Remediation and Mediamachia in Ekphrases

Orsolya Milián

University of Szeged, Department of Visual Culture and Literary Theory, 6722-Szeged, Egyetem street 2., Hungary
milianro@yahoo.com

Remediation as conceived by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin designates a kind of intermedial relationship in which various media may refashion or appropriate, pay homage to or rival one another. Taking as example the literary form of ekphrasis, understood in its narrower sense as the literary description of a visual work of art, this article examines ekphrasis as a technique of remediation. Following Bolter and Grusin's understanding of remediation and W. J. T. Mitchell's analysis of the text-image dialectic, this article aims at outlining the traits of the paragonal struggle (that is mediamachia) between word/text and image in "The Parable of the Blind" by William Carlos Williams and "Der Blindensturz" by Gisbert Kranz. Firstly, it establishes a theoretical framework within which the differentiation of ekphrasis as a strategy of verbal hypermediacy becomes possible. Secondly, it presents a comparative analysis of the above mentioned poems, showing that while Williams's poem effaces the visual (Brueghel's The Parable of the Blind) *keeping its traits in verbal allusions only, and in a sense repressing the image in order to create its own verbal "self-portrait," Kranz's poem adds another stratum to the mediatization of Brueghel's painting through verbal description, namely the typographic image of the verbal text which exhibits the "skeleton" of the original pictorial composition as well. Thus, Kranz's poem might be considered as a form of multiplied hypermediacy. As opposed to Williams's more conventional ekphrasis, Kranz also rearranges the traditional word-image hierarchy of ekphrases (that tend to give supremacy to words) in that it vindicates a more "democratic" or balanced relation between the verbal and the visual medium.*

Keywords: intermediality / literature and visual arts / poetry / image description / ekphrasis / Williams, William Carlos / Kranz, Gisbert / Brueghel, Pieter the Elder

> "*Eyes have always stood first in the poet's equipment.*"
> (William Carlos Williams)

Ekphrasis as verbal hypermediacy

In their remarkable book entitled *Remediation. Understanding New Media* Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin raise the question: "What is a medium?"[1] Their answer is the following:

> a medium is that which remediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real. A medium in our culture can never operate in isolation, because it must enter into relationships of respect and rivalry with other media. (Bolter and Grusin 65)

This definition of medium obviously alludes to Marshall McLuhan's famously aphoristic statements "the medium is the message" and "the content of any medium is always another medium" (McLuhan 7–8) in the sense that, according to Bolter and Grusin, in media history newly emerging media always reproduce or repackage earlier or old media, their contents, techniques, practices or conventions. For example, writing remediates speech, photography remediates painting, film remediates photography, computer games remediate film, and so on. During the process of remediation, media sometimes just borrow and recycle the content of the remediated medium, while at other times they build the respective medium itself in themselves or invoke it through allusions. Thus, a medium never appears isolated, it constantly stands in relation to other media in various ways. To put it more precisely, we, the users of the medium situate the respective medium in comparison with other media and their technical conditions, perceptual, receptive and institutional traditions or everyday practices of consumption.

According to Bolter and Grusin, remediation, the blending of old and new media, is realized through two logics or strategies, namely immediacy and hypermediacy. Immediacy refers to the workings of media by which they aspire after transparency and immediateness by covering up all hints of mediation or making the medium invisible. Hypermediacy denotes precisely the opposite: It aims at drawing the viewer's or reader's attention to the medium and its opacity and height-

---

ening our awareness of the medium's presence. In Bolter and Grusin's words: "[H]ypermediacy is opacity—the fact that knowledge of the world comes to us through media. The viewer acknowledges that she is in the presence of a medium and learns through acts of mediation or indeed learns about mediation itself" (Bolter and Grusin 70–71).

These two processes of remediaton should not be considered as completely separate strategies or logics, since on the one hand according to the authors, hypermediacy can build upon immediacy (or at least upon the illusion of it), and on the other hand, it depends on us, the recipients, whether we judge something as transparent and immediate or multiply mediated. Indeed, as Bolter and Grusin argue:

> What seems immediate to one group is highly mediated to another. In our culture, children may interpret cartoons and picture books under the logic of transparent immediacy, while adults will not. Even among adults, more sophisticated groups may experience a media event as hypermediated, while a less sophisticated group still opts for immediacy. (Bolter and Grusin 71)

It is very telling that the authors etymologize remediation from the Latin "remederi" (Bolter and Grusin 59) which means "to cure" or "to heal." By playing upon this meaning, the authors designate the phenomenon when we assume that the newly emerging medium not only transforms, but also complements, even develops the earlier medium or media, that is it corrects, or "heals," its or their deficiencies (e.g. in connection with a more authentic mediation or documentation of reality). For that reason, the remediating medium always takes on a competitive, rivaling position against the remediated one. Or as Bolter and Grusin point out: "All currently active media (old and new, analog and digital) honor, acknowledge, appropriate, and implicitly or explicitly *attack* one another" (Bolter and Grusin 87, emphasis mine). Naturally, this combative or militant wording ("attack one another") is well known in the vocabularies of treatises that compare diverse art forms and media with each other—one can think of Leonardo da Vinci's *Paragone*, Lessing's *Laokoon* or Rudolf Arnheim's *A New Laokoon: Artistic Composites and the Talking Film*.

