

Sacred Space revisited: Agency, embodiment, performativity

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This paper will reconsider some texts that I have analysed elsewhere, asking some different questions of them. These questions are partly inspired by the subject of your series - sound and its relationship to space – and partly by the very different work I have done since writing the article in *DOP* both on ekphrasis and on the theatre. This later work made me think more deeply about performance and bodily presence (the idea of presence being the shared element between rhetorical ekphrasis and *enargeia* on the one hand and the theatre on the other) and also introduced me to theories of agency, particularly Alfred Gell's work on *Art and Agency* (Oxford, 1998). The new perspectives, then, could be summarised as performativity, embodiment and agency.

The primary aim of the *DO* piece (and the article published with Liz James in *Art History* 1991) was to propose what was then a different reading of late antique and Byzantine ekphraseis of works of art. As is well known, these had been read largely as testimonies to a lost archaeological reality (whether their subjects were buildings, images, statues or cities) and, although the authors of these studies did not claim to any particular theory of literature, their approach was based on various assumptions about what 'true description' should do: it should represent its subject matter faithfully, it very definitely should not interpose itself between the reader and the subject by stylistic effects, etc. Our response to this was twofold, to propose a reading of these texts as texts that were shaped and guided by the nature of language (e.g. the selection of details, the tendency to place these in a narrative framework in which time stood for space, the parallel tendency to narrativise images) and that were also responded to the expectations of their readers that vivid language should have an impact on the eye of the mind. This latter characteristic explains why these descriptions were not limited to what was literally perceptible to the physical eyes but, in the case of images, could happily include the rest of the story and not just the moment depicted, or, in the case of buildings, could include the invisible features, not visible to the eye. For this reason, ekphrasis was particularly well suited to numinous subjects.. In line with this, we argued that

ekphraseis were best at showing how objects were perceived by contemporaries and were never intended to be an objective record of appearances.

One body of recent work that seems to bear out this observation for all periods and all cultures, not just for Late Antique and Byzantine ekphraseis, is that in cognitive science. This work, by revealing the implication of the body and the senses other than vision in perception, in cognition and in our memories of objects perceived, shows that some at least of the features of ekphrasis that were earlier thought of by modern scholars as eccentric are instead deeply rooted in the mechanics of perception. These breakthroughs are valuable because they provide a different understanding of ‘normal’ perception from that which underlay the older readings of ekphrasis. In particular, traditional expectations of description were based on a clear dichotomies between perceiving subject and perceived object and on assumptions about the detached and disembodied objectivity of the perceiver. Recent work, particularly on “embodied cognition” calls these dichotomies into question in ways that are highly suggestive for the practice of ekphrasis and its aim of creating a sense of presence through the use of *enargeia*. We need to be wary, however, of merely replacing one type of universalism (assumptions about what language in general and description in particular should do) with another and we need to allow for cultural differences over time and space.¹ In the particular case of the texts analysed in this paper, I would simply say that this approach, like the other approaches outlined below, helps to bring out the importance of details in our texts that we might otherwise miss.

The approaches mentioned above – performativity, embodiment and agency – are intertwined. In several cases they represent different ways of thinking about the same passages. I will therefore approach them separately, despite the artificiality of doing so, in the hope that we can discuss the interrelationships during the seminar.

Agency:

In Gell’s vision, any skilfully fashioned object (a Trobriand canoe prow or a Velazquez) has an immediate impact on the viewer, who responds to his or her perception of the superior abilities of the maker. The term he uses for this is “captivation” the sense of shock and awe (cf. the Greek *thauma*) that immediately overtakes the viewer without needing a conscious intellectual response. The captivation results from the incongruity between the viewer’s

¹¹ See G. Lloyd, *Cognitive Variations* (Oxford, 2007).

understanding of his or her own capabilities and the skill that is manifested in the object. In the face of this mismatch, the viewer seeks an explanation which, according to his or her view of such objects, can be the superior artistic skill of the maker or a divine force.² (Photios Homily 10.3 is a perfect expression of the latter type of interpretation: “Looking at it, you would not say it was the work of a human hand but that some divine power beyond us had fashioned its beauty’ Εἶποις ἂν εἰς αὐτὸν ἰδὼν, οὐκ ἀνθρωπίνης χειρὸς ἔργον, ἀλλὰ θεῖαν τιὰ καὶ ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς δύναμιν τὸ κάλλος αὐτῷ ἐπιμορφώσασθαι cf. Procopios, *Buildings*, 1.61 for the same thought.) An important aspect of Gell’s approach is that these reactions are immediate and do not involve a laborious and conscious decoding of signs.

