrasis there is a tendency to speak of 'pictorial works' of art, the speaking out of the pictorial form. In this case the 'work of art', the visual pictorial image is somehow translated into words, visual into verbal.

To give a very recent incidence of 'Ekphrasis', in novel, in the Irish writer John Banville's curious detective story *Athena* (1995) the protagonist, narrator, is an art specialist who becomes involved in a sordid murder mystery where his role is to authenticate works of art which have been stolen by a group of violent criminals. The structure of the novel is broken

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Heffernan's article, "Ekphrasis and Representation", *New Literary History* 22. no.2 (Spring 1991): 297-316.

by chapters which are detailed, perhaps, one could add parodies of critical descriptions of works of art such 'The Rape of Proserpine' 1655 by L. van Hobelijn. The following quotation highlights the "the verbal representation of the visual representation", in the novel the paintings are represented verbally but without visual images of the paintings.

"Although the grandeur of its conception is disproportionate to its modest dimensions, this is Van Hobelijn's technically most successful and perhaps his finest work. The artist has set himself the task of depicting as many as possible of the elements of the myth of the abduction of Demeter's daughter by the god and the underworld, and the result is a crowded, not to cluttered, canvas which with its flattened surface textures and uncannily foreshortened perspectives gives more the impression of a still life than the scene of passionate activity it is intended to be. The progression of the seasons, the phenomenon which lies at the heart of this myth, is represented with much subtlety and inventiveness."

The narrator/author "makes us see" the paintings what W.J.T Mitchell refers to as Ekphraistic hope,

"This the phase when the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we discover "sense" in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do: "to make us see" (p.152)

This is a traditional mode of what Ekphrasis could be considered as the translation of the visual into the poetic written form, the often cited example is poetic description of the of the "Shield of Achilles" in the *Iliad* comes to mind, the literal translation from one form to another, the poetic written form which emulates the poetic visual form. In our case, the

translation of the pictorial image into descriptive analytical forms in the novel, Bainville by breaking the structure of the narrative of the novel with passages of descriptions of the very paintings themselves is highlighting Ekphrasis as a poetic form itself, paintings which are inherent to the novel itself, inherent to a story which is centred on paintings: the reason for the murders, the reason for the protagonists love affair and ultimate downfall will be the paintings themselves. However, to continue with Mitchell's analysis this phase of ekphrastic hope, where the impossibility of ekphrasis can be overcome, where the writer can "make us see" encounters another moment, a moment of "ekphrastic fear".

To quote Mitchell again :

"This is the moment of resistance or counterdesire that occurs when we sense that the difference between the verbal and the visual representation might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually." (p. 154)

In the case of the Bainville's novel the narrator, is confronted with the limits of language, when he attempts to describe his close encounter with the masterpieces he says " And yet, what did happen? Nothing, to speak of, nothing that can be spoken of, in words, adequately" (p.84).

There is an earlier passage in the novel where the narrator himself reflects the ekphrastic tension, a tension between 'ekphrastic' hope and 'ekphrastic fear' a reflection on silence of the images, the profound silence or to use Barthes terminology 'the reality effect' of the images. As the narrator says:

"What affects me most strongly and most immediately in a work of art is the quality of its silence. This silence is more than an absence of sound, it is an active force, expressive and coercive. The silence that a painting radiates becomes a kind of aura enfolding both the work itself

and the viewer as in a colour-field. So the white room when I took up Morden's pictures and began to examine them one by one what struck me first was not colour or form or the sense of movement they suggested but the way each one amplified the quiet. Soon the room was athrob with their mute eloquence. Athrob, yes, for this voluminous, inadudible din with which they filled the place, as a balloon is filled with densensed air, did not bring calm but on the contrary provoked in me a kind of suspenseful agitation, a tremulous, poised expectancy that was all the more fraught because there seemed nothing to expect. As I worked I talked to myself, only half aware that I was doing so, putting on voices and playing out dialogues under my breath, so that often when I finished for the day my head resonated with a medleyed noise as if I had been since morning in the company of a crowd of garrulous, mild lunatics. (p.79)

The tension present in this passage seems to highlight the tension between the 'verbal' and the 'visual', how the silence of the paintings becomes dialogues, or monologues of mild lunatics. The images think, in the sense that they provoke the interior dialogue of the protagonist, they provoke dialogue, and if we are to accept with Plato that thinking is 'the silent dialogue of the soul' then we could add here this passage highlights the way in which the pictorial images are translated into dialogue through the language of the spoken word itself. It is this translation, if it is a translation, of Ekphrasis which I would like to turn to now, to adapt Paul Ricoeur's famous maxim towards the end of *The Symbolism of Evil*, *Le symbole donne a penser*, the symbol gives rise to thought, or 'food for thought' as Ricoeur entitles his article of 1959, 'The

Symbol food for thought', in our case here, to simplify things for a moment the 'image gives rise to thought', we think in language, in symbolic form.

