

EPICUREAN PHANTASÍA IN POST-CLASSICAL AND EARLY MODERN ART: AN EXPLORATIVE APPROACH

FANTASÍA EPICÚREA EN EL ARTE POSTCLÁSICO Y PREMODERNO: UN ENFOQUE EXPLORATORIO

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers an explorative analysis of traces of Epicurean *phantasía* in post-classical and early modern art, with a particular focus on the reception of ancient *ékphrasis* and Epicurean perception theory in the Renaissance. It raises the question of whether an Epicurean *phantasía* did exist, what it was like, and how to recognize traces of it in pre-modern art theoretical literature and artistic practices.

Keywords: Phantasía, Ékphrasis, Epicureism

RESUMEN: Este artículo ofrece un análisis exploratorio de las huellas de la fantasía epicúrea en el arte postclásico y premoderno, con especial atención a la recepción de la écfrasis antigua y la teoría epicúrea de la percepción en el Renacimiento. Plantea la cuestión de si existió una PHANTASÍA epicúrea, cómo era y cómo reconocer sus

huellas en la literatura teórica del arte premoderno y en las prácticas artísticas.

Palabras clave: Fantasía, Écfrasis, Epicureísmo

INTRODUCTION

In the academic discussion about the early modern concept of *phantasía*, there is a broad consensus that the practical use of this term goes back to Aristotle.¹ However, theories of *phantasía* can also be found among the Stoics² and the Epicureans.³ But how did these theories find their way into Renaissance art? Sometimes they are mentioned in theoretical texts, as in Pomponius Gauricus' *de scultura*, but they also entered the sphere of art through the influence of ancient rhetoric. It is not by chance that Manuel Chrysoloras used the term *phantasía* not only in the sense of Aristotle but also in the sense of inventive *ékphrasis*.⁴

After a short reassessment of Epicurean *phantasía*, this essay focuses on the core feature of *ékphrasis*, *enárgeia* (ἐνάργεια, «evidence»), which as a technical term may go back to Epicurean gnoseology and is relevant to the discussion of the *mímesis-phantasía* problem.⁵ Central to this assumption is Epicurus's fourth criterion of knowledge, popularized by Diogenes Laertius,⁶

1. Cf., e.g., BARBARA NIEBELSKA-RAJCA: «The Poetics of Phantasia: Some Remarks on the Renaissance Concepts of Imagination and 'Fantastic Imitation'», in *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich*, LXI/1, 2018, pp. 37-51.

2. SIGMUND MÉNDEZ: «Classical Sources on phantasia in Pomponius Gauricus' *De Sculptura*», in *Humanitas*, 65, 2013, pp. 141-159; GÖTZ POCHAT: «Rhetorik und bildende Kunst in der Renaissance», in Heinrich F. Plett (ed.), *Renaissance-Rhetorik*, Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993, p. 268.

3. E.g., ANNE SHEPPARD: *The Poetics of Phantasia. Imagination in Ancient Aesthetics*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York, 2014; JESÚS MUÑOZ MORCILLO: «El Kanón de Epicuro en la *Epístola a Heródoto*», in *Cuadernos de Filología Clásica. Estudios griegos e indoeuropeos* 28, 2018, pp. 141-157.

4. POCHAT: *Rhetorik und bildende Kunst*, p. 228.

5. On the reception of *enárgeia* in the Renaissance, see HEINRICH F. PLETT: *Enargeia in Classical Antiquity and the Early Modern Age*, in *International Studies in the History of Rhetoric* 4, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2012; his remarks on *enárgeia* and art, however, are considered by Zanker to be too sweeping and unconvincing (GRAHAM ZANKER: «Heinrich F. Plett, *Enargeia in Classical Antiquity and the Early Modern Age: The Aesthetics of Evidence*, International Studies in the History of Rhetoric 4, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2012. Pp. xii +240. ISBN 978-90-04-22702-6», in *The Ancient History Bulletin Online Reviews* 3, 2013, pp. 7-9); on *enárgeia* and painting, see also VALESKA VON ROSEN: «Die Enargeia des Gemäldes. Zu einem vergessenen Inhalt des Ut-pictura-poesis und seiner Relevanz für das cinquecento Bildkonzept», in *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 27, 2000, pp. 171-208.

6. On disseminating manuscripts of Diogenes Laertius's *Lives and Opinions of Famous Philosophers* in the Renaissance, see the introduction to the critical edition by TIZIANO DORANDI (ed.): *Laertius Diogenes: Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Cambridge University Press, 2017. Diogenes Laertius's *Lives* were accessible to humanists thanks to Ambrosio Traversari's translation into Latin (Traversari 1433); cf. text edition by CHRISTIAN KAISER (2019).

«the inventive projection of the mind» (*phantastikè epibolè tēs dianoías*, i.e., φανταστική ἐπιβολὴ τῆς διανοίας), which explains, among other things, the *enárgeia* of natural language and abstract thought.⁷ This criterion seems to have influenced the late antique discourse on the connection between *phantasia*, painting, and *sophía*,⁸ as well as the ekphrastic practice of the Second Sophistic. The reception of such texts in the Early Modernity led to an extraordinary pictorial production, from which some motifs are examined for Epicurean traces of *phantasia*: primitive mixed creatures (Piero di Cosimo), Dürer's cloud faces,⁹ living stone pictures,¹⁰ Hans Baldung Grien's depiction of creation, and Arcimboldo's «composite heads».

ON THE ORIGINS OF THE CONCEPT OF *PHANTASÍA*

Plato already used the term *phantasia* in the sense of «appearance», as *phantasia* is related to the verb *phainesthai*, which means «it appears». The main gnoseological issue of this term seems to have already been spotted in the platonic dialogue *Theaetetus* (152c1). According to Plato, we cannot go beyond our senses to decide if something that appears to us, such as coldness or wetness, is true or not. Therefore, our own perception is also what we call *phantasia*, i.e., appearance.¹¹ Other uses of *phantasia* in Plato imply the concurrence of perception and judgment (i.e., *dóxa*), which leads to false assumptions (e.g., in *Philebus* 38c). The *technè phantastikè* explained in *Sophist* is the art of imitation following our perception so that things appear to us as we perceive them and not as they really are. Subsequent philosophers declined this kind of subjective *phantasia*, but Plato made a persistent point: *phantasia* involves human experiences and external stimuli.

Aristotle's main account of *phantasia* can be found in *On the Soul* 3.3: For him, *phantasia* seems to be a faculty located somewhere between sense perception and thinking. It is a *dýnamis* of the soul, a psychological faculty,

7. JESÚS MUÑOZ MORCILLO: *El Kanón de Epicuro*, 2018, p. 155. On the fourth Epicurean criterion of truth, see the recent article by JAN MAXIMILIAN ROBITZSCH: «ΕΠΙΒΟΛΗ ΤΗΣ ΔΙΑΝΟΙΑΣ: Reflections on the Fourth Epicurean Criterion of Truth», in *The Classical Quarterly* 71/2, 2021, pp. 601-616.