Although Bolter and Grusin touch upon the relationship between verbal and visual media only briefly, since in addition to paying homage (or inseparably linked to it) they name the "implicit or explicit *attack*" among the strategies of media reacting and relating to each other, perhaps it is not unreasonable to correlate their views with the ones formulated by W. J. T. Mitchell. In his book entitled *Picture Theory*, Mitchell argues that in the Western logocentric history of ideas

there exists a weighty tradition of conceiving images as radically different from language, kept under linguistic control or appropriated by it, which ultimately treats the power relations between the speaking subject and the mute Other, the privileged viewing subject and the disadvantageous viewed object as figures of knowledge. Mitchell essentially perceives words and images as equals that tend to occur inseparably from each other, though their simultaneous appearances obviously take shape in various cultural products. Nevertheless, Mitchell does not capture the text/image relation with the aid of the doctrine of the sister arts, but rather by means of the figuration of *the war between or among signs*, inasmuch as the relation between images and language incessantly resists neutral classification and the rivalry between them never constitutes just a contest between two signs, media or art forms, but also a struggle between body and soul or nature and culture. In other words, Mitchell detects the nexus between image and verbal text and the discourse about it as a politicized domain where ideological and power struggles take place for cultural primacy. Similarly, Bolter and Grusin also indicate that remediation and the medial rivalry interconnected with it never consists in a merely semiotic or technological skirmish, but takes on the form of social, aesthetic, even economic duels (Bolter and Grusin 19). In consequence remediation denotes a particular kind of intermedial relationship in which, through processes of medial refashioning or appropriation, "both newer and older [media] forms are involved in a struggle for culture recognition" (Bolter 14).

The primary purpose of Bolter and Grusin's book *Remediation. Understanding New Media* is to delineate the strategies of new media, and accordingly they do not endeavor to create a meticulously wrought, over-arching media historical master-narrative that would start with orality and end in new media. At the same time, in accordance with their above-quoted definition of medium they argue that remediation does not emerge together with the invention of digital or new media, and it does not operate only within the logic of new and earlier media following each other in succession, inasmuch as "older media can also remediate newer ones" (Bolter and Grusin 55). In the light of this assertion perhaps it is not surprising that—although on only one single occasion—they mention ekphrasis, "the literary description of works of visual art" (Bolter and Grusin 45) after all. They consider ekphrasis as a form of remediation, as long as it achieves "the representation of one medium in another" (ibid.), though—inasmuch as they do not focus on image/text relations—

they do not expound on whether the logic or strategy of immediacy or that of hypermediacy would be more characteristic of ekphrases. It is therefore worth asking: If we consider them within the conceptual framework of Bolter and Grusin's remediation theory, which logic is more typical of ekphrases?

One could mention a huge body of scholarly literature that either implicitly or explicitly discusses ekphrasis as if its essential purpose or aspiration were to provide an immediate access to something outside of its text.[2] (Let me remind the reader of those analyses that treat Homer's "The Shield of Achilles" as referring to an actual, existing shield; one could also mention the case of Jean Boivin, who ordered the fabrication of a shield, a forged "translation" of Book XVIII of *The Iliad*.) That is to say, there exists a theoretical tradition which treats ekphrases as though we should and must look through the ekphrastic text in order to understand the subject or the referent of the verbal discourse, as though while longing for the natural sign (or the illusion of it) we could easily and without hindrance look through words, and would desire to be able to do so with our physical eyes or our mind's eye. By definition, ekphrases involve a dialogue with their "neighbours," the artworks of the sister arts. Sometimes they explicitly and thematically portray this, for example by presenting dialogues between a painter and a poet or a private art collector and a visitor of his gallery (see for example the Prologue to Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* or Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"). At other times they vivify or give voice to visual works of arts via ventriloquism (see for example the ending verses of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"). Ekphrases always recontextualize and reframe visual representations, but they typically do not seek to visually recreate the respective artwork, they do not strive for setting up striking spectacles by the help of the typographic layout of words. The specialty—and perhaps the appeal—of ekphrases conventionally lies precisely in the fact that the described picture never is or never will be present in the literal or physical sense. As W. J. T. Mitchell puts it so neatly:

> A verbal representation cannot represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an

---

[2] For an outline of such a theoretical tradition see my doctoral dissertation in Hungarian: Milián Orsolya: *Az ekphraszisz fikciói. Elméleti, történeti és diszciplináris átrendeződések az ekphraszisz teoretikus diszkurzusaiban* [*Fictions of Ekphrasis. Theoretical, Historical and Disciplinary Realignments in Theoretical Discourses on Ekphrasis*] or Murray Krieger's seminal book entitled *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*.

object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can 'cite', but never 'sight' their objects. (Mitchell 152)

In his exceptional book chapter entitled *Ekphrasis and the Other*, Mitchell emphasizes that in the case of ekphrases, the desire or aspiration to shape language into images will sooner or later amount to a resistance to the image, which ultimately leads to the suppression and repression of the image by words (Mitchell 154–157).

