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**THE PETRIFYING GAZE OF MEDUSA: AMBIVALENCE, *EKPLEXIS*, AND THE SUBLIME**

*Caroline van Eck*

The Dutch art theorists Junius and van Hoogstraten describe the sublime, much more explicitly and insistently than in Longinus’s text, as the power of images to petrify the viewer and to stay fixed in their memory. This effect can be related to Longinus’s distinction between poetry and prose. Prose employs the strategy of *enargeia*; poetry that of *ekplexis*, or shattering the listener or reader. This essay traces the notion of *ekplexis* in Greek rhetoric, particularly in Hermogenes, and shows the connections in etymology, myth, and pictorial traditions, between the petrifying powers of art and the myth of Medusa. DOI: [10.5092/jhna.2016.8.2.3](https://doi.org/10.5092/jhna.2016.8.2.3)

**Introduction**



Fig. 1 Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), *Medusa*, ca. 1618, oil on canvas, 68.5 x 118 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (artwork in the public domain; photo: KHM-Museumsverband)

- 1 In his autobiography the Dutch poet, civil servant, and patron of the arts Constantijn Huygens recalls viewing a Medusa’s head painted by Peter Paul Rubens in 1617–18 in an Amsterdam collection (fig. 1). It left him confounded in that typical mixture of fear, desire, fascination, and horror we now call the sublime:

It is as if of Rubens’ many paintings, one always appears before my mind’s eye . . . It represents the severed head of Medusa, encircled by snakes that appear from her hair. In this painting he has composed the sight of a marvellously beautiful woman, who is still attractive but also causes horror because death has just arrived and evil snakes hang around her temples, with such inexpressible deliberation, that the

viewer is suddenly caught by terror—since usually it is covered by a curtain—but that the viewer at the same time, and in spite of the horror of the representation, enjoys the painting, because it is lively and beautiful.<sup>1</sup>

- 2 Ambivalence is indeed one of the defining characteristics of the sublime. Sublime speech, according to Longinus, inspires wonder and transports the public out of themselves. “A well-timed flash of sublimity,” he adds, “shatters everything like a bolt of lightning.” The sublime inspires both fear and admiration, wonder and amazement, the apprehension of the terrible and the appreciation of beauty. But its effects also endure. The images conjured up by means of the *phantasia* of the orator are difficult to resist; they enter into the memory of the listener to stay there and cannot be shaken off.<sup>2</sup> As the Dutch philologist and art theorist Franciscus Junius (1589–1677) put it, “That is great indeed . . . which doth still returne into our thoughts, which we can hardly or rather not at all put out of our minde, but the memorie of it sticketh close in us and will not be rubbed out.” Junius also describes how viewers become tongue-tied and transfixed by the sight of art: “great rings of amazed spectators together are led into an astonished extasie, their sense of seeing bereaving them of all other senses; which by a secret veneration maketh them stand tong-tyed.”<sup>3</sup>
- 3 This phenomenon would be repeated in almost identical terms by Rembrandt’s pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten in his *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst*: “[T]hat is truly great . . . which appears time and again as if fresh before our eyes; which is difficult, or rather, impossible for us to put out of our mind; whose memory appears to be continuously, and apparently indelibly, impressed on our hearts.”<sup>4</sup>
- 4 These claims for the transfixing effects of sublime oratory or art raise many questions. Longinus devotes the greatest part of his treatise to a discussion of the means by which they are achieved: the famous analysis of the five sources of the sublime, which includes the power of grand conceptions, the inspiration of vehement emotions, the proper construction of figures, the nobility of language, and a dignified and elevated arrangement of words. The resulting sublime “elevates us and stays in the mind.”<sup>5</sup> Grand conceptions and vehement emotions are produced by means of *phantasiai* (visualizations). As Longinus explains, “[T]he term *phantasia* is applied in general to an idea which enters the mind from any source and engenders speech, but the word has now come to be used predominantly of passages where, inspired by strong emotion, you seem to see what you describe and bring it vividly before the eyes of your audience.”
- 5 Longinus refers here to the well-known rhetorical doctrine that the maximum force of persuasion is exercised when the orator makes his audience forget that they are listening to his words and instead see before their mind’s eye what he describes. He continues: “That *phantasia* means one thing in oratory and another in poetry you will yourself detect, and also that the object of the poetical form is to enthrall [*ekplexis*], and that of the prose form to present things vividly [*enargeia*], though both indeed aim at the emotional and the excited.”<sup>6</sup>
- 6 Most followers of and commentators on Longinus explain this process of visualization resulting in vivid presence or enthrallment by means of an account that draws on the human tendency to experience emotions expressed in a way they recognize by other human beings or their representations. Cicero and Quintilian had already drawn attention to the universally recognized

expressive power of gesture and facial expression. As Thijs Weststeijn shows in his essay for this volume, Franciscus Junius drew on the ekphrastic writing of the Philostrati to explain the process of emotional empathy that is excited by representations of emotions felt to be lifelike.

