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Agata Handley

University of Łódź, Poland

agata.handley@uni.lodz.pl

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-9315-9165

David Allen

Midland Actors Theatre, United Kingdom

david@midlandactorstheatre.com

Ekphrasis in Disneyland: *The Alice in Wonderland Ride* (1958)

Abstract: The *Alice in Wonderland* ride in Disneyland, which opened in 1958, was designed to place visitors inside the action, as if seeing things through Alice's eyes. It drew on the film and on concept artwork, as well as the Lewis Carroll book; and can be seen as a transmedial work, which utilised a complex set of media elements. It can also be considered ekphrastic, in the way it referred to source media texts, but elaborated on them, and repurposed them.

The concept of ekphrasis has traditionally been applied to verbal representations of visual art works. Modern theoretical approaches, however, have challenged the idea that language is the only acceptable target medium; the concept has been applied to different media products, including films, music videos, video games, etc. Cecilia Lindhé (2016) has emphasized the ancient Greco-Roman understanding of ekphrasis, which highlighted the question of *enargeia*: the imaginative and physical response in the reader or viewer. The *Alice* ride was like a journey through a strange dream, a series of random, even surreal encounters; it exemplified the concept of *enargeia*, in making visitors feel, not only as if they were present at events, but that it was happening to them.

Key words: ekphrasis, *enargeia*, Disney, Disneyland, transmediality, Elleström, Carroll

“Disneyland is like Alice stepping through the looking glass,” Walt Disney once declared (as cited in Finnie, 2006, p. 20). But it was not until 1958 – three years after the park opened – that it got an *Alice in Wonderland* ride.¹ It was a so-called ‘dark ride’: i.e., an indoor attraction that utilizes atmospheric special effects, such as ultraviolet or ‘black’ light, and is often associated with ‘haunted house’ attractions. It was located in the ‘Fantasyland’ area, which was primarily aimed at children; and joined three other dark rides in the same area, all based on familiar stories that had been turned into popular Disney films: *Snow White and her Adventures*, *Mr Toad’s Wild Ride* and *Peter Pan’s Flight*.

The *Alice* ride was designed by Disney imagineer Claude Coats. Coats had worked on the 1951 Disney film; and the ride drew on the film, but also on some

¹ We are not counting the *Mad Tea Party*, a ‘spinning teacups’ attraction, which was present when the park opened, but which was really a conventional fairground ‘waltzer’ ride, that used Alice as a ‘theme.’ (Themed elements included Japanese lanterns hanging overhead, which also appear in the film.) An *Alice* dark ride was evidently planned as early as 1954; see Janzen & Janzen (1999, p. 26).

of the background and concept artwork that was produced for it.² In this way, it can be seen as a transmedial work, which utilised and transformed a complex set of media elements (including, of course, the original Lewis Carroll book). It can also be considered ekphrastic, in the way it referred to source media texts, but elaborated on them, and repurposed them. The ride, to some degree, depended on visitors' knowledge of the source texts, but it also played against expectations, in a kind of transmedial 'game' of allusion, incorporation and transformation.

It might seem surprising to discuss a theme park ride in terms of ekphrasis. The concept has traditionally been applied to verbal representations of visual art works; it can be understood, more generally, as "an example of a transmediation between a source media product and a target media product, belonging to different media types that are structured differently on the level of the semiotic modality" (Bruhn, 2000, p. 148). Modern theoretical approaches to ekphrasis have, in fact, emphasized the intermedial character of contemporary art forms, and challenged the idea that language is "the only acceptable target medium" (Cariboni Killander et al., 2014, p. 10), making the concept applicable to different media products, including films, music videos, video games and comic books, but also art installations and architecture. As Heidrun Führer and Anna Kraus observe, currently, "ekphrasis studies include media products outside the word/image dichotomy and the traditional system of arts as source and target medium" (Führer & Kraus, 2020, p. 98).³ In their study of Gordon Matta-Clark's art, Führer⁴ and Kraus stress the participatory potential of ekphrasis; they analyse it as an "performative process of pro-duc[ing] and performing something for an audience in the flow and entanglement of signs" (Führer & Kraus, 2020,

² Concept artists create sketches and colour palettes that serve as guidelines and inspiration for the animators working on a Disney film.

³ For example: Goehr, 2010; Lindhé, 2013, Führer and Kraus, 2020.

⁴ In an earlier study, *Thinking ekphrasis through the digital* (2017), Heidrun Führer explains her aim of establishing an alternative view of ekphrasis within digital media, which questions the understanding of ekphrasis as translation between source and target medium.

p. 99).⁵ This element in ekphrasis is also foregrounded in research by Renate Brosch, who calls it a “performative strategy.” She argues for

a revival of rhetorical and performative understandings of ekphrasis that can augment theoretical conceptualizations and bring them into line with the participatory and hybrid practices of ekphrasis today. Increasingly, what used to be a central aim of ekphrasis – the description of an artwork – has been replaced by modes of rewriting the artwork and in the process questioning accepted meanings, values, and beliefs, not just relating to the particular artwork in question but referencing the ways of seeing and the scopic regimes of the culture at large (Brosch, 2018, p. 225).