Therefore the duel or the dialogue between word and image in ekphrases characteristically does not come into play through an analogical exchange or an iconic semblance, but takes place via a radical appropriation. On the one hand, during the process of interart translocation or the so-called *transposition d'art*, words eliminate the materiality of the visual medium—in Garrett Stewart's terms, they "demediate" pictures; on the other hand, words always tamper with their object of description by means of various rhetorical and narrative devices (such as focalization, narrativization, description, metaforization, allegorization, name dropping and so on). In this sense ekphrases produce, bring into being or perform, rather than map, mirror or represent something, namely they produce "images" that do not exist outside their verbal discourse, even if they describe visual artifacts that de facto exist. In other words, as Mitchell points out, "in a sense all ekphrasis is notional, and seeks to create a specific image that is to be found only in the text as its 'resident alien', and it is to be found nowhere else" (Mitchell 157). Jaś Elsner reaches a similar conclusion with regard to the representational strategies of ekphrases:

> for the speaker in ekphrasis, his speech is an attempt to service and fulfill the listeners' desire for knowing the painting. The ekphrases keep the dynamic of desire flowing and yet, simultaneously, demonstrate its failure and its lack. The more the speaker performs his speeches, the less can they be said to have succeeded in their aim. … In needing to cover that void …, the ekphrastic impulse constantly reveals it. (Elsner 175–176)

One of Mitchell's most remarkable suggestions concerning ekphrasis is that in contrast to film, illustrated books, pattern or concrete poetry, and theatrical shows, "the ekphrastic encounter in language is purely *figurative*" (Mitchell 158, emphasis mine). However, he briefly notes that in the case of pattern or concrete poetry the war between signs or the battle between media explicitly comes into sight, since here "the written signifiers … themselves take on iconic characteristics" (ibid.).

Nonetheless, Mitchell does not keep count of those intermedial configurations where the text works up and tampers with the picture not only in a linguistic-tropological, but also in a visual-typographical sense, that is to say, where the text, besides building upon the descriptive linguistic performance, at the same time significantly builds on the iconic performance of the typographic arrangement of the text as well. In these intermedial occurrences the ekphrasis seems to make up for, or fill in with visual elements, the absence or gap that exists between the "resident alien" and its linguistic home. In my view, in such cases the ruptures, tensions or conflicts residing in intermedial or mixed works of art or the duel between the text and the image come over differently than in the case of conventional ekphrases that commonly give the verbal medium a dominant role—sometimes even by definition (see for example Áron Kibédi Varga's approach[3]). In the outstanding cases of composite forms that are at the same time both descriptive and iconic, or ekphrastic and calligramatic if you like, the traditional word-image hierarchy of ekphrases (that tend to give supremacy to words) is rearranged, in the sense that these complex intermedial works of art seem to vindicate a more "democratic" or balanced relation between the verbal and the visual medium.

Based on Mitchell's and Elsner's theoretical standpoints, which entail linguistic skepticism as well, it seems clear that if we explore ekphrases in the context of Bolter and Grusin's remediation theory, ekphrases should not be associated with immediacy, rather, they should be linked to hypermediacy, that is the strategy of remediation which makes us aware of the presence and operation of the medium—in terms of ekphrases, the presence, workings and functioning of the verbal medium.

The blind leading the blind: Williams, Kranz, and Brueghel

In order to take a closer look at the paragonal struggle for domination or power, that is mediamachia between text and image, and the strategies of hypermediacy materializing in ekphrastic discourse, this section will more closely examine "The Parable of the Blind" by William Carlos Williams and "Der Blindensturz" (alternate title: "Brueghels Blinde") by Gisbert Kranz.

---

[3] "If we turn to *secondary* relations, relations where word and image appear subsequently, we do not find the same type of relations. … That part which appears later dominates the original part. … If the image precedes the word, the term used is *ekphrasis* or *Bildgedicht*" (Kibédi Varga 43, italics in the original).

Like the judgement between immediateness or multiple mediatedness, the interpretation or even the realization of remediation depends on the recipient and his or her background knowledge. For example, though it may seem self-evident that both "The Parable of the Blind" by the American modernist poet/writer William Carlos Williams and the poem entitled "Der Blindensturz" by Gisbert Kranz,[4] primarily known as a literary historian, remediate Pieter Brueghel the Elder's *The Parable of the Blind* (alternate title: *The Blind Leading the Blind*), these texts may turn up in a socio-cultural context where neither the painting, nor the artist's name is familiar.[5]

Undoubtedly, other works by the soi-disant "Peasant Brueghel" or works attributed to him—such as the *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* or *The Hunters in the Snow*—constitute tremendously popular themes in ekphrastic literature as well, and perhaps the endless polysemy of Brueghel's paintings is one of the principal reasons for the fact that dozens of literary and other media products have remediated his paintings to the present time. Choosing only from the field of literature and from texts relating to Brueghel's *The Parable of the Blind*, besides Williams's and Kranz's poems, one could also scrutinize "Die Blinden" by Josef Weinheber, "Brueghel: Die Parabel von den Blinden" by Erich Lotz, "Die Blinden" by Walter Bauer, "Les Aveugles" by Charles Baudelaire and the Hungarian modernist poet Mihály Babits's poem entitled "Vakok a hídon" ["Blinds on the Bridge"] or Gert Hoffmann's novel entitled *Der Blindensturz*.

