

Valerie Robillard: Beyond Illustration: 'Visual Ekphrasis' and Intermediality

The notion of ekphrasis has increasingly captured the imaginations of scholars since the term's revival in the 20th century, and much thought has been given to establishing the definition of the term and as well as its parameters. However, most critical discourse concerning the nature of ekphrasis proceeds from the assumption that ekphrastic texts are essentially verbal. The consequence of this one-sided approach to ekphrasis is that the increasing body of innovative work in the visual arts that respond to written texts continue to be regarded as types of 'illustration' rather than the complex intermedial constructions that they are. As any comprehensive book on art history will demonstrate, visual works of art from all ages respond in highly diverse ways to verbal texts, ranging from 'faithful' depiction to highly autoreflexive responses, thereby exceeding our notions of illustration. In fact, the highly varied responses of the visual arts to verbal texts suggests that this particular word-image relationship might well fall within our current understandings (and definitions) of the operations of ekphrasis. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that ekphrasis can be seen as a balanced equation in which the verbal and the visual are understood to be equal partners within the parameters of intermedial discourse. Proceeding from an intertextual standpoint (which will be concerned with the manner in which one text is shaped by a previous one) and through the use of pragmatic categories, I will focus on the various ways in which the visual arts can refer to, or otherwise make use of, verbal pretexts. This paper will demonstrate the usefulness of dividing the term 'ekphrasis' into the subcategories 'visual ekphrasis' and 'verbal ekphrasis' and, through a brief analysis of the Scottish artist Callum Colvin's contemporary designs based on *Ossian*, will suggest the critical possibilities that this re-categorization offers to further understanding the functions of intermediality.