8. See Philostratus's *Life of Apollonios of Tyana* 2.22 and *Imagines* 1.1.

9. FELIX THÜRLEMANN: *Dürers doppelter Blick*, Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 2008.

10. BRONWEN WILSON: «Lithic Images, Jacopo Ligozzi, and the *Descrizione del Sacro Monte della Vernia* (1612)», in *Motion: Transformation, CIHA 2019*, Bononia University Press, 2021, pp. 345-352; CLAUDIA BLÜMLE: «Mineralischer Sturm. Steinbilder und Landschaftsmalerei», in Werner Busch, Oliver Jehle (eds.), *Vermessen: Landschaft und Ungegenständlichkeit*, Zürich, 2007, pp. 151-164; JURGI BALTRUSAITIS: *Imaginäre Realitäten. Fiktion und Illusion als produktive Kraft*, Köln, 1984.

11. Cf. SHEPPARD: *The Poetics of Phantasia*, 2014, p. 1; on Plato's concept of *phantasia* cf. also ALLAN SILVERMAN: «Plato on 'Phantasia'», in *Classical Antiquity* 10/1, 1991, pp. 123-147; cf. MIREILLE ARMISEN: «La notion d'imagination chez les Anciens: I – Les philosophes», in *Pallas* 26, 1979, pp. 11-51; «La notion d'imagination chez les Anciens: II – La rhétorique», in *Pallas* 27, 1980, pp. 3-37.

and an experience. At 429a1–2, he defines *phantasía* as «a movement taking place due to actual sense-perception». But he doesn't discuss any connections between *phantasía* and visualization, or even imagination. In other words, something is missing between this idea of *phantasía* and the notion of «putting before the eyes» (*pro ómmatōn*) from his *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* (*Rh.* 1411b 24–5), an expression that scholars often connect with the idea of Aristotelian *phantasía*.¹²

Stoics and Epicureans developed empiricist theories of knowledge that complete the picture of Hellenistic *phantasía*. Despite the fact that the sources are fragmentary, the most advanced idea of *phantasía* based on physical experience and visualization as a movement and a faculty of the soul comes from these two schools of thought.

The Stoics referred to *phantasía* in the sense of impression, distinguishing between the impression we receive when we perceive something and the figments of fanciful thoughts (*phantásmata*) that occur, e.g., in dreams. But according to Diogenes Laertius (DL 7.53), there are sensory and non-sensory impressions, i.e., those obtained by thought or affections that arise in the soul from no external stimulus (or *phantastón*, «impressor»). In this case, this experience is called *phantastikón*, i.e., imagination as empty attraction, also known as hallucination. The Stoics even knew methods to produce non-sensory impressions, such as similarity, analogy, transposition, combination, or opposition.

All Hellenistic philosophers dealt with the same issues; they tried to explain how we see images, dreams, and hallucinations and how we envisage things that we have never seen, such as hybrids or mythological beings. The most materialistic answer to this issue is the Epicurean one related to the pre-Socratic «intromission» theory of vision, which goes back to Democritus.¹³ Objects emit subtle particles that interact with our sensory organs, resulting in aesthetic experiences. However, the eye is by no means passive. Already at the moment of sensory experience, «ordering impulses of the mind» arise, identified by Epicurus as *epibolē tēs dianoías* («projection of the mind») in the *Letter to Herodotus*.¹⁴

A possible reading of this letter interprets the *epibolē* as an iterative truth criterion present in every step of cognition, i.e., from physical experience to abstract thought.¹⁵ Epicureans added a fourth criterion of knowledge to

12. RUTH WEBB: *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, Surrey, Ashgate, England, 2009, pp. 107–130.

13. Cf. KELLI RUDOLPH: «Sight and the Presocratics: Approaches to Visual Perception in Early Greek Philosophy», in Michael Squire (ed.), *Sight and the Ancient Senses. The Senses in Antiquity*, Routledge, 2015, pp. 36–53.

14. JESÚS MUÑOZ MORCILLO: *El Kanón de Epicuro*, 2018. For an extensive approach to the epicurean *phantasía* including the role of the *epibolē*, see DAVID KONSTAN: «Epicurean Phantasia», *ΠΗΓΗ/FONS* 5/1, 2020, pp. 1–18.

15. MUÑOZ MORCILLO: *El Kanón de Epicuro*, 2018.

explain creative mental processes, «the inventive projection of the mind» (*phantastikè epibolè tēs dianoías*), as passed down by Diogenes Laertius (DL 10.31). This fourth criterion is as unique to Epicurean philosophy as it is difficult to reconstruct its whole meaning. However, recent research has pointed to a logical connection with the third criterion of truth,¹⁶ the *epibolè tēs diánoias* as presented in the *Epistula ad Herodotum*.

The difference between both terms may have involved the capability of creating mental images and stimuli with the potential for physical responses and truth verification. In this sense, David Konstan explains in a recent article that the *epibolè* could have been bidirectional to explain how impressions transmitted from the senses to the mind are subject to internal influences that could lead to misconceptions. Still, at the same time, these impressions stored in the mind can flow back to the senses and be compared with fresh *phantasíai* of the same object. Based on Epicurus's *Letter to Herodotus* (esp. § 49–52) and new fragments from the *Peri Phýseos* («On Nature»), Konstan considers, therefore, that Epicurus relied on a perception theory that works with the «extramission» tradition as well, i.e., the platonic idea that vision consists of rays emitted by the eye towards the objects (*Timaeus* 45b–46a).¹⁷ In any case, this approach stresses the fact that the epicurean theory of *phantasia* was related to the origin and handling of misconceptions.

In his Latin version (1433) of Diogenes's *Lives*, Ambrosio Traversari translated the expression *phantastikè epibolè tēs dianoías* as «phantasticos intuitus mentis»,¹⁸ i.e., «imaginary views of the mind», meaning the faculty of imagining physical appearances, even those that imply the creation of imaginary hybrid beings, as the result of misconceptions, to prove them false. However, the «imaginary views of the mind» only have potential for physical responses by others insofar they can be communicated, which in the epicurean philosophy is only possible through the materialistic and progressive production of language, from object-related names to abstract conventions, and through *mímesis*, which is a natural born faculty to learn and communicate (*Ep. ad Hdt.* § 75–76). Likewise, we may add, the production of images as a language is interwoven in materialistic processes of imitation and verification to achieve reliable representations or conventions of them.

Traversari's translation of Diogenes Laertius' *Life of Epicurus* and Lucretius's *De rerum natura* were known among intellectual circles in mid-15 cen-

16. *Ibidem*.