Williams's "The Parable of the Blind" appeared for the first time in the spring issue of *The Hudson Review* in 1960, being published in revised form in his 1962 volume entitled *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems*, which opened with the title cycle of ten poems ("Pictures from Brueghel"). "The Parable of the Blind" became the ninth part of that cycle of poems. Williams's correspondence reveals that he was considering including reproductions of Brueghel's paintings in his

---

[4] The poem was published under the title "Brueghels Blinde" in Kranz's volume of poetry entitled *Niederwald und andere Gedichte* in 1984. But Kranz had already published the poem without any title in an eminent handbook entitled *Das Bildgedicht. Theorie, Lexikon, Bibliographie* edited by him (Kranz, *Das Bildgedicht* 31). Later on the poem appeared in several anthologies and periodicals. For instance, it was republished in a thematic issue on concrete poetry in the journal entitled *Deutsch Betrifft Uns* in 1986. Kranz also published the poem under the pseudonym Carlo Carduna. Siglind Bruhn published the poem in English in her monograph entitled *Musical Ekphrasis. Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting* (Bruhn 59).

[5] For instance, I typically encounter such a situation at my seminar on *Static Image Analysis* attended by first year students.

poetry volume, but ultimately abandoned this plan. However, the poem titles—such as "Children's Games", "The Hunters in the Snow", "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus", "The Parable of the Blind" and so on—obviously denominate paintings by or attributed to Brueghel, just as Kranz's poem title "Der Blindesturz" does. In addition, the title of Williams's cycle of poems and several of the poems specify the painter's name.[6] The alternate title of Gisbert Kranz's poem ("Brueghels Blinde") acts exactly in this manner, but beyond that the poem's typographic configuration also alludes to Brueghel's painting. Hence it is not particularly hard to diagnose the interart connection between the two poems and Brueghel's painting—at any rate, if we are familiar with the painter's body of work.

Both poems offer descriptions of Brueghel's *The Parable of the Blind* and both of them are ekphrases, but even a brief look reveals some striking dissimilarities, especially that the typographical or visuospatial arrangement of Kranz's poem forms a configuration, an image with potential meanings, while Williams's poem uses a more traditional page-setting. Williams demediates or dematerializes Brueghel's painting, but at the same time preserves verbal traces of the pictorial medium that was effaced and erased from the material level of poetic signification. Phrasings like "without a red" (which draws our attention to the absence of vivid colors from Brueghel's painting), the words "the canvas" and "the composition"—the latter occurring three times—or allusions to the process of viewing (such as "a peasant / cottage *is seen*," emphasis mine) and the agency or functioning of the painting (such as "the composition shows"; "no seeing man / is represented") might be considered as traces or marks of the pictorial that had been imprinted on the verbal medium. The poem begins with an appreciative but ambivalent praise ("this horrible but superb painting"), before describing and narrating the painting in a laconic manner, typical of Williams. At the same time or perhaps even more importantly, the poem also provides a narrative of the activity and process of viewing—in the words of James Heffernan "a narrative of the viewer's eye in motion" (Heffernan 168)—as if we were to follow the wandering eye of the lyrical subject, which itself seems to look for the correlations among the particular visual details. Instead of comprehensively itemizing the observed objects and the spatial, syntactic or semantic relations among them,

---

[6] See for example the following excerpts: "Brueghel the painter / concerned with it all" ("The Hunters in the Snow"); "Brueghel saw it all / and with his grim / humor faithfully / recorded / it" ("Children's Games").

Williams's *The Parable of the Blind* emphasizes the process or the event of visual perception, and because of that it seems that the most prolific interpretation of Williams's poem would consist in analyzing how the speaking subject views, rather than what he views.

It is quite striking that when the viewer (and the mediator of the painting) enumerates details of the painting, he provides minimal information about the spatial layout of the visual components. In this fashion, the diagonally downward line of human figures clinging to each other is described in detail—in proportion to Williams's laconicism—(e.g. "leading / each other diagonally downward"; "one / follows the others stick in / hand"), while no information is disclosed about the precise location of the elements of the rural scenery (such as "the peasant cottage" or the "church spire"), and these are mentioned only briefly, as if incidentally. This particular viewer of the painting seems to be mainly interested in the human figures, the blind beggars and the catastrophe, the downfall to which their marching ultimately leads, and which can only be witnessed by the painting's actual viewer, since "no seeing man / is represented" on Brueghel's painting. (As I shall point out later on, this does not necessarily mean that Williams's poem would only recognize the significance of Brueghel's painting in the representation of blind people left to themselves by the able-bodied community, and as a result classifying it as genre painting only.)

