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Narratives of Spectatorship: The Medusa Rondanini, *Tableaux Vivants*, and Torchlight Sculpture Visits

Introduction

In 1798 the poet Novalis noted the following observation about the Laocoon sculpture group (**Fig. 1**):

Ließe sich nicht ein umfassenderer, kurz höhergrädiger Moment im Laocontischen Drama denken – vielleicht der, wo der höchste Schmerz in Rausch – der Widerstand in Ergebung – das höchste Leben in Stein übergeht.

He added, between brackets, almost as an afterthought: “(Sollte der Bildhauer nicht *immer* den Moment der *Petrefaction* ergreifen – und aufsuchen – und darstellen – und auch nur diesen darstellen können?)”.¹

The classical tradition of sculpture criticism is reversed here in two ways. First, Novalis suggests to represent another moment in the story, pushing its drama even further, beyond pain and despair, to the moment of extasy and surrender. Second, he suggests that the highest aim of the sculptor is not the animation of marble in representing life in its utmost vividness; but instead the petrification of life in stone. At the same time, he continues to adhere to the classical ekphrastic tradition by conceiving the sculptor’s task to be the representation of the culmination of Laokoon’s drama. Like Philostratus and Callistratus, his Greek predecessors from Antiquity, he focuses on the representation – and its vivid description or ekphrasis – of an action, of *to drama* in ancient Greek. We find, here, in Novalis’s brief fragment, in a few pregnant sentences, two key issues in many accounts of classical sculpture produced in Germany around 1800: on the one hand the topic of animation versus petrification, on the other the question of narrative and how to represent it with sculptural means. The first figures mainly in viewers’ accounts, the second is a major theme in artistic theory of this period.

¹ Novalis 1798–1799, 412–413. On the nature and genesis of the *Brouillon*, see also the edition by Mähl 1993, xi–xxviii.



Fig. 1: Laocoön group: Athanodorus, Agesander, and Polydorus, Parian marble; Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

This reversal occurred at a time when the viewing conditions of sculpture also changed radically. The Museo Pio-Clementino, the first public sculpture gallery, opened in 1771 (**Fig. 2**). It presented statues in one, unified space, which did not separate the space of the statues from that of the viewer, and thus allowed the viewer to engage in a direct relation, if not visual dialogue, with the sculptures. In fact it proved the ideal setting for Winckelmann's descriptions, which are no longer ekphrastic accounts of the action represented, but accounts – or even re-enactments – of viewing experiences that are much more indebted to Pietist confessional literature than to Philostratus (**Fig. 3**).



Fig. 2: Museo Pio-Clementino, Rome: Vatican Museums, created 1771; Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

But the public exhibition of sculpture was not the only viewing situation to change in the decades around 1800: at the same time, private viewing parties came into fashion in which spectators engaged informally, but no less intensely with statues. What connects the public viewing situation of the Museo Pio-Clementino to the private *tableau vivant* is that both settings favour a close, direct, one-to-one engagement with the statue, and thus allow its agency to unfold in a very direct and unmediated way, often resulting in claims that the viewer seems to be petrified while the statue becomes animated.

Narrative in sculpture became an issue after the publication of Lessing's *Laokoon* (1766) and Herder's *Plastik* (1778) (**Fig. 1**). Lessing dismissed the humanist doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* and its underlying assumption of a representational equivalence despite differences in medium, between poetry and the visual arts. He argued that poetry and prose are narrative arts, that is arts predicated on an unfolding in time, both in their own telling of a story and in the way they are read or viewed; whereas the visual arts are arts of the moment, presenting one pregnant moment, and perceived in one glance.²

Herder severed traditional equivalents between the visual arts and poetry or prose even more radically perhaps, by claiming for sculpture a separate status, since

² Lessing 2007, 13–14; 52–67, and particularly § xvi, in this edition 116–121.