17. KONSTAN, «Epicurean Phantasia», 2020, p. 13.

18. According to the text edition by Christian Kaiser (2019), *intuitus* is a correction of *imaginales* introduced as a scholium by Traversari. See CHRISTIAN KAISER (ed.): *Epikur im Lateinischen Mittelalter: Mit einer kritischen Edition des X. Buches der Vitae Philosophorum des Diogenes Laertios in der Lateinischen Übersetzung von Ambrogio Traversari*, Brepols, 2019, p. 357). This shows the challenge faced by Traversari for accurately translating the Greek term *epibolás*. The term *intuitus* is also used in the sense of *epibolai* in the *Letter to Herodotus* (*Epistula ad Herodotum* § 38).

tury Italy. Poggio Bracciolini's first copy of the rediscovered Lucretian poem *De rerum natura* was sent to Niccolò de' Niccoli who didn't return it for fourteen years. Later copies circulated broadly among other Humanists and eventually reached artistic circles south and north of the Alps.¹⁹ Traversari's translation of Laertius's *Lives* also circulated among intellectual circles of the Quattrocento and it is quite sure that Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) knew it.²⁰

It is also legitimate to assume that the fourth criterion of truth, «the imaginary views of the mind», as known in Antiquity (cf. DL 10.33), i.e., understood as the inventive cognitive step at the top of all materialistic perception processes – be it as genuine mind projection or as a perceptual corrective –, was most likely also known among Renaissance humanists and artists engaging with epicurean ideas, such as Piero di Cosimo, Albrecht Dürer, or Hans Baldung Grien.²¹

The field for this case of epicurean reception may even have been unexpectedly paved in scholastic circles. In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas avoided the overly materialistic notion of the epicurean *phantasia*, but he reinserted the idea of discursive perception under the concept of *visio* («gaze»),²² implying that the object and the perceiving person enter into a physical-intellectual dialogue. Perception becomes the interweaving of the mind with real things.

HOW DID PHANTASÍA THEORIES FIND THEIR WAY INTO RENAISSANCE ART?

Phantasia ideas and theories are sometimes explicitly quoted in theoretical texts, as in *De sculptura* («On Sculpture») by Pomponius Gauricus, who uses the terms *euphantasiotos* to refer to the sculptor's main faculties (vgl. Méndez 2013). He also uses the term *enárgeia*, which means «vividness» and

19. On the humanist reception of Epicurean philosophy cf. among others JONES HOWARD: *The Epicurean Tradition*, London-New York, 1989, pp. 142-165; MARC LIENHARD (ed.): *Croyants et sceptiques au XVIe siècle: le dossier des "Epicuriens": actes*. Librairie ISTRÀ, 1981. On the rediscovery of Lucretius's manuscript see also STEVEN GREENBLATT: *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, London-New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.

20. MARTIN McLAUGHLIN: «Alberti and the Classical Canon», in Carlo Caruso and Andrew Laird (eds.), *Italy and the Classical Tradition Language, Thought and Poetry 1300-1600*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 84; LUCIA BERTOLINI: *Grecus sapor: tramiti di presenze greche in Leon Battista Alberti*, Rome: Bulzoni 1998, p. 85.

21. On connections with Epicureism see JEAN WIRTH: «Hans Baldung Grien et les dissidents strasbourgeois», in Marc Lienhard (ed.), *Croyants et sceptiques au XVIe siècle: le dossier des "Epicuriens": actes*, Strasbourg: Librairie ISTRÀ, 1981, 131-138; FRANÇOIS GEORGES PARISET: «L'épicurien et l'art, le cas de Baldung Grien», in Marc Lienhard (ed.), *Croyants et sceptiques*, 1981.

22. UMBERTO ECO: *Kunst und Schönheit im Mittelalter*, München: dtv, 1993, pp. 122-127.

which, according to Graham Zanker,²³ is an Epicurean technical term denoting the idea of «evidence» that eventually became commonplace in school rhetoric, especially in connection with the production of *ekphraseis*.²⁴

Occasionally, there are implicit mentions of Epicurean ideas, such as in Alberti's *Della pittura* (*On Painting*) and *De statua* (*On Sculpture*), when he refers to ancient peoples discovering faces and landscapes depicted by Nature on stones and tree stumps (*Della pittura* 2.38) quoting an Epicurean example passed down by Lucretius in *De rerum natura* (DRN 4.129-142 and 722-749) and by Vitruvius in *De architectura* (Vitruvius, *De architectura* 2.1).

However, many ideas of *phantasia* entered the art sphere more inconspicuously – through the influence of ancient rhetoric, and especially through inter-artistic relations to ancient fables, narrations, anecdotes, and, above all, descriptions, i.e., *ekphraseis*. Alberti already recommended artists to look for inspiration in the vivid texts of the ancient authors and to make use of the practice of *inventio* to create their own works (*Della pittura* 3.53). For him, an excellent example of ancient literature's inventive potential was Lucian's *ekphrasis* of Apelles's *Calumny* (Luc. *Cal.* 2-5) that Alberti even translated with a pedagogical function, following in this the steps of former translators of the *Calumny*, such as Christophoro Landino or Guarino da Verona.

Manuel Chrysoloras, the Byzantine polymath who introduced most of Greek literature to Western Europe, used the term *phantasia* not only in Aristotle's sense of a faculty but also in the sense of the inventive *ekphrasis*,²⁵ which is capable of evoking mental images in the minds of the audience. The ekphrastic experience corresponds with the practical, materialistic tradition of rhetoric that connects with visual epistemology as understood by Epicurus.²⁶ Therefore, understanding what an *ekphrasis* was in the Renaissance is instrumental to explain the impact of Epicurean *phantasia*.

ÉKPHRASIS AS PHANTASÍA DEVICE

Ékphrasis was a rhetorical exercise, a *progýmnasma*, learned at school, and one that all rhetoricians and authors of *progymnasmata* handbooks de-

23. GRAHAM ZANKER: «Enargeia in der antiken Poesiekritik», in *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* CXXIV, 1981, pp. 297-311.

24. On uses of *enargeia* in art theoretical literature of the Renaissance, cf. VON ROSEN, *Die Enargeia des Gemäldes*, 2000, pp. 171–208; see also MUÑOZ MORCILLO, *Renaissance der Ekphrasis*, 2024: 26-27.

25. POCHAT, *Rhetorik und bildende Kunst*, p. 268.

26. ZANKER, *Enargeia in der antiken Poesiekritik*, 1981; MUÑOZ MORCILLO, *El Kanón de Epicuro*, 2018.

defined as «a guiding speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes».²⁷

The motifs of an *ékphrasis* were more than just descriptions of pictures. An *ékphrasis* was a device to describe characters, incidents, places, periods, and situations, among other things. Aelius Theon (1st century) also mentions the *ékphrasis trópōn*, that is, the description of manners of manufacturing; Aphthonius (4th century) included plants and animals; and the rhetorician Nicholas of Myra added festivities, paintings, and sculptures to this list as late as the 5th century CE.

The main characteristics were «vividness» (*enárgeia*), «clarity» (*saphéneia*), and «concision». However, the latter was only mentioned by Aelius Theon in a long expression: «not to beat around the bush with useless information».²⁸

Enárgeia (i.e., sensory evidence), however, is the most critical ingredient needed in order for an *ékphrasis* to be effective. *Enárgeia* involves the experience of sensory evidence not only as a visual experience but as an experience of all five senses, with the sense of touch (the haptic experience) being the second most relevant after the sense of sight.

Some Scholars have equated Epicurus's *phantasia* with *enárgeia*,²⁹ but there is no need for that, since otherwise all appearances would be understood as infallible mimetic images. *Enárgeia* isn't achieved as true evidence if the perceived *phantasiai* are influenced by other factors, such as variations of air density or the interference of our opinions (*dóxa*). According to Epicureans, when you see a cow in the distance, you can easily take it for a different animal because of the visual aberration that occurs as a result of the interaction between the atmosphere and the subtle flow of particles detaching from the body and flowing to meet our senses, i.e., the actual *phantasiai* (DL 10.33).

