

Renata Gambino and Grazia Pulvirenti
Department of Humanities, University of Catania
Catania, Italy
renatagambino@gmail.com, grapulvir@gmail.com

**THE PARADOX OF ROMANTIC EKPHRASIS.
METACRITIC DISCOURSE, PERCEPTION AND IMAGINATION IN ART
DESCRIPTION**

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You know, Phaedrus, that is the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly correspond to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence.

Plato, *Phaedrus* (275d)

Abstract: Ekphrasis is a text genre based on the intertwining of visual and verbal features, involving the processes of both reading, and priming a visual image or a related action. We argue in this study that this genre, which has been object of many disputes and critical claims over the times, is a powerful tool in order to stimulate a particularly intense activation of the reader/listener's emotions and imagination. This because of the double nature of the inputs triggering more powerfully the embodied simulation by mixing the regime of perception, affection and thought.

Ekphrasis is characterized by a "paradoxical nature", i.e. the fact that the fictional visible qualities of the described artwork disavow the process of visualization by facing the reader/listener with the need of "creating" his own

images, by activating a kind of “guided imagination act”. The intertwining of codes determines also a substitution of the description by actions, as described by ancient rhetoricians. The description of actions solicits more powerfully the embodied simulation of the reader/listener. This creates an “in-between” space where what was unthinkable becomes thinkable. Since the afforded cognitive process is overwhelming for the reader/listener, he/she is driven to overcome his/her own cognitive limitations thanks to processes of the imagination that “fills in the gaps” between the known and unknown.

We argue that in modern times, starting with Romantics, this process is particularly amplified and ekphrasis becomes a metacritical commentary about the act of imagining, since it induces the reader to complete the description by simulating a personal experience triggered by the rhetorical “vividness” of ekphrasis. This hypothesis will be elucidated by investigating as case-study an ekphrastic text by German author Heinrich von Kleist, who wrote about the revolutionary painting *The Monk at the Sea* by Caspar David Friedrich. In Kleist’s text *Feelings about a Seascape by Friedrich (Empfindungen vor Friedrichs Seelandschaft, 1810)*, the author does not describe or represent the painting, according to the traditional ekphrastic praxis, but the aesthetic, perceptive, emotional and imaginative experience of seeing the picture, i.e. the dynamical affective processes engaged by the reader/observer in front of the painting, which in Friedrich’s intention represents “the act of seeing itself”. This act involves a strong embodied simulation which finally amplifies the process of the imagination of the reader, whom is guided to bodily experience the imagined sublime space of the picture.

Keywords: Ekphrasis, Heinrich von Kleist, Caspar David Friedrich, neuroaesthetics, embodied simulation

Question and aims of this study

The “vividness”, i.e. the peculiar “effectiveness” of ekphrastic texts is based on the intertwining of verbal and visual codes, involving the processes of both reading (or in the ancient times listening to) and elaborating visual features by priming a mental image. This is a paradox: the word evocation of visual features disavows the process of visualization by facing the reader/listener with the need of “creating” his own images, by activating a kind of “guided imagination act”. Moreover, since the ancient time of the Latin rhetoricians, the technique of ekphrasis aims to transform

the reader/listener in witness of the described scene, presenting before the eyes not really a static scene but the action itself, like in case of a murder or a battle. In this perspective, ekphrasis turns out to be not so much a description of visible phenomena but the representation of actions. This enhances in the reader a stronger affective and emotional response, due to the more intense experience of reconstructing the features of an action by creating his/her own imaginative counterpart to the words. Finally, the reader/listener is faced by a cognitive overwhelming process triggered by the heterogeneous nature of the text: this induces a strong activation of the imagination in order to establish a relation to the very process of the aesthetic experience itself, which is metacritically represented in the text, since ekphrasis implies a meta-reflection on the act of seeing an artwork. This relation among the artwork, its literary representation and the reader/listener's response become crucial within the genre.

We will elucidate this claims by analysing Kleist's ekphrasis of the painting *The Monk at the Sea* by the Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich (see: Müller; Begemann, Rühse). The focus of our study is to highlight and explain the innovation in Kleist's use of the traditional rhetorical strategy of ekphrasis in relation to the crucial questions of the epoch about the Sublime in nature and in the art (see Kant and Schiller). Kleist's text twists the traditional system of ekphrasis, by representing the very process of imagining: this is obtained by deconstructing the original image in order to stimulate the reader's imagination to reconstruct the process of the aesthetic experience of seeing the picture. The text describes not an art object, but rather the process of relating to it by the imagination act triggered by the embodied simulation instantiated by the textual features. The described experience refers to a state of tension between nature and art, as well as between artefact and subject. The representation of this process allows the author to render the experience of the Sublime which is otherwise impossible to describe, calling on the emotional and imaginative power of the reader and conducting him to reconstruct the very process of the aesthetic experience.

Ekphrasis and *enargeia*

Ekphrasis is a text genre bringing a visual subject matter vividly before the eyes (see Webb). This issue characterizes the pivotal works from the Ancient time to the Renaissance: Philostratus' *Eikónes*, Giulio Camillo's *Theatre of Memory*, Vasari's

Lives of the Artists, Giambattista Marino's *La Galleria* (without forgetting Homer's and Vergil's ekphrastic passages). This genre was rediscovered and much practised in the Eighteenth century, starting with Winckelmann's famous "emotional" descriptions of the Belvedere Apollo and with Lessing's attempt to contrast the old paradigm of "ut picture poësis erit". In the ekphrastic texts of the Modern time – by Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1756), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1766), Wilhelm Heinse (1787) and Wolfgang Goethe (1798)– it is crucial the inquiry into the relation among the artwork and its literary description. We cannot now follow the development of this technique during the Eighteenth century (for this issue see: Cometa), when it acquired a particular relevance in the aesthetic discourse and was much practised and discussed, since our attention in this paper is focussed on the cognitive, emotional and imaginative processes put at stake by the strategies of ekphrasis since the Romantics.

