FOLD AS A MODEL OF EKPHRASIS
IN CONTEMPORARY ESSAYS ON THE VISUAL ARTS
(BASED ON THE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH ESSAYS)

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Summary

The article addresses the complex nature of ekphrasis as the verbal representation of the works of the visual arts and discusses its explications through the prism of various metaphorical models. With the metaphors of the paragone and the sister arts acknowledged as the two powerful models of ekphrasis, a recently introduced metaphor of ekphrasis as a fold is given a close look. The roots of the fold as a metaphorical model are traced back to works of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and further philosophical elaboration of this model in Gilles Deleuze's writings is discussed. It is argued that viewing ekphrasis as a fold makes it possible to capture the nature of ekphrasis in contemporary essays on the visual arts as a means of producing meanings through interpretation of the existing meanings and thus as a means of perpetuating culture. This argument is supported with the cognitive poetic analysis of ekphrasis in John Berger's essays on the visual arts.

Keywords: a work of art, verbal representation, metaphor, meaning, interpretation, continuity.

1. Introduction

Any of widely accepted definitions of ekphrasis implies its complexity. L. Spitzer's seminal characterisation of ekphrasis as "the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art, which description implies, in the words of Theophile Gautier, "une transposition d'art," the reproduction through the medium of words of sensuously perceptible *objets d'art (ut pictura poesis)*" *(Spitzer, 1955: 207)* brings forward such aspects of ekphrasis as the verbal ("the poetic description"), the visual ("a pictorial or sculptural work of art"), the artistic ("a pictorial or sculptural work of art", "*objets d'art*"), the perceptible directly through the senses ("sensuously perceptible"), the transposed (""une transposition d'art,""). J. A. W. Heffernan's frequently quoted delineation of ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of graphic representation" *(Heffernan, 1991: 299)* highlights the verbal ("the verbal"), the visual ("of graphic representation"), as well as the represented and the representing ("the verbal representation of graphic representation").

Because of the intricacy of ekphrasis, no single definite explanation has become comprehensive but rather there have appeared various interpretations of what this phenomenon is actually like. The famous two interpretations are those of the paragone and the sister arts *(Bugno-Narecka, 2020: 3)*. Both interpretations are metaphorical, the paragone employing the idea of "unresolved rivalry and continuous struggle for domination between word and image" *(Bugno-Narecka, 2020: 3)* and the sister arts dwelling on the idea of "the cooperation between

the visual and the verbal" *(Bugno-Narecka, 2020: 3)*. Both the paragone and the sister arts approaches have had long and rich traditions of discussion *(Harvey, 2002)*. However, neither any of them, nor their combination has succeeded in providing the exhaustive description of ekphrasis. Thus, this paper aims at examining the possibility of yet another model of ekphrasis, which is viewed in this study as the verbal representation of the works of the visual arts, and discussing the explanatory potential of this third model for the studies of ekphrasis in contemporary essays on the visual arts.

To achieve this aim, the following tasks were set: to review the nature of metaphorical models in research, to consider the origins of fold as a model in philosophy and its subsequent development, to discuss the model of ekphrasis as a fold and to test the applicability of this model via an analysis of contemporary essays on the visual arts written in English.

The whole study is grounded in the cognitive approach, which means that metaphor is treated as a cognitive rather than purely linguistic phenomenon and that cognitive poetic approach is adopted to the analysis of the ekphrases in the essays.

2. Metaphorical models as a means of research

Scientific modelling is viewed as "the generation of a physical, conceptual, or mathematical representation of a real phenomenon that is difficult to observe directly" *(Britannica: scientific modelling)*. According to D. M. Bailer-Jones, a scientific model is "an interpretative description of a phenomenon that facilitates access to that phenomenon" *(Bailer-Jones, 2002: 108)*, with the access being "perceptual as well as intellectual" *(Bailer-Jones, 2002: 109)*. Models usually focus on some specific features of a phenomenon and thus they are partial descriptions *(Bailer-Jones, 2002: 109)*.

The idea that scientific models are metaphors is attributed to M. Black *(Bailer-Jones, 2002: 117)*. Metaphorical is explained in contrast with the literal *(Bailer-Jones, 2002: 117)* and through the concept of "a meaning shift for metaphors" *(Bailer-Jones, 2002: 117)*. Metaphors are acknowledged to "play a crucial role in the understanding of science" *(Humar, 2021)* because "since antiquity, metaphors have been used in technical texts to describe structures unknown or unnamed; besides establishing a terminology of science, metaphors are also important for the expression of concepts" *(Humar, 2021)*.