### ***Enargeia***

- 7 In a recent study of the concept of *enargeia* Ruth Webb has argued that this concept should not be understood as has traditionally been done in terms of its result, as the somewhat mysterious power of words to convey images that enter into the mind of the listener to excite emotions.<sup>7</sup> Instead, *enargeia* is the result of a correspondence between the orator's power to use words that can excite in the mind of the public visual images; and the public's power to visualize what is represented so vividly. As a result the public is led to believe that it experiences at firsthand what is represented in words or images. Vivid speech therefore does not conjure up, magically, the living presence of the person or situation described, but excites in the mind of the listener memories that allow him or her to visualize what is described. Thereby presence is not recreated, but the *experience* of seeing what is described. Similarly, statues or paintings do not by their vivid lifelikeness miraculously dissolve into the living being they represent. Instead, they as well excite images in the mind of the viewers that are animated by their memories of similar situations and living beings, and thus recreate not their presence, but the *experience* of their presence. The living being is not recreated, but the experience of seeing it, by means of *phantasia*. This, Aristotle would say, is the result, literally the impact or impression, of a sense perception.<sup>8</sup> Vivid images, like vivid words, trigger memories that feed mental images and thus make us relive the experiences of living beings while looking at their marble representations. In other words, although *enargeia* is a form of mimesis, like the visual arts or the theater, its effect on the viewer is not based on its lifelikeness, but on the power of words to activate the experience of seeing in the listener.<sup>9</sup> As Ruth Webb elegantly puts it, "Plutôt que faire voir une illusion, [*enargeia*] crée l'illusion de voir."<sup>10</sup>
- 8 The rhetorical understanding of *enargeia*, based on Aristotelian and Stoic views of memory and perception, thus offers an important clue to understanding why an audience can react as if they are looking at a living being instead of listening to its description or looking at its representation. Works of art in the rhetorical view are externalizations taking the place of the orator's words, or the *phantasiai* in the artist's mind, that by their vividness trigger memories in the mind of the viewer of living beings. When viewers attribute life to a work of art, the experience of looking at a living being is recreated while looking at it, just as the work of art itself recreates such a being.

### ***Ekplexis: Terrifying, Shattering, and Petrifying***

- 9 So much for *enargeia*. But what about *ekplexis*, which for Longinus was the vivid effect reached by sublime poetry? It is a distinction with important implications for the arts, since they were considered in antiquity and the early modern period to be more akin to poetry than to prose.<sup>11</sup> Even though it might be putting too much weight on Longinus's pairing of prose with *enargeia* and poetry with *ekplexis*, I do think it worthwhile to pursue the poetical variety of the sublime, because it may tell us more about the nature of the sublime in the arts, and because Dutch varieties are particularly telling. We also move here from theoretical accounts of the sublime to its figurations, because Netherlandish artistic literature, as far as I can see, is rather silent about the striking, terrifying, or even paralyzing and petrifying variety of the sublime.

- 10 *Enargeia* and *ekplexis* have very different etymologies and hence connotations. *Enargeia* is derived from *argos*, a strong light, comparable to the almost white flash of lightning in the Mediterranean, or a spotlight. Homer uses it to describe the epiphany of the Olympian gods. *Ekplexis* is derived from *ekpletto*, which means to strike, confound, paralyze, or render somebody beside themselves with fear, surprise, or amazement, a much more negative effect than the shining vividness *enargeia* evokes.<sup>12</sup> Longinus pairs *enargeia* with prose, and *ekplexis* with poetry. This distinction alerts us that the effect of sublime *phantasia* is not simply a very intense variety of *enargeia*; it may also turn out to be much more negative, threatening, unsettling, or even petrifying.
- 11 In *Peri hypsous* these terrifying aspects of the sublime are illustrated repeatedly by the rhetorical powers of Demosthenes, who, as Longinus describes it, “with his violence, yes, and his speed, his force, his terrifying power of rhetoric, burns, as it were, and scatters everything before him, and may therefore be compared to a flash of lightning or a thunderbolt.” And, he adds, at the end of the surviving text, “You could sooner open your eyes to the descent of a thunderbolt than face his repeated outbursts of emotion without blinking.”<sup>13</sup> The brilliant illumination of *enargeia* has here turned into the shattering flash of *ekplexis*.
- 12 The term Longinus uses here to define the awe-inspiring, terrifying aspects of the sublime is *to deinos*, meaning the terrible, awe-inspiring, or forceful but also the excessively or incomprehensibly crafty or virtuoso. He briefly mentions this when discussing Homer. For a more extended discussion, which connects *ekplexis* with the terrifying effects of speech, we have to turn first to the treatise on style long believed to be by the rhetorician Demetrius of Phaleron, a student of Aristotle, and now generally dated around 150 bc.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the authors of the majority of rhetorical handbooks he does not distinguish three kinds of style (elevated, middle, and low), but four: the grand, elegant, plain, and forceful (*deinos*) style. It is the last variety that concerns us here, because Demetrius observes that the effect of this style is often to transfix and shatter the audience with fear mixed with awe or admiration. Combinations of hyperbole and allegory (in the sense of allegorese) for instance achieve this effect:
- This is an example: “Alexander is not dead, men of Athens: or the whole world would have smelled his corpse.” The use of “smelled” instead of “noticed” is both allegory and hyperbole; and the idea of the whole world noticing implicitly suggests Alexander’s power. Further, the words carry a shock [*ekplektikon*] . . . ; and what shocks is always forceful, since it inspires fear.<sup>15</sup>
- 13 *To deinos* is also, like the sublime, ambivalent. It inspires fear mingled with admiration but can also consist, according to Demetrius, of the terrible or horrible mixed with the ironic, the comic, or the grotesque.<sup>16</sup>
- 14 This combination of characteristics—the fear-inspiring, the terrible, the grotesque, or even comic—which result in an effect of shattering or transfixing the public, can also be found in one particular group of mythological figures: the Gorgons, and chief among them Medusa. As Giovanni Lombardo has recently suggested, it is precisely in accounts of these sisters and their actions that we find the complex of terrifying awe that arrests the public, which Demetrius and Longinus tried to describe with the terms *deinos* and *ekplexis* and which is more usually associated with Burke’s