The nature of this captivation (awe inspired by the art of Vermeer or fear of the supernatural powers made manifest in the object) depends on our view of the agency at the origin of the work. The great advantage of Gell’s system is its flexibility, agents can be primary (e.g. the patron) or secondary (e.g. the artisan). It also allows for the fact that different cultures or different individuals attribute the power manifested in the artefact to different sources (magic, for example, or artistic skill). Moreover, the primary agents can be identified differently by different viewers or at different moments: the patron may be seen as the source of agency (by the original audience for example), in the case of images, the prototype may be seen as the primary agent (as in tales of miraculous icons), or the artist may be the primary agent (by later viewers in the context of a museum). This is a gross simplification of Gell’s work and thought, but it brings out one aspect of Church ekphrasis: the importance of agency and the way in which it is dealt with differently by different authors and may dictate the form they choose for their descriptions. The narrative of origin that is used for example by Procopius talking about Hagia Sophia (as he does throughout the *Buildings*), attributes the agency primarily to the patron, Justinian, working through the architects Justinian himself being inspired by God (*Buildings*, 1.1.71). Paul the Silentiary also presents a reading of the church in which Justinian plays the moving role, prompted by the personification of Roma.

These particular examples bring to the fore some of the questions posed above: particularly, whether the narratives of origin that identify the emperor as the primary agent reflect the common understanding of the audience or whether they are part of a larger argument (one of the rhetorical functions of ekphrasis in the wider sense of the term) aimed at augmenting the audience’s adhesion to a thesis that they might not have held spontaneously. The politics of

² Gell, *Art and Agency*, pp. 68-72.

buildings, however, is not my main concern here (even though it would be possible (and interesting) to create a typology of ekphraseis of churches based on their different treatments of agency.) The most important consequence, however, is that this approach reveals to us the multiple (sometimes even competing) sources of power that could be perceived as flowing throughout Church buildings (the power of the patron, the ability of the architects and artisans, divine power) and as fixing it within a complex network of divine and human power relations. As discourses, ekphraseis can articulate these phenomena, which were as real to the original viewers as the stones and shapes are to us. Other sources of agency which emerge clearly in the language used by the authors such as the building itself. What's more, the authors themselves, or their personified discourses, can appear, at times, as sources of agency.

This brings us to another way in which the idea of agency is germane to the ekphraseis of sacred buildings: the associations of each building were as real as the stones and tesserae to the original viewers. But those associations – the perceptions of agency – were not fixed or inevitable. I have suggested in *Demons and dancers* that agency was one of the (many) contested areas of theatre practice. This is partly due to the organisation of theatrical performances in which the agency of the patron could be seen to be in conflict with that of the artist: whereas the official who funded a particular show had good reason to think of himself as the agent and as the artists as mere commodities, during the moment of performance, all the attention of the spectators was focused on the performer whose agency – or we could call it skill – is clearly demonstrated while the patron may fade into the background. In the case of the theatre, I argued, this conflict and the tensions it engenders, manifests itself in various ways including the omission of reference to the skill of the artists themselves and the transfer of responsibility for the impact of performance onto negative supernatural powers i.e. “demons”. In the context of the theatre, Gell's ideas of agency and captivation were a major help in understanding such statements as attempts to define a real perception of power. So, it is interesting now to come back to the question of ekphraseis of sacred buildings in this light, particularly as, in the Late Antique city, Church and Theatre could be presented as opposing institutions and thus as monuments invested with opposing values. Both, then, were spaces filled with traces of invisible power that, as noted above, had a certain reality for contemporary visitors (I am avoiding the word “viewer” here for reasons that will become clear immediately below). As the example of the theatre showed, these forces lent themselves to varying interpretations and this is something that can apply to the case of ekphraseis of sacred spaces by suggesting that the authors of ekphrasis had a

particular job to do in setting out and defining the exact nature and origin of the forces at work. They might also interact in other ways with these forces, claiming for themselves a part of the agency of the monument (to be developed).