Since metaphors highlight some aspects of the concept which is comprehended with the help of metaphorical projection and simultaneously hide other aspects of this concept *(Lakoff, Johnson, 1980: 11)*, complex phenomena might need several metaphorical models to be properly understood. Hence the metaphorical model of ekphrasis as a fold, introduced by D. Bugno-Narecka as a development of the concept of fold in philosophy *(Bugno-Narecka, 2017; Bugno-Narecka, 2020)*, deserves a close examination.

3. Fold as a metaphorical model

The concept of fold as a means of conceptualisation and explanation of a certain aspect of the world can be found in a wide range of disciplines: "from philosophy to mathematics, biology, physics and chemistry, from the arts to art history, and so on" *(Seppi, 2016: 50)*. Fold as a metaphorical concept is rooted in the conceptualisation of material folds, the manifestations of which are numerous: "they stretch out from the folds of drapery to the folds of living tissue,

from the diptychs of antique tablets and reliefs to the explicit or implicit diptychs of painting, from book-folds to present-day folded Note-Books, from the art of folding paper to foldable architecture" *(Seppi, 2016: 50)*.

Since the conceptualisation of fold as a phenomenon in reality can be quite rich, various aspects of this conceptualisation may be selectively exploited in different conceptions. For example, G. Deleuze explicates his conception of fold, developed as a reaction to Leibniz's ideas of fold, using the image of veins of marble: "… sometimes the veins are the twisted coils of matter which surround the living beings caught in a block, so that a bank of marble is like an undulating lake full of fish. Sometimes the veins are the innate ideas in the soul, like the bent figures or the potential statues caught in a block of marble" *(Deleuze, 1991: 229)*.

3.1. Fold as a model in the works of Leibniz

When the concept of fold is used in modern philosophy *(Seppi, 2016)* and studies of ekphrasis which dwell on philosophical conceptions *(Bugno-Narecka, 2017; Bugno-Narecka, 2020)*, it is traced back to the works of G. W. Leibniz *(Seppi, 2016: 50; Bugno-Narecka, 2017: 98; Bugno-Narecka, 2020: 4)*. Leibniz's fold eliminated Cartesian dichotomy between the ideal and the material *(Bugno-Narecka, 2017: 98)*. As A. Seppi summarises, "Leibniz conceives of matter as an elastic, continuous and endlessly folded texture" *(Seppi, 2016: 66)* and of "the material world" as "a worldwide net of ever-smaller folds" *(Seppi, 2016: 66)*. D. Bugno-Narecka's account of Leibniz's ideas concede with A. Seppi's: "For Leibniz, matter is an infinite continuum of elastic texture that folds into ever smaller folds" *(Bugno-Narecka, 2017: 99)*. In more details, for Leibniz, "Folded into ever-smaller folds, matter does not ever break down into primary atomic constituents, nor is its cohesion (tension and release) ever lost" *(Seppi, 2016: 66)*, "Within these folds there is no final indivisible point and different forces are at play. Subject to these forces, matter also forms inner folds, distinct from outer ones, but belonging to the same continuum, the same unity" *(Bugno-Narecka, 2017: 99)*. A. Seppi emphasises that "Leibniz holds on to the hypothesis that matter forms an infinite continuum and consequently denies the existence of any final indivisible point, which would allow us to determine the limits of a specific body or motion" *(Seppi, 2016: 68)*. Further on, in Leibniz's conception, "the unity of matter points to the existence of another layer – the labyrinth of the soul, also subject to folding and unfolding" *(Bugno-Narecka, 2017: 99)*.

G. Deleuze, who develops the idea of fold in his own works, underscores that Leibniz, contrary to the Cartesian hypothesis does not break the world into "separable minima" *(Deleuze, 1991: 231)* but rather "sets forth in an extraordinary text: a flexible or elastic body still has coherent parts which from a fold, with the result that they do not separate into parts of parts, but rather divide infinitely into smaller folds that always retain a certain cohesion" *(Deleuze, 1991: 231)*.

Thus, Leibniz's fold as a model of the world, which encompasses both the matter and the soul, highlights the continuity and the cohesion.