much later redefinition of the sublime as the terrible that at the same time fascinates.<sup>17</sup> The monstrous aspect of the Gorgons is often described as *deinos*; the petrifying agency of their snake hair and gaze as *ekplexis* or *kataplêxis*.<sup>18</sup> In a highly original twist, Demetrius observes that such mixtures of the terrifying with the comic, the ironic, or even the graceful are often most effective in captivating the audience. Homer is the past master of producing such *phoberai charites* (fear-inspiring graces), for instance in the horrible gloating with which Polyphemus announces the order in which he will devour Odysseus and his comrades.<sup>19</sup>

## Medusa as the Original Sculptress



Fig. 2 Artus Quellinus (1609–1668), *Medusa*, 1650–52, marble, 70 x 25 cm. Amsterdam, Koninklijk Paleis (artwork in the public domain; photo: Tom Haartsen 2015)

- 15 Armed with all this knowledge we can now return to Dutch accounts of Medusa. Rubens was not the only artist to produce literally stunning versions of this figure, nor was Huygens the only viewer who left an account of the impact of these images. Other versions of Medusa in the Dutch Republic also left their viewers fascinated but terrified, torn between a desire to gaze into her eyes and the impossibility of leaving the scene. The Dutch excentric nobleman and poet Everard Meyster for instance, in his panegyric on the new Town Hall of Amsterdam, describes the stunning effect of looking at Quellinus's Medusa in the Vierschaar (fig. 2):

... the infernal monster

Erynnis, and Medusa, had wanted to tear us apart

and trample us while still alive; we can hardly remain on our feet and tremble,

when we think of it, and methinks, they still follow us.<sup>20</sup>

- 16 In the *Mengelrymen* of Pieter Rixtel—the poem which has a central role in the contribution of Lorne Darnell in this volume—the Town Hall herself speaks, brought to life by the art of Berkheyde (fig. 3). The poem plays on the entire gamut of sublime topoi, from the elevation of the building into the skies to its ambition to embrace the entire circle of canals and its power to instill





Fig. 3 Gerrit Berckheyde (1638–1698), *View of the Town Hall of Amsterdam*, oil on canvas, 75.5 x 91.5 cm. Amersfoort, Bruikleen Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed (artwork in the public domain)

higher emotions in the money-minded Amsterdam merchants. But the building can also petrify:

When the Sun caresses my head,  
And plays through the Gold, and Marble Statues,  
No curious spectator can bear in his eyes  
the radiance of the white Alabaster,  
but stands, gazing at the stone, as one  
who himself has been transformed into Stone.<sup>21</sup>

- 17 Like Medusa's original victims, these viewers fear they have become petrified. In these cases of *ek-plexis*, words are not the means by which the sublime effect is achieved. Nor is it vivid lifelikeness in itself, or the expression of emotions in such a way as to force the viewer to empathize, because that would simply lead to a horrified rejection, particularly so since most Medusas produced in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth-century present her as a somewhat masculine old woman. They never follow, as far as I have been able to see, the Praxitelean model representing a handsome young woman that fascinated viewers so much in the decades around 1800.

### Medusa as Pygmalion's Dark Double

- 18 To understand sublime petrification and the questions it raises, we need to turn to its source: Ovid's retelling of the myth of Medusa, and in particular the way in which he fashions it as a counterpart to the myth of Pygmalion. Ancient Greek myths often expressed desires and fears for images that are not discussed so fully in artistic theory. Two among them explore the precarious borders between a lifeless image and the living being it represents, the viewer's desire that an image lives, and fear of its powers: those of Pygmalion and Medusa.<sup>22</sup> Ovid's retelling of the story of Pygmalion presents the sculptor's desire that his creation come alive, and that he can have an affair with it, a narrative shown with unparalleled explicitness in Hans Speeckaert's *Allegory of Sculpture* of 1582 (fig. 4). His account dwells insistently on the tactile experience of statues, when



Fig. 4 Hans Speeckaert (1535–1575/80, *Allegory of Sculpture*, 1582, etching (artwork in the public domain; photo: Wikimedia Commons)

he describes how the sculptor touches the ivory, feeling and caressing it in the hope that it might turn out to be alive, and easing himself into this illusion. Persuaded by his own artistry, Pygmalion is inflamed with desire:

Indeed, art hides his art. He marvels: and passion, for this bodily image, consumes his heart. Often, he runs his hands over the work, tempted as to whether it is flesh or ivory, not admitting it to be ivory. He kisses it and thinks his kisses are returned; and speaks to it; and holds it, and imagines that his fingers press into the limbs, and is afraid lest bruises appear from the pressure.<sup>23</sup>

- 19 When he returns home from sacrificing to Venus and praying her to give him a wife similar to the statue, “for he dares not ask for an ivory virgin,” he kisses the statue again; but this time, her body grows soft and warm under his caresses.<sup>24</sup> Startled, he again explores her body, and feels how her veins throb with life under his hand: “corpus erat,” the narrator exclaims, she has become a living body.
  
