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ON DIVING INTO ARTISTIC POTENTIALITY – THE INFRA-GAZE OF INTERPRETATION

Abstract: What does it take for the cultural analyst to actually engage in a hermeneutical dialogue with ekphrastic artworks and to critically echo their mutual exchanges? How should the art critic acknowledge the dialogism that is intrinsic to different artistic media? It may be as if one adopted not only a *meta* perspective of interpretation, but also an *infra* view, by delving into the interstices of artistic praxis. This would amount to a methodological leap, from an encompassing, transcending gaze at artworks and aesthetic phenomena to an *infra gaze*, as a more contingent and fragile engagement with the objects or subjects of analysis. The critical gaze of the *infra* type does not necessarily mean, however, doing close reading of texts, pictures, intermedia performances or other hybrid objects of cultural analysis. Rather, I discuss a hermeneutical exchange between the interpreter and the artwork which acknowledges an “inner resistance” within art objects and processes; that is, the *potentiality*, the *inner mannerism* – in the sense that Giorgio Agamben confers to these concepts. The Bartleby type of artistic attitude is to be analyzed in a few pieces of fiction writing and visual arts, or in-between the two, i.e. within the ekphrasis of certain “iconotexts”. The interpretative intention would recognize, “voice” or speak out (*ek-phrazein*), away from artistic discourse into argumentative discourse, the “potentiality **to not-be**” (Agamben). Or it would aim to reconstruct, into an almost fictional, albeit argumentative narrative of interpretation, the pre-expressive and non-expressed layer of the

artwork's "voice"; its silent side, even its refusal to be totally exhausted into a single artistic medium, into expression or into act.

Keywords: critical *ekphrasis*, *meta gaze/infra gaze*, potentiality, Bartleby, Victor Man, Giorgio Agamben

Writing the Unwritable – Bartleby and the Artistic Potentiality

By stating a significant ontological paradox, such as the "potentiality to not-be," philosopher Giorgio Agamben turns it into a powerful original argument, relevant for a puzzling aesthetic attitude and even for an artistic dilemma. A short but essential chapter of his book *The Coming Community* is entitled *Bartleby*, invoking the strange figure of the copyist from Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall-Street* (1853). Bartleby's highly astonishing reply – "I would prefer not to" – to the requests of his employer (the latter appearing as the first-person narrator in Melville's story) is a carefully chosen *mise en abyme* for Agamben's own philosophical argument: "The perfect act of writing comes not from a power to write, but from an impotence that turns back on itself and in this way comes to itself as a pure act (which Aristotle calls agent intellect)." Further, Agamben resorts to an *ekphrasis*, whereby his concepts receive much more sensitive treatment, gathered in a persuasive discourse. Thus, he increasingly elaborates on his central thesis not only through paraphrasing the words of Melville's protagonist, but also through a projective visualization of the enigmatic character himself. Bartleby becomes more of an image than a fictional character in motion, "the extreme image" of an angel, of a spiritually encoded and ethereal vision:

"This is why in the Arab tradition agent intellect has the form of an angel whose name is *Qalam*, Pen, and its place is an unfathomable potentiality. Bartleby, a scribe who does not simply cease writing but 'prefers not to,' is the extreme image of this angel that writes nothing but its potentiality to not-write" (Agamben 1993, 37).

But who is, actually, Bartleby, and what sort of aesthetic phenomenon does he stand for? In Hermann Melville's fiction, he is the seemingly perfect copyist, who

one day refuses to abide by his duties, no longer follows orders and, ultimately, refuses to be completely alive. Considering his sudden change of attitude, his amazingly stubborn and inexplicable refusal to deliver what he is expected to, one might infer that he is haunted by suicidal thoughts. His puzzling silence deserves to be dedicated at least a fictional biography. A monograph of the symptomatic cases of refusal of writing is, for instance, the pedant narrator of *Bartleby & Co*, by Enrique Vila-Matas, who writes somehow reconciled with the fatality that he can only "copy" or browse through the literary quotations of others. Set against the grain with the posture of those self-sufficient writers that take themselves for granted, he is instead an admirer of Melville's emblematic character. And the paradoxical narrator of Enrique Vila-Matas follows in the footsteps of a myriad writers that belong to the constellation of "Bartlebys" (Walsler, Kafka, Musil and Beckett being among the most famous ones). He keeps on praising their allegiance to "No," with some black humor and a dash of therapeutic cynicism. It is as if the artistic impulse could survive only by denying itself.