“The symbol invites us to think, calls for interpretation, precisely because it says more than it says and because it never ceases to speak to us”.

The picture, painting gives rise the interior 'medleyed noise', the cacophony of voices. However, the risk here is over generalize the sense attributed to 'symbol' to include too hastily all forms of symbols and confuse to quickly symbols and images. In order to attempt to mitigate against this risk it is necessary to contextualize the movement towards the analysis of language and the symbolic in Ricoeur's early work of structural phenomenology and by extension his shift towards concerns with language, interpretation and development of hermeneutic phenomenology.

There is a particular point in the work of Paul Ricoeur, where the problematic of symbol begins to come to the fore within his structural phenomenology of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The original project of *The philosophy of will* was to include three volumes, where Ricoeur was exploring the limits of the will by investigating the limits of experience. The publication of *The Symbolism of Evil* in 1960 represents is definite departure from the structural Phenomenology of his earlier works such as *Freedom and Nature* and *Fallible* where the central concern was the limits of experience and freedom. Nonetheless, the precursor to Ricoeur's development of his encounters with structural linguists and the Anglo-American philosophy can be detected in *Fallible Man*, where to quote Ricoeur as he explores the Kantian problematic of understanding and sensibility is couples with speech and perception, akin to wider notion of ekphrasis, saying and seeing.

“This dialectic of signifying and perceiving, of saying and seeing, indeed seems absolutely primal, and the project of phenomenology of perception

wherein the moment of saying is postponed and the reciprocity of saying and seeing destroyed is ultimately untenable” (p.10, *Fallible Man*).

As Richard Kearney points out Ricoeur’s hermeneutics is concerned with double or multiple levels of meaning, the visual model of a descriptive phenomenological approach is replaced by a verbal model of enables Ricoeur to affirm the poetical role of imagining. Images can no longer be adequately understood in terms of an immediate phenomenological appearance to consciousness. *The Symbolism of Evil* introduces the linguistic functioning of imagination and hermeneutics as ‘the art of deciphering indirect meaning’ .

*The Symbolism of Evil* is Paul Ricoeur first foray into hermeneutics, where his early critique of Husserl’s presuppositionless phenomenology is confronted with the indirect nature of expression. As Ricoeur states :

“Perhaps you must actually experience the frustration involved in seeking a philosophy without presuppositions to appreciate the problem we are raising. In contrast to philosophies wrestling with starting points, a meditation on symbols starts right out with language and with meaning that is always already there. It takes off {in} sic the midst of language already existing where everything has been said after a certain fashion.” (1960: p.196)

Don Idhe has referred to this as the Hermeneutic Shift<sup>2</sup>, where the main concern will that of the indirect expression of symbols, an analysis which highlights a reluctance of turning directly to an analysis of experience but which looks to interpret expressions. It is here the kernel of the problematic at stake, the relationship between direct experience and the mediation of experience through language, but rephrase in our terms stated above in relation to pictorial art, the ‘verbal representation’ of the ‘visual

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<sup>2</sup> Don Idhe, p.82.



representation'. It is through an exploration of the indirect expression of experience that Ricoeur begins to examine the problematic of Evil, how evil, which is part of the limit of experience and is only expressed indirectly through symbols and myths. For Ricoeur from the outset this will take the form of a wager, a bet, a heuristic, as if hope:

“I wager that I shall have a better understanding of man and the bond between the being of man and the being of all beings if I follow the indication of symbolic thought” (S.E. p. 355)