- 20 A very different tale of the life and agency of statues is told in the story of Medusa. In the *Metamorphoses* Perseus recounts it as an episode in the tale of how he rescued Andromeda and vanquished Phineus, her intended bridegroom. It has rarely been noted that the Gorgon is here presented as a kind of anti-Pygmalion, petrifying where the sculptor animates. The countryside surrounding the home of the Gorgons is described as a statue garden, full of the petrified victims of their gaze. Later on, after Perseus has decapitated Medusa and uses her head to defeat Phineus and his comrades, Ovid employs words to describe their petrification that are usually associated with statuary: “Thescelus became a statue, poised for a javelin throw”; “there he stood; a flinty man, unmoving, a monument in marble”; “Astyages, in wonder, was a wondering marble.” Finally, Phineus sees the *simulacra*, the stone statues of his comrades in arms, and calls their names. Like Pygmalion he does not believe what he sees and touches their bodies because he fears their metamorphosis, only to realize that they have been turned into stone. “They were marble,” he cries out, “marmor erant” in a clear echo of Pygmalion’s “corpus erat”:



[Phineus] sees them all,  
All images, posing, and he knows each one  
By name, and calls each one by name, imploring  
Each one for help: seeing is not believing,  
He touches the nearest bodies, and finds them  
All marble, all.<sup>25</sup>

- 21 Representations of Medusa as a petrifying sculptress are not very frequent, but some seventeenth-century versions, such as the one by Sebastiano Ricci (shown here) and a number of Dutch versions to which we will return, play on the similarities between her petrifying powers and those of the sculptor by locating this scene in a statue gallery (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 Sebastiano Ricci (1659–1734), *Perseus Confronting Phineus with the Head of Medusa*, ca. 1705–10, oil on canvas, 65 x 80 cm. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. no. 86.PA.591 (artwork in the public domain; digital image courtesy of Getty Open Content Program)

- 22 Ovid's version of the Medusa myth figures the ambivalences surrounding the agency of art when it becomes very close to living beings in its power to fix and petrify, and in particular in its suggestion that sculpture is an act of petrification that can become uncomfortably close to Medusa's paralyzing gaze. Here she turns out to be a sculptor, but not an entirely benign one. Very few studies have distinguished this aspect of the myth, with the notable exception of the French ancient historian Françoise Frontisi-Dutroux, who has drawn attention to what she calls the paradigm of *ikonopoesis* or figuration presented by the myth.<sup>26</sup> First, the Gorgon's petrifying gaze, changing living beings into lifeless statues; second, Medusa's figuration on the reflecting mirror of Perseus; and third, the petrification resulting from a confrontation with that mirror image. These three kinds of figuration, or image making, all thematize the agency of art and the dangers of looking. Viewers die, petrified by the power of Medusa's gaze, or, one might say, they die by representation. Underlying these Medusean paradigms of figuration and petrification is an uneasy awareness that the relation between a living being and its image is not a matter of harmless distancing or abstraction through representation in another medium. It is an ambiguous, precarious relation, in which

inanimate images turn out to possess the same agency as the living being they represent.



Fig. 6 Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), *Temple of Janus* (sketch for the Joyous Entry of the Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand), 1634, oil on panel, 70 x 65.5 cm. St. Petersburg, State Museum of the Hermitage (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 7 Theodoor van Thulden (1606–1669), after Peter Paul Rubens, *The Temple of Janus*, etching, 531 x 454 mm (from Johannes Casper Gevartius, *Pompa Introitus Ferdinandi* [Antwerp, 1641]). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-P-OB-70.270 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 8 Primaticcio (1504–1570), *Grotte des Pins*, begun ca. 1528, Château de Fontainebleau (artwork in the public domain; photo: author)



Fig. 9 Primaticcio (1504–1570), apartment of the duchesse d'Étampes (detail showing caryatids), 1541–44, Château de Fontainebleau (artwork in the public domain; photo: ©Château de Fontainebleau - RMN/Jean-Pierre Lagiewski)

- 23 The closeness between the sculptor's act and Medusa's petrifying gaze is often thematized in the art of the Low Countries. Rubens often plays on it, for instance in his designs for the *Pompa Introitus Ferdinandi* (figs. 6 and 7). As I have argued elsewhere, many of the designs he made for the gates play on the theme of animation and petrification and the difficulty of discerning whether the deities, grotesques, or mythological beings he includes in his gate designs are living beings on the point of being petrified or statues that are so vivid that they come alive.<sup>27</sup> This theme can be traced back to sixteenth-century work done at Fontainebleau. In the *Grotte des Pins*, for instance, human forms gradually emerge from the rustic stones, suggesting first, when looked at from

left to right, the gradual stirring of living forms from inanimate stone, and then their gradually subsiding into stone again (fig. 8).<sup>28</sup> In Primaticcio's decorations of the rooms of the duchesse d'Etampes the caryatids framing the paintings and surrounding the herms and rams' faces are so vividly sculpted that they seem to step out of the wall, move into it, touch the frames, and interact with each other and the viewer (fig. 9). In fact it is difficult to tell whether we are looking here at a very vivid sculptural representation of human figures, or at the representation of petrified human beings becoming alive again. There is also a drawing associated with Jacopo Zucchi, probably made for Fontainebleau, representing Perseus killing Medusa, which figures in a very insistent manner the closeness of sculpting and petrifying (fig. 10). In Rubens's unfinished treatise as well, some of the drawings of male torsos reduce the body to a combination of blocks—or reveal these to be its underlying essence (fig. 11). The Cabinet des Estampes of the Louvre has a drawing by