A strange embodiment of the refusal of creativity is, perhaps, the gothic image of the corpse that keeps on growing, in Eugène Ionesco's play *Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser* (translated into English by Donald Watson as *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It*). Let me analyze, within just a few paragraphs, the ambiguous posture of the protagonist, Amédée, as he develops an unpredictable emotional with the dead body hosted by him and by his wife in their modest apartment. Amédée perfectly corresponds to the Bartleby type of writer, one that gets stuck on improving on a single phrase for years, while the corpse that he hides in his house is constantly growing. The oddly fascinating dead body performs a paradoxical creativity of its own, in spite of the existential deadlock of his host (or his father, possibly), ironically compensating for Amédée's lack of creativity, or for his mere nausea and lack of will to write any longer. The moving corpse is a visual and textual riddle, a theatrical questioning of the mere possibility of meaning-making in a nonmimetic, so-called absurd mode of playwriting. The code or key to Ionesco's texts seems, however, to be closed or even buried, like the ingénue schoolgirls killed by the Professor in *La Leçon/The Lesson*, in the magma of discourse, or in what Ionesco himself calls a "tragedy of language." In order to open such cryptic fictional worlds, one should recover the interpretative key which seems lost in some textual hatch or capsule, since the plays' "moral" is maintained most often secret, according to a poetic of (neo)gothic mystery. If the deeply hidden

meaning of such texts really exists, then it is a “corpse” that haunts, obsessively, the analyst or the ingenuous reader altogether. One could argue that the latter had better discard this interpretative obsession (as the playwright character himself, Amédée, does when he gently relates to the corpse), because, simply, there is nothing to do with it. As in the case of the body at the end of the play *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It*, the encrypted meaning or “moral” of the fable comes out of the scene, that is out of Ionesco’s text, and thus becomes imponderable, according to the oneiric “logic” of a meta-textual farce.

Either an imponderable, or a hidden, carefully encrypted semantic truth, the secret of the dead body (a parodic hint to a cliché topos of detective fiction) is to be found behind the much too superficial and exhausted label of the “absurd.” At least one deep semantic layer of the dramatic text is encoded and “buried” within the corpse, so that the eventuality of a plausible *mise-en-scène* is put to test, in that it should approach the unrepresentable. The play’s dramatic tension centers on this metapicture, whose archetype is probably the famous image of the shield of Achilles’. It stands for the *omphalos* of both the fictional world and of the extratextual, in-between world projected by the fiction outside of itself, of its aesthetic frames, and by the reader or viewer back onto the fiction.

This paradoxical emblem, of a highly concealed and encoded meaning, calls into question a whole attitude towards writing and creativity as such, all the more radical as the metonymic image of the corpse is supposed to gain a dense materiality on stage. The body could be seen as Amédée’s alien Other, as a temporarily dead “Bartleby” figure, who is finally meant to free the protagonist from any presumed guilt. The *potentiality to not-be*, the strange resistance to the enactment of creativity, to actually coming into being, is thus rendered visible and presumably tangible in Ionesco’s parable-like play, and it can actually be perceived as *alive*.