The threefold occurrence of "composition" might be interpreted as a reference to the structuredness and the visual code of the painting, but we can also correlate it—especially the lines of "there is no detail extraneous / to the composition"—with the composition of the poem itself. Accordingly, this self-reflexive remark may draw our attention to the fact that though the painting is not re*present*ed by the poem in the spatial or literal sense, but Williams's poem itself has an organized, structured and meaningful form, and as such by reason of the artistic shaping of its verbal signs is equal or at least related to the respective painting. As A. D. Baker has argued in his doctoral thesis in connection with Williams's cycle of poems *Pictures from Brueghel*: "The method of the poems is deceptively simple: they appear to be casual restatements of an original picture, but a discrete art in their organization makes them verbal artifacts in their own right" (Baker 162). We might perceive this gesture as a declarative self-description that effaces the picture from the poem's discourse by hinting at its own linguistic capacities, the power of verbal "composition" or the force of the poem's taciturn character and its success; at the minimum, it brings itself and the lin-

guistic aspect into prominence. Therefore, this motif of rivalry would prove that the poem is able to "catch up with" or be an equal to the painting and it might even exceed it in its effect on the recipient or the powerful representation of the dreadful threat of downfall.

Williams significantly rearranged the lines of "The Parable of the Blind" for the volume edition, especially with regard to the last four stanzas, so presumably he was preoccupied with the physical layout of his poem on a book page, that is to say, apparently he was interested in his text's visuality. Despite that, the final form of the poem does not display the pursuit of configuring words into an optical image; the redesigned page-setting makes no attempt to fit in the emblematic or pattern poetry traditions. The visuospatial presentation of this *vers libre* poem and the use of enjambments make the poem's sonority, its phonesthesia and aural rhythm a priority. In other words, to quote my epigraph from Williams, though the "eyes" are still indispensable pieces of the "poet's equipment"—insofar as the poems of "Pictures from Brueghel" broach the performance of the viewer's gaze all the time—apparently they are not the most important artistic "tools," at least in the sense that Williams, who was an amateur painter as well, alludes to the visual dimension only by resorting to words that can be read aloud. The lineation of "The Parable of the Blind" fundamentally serves the smooth continuity of the lyrical voice's flow (and its readibility in such a way) and does not endeavor to arrest or freeze its movement into a visual shape or spatialize it through the typographical placement of words.

At first glance it may seem that the reverse process is taking place in Kranz's poem: this text is incontrovertibly held together by a visual pattern, these lines of poetry are made to fit a visual shape as well, and their meanings can be accessed through the process of deciphering both the words and the visuospatiality of the textual fragments arranged on the white book page. (Not to mention the fact that if we do not speak German at all, we might comprehend the poem as a visual, though visually *meaningful* pattern only.) Naturally, the optical image here becomes apparent only through the (re)mediation of writing and the typographical arrangement of the text, and as a consequence we cannot state that Kranz's poem entirely frees the visual from the domineering ambitions of language. Nonetheless, while trying to construe the text/ image suture of *Der Blindensturz* we must constantly make decisions about whether we read or view the poem, since in this mixed media format (as well as calligrams or pattern poems in general) the image and the text cannot be perceived at the same time; nor can they both

be understood at the same time. Thus, one might tentatively argue that in its semiotic war between texts and images, the image-text dialectic of Kranz's poem stages an encounter of equals. Or at least it sets ups a duel between *more equal* participants, especially as compared with the bulk of the ekphrastic literary tradition, which tends to subordinate the visual to the textual/verbal.

As might be seen from the above, I would steer clear of identifying the word-and-image relation in Kranz's poem as a peaceful coexistence. Perhaps it is sufficient to refer to those fruitful tensions that arise from reading and/or looking at the block of text in the upper right corner of the poem:

l
i
n
ks
liegen
lässt die kirche[7]

One could decode this layout of words as an image of a towered church or a church with a steeple, but in no way would it be interpreted as such by all readers/viewers. Moreover, it is open to debate whether this connotation has built on the knowledge that Kranz's poem remediates Brueghel's painting or whether it has been formulated owing to the fact that the word "kirche" [*church*] features in the fragment. In the former case a recollection of an example of fine art or a visual remnant, while in the latter case a verbal element is influencing or even guiding the process of construction of meanings. If one identifies this excerpt as a visual tautology of the word "kirche" [*church*] and one's understanding is driven primarily or solely by that solitary word (or the verbal medium itself), the visual form or pattern will actually be endowed with the function of an illustration, an appendix or supplement that complements the text. In this case the image becomes subordinated to the word.

Resembling to some extent Williams's poem, Kranz's ekphrastic calligram or calligramatic ekphrasis denotes the downward direction of the blind people's route as well as their fate, the "disaster." But here the typographic arrangement of the block of text in the lower left corner of the book page itself shows a gradual, diagonal and downward movement that can be conceived as such both through the visual perception of the fragment and the Western convention of reading from left to right:

---

[7] In Siglind Bruhn's translation: "ignoring the church to the left is" (Bruhn 59).