Fig. 10 Attributed to Jacopo Zucchi (1540–1595/6), *Design for a Fountain with Perseus Killing Medusa and Pegasus*, ca. 1600, pen and brown ink, brown wash, 45.7 x 33.4 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Cabinet des Estampes, inv. no. 4553 (recto) (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 11 Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), *Study of the Farnese Hercules*, pen and ink on paper, 15.3 cm x 19.6 cm. London, The Courtauld Gallery, The Samuel Courtauld Trust, inv. no. D.1978.PG.427 (recto) (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 12 Leonaert Bramer (1596–1674), *Perseus*, date unknown, gray ink and wash on gray paper, 20.9 x 30.5 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Cabinet des Estampes, inv. no. 22528 (recto) (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 13 Attributed to Bertholet Flémalle (1614–1675), *Perseus Brandishing the Head of Medusa*, ca. 1650, oil on canvas, 165 x 243.4 cm. London, National Gallery (artwork in the public domain)





Fig. 14 *Son of Niobe* (Roman copy, possibly after Scopas and Praxiteles, formerly in the garden of the Villa Medici in Rome), marble, h: 160 cm. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi (artwork in the public domain; photo: Wikipedia Commons)

Leonaert Bramer showing Perseus brandishing the head of Medusa, in which the victims have become statues (fig. 13). Similarly, a painting (ca. 1650) in the National Gallery formerly attributed to Poussin, but now considered to be by the Flemish painter Bertholet Flémalle, shows the petrified victims of Phineus in the attitudes of the Niobids that could be seen in the Villa Medici in Rome (fig. 14).

- 24 Many images of Medusa petrifying her victims made in the Low Countries show an allegorical setting, in which she is used to confront *Invidia* or *Impietas*, as in Rubens's designs for the *Pompa Introitus Ferdinandi*, or the allegory by Otto van Veen of 1585–92, showing the duke of Parma as the defender of the Catholic faith, reducing Envy to a broken statue, with his shield displaying the Gorgon's head (fig. 15).



Fig. 15 Gijsbert van Veen (1562–1628), *Allegory Showing the Duke of Parma as Defender of the Catholic Faith in the Low Countries*, 1585–92, engraving. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-P-OB-79.754 (artwork in the public domain)

- 25 But the most intriguing images of Medusa's petrifying acts can be found in illustrations to Ovid's retelling of the myth. The German illustrations by Johann Ulrich Kraus, for instance, are extremely rich but fall outside the scope of this volume of essays. In the Dutch Republic, the illustrated translation by Vondel is a particularly interesting case. Unlike van Mander, who very much dwelt on the moral aspects of the myth, retelling it as a cautionary tale about the dangers of lust, Vondel follows Ovid quite faithfully but adds to the gruesomeness of the battle between Phineus and Perseus by his rather plastic choice of words: "the turmoil of battle" (het barnen van den strijt); shoot a thunderbolt into a body (een' schicht naer 't lyf).<sup>29</sup>

- 26 As in Ovid, the enemies of Perseus perform a reversal of Pygmalion's behavior, or of that of early modern art lovers: he touches the statues in the hope that they are still alive, just as art lovers of the same period touch them and speak to them to test whether they are living beings or just images.<sup>30</sup> The illustrations are rough copies of the images by Antonio Tempesta for the translation by Pieter de Iode published in Antwerp in 1606 and do not dwell on the petrification of Perseus's images. The images made by Frederik Boutatts after an unknown artist for the 1703 edition are more telling: here the victims are transformed into hermlike statues, which, according to some Greek historians, were among the earliest cases of freestanding statues (fig. 16).<sup>31</sup>



Fig. 16 Frederik Boutatts, after unknown artist, *Perseus Defeating Phineus by Showing Him the Head of Medusa* (from the 1703 edition of Joost van den Vondel, *Publius Ovidius Nasos Herscheppinge vertaelt door Joost van den Vondel*, originally published in Amsterdam, 1671) (artwork in the public domain; photo: Wikipedia Commons).

## Conclusion

- 27 In the passages from Junius and van Hoogstraten quoted above, the sublime is described, much more explicitly and insistently than in Longinus's text, as the power of images to impress themselves upon the mind and remain there. The listener or viewer is transfixed or tongue-tied. This effect, as we have seen, can be related to Longinus's distinction between the aims of poetry and prose. Prose, as we have seen, employs the strategy of *enargeia*; poetry that of *ekplexis*, and the visual arts, which are closer in character to poetry than prose, also aim for the shattering variety of the sublime. In itself, this aspect of the sublime already calls up an association with Medusa. But what is the point of comparing Medusa to a sculptor, of presenting her as the dark double of Pygmalion, and the witnesses to her deadly agency as benighted art lovers who look not for life in art but for life in dead stone? Why suggest, as in the Fontainebleau material, Rubens's designs, or the Vondel illustrations mentioned above, that the artistic ideal of animation, of endowing statues with the living presence of *enargeia*, can actually turn into the process of petrification, visited upon mortals by the gods, as in the case of Niobe, or part of the natural process of growth, flowering, and decay, as shown in many art works in Fontainebleau?
- 28 Sometimes the Medusa myth is interpreted as a fable about the artistic representation of horrors as a way of making them bearable or of warding off their danger by petrifying them into a work of art that can look at us but cannot hurt us. Thus it becomes an instance of the aesthetic paradox that Aristotle identified, when he observed that we enjoy looking at representations in art of situations, persons, or events that would fill us with horror, fear, or disgust if encountered in real life.<sup>32</sup>