Approaches like this stress ekphrasis as a process, rather than a static form (Brosch, 2018, p. 226). This produces a shift of focus, from the medium, to the question of reader/viewer response, and the ways in which ekphrastic strategies can create a shift in perspective, and have an immersive impact on the reader/viewer/participant (Brosch, 2018, p. 226).

Siglind Bruhn has offered one of the most radical re-definitions of ekphrasis, seeing it as the “representation in one medium of a real or fictitious text composed in another medium” (Bruhn, 2000, pp. 7–8). This means that the “recreating medium need not always be verbal, but can itself be any of the art forms other than the one in which the primary ‘text’ is cast” (Cariboni Killander et al., 2014, p. 12). Agnes Pethö, for example, investigates the use of ekphrasis in cinema, arguing that the uniqueness of the medium stems from its complex and mixed mediality. Pethö defines ekphrasis as “a case of media being incorporated, repurposed by other media” (Pethö, 2010, p. 214). In place of a unity of image, language, and sound (etc.), there is an unstable set of interrelations between elements. In this way, the medium can “remediate” all other forms (Pethö, 2010, p. 211).

⁵ This study stresses that transmediation of the ekphrastic process “is far from always a clear-cut, easily demarcated phenomenon” (Elleström, 2020, p. 11), especially in the case of collaborations which involve multiple media forms.

Ekphrasis in cinema, text and photography, has also been examined by Laura Sager Eidt. She proposes four categories of ekphrasis: “attributive” (allusion or brief mention); “depictive” (more detailed description); “interpretive” (more detailed reflection, with a higher degree of transformation); and “dramatic”, which has a high degree of “*enargeia*,” i.e., the capability to generate images in recipients’ minds (Sager Eidt, 2008, pp. 45–56). The final category is particularly relevant to the present study, as it involves a theatricalization of a work of art, to such an extent that it seems to take on a life of its own (Sager Eidt, 2008, p. 50).

Elleström sees ekphrasis as an example of “complex representation of media products” (Elleström, 2014, p. 32).⁶ Following Elleström, Cariboni Killander et al. suggest that the representation is simple when “the media product is briefly referred to or quoted in a different media product,” and complex when it is “more developed, elaborated and accurate, in other words if a larger amount of media characteristics are transferred from the source medium to the target medium” (Cariboni Killander et al., 2014, p. 12). They argue that, in order for “simple media representation to become ekphrasis” (Cariboni Killander et al., 2014, p. 14), additional conditions have to be fulfilled:

⁶ Elleström explains ekphrasis within the frame of media representation; however, he notes that “representing a media product in general includes transmediating it to some extent. Ekphrasis would indeed seem quite pointless if the characteristics of the source media product were not represented again by the target media product” (Elleström, 2014, p. 8). Thus, in the process of ekphrasis, media characteristics of the source medium become transmediated into the target medium. In this article, transmediation and media representation are understood in line with the recent understanding of the terms offered by Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirrmacher, who claim that: “Transmediation reconstructs meaning that was previously mediated by another media type; a film adaptation, for example, may mediate the same story as a novel. When we analyse transmediations, we focus on a diachronic process and we explore the relation between a source media product and a target media product and analysing what is transferred and what is transformed... When exploring media representation, we analyse how one medium represents the characteristics of another medium, such as when a poem describes a painting not only by way of representing the image or the depicted scene but also offers a depiction of the painting as an object” (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2022, p. 104).

[A]n ekphrasis occurs when one media product (the source, for example a painting) is represented in a different media product (the target, for example a photograph) with a certain degree of elaboration (*energeia*), including the repurposing of the source – for instance through a semiotic process – and eliciting *energeia* in the receiver (Cariboni Killander et al., 2014, p. 14).⁷

Consequently, it can be said that the elaboration of the source media object, and the re-purposing of this object in the target medium,⁸ are necessary for ekphrasis to occur. The nature and degree of ‘repurposing’ and ‘elaboration’ are unique for each instance of ekphrasis. As Elleström suggests, we should not ignore the fact that “representations of media products are possible, common and [thus] worthwhile to theorize about far beyond the more conventional modern borders of ekphrasis” (Elleström, 2014, p. 8). The following discussion seeks to go beyond those conventional “borders,” to investigate the repurposing and elaboration of source media – in this case, a book and a film – in a multimedial, and multisensory, target medium: a Disney theme park ride.

