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Vision and reflexivity in the *Odyssey* and Early Vase-Painting

Summary

This paper makes the case that both the *Odyssey* and the arguably earliest representations of it in vase-painting self-consciously engage with the senses of hearing and seeing. While there are a couple of scenes in the *Odyssey* which seem to allude to the visual quality of epic, Homer explicitly points out the aural nature of his medium (I). When the plot of the *Odyssey* has the sense of hearing trump sight, it thus boosts its own form of expression: while formulaic as well as non-formulaic diction closely links the idea of homecoming to seeing (II), the notion of sight is downplayed during Odysseus’ return. Instead, narration emerges as crucial in the recognition scenes on Ithaca (III). The earliest paintings that can be argued to represent *Odyssean* themes, on the other hand, concentrate on scenes that centre on eyes and gazes, thereby privileging their own medium (IV). The *Odyssey* and early vase-painting thus illustrate a self-conscious engagement with medium well before the shrewd Hellenistic and Imperial plays with narrative and image that have received so much attention lately (V).

Keywords

Homer, Greek vase-painting, reflexivity, *enargeia*
The ancient category of *enargeia* signifies the vividness of an account, focusing often on its graphic quality. An anonymous rhetorical treatise of the Imperial Age, for instance, discusses *enargeia* as ‘speech bringing what is being told before the eyes’ (*The art of political speech* 96). Heliodorus’ novel *Ethiopica* features a scene that puns wittily on the paradoxical notion that we are made to see the representation of an aural medium. When Calasiris, in his extended narration, summarizes the procession at Delphi, Cnemon interrupts him, complaining that Calasiris has not made him a viewer yet (3.1.1). Calasiris gives a detailed *ekphrasis* of the procession, but his perfunctory reference to a hymn sung by the participants prompts Cnemon to another intervention. This time he requests a full rendering of the song (3.2.3): ‘It is as if you had only made me a viewer of the procession without making me also a listener.’ Cnemon’s assertion that he is only a viewer, not a listener drives home the paradox inherent in the ideal of *enargeia*. The organ by which we perceive the telling of a tale is the ear; the eye lets us see images.

In this paper, I will argue that both the *Odyssey* and early vase-painting that I take to represent it self-consciously engage with the senses of hearing and seeing. Ancient as well as modern scholars have noted the visual quality of Homeric epic and there are even a couple of scenes in the *Odyssey* which seem to allude to the visual appeal of narrative. At the same time, Homer explicitly points out the aural nature of his medium (I). When the plot of the *Odyssey* has the sense of hearing trump sight, it thus boosts its own form of expression. I will argue that formulaic as well as non-formulaic diction closely links the idea of homecoming
to seeing (II). During Odysseus’ return, however, the notion of sight is
downplayed and narration emerges as crucial in the recognition scenes on Ithaca
(III). The earliest paintings that can be argued to represent Odyssean themes, on
the other hand, concentrate on scenes that centre on eyes and gazes, thereby
privileging their own medium (IV). The Odyssey and early vase-painting thus
illustrate a self-conscious engagement with medium before the shrewd Hellenistic
and Imperial plays with narrative and image that have received so much attention
lately (V).

I. THE ENTWINEMENT AND JUXTAPOSITION OF SEEING AND
HEARING IN THE ODYSSEY

Before I trace the link between vision and nostos and argue for its
metapoetic significance, I wish to show that the Odyssey juxtaposes seeing and
hearing and is aware of their significance to epic poetry. Not only modern and
ancient scholars have elaborated on the visual appeal of Homer, but the Odyssey
itself seems to gesture subtly to the graphic quality of narrative. More pointed
however than this entanglement of sight and hearing is their polar juxtaposition.
Homer even calls attention to the aural nature of epic poetry.

Before modern scholars, ancient critics commented on the ‘visualness’ of
Homeric epic. The scholiasts find enargeia especially in the Iliad, but also in the
Odyssey. When in Demodocus’ song the Greeks climb out of the wooden horse in
Troy, the scholion comments for example on the expression ‘streaming from the
horse’ (ἱππόθεν ἐκχύμενοι) that is used for the soldiers jumping out of the wooden horse in Troy: ‘he has achieved vividness through this phrase’ (ἐνάργειαν ἐποίησε διὰ ταύτην τὴν λέξιν, Scholion ad 8.515). Other passages that have attracted praise for their enargeia include Odysseus’ description of how he clung to the fig-tree while Charybdis sucked in the sea (Scholion ad 12.435) as well as the metaphor of ‘stalk’ (καλάμη) illustrating his depletion (Scholion ad 14.214).

What about the Odyssey itself? It is widely acknowledged that the bardic performances and embedded tales endow the poem with a strong self-referential dimension. Does the Odyssey also reflect on its own graphic quality? While there are no comments specifically on the visual quality of narrative, its power to transform listeners into eye-witnesses is at least intimated. Demodocus’ recital of the story of the Trojan horse agitates Odysseus so much that he breaks into tears. A simile highlights his distress (8.521–31):

So the famous singer sang his tale, but Odysseus melted, and from under his eyes the tears ran down, drenching his cheeks. As a woman weeps, lying over the body of her dear husband, who fell fighting for her city and people as he tried to beat off the pitiless day from city and children; she sees him dying and gasping for breath, and winding her body about him she cries high and shrill, while the men behind her, hitting her with their spear butts on the back and the shoulders,
force her up and lead her away into slavery, to have
hard work and sorrow, and her cheeks are wracked with pitiful weeping.
Such were the pitiful tears Odysseus shed from under
his brows, but they went unnoticed by all the others ...