From its origins, ekphrasis was meant to stimulate the imagination (Webb 1) and to achieve an alteration in the reader/listener's emotional state. This was to be obtained by enhancing through words the "liveliness" of the mental image representing the described object (Henkel, *Descriptio* 337), consequently illuminating the quality and essence of the object itself. This technique was considered in the Latin culture as a powerful tool capable to give to the verbal medium new "persuasive" qualities, forcing and stretching the usual descriptive limits and the power of "meaningfulness" (Boehm 22). As explained by Latin rhetoricians, particularly by Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* 6.2.29-30), ekphrasis is "a technique used to make the audience feel involved in the subject matter, to make them feel as if they were at the scene of a crime, or that they themselves witnessed the achievements for which an emperor is being praised" (Webb 10). Ekphrasis was best applied not just to represent a scene (i.e. time, place, characters, etc.), but the action itself (i.e. a murder, a battle, etc.). This issue in our opinion does not characterize only the ekphrastic discourse of the ancient culture in contrast to the modern one, but is a fundamental character of the genre and has been much exploited again since the Romantics.

This implies that ekphrasis is to be considered not so much as a description of visible phenomena but as the representation of actions. This triggers a more intense emotional response in the reader/listener, since the somatic components of emotion respond more strongly to the activation of the sensory-motor circuitry solicited by

the embodied simulation, which is enhanced by the contemplation of an action (Cuccio, Carapezza and Gallese 69). So, although unaware of the brain processes, but well aware of the efficacy of the rhetorical use of the language, already ancient writers aimed to depict the subject matter through actions and events, instead of carefully listing the elements of the scenes which were to be described. In fact, the final purpose of the ancient ekphrasis was to “persuade” and emotionally move the audience by creating the fictive and lively illusion of “being present” on the described scene. At the linguistic level, this was achieved recurring to the quality of *enargeia*, i.e. the vividness of language, which was theorized not only in ancient times, but also in the Romantic period, mainly by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1830-35).

The description of artworks was meant to imply a more evident use of the words as tools of emotional transmission and resonance (Heffernan, Ekphrasis 297-316). For the German Romantics the relation between thought and speech was a major research issue since their new psychological inquiries especially focused on the linkage between language and emotions¹. Therefore, a central issue was the role of language in the construction of thought. According to Friedrich Schleiermacher, thinking is grounded in language, is “identical with language”: “*Speech* is the mediation of the communal nature of *thought*” (Schleiermacher, Hermeneutics 7). Language is the essence of all which is conceivable by the human brain:

Language is a guiding principle for everyone, not only negatively, in that we cannot escape from the domain of the thought grasped within it, but also positively, in that the language directs how we combine thoughts through the interrelationships that lie within it. Thus we can say only what language wants, and we are its voice. (Schleiermacher, Hermeneutics 15)

During the Romantic period, literary and linguistic studies were mainly engaged with the theoretical attempt of tracing the origins and the features of beauty and of the aesthetic experience. The quarrel about the prominence of verbal or visual media in the making of the aesthetic experience and of thought was not first raised in the Romantics, and specifically by Heinrich von Kleist (*About the deep elaboration of thoughts in the speech / Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim*

¹The first steps of what later became psychology are to be traced back into research fields like the German *Erfahrungseelenkunde* and the *Affektenlehre*, both considered branches of medical and philosophical research focused on the “empirical study” of human thought and emotions (see Meyer-Sickendiek; Gambino).

Reden, 1805), but had already been intensely debated in works by Gottfried Herder (*Treatise on the Origin of Language / Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, 1770) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (*On thinking and speaking / Über Denken und Sprechen*, 1795). Many thinkers and writers of that period claimed thought to be dwelling in the *enargeia* of words (Müller, Kleists Rethorik 231; Müller, Kleist und die bildende Kunst). What was considered to be common ground to all practised forms of pictoriality² was the lively rendering of the scene, the *enargeia* of the description.

In order to uncover the main features ascribed to *enargeia*, we have to consider Quintilian's book VI of his *Institutio Oratoria*, where he describes the production of *enargeia* from the orator's point of view and sets out his understanding of the psychological processes involved in it. As analysed in depth by Ruth Webb, Quintilian conceived of *enargeia* as the result of an internal, psychological process, pointing out that the force or "vividness" of the speech relies on the capacity of the orator to transfer his mental image through words to the listener. How is this meant to work? Quintilian explains it by giving a brief account of the mental process he calls *φαντασία* (*phantasia*), a Greek term usually translated in Latin with *visiones* (Webb 95). He describes this mental process as similar to daydreaming and was so interested in it because the Greek tradition referred to it as the means by which absent things could be represented in a way that readers/listeners may have the impression of "seeing them with their own eyes". The mastery of this faculty was thought to give great power over the emotions of the audience (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 6.2.29–30). Quintilian's claim about *enargeia* implies that this last is an active force with a strong impact on the reader's mind, almost like a physical force. The process of "placing before eyes" creates in the reader the illusion of being present at a past or future event, even if he is "aware" of the paradox implied by not being in front of the real scene. Quintilian suggests that in order to make this illusion as realistic as possible, the author should always use familiar elements, things "most apt to lodge themselves in the mind" (Webb 110), because of their analogy with personal memories.

² See its different forms as described by Louvell: transpictoriality, inter- and intrapictoriality, parapictoriality, and metapictoriality; hypertextuality and hypopictoriality; archpictoriality; mnemopictoriality and archtextuality (Louvell 6).