Cecilia Lindhé, in her analysis of ekphrasis in contemporary art installations, has emphasized audience response, rather than the verbal description of the artwork or artifact (Lindhé, 2016, p. 32). She points to the relevance of the ancient Greek and Roman understanding of ekphrasis, which highlighted the impact on the audience,⁹ making it an important aspect of the “ekphrastic interaction” (Brosch, 2018, p. 235). This again places

⁷ To illustrate their point, Cariboni Killander et al. offer an analysis of a sequence from the 2012 film *Barbara*, directed by Christian Petzold, which was set in 1980s’ East Germany. One scene features Rembrandt’s painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). The authors undertake a detailed analysis of the “relation between *energeia*, as a potentiality in the object (the media product), and *energeia*, as an actualisation in the head of the subject (receiver)” (Cariboni Killander et al., 2014, p. 14).

⁸ See Cariboni Killander et al (2014, p. 14).

⁹ See Lindhé (2016, p. 32), Brosch (2018, p. 235).

the focus, less on the medium, than on the question of *enargeia*: the response in the reader or viewer.¹⁰ *Enargeia* is here understood as vividness (Lindhé, 2016, p. 34), which engages the imagination of the audience, and appeals to the senses, so making them feel as if they were present at the events. The immediacy, spectatorship, and the existence of the live audience (Lindhé, 2016, p. 34), were crucial elements in the rhetorical practice of ekphrasis, in terms of the effect it has on the body of the listener/spectator (Lindhé, 2016, p. 34). As Ruth Webb observes: “in the ancient definition the referent is only of secondary importance; what matters... is the impact” (Webb, 2009, p. 7), and the power to penetrate the emotions, through an appeal to the “eyes of the mind” (Webb, 2009, p. 98).

It should be noted that this understanding of ekphrasis acknowledges its *processual* character, and the changes and impact which occur in the process of visualization. Lindhé discusses the way that ekphrasis works in art installations, evoking “a variety of imaginative, emotional, and rational reactions” in the viewer (Lindhé, 2016, p. 36). Arguably, this may also be applied to the Disneyland ‘dark rides,’ which utilized transformative and interventionist strategies, turning the spectator into an active participant, who experienced events as if they were actually ‘there,’ immersed in the action.

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The Fantasyland rides such as *Alice* were originally conceived to place the visitor inside the action, seeing things as if from the point of view of the main character. There was no Snow White in the *Snow White* ride, for example; instead, it was the visitor who travelled through the dark wood, and was offered the apple by the witch, etc. In filmic terms, the experience was akin to a sustained tracking shot from the character's point-of-view, as the ride took visitors through a series of different environments. They were puzzled, however, by the absence of their favourite character. Disney Imagineer Ken Anderson observed that “nobody

¹⁰ See Brosch (2018, p. 226).

got it... They just wondered where the hell Snow White was" (as cited in Janzen, 1992, p. 25). Nevertheless, as Jack Janzen suggests, even if visitors did not understand they were supposed to be Snow White, they still felt "threatened by the Witch, the Evil Forest... the twisting and confining mine tunnels, the looming boulders... and the dark!" (Janzen, 1992, p. 25).

Elleström observes that "transfers among different media always entail changes" (Elleström, 2020, p. 2). In the *Snow White* ride, one of the major changes made, in the transmedial process of adaptation/transformation from book and film, was that a number of scenes that might be considered essential to telling the story, were omitted; there was an emphasis instead on immersion in a series of dark and forbidding environments (the castle, the dark wood, etc.). Visitors were threatened by objects: for example, in the castle dungeons, a skeleton hanging from a wall "stretched its neck and opened its jaws" (Sundberg, 2013) as cars passed by, culminating in the climax when the witch, standing on a cliff above, was poised to drop a boulder on visitors' heads. ("Goodbye, dearie!" she cried [Sundberg, 2013].)

In the 1958 *Alice* ride, similarly, visitors 'became' Alice, or rather, assumed her place/perspective. Alice herself only appeared as a voice-over. In this way, the shift in perspective was characterised by the transfer of the ride visitor into the position of participant. At the start of the ride, the cars entered a tunnel, as if passing underground, and visitors heard Alice in the darkness say, "My adventures in Wonderland began when I followed a white rabbit down a rabbit hole. All of a sudden, I fell! Down, down, down..." (as cited in Seegar, 1993, p. 44). It was as if this was a voice in the visitor's own head. Here, then, was a simple device that shifted guests immediately into the position of character/participant.

The ride was like a journey through a strange dream, a series of random and even surreal encounters. The visitor 'became' Alice, then, not by following her narrative journey; rather, the ride was a *psychological* journey through the various environments – or perhaps, rather, the subjective spaces – of "Wonderland"; as if it was all happening in the rider's head, like a waking dream. The effect of the transmedial transfer and transformation was, to use Webb's words, to transport the "audience in imagination... to the events in

questions, making use of the ability of *enargeia*" (Webb, 2016, p. 101) – in this case, making visitors feel, not only "as if" they were present" (Webb, 2016, p. 101), but that it was happening *to them*. The images in the source media were given physical form, and yet, the idea remained of an *imaginative* immersion, through the "eyes of the mind" (Webb, 2009, p. 98).