The comparison of Odysseus ‘the destroyer of cities’ with a female
prisoner of war raises important questions about the reasons for Odysseus’ strong
reaction to Demodocus’ songs on the Trojan War. While an Aristotelian reading
would emphasize that the song reminds Odysseus of his own sorrows, the simile
inspires us to think also about the empathy that he may feel with his victims. For
my argument, it is crucial that the response of Odysseus who listens to
Demodocus is compared with that of a woman looking at her dying husband. The alignment of aural with visual perception, I propose, reflects the capacity of narrative to conjure up images in the mind of listeners. Seen from this perspective, the praise which Odysseus bestows on Demodocus after his second song, that he sings ‘as if you had been there yourself or heard it from one who was’ (‘ὡς τέ που ἡ αὕτης παρεὼ ἡ ἀλλού ἀκούσας.’ 8.491), may encompass not only the veracity of his account, but also its vividness and effect on the audience.

A further passage that seems to gesture towards the visual impressions evoked by narratives is found in the nekyia. Agamemnon introduces the account of his death as follows: ‘You have been present in your time at the slaughter of many men, killed singly, or in the strong encounters of battle; but beyond all others you would have been sorry at heart to see …’ (‘ἤδη μὲν πολέων φόνῳ ἀνδρῶν ἀντεβόλησας, μουνᾶς κτεινομένων καὶ ἐνί κρατερῇ ὑσμίνῃ/ ἀλλὰ κε κεῖνα μάλιστα ἰδὼν ὀλοφύρα θυμῶ,’ 11.416–8). Of course, the reaction of Odysseus seeing Agamemnon’s death is only hypothetical for he was not there. And yet, the highly graphic account featuring dying men ‘sprawled by the mixing bowl and the loaded/ tables’ and the floor ‘steaming with blood’ (11.419–20) makes it tempting to read Odysseus’ hypothetical reaction to the scene as the response that Agamemnon wishes to elicit from him now through his report.

Together with the simile of the female prisoner of war, this passage suggests that the visual quality of narrative, while not elaborated in explicit comments, already forms part of the Odyssey’s poetics. This observation ties in with the argument made by Minchin and others that the very process of
performing an oral poem involved a high degree of visualization by both bard and audience.9

That being said, even in an oral culture and in a rhetorical tradition that emphasizes the power of words to make recipients visualize their content, narrative is first of all an aural medium. While the scenes just discussed bring together word and vision, other passages in the *Odyssey* juxtapose them. Using the same words each time, Telemachus asks Nestor and Menelaus if they have news about his father: ‘… to tell me of his dismal destruction, whether you saw it/ perhaps with your own eyes, or heard the tale from another …’ (‘… κείνου λυγρον ὀλεθρον ἐνισπεῖν, εἰ ποὺ ὑπωτας/ ὀφθαλμοῖσι τεοῖσιν, ἢ ἄλλου μύθου ἄκουσας …’ 3.93–4=4.323–4). Penelope wishes to ask the beggar ‘if he has somewhere heard any news of steadfast Odysseus/ or seen him with his eyes.’ (‘εἰ ποὺ Ὄδυσσηος ταλασίφρονος ἢ πέπυσται/ ἢ ἰδὲν ὀφθαλμοῖσι’ 17.510–1).

The metapoetic significance of these polar expressions comes to the fore in the famous invocation of the Muses at the beginning of the Catalogue of Ships: ‘For you, who are goddesses, are there, and you know all things,/ and we have heard only the rumour of it and know nothing.’ (‘ὑμεῖς γὰρ θεαί ἐστε, πάρεστε τε, ἰστε τε πάντα,/ ἴμεῖς δὲ κλέος οἶον ἄκουμεν, οὐδὲ τι ἱδεν—’, *Il.* 2.485–6). The juxtaposition of the Muses with the poet and his audience is highlighted through the dichotomy of seeing and hearing. The presence of the Muses confirms their status as eyewitnesses, which is also conveyed by the verb ἰδέναι with its strong visual connotation.10 The dependence of the poet and his audience on their
ears is explicit in ἀκούμεν and implicit in κλέος. Being related to the verb κλύω, κλέος can signify both rumour and the fame generated by poetry. Both meanings come into play here: while the juxtaposition with knowledge based on sight activates the meaning of rumour, the reference to poet and audience in a self-reflective comment makes it hard not to think of epic poetry, especially since the following lines explicitly mention the voice of the poet. In this central meditation on epic poetry, Homer highlights the aural nature of his medium.

In the *Odyssey*, the metapoetic relevance of the juxtaposition of eyesight and hearing is heralded in the introduction of Demodocus: ‘She reft him of his eyes, but she gave him the sweet singing …’ (‘ὀφθαλμῶν μὲν ἁμέρας, δίδου δ’ ἡδεῖαν ἀοιδήν.’ 8.64). The blindness of Demodocus has been interpreted along various lines: From a historical and anthropological perspective, it has been pointed out that in archaic societies singing was one of the few professions remaining for the blind. Literary scholars have spelt out how blindness contributes to the shaping of the figure of the bard. Notably, it separates the bard from the audience for which he performs. Besides expressing his impartiality, the bard’s distance from his environment highlights his ability to access the past with the help of the Muses. The pointed juxtaposition of the bard’s blindness with ἀοιδή in 8.64 prompts me to relate it to the medium of epic poetry. No matter to what extent graphic descriptions stimulate our imagination, the primary sense that poetry addresses is the ear. Demodocus’ and Homer’s alleged blindness dovetails with the aural nature of their medium.
Visualization is crucial to the oral tradition of Homeric epic. A highly graphic account permits both singer and audience to navigate the world of the epic. This, however, does not mean that the distinction between seeing and hearing is discarded. Homer not only juxtaposes seeing with hearing, but also reflects on the relation of epic to both senses. While intimating the visual appeal that narrative may have, he explicitly points out the aural nature of his own medium. Seen against this backdrop, the connection between nostos and vision to be laid out in the next two sections gains metapoetic significance and can be related to the Odyssey itself.