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The dual attitude of self-effacement and self-statement is exactly what those Bartleby¹ characters accurately embody. This structural ambivalence enhances the cryptic nature of a fictional, rhetorical and altogether philosophical tropism. Such a

¹ The intrinsic duality of Bartleby is approached by Giorgio Agamben in yet another volume, written with Gilles Deleuze, entitled *Bartleby. La formula della creazione* (1993), the essays of Agamben being translated and edited in English by Daniel Heller-Roazen, as *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (1999). Actually, for Agamben, Bartleby is “the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality”. See *Potentialities*, pp. 253-254.

duality, which is intrinsic to human creativity, could be more relevantly considered, once again, by invoking Agamben's arguments about "the potentiality to be" and "the potentiality to not-be" within the artistic process. The Italian philosopher claims that the two (*potentia ad actum* and *potentia potentiae*) are only apparently symmetrical: "In the potentiality to be, potentiality has as its object a certain act, in the sense that for it *energhēin*, being-in-act, can only mean passing to a determinate activity (this is why Schelling defines the potentiality that cannot not pass into action as *blind*); as for the potentiality to not-be, on the other hand, the act can never consist of a simple transition *de potentia ad actum*: It is, in other words, a potentiality that has as its object potentiality itself, a *potentia potentiae*" (Agamben 1993, 35-36). Actually, the novelistic essay of Vila-Matas, *Bartleby & Co*, testifies to such a dichotomy, more than to an overwhelming literary sickness. The pseudo novel comprises, in the narrator's view, a series of footnotes for an otherwise invisible text, a phantasmatic piece of writing. The ambivalent narrator, who writes frenetically on his phantasms about a compulsive withdrawal from writing, also assumes the Bartleby syndrome of mere potentiality. By fighting his pulsion to write, he attempts to make visible what I would call *the unwritable*. This actually constitutes an exquisite ekphrasis, since what the reader is ultimately left with is the metapicture, or the imaginative projection of an "iconotext" (to use Peter Wagner's term²) of Bartleby. As a metonymy of creative self-refusal, his cryptonymic figure embodies a rather "talkative" silence, of the kind of writing which revolves around what Vila-Matas calls the very "impossibility" of literature.

The Bartleby Posture in Art. Victor Man's Painted Cryptograms

A particularly enigmatic painting of Victor Man's³ bears both a title that is actually a non-title (*Untitled*) and a subtitle overloaded with literary and biblical mythemes (*S.D. as Judith and Holofernes*). The initials S.D. seem to allude to James Joyce's protagonist Stephen Dedalus, from his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Dedalus appearing as well in Joyce's *Ulysses*). A young

² See Peter Wagner's idea of an intermedial reading in his book *Reading Iconotexts. From Swift to the French Revolution*, London: Reaktion Books, 1995, p. 162: "I suggest that a picture, for instance, can be analyzed with much profit if we decode it as iconotext, as a construct that welds texts to images while appealing to the observer to activate his/her knowledge of both media".

³ Born in 1974, in Cluj, Victor Man is – along with other representatives of the so-called Cluj School of Painting, such as Adrian Ghenie, Șerban Savu or Marius Bercea – one of the most sought-after and world-renowned artists on today's art scene.

androgynous figure, whose face is somehow ravished by a silent revelation, keeps in his/her lap a deeply expressive, seemingly “alive” mask (which can also be interpreted as the biblical Holofernes’ severed head, if we take on the hint from the subtitle). The dualities face – mask, masculine – feminine, or animal – human-like (the latter appearing in other paintings and installations of Man’s, like *Untitled (Wolf)*, 2007, or *Ubiquitous You*, 2008), are part of the imaginative strategy of indulging in cryptic art-making.



Victor Man, *Untitled (S.D. as Judith and Holofernes)*, 2011

Still, the promise of *almost* arriving at a meaning is always out there, together with the thrill of engaging in a game of interpretation that does not have to exhaust the “core” of these artworks by purely rational explanations. Comparing Man’s extremely subtle and dream-like pictures with those of the Belgian artist Luc Tuymans, art critic Natalie Haddad points out that “Man’s work denies the definition that positions Tuymans’ subjects within a greater historical narrative. Instead, he strikes at precisely the point at which meaning begins to coalesce” (Haddad 2008). The viewer is allowed to plunge into a fictional and otherwise archetypal realm, where, once entered, one should accept a few almost “pataphysical” laws and also the strange, ambivalent entities that populate it. Victor Man encrypts biblical histories, literary figures and narratives, like a true Bartleby-type, i.e. an artist of “refusal” (Vila-Matas). As in the case of Melville’s elusive character, he “would prefer not to” disclose meanings, but instead to preserve them, as if they were some precious and tiny “objects”, or, better said, fragile visual beings.