But the term *phantasia* also refers to the production of unverified images due to an innate faculty of the mind called *epibolē*. In an article dealing with the reconstruction of the Epicurean canon,³⁰ I already argued that there is one crucial concept for constructing abstract reasoning that also implies the capacity of creativity and imagination. This concept is called the *epibolē*, which can be translated as «projection». In this reconstruction of the Epicurean *Canon*, the *Letter to Herodotus*, which summarizes Epicurean physics,

27. AELIUS THEON, *Progymnasmata*, 118, 7: ἔκφρασις ἔστι λόγος περιηγηματικός ἐναργῶς ὑπ' ὅψιν ἄγων τὸν δηλούμενον (MICHEL PATILLON, GIANCARLO BOLOGNESI (eds.): *Aelius Théon. Progymnasmata*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1997, p. 66).

28. τὸ μὴ τελέως ἀπομυκύνειν περὶ τὰ ἄχρηστα, *ibidem*.

29. HANS OPPERMAN: «Epikurs Erkenntnistheorie», *Das humanistische Gymnasium*, 41, 1930, pp. 193-199; here, p. 194. On a critical lecture of Oppermann's position cf. MUÑOZ MORCILLO, *El Kanón de Epicuro*, 2018, pp. 151-152.

30. MUÑOZ MORCILLO, *El Kanón de Epicuro*, 2018.

was used as primary source: I arrived at the conclusion that the *epibolē* has a comprehensive function, i.e., it deploys its agency at all cognitive levels, from sensory perception (*aísthesis*) to the affects (*páthē*), and the use of the mind.

Despite the brevity of the *Letter to Herodotus*, it seems that the fourth criterion of truth known as *phantastikē epibolē tēs dianoías* (φανταστικὴ ἐπιβολὴ τῆς διανοίας), the «imaginative projection of the mind», is an equivalent expression for a criterion of knowledge that is already present *in nuce* in the *Letter*. If there is a specific Epicurean aesthetics related to the idea of *phantasia*, this term, i.e., the *phantastikē epibolē tēs dianoías*, is the most important concept related to it, because it explains the origin of abstract and creative thinking, and yet is still connected to the realm of the senses, since the term *phantastikē* is related to *phantasia*, i.e., sensitive appearance and imagination in one and the same word.

The focus lies, therefore, on Epicurus's fourth criterion of knowledge, as popularized by Diogenes Laertius (DL 10.31), i.e., «the inventive projection of the mind» (*phantastikē epibolē tēs dianoías*), with which the *enárgeia* of natural language and the origins of abstract thinking were explained from a materialistic point of view. Diogenes Laertius refers the *phantastikē epibolē tēs dianoías* to Epicureans in general terms but he does it while summarizing Epicurus's *Canon*, i.e., his central work on the rules of true knowledge and perception.

This fourth criterion may have influenced the late antique discourse on the connection between *phantasia*, painting, and *sophía*, and the ekphrastic immersive practices of the Second Sophistic, whose members have also been connected to epicurean thinking – e.g., Philostratus the Elder (c. 190 – c. 230 AD), as explained by Peter Grossardt (2021)³¹ or Lucian of Samosata (c. 125 – after 180), as claimed by Peter van Nuffelen (2011).³² Philostratus's claim that painting is related to truth and wisdom can't be explained in Platonic nor Aristotelian terms fully (Phil. sen., *Im.* 1 and *VA* 2.22). In this regard, Epicurean materialistic notions of *phantasia* seem to be much more convincing, as we will see in the next sections.

31. PETER GROSSARDT: «Zur Frage nach dem Umfang und der Bedeutung der Hinweise auf die Philosophie Epikurs in Flavius Philostrats Vita Apollonii und Heroikos. Eine Entgegnung auf die "Evaluation" von Gerard Boter», in *Würzburger Jahrbücher*, 2021, pp. 193-242.

32. PETER VAN NUFFELEN: «Lucian, Epicureanism and strategies of satire», in Peter van Nuffelen (ed.), *Rethinking the Gods*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 179-199. Cf. also ALLISON GRAHAM: «Epicureanism and Cynicism in Lucian», in *Pseudo-Dionysius*, XVIII, March, 2016, pp. 41-48.

PHANTASÍA AS MIND PAINTING OF CENTAURS IN PHILOSTRATUS THE ELDER

In *Im.* 2.3, Philostratus starts his description of the Centaurides with the sentence:

You used to think that the race of centaurs sprang from trees and rocks or, by Zeus, just from mares – the mares which, men say, the son of Ixion covered, the man by whom the centaurs though single creatures came to have their double nature.³³

Furthermore, in *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, we read the following on clouds with different shapes:

The things which are seen in heaven, whenever the clouds are torn away from one another, I mean the centaurs and stag-antelopes, yes, and the wolves too, and the horses, what have you got to say about them? Are we not to regard them as works of imitation? [...] these figures flit through the heaven not only without meaning but, so far as providence is concerned, by mere chance; while we who by nature are prone to imitation rearrange and create them in these regular figures.³⁴

Here, Philostratus claims that nothing randomly created by nature is to be seen as a work of imitation. Only human beings can connect the dots of random appearances to create different shapes. This is obviously not a metaphysical but a materialistic claim that involves a mental activity, such as the *epibolē*. Images on marble, stumps, or clouds, as well as distorted or anamorphic images or even «composite heads», are suspected of having something to do with Epicurean notions of *phantasía*, but influential scholars who have dealt with similar pictorial experiences, such as *pareidolia*³⁵ or *anamorphosis*,³⁶ above all Baltrusaitis,³⁷ did not necessarily link them with such traditions.

Baltrusaitis dated the first use of the term *anamorfosis* in the seventeenth century (i.e., first used by Gaspar Schott in *Magia universalis*, 1657–1669)

33. *Imagines* 2.3 (Female Centaurs), translation by ARTHUR FAIRBANKS, *Philostratus the Elder, Imagines. Philostratus the Younger, Imagines. Callistratus, Descriptions*, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931.

34. *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 2.22, translation by F.C. CONYBEARE, Philostratus. *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, Vol. 1, London: William Heinemann / New York: The McMillan Co., 1912, p. 174–175.

35. Perception of a visual stimulus as an object, figure or pattern that actually doesn't exist.

36. Usually, an oblique (1) or mirrored projection (2) that requires a specific vantage point (1) or a specific optical device (2) to see the depicted object.

37. E.g., BALTRUSAITIS, *Imaginäre Realitäten*, 1984; cf. also BLÜMLE, *Mineralischer Sturm* 2007, pp. 151–164.

but other authors, such as Castillo³⁸ and Maravall³⁹ see its origin in the art theory and practice of the Renaissance, the latter even linking it with platonic ideas of perception although without specific references.