II. SEEING AND NOSTOS

Let me first show the close link that the Odyssey establishes between seeing and homecoming in its first half. The idea of Odysseus’ return is repeatedly expressed through visual terms. On the one hand, those on Ithaca muse on seeing Odysseus again; on the other, the nostos from the perspective of Odysseus is literally and metaphorically conceived of as an act of seeing. Moreover, I will argue, the visual notion of Odysseus’ homecoming is highlighted by an inversion of the dynamic of gaze and desire.

In 1.163–5, Telemachus wishes in a conversation with Athena in the guise of Mentor: ‘If they were ever to see him coming back to Ithaca/ the prayer of them all would be to be lighter on their feet/ instead of to be richer men for gold and clothing.’ (‘εἰ δὲν καίνων γὰρ Ιθάκην ἱδοῖσθ᾽ ἐποίησαν τοῦ νοστῆσαι,/ πάντες κ᾽
ἀρησαίατ’ ἐλαφρότεροι πόδας εἶναι/ ἢ ἀφειότεροι χρυσοῖ τε ἐσθήτος τε.’ 1.163–5). Along different lines, Telemachus envisages the return of his father: ‘… as he sat among the suitors, his heart deep grieving within him,/ seeing in his mind his great father, how he might come back/ and all throughout the house might cause the suitors to scatter …’ (‘Ἦστο γὰρ ἐν μνηστήρῳ φίλου τετιμένος ἢτορ, ὡς σώμενος πατέρ’ ἐσθλὸν ἐνι φρεσίν, εἰ ποθεν ἐλθὼν/ μνηστήρων τῶν μὲν σκέδασιν κατὰ δῶματα θεί …’ 1.114–6).

The visual connotation of nostos from the perspective of Odysseus is firmly planted in formulaic diction. The formula νόστιμον ἡμαρ ἰδέοθαι occurs three times (3.233; 5.220; 8.466) and is modified to νόστιμον ἡμαρ ἰδήαι in a fourth passage (6.311). While this formula draws on a metaphorical use of ‘seeing’, the phrases φίλους τ’ ἰδέειν καὶ ἱκέοθαι (4.475; 5.41; 114; 9.532) and ἄλοχον τ’ ἰδέειν καὶ πατρίδ’ ἱκέοθαι (8.410) employ a literally visual experience to refer to the homecoming. ‘Seeing the wife’ also paraphrases nostos in 11.161–2 (‘οὐδὲ πω ἠλθες/ εἰς Ἰθάκην οὐδ’ εἶδες ἐνι μεγάροις γυναῖκα;’). In 7.224–5, property and slaves are mentioned as the object of his seeing that signifies a return: ‘… and let life leave me when I have once more/ seen my property, my serving people, and my great high-roofed house.’ (‘“… ἰδόντα μὲ καὶ λίπτοι σιών/ κτῆσιν ῥμῆν διμῶδος τε καὶ ύψερεφές μέγα δῶμα.”’).

In the Nausicaa and Phaeacian episodes, the visual colouring of nostos comes to the fore through the inversion of the relation between gaze and desire. The common link between gaze and desire is illustrated by one of the loveliest
passages of the *Iliad*: Hera seduces Zeus in order to distract him from the Trojan War and to grant the Greeks a great victory (14.293b–6):

… And Zeus who gathers the clouds saw her,
and when he saw her desire was a mist about his close heart
as much as on that time they first went to bed together
and lay in love, and their dear parents knew nothing of it.

… ἴδε δὲ νεφεληγερέτα Ζεύς.
ὡς δὲ ἴδεν, ὡς μιν ἔρος πυκινὰς φρενὰς ἀμφεκάλυψεν,
oἶον ὅτε πρώτιστον ἐμισγέσθην φιλότητι
eἰς εὐνήν φοιτώντε, φίλους λήβοντε τοκῆς.

The sight of Hera directly translates into desire, the strength of which Zeus delicately expresses by comparing it with the lust he felt for his extramarital affairs neatly presented in a catalogue. The strong impression that Hera’s appearance makes on Zeus may be reinforced by a talisman she received from Aphrodite, and yet the reworking of formulas describing Zeus’ excitement in a speech by Paris to Helen indicates that the strong link between seeing and desiring somebody holds true also for encounters without magical gear. The hero of the *Odyssey* lays his eyes on gorgeous women too, albeit without desiring them. By the same token, many of the places that Odysseus gets to see stir wonder and admiration in him, but he does not wish to stay. Odysseus’ encounters with
Calypso and the Phaeacians reveal that for him the link between appreciative gaze and desire is interrupted.

Let us first look at the Phaeacian episode. Odysseus is amazed at the city of the Phaeacians: he admires their harbours, ships, meeting places and high walls (7.43–5); he is particularly struck by the palace of Alcinous with its gold and silver dogs (7.91–4) and the burgeoning orchards (7.112–32) to be matched only by the ever-blooming Californian valley: ‘And there long-suffering great Odysseus stopped still and admired it./ But when his mind was done with all admiration …’ (‘ἔνθα στὰς θηέτο πολύτλας δίος Θυνωσεύς./ αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δὴ πάντα ἐὼ θηήσατο θυμῷ’, 7.133–4). At the court of Alcinous, Odysseus witnesses a dance performance of adolescents and ‘he gazed on the twinkling of their feet, his heart full of wonder’ (‘μαρμαργάς θηέτο ποδῶν, θαύμαζε δὲ θυμῷ.’ 8.265). He comments on a dance with a ball: ‘“… Wonder takes me as I look on them.”’ (‘“… σέβας μ’ ἐχει εἰσορόωντα.”’ 8.384). Despite all this enticement, Odysseus is not tempted to stay and urges his departure.