This brings us directly to the relationship between memory and imagination as modern researches have recently shown (see Chatterjee's researches). In fact, memory seems to be directly connected with mental images. For Greek and Latin thinkers too, images were considered to be the product not only of sense perception, but also of the recollection of memory images (*phantasmata*). In Aristotelian philosophy, perceptual impressions received through the senses during life were supposed to create memory-images thanks to a sort of mechanical "imprinting" of the brain (Aristotle, *On Memory and Recollection* 450a 30–32). Words are in Quintilian's opinion, and in that of many later rhetoricians too, tools to communicate the internal images of the speaker to the audience, thanks to the natural power of words to recall memories. The *enargeia* is therefore far more than just a rhetorical strategy: it becomes a way of giving language the power to transfer the images stored in the author's memory to the imagination of the audience. Reading about a visual experience stimulates the reader to conceive imaginary or recollected scenes by "virtually" seeing something that is physically absent. This fictive paradoxical nature of ekphrasis engages the reader in a complex "combination of acquiescence to and awareness of the illusion" (Webb 10).

We claim that at the core of this paradoxical dynamics of such texts is not just the description of a work of art (*Bildbeschreibung*), but the reconstruction of a perceptive, emotional and imaginative experience aiming to represent the response to an aesthetic experience. This because the peculiarity of ekphrasis is to trigger a strong and contradictory affective response in the reader, leading to noticeable emotional and cognitive changes.

This process is instantiated by the "intermedial" act of weaving together elements pertaining to visual arts with those pertaining to poetics, forcing a shift from one kind of stimulus into another and generating what in the modern theoretical and aesthetic discourse is called a hybrid "iconotext" (image/text device) (Mitchell 100) reliant on two heterogeneous semiotic systems (Louvell 6). The strength and fascination of ekphrasis relies on this paradoxical feature:

Ekphrasis, then, has a Janus face: as a form of mimesis, it stages a paradoxical performance, promising to give voice to the allegedly silent image even while attempting to overcome the power of the image by transforming and inscribing it. (Wagner 13)

This paradoxical quality of ekphrasis is amplified in the Romantics. What is at stake now in the definition of new paradigm of Modernity is the experimentation of the power displayed by the ekphrasis to strongly influence the emotions, the recollection of memories, and the imagination of the reader, by meta-representing the very process activated by the imagination during the aesthetic response.

Ekphrasis, aesthetic response and imagination

Before demonstrating the above exposed claim in relation to the aesthetic discourse of the Romantics, we need first to describe how emotions, recollection of memories and imagination are put at stake by ekphrasis. In ancient rhetorical theories of ekphrasis we find the phenomenological explanation of some features of this text genre that were developed intuitively in order to gain a better response in soliciting perceptive and imaginative faculties in the audience. These issues are nowadays up-to-date matters in many neuroscience studies, particularly in those referring to the biological underpinnings of the aesthetic experience (see: Ramachandran and Hirstein; Cupchik) and of the experience of beauty: Semir Zeki, pioneer of the research on visual and aesthetic perception and their neural correlates (see: Zeki, *Art*; Zeki, *Inner Vision*; Zeki, *Neurology*; Zeki, *Splendors*), has recently discovered and tested the fact that different kinds of experience of beauty correlate with the activation of the same part of the emotional brain (see: Ishizu and Zeki; Zeki, *Mathematical Beauty*).

The iconotextual hybrid medial coding of ekphrasis solicits in the brain as well areas processing language, semantic inferences, symbolic representations, as areas processing mental images and embodied simulation. We speculate that the embodied experience of the reader is more amplified by the ekphrastic text, than by text genres. This because the multimodal codes intertwined in the ekphrasis appeal more than in other cases to the embodied simulation of the reader, to bodily perception, to actions, to emotions and to the multisensory nature of imagination.

In general, language relies as well as on an embodied as also on a symbolic basis, as attested by Louwarse's *symbol interdependency hypothesis*. Linguistic understanding is therefore the result of mixed processes attaining the embodied perception of the reader and the symbolic meaning induction of words (Louwarse 273–302). The embodied simulation instantiated by ekphrasis is a mechanism activating our own internal representation of body states that are associated with

actions, emotions, or sensations (Freedberg and Gallese 198). The embodied simulation processes (see: Varela, et al.) rely on the “as-if body loop”, which implies empathic and emotional activations. As Vittorio Gallese claimed, when interpreting actions, emotions and sensations of others, the embodied simulation is the core experience of the pre-rational sense-making process (Gallese, *Mirror Neurons* 519–536). Freedberg and Gallese draw the following conclusions:

Activation of the same brain region during first- and third-person experience of actions, emotions and sensations suggests that, as well as explicit cognitive evaluation of social stimuli, there is probably a phylogenetically older mechanism that enables direct experiential understanding of objects and of the inner world of others. (Freedberg and Gallese 198)

Not only actions, emotions and sensations we see, but also those we read about, activate our internal embodied system of bodily representations “as if” we were directly experiencing similar emotions, feelings or sensations, also evoked by forms, colours and lines. The aesthetic emotional response during the literary experience is more strongly enhanced by the activation of simulation-loops elicited by the dynamic qualities of the literary imagery (see: Pulvirenti and Gambino, *Immaginazione*; Pulvirenti and Gambino, *Leggere Goethe*). It has already been demonstrated through brain imaging that the activity of motor areas is particularly enhanced by motor imagery (see: Cuccio, Carapezza, and Gallese). There is also scientific evidence about the fact that visual and haptic systems share a common substrate and that the neural substrates for visual and haptic processes overlap (see: Kim and James; Stilla and Sathian). Information deriving from visual and haptic origin converges in IPS (intraparietal sulcus), which is not only part of the somatosensory and visual system, but also part of the motor system, integrating sensory, visual and motor processes (see: Hamilton and Grafton).

