



Research Paper

Christa Wolf's *Kassandra*, Evelyn De Morgan's *Cassandra* and Ekphrasis

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In the spring of 1980, at the beginning of a trip to Greece, Christa Wolf read Aeschylus' play and was immediately drawn to the character of Cassandra.¹ This trip inspired her Cassandra Project. Her novel or *Erzählung Kassandra* was then published for the first time in 1983. Wolf saw the character of Cassandra as “a woman victimized and misunderstood by others, who nevertheless persists in speaking the truth as she sees it and thus maintains a sense of herself in the face of death”.² The novel is Wolf's own interpretation, a kind of "spin off" of the original Cassandra of Greek mythology, who is very conveniently labeled a "mad woman" by patriarchal forces because she has her own voice. The novel gives voice to the literary character and a new dimension of meaning to the mythology. Schelbitzki Pickle writes:

“Finally, the novel that Wolf creates around this figure is an example of the kind of literature that, written “from below”, that is, from the vantage point of those who have had no literary voice, can assist in a new understanding of Western myth, culture, and history that might change the suicidal course humankind seems bent on”.³

De Morgan painted Cassandra⁴ almost a century ago in 1898 in a similar attempt to give a voice to a figure held back by society. In an oil on canvas painting in the Pre-Raphaelite style, Cassandra is seen showing extreme emotion standing in front of a burning Troy and the wooden horse. Although Cassandra is a minor character in classical Greek mythology, De Morgan found her character to be worthy of recognition. The prophetess of doom, who was always portrayed as an evil, mad and unfortunate woman, found a new narrative from a woman's perspective. It is as if Cassandra is looking at the Trojan War from her own perspective. De Morgan was a pacifist, and many of her paintings e.g. *The Death of The Dragon* (1917-18), show her desire for peace to rule the world. She was a staunch opponent of wars and thus, the horrors and destruction that wars bring were clearly depicted in her *Cassandra*. The background of the painting shows a burning Troy and the infamous Trojan horse. However, the destruction of war is not only depicted by the burning Troy in the background but it is also reflected in Cassandra's facial expression.

Both of these works have a common foundation: women taking the narrative of an otherwise vilified woman character in their own hands. Since art is intermedial, a concept can transcend the barriers of genre and flow from one artform to another to be able to tell a story. One story can be retold in several ways in different media. An example is the story of Laokoon. The story has been told both in the visual and verbal forms. The comparison or the intersection between the two forms has been analysed by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his famous book “Laokoon”. This work is a similar attempt to find a point of intersection between two retellings of the story of Cassandra in two different media. This paper aims to analyze the intersection of art and literature, discussing the character of Cassandra in light of the novel *Kassandra* (1983) by Christa Wolf and the painting *Cassandra* (1898) by Evelyn De Morgan. The goal of the paper is to find out if the visual representation can be compared to the textual representation and to analyze the similarities and dissimilarities, if any, in the two media.

Both the literary and the visual representations of *Kassandra* are widely accepted by the readers and viewers. However, a comparative study of the two works requires the techniques of scholarly interpretations of both the works. The question of mutual permeability or interchangeability of the Aristotelian concept of “spatial” and “temporal” art have time and again been in discussion since antiquity.⁵ The discussions revolved around famous dictums and have evolved ever since. It is at this point that the topic of “intertextuality” became a part of the discussion.

The “Intertextuality” is an important term that connects two texts structurally. “Influence” and “inspiration” are two key terms that shape intertextuality. An earlier text is considered to have a privilege upon a later work, since the earlier text acts as the source of inspiration.⁶ The inspiration for both Christa Wolf's work

and De Morgan's work is the mythological character of Cassandra. Wolf draws inspiration from Aeschylus' play and her trip to Greece.⁷ De Morgan's exact source of inspiration is unknown. However, the intertextuality gave rise to interart studies and the blending of different genres were studied. It is stated that no work of art is original in nature and is somehow an inspired work. So, in order to understand poetry or painting, the work of art must be engaged in rhetorical contexts.⁸ The new notion of intertextuality therefore removes the boundaries between different genres of art. It in fact engages with the study of the relation between visual arts and social texts. Society and aesthetics, therefore, come under the same boundary and acknowledge artworks that are important for society.⁹ It is possible to interpret De Morgan's work through this modern view of interart relations.