Before Odysseus marvels at the wonders of Scheria, his gaze falls upon Nausicaa. He extensively voices his amazement at her beauty (6.160–1). Lacking human *comparanda*, he first likens her to Artemis (6.151–2) and then compares her to the shoot of a palm tree he saw on Delos (6.162–169). Odysseus may be choosing his words carefully to flatter Nausicaa and thereby to secure a warm welcome, but Nausicaa’s extraordinary beauty is confirmed by the narrator, who introduces her as ‘like the immortal goddesses for stature and beauty’ (‘ἄθανάτησι φυήν καὶ εἴδος ὀμοίη’, 6.16). Love and even marriage are in the air:
Nausicaa is at the right age to find a husband and Odysseus praises the one who gets to marry her as ‘the most blessed at heart of all’ (‘κεῖνος δ’ αὖ περὶ κήρι μακάρτατος ἐξοχον ἄλλων’, 6.158).

Still, the deep impression that Nausicaa’s appearance makes on Odysseus fails to trigger his desire. The circuit between gaze and desire that comes to the fore in *Iliad* 14 is interrupted. Instead of desiring Nausicaa, Odysseus is eager to ‘see his day of homecoming’ and ‘his own people’ (‘ἔνα νόστιμον ἐμαρ ἴδηαι’; ‘φίλους τ’ ἴδειν’, 6.311–4 in Nausicaa’s speech; cf. 8.466 and 7.224–5) for he ‘cannot think of any place sweeter on earth to look at’ than Ithaca (‘οὔ τι ἔγὼ γε/ ἦς γαίης δύναμαι γλυκερότερον ἄλλο ἱδέοθαι’, 9.27–8). The pervasive wish to return home prevents Odysseus from fancying what he has right before his eyes. The imperative of *nostos* breaks the circuit between desire and gaze. More pointedly, it turns the relation between gaze and desire upside down. Odysseus’ gaze does not lead to desire, but he desires to see: metaphorically ‘his day of homecoming’ and literally his home. Through the deployment of visual terms for achieving *nostos*, the *Odyssey* redefines the dynamics of gaze and desire for Odysseus. Instead of inviting desire, gazing has become the object of desire.

The inversion of gaze and desire also comes to the fore in book 5. Calypso’s residence features a rich flora and fauna as well as four fountains: ‘… and even a god who came into that place/ would have admired what he saw, the heart delighted within him.’ (‘… ἔνθα κ’ ἐπείτα καὶ ἄθανατός περ ἐπελθὼν/ θηήσατο ἰδὼν καὶ περφθείη φρεσὶν ἣσιν.’, 5.73–4). Accordingly, ‘there the courier Argeiphontes stood and admired it.’ (‘ἔνθα στὰς θηήτο διάκτορος
Ἀργείφοντης.' 5.75). Odysseus, on the other hand, after several years on Ogygia, has no eye anymore for the beauty of the setting (5.156–8):

But all the days he would sit upon the rocks, at the seaside, breaking his heart in tears and lamentation and sorrow as weeping tears he looked out over the barren water.

Odysseus admits that Calypso is superior to Penelope ‘in beauty and stature to look at’ (‘εἶδος ἀκιδυοτέρη μέγεθός τ` εἰσάντα ἰδέσθαι’ 5.217), but nonetheless ‘the nymph was no longer pleasing to him’ (‘ἐπεὶ οὐκέτι ἤνδαυε νύμφη’, 5.153). As Calypso bitterly remarks, Odysseus ‘is longing to see/ his wife, for whom he is pining all his days here’ (‘ἰμερόμενος περ ἰδέσθαι/ σὴν ἁλοχον, τῆς τ` αἰὲν ἔλεδει ἦματα πάντα.’ 5.209–10). Calypso may have delighted Odysseus once, but the thrill is gone. Now the sight of Calypso does not arouse Odysseus’ desire who instead wishes to see his wife, just as the beauty of Ogygia does not cast a spell over him, for he yearns to see ‘his people’ (‘φίλους τ` ἰδέειν’, 5.114) and ‘the day of homecoming’ (‘νόστιμον ἦμαρ’, 5.220).

Norman Bryson notes that ‘the life of vision is one of endless wanderlust, and in its carnal form the eye is nothing but desire.’ In the case of Odysseus, however, the desire that the sight of gorgeous women and marvellous places
arouses has been blocked by his desire to see his wife and home on Ithaca. This play on the semantics of the gaze transforming it from the cause of desire into its object underscores the visual connotation of the *nostos* and drives home Odysseus’ iron will to return to Ithaca.

III. RECOGNITION, SEEING AND NARRATIVE ON ITHACA

Given the prominence of visual imagery in expressions for Odysseus’ *nostos*, it is striking to note that sight plays only a minor role and is refracted in multiple ways when Odysseus actually returns. At the court of Alcinous, Odysseus narrates that after the departure from Aeolus ‘on the tenth day at last appeared the land of our fathers,/ and we could see people tending fires’ (‘τῇ δεκάτῃ δὲ ἕδη ἀνεφαίνετο πατρίς ἄρουρα,/ καὶ δὴ πυρπολέοντας ἐλεύσομεν ἐγγὺς ἐόντας.’ 10.29–30). However, Odysseus falls asleep, his companions open the bag of Aeolus and the winds escape driving the ships far away from Ithaca. In contradiction to the visual semantics of *nostos*, seeing Ithaca does not mean the desired homecoming, which is being deferred still further. When Odysseus, after braving the Laestrigonians, Scylla and other trials, finally sets foot on Ithaca, he first does not recognize the island, for Athena has cast a mist over it (13.187–90). As Goldhill puts it: ‘The constantly expressed desire to see the fatherland is baulked at the moment of return.’