There was a switch, then, from narrative – (re)telling the story – to the effect on the viewer. The familiar storyline of the book and film was disrupted. Many of the most popular characters and episodes were missing: there was no Tweedledee and Tweedledum, even no Queen of Hearts. This also meant a deliberate loss of clear 'markers' of the storyline, generating a certain feeling of randomness, an uncertainty about what was happening, and what would happen next. This replicated Alice's own experiences: in the book, and the film, she often repeats that she feels lost. If the ride had followed the familiar narrative line, then visitors would not have experienced the same sense of disorientation.

From the start, the ride offered a sense of transformation, which was also a disruption of visitor expectations. It began in an outdoor garden. Coats' design here was based on the 'caterpillar' scene in the film: it included a gigantic mushroom, like the one the caterpillar sits on. This was not a natural garden, but something more fantasmagoric. The artificial plant leaves were the height of trees; they towered over the guests, as if they were already seeing things from Alice's perspective when, in the story and film, she shrinks to three inches. To see this in ekphrastic terms: the effect of Alice's diminution was first described in the book, then visualised in the film, and then physically embodied, with the visitor's position moved from reader/viewer, to participant.

The shapes and colours of the plant leaves in the garden, with their baroque twirls, recalled the wisps of smoke that, in the film, rise from the caterpillar's hookah. The ride cars wound through the 'garden' and then into a tunnel, as if going 'underground' (down the 'rabbit hole'). The cars were designed to resemble giant versions of the caterpillar, with its curved shapes, as if the riders were accompanying this creature in burrowing into the ground. The cars were also painted in a range of bright colours, like the caterpillar's multi-coloured smoke.

The 'caterpillar' scene occurs later in the book/film, and so was here transposed in position in the narrative structure. The opening of the ride, moreover, was an example of transmediation, with an elaboration and repurposing of familiar elements, motifs, and characters. The caterpillar, present in both novel and film, underwent not only a repurposing (as a vehicle); it was also hybridised, and so elaborated upon. Retaining its identity, it was also something more than just a caterpillar. It was as if the creature was a guide or psychopomp, taking visitors into the underworld.

The first environment encountered by visitors, as they descended 'underground,' was the 'Upside Down' room. This does not appear either in the book or film (although the design incorporated certain recognisable motifs); signalling at once that the ride experience would parallel Alice's journey in the film, but not follow it. The room was a 'subjective' or dream space, in the sense that it was designed to have a psychological effect on the visitor; simulating the disorientation of Alice's fall down the rabbit hole. We may see it, then, not as a direct representation or reproduction of something in the source media, or even simply a repurposing or elaboration. Rather, it was a form of 'objective correlative' – i.e., it was designed to generate an emotional impact on visitors, which correlated to Alice's experiences, through the combination of sound, image, and objects. In other words: there was an ekphrastic transposition and transformation, not only of visual/textual elements in the source media, but of emotional or psychological experience or affect.

What visitors saw on the ride was a cosy domestic interior – ostensibly the home of the White Rabbit, with family portraits hanging on the walls;¹¹ but everything was upside-down, with furniture hanging down over the heads of the guests. In the film, when she is falling, Alice sees herself for a moment upside-down in a mirror; and here, visitors could see an image of themselves in a mirror on the wall, but *upside-down*, as if they no longer had their feet on the ground.

One of Coats' concept sketches for the film can be seen as a source medium for the 'Upside Down' room. It shows Alice's fall down the rabbit

¹¹ There is a White Rabbit's house in the Disney film, but it is very different in design from the Upside Down room on the ride.

hole.¹² The walls are panelled, as if she is actually in someone's home; she passes various domestic objects as she falls (armchair, stool, table, etc.). There is the long line of a chimney, not straight, but twisting like a snake; its brickwork could be the snake's scales. There is what looks like a lampshade hanging down (but it could equally be a gilded bird cage); and a twisted picture frame, with curled edges that make it look like some organic plant-form, growing from the walls of the tunnel. The sketch is dominated by a stuffed armchair. To use a term from animation, the object has been 'stretched' (as opposed to 'squashed'): the chair back has been elongated and twisted. Moreover, the chair seems to have animal features, as if it is some strange subterranean creature, with the chair arms for eyes, the seat forming a mouth, and the wide sides like monstrous flapping ears. In this way, it combines the 'natural' and the 'man-made.' There is a certain parallel here with the so-called 'Museum of the Weird' which was designed by imagineer Rolly Crump (but never built) for the Disneyland *Haunted Mansion* attraction. It included domestic objects that combined the animate and the inanimate: an armchair with a human face, which would "stand up and speak to visitors"; a plant with a demon face; a melting "Candle Man," etc. (Janzen, 1990, pp. 24-27). We may recall the way that surrealists like Salvador Dalí created unexpected combinations of natural and domestic objects – for example, the umbrellas that perch like vultures in Dalí's *Sewing Machine with Umbrella in a Surrealistic Landscape* (1941). The combination produces the "uncanny" (to use Freud's term): i.e. the object is familiar, and yet strange at the same time. Disney artists might well have studied surrealists such as Dalí in preparation for the *Alice* film; it includes uncanny hybrids such as flamingo-umbrellas. (It may be no coincidence that Dalí himself worked for a time at the Disney studios in the 1940s¹³).