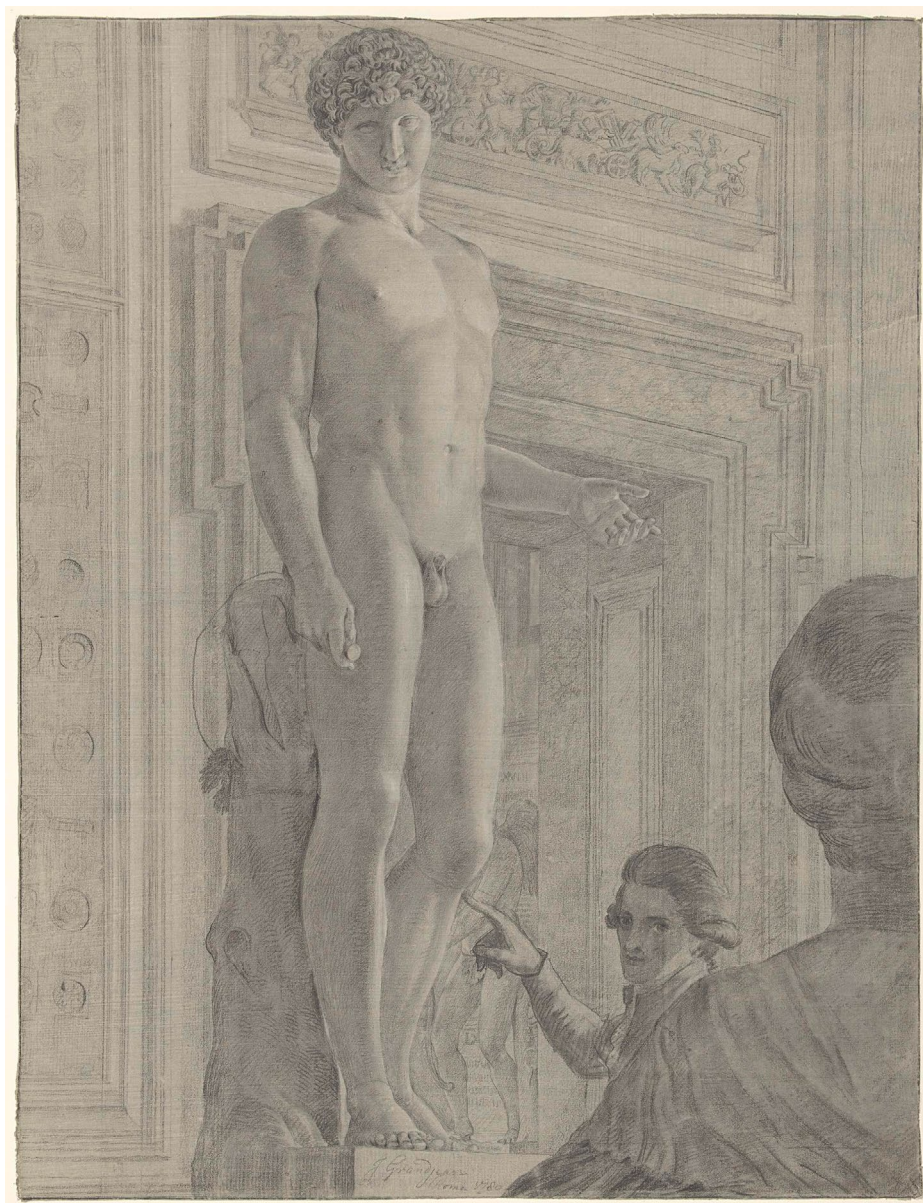


Fig. 3: Antoine Grandjean, Cicerone in the Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican, Rome, c. 1770, pencil on paper, Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum; Photo: Rijksmuseum Studio.

for him its perception and appreciation are not visual, mediated and intellectual, but tactile, and hence unmediated and sensual. Close, attentive viewing of statues should result in their animation, for the primitive as well as for the cultivated spectator:

Ehrfurcht, die beinah *Schrecken* wird und *Schauer*, Gefühl, als ob sie [die Statuen] *wandelten* und *lebten* [...] sind die ersten Eindrücke der Kunst, zumal bei einem halb-wilden, d.i. noch ganz lebendigen, nur Bewegung und Gefühl ahnenden Volke. Bei allen Wilden oder halb-wilden sind daher die Statuen *belebt*, *Dämonisch*, voll Gottheit und Geistes, zumal wenn sie in Stille, in heiliger Dämmerung angebetet werden, und man ihre Stimme und Antwort erwartet. [...]