Odysseus’ failure to recognize the much-desired destination of his travels is underscored by the detailed description of the harbour of Phorkys and the cave
of the nymphs by the narrator. As Byre has argued, the sequence of the description ‘mirrors the movement of the Phaeacian ship into the harbor and to the shore’¹⁹, and yet the ‘god’s eye’ view of the landscape distances the audience from Odysseus: ‘And this distanced, godlike knowledge that we are thus granted intensifies and deepens the poignancy of the dramatic irony of Odysseus’ not knowing at first where he is.’²⁰

The close link between returning and seeing that is suggested by the expressions for Odysseus’ nostos in the first part is broken not only by Odysseus’ failure to recognize Ithaca. Athena disguises Odysseus ‘so that no mortal can recognize’ him (13.397). The suitors constantly see Odysseus, but his disguise prevents them from recognizing him. Even when Athena beautifies Odysseus before the boxing match with Irus, they admiringly gaze at his strong body without figuring out his identity (18.66-71). It is striking that sight also plays a minor role in the recognition scenes. The chain of these scenes is complex and has been tackled from various perspectives in scholarship.²¹ Drawing on this work, I shall touch only on the means of recognition. A quick and necessarily perfunctory run through the scenes in this section will reveal that instead of sight narrative emerges as the salient means of recognition.

Odysseus’ revelation of his identity to his son (16.172–214) does not qualify as a recognition scene stricto sensu because, as Erbse points out, without memories of his father Telemachus has no chance of recognizing his father.²² The scene nonetheless destabilizes the significance of sight. Athena, who first disguised Odysseus as an old beggar, now gives him the appearance of a dashing
young man (16.172–6). When Telemachus is bewildered and suspects facing a god, Odysseus explains to him (16.207–10):

But here you see the work of Athena, the giver of plunder,
who turns me into whatever she pleases, since she can do this;
and now she will make me look like a beggar, but then the next time
like a young man, and wearing splendid clothes on my body.

As Pucci remarks, ‘if Telemachus finally “recognizes” his father, it is because he lets himself be persuaded by Odysseus’ voice. Confronted with conflicting outward signs – miraculous signs – and the voice of Odysseus, Telemachus chooses to believe the latter.’ In the case of Telemachus, who cannot remember how his father looks, seeing Odysseus may be of minor importance anyway. Nonetheless, the permanent subjection of Odysseus’ appearance to changes undercuts its significance for his identity.

The first ‘real’ recognition scene is Odysseus’ encounter with his old dog Argus. Unlike the barking dogs of Eumaeus, Argus silently raises his head and pricks up his ears when Odysseus comes (17.291). The recognition is also visual - besides stating that Argus dies ‘when, after nineteen years had gone by, he had
seen Odysseus’ (‘αὐτίκ’ ἵδοντ’ Ὅδυσῆα ἑἰκοστῷ ἐνιαυτῷ’, 17.327),
the narrator describes the recognition with the verb νοεῖν, which has a strong visual connotation. It is noteworthy that the only encounter in which the sight of Odysseus seems to suffice to establish his identity involves an animal. And yet, even the Argus scene challenges the notion of sight. Regarding Argus, Odysseus wipes away a tear and says to Eumaeus (17.307–10):

The shape of him is splendid, and yet I cannot be certain whether he had the running speed to go with this beauty, or is just one of the kind of table dog that gentlemen keep, and it is only for show that their masters care for them.

“… καλὸς μὲν δέμας ἐστίν, ἀτὰρ τόδε γ’ οὗ σάφα οἶδα, ἢ δὴ καὶ ταχὺς ἐσκε θεέιν ἐπὶ εἴδει τῶδε, ἢ αὐτῶς οἷοί τε τραπεζῆς κύνες ἄνδρῶν γίνοντ’, ἀγλαίης δὲ ἐνεκεν κομέουσιν ἀνακτεῖς.”

In questioning the correspondence between a dog’s appearance and his swiftness, Odysseus opens a rift between appearance and quality. Even without divine transformation, what you see is not always what you get.

The next recognition scene plays with the senses of seeing and touching. In book 19, Penelope notes that Odysseus resembles the beggar in his feet and hands (19.358–9) and Eurycleia says to the disguised Odysseus that she ‘has never seen one as like as you are/ to Odysseus, both as to your feet, and voice and
appearance.’ (‘ἀλλ’ οὖ πώ τινά φημι ἐοικότα ὥδε ἰδέσθαι/ ὡς σὺ δέμας φωνήν
tε πόδας τ’ Ὀδυσσήϊ ἐοικας.’ 19.380–1). Her recognition of Odysseus, however,
is haptic – when she washes him, it is the touch of his scar that makes her identify
the old beggar (19.467–8; 474–5).27 The fact that Odysseus moves away from the
fire to prevent Eurycleia from seeing his scar (19.388–91) signals that the scar is
also a visual marker of Odysseus’ identity and makes it even more noteworthy
that Homer has Eurycleia recognize Odysseus through touch.