> augenlos, der sich
>   hält am stab von
>   augenlos, der sich
>   hält am leib von
>   augenlos, der sich
>   hält am leib von
>   augenlos, der sich
>   hält am stab von
>   augenlos, der sich
>   hält am leib von
>   augenlos, der
>   stürzt
>   bo-
>   den-
>   los[8]

In addition, the vertical layout of the words ending the poem ("der stürzt bodenlos" ["who falls bottomless"]) conjures up in itself the notion of falling, while the lack of punctuation at the ending of "Der Blindensturz" indicates the continuous or infinite nature of the fall. Nevertheless, in order to interpret the downward line as the route of blind people connected to each other, one must inevitably rely on language, the repetition of the word "augenlos" ("eyeless" or "blind") and the verbal description of their march. While Williams's poem does not localize the "church" (in Williams's words "the church spire") within the literary space of the ekphrasis, not only do the two parts of Kranz's poem that are visually and typographically separated from each other mirror the arrangement of the main syntactical elements of Brueghel's painting, but the empty space between the two blocks of the text represents the spatial distance between the chief compositional constituents of the painting, and—if we take verbal meanings into account as well—the physical-spatial or religious distance between the blind people and the church.

Kranz's "Der Blindensturz" seems to give a more substantial role to the "church" than Williams's "The Parable of the Blind", and it looks as though this increased significance is primarily assignable to the visuospatial arrangement of its blocks of text and the visual shape of the excerpt incorporating the word "kirche." In order to explore this hypothesis and its consequences more thoroughly, one has to take into

---

[8] In Siglind Bruhn's translation: "eyeless, who holds on the staff of eyeless, who holds on to the body of eyeless, who holds on to the body of eyeless, who holds on the staff of eyeless, who holds on to the body of eyeless, who falls bottomless" (Bruhn 59).

account some pivotal aspects of the rich and diverse interpretive traditions of Brueghel's *The Parable of the Blind*.

Figure 1: [Pieter Brueghel the Elder: *The Parable of the Blind* (*The Blind Leading the Blind*). 1568. Museo e Gallerie Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples]

Brueghel's intentionally polysemous art probably accounts for the fact that although art historians unanimously consider *The Parable of the Blind* a pictorial masterpiece and the painting has engendered many thoughtful explanations, we do not yet have a single, consensually accepted art historical interpretation of it. In essence, interpretations of the painting vary according to the judgment whether one has to deal with a genre painting or an allegorical painting. In the former case the picture would focus closely on human figures engaged in everyday activities: "Brueghel's work depicts the tumbling down of half a dozen blind men holding to each other … [T]he crippled, blind beggars and pilgrims, who inseparably belonged to the cityscapes of the time, were primarily understood as comic figures" (Kukla, transl. mine). In Brueghel's time, blindness was also customarily associated with criminality, as it was often a penalty imposed for committing unlawful acts. Blindness was also associated with moral corruption, as it was believed to be God's punishment for sin. Since in general blind people could not find any job, they frequently had to fall back on begging.

But it is much more common to decipher Brueghel's *The Parable of the Blind* as an allegorical work founded upon certain texts of Scripture: "Leave them [the Pharisees] alone. They are blind guides! But if a blind

person leads another blind person, they will both fall into a ditch" (Matthew 15:14). For instance, Hans Sedlmayr, who devised his famous *Strukturanalyse* (structure analysis) method as applied to Brueghel's *The Parable of the Blind*, sets forth the following probable meanings:

> [T]he painting provides a grim and dreadful atmosphere because of the parabolic arc proceeding downwards and the use of some alarming colors in the lower part of the picture, while one of the horizontals in the upper part of it expresses calmness through the completely amiable quality of coloring. The original, literal meaning refers to the conception of blinds as empty-headed people prevailing in the late sixteenth century, while the allegorical meanings evoke the idea of "the blind leading the blind" that is the parable of the world turned upside down and blind people symbolizing zealous, errant souls. An additional eschatological meaning brings forth the inexorability of the fall and touches on the last things of human destiny (such as death), thus it assigns the additional meaning of fatelessness to the tranquil landscape, the location of the plot. Finally, Brueghel's painting possesses a tropological meaning, too, inasmuch as it encourages the viewers to classify their own selves as belonging among the zealous, errant souls and interpret the representation as a call for (better) self-comprehension. (Quoted in Imdahl 90, transl. mine)

Accordingly, Brueghel's representation of blindness may refer to a sin, a stroke of fate, a bigotry or an aberration from a religious system of beliefs, but it might also mean untrainedness or a lack of intellect or self-understanding.

It is worth mentioning that the village church in the background of the painting is noticeably similar to St. Anna Pede at the village of Dilbeek (Belgium), which still stands today. Brueghel's painting may had been inspired by or might illustrate the parable of Jesus, but it might also be based on a common maxim, the widely known Netherlandish saying of "the blind leading the blind," especially considering that Brueghel himself had often created drawings and paintings on the subject of proverbs, most notably in works such as *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* (1556), *Twelve Proverbs* (1558) and *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559). The last one features a small trio of blind men, a line of beggars in the background, thus it is a specific visual representation of the well-known proverb and a prefiguration of *The Parable of the Blind*. Be that as it may, this painting shows Brueghel's ability to create mesmerizing allegorical works based either on religious doctrines or popular proverbs.