But in the cases discussed here something else is at stake. These couplings of animation and petrification tell us something about the unease viewers felt when confronted with extremely vivid cases of lifelikeness, as in the case of the Town Hall Medusa, or the Rubens Medusa that Huygens saw. In such cases, one might argue, *enargeia* becomes *ekplexis*: the clear shining spotlight revealing vividness becomes too strong and shatters the viewer. The image no longer observes the boundaries of reality but moves into the realm of fiction, if not nightmares. In early modern artistic theory this phenomenon is hardly ever addressed. Instead, the fascination for statues which are so vivid that they fix the viewer and rob him or her of speech and movement is figured by means of representations of the Medusa story in which she is likened, almost surreptitiously, by means of the appearance of her victims, to a sculptor. What we would now call the agency of art cannot be historicized simply by comparing it to the persuasiveness of art as defined in terms of its *enargeia*. To trace, in historical terms, something of the uneasy fascination and deep fear that art can inspire as well, we need to turn to those images that present to the viewer in the most direct manner the sublime power of art to stay in the mind and transfix the viewer: the gaze of Medusa and its effect on her beholders.

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<sup>1</sup> *De jeugd van Constantijn Huygens door hemzelf beschreven*, ed. Albert H. Kan (Rotterdam and Antwerp: Donker, 1971), 74–75: “Het is me, alsof ik van zijn vele schilderijen altijd één voor oogen heb. . . . Het stelt het afgehouden hoofd van Medusa voor, omwonden door slangen, die uit het haar tevoorschijn komen. Daarin heeft hij de aanblik van een wonderschoone vrouw, die nog bekoorlijk is maar toch afgrijzen wekt, doordat de dood juist is ingetreden en ongere slangen om haar slapen hangen, met zulk een onuitsprekelijk overleg gecomponeerd, dat den beschouwer plotseling een schrik bevangt—het is namelijk gewoonlijk door een doek bedekt—maar dat hij toch ondanks het ijselijke van de voorstelling geniet, omdat ze levendig en mooi is.” The autobiography dates from 1629–31. On the relation between Rubens and Huygens, see Lieven Rens, “Rubens en de literatuur van zijn tijd,” *Dietsche Warande en Belfort* 122 (1977): 328–66; on Huygens, Rubens’s *Medusa*, and the sublime, see most recently Jürgen Pieters, “De blik van Medusa,” in *De tranen der herinnering: Het gesprek met de doden* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2005), 130–66; on Rubens’s *Medusas*, see Walter Prohaska in *Peter Paul Rubens 1577–1640*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, 1977), 81–83; Peter Sutton in *The Age of Rubens*, ed. P. Sutton, exh. cat. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1993), 245–47; Marion van der Meulen and Arnout Balis, eds., *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard*, vols. 23/2 and 23/3, *Copies after the Antique* (London and Philadelphia: Brepols, 1994–95), figs 345, 346, 350, and 351. All translations unless otherwise indicated are by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 1.4, 1.7, and 7.3. All translations are from the Loeb Edition: *Longinus on the Sublime*. revised by Donald Russell, translated by W. H. Fyfe, (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995).

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<sup>3</sup> Franciscus Junius, *The Painting of the Ancients* (London: printed by R. Hodgkinsonne, 1638), 290; Junius, *De schilder-konst der Oude* (Middelburg: Zacharias Roman, 1641), 323–24: “sich aen de selvighe stucken met sulcken diepen verwonderinghe vergaepen, datse als door een verruckte verslaegenheyd schijnen gheslagehen te sie jn.”

<sup>4</sup> Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst* (Rotterdam: François van Hoogstraten, 1678), 179: “[D]at is waerlijk groots . . . ’t welk ons t’elens wederom als versch voor d’oogen verschijnt; ’t welk ons zwaer, of liever onmogelijk is uit de zin te stellen; welkers gedachtenisse geduerich, en als onuitwisselijk, in onze herten schijnt ingedrukt.”

<sup>5</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 1.4.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.1–2.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 1–8.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *De anima*, 432a9–10.

<sup>9</sup> Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 248.

<sup>10</sup> “Rather than making one see an illusion, [*enargeia*] creates the illusion of the act of seeing.” Ruth Webb, “Mémoire et imagination: les limites de l’*enargeia* dans la théorie rhétorique grecque,” in *Dire l’Evidente (philosophie et rhétorique antiques)* ed. Colette Lévy and Louis Pernot (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), 248.