Ekphrasis is a specific area of intertextuality. It is the intermedial perspective where one of the two mediums involved is visual and the other non visual. The aim is to see whether the language of the verbal medium can awaken the visual representation of the subject in the imagination of the readers. There are, however, a multitude of debates regarding the 'genre' of ekphrasis. It evokes a number of interlocking questions ranging from the positivistic ones to the poststructuralist definition of a pure text. The "representation of representation" is important here.¹⁰ There are many different definitions of ekphrasis and the ultimate question comes to whether any form of art or literature can be singled out as "the correct definition" of ekphrasis.¹¹ The ancient definition of ekphrasis, as found in "progymnasmatata", talks about the effect of a work on the listeners and the audience. It does not mention the genre of visual artworks. Modern thinkers assume that objects are proper domains of description. This has influenced the modern definition of ekphrasis as the description of artworks.¹² With this, a clear distinction between the ancient and the modern definitions of ekphrasis has been drawn. However, in the absence of a single definition of ekphrasis that has been agreed upon by modern thinkers, the basis of ekphrasis has been thought to be "writing about art". The details of the definitions vary for different thinkers.¹³ The removal of the definition of ekphrasis of antiquity is therefore essential for modern coinage, since the common assumption of modern definition revolves around art.

In order to understand or "read" a picture, one has to ask the question, "What is the meaning of this picture?" A visual phenomenon like art is described, historicized and appreciated with the help of words. This is how the visual translates into verbal and becomes a part of art history.¹⁴ Some art theoreticians argue that art history is, in reality, nothing other than ekphrasis, or an extended argument of ekphrasis.¹⁵ It uses rhetorical descriptions to suit the author's well intended arguments for explaining an artwork. The visual is hence translated into the verbal.

There are certain methods that help one determine the meaning of an artwork and provide an intellectual context for the art history. The starting point to "reading" an artwork is to determine the representational meaning of the work. This notion of representation of an artwork is often connected to the way one sees the world.¹⁶ The viewers determine the "representation" of art. The cultural background of the viewer plays an important role in representing a work of art. So, it is the ability of the viewers to read the art that gives the artwork its meaning and also makes the meaning an important part of art history. Jaś Elsner, however, lays more emphasis on the fact that the art history is a description of the artworks. The cultural background of the viewer plays an important role in the history of art, but the articulation of a visual form of art into the verbal form is the basic requirement for writing the history.¹⁷ Jaś Elsner also discusses the phenomena of ekphrasis here. A very formalist analysis or a hollow description or even the most complex analysis of the symbolisms expressed in the painting have been categorized as Ekphrasis by Elsner. The act of translation of the visual into the verbal stands in the center of Ekphrasis.¹⁸

The second method of reading an artwork is to be aware of the ideas or narratives that might be behind the work. These ideas often have textual sources. Evelyn De Morgan's *Cassandra* can be counted as an example of that. The painter can take the liberty to depict a textual character in their own way, since the textual descriptions are often looser than the visual representation.¹⁹ However, the paintings include certain attributes that are typical to the characters depicted. A character can be painted in a multitude of ways, but these attributes help the viewers recognize the textual context of the paintings. De Morgan's *Cassandra* includes many such attributes. The burning Troy behind her figure and the Trojan Horse tell the viewers the tale of the Tragic incidents that Cassandra had to witness. Cassandra's painful cry of helplessness and her holding of her hair hints at the madness that she has been time and again accused of. These are the attributes that help the viewers to recognize the painting as Cassandra. However, no matter how articulate the description of an artwork might be, the visual and sensual nuances are impossible to be exactly described. The descriptions can be interpretative, but they can never completely replace the object.²⁰

There are two things that can be concluded from the relationship between the text and its visual representation. Firstly, the text cannot be completely reconstructed from the paintings. The image might be very specific in nature, but it is not independent of the textual source. One has to, therefore, know the text in order to read the image.²¹ Secondly, the meaning of the image is dependent on the knowledge and understanding the

viewers have of the text. So the meaning of an artwork is the outcome of a complex relationship between the text, history and culturally conditioned viewers.²²