Like the sightless beggars in the foreground, the church in the background also called forth various, conflicting interpretations. According to some scholars, the building does not bear any iconographic meaning

at all, being merely a typical element of Flemish countryside (Hagen and Hagen 193), while others suggest it is a religious symbol which brings to the forefront the parabolic and moralistic discourse of Brueghel's painting. As its vertical axis splits the group of people heading towards their inevitable fate into two, dividing those who are already falling from those who are just wavering as yet, it might indicate that while the first two men in the line of beggars are already beyond recovery, those at the end of the row might let go of one another and avoid falling into the swamp—thus, they still might be saved. One of Brueghel's most brilliant ideas was to cut the church spire off the upper edge of the picture with the frame. As a consequence, it is impossible to decide whether we are looking at a Catholic or a Reformed church and whether the "zealous, errant souls" of the blind people interpreted along the lines of Matthew's Gospel belong to one denomination or the other. In other words, we cannot tell from the pictorial syntax whether this painting, which was created during the period of religious wars waged in the sixteenth century,[9] signifies an anti-Catholic or an anti-sect[10] representation or whether—as Sedlmayr has argued—its meanings have to be constructed on a more universal level.

As mentioned earlier, Williams's ekphrasis seems to relegate the church to an ancillary role and place much more emphasis on the fate of the blind men, while Kranz's ekphrastic pattern poem elevates the church to a protagonist—not only verbally, but visually, too. These procedures of remediation may show that the two poems have conflicting preferences concerning the distinctly different interpretive traditions of Brueghel's work. In this respect one could state that Williams's poem is prone to comprehend Brueghel's *The Parable of the Blind* as a genre painting, while Kranz's poem tends towards grasping it as an allegorical depiction; however, their impact on the interpretive possibili-

---

[9] The painting's low-spirited tone may be related to the establishment of the Council of Troubles in 1567 by the government of the Spanish Netherlands. The Council ordered executions in order to enforce Spanish, Catholic rule and subdue Protestantism.

[10] By the time Brueghel painted *The Parable of the Blind* in 1568, many religious sects had appeared in the Low Countries, such as the Lutherans, the Zwinglians, the Frankists (followers of Sebastian Frank), the Spiritualists and the Servetiens, as well as the Anabaptists. As Margaret A. Sullivan argues along the lines of The Gospel of Matthew: "The charge of blindness could be applied to the church—the priests who kept concubines and the convents and abbeys that failed to carry out their mission of caring for lepers and the needy, as well as the multiple sects who put their own understanding of the Bible above the wisdom of the church fathers—but for Bruegel's viewers the number of blind men in the painting made the sects, each with its own dogma and interpretation of the Bible, the most obvious candidates for criticism."

ties of the misfortune or the disaster mentioned in the poems' endings seems to be worthy of closer scrutiny.

Discussing Kranz's "Der Blindensturz", Siglind Bruhn notes that "the German expression 'links liegen lassen' is particularly powerful, since it covers both the literal observation that the blind men pass the church, 'leaving it behind to their left', and the figurative meaning of 'deliberately not taking notice of it'" (Bruhn 60). While in the literal sense the words just signify walking past a building, in the metaphorical sense both translational choices mark a turning away from "the church" (that is falling away from God and one or all of the religious sects) or a practice of false religion; moreover, the latter solution ("deliberately not taking notice of it") implies that the blind men's way of acting rests on an intentional and conscious decision. If we favor metaphorical implications and take them into consideration together with the relationship of the two visuospatially separate blocks of text of the poem, the *Der Blindensturz* will establish the quality of the attitude towards "the church"—that is the turning away from it—as the chief reason and explanation for the blind people's "bottomless fall." It can be readily accepted that the interpretations of this complex state of affairs may vary vastly; however, the multiplication and dissemination of meanings depend on how one decodes "the church." For example, besides the literal and figurative meaning of "stumbling" the word "fall" may also denote that the human characters will be doomed to Hell for eternity. (And who exactly will be condemned to Hell? The Catholic errant or the Protestant?)

At first glance, Williams's poem seems to omit completely the allegorical aspects of Brueghel's painting. It is almost as though an amateur or a dilettante spectator was viewing Brueghel's *The Parable of the Blind*, reaching the conclusion that the "beggars" will "stumble finally into a bog" and that will cause their "disaster" (that is, they will lose their way in the morass and may even drown there). This ekphrasis does not attribute central importance to the "church," but even so, the weight of the word "disaster," which concludes the poem, retunes the strayed blind men's stumbling into the swamp. The ending of the poem hardly touches upon eternal punishment or everlasting damnation, but it brings an aggregate tragedy, the wanderers' stumbling to death and the risks of zealotry (e.g. following a leader blindly) to the fore all the more.

Conclusions

Both poems remediate Brueghel's *The Parable of the Blind*, but not in an innocent or transparent manner. Both can be differentiated and recognized as cases of hypermediacy, but there exists an essential difference between the two of them. While Williams's poem effaces the visual (Brueghel's painting) keeping its traits in verbal allusions only and in a sense repressing the image in order to create its own verbal "self-portrait," Kranz's poem adds another filter or stratum to the mediatization of Brueghel's painting through verbal description, namely the typographic image of the verbal text which exhibits the "skeleton" of the original pictorial composition as well. Thus, Kranz's poem might be considered as a form of multiple hypermediacy. As opposed to Williams's more conventional ekphrasis, Kranz' also rearranges the traditional word-image hierarchy of ekphrases (that tend to give supremacy to words) in that the poem vindicates a more "democratic" or balanced relation between the verbal and the visual medium. Kranz's ekphrastic and calligramatic poem is a mixed media artwork that brings into effect a more multilevelled hypermediacy through the multiplication of mediation. In this way it urges us to take a reflexive look at the mediation of pictures and texts and the relationships between them in a more forceful and vigorous manner.

