

## Images of Terror: How to “See” Trauma in Literary Texts?

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### Abstract:

*Terrorizing Images: Trauma and Ekphrasis in Contemporary Literature* explores how images of trauma open new ways of understanding the phenomenon of ekphrasis, the verbal representation of images in literature. Instead of rooting ekphrasis in the conventional rivalry between the visual and the verbal, the volume offers fresh points of view of the practice of incorporating images of terror in literary texts. As a result, ekphrasis is provided with new subjects and functions — thus remaining true to its ever-changing nature.

### Bilder des Terrors: Wie kann Trauma in literarischen Texten “gesehen” werden?

#### German Abstract:

*Terrorizing Images: Trauma and Ekphrasis in Contemporary Literature* untersucht, wie Bilder, die Trauma darstellen, neue Wege zum Verständnis von Ekphrasis, der verbalen Darstellung von Bildern in Literatur, eröffnen. Anstatt Ekphrasis im konventionellen Kampf zwischen dem Visuellen und dem Verbalen zu verwurzeln, bietet der Sammelband neue Aspekte für die Praxis, Bilder des Schreckens in literarische Texte einzubauen. Folglich wird Ekphrasis mit neuen Inhalten und Funktionen versehen — und bleibt so ihrem sich ständig wandelnden Wesen treu.

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The relationship between words and images has been much discussed in academia. One side of this relationship, namely, the image which is put into the word, or the phenomenon called ekphrasis, has been especially attractive to scholars in the last thirty years, causing fast development but also constant reconception of the term.

Ekphrasis was and still is an umbrella term. From a “vivid, picture-like description” to a poetic description of an artwork and eventually to “a verbal representation of a visual representation” (p. 5, 1), the term has gone through a serious redefinition process throughout the years. The only thing about ekphrasis that seems to make all scholars come to an agreement for once is that it can be variously used and variously defined. A very convenient feature that the anthology *Terrorizing Images: Trauma and Ekphrasis in Contemporary Literature* takes as a starting point to accommodate twelve essays on ekphrasis in relation to terror and trauma. With the examples of several essays from the volume, this review will demonstrate how *Terrorizing Images* manages to bring further changes to the constantly developing nature of ekphrasis through three simple but appealing ways: by redefining the term, broadening the usual set of its subjects, and discovering new functions of ekphrasis in literary texts.

In the introduction to the volume, Charles Armstrong and Unni Langås clarify that there is no single definition of ekphrasis which all essays rely on. But despite different shades attributed to ekphrasis by the contributors, on the whole, ekphrasis can be understood as a form of response. Prioritizing the interpretive nature of ekphrasis rather than simply a mimetic one, Armstrong and Langås set the tone for the whole volume: ekphrasis is not merely an image put into words. It is a response — in this case, a literary response to terror — which interprets terror when witnessing, processing, living, and/or reliving it.

It is, of course, not coincidental to pair ekphrasis with trauma. Apart from the obvious reasons of conducting research on a topic which has not received much attention so far, Armstrong and Langås mention two reasons why ekphrasis and trauma engage in a special bond. First, the ways ekphrasis and trauma function are alike: “the deferred manifestation of trauma is akin to the temporal lapse between the ekphrastic image and its verbal response” (p. 5). Secondly, they both include a very prominent visual element: ekphrasis having images as its subjects, and trauma being “associated with particularly harrowing mental images” (ibid.). As the editors note, owing to that, it becomes possible for ekphrasis to broaden its subject-related horizons. Thus, when it comes to the subject of ekphrasis in the volume, it is crucial to pay attention to the choice of words: the essays favor the *images* of trauma to the *visual representation* of trauma. Most of the contributors turn to mental images in their analyses and thereby expand the set of ekphrasis’s subject-matters which is most commonly affiliated with artworks of visual nature, such as paintings, photographs, films.