<sup>11</sup> The most influential ancient statements about the relation between poetry and the visual arts are by Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1448a and 1450a); Simonides, for instance as reported by the *Auctor ad Herennium*, 4.39 (“Poema loquens pictura est, pictura tacitum poema debet esse); Philostratus, *Eikones*, 1.1 and 2.2.1; and Dio Chrysostomus, *XIIth Olympian Discourse*, 12.82,

on the relative merits of sculpture and epic poetry. For a historical overview, see Gert Üding et al., eds., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* (Tübingen: Walter De Gruyter, 1992–2000), s.v. “Malerei” and “Paragone.” For Netherlandish artistic theory, see Jochem Becker, “Lucas de Heere,” *Simiolus* 6 (1972/73): 113–27; Becker, “Domenicus Lampsonius,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 24 (1973): 45–61; Karel van Mander, *Den grondt der edel vry schilder-const*, ed. Hessel Miedema (Utrecht: Haentjens, Dekker, & Gumbert, 1973), vol. 1, prologue and chapt. 1; Philipp Fehl, “Franciscus Junius and the Defence of the Arts,” *Artibus et Historiae* 3 (1981): 9–55; Colette Nativel, “La comparaison entre la poésie et la peinture dans le *De pictura veterum* (I.4) de Franciscus Junius,” *Word and Image* 4 (1988): 323–30; Philips Angel, “Praise of Painting, translated by Michael Hoyle, with an introduction and commentary by Hessel Miedema,” *Simiolus* 24 (1996): 227–58; Franciscus Junius, introduction to Gerardus Johannes Vossius, *De quatuor artibus popularibus* (Amsterdam: Ioannes Blaeu, 1650); Cornelis de Bie, *Het gulden cabinet van de edele vry Schilder-const* (Amsterdam: Ian Meyssens, 1661–62), 22, 467–71; and W. Goeree, *Inleydingh tot de Practijck der Al-gemeene Schilderconst* (Middelburg: Wilhelmus Goeree, 1670), 22–26.

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<sup>12</sup> On *ekplexis* and the related *kataplêxis*, which are not very common terms outside rhetoric and poetics, see also Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1460b25; and Eugenio Refini, “Longinus and Poetic Imagination in Late Renaissance Literary Theory,” in *Translations of the Sublime: The Early Modern Reception and Dissemination of the Peri Hupsous in Rhetoric, the Visual Arts, Architecture, and the Theatre*, edited by Caroline A. van Eck, Stijn Bussels, Maarten Delbeke, and Jürgen Pieters (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 45–46.

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<sup>13</sup> Longinus, *Peri hypsous*, 12.4 and 34.4.

<sup>14</sup> The *editio princeps* was published by Aldus Manutius in Venice in 1508–9, in his famous volume of rhetorical treatises, *Aphonii Sophistae Progymnasmata* (vol. 1, pp. 545–73). The first Latin edition was made by Pier Vettori: *Petri Victorii Commentarii in Librum Demetrii Phalerei de Eloquentia* (Florence: Giunti, 1572). This was dedicated by the academician Vettori to Cosimo I of Florence. A partial Latin translation was published in Antwerp by Johannes Sambucus in 1567: *Demetrii Phalerei De Epistolis Doctrina* (Antwerp: Ex Officio Christophori Plantini, 1567). For the early edition and dissemination history, see Bernard Weinberg, “Translations and Commentaries of Demetrius’ *On Style* to 1600: A Bibliography,” *Philological Quarterly* 30 (1951): 353–58; but much remains to be done, in particularly on the possible impact of Demetrius’s mixture of the terrible and the comic or the grotesque and its possible impact on Netherlandish art. The best recent editions of Demetrius are the Budé edition by P. Chiron: *Du Style* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1993) and by G. Marpurgo-Tagliabue: *Demetrio: Dello stile* (Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> Demetrius, *On Style*, sect. 283.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, sect. 258.

<sup>17</sup> Giovanni Lombardo, “Sublime et *deinotès* dans l’antiquité gréco-latine”: [www.cairn.info/article\\_p.php?ID\\_ARTICLE=RPHI\\_034\\_0403](http://www.cairn.info/article_p.php?ID_ARTICLE=RPHI_034_0403); consulted on April 4, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Lombardo suggests this but does not quote any sources. The most important are: Hesiod

(attr.), *The Shield of Heracles*, lines 226–37; Pindar, *Pythian Ode*, 12.12–15, on the Gorgon's *deinos* character; on their petrifying agency, see, for example, Apollodorus, *Library and Epitome*, 11.4.2; Lucian, *The Hall*, chapt. 19. The latter is also of interest in the context of this essay because Lucan uses a comparison with the petrifying powers of the Gorgons to bolster his argument that images make a far stronger and more lasting impression than words. For the cultural and religious context of the Gorgons, see Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Persée, la mort, l’image,” in *L’Univers, les dieux, les hommes* (1999; repr., Paris: Seuil, 2007), 133–41; Vernant, “Le Masque de Gorgô,” in *La Mort dans les yeux: Figures de l’autre en Grèce ancienne* (1985; repr., Paris: Seuil, 2007) 1488–93; Vernant, “Figures du masque en Grèce ancienne,” in *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne*, Vernant and Pierre Vidal Naquet (1986; repr., Paris: Seuil, 2007), 1188–1202; Françoise Frontisi-Dutroux, “La Gorgone, paradigme de creation d’images,” in *Les Cahiers du Collège Iconique: Communications et Débats 1* (Paris: La Diffusion Française, 1993); English translation in *The Medusa Reader*, ed. Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 262–67.

<sup>19</sup> Demetrius, *On Style*, sect. 283. He refers to *Odyssey*, 9.369–70.

<sup>20</sup> Everard Meyster, *Hemelsch Land-spel of Goden Kout*. . . (Amsterdam: Gedrukt voor de Lief-hebbers, 1655), 78: “. . . het helsch gedrocht/Erynnis, en Medus, ons levend hadden willen/ Versccheuren en vertreen; wy staen schier noch en trillen,/ Als wy’r gedenken aen, my dunkt, sy volgen noch.”