Spatiality

Another way of organising ekphraseis of any type of building or place is to describe a journey through it: the *periegesis*. I would like to propose a slightly different angle on this too, emphasising more strongly the way in which— as well as providing a convenient organisational scheme for representing space in language – it reproduces a personal experience of moving through the space. This is, of course, a widespread way of describing places, encoded in the memory palaces of ancient and medieval rhetoric, but the work of Antonio Damasio invites us to consider it from another angle, that is, as a reflection of the way in which we perceive and then remember interactions with objects: “The organism interacts with objects, and the brain reacts to the interaction. Rather than making a record of an entity’s structure, the brain actually records the multiple consequences of the organism’s interaction with the entity.”³ It is interesting to note that the contrast drawn here by Damasio corresponds neatly with the contrast between the expectations that ekphraseis of monuments should ‘record structures’ and the actual practice of Late Antique and Byzantine authors, who prefer to place the emphasis on interaction. We can also note the way in which ekphrasis and *enargeia* in general were thought to create a feeling of presence which was spatial and sonorous as well as visual, emphasizing engagement with the sight.

According to Damasio, then, we both perceive and remember objects (including monuments) not as objects separate from us but as corporeally connected to us. It is for this reason that I shied away from the term “viewer” just above. To talk for a moment about actual experience (rather than ekphrasis), the implication of Damasio’s claim is that our relationship to the monument, as to any other physical entity, is not merely visual but corporeal, we understand it as we experience it with our whole bodies, in spatial relationship with it, as embodied perceivers. To extend this further, and to come to the question of space, this embodied perception means that the ‘empty’ space delimited by the monument is as significant as the stones and glittering surfaces. The body feels its position in the space.

³ A. Damasio, *The Self comes to Mind* (London, 2012) p. 132.

The preceding remarks apply to any kind of space, but what makes sacred space sacred and how is this expressed in words? I would like to suggest (at the moment of writing) that it is the combination of these features of the perception of monuments that distinguishes sacred space from other ‘ordinary’ spaces and the buildings that delimit them.

A place to start thematically, if not chronologically, is Constantine the Rhodian’s ekphrasis of the Wonders of Constantinople and the Church of the Holy Apostles (recently made accessible in the new translation and text by Liz James and Ioannes Vassis, Ashgate Press 2012)..

Constantine the Rhodian

Constantine’s text is a particularly interesting bridge because it brings to the fore questions of patronage and thus of agency. Constantine refers to himself openly as writing at the bidding of the Emperor who has commanded him (*keleueis ekphrasai* l. 387-8) to compose his poem on the Holy Apostles and the Wonders of Constantinople. The poet’s role is highly ambivalent. He is at the beck and call of his powerful patron and yet, within the poem, he is the authoritative enumerator of monuments and the organiser of space, able to name and classify and order numerically the sights of Constantinople. It is only when he turns from the first part of the poem, with its catalogue of columns and other landmarks to the ekphrasis of the Church itself that he evokes his loss of control of language (*ouk euporōn*, l. 383) under the impact of the sight (*ekthambos eimi* l.382).⁴ Of course this is a regular, if elaborate, *recusatio* and of course the fact that Constantine expresses this lack of control of language in classicising verse shows that this is not a spontaneous expression of personal experience. But it is a very clear expression of the idea of captivation and of the poet’s position caught between two sources of agency: that of his patron commanding him to write and that of the monument itself (to which Justinian again has a contribution to make, l 366).

This moment of transition from the sights of the city to the church itself is a moment of acute intensity in Constantine, expressed in terms of his ability, or lack of it, to carry out his task. As already mentioned, this moment is underlined by other authors too and it is to come examples of this that we will now turn.

Transitions: Photius, Chorikios and the loss of distinction between self and other.

⁴ For the context see the texts attached.

Two ekphraseis that represent this moment of transition from outside the church to inside are, Chorikios' description of the Church of St Sergius at Gaza in his encomion of bishop Marcian and, course, Photios' *Homily* 10. The two texts are far removed in time and place but present the experience of entering the Church in comparable ways. Chorikios speaks of the dizziness that afflicts the visitor as he or she steps over the threshold:

“When you enter you will be made dizzy by the variety of things you see and striving to see absolutely everything you will go away having seen nothing clearly (*enargos*) as your eyes are pulled this way and that as you try to leave nothing unseen.”