Thus, Adriana Dancus discusses the representation of delusions, visions, hallucinations, flashbacks, and other mental images as subjects of ekphrasis. Her analysis is based on Édouard Louis’s novel *History of Violence* (London 2018) which tells about the post-traumatic experience of rape. Dancus shows how productive it is for ekphrasis to respond not only to visual objects (which, nonetheless, play a certain role in Louis’s narrative) but also to mental images, because, owing precisely to the latter, the main character is able to “orchestrate a re-enactment of his own rape” (p. 114). In her essay, Dancus, on the one hand, connects ekphrasis to its roots in ancient Greek rhetoric — mimesis — when analyzing how it represents the traumatized mind itself. But on the other hand, she proves that ekphrasis goes beyond the limitations which were put on its subject by some scholars like James Heffernan who defined ekphrasis as “a verbal representation of a *visual representation*” (p. 1, emphasis added).

In the same vein, László Munteán broadens ekphrasis’s usual subject-matter by equating it with another kind of mental images of a traumatizing event. He explores Don DeLillo’s novel, *The Falling Man* (New York 2007), to show that the subject of ekphrasis is the collective memory of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. This memory is strongly influenced by Richard Drew’s famous photograph “The Falling Man” (2001), which initially appeared in *The New York Times* on the day after the attack. By triggering the memory of the photograph through passages that, one way or another, deal with falling and/or jumping bodies, DeLillo manages to ‘bring’ the memory

of the attack into view without directly describing the photograph. Munteán concludes that ekphrasis moves to a different direction from its conventional subject and, by doing so, becomes a mnemonic tool that compels readers to recall the traumatizing images of 9/11.

Finally, the volume sheds more light on various functions that ekphrasis has in contemporary literature. Unlike former views of the term, for example ancient ekphrasis, which was meant to bring the scene before one's eyes, ekphrasis of the 20th century, which functioned as a descriptive device, or Heffernan's ekphrasis, whose purpose was to tell a story implied by a visual representation, ekphrasis in *Terrorizing Images* is believed to not be restricted by one function or another.

While in DeLillo's *Falling Man* ekphrasis functions as a device to evoke the traumatizing memory of 9/11, for Christine Berberich the role of ekphrasis is to try to reshape the conception of a traumatizing event in our culture. She studies the representation of the Holocaust in contemporary culture and writes that it is viewed as "something that one does not want to hear mentioned," "deal with at close range" or "face the horrific content of" (p. 171–2). However, her case study, Jonathan Littell's novel *The Kindly Ones* (London 2009), deals with the representation of the Holocaust, portraying it in ugly, uncensored, or should one say, simply honest descriptions of acts of genocide. In Berberich's essay, ekphrasis becomes a narratological device which tries to drag the conception of the Holocaust out of its cocoon of being a merely uncomfortable topic: "by conjuring up images of Holocaust — painful, brutal, uncomfortable — it [ekphrasis] forces the reader to *look*, to address the very thing rather than just think about it as a euphemism or as an abstraction" (p. 172).

In connection to ekphrasis's functions, the volume brings another novelty to the conceptual heritage of ekphrasis: It gives the term attributive adjectives which are related not to its subject, as in *pictorial* or *cinematic* ekphrasis, but rather to its function. Thus, Øyvind Vågnes introduces *speculative* ekphrasis as a term to describe the function that ekphrasis fulfills in Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (New York 2016). According to him, ekphrasis "speculates" or, to be exact, creates "speculative imaginaries" of events in DeLillo's plot (p. 33). Another example would be Unni Langås's concept of *anticipating* ekphrasis. In her analysis of Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* (New York 1998), Langås sees the purpose of ekphrasis in generating anticipation.

Accordingly, in the novel ekphrasis creates a trail of traumatic images which one after another anticipate the culmination of terror — the final image of a life with the AIDS disease.

Overall, by broadening the scope of ekphrasis, adjusting its form, and multiplying its functions, *Terrorizing Images* serves as an even further step away from the traditional conception of ekphrastic studies — the trend that started gaining popularity in the 1990s and put James Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis to the summit of it. By using different methods of analysis and a rich variety of primary sources, the anthology's essays manage to look at ekphrasis from many possible angles while nevertheless keeping the concept of trauma not merely in sight but at the core of the concluding remarks on ekphrasis that they come to. Although agreeing to put the main value on the interpretive nature of ekphrasis rather than on its representational ability, the contributors keep 'jumping in time' from one definition of ekphrasis to another, reflecting the very nature of the term: its elasticity and infinitude.