Different symbols hidden in an artwork can be decoded with the help of iconography and iconology, as discussed earlier. The identification of motifs in an artwork is an essential part of iconography. Christian iconography acts as symbolic codes in paintings. For example, white dove represents the Holy Spirit or a vase of lilies signifies the Virgin's purity.²³ De Morgan's *Cassandra* has certain aspects of Christian iconography which are expressed as certain symbolisms. Excessive use of roses in *Cassandra* is considered as De Morgan's symbolism. That the earthly life is short and might end any time, is one of the interpretations of the presence of roses in *Cassandra*. Another more biblical interpretation of roses is redemption and resurrection.²⁴ *Cassandra* is a reminder of the banality of earthly life and death, as well as of resurrection. In Wolf's *Kassandra*, we find a figurative death and resurrection of Cassandra. Her lust for power and jealousy marked her earthly or material life. The moments before her self realization, or the time when she was a mere prisoner at the fortress of Mycenae could be counted as her death. Only through self realization did she go through resurrection and redemption. The message in both the works are, therefore, similar in this context. The ideas transcend the visual representation of Cassandra by Evelyn De Morgan in 1898 into the verbal representation of her by Wolf in 1983.

The "reading" of an artwork is still more subjective in nature than objective. The understanding of symbolisms is highly interpretative. Art History is based on interpretative descriptions of artworks. With the advent of photography, it is assumed that art history has become more objective. The inclusions of photos with verbal descriptions of the artwork is supposed to make it less subjective. However, photography is a visual form of ekphrasis as well. With the help of certain angles and lighting, it is possible to represent an artwork in an interpretative manner.²⁵

Delving deeper into the question of ekphrasis, one can safely say that the terminology "ekphrasis" connects words and images. The genre of ekphrasis covers a wide range of interlocking questions and interests:

"from the positivist pursuit of lost monuments described in ancient and medieval ekphrasis to the poststructuralist fascination with a textual fragment which declares itself to be pure artifice, the representation of representation"²⁶

Ekphrasis is the moment when two media meet in a very wide connotation. Marshall McLuhan discusses this moment of meeting of two media in his book "Understanding Media" as:

"The hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born. For the parallel between two media holds us on the frontiers between forms that snap us out of the Narcissus-narcosis. The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses".²⁷

The ekphrasis therefore helps one to take notice of the forms separately. It gives an insight into the work. The ordinariness of the work also dissolves and instead arises a tendency to compare the work in its visual and the verbal forms. It is safe to say that two media mutually illuminate each other. If the ekphrasis of an artwork is considered as the verbal representation of the visual and not merely the description of an artwork in its broadest sense, the translation phenomena comes into play. One is constantly exposed to an oscillation between the text and the image.²⁸ A person thus reads an image as well as texts and words at the same time.

Ekphrasis has been in discussion for a long time. One of the special features of ekphrasis is that it is not unidirectional. The verbal representation of art is generally considered as ekphrasis. However, a work of literature can also produce a spatial image of the occurrences in the imagination of the readers.²⁹ Therefore, certain scenes from Wolf's *Kassandra* can evoke images in the minds of the readers. Evelyn De Morgan's *Cassandra* depicts Cassandra's helplessness as well as her madness. Her silent cry and the act of pulling her own hair express the complex emotions that Cassandra is going through. This helplessness can be observed throughout Wolf's *Erzählung*. In one of her inner monologue, she says: "Anscheinend glaubte sie, es läge in meiner Hand, vom Wahnsinn frei zu werden. Unflätig beschimpfte ich sie dafür".³⁰ This act of 'unflätig beschimpfen' exposes the madness that Cassandra has time and again been accused of. However, this anger of Cassandra is justified. She warned everyone against the outcome of the war:

"Als unsre jungen Männer, nur durch ihren Lederschild geschützt, lachend dem Feind entgegengingen, in den sicheren Tod, da habe ich sie alle, die das verantworteten, inbrünstig verflucht".³¹

The painting by Evelyn De Morgan hints at this justified anger of Cassandra as well. The burning Troy behind the figure of Cassandra along with the Trojan Horse, can be seen in the background of the painting. This is not only a moment, this tells the story of Cassandra's prophecies being ignored and her helpless anger. Wolf creates an image of the massacre caused by wars through words:

"...die Dörfer plünderte, die Männer niedermachte, die Frauen vergewaltigte, Ziegen und Schafe abstach, die Felder zertrampelte. Aineias! Ich flog vor Angst. Nach einem Monat kam er an der Spitze der Dardaner, die sich hatten retten können, in die Festung. Alles schrie und weinte, es war mein schönster Tag".³²

The verbal description of a situation is translated into visual images of war in the reader's imagination. It is, therefore, an example of ekphrasis as well.

