

Representation: *Èkphrasis* within Drama

Luigi Cocchiarella

Abstract

Since the topic claims to regard *èkphrasis* as oriented to predictions, the envisioning of imaginative and utopian scenarios in relation to science, arts, and other disciplines may be considered.

In this work, we confine ourselves to architectural design, regarded in its wide extension, namely, in relation to the envisioning of future transformations inherent to interiors, buildings, settlements, landscapes, and geographical contexts, with a special focus on space.

From this perspective, in accordance with the call, on the one hand we will refer to the ancient Greek word *èidos* and to its broad meaning, today translatable with the word idea, which mainly deals with imaging and intuition; on the other hand, since ideas need to be developed, we also call into question the thought, which in our cultural tradition may be classified in two primary branches, that of logical thinking and that of visual thinking, each one able to offer specific descriptions and narratives.

These two components are normally integrated in the holistic approach characterizing the architectural design processes, appropriately supported by representation tools, forms, and strategies, whose semantic extension shows as enormously empowered in the digital era.

Indeed, the many informative components traditionally integrated in the mind of an architect, are nowadays related and interacting within informed models and even digital clones, aiming at providing scenario simulations.

Thus, since representation still deals with the body and the spirit of things in space and time, its Greek origin related to the theatrical performances can be finally evoked, where *èkphrasis* was the relevant introductory part, close to drama itself.

Keywords

Representation, *èkphrasis*, *èidos*, logical thinking, visual thinking.



The Mouth of Truth. Rome.
(Graphic elaboration by
the author).

Èkphrasis in action

According to the dictionary, the word *èkphrasis*, literally “explain, describe; describe with elegance”, is the “name that Greek rhetoricians gave to the description of an object, a person, or to the detailed exposition of an event, and more particularly, to the description of places and works of art made with virtuosity, and elaborate style, so as, to compete in expressive power with the thing itself described” [1].

In other words, *èkphrasis* stands for something else, and in this sense, it belongs to the world of representation, when dealing with descriptions, as well as when aspiring to compete with the referent, or to show semantic autonomy [Cocchiarella 2009]. This is a crucial point.

Indeed, despite this competition may produce a certain detachment from the thing described, and the risk of touching the borders of truth, it often offers in return some unexpected novelties, and unprecedented pre-figurations may emerge.

Which is the essence of architectural design at the end, when the project comes from elaborating and envisioning something new about a real context, including its tangible and intangible aspects and requirements. That is, a state change is realized, characterized by the transition from an *icastic èkphrasis*, based on the description and the analysis of a certain state of things, to a *phantastic èkphrasis*, based on imagination, and generating new visions.

As the poet Horace would say, a transition from describing to creating, literally in Latin, from *pictura* to *poiesis* [Ugo 1994].

In this way *èkphrasis*, namely *phantastic èkphrasis*, takes a crucial part in the development of a project, somehow it is the project itself.

But what does an architectural project consist of? Is it a technical or artistic outcome, or rather a scientific one? As we know, a bit of all this.

For the purpose, according to the traditional division of knowledge, we have for a long time used to distinguish logical from visual thinking, referring the first one to Maths and Science, and the second one to Visual Arts.

Not to mention Humanities. It was an artificial division, particularly perceived as such in Architecture, and in fact, about one century ago, a bond between Art and Engineering was finally signed, to provide a modern disciplinary field.



Fig. 1. *Èkphrasis* in action through AI, on envisioning a future public space (Midjourney, May 27, 2025. By author, with M. Cavaglià).

Even today, compared with the others, the academic *curricula* in Architecture probably include the highest number of different disciplines, which need to be synthesized in the project. And the new sensitivity for sustainability, together with the increase of hybrid technologies, like mechatronics and similar, including web and artificial intelligence, will require even more comprehensive approaches in the future.

Each one supported by a specific representation system.

Consequently, new representation tools and strategies are expected to be integrated into the current ones.

In some respects, we could say that more than one *èkphrasis* will be in action, interacting with each other; since the holistic cooperation between logical and visual approaches, is at the base of the design processes, starting from their germinal phases.

But some fundamentals remain stable, given that architecture will always require close connections between aesthetics of space and physics of space.

It might be said that higher scientific knowledge should be taken into account when managing the artistic side of architecture, as well as higher artistic sensitivity should be taken into account when managing the scientific side of architecture.

And most of all, the final goal will not change, that is, the focus on the quality of the architectural space as the priority target.

Even in the age of the so-called 'mediatecture' [Hemmerling, Cocchiarella 2018], integrating masses and digital devices and information in the built architecture, as well as geometrical features and parameters and properties in the design models, in the unavoidable aim of providing spaces at the service of human beings.

Then, to envision architectural space, both logical and visual strategies are to be activated, and integrated, according to an ideal taxonomy including their permutations, that is, pure logic, to be integrated with visuality, or, with visual *èkphrasis*, and pure visuality to be integrated with logic, or, with logical *èkphrasis* (fig. 1).

Straddling borders

With reference to Architecture considered as a disciplinary field, *èkphrasis* shows in different areas. On the one hand, the literary area provides documentation and critical reviews on Architecture, as well as theoretical elaborations, aiming to give a structure to the knowledge. Insights and predictions may be part of these dissertations, proposing hypotheses on how the future architectural environment around us is expected to be. These inputs do not necessarily come from architects, then suggestions and predictions may come from sociologists, politicians, technicians, industrial and financial sectors, each category using its specific lexicon, mainly based on a logical *èkphrasis*, where architectural space is at most evoked, but not shaped.