LITHIC IMAGES FROM PAULUS SILENTIARIUS TO LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI

In his *ékphrasis* of the *Hagia Sophia* from the sixth century, Paulus Silentiarius describes ornamental patterns resembling different figures, including, faces, landscapes in marble panels, and even stars produced by the glossy crystals present in the porphyry columns. Flood summarizes this as follows: «the veins of its book-matched marble veneers are said to describe figures resembling drawings or paintings, their veins divided into units of four or eight to form an ornamental pattern (*kosmos*)».⁴⁰

It is worth it to draw the reader's attention to the Greek word *kósmos*, which can be understood as «cosmic order» in a religious context and suits Silentiarius's poetic order too. This can be interpreted as an anagogical projection similar to the one we'll find much later in Suger of Saint Denis's *Liber de rebus in administratione sua gestis*.⁴¹ However, But Silentiarius invokes not only the Christian divinity but also the geniuses of Antiquity, and above all Homer, to fulfill his ekphrastic mission. He seems to have been aware of Philostratus's *reductio ad absurdum* that arises when considering the creation of figures in clouds by the actual hand of the gods instead of as the result of making likeness with the mind (Phil. sen., *Im.* 1.1; see also Phil. sen. *Vita Apollonii* 2.22):

For one who wishes a clever theory, the invention of painting belongs to the gods – witness on earth all the designs with which the Seasons paint the meadows, and the manifestations we see in the heavens – but for one who is merely seeking the origin of art, imitation is an invention most ancient and most akin to nature; and wise men invented it, calling it now painting, now plastic art.⁴²

38. DAVID CASTILLO: *(A)wry Views: Anamorphosis, Cervantes and the Early Picaresque*, Purdue University Press, 2001, pp. 10-11.

39. JOSÉ ANTONIO MARAVALL: *La cultura del Barroco. Análisis de una estructura histórica*. Barcelona: Ariel, 1980, p. 450.

40. FINBARR BARRY FLOOD, «'God's Wonder': Marble as Medium and the Natural Image in Mosques and Modernism», in *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 23/2, 2016, pp. 162-341.

41. ANDREAS SPEER, GÜNTHER BINDING (eds.), *Abt Suger von Saint-Denis ausgewählte Schriften: Ordinatio, De consecratione, De administratione*, Darmstadt: WBG, 2008.

42. Translation by ARTHUR FAIRBANKS, *Elder Philostratus*, 1931, p. 3.

In the actual church, the zoomorphic or anthropomorphic qualities of the existing marble patterns were even amplified by properly placed drill holes. We find similar descriptions and cases across the Mediterranean region.⁴³ Following epicurean gnoseology, human perception and creativity as a natural impulse of the mind (a *phantastikè epibolè*) are involved in reading these patterns.

The aesthetic use of natural images in marble was a *locus communis* in the Middle Ages, especially concerning the inner decoration of churches and mosques.⁴⁴ Still, when the image-creating process is detached from its materialistic origins, such appearances become mystic projections. However, Albertus Magnus described an episode of an image appearing on marble plates in the *Book of Minerals*, linking this phenomenon with the Philostratean and Lucretian tradition of cloud images.

It happened that when one [piece of] marble had been cut in two and the cut slabs were placed side by side, there appeared a most beautiful picture of a king's head with a crown and a long beard. [...] I said that the stone had been hardened from a vapour, and in the middle the vapour had risen up too far because the heat was greater there. [...] There is something of the same sort in clouds when they are not disturbed by winds, and all sorts of figures appear in them and continually melt away because of the heat that raises them.⁴⁵

In the mid-fifteenth century, there was already a tradition involving faces, landscapes, and other figures made by Nature, to which human perception and its interpretative capabilities also belong. The phenomenon of lithic images has been studied above all by Baltrusaitis (e.g., 1984). However, it is still an ongoing topic in recent research conducted by Claudia Blümle⁴⁶ or Brown Wilson,⁴⁷ the latter with a focus on Ligozzi's engravings for the book *Descrizione del sacro monte della vernia* (1612) as late as at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

In religious contexts, the connection of the above-mentioned cases of *pareidolia* to the Epicurean idea of *phantasia* is most likely replaced by metaphysical interpretations, but when we look at humanists and painters such as Alberti, Botticelli, or Piero di Cosimo, the connection with Epicurean philosophy becomes more evident. Alberti speaks of faces created by Nature in his book *On Sculpture*:

43. Cf. FLOOD, *God's Wonder*, 2016.

44. Cf. FLOOD, *God's Wonder*, 2016, pp. 172-209.

45. Translation by Dorothy Wyckoff; here after FLOOD, *God's Wonder*, 2016.

46. BLÜMLE, *Mineralischer Sturm*, 2007, pp. 151-164.

47. WILSON, *Lithic Images*, 2021, pp. 345-52.

I think that the arts of those who wish to express and portray in their work a likeness, and the resemblances of subjects created by Nature, originated from this: that they by chance happened to see in some tree stumps, or in clay, or in various other materials, some features which could, with a little work, be transformed into something similar to faces made by Nature.⁴⁸

Alberti explicitly mentions the involvement of perception and human creativity in the transformation of what I would call *formes trouvées* («found forms») into specific figures. It is possible to explain it in Aristotelian terms, i.e., in the sense of *natura potentior ars*, but it is also possible to interpret Alberti in Epicurean terms, i.e., as the result of the inventive *epibolē*. Indeed, Alberti made a materialistic point with his personal emblem of a winged eye⁴⁹ sprouting nerve fibers as if it touches everything it sees, and as if it sees everything it touches. This emblem embodied the idea of sight as the king of the senses and the ultimate gate to knowledge through sensory-based evidence. Furthermore, with this visual metaphor, Alberti placed the visual arts at the top of knowledge production alongside the sciences.⁵⁰

A more specific connection with the Epicurean idea of *phantasia* can be found in *On painting*. Here, Alberti states:

Nature herself seems to delight in painting, for in the cut faces of marble she often paints centaurs and faces of bearded and curly haired kings. It is said, moreover, that in a gem from Phyrrius all nine Muses, each with her symbol, are to be found clearly painted by Nature.⁵¹

Here, it is significant not only the role of human perception to complete what Nature has created, but also the details Alberti mentions, such as curly haired kings, the attributes of the nine Muses or the shape of centaurs. This note on complex figurations including hybrid beings (centaurs) is a possible conceptual precursor to Arcimboldo's allegorical «teste composte» («composite heads»).

48. LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI: *On Sculpture*, translation by Jason Arkles, Lulu Press, 2013.

49. Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, Ms. Magliabechiano II.IV 38, fol. 119v

http://epa.oszk.hu/02500/02582/00005/pdf/EPA02582_nuova_corvina_1999_05_075-087.pdf

50. On Alberti's emblem of a winged eye from an art theoretical perspective see, e.g., ULRICH PFISTERER: «Soweit die Flügel meines Auges tragen: Leon Battista Albertis Imprese und Selbstbildnis», *Mitteilungen des kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 42, 1998, pp. 203–251; MARKUS RATH: «Albertis Tastaue. Neue Betrachtung eines Emblems visueller Theorie», in *kunsttexte.de*, 1, 2009, pp. 1–7; HORST BREDEKAMP: *Der Bildakt*, Berlin: Wagenbach, 2015, pp. 321–324; MUÑOZ MORCILLO: *Renaissance der Ekphrasis*, 2024, pp. 114–116.

51. LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI: *On Painting*, translated by John Richard Spencer, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966, p. 67.