3.2. Fold in Deleuze's conception

Deleuze uses the idea of fold to contemplate the nature of the Baroque: "The Baroque does not refer to an essence, but rather to an operative function, to a characteristic. It endlessly creates folds" *(Deleuze, 1991: 227)*. As Leibnitz, Deleuze operates with the concept of fold to deliberate on both the material and the spiritual: "The characteristic of the Baroque is the fold that goes on to infinity. And from the beginning it differentiates them along two lines, according to two infinities, as if the infinite had two levels: the coils of matter, and the folds in the soul" *(Deleuze, 1991: 227)*.

A. Seppi observes, that "with Leibniz and Deleuze the fold is everywhere and nowhere the same" *(Seppi, 2016: 58)*. From this observation she draws an inference that "the fold must not be perceived as universality, but rather as a universal differentiator" *(Seppi, 2016: 58)*. She further develops Deleuze's ideas of fold and indicates that "thinking in folds" "implies a philosophy of the event and a corresponding theory of differentiation and individuation" *(Seppi, 2016: 73)*.

Hence Deleuze's fold, grounded in Leibniz's fold, enables conceptualisation of the different and the individual.

3.3. Fold as a model of ekphrasis

D. Bugno-Narecka suggests that the concept of fold can be employed to "provide a new dynamic model of ekphrasis" which can capture the relationships between word and image as "complementary rather than competitive modes" *(Bugno-Narecka, 2017: 98)* since "word and image" are viewed as "folded together into a single structure" *(Bugno-Narecka, 2017: 103)*. The scholar argues that when ekphrasis is viewed as a fold that "joins word and image and at the same time marks the difference between them", the centuries old paragone between word and image "is solved" because the visual and the verbal elements "are equally important and the binary opposition is lifted/deconstructed as the verbal and the visual elements in ekphrasis constitute the ends or extremes of the fold's extension in a given direction" *(Bugno-Narecka, 2017: 105)*.

Advocating fold as a model for ekphrasis, D. Bugno-Narecka highlights that "the elements within the fold, or its sides, remain distinct but are inseparably connected as they belong to a continuum" *(Bugno-Narecka, 2020: 4)*. Thus, her model of ekphrasis as a fold presupposes that "there is no hierarchy, no domination of one element over the other" *(Bugno-Narecka, 2017: 106)*, the verbal and the visual in ekphrasis are balanced and equal *(Bugno-Narecka, 2017: 106)*. While highlighting this equality between the verbal and the visual in ekphrasis, the scholar asserts that that "ekphrasis unifies word and image but at the same time maintains the difference between them" *(Bugno-Narecka, 2017: 106)*.

3.4. Fold as a model of essayistic ekphrasis

The model of ekphrasis as a fold seems to be properly applicable to ekphrasis in English essays about the visual arts written at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century as it allows to account for the vibrant relationships between a work of art and its verbal representation that is not intended to substitute or repress the original image or to subordinate to it, but aspires to continue the process of producing meanings as a means of perpetuating culture.

For example, John Berger's essay on Piero della Francesca *(Berger, 2015: 12-16)*, the Italian painter of the 15th century who "came to be recognized in the 20th century as a major contribution to the Italian Renaissance" *(Britannica: Piero della Francesca)*, includes ekphrasis of several details of Francesca's paintings: "*Look again at Piero's faces, the ones that watch us. Nothing corresponds to their eyes. Their eyes are separate and unique. It is as thought everything around them, the landscape, their own faces, the nose between them, the hair above them, belonged to the explicable, indeed the already explained world: and as though these eyes were looking from the outside through two slits on to this world. And there is our last clue – in the unwavering, speculative eyes of Piero's watchers. What in fact he is painting is a state of mind. He paints what the world would be like if we could fully explain it, if we could be entirely at one with it. He is the supreme painter of* knowledge*. As acquired through the methods of science, or – and this makes more sense than seems likely – as acquired through happiness." (Berger, 2015: 16)*. This passage singles out the faces depicted by the artist as an

object of ekphrasis (*Look again at Piero's faces*) and then zooms in to discuss the painted eyes (*Nothing corresponds to their eyes*). With the important visual details highlighted (*everything around them, the landscape, their own faces, the nose between them, the hair above them*), the ekphrasis provides a characteristic of the painted eyes as one-of-a-kind (*Their eyes are separate and unique*) and offers an interpretation of the meaning of the depicted as a representation of the special state of mind when a person can fully cognize the world and become one with it (*What in fact he is painting is a state of mind. He paints what the world would be like if we could fully explain it, if we could be entirely at one with it*).