The detour will take him through the signs and symbols of man, and by deciphering the symbols, signs and myths that the subject comes to know itself. This introduces language at core of his approach, language as intersubjective enables the symbol, for example, the dream image to be recounted, told, communicated. A hermeneutic detour which will take Paul Ricoeur, from the symbol to the metaphor and later to the larger unit of the text. While the 'linguistic turn' of the 1960s has been well documented through his debates with structuralism at that time, the turn to symbolic language is set, in a wider context of an understanding of the symbol. But from the outset Ricoeur states clearly delinates his interest from cosmic or primary symbols :

Hence, although we shall only deal with the spoken symbols and, indeed, only symbols of the self, we never forget that these symbols, which will appear to us as primary in comparison with the elaborated and intellectualized formulations of the consciousness of self, are already on the way to cutting themselves loose from the cosmic roots of symbols. (S.E. p. 15)

The spoken symbol will be his focus for analysis, and yet he acknowledges that there is in the background the cosmic roots of symbolic thought, what Eliade terms 'hierophanies', such as sky, water, moon etc. It should be noted here that Mircea

Eliade would include sacred art in his analysis of sacred symbols. For example the sky, the symbol of the most high, of the elevated and immense, of the powerful and well-ordered, of the shrewd and wise of the sovereign and immovable. (1959, p.198). As Ricoeur points out “This symbol is truly inexhaustible; it branches out into cosmic, ethical and political categories”. The second category of symbol is the oneric or nocturnal, this relationship between the symbol and psychoanalysis Ricoeur will explore in much more detail in his controversial book *Freud and Philosophy* (1970). The symbolic for Freud will be something which stands for something else but also that covers up and hides and therefore to be suspected. Finally the third category which is the poetic, it is this third category which shows up at the very emergence of language. It is worthwhile exploring this a little depth for a moment, the distinction between the cosmic, the oneric and the poetic is the relationship with language itself, the cosmic and the oneric are representation-image while the poetic is the word-image. The representation-image still means rendering objects in some way present to us, it still depends on the thing it makes unreal. It is this distinction which is the basis of the symbol for Ricoeur:

This word-image which is no longer representation-image is what I am here calling symbol. The one difference from the two preceding cases {cosmic and oneric} is that the poetic symbol...shows at the moment when it puts language at the state of emergence.

The symbol is therefore at point at which language emerges, or to quote Bachelard the point at which it becomes a new being in our language, to point at which language expresses ourselves and by so doing makes us what we are into what it expresses. Hence the hasty distinction between visual representation and verbal representation needs to be re-examined. This distinction between representation-image and image-verbe

which Ricoeur develops in *Freud and Philosophy*, is an implicit critique of Sartre's exploration of the image as negation, a mere negation of perceptual reality. As Ricoeur states at the beginning of *The Symbolism of Evil*:

It is necessary to firmly distinguish imagination from image, if by image is understood a function of absence, conceived on the model of a portrait of the absent, is still too dependent on the thing it makes unreal; it remains a process for making present to oneself the things of the world.

The word-image of semantic innovation and double meanings will be the centre of focus of Ricoeur's exploration of the symbolic. However, it is important to emphasise the their inter-relationship, the 'word-image' traverses and transcends the 'image-representation'. The 'image-representations' of the cosmic and oneric, give rise to speech, to thought. The cosmic, oneric and the poetic have the same symbolic structure. It is later with the publication of *The Rule of Metaphor* that Ricoeur makes a clear distinction between word-image and representation-image as an opposition in Kantian terms between productive and reproductive imagination. The non-verbal and the verbal find the correlation in the reproductive and the productive. It is here that their interdependence is most explicit, as Richard Kearney states:

And yet the imagination needs images. Without any visual aspect, the verbal imagination would remain an invisible productivity. So what remains to be demonstrated is the sensible moment of metaphoric imagination. And this is where Ricoeur calls for a phenomenological psychology of seeing-as to complement the creative saying.

Seeing as or resemblance joins the semantic and sensible, it holds them together in an intuitive manner. Seeing as inter-relates the verbal with the non-verbal, the function

of resemblance acts as the shared characteristic of verbal and non-verbal. As Ricoeur states in *The Rule of Metaphor*

The seeing as activated in reading ensures the joining of the verbal meaning with imagistic fullness. And this conjunction is no longer something outside language since it can be reflected as a relationship. Seeing as contains a ground, a function, this is precisely, resemblance.