εἰσιῶν οὖν ἰλιγγιάσεις τῷ ποικίλῳ τῶν ὁρωμένων καὶ πάντα φιλονεικῶν ἀθρόως ἰδεῖν οὐδὲν ἐναργῶς οἰχήσῃ τεθεαμένος περιφερομένων σοι τῆδε κάκεισε τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν οὐδὲν ἀόρατον καρτεροῦντι παραλιπεῖν·(23)⁵

This idea (found in many different texts), of the eyes being pulled hither and thither is a very effective means of representing in verbal form both the three- dimensionality of the sight and the sheer quantity of visual stimuli presented to the senses words via the embodied and clearly situated person of the viewer. But there is far more to say: the dizziness spoken of by Chorikios' is caused by the active efforts of the visitor to see, but this activity results in an intellectual impasse. In the lines that follow, Chorikios speaks of the *aporia* that afflicts the viewer, presenting it as an intellectual question of judgement or the ability to distinguish (*krisis*):

“If you are asked what is the best thing you have seen you will be at a loss (*aporeo*) and in your confusion (*aporeo*) you will looking around again; unable to decide (*krino*) you will ask the same question of your interlocutor”.

κὰν πύθηταί τις, ὄτω μᾶλλον τίθεσαι τῶν εἰργασμένων, διασκεψάμενος μὲν ἀπορήσεις, ἀπορήσας δὲ πάλιν περισκοπήσεις· οὐκ ἔχων δὲ κρίνειν ἀντερωτᾶς· σὺ δὲ τίνι μᾶλλον ἦσθης τῶν ὁρωμένων;

Furthermore, there is a striking play on the notion of *enargeia* in the passage: the sheer impact of visual sensations in fact prevents the clarity of perception that is often attributed, through the use of *enargeia* as a technical term in ancient philosophy, to the evidence of the

⁵ See texts for the full passage.

senses.⁶ What is more, by engaging in an ekphrasis – a *logos enarges* or speech that is characterized by its quality of *enargeia* - Chorikios implies that the word, in its interaction with the eye of the mind, can provide an order and a clarity that the physical eye, overwhelmed by the sensations assailing it, fails to distinguish (*krinein*) anything.

Photios' account of the Church of the Virgin of the Pharos is another example that takes certain elements of Chorikios' account one step further. While Chorikios speaks of the inability to discriminate, to compare and evaluate different elements of the building (as an impartial observer?), Photios represents a far more radical collapse of the distinction between subject and object. Speaking of the atrium, he draws a comparison with Orpheus, who charmed inanimate objects, making them move and act like humans or animals, he reverses the elements of the comparison to explain that whereas Orpheus made objects move, the sight of the church transforms people into trees, rooted to the spot, like columns (the last analogy is my own). Two elements are striking: the analogy with the musician, between the impact of sound and that of sight, and then the interchangeability between the sentient and the non-sentient. This latter develops further as Photios recounts the impact of the sight of the interior of the church: as the viewer twists and turns to see more, he transfers this motion to the object seen until it seems to turn itself. Photios' account could be seen as a rationalisation of the sense of captivation, but it is presented in terms that break down any boundary between the act of perception and the thing perceived.

Michael the Deacon (12th century) goes still further in his statement that the gold decoration of Hagia Sophia appears to drip down (*katastazein*), in an apparent dissolution of all solidity. What is more, this effect is attributed to the physiognomy of vision: the brilliance of the gold affects the moisture within the eyes, making it move and causing the viewer to imagine that the condition of the eyes is transferred to the building.