This ekphrasis as a verbal description of the material side of the work of art and its interpretation does not enter any competition with the original painting as it is not an attempt to render exactly what the eyes in Francesca's canvases look like (i.e., no shape, or colour, or size is ever mentioned) and thus it does not aim at substituting the painting. Neither is the ekphrasis in the essay a try to surpass the painting since it highlights the paintings merits (their uniqueness ensured by the originality of the significant details), nor is it an undertaking to subordinate to the paintings because it goes on to discuss the idea that emerged in the process of interpreting the depicted, i.e., the idea that knowledge can result from both scientific study of the world and emotional interaction with it (*He is the supreme painter of* knowledge. *As acquired through the methods of science, or – and this makes more sense than seems likely – as acquired through happiness*). In the discussed extract the concepts of knowledge (*knowledge*), science (*science*) and positive emotions (*happiness*) constitute the semantic focus of the meaning which is being generated.

Connected by the ekphrasis, the paintings and their verbal representation and interpretation do remain different, they maintain their own individualities, however they create a certain continuity of meaning generation. Essayistic ekphrasis reveals the paintings meaning and then proceeds to further develop it into a new idea that knowledge can be gained not only with the help of scientific methods but also through emotional enjoyment of the existence (*As acquired through the methods of science, or – and this makes more sense than seems likely – as acquired through happiness*).

The process of a new meaning being generated in an essay through the discussion of a work of the visual arts can be further illustrated with the following ekphrasis from Berger's essay *(Berger, 2015: 267-274)* on Vincent van Gogh, "Dutch painter, generally considered the greatest after Rembrandt van Rijn, and one of the greatest of the Post-Impressionists" *(Britannica: Vincent van Gogh)*: *"I can think of no other European painter whose work expresses such a stripped respect for everyday things without elevating them, in some way, without referring to salvation by way of an ideal which the things embody or serve. […] He became strictly existential, ideologically naked. The chair is a chair, not a throne. The boots have been worn by walking. The sunflowers are plants, not constellations. The postman delivers letters. The irises will die. And from this nakedness of his, which his contemporaries saw as naivety or madness, came his capacity to love, suddenly and at any moment, what he saw in front of him. Picking up pen or brush, he them strove to realise, to achieve that love. Lover-painter affirming the toughness of an everyday tenderness we all dream of in our better moments and instantly recognise when it is framed…" (Berger, 2015: 271)*. This extract provides a verbal representation of the peculiarities of van Gogh's depiction of real-life objects as recognisable real-life objects ("*The chair is a chair*") without any idealisation (*such a stripped respect for everyday things without elevating them, in some way, without referring to salvation by way of an ideal which the things embody or serve*), without representing these objects as imagined or symbolical ("*not a throne*"), or mythological or metaphorical ("*The sunflowers are plants, not constellations*") ones. The ekphrasis acknowledges that van Gogh's pictorial representations

of everyday objects reflect their typical use ("*The boots have been worn by walking"*) and the natural change that occurs to them ("*The irises will die"*). Further on, the ekphrasis suggests an interpretation of the artist's paintings as his expression of his love of the ordinary everyday things ("*came his capacity to love […] what he saw in front of him. Picking up pen or brush, he them strove to realise, to achieve that love"*). This explication is further elaborated into the idea that all people dream of "*toughness of an everyday tenderness*" which is a meaning generated in the essay as an attempt to understand some of the aspects of life based on the artistic achievements. Thus, the ekphrasis in the essay connects the visual (van Gogh's paintings) and the verbal (their ekphrastic representation and interpretation) into the continuity of generating meanings centred around the concepts of life (*everyday things, existential*) and love (*love*).

4. Conclusions

The metaphorical model of ekphrasis as a fold can help to grasp such a characteristic feature of ekphrasis in contemporary essays on the visual arts as being a means of generating new meanings through the verbal interpretation of the meanings inherent in the works of the visual arts which ultimately results in perpetuating culture. The model of ekphrasis as a fold is particularly helpful in capturing the continuity of meaning generation which occurs when a verbal essayistic text dwells on a work of the visual arts.

The further research can deepen the understanding of ekphrasis as a fold between the visual and the verbal and result in determining the types of ekphrastic folds.

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