Noch jetzt wandelt uns ein Gefühl der Art an in jedem stillen Museum oder Coliseum voll Götter und Helden: unvermerkt, wenn man unter ihnen allein ist und wie voll Andacht an sie gehet, beleben sie sich, und man ist auf ihrem Grunde in die Zeiten gerückt, da sie noch lebten und das Alles Wahrheit war, was jetzt als Mythologie und Statue darsteht.³

One of the many implications of the views of Herder and Lessing was that they deprived viewers of traditional strategies of description or interpretation. They could no longer draw on the ekphrastic tradition, in which the speaker describes not so much the material, pictorial sculptural characteristics of a work of art, but the action – *to drama* – that is represented so vividly that the viewer is persuaded he or she looks at the event or persons themselves, not at their image. See for instance Callistratus' description of a statue of Medea, which attributes a character, inner life and a narrative of deliberation to Theseus' wife on the brink of killing her children:

I also saw the celebrated Medea in the land of the Macedonians. It was of marble and disclosed the nature of her soul in that art had modelled into it the elements which constitute the soul; for a course of reasoning was revealed, and passion was surging up [...] and what one saw was an interpretation of her whole story.⁴

Such ekphrastic strategies operated precisely on the basis of the representational equivalence rejected by Lessing; they were verbal, mediated, and therefore could not accommodate the tactile, unmediated, sensual experience of sculpture Herder advocated.

In this essay I want to explore some of the new viewing strategies and resulting narratives of spectatorship developed around 1800 to deal with these reversals. I

³ Herder 1995, 80–81.

⁴ Callistratus 1979, 419.

will show how new viewing settings, in particular the torchlight visit to sculpture collections and the *tableau vivant*, can be read within this context as attempts to solve the problem that traditional ekphrastic strategies, predicated on a narrative reading of sculpture, were no longer felt to do justice to this art. Within these new settings, the impact of the statue on the viewer, what we would now call its agency, acquires a new intensity, often linked to the illusion that under the flickering light of torches and candles the marble appeared to become animated. I will also argue that in this context a new topic appears: that of petrification, used both to describe the highest art of the sculptor and the agency exercised by statues. In other words, the mythological paradigm used to think about the sculptor's art shifts from Pygmalion to Medusa. At the same time, the narrative represented by the statue makes place for a narrative of spectatorship.

1. The Medusa Rondanini and Weimar *Tableaux Vivants*

From the moment Goethe saw the Medusa Rondanini (**Fig. 4**) in Rome in 1786, he was utterly fascinated by it. Thus he wrote about the recently discovered head in the Rondanini collection:

Gegen uns über im Palast Rondanini steht eine Medusenmaske, wo, in einer hohen und schönen Gesichtsform, über Lebensgröße, das ängstliche Starren des Todes unsäglich trefflich ausgedrückt ist. [...]

Ein wundersames Werk, das, den Zwiespalt zwischen Tod und Leben, zwischen Schmerz, Wollust ausdrückend, einen unnennbaren Reiz wie irgend ein anderes Problem über uns ausübt.⁵

The Medusa Rondanini continued to exercise its spell over him throughout the rest of his life. In 1826, at the very end of it, he finally obtained a plaster cast from the King of Bavaria, which is still in the Goethe-Haus in Weimar, and occupied a very prominent place among his collection. During Goethe's lifetime it was placed on top of his chest of prints and drawings, as if to ward off unwanted visitors. He also gave her an important role in one of the fragments connected with the second *Faust*, Helena's Antecedents, where Medusa figures in Hell, stopping the dead from leaving by her terrible gaze, and the living from entering.