This helps not only to dramatize the scene – Odysseus turns away from the
light, but nevertheless the scar will betray his identity – it also characterizes this
particular recognition.28 The sense of seeing is based on distance between subject
and object29 and allows us to look away as is illustrated by Penelope, whose eyes
Athena turns elsewhere when Eurycleia wants to share her discovery with her
(19.476–9). Touching, on the other hand, requires direct contact between bodies
and qualifies as the sense with the strongest ‘pathic’ dimension. The haptic
recognition in book 19 not only conveys the threat that an early recognition would
pose to Odysseus, who therefore hurries to grab Eurycleia’s neck and addresses
her with harsh words (19.476–502), but it is also particularly appropriate for the
woman who nursed Odysseus as a child and takes on the features of a mother in
the Odyssey.

A further aspect in this scene helps to downplay the importance of sight
for recognition. Auerbach’s reading on the digression on the scar as illustrating
the lack of depth in Homeric narrative has not found full approval among
classicists.30 It has alternatively been suggested that the story of the scar is
focalized internally through Eurycleia, reproducing what goes through her mind the moment she recognizes the scar.\(^{31}\) Seen from this perspective, the digression on how Odysseus received his scar flags the crucial role of narrative for recognition and, more profoundly, for identity.\(^{32}\) In the form of this scar, an experience defining Odysseus’ character has been inscribed into his body. The scar can serve as a marker of Odysseus’ identity because it evokes a narrative of his past.

The scar also figures in the following recognition scene, albeit along different lines. While Eurycleia recognizes Odysseus haptically, Eumaeus and Philoetius look at the scar, which this time does not betray Odysseus’ identity against his will,\(^{33}\) but serves him as evidence for it (21.191–225).\(^{34}\) Sight is more important than in other recognition scenes, but still limited in its significance. Unlike Penelope and Laertes, the herdsmen do not doubt the proof that the scar provides and start hugging and kissing Odysseus immediately after its presentation (21.222–4). At the same time, the scar does not trigger the recognition, it is only unveiled as proof. It is not so much the scar as Odysseus’ speech that reveals his identity just as Odysseus ‘recognizes’ Eumaeus and Philoetius by inquiring which side they would choose were their master to return (21.193–205).\(^{35}\)

The most elaborate anagnorisis scene is the one between Odysseus and Penelope.\(^{36}\) Seeing in the reunion of the spouses the climax of the Odyssey’s action, scholars since antiquity have been tempted to condemn the rest of the poem as later interpolation.\(^{37}\) However that may be, Penelope’s recognition
hammers home the limits to visual perception. The role that vision can play for
the purposes of identification comes to the fore when the beggar describes
Odysseus’s cloak and brooch to prove that he has actually seen Odysseus (19.225-
35). That said, when the identification of the slayer of the suitors as Odysseus is at
stake, sight recedes to the background.

When Penelope remains sceptical about his identity, Eurycleia adduces the
scar through which she identified Odysseus (23.73–6). Penelope does not accept
what Eurycleia considers a σῆμα ἀριφραδές, but says: ‘Let us go to see my son,
so that I can look on/ these men who courted me lying dead, and the man who
killed them.’ (‘… ἀλλ’ ἔμπης ἱομεν μετὰ παίδ’ ἐμόν, ὁφρα ἱδωμαι/ ἁνδρας
μνηστήρας τεβνητάς, Ἦδ’ ὡς ἐπεφνευ.’ 23.83–4). Any expectation that a fresh
look will convince Penelope of Odysseus’ identity is disappointed. She goes into
the megaron and takes her place across from Odysseus (23.90–5):

… while he was seated by the tall pillar,
looking downward, and waiting to find out if his majestic
wife would have anything to say to him, now that she saw him with her
eyes.
She sat a long time in silence, and her heart was wondering.
She saw, and at one moment thought she recognized him,
but then again she failed to recognize him in the foul clothing he wore. 38

… ὁ δ’ ἄρα πρὸς κίονα μακρήν
ήστο κάτω ὀρόων, ποτιδέγμενος εἶ τί μιν εἶποι
When Telemachus chides Penelope for not welcoming her husband, she remarks that she ‘cannot find anything to say to him, nor question him, nor look him straight in the face’ (‘οὐδὲ τι προσφάσθαι δύναμαι ἔπος οὐδ’ ἐρέσθαι/ οὐδ’ εἰς ὠπα ἱδέοθαί ἐναιτίον.’ 23.106–7) and refers to ‘signs’ that will clarify the identity of the beggar. Even after Odysseus has taken a bath and has been rejuvenated by Athena (23.152–63), Penelope does not accept him as her husband.

Only Odysseus’ response to the cunning mention of their bed gives her sufficient evidence:39 When she orders Eurycleia to put outside the chamber the bed Odysseus built himself, he loses control and snaps at her. The command to move the bed that was built around a tree-trunk and therefore immobile suggests to Odysseus that it had been moved by another man. Here, the mutual, albeit asymmetrical, character of the recognition comes to the fore: As Froma Zeitlin observes, the question of Odysseus’ identity intersects with that of Penelope’s fidelity.40 The pretension of infidelity elicits from Odysseus a reaction that proves his identity for his wife. When Penelope unveils her trick, Odysseus recognizes her fidelity just as she has recognized his identity. The semantics of the bed as a locus for marriage and more specifically the entwinement of nature and culture,
the outside and the inside in a bed that is built around a tree are obvious. For my argument, it is crucial that Odysseus reports in detail how he constructed the bed (23.189–201). Sight does not suffice to establish Odysseus’ identity for Penelope. She only accepts him on account of the story that the symbol of their marriage triggers in him. It is obviously the topic of the story that is essential and yet it is noteworthy that not sight but a narrative constitutes recognition; memory trumps appearance as proof of identity.