On the other hand, graphic representations provide elaborations on the existing Architecture, mostly synthesized in the form of visual predictions concerning the transformations of places, sometimes in form of feasible projects, sometimes in form of utopian pre-figurations, sometimes envisioning new architectural types and prototypes, or imagining futuristic housing models for individuals and society. These inputs normally come from architects, being strongly based on a visual *èkphrasis*, which in turn, aims to be consistent with, and sensitive to, the inputs emerging from other disciplinary fields, including the literary area.

Back to the scope of this contribution, since graphic representation is our own major, we will refer to graphic *èkphrasis*, which is based on visuality, as the main rhetorical strategy, addressed to support either knowledge (icastic), or creativity (phantastic) processes concerning Architecture. One of the most relevant points legitimating this approach, is that visuality deals with the geometric structure of the architectural spaces, which is, at the same time, the driving force aggregating the several information levels involved into the real consistency of a project.

The advancements in the field have been very rapid in the last years. In a few decades, the semantic capacity of visual tools and strategies had an extraordinary increase [Baricco 2018]. While CAD systems could manage geometry, parametric modeling included several other information levels, making them interdependent, then over time serious games gave the opportunities to simulate complex scenarios, metaspaces offered extensions to our

everyday spaces and lives, and finally AI is aiming at interacting with us as a digital co-pilot [Quintarelli 2020], even in generating design options, as well as in envisioning prototypes for novel architectural contexts. All these steps may be regarded as so many evolutionary steps of the *èkphrasis*.

This is of great interest to us, in the perspective of feeding research by design with an emphasis on graphic representation, in order to carry out research on architectural design through the proper language of Architecture, which is, in the end, Drawing, based on Geometry and Graphics, over time evolving and expanding, incorporating several information levels and functions [Hovestadt, Hirschberg, Fritz 2024] (fig.2).



Fig. 2. *Èkphrasis* on straddling borders through AI, envisioning a futuristic sustainable urban system (Midjourney, May 27, 2025. By author, with M. Cavaglià).

Education

One of the most relevant challenges connected to the trend here discussed, is that of considering how to innovate teaching in accordance to how learning works [Ambrose et al. 2010], having as an implication, the question how to redesign architectural graphics education.

Indeed, given the link between *èkphrasis* and the disciplinary field of graphic representation in Architecture, the mission of graphics education will also be about outlining, periodically and as far in advance as possible, clearly updated pictures of the disciplinary field of graphic representation itself, that is, what graphic representation will be expected to be and how it will be expected to work, together with what representation will be expected to be for in this new era. Playing a bit with words, this critical self-representation, shows as an *èkphrasis* of *èkphrasis*, or, an *èkphrasis* at a square power.

A pivotal point in education will be the speed of the biological adaptability of our learning abilities, in relation to the (higher) speed characterizing the innovation of graphic devices, and the new related approaches to the representation of architectural spaces.

Easier said than managed (fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Èkphrasis in education through AI, envisioning architectural representation in a future learning context (Midjourney, May 27, 2025. By author, with M. Cavaglià).



Compared with other fields, in fact, Drawing, be it traditional or digital, requires a broader involvement of our cognitive abilities, including logic, emotional, and psychomotor domains, as the Bloom's Taxonomy taught us [Clark, Ernst 2010], which is gaining growing interest from the neurosciences as well [Costantino 2023; Robinson, Pallasmaa 2021].

Therefore, understanding the specificities of learning styles and aptitudes at the various educational level, and in various educational contexts and environments, will really matter for establishing effective teaching strategies, sensitive to the incessant changes, and flexible enough to be appropriately adapted, in a lifelong teaching/learning perspective [Cocchiarella 2008].

In this process, redesigning the teaching will be by far the easiest part, compared to the preliminary understanding of the largely impenetrable mechanisms at work when we learn, that is, when we turn our attention to what happens within ourselves.

By the way, in a relatively recent book, the neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene proposed seven definitions of 'learning', coherent with the interpretation of the most general one, recognizing learning as leading to forming internal models of the external world [Dehaene 2021].

Not an easy process at all, as one can easily imagine.

Even with closer reference to the Architecture, if teaching and learning architectural drawing are demanding tasks that need appropriate strategies, far more demanding ones are teaching and learning architectural design, where *èkphrasis* takes off towards new horizons [Gänshirt 2021].

Therefore, in the era of information, education should also find right balances between informing and forming, supporting students in the process of becoming self-directed learners, as well as stimulating their sense of responsibility in the selection, the acquisition, and the use of knowledge and skills [Zagrebelsky 2022].

Conclusions

At least with reference to our field of studies, in accordance with the title of this contribution, we may conclude that *èkphrasis*, be it descriptive or visionary, is 'within' the Drama, or it is not.

Drama is then Architecture, considered in its wide multi-scalar extension, be it built, surveyed, designed, envisioned.

Drawing as related to *èkphrasis*, must match all these states in a consistent manner, taking advantage of the multi-powered potential provided by the synergistic contributions of visual and logical thinking, both at an individual and cooperative level, even more vitalized in the era of cross-media communications. The complexity and the multifaceted consistency of Architecture, including its social relevance, requires drawing, or representation, or *èkphrasis* at the end, to be based on the deep understanding of the contexts of life.

It is no coincidence that, from a philosophical point of view, 'understanding' was mentioned by Edgar Morin as one of the seven fundamental pillars in the education for the future [Morin 1999]. Which, considering the revolutionary changes occurred in a short period of time due to the diffusion of Information Technology, and still occurring at an increasing speed, calls into question the integrity of the identity of our disciplinary field of Drawing, not only as a rhetoric descriptor, but as an active part in the architectural drama. Without forgetting that, as symbolized in the cover image, aiming at telling the truth, *èkphrasis* may phagocytize reality.

Note

[1] <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ricerca/Ekphrasis/>.

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Author

Luigi Cocchiarella, Politecnico di Milano, luigi.cocchiarella@polimi.it

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