¹² See Girveau (2007, p. 31).

¹³ Dalí worked at the Disney Studios over some two months in 1946. He produced sketches and inspirational paintings for a planned short film, *Destino*, which was never made (see Allen, 2020). A version of the film, reconstructed from Dalí's sketches, was finally produced in 2003; it was featured on the 2010 blu-ray release of *Fantasia 2000*.

On the *Alice* ride, the Upside Down room contained some of the same objects that appear in Coats' sketch, and in the film (armchair and footstool, vases, lamps, picture frames, etc.). It conformed in this sense to Elleström's notion that a significant amount of "media characteristics" are "transferred from the source medium to the target medium" (Elleström, 2014, p. 13). The images of domesticity, although easily recognised as elements transferred from the film, were transformed in the target medium. They were "made strange," not only by being squashed or stretched, but also by being *inverted*. For example, there was an upside-down fireplace; with its curtain of flames, it was like some gaping mouth of hell. The inverted fender, hanging over it at the top, looked like a threatening portcullis about to drop. At one point, the ride car seemed to be heading towards the open fireplace; it was not simply an obstacle in the path of the car, but like a creature poised to swallow up the riders.

The walls of the room were twisted (squashed and stretched) out-of-shape, suggesting both 'house' and 'underground burrow.' The lamps and tablecloths were decorated with veined patterns; they had curled edges, as if they were semi-organic, and the lamp itself was shaped more like a plant. The room was dominated by organic swirls, down to the patterns covering the rugs and even the table. The colour scheme in the room was predominantly pinkish brown, with splashes of yellow, green and orange – again, suggesting some kind of underground garden. Beneath the wheels of the car, the actual floor of the ride was in darkness, so riders could not see the track ahead. There were several 'false exits': first, the car seemed to be heading towards an archway, with a view of a winding path through an ornate garden; but then, the figure of the White Rabbit swung into view, blocking the exit – blowing a trumpet, as if to warn the visitor away. The suddenness of his appearance was both comic, and threatening (even down to the blaring sound of the trumpet). (A number of figures on the ride, like this one, were two- rather than three-dimensional, making the ride, on a certain level, like a large-sized 'pop-up' storybook.)

The car swerved as if to avoid the White Rabbit, and seemed to be heading towards the open fireplace, as if the visitors were about to fall into the flames; but again, it veered away at the last moment. There were no other exits visible

in the room, and the car now appeared to be heading straight towards a wall; but in fact, this was a disguised set of doors, which parted at the last minute to let the car through. Alan Coats (Claude Coats' son) notes that, as the ride progressed, the 'crash doors' from one space to the next became progressively lower, so "you tended to want to instinctively duck your head as you passed through" (Personal correspondence, March 3, 2013). This made the doors into an obstacle, and also meant that riders experienced the classic dark-ride fear of apparent collisions looming ahead. Moreover, the crash doors, together with sudden appearances by characters such as the White Rabbit and the Cheshire Cat, generated a sense of threat, making the ride seem like a series of near-death experiences. This may itself be seen as a correlative of Alice's experiences in the book/film, plunged into a world where she could suddenly find herself under a sentence of execution ("Off with her head!").

In this way, then, elements of a standard dark ride were utilised (and repurposed) to generate a sense of physical and psychological disorientation in the rider, as an objective correlative for the character's experience. (It might equally be argued that adapting *Alice* to the format of a dark ride changed the nature of the story, into something altogether 'darker' and more threatening.) In its tortuous winding route, and abrupt changes of direction, the ride recalled the maze that appears in the Disney film (as well as the maze-like forests through which Alice wanders). The sudden changes from one environment to the next also recalled the climactic 'chase' sequence in the film, when Alice flees the Queen's court: one moment, she is skipping over rocks on the ground; the next, the 'rocks' have become tea things on a table that she is running down; then she finds herself swimming in the ocean, and so on.

Exiting the Upside Down room, riders found themselves next in the 'Oversized Room.' This can be seen as another instance of transmedial elaboration: it evokes associations with the source media, but it does not exist in either the book, or the film. If, in the first environment/scene, riders were turned upside-down, it was now as if they had suddenly grown 'small.' (The voice of Alice was heard again here: "I kept getting smaller, and smaller, and smaller" [as cited in Seegar, 1993, p. 44]). Some of the same objects

reappeared – the overstuffed armchair, a footstool, a table covered in tea things; the right way up this time, but much larger: the armchair, for example, had swollen to fifteen feet high (Janzen & Janzen, 1999, p. 30).