Seeing-as unites the non-verbal and verbal at the very core function of language which is image-ing, language as a creative metaphorical activity. The oversimplification of a dycthomy of verbal and non-verbal, or ‘verbal representation’ and ‘visual representation’ would it would seem be challenged by the metaphor as a seeing as, a similarity and resemblance which for Ricoeur is at the kernel of imagination.

However, there is another aspect to this distinction between ‘verbal’ and ‘visual representation’ which needs to be explore, namely that of the semiology and semantics, or what I have loosely refered to as visual semiotics. In a conversation with Paul Ricoeur in 1992 when I asked him about the relationship between the semiology of visual and linguistic semiology he answered me :

But we cannot transpose from language to visual arts because you have not got what De Saussure has shown as the difference between signifier and signified which is typical of language. The materiality of the word and its meaning. Here the materiality of the colour is the painting itself. We must start anew. The description, the condition of meaningfulness, which are different from those of language on, sense, reference. I should not say that it is unique in that sense. Interlocution, we can not say that the painting is addressed to someone

in a sense that a sentence is addressed to someone else. So the interlocution is constitutive of it.

The movement from semiology of the sign in Saussure's sense to a semiology of the visual is therefore highly problematic, it is this movement which is at the core of some of the criticism that Ricoeur will make in terms of the relationship between semiology and semantics. The root of this distinction can be found in the analysis which Ricoeur gives of the Symbol in *The Symbolism of Evil* where he clearly limits the notion of the sign and the symbol. Every symbol is a sign but not all signs are symbols.

Every sign is directed to something beyond itself and stands for this something. But not every sign is a symbol. I would say that the symbol has hidden within its purpose a double intentionality.

This distinctive characteristic of the symbol to be 'double intentional' or multiple meaning or polysemic is of course a moot point of debate when one considers the polysemic nature of all words as Derrida has convincingly pointed out in relation to the notion of difference. However, this is not the purpose of my presentation today. The critic which Ricoeur develops in relation to Structuralism is the over generalization of semiology of signs and to semiology words, a word for Paul Ricoeur will be the semantic unit of analysis, words as are signs in discourse position. The closure of language as semiological system is counter balanced for Ricoeur by its openness, openness to the world. It is only when the words are taken out of the dictionary and placed in discourse, in speech, in enunciation to borrow the terminology of Benveniste that he says. As Ricoeur points out

I am equally unable to accept a rationalistic explanation which would extend to the text the structural analysis of sign systems that are characteristic not of

discourse as such but of language as such. This equally undue extension gives rise to the positivistic illusion of textual objectivity closed in upon itself and wholly independent of the subjectivity of both author and reader.

The transposition from the closed semiotics of the sign system of phonology cannot be extending to include the opening out of language, where words say. The transposition into visual semiotics is equally problematic where the visual sign is expanded to discourse, images speaking, or speaking images. This is highly problematic as the inter-relationship between them is much more complex than any simple dichotomy between words and images would initially suggest.

However, as I stated earlier there is a tendency to see pictorial images or figurative representations as the point of analysis of Ekphrasis. Whilst Ricoeur does not do so, he is well aware of the non-figurative as he states in an interview, one could one of the very rare occasions throughout Ricoeur's vast work where he speaks directly of the visual arts and painting in particular :

Because the painting of the past few centuries, at least since the invention of perspective in the Quattrocento, has almost always been figurative, we should not be fooled about the nature of *Mimesis*- and I shall maintain this paradox: it is in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when painting ceased to be figurative that the full measure of this *mimesis* could be taken, namely, that its function is not to help us recognize objects but to discover dimensions of experience that did not exist prior to the work. (p.27)<sup>3</sup>

It suffices to glance through some of the catalogues of bi-ennals and documenta to remark that within contemporary art there has also been a linguistic turn, a turn to the

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<sup>3</sup> 'Aesthetic experience', *Critique and Conviction*, p. 27

theatrical to borrow Fried's terminology. In order to conclude I would like to look to a specific artists who it appears it exploring the very performative nature of language in his performances, performances or works of art, objects of art which themselves serve as a dismantling or deconstruction of the very notion of 'object' of art. Hence to challenge the very foundation of the notion of Ekphrasis that I have explored as 'speaking out' or 'naming of the object'. The British-German artist Tino Shegal has throughout his work challenged the established ideas of art in gallery spaces.