In the final recognition scene, Odysseus meets his father (24.231–348). Unrecognized by Laertes, he first pretends to be a certain Eperitus who was host to Odysseus more than four years ago. At the mention of his son, grief overcomes Laertes; Odysseus reveals himself and, asked for a σῆμα ἀριφραδές, presents his scar and adduces the trees that he received as a young boy from Laertes (24.331–44). The proof given by Odysseus is again tailored to his addressee: Odysseus mentions that Laertes and his mother sent him to his grandfather where he would be injured by the boar (24.333–4), an element missing from the far more extensive narrative on the scar in book 19. Besides corresponding to the orchards in which Odysseus encounters Laertes, the trees aptly evoke the patrimony passing from father to son. As in other recognition scenes, sight plays a minor role; it is again retrospective narrative that finally proves Odysseus’ identity.

The close association that formulaic and non-formulaic expressions, some metaphorical, others literal, establish between the idea of homecoming and the act of seeing is not expanded upon narratively in the account of Odysseus’ return to Ithaca. After seeing Ithaca, Odysseus has to undergo another round of trials, and
when he finally sets foot on the island, he fails to recognize it. Instead of sight, narrative emerges as crucial in the recognition scenes on Ithaca. The emphasis on narrative and the comparatively minor role of sight in the *Odyssey*’s *anagnorisis* scenes bears significance on various levels. In having the characters establish identity through memory rather than outward appearance, the poem highlights the temporal dimension of human life. We are strongly defined, it seems, both for ourselves and others, by the stories into which we have transformed our past experiences.

Moreover, the strong narrative component of the recognition scenes contributes to the characterization of Odysseus: ‘The recognition of Odysseus is interwoven with his powers of *mētis*, his powers of manipulation of signs and language, his power to conceal, distort and control through words.’ Odysseus’ deployment of stories for the sake of recognition and their fine-tuning to the perspective of his audience reveals his cunning. It also shapes the narrative of his arrival on Ithaca, endowing it with the sense of deferral, irony and ambiguity on which much scholarship has focused. The predilection for stories in the chain of *anagnoriseis* provides the *Odyssey*’s last third with a powerful narrative engine.

Most importantly, the privileging of the aural over the visual is metapoetically charged. The represented - the senses of seeing and hearing at the level of content - is interlocked with the epic representation that addresses the ear. As we have seen, Homer juxtaposes seeing with hearing and highlights the aural nature of epic. In first strongly connecting the idea of *nostos* with the sense of seeing, but then having narrative trump sight, the *Odyssey* gives preference to its
own medium. In the recognition scenes, epic boosts its own form of expression. The *Odyssey* self-consciously plays up its aural nature against the sense of seeing.

**IV. SEEING AND VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ODYSSEY**

I will now turn from narrative to image and argue that not only the *Odyssey*, but also early vase-painting reveals a sense of its own medium. While epic privileges aural over visual information, what is arguably the earliest depiction of an Odyssean tale concentrates on scenes that centre on eyes and seeing, thus foregrounding the sense that is crucial to their own medium.⁴⁵ The act of seeing on the vase mirrors and refracts the gaze directed towards the vase.

First, though, we have to consider a methodological issue, namely the notoriously controversial relation of early vase-painting to Homer. The fluidity of the epic tradition that most scholars accept for the Archaic and many also for the Classical Age⁴⁶ makes it impossible to argue that these images refer to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as we have them.⁴⁷ Besides the works of Homer, a rich tradition of epic and non-epic tales were in circulation.⁴⁸ Vase-painting can and will have been inspired by tales that have not been preserved. Revisiting our iconographic record from the Archaic Age, Snodgrass makes a strong case that *Iliadic* and *Odyssean* motives are far less prominent than we would expect.⁴⁹

The motif on which the first part of my argument focuses has received much attention: we have several vases from the 7th and 6th centuries representing men who drive a stick into the eyes of a man or giant.⁵⁰ While many scholars
identify this scene with the blinding of Polyphemus, Snodgrass challenges the reference to Homer for most vases, noting various differences from his account.\textsuperscript{51} And yet, Snodgrass’ methodological maxim that requires ‘some acknowledgement of the debt to the literary source’\textsuperscript{52} raises the bar unduly high – where artists tried to represent a scene, he expects an unmistakable reference to a source.\textsuperscript{53} Snodgrass also asks for an exact reproduction of details.\textsuperscript{54} However, differences concerning the number of men or the exact nature of the object driven into the eye do not necessarily indicate that the painting depicts a Non-Odyssean version of the episode or an entirely different tale. We have to take into account the conventions of pictorial representation and the freedom of artists to change such details.\textsuperscript{55} As Michael Squire points out, the notion of illustration does not provide an appropriate framework for the interaction between image and text in Archaic Greece.\textsuperscript{56}