Mary Blair produced a number of concept sketches for the Disney film; she is widely credited as the formative influence on the film's style.¹⁴ These sketches may be seen as another source medium for the ride. In one of them, Alice is sitting at the table at the Mad Hatter's tea party, a diminutive figure on a larger-than-life armchair; only her head is visible through a forest of teapots.¹⁵ The image suggests her subjective viewpoint: the situation makes her feel small, and the objects seem large. Similarly, the effect of the Oversized Room on the Disney ride was less to make riders feel that *they* had shrunk in size, but rather, that the objects had *grown*, and were threatening to overwhelm them.¹⁶

On the ride, 'shrinking' the riders (relative to the objects) gave them the point-of-view of a child, surrounded now, in the Oversized Room, by (imaginary) monsters in the dark; so, for example, the armchair was like some monstrous bat, or a huge mouth, about to swallow them up. The Cheshire Cat loomed over the riders on a six-foot high footstool, with his "piano-key teeth and staring, fried eyes" (Janzen & Janzen, 1999, p. 30), as if, to him, they were a mouse that he would like to eat. The car passed under the legs of the footstool, and the cat suddenly swung into view, hanging upside-down in front of the riders (Janzen & Janzen, 1999, p. 31), just as they were about to exit through the doors ahead. Like the White Rabbit in the Upside Down room, the cat's sudden appearance was at once both comic, and threatening. The car now took a hairpin bend, as if evading the cat (another near-miss). Ahead was the doorknob (as it appears in the film, with a comic-grotesque face); its mouth

¹⁴ See, for example, Canemaker (1996, p. 129).

¹⁵ See Canemaker (2003, p. 51).

¹⁶ We may recall here the way, in some of the absurdist dramas by Eugene Ionesco, objects seem to proliferate and grow, "like the cells of a cancerous growth" (Lamont, 1993, p. 15). In *The Chairs*, for example, chairs multiply until they fill the stage; at the end of the play, the human characters depart, and the chairs are all that remains.

was open, again as if about to swallow the riders, but then, the doors parted, and the cars passed through to the 'Garden of Live Flowers.'

This transmediated environment was in many ways true to the scene in the film, but also involved a considerable level of transformation. In the film, the flowers in the garden tower over Alice.¹⁷ They are predominantly portrayed as maternal, even matriarchal figures; the smaller plants such as the pansies are voiced by children, turning the garden into a kind of nursery. On the ride, the fact that the plants were larger-than-life, towering over the riders, made this environment at once both 'garden' and dense 'jungle.' They were serenaded by the flowers (as Alice is in the film), with the jolly 'nursery' song, *All in the Golden Afternoon*. The garden seemed to offer, then, a temporary refuge from danger, a *locus amoenus*.

In the film, the scene takes several minutes. On the ride, the elements of the cinematic *mise en scene* were compressed (the scene lasted seconds, not minutes). In the film, the flowers are friendly and welcoming at first, but turn hostile when they decide Alice must be a weed, and expel her. At the end of the same scene on the ride, there was also an irruption of hostility, but here, it was not given any explanation or motivation. The 'Dandy Lion' suddenly popped up from below the track path with a roar, in another random 'attack.' This was, again, an example of how the de-emphasising and compression of the narrative only added to the disorienting, nightmarish impact of the ride.

The cars veered away again, and riders were plunged into darkness. A sign read 'Tulgey Wood.' The ride passed, then, from the daylight of a "golden afternoon" to what was effectively a 'night' scene.¹⁸ In the film, the wood is the darkest environment, filled with strange (uncanny) creatures of the night. It is here that the (Dalí-esque) merging or blurring of the 'natural' and the 'domestic' is most apparent. In creatures such as the Birdcage Bird,

¹⁷ In this scene in the Disney film, Alice has shrunk again to three inches high. In the equivalent scene in the book, she has returned to life-size.

¹⁸ In the film, the Mad Hatter's Tea Party scene precedes Tulgey Wood; on the ride, it *followed* it. The change in order of scenes meant that Tulgey Wood acted as a gloomy counterpoint to the 'Garden of Live Flowers'; it allowed the Mad Hatter's Tea Party to form a 'climax' to the ride.

the Accordion-Neck Owl, and the Umbrella Bird (an umbrella/vulture that again recalls Dalí), it is as if domestic objects have been transformed, and come to life – or as if animals have been merged with machines in some mad scientist's lab. Tulgey Wood could also be seen as a kind of child's nursery at night, where strange mechanical toys have come to life. In the film, the various creatures perform actions that are at once 'natural' and 'mechanical': e.g. an owl hoots by stretching its accordion neck; and a 'dog,' with a broom for its head, sweeps the path (at once, both a domestic vacuum cleaner, and a canine on the trail of interesting scents).