In order to carry out his intentional analysis of the symbol Ricoeur makes a necessary distinction between symbol and sign, symbol and myth, symbol and symbolic logic and finally symbol and myth. However, for the purposes of this paper, I shall focus on the first distinction between symbol and sign which will enable the distinction and I would insist extension to a over-generalization in areas of visual semiotics.

## Conclusion

Through revisiting the notion of the symbol and sign in this relatively early work it hoped to point to a yet unexplored element of Ricoeur's work in relation to Aesthetics and contemporary Critical Theory. The famous maxim of *The Symbolism of Evil*: The Symbol gives rise to thought, it will be argued could be a determining element in the reconsideration of the nature of language and Aesthetics within hermeneutic phenomenology. The hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur's early work could enable the re-evaluation of the mediation of the silence of the artwork. One of the principal tenants of this paper is that the problematic of *Ekphrasis*, which is central to any development of a new critical theory, is beyond the predominant discourse of visual semiotics where images are held to speak. *Ekphrasis* has long been

a problematic within the field of visual studies and critical analysis. The term itself, within philosophical discourse, can be dated to Plato's *Phaedrus*. The opposition between the visual and the textual exegesis has become a moot point of research within contemporary critical theory and fine art.

The work of art, in particular the visual work of fine art, poses a specific problematic for the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. One where, to a certain extent the ineffable becomes sayable, where we are confronted with the limits of language. But to come to an understanding of the visual a process of Ekphrasis is necessary, where discourse attempts to formulate or articulate the silence of the painting. It is well documented that Paul Ricoeur was passionate about visual arts and yet they do not feature overtly within his vast work. There are relatively few direct references to visual artwork and the nature of Aesthetics and hermeneutic phenomenology. In *Critique and Conviction* Ricoeur explores the nature of sign in relation the plastic arts, the sign he argues has a twofold nature, it retreats from and to transfers back into the world. In an interview 'Arts, Langage et herméneutique esthétique' Ricoeur develops more completely the relationship between the aesthetic experience and communicability through the notion of 'monstration'. Nonetheless, the nature of the symbol and the sign has been largely been considered by critics in relation to his linguistic or metaphorical analysis of the sign and the symbol. If the symbol gives rise to thought, it could be argued that language, not only mediates the silence of the visual art work but to certain extent constitutes it. Whilst within research in phenomenology the relationship between language and experience, the relationship between a presuppositionless phenomenology or idealist phenomenology and hermeneutics, has long been a moot



point of discussion; in Critical Theory and visual arts this is still a largely area of debate underdeveloped.

Ricoeur's critique of Husserl's idealism on the one hand sets up an opposition, or antithetical relationship, between phenomenology and hermeneutics, on the other Ricoeur argues that phenomenology is an indispensable presupposition of hermeneutics. The relationship between language and experience is key to any understanding of the relationship between Hermeneutics and Phenomenology. In this early hermeneutics of *The Symbolism of Evil* there is an exploration of the relationship between language and pre-linguistic experience, language is given a mediating function. Whilst, it could be argued that Ricoeur is referring to particular types of experience in *The Symbolism of Evil*, there is the possibility of generalizing the nature of the relationship between language and pre-linguistic experience to include the problematic of Aesthetic experience as a pre-linguistic experience.

Self-understanding for Ricoeur is one which is mediated through language and discourse but when confronted with the silence of the visual how does 'mood', as Ricoeur refer to it in *Critique and Conviction*, or specific singularity become sayable. This paper will outline how, within the work of Paul Ricoeur, hermeneutics could offer a possible means to approach the silence of the visual through the mediation of the language. By starting with Ricoeur's famous maxim 'The symbol gives rise to thought', this paper will trace the development of the concept of sign, symbol and narrative across Ricoeur's early hermeneutic phenomenology, it will then re-examine the relationship between the symbol and the reflection it prompts. It is hoped to come to an understanding of *Ekphrasis* as a process inherent to interpretation and integral to

the hermeneutic process itself. In other words, it is hoped to come to an understanding of the translation, reappropriation of the visual through the act of interpretation itself. In addition, it is necessary to take into account the Ekphrastic nature of contemporary art practice where the dominant forms are at the boundaries between traditional distinct, separate forms of the visual and the text. It is hoped, therefore to demonstrate that there is a need to foster an understanding of the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur which enables Critical Theory to confront the silence of the visual.