Moreover, the multisensory nature of imagination involves the haptic activity bound to movement and visual acts (see: Goebel et al.). In particular, looking at a painting representing a physical action or reading about it engages part of the motor system, specifically the mirror neuron system. Discovered by Rizzolatti and colleagues (1992, 1996, 1999, 2009), the mirror neurons fire, both in monkeys and human beings, when executing or observing an action, and have also been shown to resonate in humans when observers “infer the intent of artistic gesture” (Chatterjee;

Chatterjee and Vartanian 370), either explicitly declared in an artwork or implicitly conveyed through colours and forms. The mirror neuron system offers a scientific explanation for many phenomena relevant to the aesthetic experience such as the empathic processes relying on the embodied simulation.

Responses to paintings or to descriptions of paintings display empathic reactions, since they activate our emotional circuitries, mirroring the emotions expressed in artworks through forms, colours, dynamics, and so on (Freedberg and Gallese 197-202). Empathic and emotional feelings may arise in any aesthetic experience, since, as Chatterjee and Vartanian claim, “subjects focusing on the feelings that artworks evoke, exhibit bilateral activation of the insulae, regions strongly implicated in regulating our autonomic nervous system and the visceral experience of emotions” (Chatterjee and Vartanian 372).

According to recent studies in the field of neuroaesthetics, we claim that the efficacy of ekphrasis in the Romantic period relies on its meta-representation of the perceptual processes involved in the ekphrastic text which intensify the activation of the brain’s motor neural areas in the act of simulation. In fact, in our hypothesis, the dynamic quality due to references of the language to action and motion produces a particularly intense dynamic simulation. Therefore, the reader, who identifies his/her own experience with the perceptual one represented in the text, will experience a particularly intense emotional response. In fact, Chatterjee and colleagues have produced evidence regarding the aesthetic experience as a phenomenon emerging from the interaction between sensory-motor, emotion-valuation, and meaning-knowledge circuitry (Chatterjee and Vartanian 370; see also Shimamura; Chatterjee). The intensity of a reader/observer’s response relies on the intensity of the activation of the neural motor areas. This has been demonstrated in relation to vision, to language, and partially to the process of imagination—even in the absence of any physical movement, the observation of an object implies the activation of the sensory-motor system (Freedberg and Gallese 201). Furthermore, language exploits the pre-existing multimodal character of the sensory-motor system (Gallese and Lakoff 456). Many studies also prove that some parts of the brain activated by seeing are also engaged in visual imagination (imagining that you are seeing) (see: Farah; Kosslyn et al.; Gallese and Lakoff 463). Finally, as also Gabriele Starr argues, referring to empirical studies that have shown the implication of the motor system in imagined actions, any kind of imagery, because of its

multisensory nature, enhances a bodily kinaesthetic reaction (Starr, *Multisensory Imagery* 275-291).

We may conclude that ekphrasis triggers with particular efficacy the embodied simulation of the reader because of the text multimodal features strongly soliciting perceptual and emotional responses. This happens in virtue of the activation of the same motor neural areas as those actually used in perceiving or acting (Gallese and Lakoff 456–457). Finally, since imagining is itself a form of mental simulation (of visual perception or action) activating motor circuitry, ekphrasis enhances more powerfully than other textual genres the act of imagination. (RG)

Ekphrasis and the Romantic aesthetics

Relevant changes occurred in the use of ekphrasis during the German romantic period, mainly due to the general paradigm shift caused by the scientific, anthropological and aesthetic revolution taking place in the turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. The relevance of a new definition of what Jacques Rancière proposes to call the “aesthetic regime of art” (Rancière 2013) determines a deep change in the aesthetic paradigms of the epoch, finding in ekphrasis an ideal device to reflect on and express the radical innovations occurring in the philosophical debate about perception, thought and emotions, as pointed out by many scholars focussing their investigations on the regimes of the visible as related to language (see: Pfothauer; Osterkamp; Miller). What is at stake in the ekphrasis of the beginning Romantics is the crisis of the aesthetic classical representation of visible qualities by their amplification in new forms experimented by the innovative use of language conveying actions and inner motion. This is the central point of the new forms of modern ekphrasis arising from the romantic aesthetic reflection about language as deeply connected with thought. In fact, a crucial issue of the romantic aesthetics is the commitment to a concept of art and beauty as deeply grounded in all aspects of human life and promoting a reflection about some critical issues of human nature, such as mainly consciousness (Berlin 20) and thought, striving towards a “knowledge of the whole human being” (Schlegel, *Lectures* 241). Moreover, the programmatic attempt of the romantic aesthetics was to transform nature and science into arts and arts into nature and science, as pointed out by one of the most active theoretician of the Romantics, Friedrich Schlegel: “The Romantic imperative demands [that] all nature and science should become art [and] art should become

nature and science” (Schlegel, Fragments 586). Therefore, the central role of aesthetics is to promote a discourse about knowledge and truth, like we may read in the “Oldest Programme of the German Romantics”:

The idea that unites everyone [is] the idea of *beauty* [...]. I am now convinced that the highest act of reason, by encompassing all ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that *truth and goodness* are siblings only in *beauty*. (Hölderlin 186).

The relevance of aesthetics in the romantic discourse is to be intended as a new modelling of scientific, philosophical, social, and ethical pursuits according to the form exemplified in poetry and in arts, as Novalis’ famous imperative of “poeticizing” life claimed. In the romantic sense, poetry intended as a “transcendental act” is a device capable of raising the human ability to think and reflect to a higher power. Its aim is to reach the unreachable, the Absolute intended as a whole, an unconditioned totality that overwhelms human reason.

