Retelling the painting

The relationship between textual and visual art is a complex one, marked by both internal struggle and interdependence. As new research offers fresh insights into this fraught relationship, Professor Mats Jansson shares his project’s findings.
Between word and image

‘A picture tells a thousand words’ might well be something of a cliché, but from Homer’s *Iliad* through to Robert Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’, the lines between language and image have presented a ripe area for hermeneutic debate. New research is weighing in against the backdrop of the Swedish modernist movement.

**SINCE THEIR INCEPTION**, the visual and textual arts have shared a complicated relationship – often mutually enriching, often fraught with a fierce competitiveness. For many centuries it was thought that poetry should emulate the visual arts, as in Horace’s famous dictum, ‘ut pictura poesis’ – as in ‘painting so in poetry’. In the 18th Century, however, the German philosopher and art critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing emphasised the fundamental disconnection between the two, asserting that since painting existed solely in the spatial realm, and poetry solely in the temporal, they could not be comparable. What is certain is that the relationship between text and visual representation has provided extraordinarily rich territory for the discussion of aesthetic meaning.

The nexus of this debate has long been the concept of ‘ekphrasis’ – a term coined in antiquity and given new currency by modern literary theory as it seeks to explore complex questions of meaning-creation across art forms. ‘In the eye of the beholder. Ekphrasis as aesthetic problem and poetic practice’ is a study conducted by Professor Mats Jansson that aims to investigate ekphrasis in modern and modernist Swedish poetry and, in doing so, provide new insights into the complex interplay between visual and textual forms.

**MARKING OUT THE BOUNDARIES**

Ekphrasis is a Greek word derived from a verb meaning ‘to speak out’, often translated simply as ‘description’. In its original rhetorical context it signified a vivid description of almost anything – a person, a place, an event, and not necessarily an art object. Its main purpose was to create a desired psychological effect in the listener’s mind, making the listener into a viewer: but long before this rhetorical use, descriptions of art objects could be found in literature – Achilles’s shield in Homer’s *Iliad* being a famous early example. More recently, the meaning of the concept has narrowed to signify a description of a piece of art and, in critical theory, has become a much-debated term: does it signify a genre, or a mode of writing?

The term becomes peculiarly charged in relation to modernist literature, as modernist art frequently seeks to trouble the distinctions between its various forms, radically re-examining conventional methods of capturing reality. Ekphrasis, occupying the border-territory between visual and textual art, raises specific semiotic and hermeneutical questions about the way meaning is produced in each form. Swedish modernist poetry provides particularly fruitful territory for these questions, as Jansson keenly observes: “Swedish modernist poets are often found to be relating to pictorial art; ekphrasis becomes a prominent text-type during the modernist period”. He continues: “My study will trace the genre of ekphrasis in modern and modernist Swedish poetry and focus on the way meaning is produced in this specific text-type. The historical axis is thus combined with analyses of literary, mainly poetic, texts. These analyses intend to show that certain literary tropes are recurrent features of ekphrastic poetry over time and thus something of a generic characteristic for this text-type”.

**AN ONGOING TENSION**

These characteristic tropes play on the essential dichotomies which hold poetry and painting in their fraught symbiotic relationship. Stillness versus movement is one such example, as Jansson notes: “However challenged and however controversial, it is a basic dichotomy that all ekphrastic writing, in one way or another, brings to the fore”. If visual art exists in a static spatial realm, poetry can attempt to invest it with temporality and forward motion. The modern and modernist Swedish poetry he has so far analysed reveals a deep concern with this dichotomy.

Linked to this is the desire to draw out – or to impose – narrative plot. As Jansson puts it:
INTELLIGENCE
EKPHRASIS AS AESTHETIC PROBLEM AND POETIC PRACTICE

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this project are to uncover, describe and analyse the poetic subgenre of ekphrasis in Swedish literature from Romanticism and into the Modernist and Postmodernist era. The aim is to combine an historical axis with analyses of selected Swedish ekphrases in order to show how this particular text-type produces meaning. The project thus aims to contribute to the understanding of the fraught relationship of word and image in its various ekphrastic manifestations. In addition to this, a purpose will be to show that ekphrastic writing has, over time, become increasingly frequent and has grown in importance and complexity as a poetic genre.

FUNDING

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INTO THE POSTMODERN ERA

This question of hermeneutics is central to the study of ekphrasis: to describe is always also to interpret. Separating and analysing multiple layers of interpretation is a challenging task, as Jansson observes: “The interesting thing is that we are dealing with a hermeneutical process in several steps: first, the painter or artist interpreting the world in his/her artwork; second the poet (who is also a viewer) interpreting this interpretation in his/her poem; and third, the reader interpreting this interpretation of an interpretation”. This chain of interpretation means that ekphrastic literature, and the study of it, necessarily joins an aesthetic discussion of art, creativity and the representation of reality that extends as far back as Plato’s dialogues and will extend far into the future.

“Narrativity is another device worth studying, i.e. the desire of words to tell the story that is latent in the pregnant moment of the painting”. For example, in Göran Tunström’s poem ‘A Carnival Evening’, from his debut collection Inringning (1958), a story is developed based on the couple in Rousseau’s painting of the same name. In the written text, the title of the poem is followed by the words ‘After H Rousseau’, which signals that the poem takes the painting as its source and starting point, but perhaps more crucially means that our reading of the poem is not to be limited by the iconography of the painting. In this way an ekphrastic relation is established whereby the poem may deviate and build on the original meaning of the painting. Such a trope reveals a fascinating tension between the visual and textual form, as the ekphrastic poem is dependent on the painting yet implicitly in competition with it. The exploration of this tension is a key aspect of Jansson’s research: he observes that in various types of ekphrasis the word dominates and subsumes the painting; in others it takes on a subservient role, helping to express meaning. If, as he notes, the relationship can ultimately be seen as a ‘dialogue’ between the two forms, each questioning the other, then ekphrasis can be seen as “a sort of hermeneutics in practice”.

DIGITAL DIALOGUES

The project will contribute to a discussion that has grown in importance and complexity as a poetic genre.

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Exploring such a complex historical discussion – whilst also undertaking distinct analysis of selected poems – has meant that Jansson has had to organise a vast amount of empirical material to get to the more interesting points of intersection. In his words, it is a question of “combining a diachronic and synchronic approach. In seeking to establish the characteristic tropes of Swedish modern and modernist literature, and evaluate them within the broader context of ekphrastic aesthetic discussion, you need both an historical timeline and analytical examples to verify your hypothesis”. Jansson is now at the writing stage of the research, and hopes it will be completed by 2012–13. By contributing to our understanding of ekphrasis and its historical development, the project will contribute to a discussion that has great currency. In the digital age, new ways of reading are complicating still further the hermeneutic questions that have driven ekphrasis and its study. “The image and the text could literally be made to coexist on the digital page, and the reader’s role would therefore also be one of a direct co-creator in the aesthetic process,” Jansson observes. “Undoubtedly, digital media will enable the reader to play an interactive part in a radically new way.”