

Èkphrasis as a New Approach to UX UI Design

Elena Benedetto

Abstract

This paper examines how the rhetorical figure of ekphrasis –commonly understood as the descriptive representation of a work of art– can extend beyond static depictions to include dynamic scenes, thus broadening its applicability to domains such as User Interface (UI) and User Experience (UX) design. Tracing ekphrasis back to its ancient roots, we highlight the role of *enargeia* –the vivid emotional engagement that enables audiences to ‘participate’ in a scene– as a central mechanism. We then connect these insights to key findings in UI/UX research, notably those on the impact of emotional appeal on usability and user satisfaction. Drawing on works by Norman and Tidwell, among others, we suggest that ekphrastic principles –specifically, the evocation of strong, participatory emotions– can inform and enhance modern interface design. Finally, we propose future research directions to empirically validate how ekphrastic criteria might lead to more inclusive, immersive, and effective design solutions.

Parole chiave

UX UI design, ekphrasis, *enargeia*.



Introduction

Concerning *ekphrasis*, nowadays the first interpretation that comes to mind is the idea of a match between text and visuality. This is a fairly strict definition, which considers *ekphrasis* as nothing but the mere description of a work of art, usually a painting or a sculpture. By following this interpretation, the domain of *ekphrasis* is confined to art history and criticism, a well-defined area that surely does not suggest any links to a domain such as interface design.

Nevertheless, if we look up the definition proposed by the Oxford Classical Dictionary, we might be surprised. In fact, according to this source, *ekphrasis* is described as a rhetorical figure that –as we may expect– is capable of inspiring an impression of a visual stimulus or object, but also –as we may not expect– the impression of a scene [Squire 2017].

Starting from the most common interpretation of *ekphrasis*, it is certainly unusual to consider scenes as one of its possible subjects. Sure enough, to better understand this controversy, we shall first delve into the meaning of ‘description’ itself. Anthologies consider a description to be any narrative pause during which we focus on a particular object. This suspended-time feature is crucial to identifying descriptions, as it sets them apart from narrative texts, whose main feature, on the other hand, is the presence of action [Bal 2009].

We can now agree that a scene is anything but suspended or static. Scenes are usually made up of a sequence of actions, which makes it clear how strange it is to see them associated with the idea of ‘description.’ This inconsistency is highlighted by Webb when he recalls how, in ancient Greece, many ekphrastic descriptions revolved around battles. When considering these examples, they also cite the *L’Effet Du Réel*, in which Barthes seems to omit these examples of *ekphrasis*, almost replacing them with well-established works of art [Webb 1999][Barthes 1978].

All these factors suggest that, even though we keep associating *ekphrasis* with fine arts, its meaning is now distant from its origins. This little crack opens the possibility that *ekphrasis* used to have much more to offer, and linking it to other domains might not be as difficult as we imagine. In this paper, we will further investigate this possibility. First, we will more clearly define the original conception of *ekphrasis* by analyzing its historical roots and following its evolution up to our modern interpretation. Then, we will compare it to sources from the User Interface (UI) and User Experience (UX) design fields to identify any potential points of convergence and finally establish whether or not the concept of *ekphrasis* can still be relevant for creating better designs.

Back to the origins of *ekphrasis*

To properly begin our investigation of the transformations of *ekphrasis*, we shall start with one fundamental question: has *ekphrasis* always been about works of art? The short answer seems to be ‘no,’ and, surprisingly, the idea of *ekphrasis* as a description of a work of art is far more recent than we might expect. In fact, according to Webb, this interpretation only dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century [Webb 1999].

Another clue is provided by the definition in the Oxford Classical Dictionary, which cites the *Progymnasmata* defining *ekphrasis* as “descriptive speech which brings the subject shown before the eyes with visual vividness” [Squire 2007].

The element of vividness can be considered pivotal in understanding the original meaning of *ekphrasis*. An ekphrastic text does not merely present a subject; it wants the reader to participate in its narration and feel it on an emotional level [Webb 1999].

As we already noted, battles used to be common subjects, and even if we consider perhaps the most well-known example of ancient *ekphrasis*, we can see why actions cannot be separated from this genre. If we examine the Homeric shield of Achilles, we can notice that, even though they are describing an object, the effect is anything but static. On the contrary, the shield is presented to us through action, showing its creation by Hephaestus and describing its engravings as scenes in constant motion [Homer 1974].