PIERO DI COSIMO'S PAINTINGS *THE FOREST FIRE* (C. 1505),
A HUNTING SCENE (1485-1500), AND *THE RETURN FROM*
THE HUNT (1494)

The theory that centaurs didn't exist, but that their pictures were «painted by Nature» (in the sense of perception processes), comes from Lucretius's *De rerum natura* (DRN 4.732–748). Otherwise, Lucretius denies that such hybrids actually existed in the early days of humankind. Centaurs are the result of a perceptive and cognitive process involving the use of a materialistic type of *phantasia*:

For soothly from no living Centaur is
 That phantom gendered, since no breed of beast
 Like him was ever; but, when images
 Of horse and man by chance have come together,
 They easily cohere, as aforesaid,
 At once, through subtle nature and fabric thin.⁵²

Knowing this, the contradictory use of hybrid beings in Piero di Cosimo's paintings⁵³ on the origin of humankind can be read in different ways.⁵⁴ Indeed, di Cosimo's paintings are suitable for putting the scenes represented into the epicurean philosophical context, with significant links to perception theory and the criteria of truth, enhancing the sources, among others, to the fourth book of Lucretius's *De rerum natura* and Epicurus's *Letter to Herodotus*.

According to Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), the paintings were produced for the wool merchant and Medici enemy Francesco del Pugliese (1458–1519) who probably used them as decorative *spalliera* (decorated backboard mounted on a wall) for one room in his Florentine palace. It is not known for sure if Francesco del Pugliese was a *studioso* of epicurean philosophy, as other contemporary humanists were, such as the members of the humanist circle around Bartolomeo Scala (1430–1497, Chancellor of Florence from 1465 to 1497). According to Alison Brown, Scala was a keen student of Lucretius's

52. Translation by WILLIAM ELLERY LEONARD, *Lucretius. De Rerum Natura*, E. P. Dutton, 1916.

53. On Piero di Cosimo's paintings, see ELENA CAPRETTI, ANNA FORLANI TEMPESTI, SERENA PADOVANI, DANIELA PARENTI (eds.): *Piero di Cosimo, 1462–1522: pittore eccentrico fra Rinascimento e Maniera*. Exh. cat., Galleria degli Uffizi. Florence, 2015.

54. According to Erwin Panofsky, Piero di Cosimo's series of paintings on the origins of humankind was primarily inspired by the fifth book of Lucretius's *De rerum natura* and Vitruvius's similar account in *De architectura libri decem* (2.1). Giovanni Bocaccio reproduced the last one in the *Geneologia deorum* (Book 12), popularizing the topic at the beginning of the Renaissance, even before Lucretius's manuscript was rediscovered; see ERWIN PANOFSKY: «The Early History of Man in a Cycle of Paintings by Piero di Cosimo», in *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 1, July 1937, pp. 24–30. For a history of the editions of DRN in the Renaissance, see ADA PALMER, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance*, Cambridge, Mass., 2014, pp. 243–247.

didactic poem, as was Michele Marullo (1453–1500) and Scala's successor, Marcello Adriani (1464–1521).⁵⁵ If del Pugliese also studied the Lucretian poem, this would have happened before he became a convinced supporter of the Dominican fundamentalist Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498).

In any case, the paintings that di Cosimo carried out for del Pugliese seem to serve an epicurean-coded visual language that legitimates asking whether the enigmatic hybrid figures represented in them were conceived following Epicurus's and Lucretius's teachings. If so, then they can only exist under the following circumstances:

- a) As erroneous perceptions due to atmospheric conditions or false opinion (*dóxa*),
- b) As re-combinations of images created in dreams or by some internal interference,
- c) As random images seen on marbles, stumps, or clouds that people, with the help of the *phantastikè epibolè tēs dianoías*, transform into figures.

An illustrative example of a possible *phantasia* misconception is the enigmatic representation of a hog and a deer with human faces in *The Forest Fire* (c. 1505). This phenomenon can be seen either as the result of a perception contaminated by *dóxa* – since it is tempting to see satyr heads in them – or as a playful allusion to the well-known verse where Horace identifies himself with an *Epicuri de grege porcum* («a hog from Epicurus's herd», cf. Horace, *Ep.* 1.4, 16), i.e., as a literary reference motivated by previous knowledge. Also, Lucretius mentions that humankind «lived wandering around like wild animals» (*DRN* 5.932: *volgivago vitam tractabant more ferarum*).

However, the infra-red reflectograms of the deer and the hog with human faces, published by the Ashmolean Museum,⁵⁶ proved that the supposed satyr heads were added later, once the painting was done. Even the ears, which seem to be part of the satyr face, were actually just part of the underlying hog. This is an important piece of information that leads to question the human faculty of *phantasia* in terms of interpreting art: art historians were actually seeing something that wasn't there. Could this painting be a *phantasia*-experiment conceived by Piero di Cosimo to activate the Epicurean

55. On epicurean circles in Renaissance Florence, see ALISON BROWN, «Lucretius and the Epicureans in the Social and Political Context of Renaissance Florence», *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 9, 2001, pp. 11-62. On the tradition of Lucretius in Renaissance Italy regarding manuscripts and identified readers, see MICHAEL D. REEVE: «The Italian Tradition of Lucretius revisited», *Aevum* 79/1, 2005, pp. 115-164. See also MICHAEL D. REEVE, «The Italian Tradition of Lucretius», *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, 23, 1980, pp. 27-46.

56. CATHERINE WHISTLER, DAVID BOMFORD: «The Forest Fire by Piero di Cosimo», Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1999, p. 9.

sensory agency inherent in the picture? In any case, the superimposed faces led to the false assumption that di Cosimo depicted hybrid beings from the beginning.

Also, in the painting *A Hunting Scene* (1485-1500), a foreshortened horse is being tamed or hunted by a naked man and, at the same time, observed by one of the hybrids on the left side of the image. The perspective of this scene leads to what is happening in the background, where two centaurs are hauling their prey. Can this scene be read in terms of Epicurean *phantasia*?

The unusually foreshortened composition of man and horse becomes central since it avoids any canonical representation of a horse or a man, idealized or naturalistic. It doesn't even resemble a wild horse, such as the kind depicted by Hans Baldung Grien three decades later. Instead, the struggling man-animal composition resembles a hybrid, boosted considerably by perspective and the distance vantage point of the beholder. Indeed, according to Lucretius (*DRN* 4.732–748), when images of humans and horses meet in the atmosphere, they may stick together finely woven, producing the vision of a centaur. This poses the question of whether Piero di Cosimo is applying the perceptual theory of *phantasia* (in terms of a perception affected by external factors) to demonstrate how the belief in hybrids such as centaurs could have started in the first place.

On the right side of the image, the man holding a bear is also looking in this direction. He carries an animal skin with two holes on his back, probably emulating a mask to create a deceptive image or *eídōlon*, perhaps to disguise himself as an animal to feint his potential prey.