On the ride, there was another shift of perspective, as the cars seemed now to be passing through the tree-tops of the wood, rather than on the forest floor. Riders were first confronted by numerous pairs of flaming red eyes burning menacingly in the darkness. The 'jungle' of the Flower Garden now gave way to the dark enclosing forest. The track was lined with the branches of two-dimensional giant trees (with numerous enlarged leaves); among the foliage, there were creatures such as the Birdcage Bird and Umbrella Bird. Cacophonous (and cartoonish) sounds of hooting and squawking were heard over the Cheshire Cat singing the *Jabberwocky* song. This song, taken from the film, is again like a 'nursery' song; but it was made slightly eerie though the use of an echo, as if the cat was a spirit haunting this mysterious wood. At the end of the scene, there was a sign saying 'Mad Hatter,' and then a door suddenly swung open, revealing another sign: 'Tea Party.'

As we have seen, in the film's climactic 'chase' sequence, Alice at one point finds herself running down the tea table, dancing among the tea things. This was remediated in the ride: in the 'Mad Hatter' scene, the unexpected twist was that the riders actually found ourselves *on the table itself*, with the car weaving and spinning through a maze of towering, larger-than-life tea-cups and teapots. There were swirling patterns on the 'tablecloth,' and also swirling leaf and flower motifs on the various pots and cups, making this another 'garden' or 'jungle.' The cups and pots were also like colourful, cartoonish toys from the nursery play chest – but enlarged, and made dangerous. Riders were trapped among objects which had taken on a life of their own: one tottering pile of cups seemed about to fall on the riders and tip the contents on their

heads. The figures of the Mad Hatter and the March Hare popped up from behind the table, shouting “Move Down! Move Down!” When the ride first opened, only their heads were visible; later, they were rebuilt, so they loomed high above the riders’ heads, meaning they were again overwhelmed on all sides by outsized objects (Janzen & Janzen, 1999, p. 33). The cars finally ‘crashed’ into a huge teapot – it was another disguised set of doors – and through it into next room. There was “an explosion of strobe lights in a variety of patterns, simulating fireworks” (Seegar, 1993, p. 44). This was the ‘Crash Room,’ a major departure from both the book and film. It was as if the riders had now, finally, crashed for real, and were ‘seeing stars.’ Alice’s voice was heard, crying, “Oh dear, how do I get out? Oh – I’ve lost my way!” (as cited in Seegar, 1993, p. 44). Signs pointed in different directions: “This Way Out” (pointing back the way that the cars had just come), “Go Back”, “Up” (pointing downwards), etc. (Seegar, 1993, pp. 44–45). This was the final scene on the ride; its boldness lay in putting riders in an *empty* environment; a subjective space suggesting a state of complete cognitive disorientation. Alan Coats observes: “An early concept sketch for the Disney film by Mary Blair pretty much defines the Crash Room scene. A bewildered Alice, hands on her waist, ponders a forest of crisscrossing paths and giant tree trunks bearing the signs – ‘That Way,’ ‘Back,’ ‘Beyond,’ ‘Over,’ ‘Yonder,’ etc. – all adding to the confusion of her predicament of, ‘How do I get out?’ This certainly illustrates her state of complete disorientation” (Personal correspondence, March 3, 2013).¹⁹

Here again, then, was the image of an object – the directional signs – multiplying beyond human control.

As an ending to the ride, however, the Crash Room must have seemed somewhat bewildering and abrupt to visitors. It mediated/evoked Alice’s state of mind, her psychological turmoil, but again, in place of the familiar narrative-line of the book/film. In particular, riders were surely puzzled by the omission of the character of the Queen of Hearts, who is central to the climax of the film.

¹⁹ For the Mary Blair design sketch, see Canemaker et al. (2009, p. 162).

In fact, it appears that, at one point in the planning, it was intended to include a 'Queen of Hearts' scene. Alan Coats recalls:

The attraction went through many concepts, beginning several years earlier. I'm sure dad faced many obstacles – not enough money, not enough space, and engineering challenges – to complete the final version. Only three months prior to the opening, promotional material describes a show with a very different ending. I have a copy of *American Weekly* magazine dated March 9, 1958, titled *My Newest Dream* by Walt Disney. The article includes a very early rendering and copy that describes how you'll pass “through a Maze of Cards and into the fearsome presence of the Red Queen, who threatens to ‘roll someone’s head’ with every breath.” This, of course, never happened (Personal correspondence, March 3, 2013).²⁰

The Crash Room seemed fitting, however, as a climax, and the culmination of all the previous near-death misses on the ride, and paralleling Alice's position at the end of the book/film, when she faces the threat of execution (“Off with her head!”). It was comparable to the ending of another dark ride, *Mr. Toad's Wild Ride*, where the car passed into a tunnel, and there was an explosion of bright flashing lights, as the car ‘crashed’ into an oncoming train. We may assume that the exit from the Crash Room was hidden, so that all that passengers could see were the flashing lights and the multiple signs. The car next smashed through three sets of doors in rapid succession – each accompanied by a loud yell from an unseen character in the dark (Seegar, 1993, p. 45). These were doors to nowhere; and it was as if, each time, riders passed through a set of doors, they had crashed (‘died’) again. There was one final ‘yell’ as the car exited the building. Alan Coats recalls that his father “wanted guests to leave laughing, and decided to use one of the funniest audio cues from Disney cartoons – the ‘goof yell’ (used by the hapless Goofy character as he fell off a building, or whatever). Dad must have remembered how my

²⁰ There is an early design sketch for the ride, which includes a ‘Queen of Hearts’ room, in Janzen & Janzen (1999, pp. 26–27).

brother and I would laugh our heads off whenever we heard this sound. So he probably decided to use this as the 'pay off' to create happy riders coming out of the Alice experience" (Personal correspondence, March 3, 2013).