Contemporaries sometimes compared Goethe himself to a petrifying sculptor. Thus the archaeologist and journalist Carl August Böttiger (1760–1835), in his review of the *Wahlverwandtschaften*, singled out the *tableaux vivants* described in

⁵ Goethe 1786. On the Medusa Rondanini and its role in Goethe's work see Buschor 1958, 1–6.



Fig. 4: Medusa Rondanini, marble, Munich: Glyptothek; Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

the book, which are an echo of the real ones Goethe himself directed and staged at the court in Weimar, for their artistic and ontological ambivalence. He noted precisely that conflict between the poetics and demands of narrative arts, unfolding over time, and those arts that are meant to present a person, character, situation or event in one moment. In this review he situated the genre of the *tableau vivant* between spatial and temporal forms of art that, being permanent, display themselves in space; and those, more ephemeral, that deploy themselves in time. In the former, he wrote, “die Wellen des bewegten Lebens sind wie durch Zauberkraft festgehalten” (the waves of moving life have been fixed as if by magic).⁶ A formula which seems to announce Aby Warburg’s description of pathos formulas, but which also recalls Goethe’s famous suggestion that the best way to see the Laocoon is during a torch-lit visit, to which I will return later. In his review of Goethe’s *Wahlverwandtschaften* he suggests Goethe himself held up Medusa’s head to the

⁶ Böttiger 1810, 9–13, quoted in Jooss 1999, 295. On *tableaux vivants*, agency and the museological issues they raised around 1800 see also van Eck 2014, 163–174, with bibliography.

actors.⁷ A few years later, in another review, Böttiger singled out another hybrid aspect of the genre: because of the presence of living actors, it differs from the fine arts, and comes closer to wax figures exhibited in curiosity cabinets, churches or anatomy museums. In another play on the Medusa myth he suggested here that her petrifying agency was the origin of wax sculpture and of *tableaux vivants*. They are a hybrid between painting and sculpture, and the not very desirable result of such a petrifying action:

Diese Bilderstellungen durch Lebenden sind sehr alt. Die gepriesener Zauberer der Pantomime, die im alten, nicht mehr freien Rom alle andern dramatischen Künste verdrängten, gründeten sich darauf. Aber es waren Bilder in geregelter, fortschreitender Bewegung, keine Minutenlang zur Unbeweglichkeit verurtheilten Versteinerungen (Apolithosen). Denn wer die Wirkungen des alles versteinernenden Medusenhaupts in Ovids Verwandlung auf Seriphos liest, wird darin die wahren Urbilder unserer jetzt so beliebten Bilderstellungen finden.⁸

At the end of his life Goethe's attitude towards the Medusa Rondanini had changed completely, and so had the appreciation of his own petrifying powers. He seems to have forgotten about his uneasy fascination with Medusa when he first saw her in Rome. Instead, in a splendid case of *Aesthetische Abwehr*, he now called her "wohltätig und heilsam", and dwelt on "Diesen Anblick, der keineswegs versteinerte sondern den Kunstsinn höchlich und herrlich belebte". In a ironic passage the novelist Jean Paul Richter alludes to this atmosphere when writing about his preparations for a visit to Goethe's home:

[...] blos Kunstsachen wärmen noch seine Herznerven an (daher ich Knebel bat, mich vorher durch einen Mineralbrunnen zu petrifizieren und zu inkrustieren, damit ich ihm etwan im vortheilhaften Lichte einer Statue zeigen könnte. [...] Ich gieng, ohne Wärme, blos aus Neugierde. Sein Haus (Pallast) frappiert [...] ein Pantheon vol Bilder und Statuen, eine Kühle der Angst presset die Brust.⁹

Petrification here is no longer the ultimate form of agency. It has instead become the final implication of the aesthetic response as a way of dealing with the agency statues can exercise on their viewers. These accounts thus offer a glimpse into the complex, and often conflicting reactions caused by the ambiguous status of *tableaux vivants*, occupying an unstable position between living beings petrified

⁷ Böttiger 1810, 9–13.