<sup>21</sup> Pieter Rixtel, “Op het Stadthuys van Amsterdam, Geschildert door den vermaerden Schilder Gerrit Berkheyden van Haerlem,” in *Mengel-Rymen* (Haarlem: Vincent Casteleyn, 1669), 42: “Wanneer de Zon myn ‘t Voorhoofd streelt,/ Door ‘t Gout, en Marm’re Beelden speelt,/ Kan geen nieuwsgierige in zyn Oogen,/ De glans van ‘t witte Albast gedoogen,/ Maer staet, de Steen aenziende, als een/ Die selfs verandert is in Steen.”

<sup>22</sup> The literature on both myths and their artistic representations is vast. On Pygmalion, see most recently, Kenneth Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992); and Victor Stoichita: *The Pygmalion Effect: From Ovid to Hitchcock*, trans. Andrew Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); on Medusa, see the exhibition catalogues: Werner Hofmann, ed., *Zauber der Medusa: Europäische Manierismen* (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1987); Valentina Conticelli, ed., *Medusa, Il mito, l’antico e i Medici* (Florence: Galleria degli Uffizi/Electa, 2008); Caterina Caneva, ed., *La Medusa del Caravaggio restaurata* (Rome: Musei Capitolini/Electa, 2002); and Elena Bianca di Gioia, ed., *La Medusa di Gian Lorenzo Bernini: Studi e restauri* (Rome: Musei Capitolini/Electa, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.252–58. <http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/trans/Ovhome.htm> - [askline](#) (translation Anthony S. Kline); consulted on January 24, 2012:

. . . ars adeo latet arte sua. Miratur et haurit  
pectore Pygmalion simulati corporis ignes.  
Saepe manus operi temptantes admovet,  
an sit corpus, an illud ebur. Nec adhuc ebur esse fatetur.  
Oscula dat redditque putat loquiturque tenetque,  
et credit tactis digitos insidere membris  
et metuit, pressos veniat ne livor in artus.”

<sup>24</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.275–76.

<sup>25</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 5.1–236, translated by Rolfe Humhries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1955), in particular lines 183: in hoc haesit *signum de marmore gestu*; 197:



Incursus erat: tenuit vestigia tellus/inmotusque silex armataque mansit *imago*; 205: Dum stupet Astyages naturam traxit eandem/*marmoreoque manet vultus mirantis in ore*; and 211–214: *Simulacra videt diversa figuris/agnoscitque suos et nomine quemque vocatum/poscit opem, credensque parum sibi proxima tangit/corpora : marmor erant* [italics added].

<sup>26</sup> Frontisi-Ducroux: “La Gorgone, paradigme de creation d’images.” See also the fundamental study by Jean-Pierre Vernant: *La mort dans les yeux*, in Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Oeuvres. Religions. Rationalités. Politique* (1985; repr., Paris: Seuil, 2007), 2:1477–1525.

<sup>27</sup> Caroline A. van Eck, “Animation and Petrification in Rubens’s *Pompa Introitus Ferdinandi*,” in *Art, Music and Spectacle in the Age of Rubens: The Pompa Introitus Ferdinandi*, ed. Anna Knaap and Michael Putnam (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 143–67.

<sup>28</sup> Sebastiano Serlio, *Livre Extraordinaire de architecture/Extraordinario Libro di Architettura* (Lyons: Guillaume Roville, 1558), pls. XX and XXIX (of the rustic series).

<sup>29</sup> Karel van Mander, *Uytleggingh op den Metamorphosis Pub. Ovidii Nasonis . . .* (Amsterdam: Cornelis Lodewijcksz. van der Plasse, 1616), fol. 35; Joost van den Vondel, *Publius Ovidius Nasos Herscheppinge vertaelt door Joost van den Vondel* (Amsterdam: Van Wees, 1671). In this edition the illustrations are rough copies of the images by Antonio Tempesta for the translation by Pieter de Iode published in Antwerp in 1606. On Dutch editions of Ovid and their illustrations, see M. D. Henkel, “Nederlandsche Ovidius-Illustraties van de 15e tot de 18e Eeuw,” *Oud-Holland* 39 (1921): 149–182; see also Eric Jan Sluiter, *De Heydensche Fabulen in de Schilderkunst van de Gouden Eeuw* (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2009) for the general context of Dutch representations of Ovid; and the very useful website *Ovid Illustrated: The Reception of Ovid’s Metamorphoses in Image and Text*, curated by Daniel Kinsley with Elizabeth Styron (<http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/ovidillust.html>).

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<sup>30</sup> For this anecdote, see Maarten Delbeke, “Elevated Twins and the Vicious Sublime: Gianlorenzo Bernini and Louis XIV,” in *Translations of the Sublime*, ed. Caroline A. van Eck et al. (see note 12 above ), 117–38.

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<sup>31</sup> F. Frontisi-Ducroux, “Les limites de l’anthropomorphisme: Hermès et Dionysos,” in *Corps des Dieux*, ed. Charles Malamoud and Jean-Pierre Vernant (Paris: Folio, 1986), 259–87. On the origins of herms, see also Hetty Goldman, “The Origins of the Greek Herm,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 46 (1942): 57–68, and Anna Donohue, *Xoana and the Origins of Greek Sculpture* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 217–8.

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<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 4.2.1448b and *Rhetoric* 1.2.9.137b.

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