Several of Victor Man’s paintings leave the impression that they can be “read” through their references to a literary Other, be it sometimes a Shakespearean character, or one of James Joyce’s. In *Untitled* (2012), the hieratic, statue-like appearance can be taken for an ambiguous Hamlet, or maybe for a Dedalus (highly resembling the androgynous figure to be found in other works of Man’s). This distinguished and dandyish figure stares at a black miniature skull and simultaneously turns his gaze towards the viewer, with a detached, somehow serene and self-contained attitude. Such paintings contain a certain nostalgia for literature, understood, in an ekphrastic manner, as a “sister art.” The privileged relation of painting to its literary alterity implies, for Man, an almost ethical acknowledgment

of textuality, and not some power position, of the “picture versus text” type. The co-presence of images and of text samples (actually, the paratextual elements of the painting’s titles) emphasizes the narrative and parable-like character of an otherwise dark, almost impenetrable kind of painting. A transpictorial rhetoric of



Victor Man, Untitled, 2012

visuality is thus being constructed, as if the paintings formed a coherent, albeit cryptic epic of their own.

The manner of bringing together an apparent pictorial impermeability with the literary allusions and riddles from the titles attached to the Man’s paintings is consistent with an elaborate strategy of visual rhetoric. The viewer of these painted “cryptograms” is given a double key, as if their meaning remained suspended in the interval between two or more competing or simultaneously acceptable hypotheses of interpretation: Victor Man’s paintings are either “untitled” or they bear an intriguing

additional name, a parenthetical title. They call for being acknowledged in their singularity, so that an act of interpretation should by no means be an imposition of a particular “reading” in the face of another. Therefore, it is as if the pictorial emblems of literary fictions or of cultural mythemes call for an aesthetic-ethical option of “making sense” of the paintings. The expected hermeneutical approach needs to be particularly non-abusive. Most of the times, those pictures hypnotize the viewers and then somehow withdraw from their too inquisitive gaze. The painted riddles merely expose themselves as ekphrastic entities, as hybrid “iconotexts” or, to resort to a dual term of W. J. T Mitchell’s, as “imagetexts,” or even as self-referential “metapictures.” But does the concept of metapicture actually fit Man’s artworks, and is the *meta gaze* upon them the most appropriate mode of initiating a plausible interpretation?

Art theorist W. J. T Mitchell identifies in Magritte’s pipe, for instance, a third-order metapicture, which is “depicting and deconstructing the relation between the first-order image and the second-order discourse that is fundamental to the intelligibility of all pictures, and perhaps of all words” (Mitchell 1994, 68). The concept of metapicture thus displays a powerful interpretative and dialogic potential, as a sort of paradoxical critical tool, and it can be linked to the experience of the hermeneutical circle. It is first of all the picture of the representational

process, self-exposed and interrogated in its nude mechanism, whereby “the inexhaustibility” of the art’s language can be revealed, and its “excess of meaning” should be better understood as an ontological experience, rather than translated into conceptual language (Gadamer 1976, 102).

In Man’s self-contained paintings, which appear as metonymies of embodied meaning, there is no ostentatious first-order visibility over second-order textuality. Sometimes, there is a circular movement of what is readable and what is visible, and a mutual deconstruction of the limits of both, as in a “third-order metapicture”. Man’s often enigmatic works could be though considered, to a certain extent, to qualify more as *infrapictures* than as *metapictures*. As such, they seem the pictorial equivalents of the “micrograms” (*Mikrogramme*), that were written almost a century ago by Robert Walser⁴ in such a tiny handwriting, as if they belonged to a private secret code, apparently indecipherable.