⁸ Böttiger 1819, n.p., quoted in Jooss 1999, 378.

⁹ Jean Paul to Christian Otto, 18th June 1796, quoted by Grave 2011, 54.

into stone, wax images or the staged enactment of a statue or painting. By that very ambiguity they seem to encourage viewers to express more freely than in the usual viewing situations how they experienced the agency of such representations. This is attested by Böttiger as we have seen, but also by Julie von Egglofstein, a participant in the *tableaux vivants* organized in 1815 during the Vienna Congress, who complained that she felt herself reduced to a passive object of desire under the uninhibited gaze of the public, and as a result felt intensely alienated from herself.¹⁰

2. Torchlight Sculpture Viewings

Goethe also identified the problem of grasping how a statue can only represent a moment but nonetheless suggest an event, movement, life, that all unfold in and over time, without having recourse to ekphrastic narrative strategies. In his essay on the Laocoon he suggested torch-lit viewing is the best solution:

Äußerst wichtig ist dieses Kunstwerk durch die *Darstellung des Moments*. Wenn ein Werk der bildenden Kunst sich wirklich vor dem Auge bewegen soll, so muß ein vorübergehender Moment gewählt sein; kurz vorher darf kein Teil des Ganzen sich in dieser Lage befunden haben, kurz hernach muß jeder Teil genötigt sein, diese Lage zu verlassen; dadurch wird das Werk Millionen Anschauern immer wieder neu lebendig sein.

Um die Intention des Laokoons recht zu fassen, stelle man sich in gehöriger Entfernung mit geschlossenen Augen davor; man öffne sie und schließe sie gleich wie, so wird man der ganze Marmor in Bewegung sehen [...]. Ich möchte sagen, wie sie jetzt dasteht, ist sie ein fixierter Blitz, eine Welle, versteinert im Augenblicke, da sie gegen das Ufer anströmt. Dieselbe Wirkung entsteht, wenn man die Gruppe nachts bei der Fackel sieht.¹¹

Torchlight sculpture visits enjoyed a brief but intense fashion in the decades around 1800 in Italy, Germany and France. They probably started in the Villa Albani, and may have been started by Winckelmann (although a tradition already existed in Rome of organizing sculpture viewing parties, for instance as part of banquets held in the early 16th-century on the Campidoglio, and art students often worked at night, in artificially lit studios: **Fig. 5** shows Joseph Wright of Derby's scene of art students copying a Venus Pudica by night). These visits can be related to the profound change Winckelmann instigated in guided art tours: instead of Cicero reciting lists of facts about the art works, he tried to make his public engage emotionally and aesthetically with the statues. That this was a clear break with nor-

¹⁰ Jooss 1999, 355.

¹¹ Goethe 1967, 59–60.



Fig. 5: Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–97), *Academy by Lamplight*, oil on canvas, c. 1768–69, New Haven: Yale Centre for British Art; Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

mal behaviour is recorded by his associate Johann Jacob Volkmann, who observed that “The papal guards stood there with open mouths completely astonished and maybe thought that the malaria had disturbed his brains”.¹² By the end of the 18th century visits by night were made to sculptor’s studios, but above all to sculpture collections, at the Vatican Belvedere, the Villa Borghese, or the Musée Napoléon. Canova recommended them because torchlight enables the viewer to appreciate the ‘gradazione della carne’, the subtlety of the handling of the marble surface, much better than the even light of day.