In this sense, according to Rancière, a main issue of the romantic aesthetics is “thinking [...] the thinkable –a thinking that modifies what is thinkable by welcoming what was unthinkable.” (Rancière 82). Aesthetics is the space where to strive towards the Absolute, since Absolute is in itself open-ended and aesthetic reception enables a deep amplification of human perception and cognition by enhancing the imaginative power of the human mind. In this sense, the romantic poetry represents a philosophical activity of the reflective and creative power of the human being striving towards the Absolute. This longing for the Infinite is an affective attitude that can be enhanced by the experience of aesthetic pleasure. Aesthetic pleasure is a peculiar form of awareness instantiated by the emotional relation (and the reflection on this relation) between a subject and an object, as we will also see in Kleist’s text. The aesthetic feeling, i.e. the experience of beauty, leads the subject to approximate the Absolute intended as a holistic unity without trying to subsume it under any principle or concept and without affording to determine it. Therefore, the aesthetic feeling striving for the Absolute is open-ended and autonomous, mostly doomed to fail in its attempt to experience the Absolute. As Kant claimed, the aesthetic pleasure is characterized by “a causality in itself, namely that of maintaining the state of the representation of the mind and the occupation of the cognitive powers without a further aim. We linger over the consideration of the beautiful because this consideration strengthens and reproduces itself.” (Kant 5:222) (RG).

Kleist's "green glasses" and his search for a tool "to paint the soul"

A metarepresentation of the aesthetic experience in relation both to the Sublime in nature and in art is at stake in Kleist's ekphrasis of Friedrich's famous painting. Kleist's interest for the fine arts is a fundamental part of his aesthetic reflection, which joins the romantic "Kunstenthusiasmus" with the experimentation of a new expressivity forcing the limits of language. His opinions about art and his use of ekphrasis is grounded in the debate about language: the author was obsessed by the problem of the inadequateness of language as tool to express and communicate his inner world and his own emotional experience. We quote one of the most relevant passages about Kleist's linguistic scepticism:

I would like to communicate everything to you [his sister Ulrike], in case it could be possible. But it is not possible (...) we do not have a tool for that. Also the only thing that we have, language, is not adequate, it cannot paint the soul. And what it gives to us are only torn fragments (Letter to Ulrike, 5.2.1801)³

The language scepticism is the expression of Kleist's philosophical and moral crisis about human knowledge (see: Mandelartz) that was usually put in relation to Kant, but probably was due to reading Fichte's *The Vocation of Man* [*Die Bestimmung des Menschen*] (1800). Kleist's famous "green glasses" metaphor expresses the outmost scepticism with regard to the concept of truth and of the human abilities to reach it:

If men had green glasses instead of eyes, they would believe that the objects they see are green – and they would never be able to decide whether their eyes show them things as they are, or whether they do add something to them that belong not to them, but to the eye. The same is true with regard to the mind. We cannot decide whether what we call truth is really true, or whether it only appears so to us. If the latter, then the truth we assemble here is nothing after our death, and all endeavour to acquire a possession which will follow us to the grave is in vain. –If the point of this thought does not penetrate your heart, do not smile at one who feels wounded by it in the deepest and most sacred part of his being. My great aim has failed and I have no other. (Letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge, 22.3.1801)⁴

³ [http://www.kleist-digital.de/brief?id=letters/b_036.xml&token=Seele#N10424]

⁴ [http://www.kleist-digital.de/brief?id=letters/b_037.xml#]

Nevertheless, Kleist tried to create a poetic and “magic” language able to “paint” his personal *phantasmata* and emotional states (Seeba 114). Emotion was a main issue in Kleist’s aesthetic appreciation of fine arts and in his attempt to understand and express their power on the human soul. In one of his most impressive ekphrasis, contained in a letter written during his French imprisonment at the time of the anti-Napoleon coalition war in 1807, he considers as the essence of a real masterwork its ability to trigger emotions:

Here in a church I saw a painting [Simon Vouet’s Saint Magdalene], not particularly excellent in the drawing, but very impressive in virtue of its composition and of the way it was conceived. The invention is in fact what determines the aesthetic quality of an artwork. Not what is represented to the senses makes out the masterpiece, but what excites the emotions. [...] I have never seen anything more touching and ennobling. (Letter to Marie von Kleist, June 1807).⁵

Since 1801 the interest for the fine arts constituted for Kleist a subjective process of self-comprehension, reflection about his own aesthetics, and stylistic development. He was at the beginning under the influence Winckelmann’s theories and the widespread enthusiasm for Rafael (as his project of the journal “Phöbus” in 1808 demonstrates), but was also very independent in his tastes and preferences and able to develop subjective critical insights and personal opinions about aesthetic matters, particularly in his contributions to the “Berliner Abendblätter”⁶, in which appeared his text about Caspar David Friedrich’s painting *The Monk by the Sea* (see: Pfothenhauer Kleists Rede; Schneider; Gebhardt). Kleist’s contributions to paintings are to be found in different forms: in his theoretical claims in “Phöbus”; in the so called “Künstlerbriefe” (the “Letter of a young poet to a young painter” and the “Letter of a painter to his son”) and in ekphrastic texts. He found in the ancient device of ekphrasis an ideal tool to express immediately and without constraint the emotional impact of the artwork on the viewer by appealing the reader’s imagination. Particularly in case of the ekphrasis of Friedrich’s painting *The Monk by the Sea*, Kleist tried to turn his readers into spectators of an inner process of imagining by experiencing the Sublime in nature in relation and/or contraposition to the Sublime in art: he guides the reader’s gaze beyond the picture, “illuminating” those elements

⁵ http://www.kleist-digital.de/brief?id=letters/b_107.xml

⁶ The *Berliner Abendblätter* was edited by Heinrich von Kleist with Adam Müller and published by

that could induce emotions and trigger the imagination, as we will demonstrate through a close-reading of the text.