In *The Return from the Hunt* (1494), the marble or wood patterns on the right side of the canvas evoke once again Lucretius's account of the origin of centaur images (*DRN* 4.732–748) along with the tradition of lithic images discussed above. Furthermore, two women sitting on a boat made of reeds are looking at a mask, one probably made of animal skin. This image is most likely a metaphor for the theory of *simulacra*, which Lucretius expounds with a very similar metaphor: *simulacra* (gr. *eídōla*) are the thin atomic skins detached from their original bodies, flowing outward and interacting with the senses to convey a likeness of the object from which they proceed. (Lucretius, *DRN* 4.110-217).

In this sense, *simulacra* operate at the first level of sensory perception (*aísthesis*) and should, therefore, be considered part of the cognitive processes related to the construction of epicurean *phantasia*. The latter sums up sensorial appearance and 'intuitive' imagination (i.e., 'projective' as related to *epibolē*) in the same word. Di Cosimo may have produced a pictorial ground for discussions on the role of perception and mental projection in creating «fantastic» images, as it also suits the illusion of ancient wildness in the minds of early modern humanists.

ALBRECHT DÜRER'S ENGRAVING *NEMESIS*

Images created by chance on clouds, tree stumps, and marble stones are not created by the gods, according to the Epicurean tradition as formulated by Philostratus the Elder at the beginning of *Imagines*: It's us that do rearrange those random patterns to create familiar forms based on *prolēpseis*, i.e., evidence-based concepts. This is basically what happens in Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Nemesis*.

Felix Thürlemann⁵⁷ pointed to a forgotten primary Greek source behind this image,⁵⁸ i.e., Pausanias's account of a sculpture that was meant to serve as a trophy commemorating the victory of the Persians over the Greeks; but since the Persians were finally defeated and the marble piece hadn't been carved yet, Phidias or his disciple Agorakritos (according to Paus. *Graec.* 1.33, 2-8; cf. *Ant. Graeca* 16.224) transformed the trophy into a Nemesis, the personification of divine retribution. However, there is another, long ignored Greek source that explains the use of many attributes present in both Albrecht Dürer's *Nemesis* and Angelo Poliziano's poem *Manto* that supposedly influenced Dürer's design: Mesomedes of Crete's *Hymn to Nemesis*. This poem is the most complete description of an ancient Nemesis image we have.

There is an insightful ekphrastic connection between Dürer's engraving and Mesomedes's poem but we are interested in a meaningful detail here. On the left side of Dürer's picture, where the clouds meet Nemesis's drapery, there is a pareidolia that recalls the wavelike images that marble plates sometimes unveil to humanity's imagination. According to Felix Thürlemann,⁵⁹ Albrecht Dürer perceived himself as a new Phidias who used the *Nemesis* engraving to articulate an artistic statement about the awareness of the tradition he was stepping into.

From this perspective, the *Fratzen* («grotesque faces») hidden between the clouds and the drapery behind *Nemesis* could be an implicit quotation of the Epicurean *phantasia* since clouds, drapery, and marble are contextually and thematically interwoven in this piece. The conscious use of pareidolia by Dürer in this engraving and other drawings (e.g., cushions and clouds)⁶⁰ also

57. THÜRLEMANN, *Dürers doppelter Blick*, 2008, pp. 41–43, 59–60, n. 45.

58. On the sources of Dürer's *Nemesis* see also ERWIN PANOFSKY: «Virgo & Victrix, a note on Dürer's *Nemesis*», in Carl Zigrosser (ed.), *Prints*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962, pp. 13–38; *Albrecht Dürer*, Princeton University Press, 1948; HANS KAUFFMANN: *Dürers Nemesis*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1951; ELENA FILIPPI: «La *Nemesi* düreriana: Un manifesto della *Translatio artium* verso il Nord», in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 84/1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ZKG-2021-1001>.

59. *Ibidem*, pp. 41–43.

60. Cf. THÜRLEMANN, *Dürers doppelter Blick*, 2008; FELIX THÜRLEMANN: «Im Schlepptau des großen Glücks: die doppelte Mimesis bei Albrecht Dürer», in *Manier – Manieren – Manierismen*, 2003, pp. 17–39.

reveals his awareness of Philostratus' defense of painting as a contributor to wisdom (*sophía*) at the same level as poetry and philosophy.⁶¹

HANS BALDUNG GRIEN'S *THE CREATION OF THE MEN AND ANIMALS* (1532)

Traces of epicurean ideas of *phantasia* can be found not only in Dürer's works. Indeed, his disciple Hans Baldung Grien, who was most likely connected to Epicurean Lutherans in Strasbourg⁶², depicted the creation of Adam, Eve, and the animals as a *mimesis-phantasia* event (*The Creation of the Men and Animals*, 1532): Adam visually emerges of a marble stone before the astonished eyes of God, who also seems to have created a fantastic being of a kind: a unicorn. The scene is intriguing since, according to the *Bible*, Adam didn't emerge from a marble stone.

The pictorial scene echoes Lucretian perceptual notion of how images of centaurs came to life (Lucr. *DRN* 4.732-748). Furthermore, in Epicurean terms, the presence of a being that – despite the medieval bestiary literature – doesn't exist outside our inventive imagination, i.e., a unicorn among the other animals created by the Lord, would theoretically question the very existence of God outside our imagination, which is an Epicurean assumption too.⁶³ Epicurus and Lucretius avoid to speak in terms of atheism only claiming that gods are real as a steam of atoms that has got into our minds, similar to a dream of the imagination but, in the end, attributing them, if they exist, to have a tranquil and undisturbed existence beyond human concerns (Lucr. *DRN* 1.44-49).

The busy god depicted by Hans Baldung Grien looks as unreal as the unicorn he presumably has created, subtly sharpening the Epicurean idea of divinity as a possible human projection.

EPICUREAN *PHANTASÍA* AND NATURAL SCIENCES

The ekphrastic tradition also shaped the visual culture of the early modern natural sciences. Microcosmic systems, i.e., ecosystems that are not visible

61. See first chapter of Philostratus's *Imagines* and 2.22 of *Life of Apollonios of Tyana*.

62. ERIKA RUMMEL, *The Confessionalization of Humanism in Reformation Germany*, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 51-52; cf. WERNER BELLARDI: *Die Geschichte der 'Christlichen Gemeinschaft' in Strassburg (1546/1550)*, in *Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte*, 18, 1934.

63. Cf. ANTHONY GOTTLIEB: *The Dream of Reason: A History of Philosophy from the Greeks to the Renaissance*, New York-London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, p. 85.

without the use of instruments or theories, such as anatomical or atomic environments, are an excellent example of the incidence of the Epicurean *phantastikè epibolè tēs dianoías* in the creation of the images needed to explain some phenomena.

There is one exceptional case of *phantasia*-based ekphrastic tradition in Andreas Vesalius's anatomical masterpiece *De humanis corporis fabrica* (1543). Vesalius illuminated the first letter of his book with the vivisection of a boar carried out by a group of cupids. This scene corresponds with the famous anatomical experiment, as vividly described by Roman physician Galen in *De praecognitione* (Gal. *Praecog.* 5.9-21; cf. Gal. *AA* 11.4 and 11; Gal. *UP* 16.4). With this experiment, Galen aimed to convince his detractors of the crucial role of vivisection in understanding how the body works—in this case, how the recurrent laryngeal nerve contributes to creating voice.