Lord Minto for instance, who visited the Museo Pio-Clementino in the 1820s, was skeptical at first, but eventually was completely won over:

I had always been a little skeptical with regard to the power of torchlight in bringing out the beauties of a fine statue, as it did not appear to me that the statues I had seen in lighted rooms at night gained very much. But in the Vatican, and with the concentrated light of one flambeau, the effect is quite marvelous. [...] The [Belvedere] Torso, which is the first we saw, is also that which gains the most by torchlight, as in addition to the beautiful display of form and muscle it acquires a fleshy appearance which gives it an air of life such as I never saw in any other work. That however which I should quote as the greatest proof of the effect of torchlight is the Laocoon. Seen by day, the unrivalled beauty of the composition and execution of this statue (the only unquestionable chef d’oeuvre of Greek sculpture that we know) affects everyone very powerfully. But it is at only that we can really appreciate the grandeur, the variety and the expression of this miraculous work.¹³

Lord Minto also hints at what is the most striking aspect of the accounts of these visits: somehow viewing statues by the flickering, moving light of torches, candles or flambeaux endows them with life. The French diarist Joubert, a contemporary of Châteaubriand, puts this perhaps most briefly and suggestively. Under such viewing conditions, in the flickering light statues seem to move towards the viewer from the dark. The play of light on the marble suggests living skin, and “ces formes idéales et molles dont les corps animés semblent comme environnés [apparaissent] à chaque trait; ce qu’un philosophe appelait les apparences de l’âme”.¹⁴ Gabriele von Bülow, a daughter of Wilhelm von Humboldt, described her torchlit visit to the statues of the Vatican in similar terms:

On Saturday, we went to see the statues at the Vatican illuminated by torchlight; it was a magnificent sight, far finer even than the Capitol. I thought of Goethe’s words

¹² Quoted by Mattos 2006, 146.

¹³ Quoted in Mattos 2006, 150.

¹⁴ Joubert 1983, 45. See also Joubert 1938, vol. II, 748 and 573.

“Marmorbilder steh’n und seh’n mich an” for they really seem to look at you; it is as if there were a living soul within the marble, a soul to which you could confide your most inner thoughts.¹⁵

K. Ph. Moritz introduced another aspect in his account of a torchlight visit to the Apollo Belvedere in 1786–88. Only under such circumstances, he argued, can one really see and appreciate antique statuary; but more importantly, because one sees the statue in its completeness in such light, time stands still, and perception is concentrated in one moment.

[Man kann] fast nicht sagen, man habe diese höchsten Werke der Kunst gesehen, wenn man sie nicht auch zum öftern in dieser Art von Beleuchtung sähe. – Die allerfeinsten Erhöhungen werden dem Auge sichtbar, und in dem, was sonst noch einförmig schien, zeigt sich wiederum eine unendliche Mannigfaltigkeit. Weil nun alle dies Mannigfaltige doch nur ein einziges vollkommenes Ganze ausmacht, so sieht man hier alles Schöne, was man sehen kann, *auf einmal*, der Begriff der Zeit verschwindet, und alles drängt sich in einen Moment zusammen, der immer dauern könnte, wenn wir bloß betrachtende Wesen wären.¹⁶

He continues with an attack on Winckelmann, whose descriptions – “ein Stirn des Jupiters, die mit der Göttin der Weisheit schwanger ist etc” – distract the viewer from being moved by the ‘pure beauty’ of the statue as a whole, and forces him or her into a narrative viewing mode, *enumerating* the beauties of the work. Moritz here eliminates the narrative aspect of statues, their presenting a story, from its ideal perception, and thereby neatly sidesteps Lessing’s problem. Put slightly differently, statues need a viewer to become complete and whole again; and that completeness is achieved when they appear to be living bodies, that exercise an agency of living presence experience on the viewer.

In such circumstances the viewing setting becomes very similar to that of a theatre audience watching a play. The statue viewer is in the dark, and has to wait until the light unveils the statues, moves along it, singles out parts like a spotlight, disappears or is extinguished. It could be an intensely dramatic experience, in which viewers like Goethe felt that they were being watched by the statues just as they tried to see them. Sometimes it would lead to excess, for instance when viewers at the parties organized to see the Venus Borghese by Canova would forget they were dealing with stone images and tried to touch and fondle the marble.¹⁷ But in any

¹⁵ von Bülow 1879.