The Trojan Horse is however the turning point of the story of the Trojan War. De Morgan painted this scene in her *Cassandra*. The helpless anger of Cassandra can be seen in her disheveled appearance. This scene in Wolf's words was described as:

“Der Zusammenbruch kam schnell. Das Ende dieses Krieges war seines Anfangs wert, schmähhlicher Betrug. Und meine Troer glaubten, was sie sahn, nicht, was sie wußten. Daß die Griechen abziehn würden! Und dieses Monstrum vor der Mauer stehenließen, das alle Priester der Athene, der das Ding geweiht sein sollte, eifertig »Pferd« zu nennen wagten. Also war das Ding ein »Pferd«. Warum so groß? Wer weiß. Ebenso groß wie die Ehrfurcht der geschlagenen Feinde vor Pallas Athene, die unsre Stadt beschützte.

Holt das Pferd herein.

Das ging zu weit, ich traute meinen Ohren nicht. Zuerst versuchte ich es sachlich: Seht ihr nicht, das Pferd ist viel zu groß für jedes unsrer Tore.

So erweitern wir die Mauer.

Jetzt rächte sich, daß sie mich kaum noch kannten. Der Schauer, der an meinem Namen hing, war schon verblaßt. Die Griechen haben ihn mir wieder angehängt. Die Troer

lachten über mein Geschrei. Die ist verrückt. Los, brecht die Mauer auf! Nun holt doch schon das Pferd! Heftiger als jeder andre Trieb war ihr Bestreben, dies Siegeszeichen bei sich aufzustellen. So wie die Leute, die in irrem Taumel den Götzen in die Stadt beförderten, sahn keine Sieger aus. Ich fürchtete das Schlimmste, nicht, weil ich den Plan der Griechen Zug um Zug durchschaute, sondern weil ich den haltlosen Übermut der Troer sah. Ich schrie, bat, beschwor und redete in Zungen. Zum Vater kam ich nicht, der sei unpäßlich”.³³

The acts of “schreien”, “beschwören” and “beten” are Cassandra's expression of helplessness. She keeps trying to make the Trojans believe in her prophecies of destruction that might come along with the horse. Her cries fell into deaf ears and the inevitable destruction followed. De Morgan's painting depicts these acts of “schrien” “beschwören” and “beten” with perfect intensity. Here lies the intersection of art and literature.

Wolf expresses that human imagination is built through images, not words. This is the use of ekphrasis in itself. One's verbal thoughts translate into images in the imagination. When talking about the importance of images in one's imagination, Cassandra says,

“Ich habe immer mehr an Bildern gehangen als an Worten, es ist wohl merkwürdig und ein Widerspruch zu meinem Beruf, aber dem kann ich nicht mehr nachgehn. Das Letzte wird ein Bild sein, kein Wort. Vor den Bildern sterben die Wörter”.³⁴

Images have access to those emotions and feelings of humans where words fail. This is true for the *Erzählung* of Wolf as well. She paints images through words that can be accessed by the readers. The images built can, however, be different for different readers. Another instance of Cassandra's mind creating images instead of verbal descriptions of feelings is when she realized that she was getting closer to death:

“Sie haben wohl recht, wenn sie sagen, je näher dem Tod, desto leuchtender und näher die Bilder der Kindheit, Jugend”.³⁵

Lastly, Wolf's work, although produced a century after De Morgan's work, is not influenced by the latter. Here, the question arises, whether it is possible to compare the two works with the help of ekphrasis under such circumstances. Lessing himself answers the said question. Even if two works are not influenced by one another, they may have the same source of inspiration. The character of *Kassandra* is found in classical Greek Mythology. It is therefore evident that Wolf and De Morgan drew inspiration from similar sources but interpreted it in their own ways.