Kleist's *Feelings about a Seascape by Friedrich*

On 13 October 1810, a text entitled *Feelings about a Seascape by Friedrich* (*Empfindungen vor Friedrichs Seelandschaft*), signed *cb* (Clemens Brentano), appeared on the daily newspaper *Berliner Abendblätter*. It was originally followed by six short dialogues, a sort of ironic report of the comments made by the audience during the exhibition.⁷ But the text which was published was in its first part heavily rewritten by Heinrich von Kleist who added an original second part giving rise to a quarrel with the two authors, Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim.

Kleist's controversial text focuses on many relevant issues of the aesthetic discourse of the time: the legitimation of landscape painting against its detractors, the demonstration of the possibility of achieving the Sublime in art representations and not only in subjective experiences of natural landscape, the possibility of giving voice to the expression of the desire of the Infinite. Most part of the studies on this text have focussed on Kleist's "linguistic distortion" of Friedrich's painting (Müller, *Kleist und die bildende Kunst*), on his adoption of the romantic "Sehnsucht" concept (Begemann 70), on the metaphysic desire of the Infinite and on Kleist's evocation of feelings related to the experience of the Sublime and the impossibility of experiencing them in art, dissolving the description in a hyper realistic representation (Greiner 160).

Kleist's interest in ekphrasis was probably due to its "paradoxical effect" (Wagner 30), which relies, as we have already pointed out, on the implicit attempt to "show" and "illuminate" an "absent object" through words generating what is called in psychological terms its "vividness", the lively rendering of a scene or action (see: Mitchell; Boehm and Pfothenhauer), or in rhetorical terms its "*enargeia*" (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*) (see: Pfothenhauer; Waldheim). He tried to forge his poetics with the force of *enargeia*, weaving into his text elements from different codes and connecting properties pertaining specifically to visual arts—space and presence (see: Lessing)—with those pertaining to poetics—time and movement—in order to

Julius Eduard Hitzig from the First of October 1810 until the 30th March 1811 in Berlin.

⁷About the reconstruction of the genesis of the text see Begemann, Meyertholen and Müller.

deconstruct the visual object and to engage the reader within the very process of the aesthetic experience, triggering his emotional reaction and imagination.

Before focussing our attention on Kleist's text, we would like to point out some important revolutionary features of Friedrich's painting, which have been emphasised in Kleist's text in order to "perform" the act of relating to the picture by ways of imagination and to potentiate the emotional relationship between the audience and the painting.

The painting by Caspar David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*, was exhibited for the first time in 1810 in the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin. It produced mainly disappointed and confused feelings in the audience of the time (Rühse 238-55), after the critics already moved by Basilius von Rahmdor (1808, 155) against Friedrich's transformation of the landscape in a Christian symbolism, like in case of the painting *Cross in the Mountain* (*Das Kreuz im Gebirge*).

Friedrich's picture *The Monk by the Sea* became a controversial case because it radically disrupts the basic principles of the classical landscape (Greiner 160). It subverts almost all the formal rules of landscape painting of that time, including the Albertian perspective model, the use of frame, the relationship between foreground and background, the function of *staffage* figures, and the references to proportion. Moreover, it renders the violence of nature and the loneliness of the endeavours by depicting a mostly schematic scene, horizontally divided into three areas characterized only by colours, the pale ochre of the dune, the black of the sea, the blue-grey of the clouds. Friedrich's representation exceeds the frame of the human gaze and amplifies the vision towards boundlessness. This is achieved by applying different strategies: first the painting lacks a foreground, and this introduces a great change in the basic principles of the eighteenth century's *framed gaze* (see: Stoichita). The importance given to the *frame* in the eighteenth century theory was due to the implicit rational intention of the gaze: this art of exploring the world urged to precision, to sharpness and therefore to the need to *cut out* a part from the whole. Isolation and sharpness determined by the "framed gaze" helped to give a cognitive structure to the elements in paintings. Step by step, the eye was conducted to explore the surface of the canvas, putting single elements together into a sort of complex cluster that gives a sense to the parts and to the whole of the representation. This "framed model" responded to the taste of the time and to the principles of education of the *Anschauungsunterricht* (see: Gambino), as theorized during the eighteenth

century, based on observation, recognition and narration.

Caspar David Friedrich discharged the rules of the “framed gaze” by opening the sight to immeasurable spaces created by means of colour fields composed without any prospective structure (Begemann 15) and of *staffage* figure disproportionately reduced in dimension. The painter converts a landscape into the abstract vision of a void and empty space with a figure put under the line of the horizon turned almost completely away from the viewer. In this way, Friedrich represents an experience of the Sublime exceeding the rational limits of thought and soliciting the activation of the imagination. This concept is theoretically described in Friedrich Schiller’s essay *On the Sublime* (1793):

The sublime object is of a double nature. We refer it either to our *power of comprehension*, and succumb in the attempt to form for ourselves an image or a concept of it; or we refer it to our *vital power*, and consider it as a power before which those of ours vanish into nothing. But although in the one as in the other case we preserve the painful feeling of our limits through its instigation, so we do not, however, flee it, but rather are attracted by it with irresistible force. Would this be quite possible, if the limits of our imagination were at the same time the limits of our power of comprehension?⁸

In its turn, the text created by Kleist on Brentano’s palimpsest describes neither the pictorial features of Friedrich’s painting nor the physical qualities of the depicted landscape. In this respect, the text amplifies Friedrich’s intentions of representing the act of relating to the landscape by the gaze, and not the object itself. This issue, on which we will focus following close-reading of the text, i.e. the process of seeing and of relating to an overwhelming natural scene by the gaze, was the very intention of Friedrich’s painting, as he claimed: «It [*The Monk by the Sea*] cannot be defined as a description. It is instead the act of seeing itself» (Friedrich’s letter to Johannes Schulze, February 1809, 2006, 45). How is this aim pursued in the text?