The mysterious darkness, which adds to Man’s singular visual “voice”, alternates with a certain phosphorescent or at least translucent, ethereal atmosphere, in works such as *Aspen*, 2009, and *Untitled (Gaseous Vertebrate)*, 2012. In *Aspen*, for instance, Victor Man’s phantasmal visual composition proves to be involuntarily consonant with the arguments of philosopher Yves Michaud, from his book *L’Art à l’état gazeux. Essai sur le triomphe de l’esthétique*. The translucent and only half-disclosed images symptomatically echo today’s ethereal quality of aesthetics, probably pointing to what Michaud sees as the vaporization of the artistic value, its disappearance in favor of a diffused and all-encompassing aesthetic regime. The dim, ethereal images are by themselves able to “picture” theory (somehow in the manner proposed by Mitchell, when he refers to a reversal of the canonic relation between pictures and the theory on them, in his *Picture Theory*). Or they just loosen up or relativize some self-indulging and biased arguments of art theory. Are, then, such images *weak* or *strong* statements in their own right? Is such a question relevant for the intrinsic “aims” of images, or is it at least significant for our own aesthetic standpoints and dilemmas?

⁴ The German-speaking Swiss writer Robert Walser (1878-1956), admired, among others, by Robert Musil, Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka or Hermann Hesse, is also included by Vila-Matas in the constellation of writers who correspond to the fictional effigy of Bartleby.

A Few Myths of Critique. Empowered Images, Empowered Words

In as early⁵ as 1941, when his volume *Les Fleurs de Tarbes ou La Terreur dans les Lettres* was published, Jean Paulhan polemically exposed an illusion in which, as he argued, the whole literary community invariably indulged. The illusion resides in what the French critic called “the myth of the power of words.” The internal contradictions of such a “myth,” shared both by the fiction writers and by the critics, divide them into the advocates of Rhetoric and the partisans of “Terror” in literature. Surprisingly, as far as a theoretical battle within the community of Letters is concerned, Paulhan actually equates such a myth with “an optical illusion.” The apple of discord between the two microgroups stands in how each of them relates to the presumed power of the words: they either abide by it, purely giving in to such a mysterious power, as it is the case with the followers of Rhetoric; or, on the contrary, they revolt against this power and exercise an avant-gardist aesthetic “terror,” so as to fight back the “verbalism” and the cliché rhetorical “flowers.” Either way, as Paulhan accurately acknowledges, the two divergent groups fall into much the same “optical illusion.” And they do so in the manner of “a sculptor or a painter”, who, in order “to convey better something that eludes our senses” (Paulhan 2006, 65), like a body that is flying or running, combines in a single figure two consecutive postures that are in reality irreconcilable. The fact that Jean Paulhan resorts to a visual representation in order to denounce a rhetorical and mostly a critical and theoretical myth is symptomatic not only for his ekphrastic manner of depicting a few paradoxes of literariness. The crux of his argument about the apparently “frightening” words is described as an “optical illusion,” as if the aporia of choosing to be on the part of Rhetoric or on the part of “Terror” in literature could be better expressed in visual rather than in verbal language.

An interesting confirmation, over decades, of Jean Paulhan’s critical insight is to be found in the art theory of W.J.T. Mitchell, who recognizes the persistence of a similar “myth” as far as images are concerned, among contemporary art critics: “In any event, it may be time to rein in our notions of the political stakes in a critique of visual culture, and to scale down the rhetoric of the ‘power of images’. Images are certainly not powerless, but they may be a lot weaker than we think (...) We as critics may want pictures to be stronger than they actually are in order to give

⁵ In fact, the text of *Les fleurs de Tarbes* was first published in serial format in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, in 1936.