Èkphrasis and *energeia*

We can agree that this example is very different from a sterile representation of a painting, so how did we get there? Still according to Webb, the main figure responsible is Leo Spritzer, who in 1955 defined *èkphrasis* as a poetic description of a work of art in his analysis of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* by Keats, thereby including the poem in the ekphrastic genre [Webb 1999][Spritzer 1955].

Prior to that, especially if we consider the Progymnasmata or other rhetorical sources, *èkphrasis* is undeniably linked to the notion of *energeia*. To introduce *energeia*, Zanker cites the very comprehensive definition provided by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, which depicts it as “the stylistic effect in which appeal is made to the senses of the listener and attendant circumstances are described in such a way that the listener will be turned into an eyewitness”[Zanker 1981].

We can consider *energeia* as the ‘vividness’ referred to by the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, which is, coincidentally, one of the key features of *èkphrasis*. Both Greek and Latin rhetorical sources by authors such as Theon, Quintilian, and Hermogenes solidify the link between *èkphrasis* and *energeia* as the ability to include spectators by letting them feel and participate in the subject of the ekphrastic passage. This definition emphasizes the role of emotion in the ekphrastic genre as a vehicle for conveying meaning. Emotions indeed play a pivotal role in allowing the audience to connect with what is being represented in the scene.

Emotions as a link between *èkphrasis* and UX/UI design

The importance of emotions in conveying a message is well known in communication and marketing, but it is not new to design either. Concerning UX and UI specifically, Norman explored and highlighted the relationship between emotions and usability in *The Design of Everyday Things* and examined it in more depth in *Emotional Design* [Norman 2013; 2004].

In this essay, Norman cites the experience reported by the Japanese research conducted by Kurosu and Kashimura, which was later verified by Tractinsky. In their research, the goal was to evaluate whether a more attractive design had any influence on the usability of a set of ATM interfaces.

Both studies concluded that, when dealing with the more visually appealing models, users found them easier to use, and Tractinsky’s research –conducted in Israel– suggested that this result was probably not influenced by users’ cultural background [Norman 2004].

Based on these findings, Norman observes how they are supported by data from his own study on how positive emotions can affect UX. Furthermore, he remarks that the emotional system changes how the human mind addresses issues by influencing the cognitive system [Norman 2004].

Tidwell also validates these statements in *Designing Interfaces*, providing a multitude of design approaches that rely on emotions to ‘narrate’ their interfaces [Tidwell 2011].

These considerations resonate with the broader debate involving the role of narrative elements in interaction design.

Following this thread, Andersen and Pold explore how interfaces are now acting as metainterfaces, adding cultural and affective dimensions into user interaction [Andersen 2018].

Similarly, Cooper highlights the importance of storytelling and metaphoric elements in interface design, stating that users would feel emotionally engaged whenever they perceive themselves as being a part of a meaningful experience [Noessel 2014].

These perspectives validate the suggestion that *enargeia* and *èkphrasis* may serve not just as literary tools, but as design principles to provide more immersive and emotionally rich digital environments. Figures 1 and 2 are meant to demonstrate how the application of ekphrastic principles affects the design of an interface.

The first option shows a typical non-ekphrastic interface whose goal is to give all the needed information while keeping its tone of voice cold and professional.