We now quote the first part of the text, with numbered lines to make further references clearer:

1 It is magnificent to stand in infinite solitude on the seashore, beneath an overcast sky,
and to

⁸The English translation is to be found:

http://www.schillerinstitute.org/transl/trans_on_Sublime.html [01.03.2015].

2 look on an endless waste of water. Part of this feeling is the fact that one has made
 life's way
 3 there and yet must go back, that one would like to cross over but cannot, that one sees
 4 nothing to support life and yet senses the voice of life in the sight of the waves, the
 murmur
 5 of the air, the passing clouds and the lonely cry of birds. Part of this feeling is a claim
 made
 6 by the heart and a rejection, if I may call it that, on the part of nature. But this is
 impossible
 7 in front of the picture, and what I should have found in the picture itself I found only
 8 between myself and the picture, namely a claim my heart made on the picture and the
 9 picture's rejection of me; and so I myself became the monk, and the picture became
 the
 10 dune, but the sea itself, on which I should have looked out with longing -- the sea was
 11 absent.
 12 There can be nothing sadder or more desolate in the world than this place: the only
 spark of
 13 life in the broad domain of death, the lonely centre in the lonely circle. The picture,
 with its
 14 two or three mysterious subjects, lies there like an apocalypse, as if it were thinking
 Edward
 15 Young's "Night Thoughts" and since it has, in its uniformity and boundlessness, no
 16 foreground but the frame, it is as if one's eyelids had been cut off. Yet the painter has
 17 undoubtedly broken an entirely new path in the field of his art, and I am convinced
 that with
 18 his spirit, a square mile of the sand of Mark Brandenburg could be represented with a
 19 barberry bush, on which a lone crow might sit preening itself, and that such a picture
 would
 20 have an effect that rivalled Ossian or Kosegarten. Why, if the artist painted this
 landscape
 21 using its own chalk and its own water, I believe he would make the foxes and wolves
 weep:
 22 the most powerful praise, without doubt, that could be given to this kind of landscape
 23 painting. (Kleist, Seascape 63-69)

From its very beginning, Kleist's text evoke overwhelming feelings in front of the natural Sublime by using adjectives describing a disproportional relation between the viewer and the natural landscape: "magnificent", "infinite", "endless" (see line 1-2). This evocation recalls Kant's concept of the Sublime (Kant, Kritik 115) as an experience exceeding the human rational ability to comprehend the own perceptions of the nature with regard to acquired concepts. The conditions for the experience of the Sublime are by Kleist at the same time denied and put again at stake in the relation among viewer, reader and the artful representation of the natural Sublime.

The author triggers an empathic *movement* of the reader into the landscape, suggesting the double identification of the reader with the author and the observer represented in the painting ("I myself became the monk", see line 9). This perspective shift is achieved by activating the process of simulation, situating immediately the reader in the "infinite solitude on the seashore, beneath an overcast

sky”, in front of “an endless waste of water” (see lines 1, 2); the simulation process is instantiated by the use of verbs related to the bodily position in the space and the movement in it, like “to stand” (line 1), which solicits a bodily stable position, and “yet must go back” (line 3), or “to cross over” (line 3). The use of such verbs activates the “as-if body loop” related to motion and action in the space, enhanced by the use of deictic prepositions situating the reader into the depicted space of nature.

Kleist triggers the reader’s proprioception by guiding him/her into an “as-if loop” process, which takes him/her in the position of the monk in the picture (see lines 1-2). This happens by using verbs of bodily motion (see lines 2, 3), and by soliciting the reader to establish a dynamical perceptual relationship with the space inside the picture, by using verbs of perception, like “to look” (line 1-2), “to see” (line 3), “to sense” (line 4). In the empathic experience triggered by the first lines of the text, the “as-if-loop” instantiated by verbs of motion and sensual perception, and by the deictic shift of the propositions, the reader’s mind is activated within a *simulation mode* that reproduces the somatic states seen in or implied by the description of the action of getting inside the space, “as if” the body were present.⁹ The action of standing on the seashore, of moving in this endeavour and of going back, activates with particular efficacy the process of bodily simulation and of empathic identification. As Antonio Damasio claims, feelings –which he defines as the conscious awareness of emotions– are instantiated not only in the direct subjective experience of the world, but also when observing the actions and emotions of others or when reading about them, like in our case (see: Damasio). Here the visual and dynamic representations of the movement solicit in the reader the activation of the relation between sight and motion.

But the simulated proprioception, empathically evoked by the verbs of movement and sight, drives the experiencing self into a disproportional landscape, which overwhelms his/her cognitive faculties: “Part of this feeling is a claim made by the heart and a rejection, if I may call it that, on the part of nature” (see lines 5-6). This provokes a kind of cognitive shock: “that one sees nothing to support life and yet senses the voice of life” (see lines 3-4), inducing the reader to *imagine* the visual experience of “viewing” this empty landscape by means of the imagination.

⁹ This phenomenon is further investigated in the light of the functioning of the mirror neurons and the embodied simulation giving account of empathy (Freedberg and Gallese, 2007). The results of the researches about mirror neurons provide the neural substrate for empathetic simulation in response to visual or verbal representations.