In Conclusion, Wolf's *Erzählung* and De Morgan's painting are both famous and noteworthy in their own rights. However, this study concerns a comparative study of the both. Wolf's *Erzählung* belongs to the verbal artform whereas De Morgan's painting is the visual artform. The question arises whether two works belonging to two different mediums can be compared. The intertextual references of both the mediums have been in question since antiquity. Lessing's work “Laokoon” is a detailed discussion of the comparison of the two mediums. The 20th century thinkers use the term “ekphrasis” specifically for this comparison. However, there certainly lies the problem of such comparison. The representation of a subject through a painting can never be similar to that through a piece of literature. However, in spite of such limitations, a comparative study of the visual and the verbal is possible with ekphrasis acting as a bridge between the two forms.

Looking at Christa Wolf and Evelyn De Morgan's life and works, it is safe to say that they both adhered to the feminist ideals of their time. Christa Wolf's *Kassandra* is a departure from the poetics that has been determined by males. She instead tried to develop her own “poetics” which is based on her feminist ideals. In this *Erzählung*, Wolf chooses Cassandra's story for a deliberate representation of a mythological character who is popularly known to be a negative character. As discussed throughout this work, the character of

Cassandra has been portrayed in the classical mythology as a hysteric and mad prophetess of doom. Wolf showed the story from Cassandra's point of view. This is no more a story of a mad prophetess, rather a story of finding one's inner self and coming to self actualization right in the moment of her own death. Evelyn De Morgan also chose this minor character and made her the muse of her work. She gave Cassandra her own voice, and the respect she has been stripped of in the stories about her written by men. The aim of the two works are similar. They both wanted to rescue Cassandra's story from the clutches of patriarchal narrative. They both represented Cassandra with a humanitarian point of view and from the point of view of a woman.

Wolf interpreted Cassandra's character as someone who was initially greedy for power in nature. She has, however, changed as a person while on her journey of self actualization. As discussed earlier in this work, Wolf makes Cassandra undergo a figurative death followed by a figurative resurrection. Her lust for power and jealousy marked her earthly or material life. The moments before her self realization, or the time when she was a mere prisoner at the fortress of Mycenae could be counted as her death. Only through self realization did she go through resurrection and redemption. De Morgan also uses motifs that signify redemption and resurrection. The exaggerated use of red roses can be interpreted as a symbol of the same. This is a biblical iconography that De Morgan has used in her own style. The message of Cassandra's resurrection and redemption therefore transcends the boundaries of the visual and the verbal medium and joins the motives of the two works from two different centuries together.

Another point where both Wolf and De Morgan agreed was the question of war and peace. Christa Wolf was a staunch pacifist. She has time and again advocated against the war machinery and nuclear warfare. Her *Erzählung Kassandra* is Wolf's clear message against the horrors of war. Evelyn De Morgan felt very strongly against wars as well. She was highly spiritual and believed in the greater good of mankind. Wolf's *Erzählung Kassandra* and De Morgan's painting *Cassandra* therefore resonate the same anti war message.

There is, however, a difference in the impact of the two works due to the different mediums of the works. As discussed earlier, the text cannot be completely reconstructed from the paintings. The image might be very specific in nature, but it is not independent of the textual source. The textual source has to be known to the viewer in order to understand the background of the image. However, no such thing is required for the verbal form of art. A verbal form of art can also create an image in the readers' minds. Therefore, although the visual and verbal artforms are influential on the minds of the viewers and readers, the effect of a work differs in different mediums.

Kassandra is not a heroic tale. It is everything but a heroic tale. It is a story about the subjective experiences of war. It does not glorify war, on the contrary, it shows the doom a war brings upon the society. It is notable that Wolf chose an ultimate "loser" as the narrator of the war. She is a woman on the losing side, Troy. She is someone nobody would want to listen to. But she was the perfect narrator for telling the story of the unrepresented: the women of Troy and of societies across the world, across generations.

Cassandra is a revolutionary part of mythology, who has been paid very little respect and attention by the male writers. The feminist interpretation of the character opens a plethora of possibilities. Anna Kuhn says:

By presenting the possibility of attaining autonomy, the exemplary narrative *Cassandra* meets Wolf's Utopian definition of literature: it keeps "awake in us the memory of the future . . . It is revolutionary and realistic; it entices and encourages people to achieve the impossible" (Kuhn 191).³⁶

Footnotes:

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