¹⁶ Moritz 1981, vol. 2, 414.

¹⁷ On the case of the Canova Venus, see van Eck 2015, 409–435.

case, as in the *tableaux vivants* discussed earlier, this viewing situation plays on the dilemma created by Herder and Lessing between temporal and atemporal aspects of sculpture and sculpture viewing. These statues embody a moment, as Goethe observed; their viewing, as Moritz noted, leads to a sense of the statue becoming alive, and a suspension of the awareness of time passing; but the torchlight viewing sessions were by their very nature temporal, unfolded in time, and founded on such unfolding. The result was not a sculpted narrative, but a narrative of viewing.

3. Between Ekphrasis and Art History, Immersion and Analysis

These fashions for staging the viewing of sculpture, that only lasted a few decades around 1800, are the result of complex developments. They took off in a period that saw not just new departures in the aesthetics of sculpture, but also several major changes in the perception and production of sculpture, from the discovery that most classical statues in Italian collections were Roman copies not Greek originals; or the discovery of the widespread use of polychromy among the ancients; to the introduction of new techniques to produce statues after plaster casts. They all raise the issue of the bodily presence of statues and their agency as embodied beings, and it is precisely in the accounts of *tableaux vivants* and torchlight visits, rather than in academic art history or aesthetics, in these slightly frivolous or disreputable occasions, that the agency of sculpture is allowed to be expressed plainly.

Therefore, as I have hoped to show, such new ways of viewing cannot only be related, as has been done by Mattos, Bredekamp or Bättschmann for instance, to changes in the way collections were displayed and viewed, or the rise of the public art museum.¹⁸ They also need to be placed in the context of the debates caused by Lessing's break with the humanist tradition of *ut pictura poesis* and with the ekphrastic tradition that singled out the action, the dramatic situation represented in stone, as its main subject, transforming the work of art into a visual narrative; and by Herder's perhaps even more radical plea to consider sculpture as an art that is apprehended in a physical, non-mediated, tactile way. A shift occurred, that is, from ekphrastic narrative concentrating on the story represented by the statue to narratives of spectatorship. Here it is interesting to note that some accounts of torchlight viewings compare the light of the torch as it glides over the statue to that of a hand that slowly moves over its surface. As a result, traditional narrative readings of statues became discredited; the narrative is no longer located in the statue, but moves to the mind and senses of the beholder.

Another aspect is also striking: for a brief period the agency of statues is acknowledged openly and intensely. Witnesses and actors of *tableaux vivants* alike

¹⁸ Mattos 2006; Bredekamp 2003; Bättschmann 1995, 183–224.

document that the impact of such events was intense, ambivalent, if not uncomfortable or even uncanny. Torchlight viewing could lead to such an intense sensation of life that viewers either averted their eyes, fled the room, or treated the statue as a living being. In the case of the Medusa Rondanini, such viewing experiences could lead to intense feelings of discomfort, as is recorded in minute and fascinating detail by the philologist Joseph Anselm Feuerbach, the father of the painter, in 1833.

In his long description many of the issues discussed here are brought together. It begins as an account of his struggle to deal with both the horror of the mask and the effort of bringing the manifold perceptions that result from the eye travelling across Medusa's face into some sort of synthesis. In fact he questions the statement by Novalis with which this essay opened, that the sculptor's highest aim is the representation of life being petrified:

Während dort, bei der Stellung der Statue, das Auge des Beschauers, von einem Gegensatze zum andern fortgezogen, in der Unruhe einer nie sich endenden Kreisbewegung, die Einbildungskraft in Schwung erhielt, findet dieses hier statt einer vielstimmigen Harmonie, einen einzigen schreienden Laut, statt eines Vielartigen nur Eins. An dieses bleibt sie gebannt, und auf der Spitze eines Aeussersten peinlich festgehalten. Selbst in der Natur erhält das menschliche Angesicht in leidenschaftlichem Zustand etwas maskenartiges; die Züge werden leblos und starr, und in der Haltung der ganzen Gestalt, in jeder Gebärde erscheint die Bewegung nur wie das Zucken, die Ruhe wie die Erstarrung eines willenlosen Krampfes. Warum dieser steinerne Mimik in Marmor wiederholen? besonders da dieser entbehrt, was jener immer bleiben muss, das wirkliche Leben [...].