Paul the Silentary

Paul's poem poses with particular acuity the types of issue I mentioned in the introduction above: Written to celebrate the rededication of the church after the repair of the dome (damaged first by an earthquake and then by collapse) it places the figure of Justinian centre stage in the introduction where he is presented in conversation with the personification of Roma. Justinian's agency is therefore stressed, as in Procopius. Interestingly, this emphasis

⁶ K. Ierodiakonou, "The notion of *enargeia* in Hellenistic philosophy" in *Episteme etc.* ed. K. Ierodiakonou and B. Morison (Oxford, 2011).

on Justinian's role as maker does not lead to the complete omission of the role of the craftsmen who carried out the less glorious physical work; once Paul moves on to the hexameter description of the interior of the Church, they are evoked on several occasions (384: ἄνδρες...δαήμονες; , 485: ἄνδρες) distanced and heroized by the choice of the epic dialect. In this connection, it is worth noting that the poetic form of the poem places Paul himself in the category of the artisan (of words) particularly when he performs feats such as the creation of four-word hexameter lines (l. 273) at the precise moment where he is speaking about the architect Anthemius).⁷ The description of the Church itself (which was pronounced in two sessions in the Patriarchal palace according to notes accompanying the text in the manuscript) is organised as a tour, culminating in the account of the new dome.

There are therefore two different types of movement portrayed in the actual ekphrasis of the interior of Hagia Sophia: the movement of the virtual visitor around the space , or rather the movement of his or her gaze over the various surfaces, and then the movement attributed to the architectural forms throughout the description. The frequency and variety of verbs of movement whose subject is a part of the church is stunning. Within the first few lines of the account of the interior we have verbs (leaving aside the participles) of 'spreading out' (ἀναπέπταται l. 354), 'moving upwards' (ἀνέρπει l. 356), 'rising up' (ἐγείρει l. 358) 'enveloping' (ἐζώσατο l. 362) 'drawing together' (συνέλκει 364) 'moving upwards' (ἀνίσχει l. 365) 'widening' (εὐρύνουσι l.366) and 'taking up' (μετεκδέχεται l. 36).

The parts of the building are described as in constant movement. In one sense, this is a repeated reminder of the process of building: to say that the arch "rises" is to create a speeded up, time-lapse film as it were of the creation that is celebrated in the poem. And descriptions of how objects were made had a venerable tradition going back of course to the Homeric Shield of Achilles. But there is also more to it than this for, by making the parts of the building the grammatical subjects of verbs and by attributing actions to them, Paul attributes a certain agency to them also. It is interesting to consider this in relation to the personification of the Church that occurs elsewhere: the dome is described as the "head", the base is

⁷ ὅς τοίχοις ἐνέηκε τόσον σθένος ὅσσον ἐρίζειν / δαίμονος ἀντιβίοιο
βαρυτλήτοισιν ἐρωαῖς. Cf a little further on, l. 281, on Justinian himself and his 'cunning
intelligence' (*metis*): τίς ἄρκιός ἐστι χαράξαι / μητιν ἀριστώδινα πολυσκήπτρου
βασιλῆος;

described as the “feet”, the building is even said to have “arms” (l. 374) that it/she stretches out.

Here, I would like to suggest that there is a connection between the forces that are understood to have created the new building and that are infused within it (Justinian’s temporal power, divine will, the desire of Roma herself which happens to correspond to these, creating a dual causation that is comparable to that of the Homeric poems). The building is presented as vibrant with these multiple, intersecting powers.

Mesarites and the Holy Apostles: Inspiration and the eye of the mind

Mesarites’ account of the Church of the Holy Apostles is mostly devoted to the figural decoration and far less to questions of space (though the representation of the related dimension of *time* is particularly complex in this part of his ekphrasis). The transition between the part of his ekphrasis devoted to the surroundings of the church to the account of the interior is, however, particularly rich in ideas. As in Photios’ 10th Homily and in Chorikios’ first speech to Marcian, this moment is described with special intensity and it is one that brings a different type of perception. This is the moment at which Mesarites speaks of the anagogical nature of corporeal perception which serves as a precursor to intellectual or spiritual understanding:

“Now it is time for us to move on in our discourse to the interior of the church as well and to see it with the eyes of the senses and to understand it with the eyes of the intellect. For the mind is able to progress from the things of the senses and, travelling on from lesser things, to understand ultimate (or perfect) things and enter secret places.....” (12.1)

Ἦδη δὲ καιρὸς ἡμᾶς προχωρῆσαι τῷ λόγῳ καὶ πρὸς τὰ ἐνδοθεν τοῦ ναοῦ καὶ κατοπτεῦσαι μὲν ταῦτα τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς, κατανοῆσαι δὲ καὶ τοῖς νοεροῖς. οἶδε γὰρ καὶ νοῦς προκόπτειν ἐκ τῶν κατ’ αἰσθησιν καὶ κατὰ τὸ ἐλάττονος ποδηγούμενος καταλαμβάνειν τὰ τελεώτερα καὶ πρὸς τὰ ἄδυτα παρεισδύνειν,

