

Dr. phil. Nataliya Gorbina
University of Konstanz
Department of American Studies
nataliya.gorbina@uni-konstanz.de

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Abstract

The Ekphrastic Event in a Postprint Culture: Spoken-Word Poetry and its Poetics of Vision

The first time I saw her,” begins the performance of Neil Hilborn’s poem “OCD” as the American spoken-word artist guides the audience’s eye inwards, inviting his listeners to become spectators and experience love at first sight the way he experienced it: “everything in my head went quiet” (0:05-0:12). With a calm emphasis on every word, long pauses, and non-dramatic and slow head movements and hand gestures, the poet starts painting a picture of instant attraction as a picture of the absence of obsessive images for a person with OCD.

Spoken-word poetry exists in unique formats unparalleled by the apparatus of ‘conventional’ print poetry that allow to conjure up more vivid mental images of present-day social, political, philosophical, psychological, and environmental distress in the audience’s imagination. However, despite the ever-growing academic interest in this phenomenon, the predominant assumption of its inclination towards narrativity and the creation of shared embodied experience (e.g. Ailes, Zumthor) resulted in the scholarly underappreciation of the process of co-visualization as an essential component of the spoken-word artist’s engagement with the audience.

Within the thematic scope of the conference, this paper addresses the poetics of contemporary spoken-word poetry in continuity with the tradition of ekphrasis that can be traced back to its original form of oral performance. It focuses on the auditory and physical immediacy of spoken-word poetry as characteristic of its rhetorical *energeia* (i.e. driving force, creative energy) and compares the ways in which it defines the similarities/differences between *energeia* (i.e. vivid visual experience) elicited in the recipients of poetry on the stage and as video/audio recordings. Based on a combination of structuralist and post-structuralist theories and approaches, the paper aims to outline the ways in which the poetics of spoken-word poetry as an ‘ekphrastic event’ enables the audience to feel like participants in co-imagined visual experience and the similarities/differences between live and mediatized performance in appealing to the audience’s inner eye.

Bio

Nataliya Gorbina holds a PhD in English Studies (TU Dortmund University) and is Assistant Professor at the University of Konstanz. Her research focuses on the issues of (inter-)mediality in contemporary literature, media, and culture. Having worked as a narrative designer in game development, she is currently interested in researching video games as an ecocritical medium. Her most recent publication based on her DAAD-funded PhD project *The Ekphrastic Gaze in British Postmodern Fiction* (2021) was published with WVT Trier.