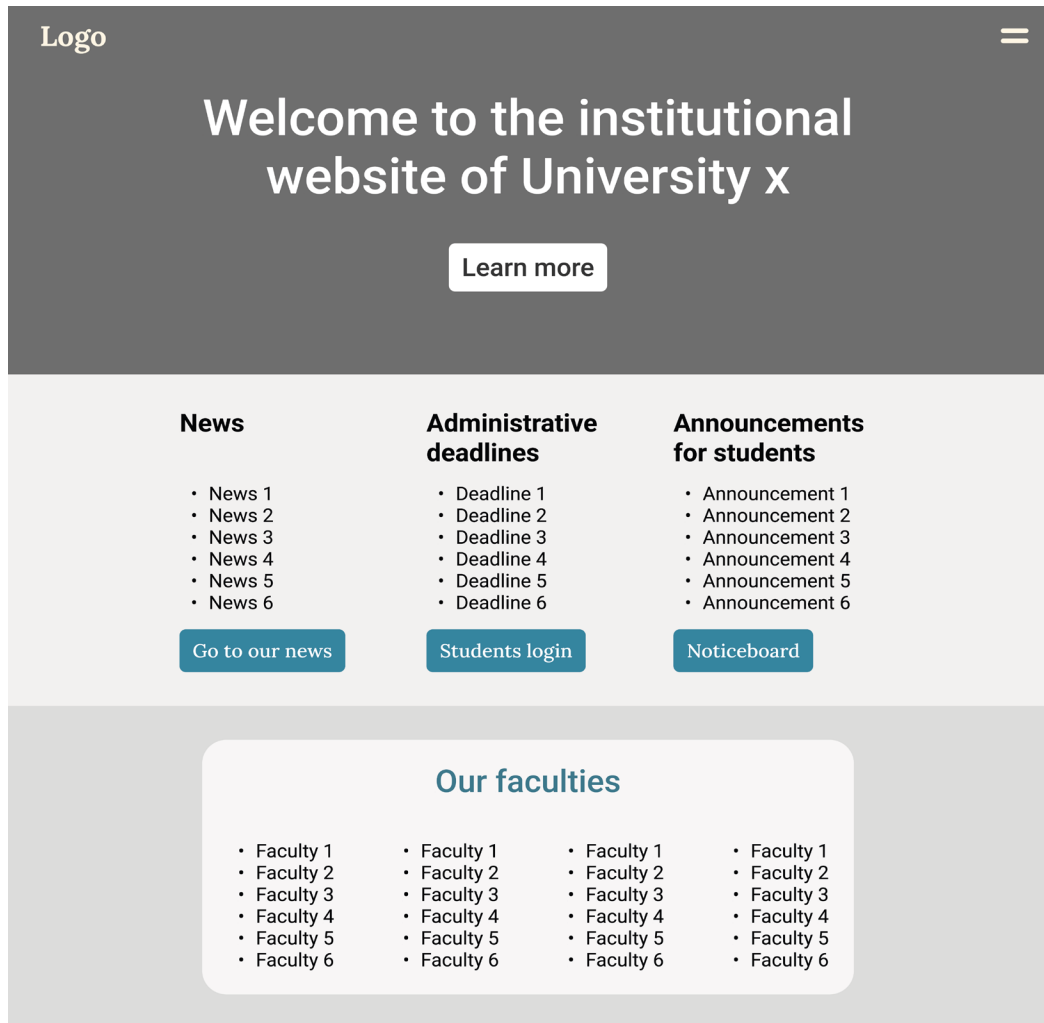


Fig. 1. Example of a prototype of a traditional user (interface made by the author).

The second one instead is aimed at connecting with the user providing a structure that includes elements which may evoke vivid mental images and emotional resonance. In this case the user journey is designed as a tell-like adventure capable of guiding users through the interface using their emotions as feelings to hook them and provide a better user experience.

Conclusion and future work

Given this context, we can now clearly see a bond connecting UX and UI design to *ekphrasis*.

Modern interfaces have to deal with many issues such as sustainability and inclusivity. Including the ekphrastic approach as part of the design process may help designers find new ways to connect with their users, considering *energeia* as an additional requirement. As *ekphrasis* relies on vividness to engage the audience and allow them to participate in the narration, a well-built interface should invite the user to feel part of it. Furthermore, emerging technologies such as generative AI may contribute to this goal by providing more inclusive and captivating experiences. Following this path, future work includes the necessity of conducting empirical studies to validate this hypothesis by evaluating the efficacy of interfaces built following ekphrastic criteria. In future developments, this



Fig. 2. Example of a prototype of an ekphrastic interface (made by the author).

theoretical framework could be empirically tested through experimental UX research. A comparative A/B test between interfaces designed with and without ekphrastic criteria may help to assess the perceptual and affective impact of enargeia, by measuring it via emotional response scales and user interviews. Such methodological integration would provide a more solid foundation to validate the rhetorical dimension of interface design and its implications for digital experience. Finally, we have demonstrated how the concept of *ekphrasis* is far from being limited to art descriptions; on the contrary, we can still draw inspiration from it to rethink our processes in order to design innovative interfaces that may become more evocative and inclusive.

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Author

Elena Benedetto, Università di Genova, elena.benedetto@edu.unige.it

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