ourselves a sense of power in opposing, exposing, or praising them” (Mitchell 2005, 33-34). If we accept, then, that the critical gaze upon images is often based on the belief that they are powerful enough to be strongly opposed, images, in their turn, could actually withdraw before the critical assault upon them and put forward a certain “weakness” or reluctance to be exposed and decrypted. Whenever they present themselves as curiously “weak,” which is the case, among others, of Victor Man’s paintings, this “weakness” may undermine the “power” of the concepts and of the theoretical premises whereby they are approached. Art critic W.J.T. Mitchell turns around the myth of the power of images, by proposing, to a certain extent, a Lacanian argument about the “desire” of images. In his view, it is as if images were subjects that “want” something from us, the beholders, and we should better comply, through a comprehensive and ethical interpretation of their *otherness*, with their needs:

“...I shift the question of what pictures *do* to what they *want*, from power to desire, from the model of the dominant power to be opposed, to the model of the subaltern to be interrogated or (better) to be invited to speak” (Mitchell 2005, 33).

However, this new subjectification of images and the further supposition that they are able to convert our impositions on them are in fact intended to ensure a renewed hermeneutical exchange between the artwork and the beholder. The relationality of the image and its viewer/critic also appears to be a central issue for an art theorist like James Elkins, who claims that the visual deserves to be taken as argument, or, at least, that images “need to be able to suddenly derail or contradict an ongoing argument, or slow it, or distract it, or even overwhelm it” (Elkins 2013, 59-60). All these assumptions about a certain personhood (and a revival of an animistic conception) of pictures would seem mere extravagant speculative fictions if they were not meant to establish a more self-critical hermeneutics, whereby the beholder⁶ is, first of all, open to be “read” by his/her Other from within the picture.

⁶ Mitchell sets forth his position by invoking Panofsky’s idea of the encounter with a work of art, formulated before Panofsky establishes his method of iconological interpretation: “The aim is to undermine the ready-made template for interpretative mastery (for example, Panofsky’s four levels of iconological interpretation or a psychoanalytic or materialist model that knows beforehand that every picture is a symptom of a psychic or social cause), by halting us at a prior moment, when Panofsky compares the encounter with a work of art to encountering an acquaintance on the street”. See, in this respect, W.J. T Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, p. 49.

The otherness or alterity of the picture – particularly striking when the images are unfamiliar and rather impenetrable, as in many of Victor Man’s, or in some of Luc Tuymans’ paintings – points less toward some hidden intrinsic meanings than toward the potentiality of a dialogue with the spectator. This is even more relevant for the hermeneutical encounter whenever images and texts converge, so the ekphrastic act of interpretation has to mirror the ekphrastic intention or root, so to say, of artistic pre-expressions, to be found in their potentiality.

Interpretative Precautions and Liberties

Here, again, when speaking about potentiality, Giorgio Agamben’s arguments about the duality of artistic creativity – “the potentiality to be” and “the potentiality to not-be” – can be called upon in order to convey some sort of methodological precautions.

Should we need such precautions, in trying to avoid ready-made analyses, whether they are iconological, psychoanalytical or in any way ideological? Maybe they are needed in order to counteract the risk of a hyper-interpretation of the images, so that the critic would restrain from speaking in their place, instead of speaking *for* them. The process of interpretation would thus have to acknowledge the internal process of art’s self-generation, its *poiesis*, and also its ekphrastic nature, the dialogism intrinsic to the artistic media. In an interview given to the critic and curator Neville Wakefield, published by the review *Flash Art*, Victor Man declares about his images: “They are kind of residual things. You are left with them and you just don’t know what to do with them. They gain this quality of the leftover”. Although he is quite reluctant to open up about his seemingly opaque installations and paintings, Man still offers some hints as to how we could approach his works as if being part of a process, and not as freeze-frames of visual imagination. The painter and the beholder have to be both involved in such a process, as in an anthropological experience of exchanging energy with the artwork, rather than in a purely aesthetic act, but first of all they are supposed to have shared at least the potentiality of visual performativity: “And sometimes you have to live with these

things for a good amount of time in order to be sure they can keep the same energy from the beginning, which we know can easily be lost.”⁷