Die Medusa Rondanini ist nur eine Maske, eine Maske mit den Zügen eines Sterbenden, sonach – die wahre facies Hippocratica! Aber welche Mannigfaltigkeit, welche unergründliche Fülle des Lebens ist hier in den engsten Raum, in die wenigen Züge eines einzigen Kopfes, in den Moment des Todes zusammengedrängt!

In a repetition of Goethe's advice on how to view the Laocoon, Feuerbach moves towards and away from the mask to grasp whether it is stone coming to life, or a living being petrified:

Treten wir, die Augen schliessend und wieder öffnend, mehr und mehr vom Bilde hinweg; wir glauben das seltsame Wesen nun im Augenblicke langsam verschwinden, nunwieder aufleben zu sehen.¹⁹

¹⁹ Feuerbach 1855, 55–57.

For Feuerbach, that is, the Medusa Rondanini embodies, in a frightening, disrupting and disconcerting way, what Greek sculptors excelled in: to put together, in the representation of one moment, an entire character, situation or even life. In this case, however, the sculpted mask itself embodies Medusa's petrifying action, appearing to die and to come back to life under Feuerbach's gaze.

Conclusion

These accounts of *tableaux vivants* and torchlight visits to statues are not only of interest because of the unusually frank accounts of the intense agency or impact felt by their viewers. They also very much revolve around questions of what we might now call immersive versus analytical viewing experiences.²⁰ In fact they became very fashionable in Europe at the very moment when two types of exhibiting art came into being. On the one hand the analytical, didactic exposition of works ordered by school, genre or chronology. For sculpture the Museo Pio-Clementino in the Vatican is among the first cases, or the classical galleries in the Louvre, variously called the Musée Central and the Musée Napoléon in the years 1790–1814. On the other, exhibitions aiming at an immersive experience, of which Alexandre Lenoir's Musée des Monuments Français is the most famous example, which attracted many thousands of visitors. Many art historians criticized its lack of chronology, bricolage and lack of proper chronological order; others, Michelet for instance, recorded how he felt that by its very staging of the monuments, the statues of the Kings of France came to life again in the half dark, under the frightened, if not petrified gaze of the spectator.²¹

In all cases of sculpture viewing discussed here, viewers no longer use traditional exphrastic strategies to describe what they saw, or record their viewing experience. Instead, they offer viewing narratives that very often circle around what one might call the Medusa motif: they construct narratives in which statues turn out to possess eyes capable of fixing the viewer and thereby petrifying them; or, as in the case of *tableaux vivants*, of the actors embodying the statues becoming petrified under the gaze of the spectators. In my view, such accounts are not mere *curiosa* in the history of the aesthetics of sculpture. Instead, they point at the conflicts and tensions at work at a key moment in European art history. This is the period when viewing attitudes informed by rhetoric are replaced by the aesthetic stance, and princely, private or ecclesiastical collections of statues are replaced by the public museum or art gallery as the place to view sculpture. In the long run, the didactic, analytical setting would survive, and the immersive viewing experience banished to popular

²⁰ On this issue in museum exhibitions around 1800 see Hurley 2013, 128–140.

²¹ Michelet 1952, vol. II, book XII, chapter VII, 538.

mixed media theatre forms such as Madame Tussaud's, or the theme parks of today. But the tensions identified around 1800 remain, because the underlying problem is still as valid now as then: how to deal with the unmistakable agency exercised by statues on viewers who are perfectly aware that they are made of inanimate, lifeless stone, but at the same time feel addressed by them as if they were living beings.

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