His next step is to call upon the Apostles themselves to “besprinkle [him] with eloquence” (12.3) and to address each one with a request for a particular ability possessed by that individual (12. 5-18): Peter the rock is asked to keep the speaker’s mind on a firm foundation; Paul is asked for eloquence; Luke, the companion of Christ, is asked to accompany the

speaker and Simon, “the zealot” is asked to fill him with the spirit of emulation. The speaker thus becomes the conduit for the agency of the Apostles and his construction becomes a parallel, noetic building. This presentation of his task as the result of outside influence thus modulates the active role that he ascribes to himself of the interpreter, able to transform his audience’s understanding by providing an intelligible screen, as it were, through which to view the building.

Modes of disruption of the senses

Mesarites’ introduction to the ekphrasis of the church interior echoes others in its evocation of a different mode of perception as he arrives in his speech at the moment of transition from outside to inside. It is unusual, however, in the way in which the speaker positions himself as the audience’s guide not just around the building but from a sensual mode of perception to an intellectual one, thus laying claim to superior understanding. More often, as we have seen, the speakers claim that their own perceptions are modified by the impact of the church interior: Concrete examples of these disruptions can be found throughout the different ekphrasis. I have noted elsewhere how the presentation of the images in Mesarites ekphrasis appears to disrupt time.⁸

Strange transformations occur to space too. For Michael the Deacon, the interior of Hagia Sophia “opens up to the infinite” (4.88) and “imitates (*mimeitai*) the heavens” (4, 1.98). In this latter statement, I would take the idea of imitation to be the active, transformative version of mimesis, by which the imitator (here the personified building) assimilates him or herself to the thing or person imitated. Michael’s statement would therefore not be about representation or mere likeness but about *being* (and possibly becoming too). Another place in which a similar idea may recur is in the account of the multi-coloured marbles in Paul the Silentiary. The catalogue of exotic marbles can be read as a sign of Justinian’s temporal power but I would also suggest that their presence inside the church (lines 538 ff. and 617 ff.) serves to bring all the places from which they came inside it, making the building into a microcosm that can contain broad extents of territory inside itself.

As Henry Maguire has recently noted, the descriptions of the multi-coloured marbles also assimilate them to elements of the natural world.⁹ Maguire argues that the ekphrasis bring

⁸ “Narrative, metaphor and motion”, pp. 70-72.

⁹ H. Maguire, “The realities of ekphrasis”, *Byzantinoslavica* 49 (2011) Supplement *Ekphrasis: la représentation des monuments dans les littératures byzantine et byzantine-slaves: Réalités et imaginaires*, pp. 7-19. He pays

out the symbolic significance of these multi-coloured stones which represented the natural world. This is certainly in concordance with Paul's account of the "flowers" in the marble (ll.549-550, 633, 618 ('marble meadows')) and, particularly, to Michael the Deacon's comparison of the floor of Hagia Sophia to the sea: "The floor is like the sea, both in its width and in its form; for certain blue waves are raised up against the stone, just as though you had cast a pebble into water and had disturbed its calm. This sea has broken out into a gulf to the east...." (6.175-180). As so often in ekphraseis of the figural arts, the language oscillates between that of likeness and that of identity (the floor is 'like' the sea but then 'the waves are raised up'. I would like to push the reading of such passages a little further to suggest that these features of the natural world are not just represented within the buildings but that they are *made present* through the representation whether this is achieved through the natural shades and patterns of marble or through the work of sculptors in the case of decorative friezes.

It is as if the natural world had been swallowed up and contained by the building. In this way, it is not just the boundary between viewer and viewed that is broken down but also that between the natural world outside and the interior space of the church

The building as human and as agent.