WORKS CITED

Baker, A. D. "The Act of Seeing: Poem, Image and the Work of William Carlos Williams." Doctoral Thesis, 1982. Durham University. Durham E-Theses Online (etheses.dur.ac.uk). Web. 24 Oct. 2018.

Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin. *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999.

Bolter, Jay. "Transference and Transparency: Digital Technology and the Remediation of Cinema." *Intermédialités* 6 (2005): 13–26.

Bruhn, Siglind. *Musical Ekphrasis. Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting*. Hillsdale, New York: Pendragon Press, 2000.

Elsner, Jaś. "Seeing and Saying: A Psychoanalytic Account of Ekphrasis." *Helios* 31.1–2 (2004): 157–186.

Hagen, Rose-Marie, and Rainer Hagen. *What Great Paintings* Say. Vol. 2. Köln: Taschen, 2003.

Heffernan, James A. W. *Museum of Words. The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago—London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Imdahl, Max. *Giotto. Arénafreskók*. Transl. Kerekes Amália. Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 2003.

Kibédi Varga, Áron. "Critera for Describing Word-and-Image Relations." *Poetics Today* 10 (1989): 31–53.

Kranz, Gisbert, ed. *Das Bildgedicht. Theorie, Lexikon, Bibliographie*. Vol. I. Köln and Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1981.

Kranz, Gisbert. *Niederwald und andere Gedichte*. Lüdenscheid: Verlag Michael Claren, 1984.

Krieger, Murray. *Ekphrasis. The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

Kukla Krisztián: "Okuláris okulás. (Id. Pieter Bruegel *Vakok* című festményének interpretációi)." Web. 27 Oct. 2018. <http://www.c3.hu/~gond/tartalom/18-19/frakukla.html>.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media. The New Extensions of Man*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

Milián Orsolya. *Az ekphraszisz fikciói. Elméleti, történeti és diszciplináris átrendeződések az ekphraszisz teoretikus diszkurzusaiban*. Doctoral Thesis, 2010. University of Szeged, Repository of Dissertations (doktori.bibl.u-szeged.hu). Web. 22 Oct. 2018.

Mitchell, W. J. T. *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Stewart, Garrett. "Bookwork as Demediation." *Critical Inquiry* 36.2 (2010): 410–457.

Sullivan, Margaret A. "Peasant and Nestrobber: Bruegel as Witness of His Times." *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 7.2 (2015): Web. 28 Oct. 2018.

Williams, William Carlos. *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems*. New York: New Directions, 1962.

– – –. "The Parable of the Blind." Web. 20 Oct. 2018. <http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/blind.html>.

Remediacija in mediamachia v opisu podob (*ekphrass*)

Ključne besede: imtermedialnost / literatura in likovna umetnost / poezija / opis podob / ekfraza / Williams, William Carlos / Kranz, Gisbert / Bruegel, Pieter st.

Remediacija, kot jo koncipirata Jay David Bolter in Richard Grusin, označuje vrsto medmedijskega razmerja, v katerem lahko različni mediji eden drugega preoblikujejo, se medsebojno prilaščajo, vzajemno sklicujejo ali tekmujejo med seboj. Na primeru literarne forme *ekphrasis*, razumljene v ožjem smislu kot literarni opis umetniškega likovnega dela, prispevek analizira *ekphrasis* kot eno izmed tehnik remediacije. Sledeč Bolterjevemu in Grusinovemu razumevanju remediacije in analizi dialektike med besedilom in podobo J. T. Mitchell želim v tem prispevku orisati poteze boja (torej *mediamachia*) med besedo/besedilom in podobo v pesmih »The Parable of the Blind« Williama Carlosa Williamsa in »Der Blindensturz« Gisberta Kranza. Najprej vzpostavim teoret-

ski okvir, znotraj katerega diferenciacija opisa podobe kot strategija besedne hipermedijskosti sploh postane mogoča. Zatem predstavim primerjalno analizo omenjenih pesmi, ki pokaže, da medtem ko Williamsova pesem izniči vizualno (Brueghelov motiv *Slepi vodi slepe* oz. *Parabola o slepih*), katerega poteze ohranja zgolj v verbalnih namigih in na nek način zatre podobo, da bi ustvarila svoj besedni »avtoportret«, Kranzeva pesem mediatizaciji Brueghelove slike skozi verbalni opis doda še eno plast, in sicer tipografsko podobo besedila, ki razkrije »skelet« izvorne likovne kompozicije. Tako je mogoče Kranzevo pesem razumeti kot obliko multiplicirane hipermedialnosti. V nasprotju z Williamsovo bolj konvencionalno *ekhphrasis* Kranz preuredi tradicionalno hierarhijo med besedo in podobo (ki običajno daje prevlado besedi), tako da vnovič vzpostavi enakopravnejše razmerje med verbalnim in vizualnim medijem.