The even more intriguing part of this interview is its final part, when Victor Man resorts to a cryptic kind of characterization of his own works, making an ekphrastic reference to a literary text, namely to the puzzling *Jabberwocky*. The allusion to Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poem, included by the writer in his novel *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There*, is by no means intended to clarify the meaning or “voice” of his paintings. It merely suspends a too intrusive attempt to decode them: “I would say it’s more of an attempt to fill a gap left open between truth and falsity. A sort of Jabberwocky” (Neville 2009, 76). Yet, what can be considered at least partially clarifying, in Man’s self-interpretations, is the need for a literary alterity, which goes back to the ekphrastic root of his visual process of meaning-making. The painted figures of Hamlet and of Stephen Dedalus, to be found in several of Man’s works, are relevant for an “embodied” ekphrasis. In *Grafting/or Lermontov Dansant come Saint Sebastien* (2014), a tricloptic demiurge creates eccentric, self-referential “imagetexts” of visuality. Here, a self-contained dialogue of the different artistic expressions (literary, pictorial, even the seemingly photographic editing of images) brings along a hybridization, a “grafting” of neighboring arts’ formula. The odyssey of meaning-making of such “literary” paintings is being exposed as such, in its progress, in its narrative, rather than descriptive, character. This sort of narrativization of visuality conveys its depth, as if the images were in a constant state of “becoming” (as Joyce’s Dedalus) and of



Victor Man, *Grafting/or Lermontov Dansant come Saint Sebastien*, 2014

moving within a vortex, in search for a purpose, from beyond the purely pictorial one.

But could the old concept of *ekphrasis* still prove relevant for today’s fast-forward convergence and interaction of multiple artistic practices and media? This would appear to be a rhetorical question, since ekphrasis and intermediality seem to share the same suspicion about aesthetic boundaries. Still, if this is the case, ekphrastic arguments can be expected to focus on something more than rhetorical strategies and devices of ambivalence (such as visual rhetoric, pictorial

⁷ See, in this sense, Victor Man’s dialogue with Neville Wakefield, in “Victor Man: Ring of Fire”, *Flash Art*, October, 2009, pp. 74-76.

textuality, virtual pictoriality, or digital performativity). Would it not be helpful for the practice of cultural analysis if ekphrasis gained new usages and hermeneutical aims? Echoing artistic hybridity, critical ekphrasis is expected to expose it to hermeneutical pluralism.

Still, a certain degree of interpretative skepticism would probably counteract the blind faith in the power of a concept like ekphrasis, whose internal paradoxes might have loosely opened its meanings, up to the stage of circular reasoning. What does it take for the analyst to actually engage in a hermeneutical dialogue with phenomena of intermedial artistic exchanges? It may be as if one adopted not only a *meta* perspective of interpretation, but also an *infra* view, by plunging into the interstices of artistic praxis. In other words, this would amount to a methodological leap, from an encompassing, transcending gaze at artworks and aesthetic phenomena to an *infra gaze*, as a more contingent and fragile engagement with the objects or subjects of analysis. The critical gaze of the *infra* type does not necessarily mean, however, doing close reading of texts, pictures, intermedia performances or other hybrid objects of cultural analysis. A hermeneutical exchange between the interpreter and the artwork implies a way of *living with* the “things” or “beings” within art and the acknowledgement of an “inner resistance” within the art objects and processes.

The interpretative intention would recognize, “voice” or speak out (*ekphrazein*), away from artistic discourse into argumentative discourse, the “potentiality to not-be” (Agamben), or the “kind of Jabberwocky” (Victor Man) from within the artwork. Or it would aim to reconstruct, into an almost fictional, albeit argumentative narrative of interpretation, the pre-expressive and non-expressed layer of the artwork’s “voice”; its silent side, even its refusal to be totally exhausted into a single artistic medium, into expression or into act. When the act of interpretation abides by this “refusal” or resistance of art to be fully expressed, the artwork is no longer a mere object of analysis. It is more of a metonymy of all its critical readings. So, it can even gain a subject position, due to or sometimes in spite of the interpretative ways of *living with* it.

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