We should note, however, that this sound – like the White Rabbit's trumpet, the Cheshire Cat's laugh, or the Dandy Lion's roar – was at once cartoonish, and also random and discordant. Through the final door, riders suddenly returned to the outdoor 'world,' as if they too were, like Alice, waking up from a world of darkness and nightmares. This was not quite the end, however. The car still had to descend along a winding path like a trailing vine through the outdoor garden. There were several sharp turns at the bottom of the ramp – similar to the bone-shaking turns on a 'Wild Mouse' ride, which throw you from side to side – before the car returned to the starting point. David Eppen observed: "Try to imagine the feeling of winding your way down that twisty ramp (squinting in the bright sunlight after emerging from the relative darkness). I especially loved the way they made it seem as if you might head straight off the edge each time you reached a curve... a simple effect that keeps you feeling a bit off-balance. Just like the whole crazy ride!" (Eppen, 2007).

The ride was substantially rebuilt in 1984. The new version exhibited a lesser degree of elaboration and repurposing; and there was a restructuring of the riders' experience and physical involvement. Alice herself now appeared; a clear signal that the aim was no longer to make the rider into the character/participant. Gone were the Upside Down and the Oversized rooms, and the new ride was more like a two-minute re-run of highlights from the movie, a series of vignettes of memorable moments and characters from the film: for example, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, the Caterpillar smoking his hookah, etc. Riders were no longer threatened and overwhelmed on all sides by outsized objects. In the 'tea party,' for example, instead of being on the table, amid the tottering cups, the cars simply rode past a vignette of the scene. Rather than being submerged in the story, riders were observing how it unfolds – a passive position, akin to the gaze of the cinema spectator. In other words: the ride no longer sought to simulate the experience of the lost and confused Alice. It did not penetrate the emotions and affect the body of the participant, or make them feel as if they were present in the action,

in the same way. (In the absence of the Oversized Room, for example, they remained 'life-size' throughout.) The original ride took us into a nightmarish world where threats and 'monsters' lurked in the 'safest' domestic objects and environments; the new version offered a much safer experience and, to a large extent, a linear recreation of the story. It was still ekphrastic in the sense that the story was given transmedial form, and characteristics were transferred from the source (film) to the target medium (ride); but the repurposing and elaboration which Cariboni Killander et al. see as key elements of the process, were missing, or occurred to only a limited degree.

This was, moreover, ekphrasis without *enargeia*. Arguably, any examination of ekphrasis needs to consider, not only the formal transfer of characteristics from one medium to another, but the question of reader/viewer response, the way the reader/viewer is positioned in relation to the work, and the nature and degree of participation/immersion that is invoked. The transformation and transposition that occur are not simply on the level of style or media characteristics, but on the level of *enargeia* and affect. In the case of the *Alice* ride, the ekphrastic transformations made the riders feel as if they were actually *there*, immersed in the action, rather than simply observers of the image. At the same time, it was as if the physical/three-dimensional elements of the ride were so many phantoms or fantasmagoria; *psychological* transformations, occurring in the "eyes of the mind" (Webb, 2009, p. 98).

The concept of ekphrasis, as we have seen, has its roots in antiquity, where it was used in the study and practice of rhetoric (Webb, 2009). As such, its primary medium, at that time, was verbal. In the *Alice* ride, the elements that were used were multimedial – a combination of different signing systems: sound, light and dark, images and objects, and movement. These signing systems were primarily non-verbal, but may be seen as so many 'texts.' There was an emphasis on the ride, less on narrative, than on environment as psychological space. The design sought to reach beyond the familiar storyline, to the *experience* of physical and psychological disorientation (falling, shrinking, being lost, etc.). Indeed, at times, it deliberately avoided the direct

representation of the familiar story, looking instead for its own objective correlatives to convey these underlying states.

Lydia Goehr (among others) has challenged the “assumption that ekphrasis is performed only through the medium of words” (Goehr, 2010, p. 389). We may see it as a transformative tool, which plays a crucial role in creating a participatory experience for the audience. In the case of the *Alice* ride, ekphrasis sheds light on the ride’s dynamic ‘architecture’ which resulted in part from the transformation of elements that were transmediated from the source media to the target medium. It also foregrounds the question of *enargeia*. As in the practice of rhetoric, the focus in the ride was on effect; the different ‘texts’ or signs were selected for their effectiveness *as texts*, in generating a response, and creating a vivid – multisensory and physical – immersion in this fictitious world.

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