As we saw above, the church buildings are thought of not just as active but are conceived of in terms of the human body. It is Michael the Deacon who offers the startling image of Hagia Sophia 'pregnant with thousands of bodies' (4.89-90). It is tempting to see the same image in Paul's use of the term *kolpos* to at l.402, 405 and 406 when speaking of the volumes of the half-domes. As Marie-Christine Fayant notes in her commentary (1997), this is an appeal to the metaphor of the sail or veil puffed out by the wind, but it can also have the sense of 'womb' (LSJ s.v.). It is interesting to note that the first time the term occurs in the sequence, it is as a passive participle with 'air' as the instrument "swollen/made pregnant with air". The building, then, contains, envelops the visitor.

Chorikios evokes an even more intimate and sensuous contact between building – or rather the space it defines and encloses – and visitor just before the moment of entry into the Church discussed above. After a highly technical description of the construction of the courtyard that leads into the church, he focuses his attention on the western portico:

particular attention to Leo the Wise's ekphrasis of the church of Stylianos Zaoutzas and John Geometres' verse ekphrasis of the basilica of the Stoudios monastery.

“The long stoa to the West leads one in full of contentment as a delightful breeze blows from the western atrium, for it blows pleasantly and not excessively? And penetrating inside your clothing it gently cools your body as the fabric is lifted up by its breath.” (*Laud. Marc.* 1.22)
ἢ πρὸς ἐσπέραν εὐμήκης στοὰ μεστὸν εὐθυμίας εἰσάγει παγκάλης αὔρας ἐκ τοῦ πρὸς
ζέφυρον πνεύσης προτεμενίσματος, πνεῖ γὰρ ἡδύς τε καὶ ἄλυπος καὶ τῶν ἱματίων ἐντὸς
ὑποδὺς ἡρέμα διαπύχει τὰ σώματα τῶν ἐσθήτων αἰωρουμένων τῷ πνεύματι.

The highly technical passage is followed by a startlingly sensual evocation of the wind and its cooling effect on the body as it gently lifts the clothing. The describer and his listeners go from being controllers and interpreters of the space, naming the parts of the architecture that delimits it and identifying their interrelationships, to being *acted upon* by the building as it draws us in (εἰσάγει), and all but caresses us, “entering beneath the clothes”. The evocation of the breeze, in particular, is a highly effective way of making us aware of the *space* of the church, the empty volume that surrounds one. (Speaking of the empty space beneath the south and west arcades of Hagia Sophia, Paul the Silentiary (l. 533) speaks of the air (*aer*) that spreads out ὅλος δ' ἀναπέπτ[αται ἀ]ήρ.)

Chorikios’ passage therefore combines the sense of sight with that of touch (the experience of being touched rather than the haptic action of reaching and grasping) and with a spatial awareness that places the listener in imagination within the building, surrounded by it and “in touch” with it. I am sure that it is no accident that this switch from sight and analysis to the caress of the breeze directly precedes the moment when Chorikios evokes the loss of self and the loss of distinction between subject and object that occurs as the visitor enters the sacred space:

We can read this brief passage in different ways. As a fragment of ekphrasis, a type of discourse that aims to recreate the sensation of presence, it is a valuable reminder that the feeling of “being there” does not concern the sense of sight alone but other senses too. Of course, this way of representing the experience of being in a space is not necessarily exclusive to sacred spaces¹⁰ and, as the passage quoted above from Damasio suggests, it

¹⁰ The significance of the passage in Chorikios was, in fact, suggested by a video installation by the Chinese architect Li Xiaodong at the Royal Academy in London in Spring 2014 who spoke of the way in which the breeze flowing through a building filled the space.

corresponds beautifully to the way we interact with our surroundings as situated corporeal beings. If this is simply an echo of the way in which humans actually perceive, is there any particular link between this type of account of perception and the idea of sacred space? I would suggest that part of the answer may be to be found in a feature that Chorikios' passage shares with other Church ekphraseis, namely the idea of the building itself, and the space that it encloses, as agents. Paul the Silentiary similarly speaks of the narthex as "receiving those who enter beneath its broad openings". (l. 426 δεχνόμενος προσιόντας ὑπ' εὐρ[υπ]όροισι θυρέτροις).