In fact, the missing description of specific features of the painting is introduced from the beginning by the evocation of a “feeling”: “Part of this feeling is the fact that one has made life’s way there and yet must go back, that one would like to cross over but cannot, that one sees nothing to support life (see lines 3-4). This kind of introduction does not allow the reader to reconstruct a real landscape (see: Kurz). In the meanwhile, the author, failing in his attempt to relate to the painting, induces strong emotional reactions, by mixing abstract images, like the “endless waste of water” (line 2) with acoustic inputs, by conveying visual effects with metaphors (the “voice of life in the sight of the waves, the murmur of the air”) (lines 4-5), and dynamic images like “the passing clouds” (line 5). The “persuasive force” of this dynamic elusive description is due to the artful gulf created between the evoked images and the need of inferring personal remembered experiences (Webb 170) in order to complete them. This is at the core of the subjective experience of the author, as it is conveyed by the parallelism of negative sentences in the first 5 lines and by the claim of the lines 6-9, culminating in the rejection that he experiences by the landscape in the picture. What the author can experience and recreate in the text is the relation to the picture by amplifying the missing elements in virtue of the imagination: “But this is impossible in front of the picture, and what I should have found in the picture itself I found only between myself and the picture”, see lines 6-8. This experience is further potentiated by reference to a reality that goes beyond the framing attitude of perception and cognition (lines 20-21). This process overwhelms the cognitive abilities, soliciting a particularly intense emotional response in the reader, which is faced with the experience of the absence of the very subject of the painting: the sea (lines 10-11). In this way, the very object of the sight –the see– is denied (Greiner 160).

The reader’s imagination is enhanced to produce a “virtual” experience of what the author self is unable to conceive, namely the vastness and loneliness of nature. This is conveyed by the use of rhetorical figures, like *prosopopoeia* (thought and emotions are ascribed to the inanimate features: “There can be nothing sadder or more desolate in the world than this place”; “the lonely centre in the lonely circle” see lines 12-13), metaphors (“the only spark of life in the broad domain of death” in lines 12-13), hyperboles (lines 12, 13-14), the climax of the simile “like an apocalypse” (line 14). The boundlessness represented in the painting is described as a “failure” of the gaze, which is no longer able to “frame” and catch the necessary glimpses of the

landscape, leaving the observers/readers with their “eyelids (...) cut off” (see line 16) in front of an inhumane nature. What the human being cannot organize recurring to cognitive frames, can only be artistically represented by syncretic operations of the reader’s mind establishing paradoxical references and connections among elements of experience by the imagination.

According to other interpretations of this text, Kleist’s point is the negation of the feeling of the Sublime as human possibility to raise himself to an ideal level compensating his nihilistic experience with the thought of the Infinite (see Greiner), remaining captured in the loneliness and isolation of the human being detached from the totality of nature (see Müller, *Kleist und die Bildende Kunst*).

On the contrary, we claim that Kleist’s text represents the dynamical process of the imagination engaged by the observer in front of the Sublime in order to face an experience overwhelming human cognitive limits. The text in fact does not recall the precise descriptive elements of the scene but focuses on the movement inside the picture evoking the “emotional landscape” of the figure in the painting (the monk). This “bridging” effect triggered by the verbs of motion and the induced relation to the landscape inside the painting (the observer “becomes” the monk inside the picture) increases the simulation effect of moving inside and of affectively experiencing the vastness of nature, reinforcing the text’s emotional impact on the reader. The elusiveness of the description determines a counteraction in the relation which the reader tries to establish with the described object, triggering him/her “to fill in the gaps” of the absent object by imagining the very essence of the experience of the figure in the landscape. Kleist makes use to a vast amount of rhetorical figure (*prosopopoeia*, lines 13-19; metaphors, lines 12-13; hyperboles, 12, 13-14; the powerful simile “like an apocalypse”, line 14), in order to convey his own strong emotions in front of the inhumane vastness and loneliness of the landscape, and to conceive and represent what goes beyond his own cognitive and expressive limits by means of the imagination, instantiating similar processes in the reader. In this way, the author succeeds in transferring to the reader his own mental process of relating to the picture through words rich in images conveyed by rhetorical figures, eliciting the act of “filling in the gaps” of the elusive dynamic description by inferences with personal memories. In fact, as we already know from Aristotle, the human being is triggered by a sort of natural “imprinting” to create memory-images out of the perceptual experience in life and to recall them by ways of inferences (Aristotle, *On*

Memory and Recollection 450a 30–32). The main tool to recall memories and internal images is, in the opinion of Quintilian and of other Latin rhetoricians, the language. This has the power to transfer the images stored in the author's memory to the imagination of the reader, by ways of textual figurations. This process turns out to be particularly effective when the author solicits by words and rhetorical figures of the text the active participation of the reader in reconstructing perceptive and imaginative processes. In such cases, the simulated perceptive action relies on the annihilation of the effective object of the description which enhances the imagination of the reader.

By dynamising the elements in the picture and the potential evoked feelings through the use of rhetorical devices and “fictionally performing” the perceptive act of emotionally experiencing and imagining the picture, the author transforms the original pictorial image into a subjective experience, capable of guiding the reader's imagination into the *Erlebnis* of the picture. In this and other modern ekphrasis, the author intuitively substitutes the description of an artwork with the representation of the perceptive, memorial and emotional processes of experiencing it, which stimulates an extremely intense imaginative and aesthetic pleasure. This is triggered by the powerful activation of the imagination in front of an elusive description by the simulation of a personal experience conducted by the rhetorical “vividness” of the ekphrasis.

According to ancient rhetoric and modern studies on aesthetics, the fictional representation of the feelings and emotions evoked by a work of art produces an intense activity of the visual imagination, recalling personal *phantasmata* and memories to construct a private and intensely emotional representation. In our case, the disproportion of human cognition to conceive immensity as well in nature as in art and to express it conducts the reader to experience and imagine an intensely emotional representation of what cannot be rationally comprehended and reduced to artistic form: the immensity of nature as represented in art. Inner experiences of the world inside and outside us, that cannot be really cognitively comprehended, may only be intuitively represented by acts of the imagination. By activating the imagination, the reader's mind overcomes the limits and restrictions of its own cognitive capability, engaging continuous new attempts to understand the human experience of the world and of the own self, creating new meanings for our existence. (GP)

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