Description and visual motif became programmatic for the design of the more famous anatomical plates of a standing human body in different poses. Even if the vivisection of a boar can be taken as accurate, drawing vivisections of the human body relies on imaginative projections of the mind, in this case, inspired by Galen's *ékphrasis* of a pig's vivisection, to afford sensuous evidence about the inner functions of the body.

Seemingly unexplainable singularities are also suitable for the use of a materialistic, i.e., Epicurean type of *phantasia*. Those singularities usually have to do with human-made or natural catastrophes but also with the existence of real or imagined monsters – fantastic beings (understood as a deviation of the standards of nature). A good example is the ekphrastic explanation of the spontaneous origin of forest fires, as described by Lucretius (*DRN* 2.897–900; 5.1096–1100) and painted by Piero di Cosimo in *The Forest Fire* (c. 1505). In this case, the «singularity» connects with the microcosmic level of explanation.

Lucretius justifies the spontaneous emergence of fire due to the very structure and behavior of atoms in dry treetops when the wind provokes friction in them. Piero di Cosimo captures this very idea by dramatizing the first stage of a forest fire without any apparent external factor, such as lightning or human agency. For achieving this kind of conclusion, the use of the fourth criterion of knowledge, the *phantastikè epibolè tēs diánoias*, is a requirement since even if this phenomenon could have been observed, the explanation given by Lucretius concerns the abstract level of thinking about the «invisible structure of the visible world», in words of Clay.⁶⁴

64. DISKIN CLAY, *Paradosis and Survival. Three Chapters in the History of Epicurean Philosophy*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998, p. 135, n. 35; i.e., *occultae res* in Lucretius's *DRN* I 145, *tò ádēlon*, pl. *tà ádēla*, in Epicurus's *Epistula ad Herodotum* § 38-40.

ARCIMBOLDO AND EPICUREAN *PHANTASÍA*

Finally, Giuseppe Arcimboldo's «teste composte» («composite heads») from the mid-sixteenth century are also interesting in the context of a possible Epicurean informed *phantasía*. There is a connection between Arcimboldo's «composite head» and the ancient *enárgeia* tradition. Ekphrastic poems by Giovanni Battista Fonteo confirm the allegorical intention behind the first versions of *Seasons* and *Elements*. Arcimboldo himself follows a description from Propertius' elegy to Vertumnus (Pr. 4.2) for the allegorical portrait of Rudolf II as the god of seasons and change. He even wrote an explanatory poem whose first words are quite similar to Vincenzo Catari's translation of Propertius's mentioned elegy.⁶⁵

Literary descriptions are used to contextualize the different vegetables and fruits in relation to the whole picture deploying a symbolical political meaning on the start of a new golden age based on a special type of analogy or proportion principle that includes something new: a serious joke as aesthetical participation of the beholder. Indeed, the beholder can recognize both the parts and the whole at the same time being both tangible truths within the traditional code of an imperial portrait. Whether intended or not, the epicurean notion of *phantasía* would underscore the idea of Rudolf's «composite head» as a serious joke.

As for the *Four Elements* paintings, these not only unite a perfect mimesis of nature with a parallel artistic reality in one bold pictorial act, but also visualize the cosmogony of Empedocles, on which Epicurus's atomistic tradition also relies. In fact, the *Four Elements* series of paintings connects the «true to nature» with the «true to art», inducing perception and cognition processes associated with materialistic traditions and allegorical practices.

Concerning the painting *Earth*, Norbert Schneider⁶⁶ wrote in *Die antikleassische Kunst*:

Der Eindruck von Haaren entsteht durch die herausstakenden Geweihe der Hirsche und das Gehörn von Widdern. Nur einmal vertritt ein tierisches Körperteil das analoge eines Menschen: so muss der Elefant, dessen Rüssel in die Wangenformation eingeschmiegt ist, dem Ohr der Personifikation Erde seines leihen. Der Gesamteindruck Gesicht ist nur von einer Ansicht aus möglich.⁶⁷

65. Cf. THOMAS DACOSTA KAUFMANN: *Arcimboldo. Visual Jokes, Natural History, and Still-Life Painting*, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 91-102.

66. NORBERT SCHNEIDER: *Die antikleassische Kunst. Malerei des Manierismus in Italien*, Münster: LIT Verlag, 2012, p. 273.

67. «The impression of hair is created by the protruding antlers of the deer and the horns of the rams. Only once does an animal's body part replace the analogous one of a human being: the elephant, whose

The fact that this picture is a *compositum* capable of creating a new visual identity, i.e., a human head with a specific physiognomy – and this just from one specific vantage point –, leads to think that Arcimboldo was, at the very least, familiar with Lucretius's poem, especially regarding the idea of the random creation of compound *corpora* out of primordial bodies. Connecting these pictures with the Lucretian theory of dreams is tantalizing. A contemporary approach can be found in the commentary written by Gregorio Comanini, *Il Figino* (from 1592), where the commentator states that Arcimboldo's *capriccio* is an *imitatione fantastica* in the sense that Arcimboldo's purpose is to recompose, with the help of the imagination, what is mediated by the senses – a very Epicurean thought.

CONCLUSIONS

In this explorative paper, I have reviewed Epicurean sensory and epistemic notions of *phantasia* that may have been relevant in the arts of the early modern period. The search for evidence starts in ancient rhetoric, especially concerning the practice of *ékphrasis* and the materialistic shaped notion of *enárgeia* that permeates Renaissance artistic practices through the progymnastic ekphrasis tradition and Alberti's general recommendation for artists to look for inspiration in the vivid texts of the ancient poets (*Della pittura* 3.53). To a less rhetorical context belongs the conscious development of optical illusions as visual compounds, partly theorized by Alberti in the tradition of the Epicurean *dóxa* and *phantasia* theories, and transformed into spectacular 'composite heads' by Arcimboldo a couple of centuries later.

Traces of Epicurean ideas of *phantasia* can be found north of the Alps long before Arcimboldo. Those were not limited to Dürer's awareness of the Philostratian notion of painting as a participant of *sophía*. Indeed, Hans Baldung Grien probably contributed to spreading a pictorial program shaped by Epicurean ideas under Lutheran intellectual circles.

On a philosophical level, the most mesmerizing tradition concerns, in my opinion, the fourth Epicurean criterion of truth, *phantastikè epibolè tēs diánoias*, probably known to early modern scholars through Ambrosio Traversari's translation of Diogenes Laertius's *Lives and Opinions of Famous Philosophers* as «phantasticos intuitus mentis» (gr. *phantastikè epibolè tēs diánoias*).

This criterion was adduced for abstract and imaginative thinking. Even if much more research is needed on this topic to achieve evidence, it can be

trunk is nestled in the formation of the cheeks, must lend its ear to the personification of the Earth. The overall impression of a face is only possible from one perspective». Translation by the author.

assumed that the *phantastikè epibolè tēs diánoias*, or a similar materialistic criterion of truth, could have built the epistemological fundament for the imaginary creation of fantastic beings such as centaurs or unicorns, being the first of them a classical *topos* of Epicurean perception and dream theories, substantially passed down by authors of the second Sophistic such as Philostratus the Elder or Lucian, and popularized among Renaissance artist by Humanists, such as Ambrosio Traversari and Leon Battista Alberti.

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