We are moving one step further here from the idea of the personification of the building discussed above for the monuments are not just the subjects of verbs, they (or in the Chorikios' case the space they delimit) are the subjects of verbs whose direct object is a human visitor. I would not like to say categorically without a lot of further research that this usage is confined to sacred buildings, but we certainly can see how it functions to present the building as being in interaction with its human occupants, a full partner in the two-way exchange involved in seeing and experiencing. In Chorikios' case there is the further element of the vocabulary used to describe the pleasant breeze that caresses the visitor: the term *pneuma* can just mean 'breeze' but it can also mean much more. If we take it in the sense of 'breath', the building comes alive, surrounding the visitor with its vital principle, if we take it in the sense of 'spirit' the implications are deeper still.¹¹

It is interesting in this light to return to Gell whose point of departure in *Art and Agency* was precisely to point out the common human tendency to ascribe agency to objects (the car that breaks down, the computer that crashes). Again, this could be seen as evidence that the type of presentation of buildings as working on their human viewers noted above is not restricted to the sacred. Sacredness, however, can be seen precisely as a particular interpretation placed on the spontaneous response to our perception of agency so that the ekphraseis serve, as verbal commentaries, to channel these interpretations in a particular direction. In the case of the church ekphraseis, this interpretation involves the multiple sources of agency – divine, imperial, the human intellect – that we have noted. If we try to visualise, with the help of ekphrasis these forces that are active within the church (I see this process as like shining an ultraviolet light to reveal sights invisible in normal light) we can imagine the air or space

¹¹ This is an area to explore in more depth.

inside as thick with their presence, a presence made tangible in Chorikios' breeze. I would suggest that it is the multiplicity of agencies that is characteristic of sacred as opposed to other space.

The voice of the poet and orator....

The breath of the Church also brings us to the orator or poet whose own breath made his words resound whether they were pronounced inside the space itself or in another place. Paul, as a poet, is the ekphrasist who pays the most explicit attention to questions of sound and voice. This is partly explicable by the form in which he is writing, epic hexameters which were originally designed to be sung (and which may have continued to be sung if e.g. pantomime libretti were composed in hexameters). The two Homeric models, of course, open with references to singing or speaking (*menin aeide/ andra moi ennepe*) as their first verbs but Paul was not bound to echo this emphasis on voice that continues in his evocation of the songs of the Church. The voice of the orator also touches his listeners physically through the transmission of the sound (ancient warnings about education show great concern about the types of sounds, words in particular, that reach the child, penetrating the mind through the ear).¹² The observations of cognitive science enable us to go further still for if hearing about an action activates regions in the brain that are also activated when the action in question is performed, then hearing about moving around and perceiving the Church will create a similar effect to the action itself.¹³ Not only saying (creating an impact in the mind of the listener) but also hearing is doing (interestingly, "listening" was conceived of in ancient education as an active process requiring training and constant attention).¹⁴

This brings me back to the question of whether the ekphraseis reflect the experience of engaging with churches or whether they serve to constitute that experience, directing the audience's perception of the monument. By their drastic selection of details to be noted and

¹² John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory and on the education of children*, depicts the organs of sense perception as gates through which harmful influences can come, the eyes and ears being particular points of vulnerability.

¹³ See for example V. Gallese, "Mirror neurons and art" in *Art and the Senses* ed. F. Bacci and D. Melcher (Oxford, 2013).

¹⁴ See, for example, Theon, *Progymnasmata* where listening was originally an independent exercise and Plutarch, *On Listening to lectures*.

by the particular interpretation given to them by the speech, the authors of ekphrasis can be said to shape the present and future responses of their listeners or readers.¹⁵

Performativity

If imagining an action is close to performing it, even causing the appropriate muscles to move, then listening to a description of visiting a church, or any building, will cause the listeners to share that experience – hearing as doing. In this sense, the speech or poem, as tentatively suggested above, does not just make explicit the sources of agency to the intellect but induces the listener to experience them, appropriating and channelling them through the speech.

Mesarites expresses this idea in the emphasis he places on the transformation that his speech will bring about in his audience's perceptions: the house that he wishes to build in words, with divine help working through the Apostles, will, he says, bring them to “see more clearly and more purely the beauty of this house [the material church]”. Appropriating the agency of the Apostles through his speech, he induces the listener to experience the heightened perception that he recounts.

I look forward to discussing the **conclusion** with you.

¹⁵¹⁵ I am grateful to my colleague Yann Coello for discussion of this point in relation to the question of attention in visual perception: viewers will focus attention on the points they consider significant in a sight, opening up a space for a culturally differentiated gaze.