What is more, at least in some pictures there seems to be, as Luca Giuliani observes, positive evidence for a reference to the Polyphemus episode.\textsuperscript{57} The vessel in the hand of the man being blinded indicates his inebriation, a distinct element of the Homeric poem that does not feature in later folktale versions of the same motif.\textsuperscript{58} By no means required by the conventions of pictorial representation, the vessel is a significant element that makes a representation of the blinding of Polyphemus very compelling for these vases and also plausible for other vases that, while not featuring a vessel, are otherwise iconographically similar.
That being said, we have to take into account the possibility of other traditions besides the *Odyssey* dealing with Polyphemus. Burgess even argues against a reference to Homer. He builds his argument on the observation that earlier traditions of a motif need not be identical with its later versions. While acknowledging that Homeric inspiration is likely ‘if the presence of wine in the story can be regarded as a Homeric innovation’, he concludes from the fact that the inebriation is not a necessary part of the *Odyssey* that it is derived from an earlier tradition that, unlike our later evidence, featured wine. Therefore the vases cannot be taken to be inspired by Homer. Several points though in Burgess’ argument may easily be challenged. Why should an element not necessary to the plot be derived from an earlier tradition? It is strange to find such a mechanical view of oral poetry in a book that is an important reminder of the dynamics of epic and non-epic poems circulating in Archaic Greece. Burgess also assigns hypothetical material an undue role in his argument - it is one thing to discuss the existence of lost traditions, but another to postulate for them such specific features as the use of wine. It is not plausible to discard a possible reference to a preserved poem, backed up by a specific element, in favour of a purely hypothetical feature of a tradition that has left no traces.

The issue of reference versus non-reference to the *Odyssey* loses some of its sting when we remind ourselves that artist and beholders would have thought rather in terms of story than text. The representation would evoke not so much a poem as a story familiar through one or more poems. It is therefore sound to claim that the vase-paintings represent a story that figures in the *Odyssey* and potentially
in other traditions. With the *caveats* just mentioned in mind, I am inclined to side with the majority of earlier scholarship and, more recently, Giuliani and Squire, who assume that the early depictions of the blinding of a man are likely to be related to what we read as book 8 of the *Odyssey*.

That said, my argument does not hinge on this qualified identification and should also make sense to scholars who remain sceptical. The self-referential dimension that I wish to demonstrate is independent of the subject represented. Besides depictions of (what I take to be) the blinding of Polyphemus, I will also discuss vase-paintings that feature the escape from the cave. Here, although details of the pictorial representation deviate from the epic account, the inscription of names on some early examples makes the identification less controversial. While the nature of our record makes it impossible to rule out a reference to other non-preserved traditions, the paintings are very likely to have evoked Odysseus’ escape as narrated by Homer.

Let us start with the first group: On the neck of a huge *amphora* found at Eleusis and dating from the middle of the 7th century BCE (insert Figure I about here), we see three men ramming a long stick, probably a spear, into the eye of a superhuman-sized man reclining with his back touching the right margin of the picture. This is one of the paintings in which the giant is unmistakably identified as Polyphemus through a vessel in his right hand. The same scene is depicted, with variations, on the *krater* of Aristonothos, an Argive *krater* and the Getty Museum’s Etruscan *pithos*, all dating roughly from the same time. Later examples include a Corinthian *alabastron*, a Laconian cup and an *oinochoe*.
attributed to the Theseus painter.\textsuperscript{67} Not only is the blinding of Polyphemus a scene in which words do not matter greatly, but it also zeros in on the organ of visual perception. More specifically, Polyphemus’ loss of his eye contrasts with the viewer’s act of seeing; the subject of the representation throws into relief its own medium.

The iconographic reflection on its own medium is particularly intense on the Eleusinian amphora.\textsuperscript{68} Not only its neck, but also its body draws attention to the act of seeing, showing two Gorgons who chase Perseus with Athena standing in between (insert Figure II about here). Behind the Gorgons, not on the front of the amphora but on its ornamental back, is the decapitated Medusa. The petrifying look of the Gorgons contrasts with the blinding of Polyphemus, one exacerbating the power of the eye, the other revealing its vulnerability.\textsuperscript{69} Shown frontally, the eyes of the Gorgons mirror the beholder’s act of viewing and invite her to relate the gaze depicted on the vase with her gaze at the vase.

A self-referential interpretation is further supported by the play with the framing of the images that blur the boundary between representation and the represented: Strikingly, all figures with the exception of the Medusa exceed in height the framing of the images, both beyond the top and bottom borders, and the stake rammed into Polyphemus’ eye is identical with the top border of the image, only separate from it between Odysseus and Polyphemus, where it has be lowered to reach its goal.\textsuperscript{70} Robin Osborne, whose main point is to relate the representation to the function of the vase as a container for the corpse of a boy,\textsuperscript{71} already noticed the correspondence between the viewer’s gaze and the acts of gazing on the
amphora: ‘Not only do Odysseus and Polyphemus engage in just the play of exchanging frontal gazes which the viewer is obliged to play with the Gorgons on the body of the amphora, but the stake which blinds the Cyclops is also the frame of the picture. As the beam is thrust into his eye the Cyclops’ whole visual world collapses in on itself; as Polyphemus’ sight is destroyed so also is the picture, and with it Polyphemus and his attackers. Both the power and the fragility of representation are highlighted here.’  

For us, though, the depiction of the scene is not impaired, as Osborne seems to propose; it is fixed on the vase and is as visible now as it was in the 7th century BCE. The interaction between the images on neck and body suggests a different reading: Polyphemus’ loss of his eye does not so much question as throw into relief the gaze of the viewer, whom not even the frontal stare of the Gorgons can petrify. The Eleusinian amphora grants the viewer an undisturbed visual reflection of simultaneously the force and vulnerability of the gaze, thereby taking its power to yet another level.

The correspondence between subject and medium of representation is also underscored in paintings in which Polyphemus is not depicted in profile, but looks out of the image. A skyphos from around 500 BCE shows three men driving a long stick into the right eye of Polyphemus who is lying with part of his upper body propped up to what seems to be the rock of his cave  (insert Figure III about here). Polyphemus’ right hand touches the back of his head, while the left hand lies next to his body. Giuliani interprets this posture compellingly as expressing the relaxed state of Polyphemus who is caught off-guard. The turning
of the Cyclops’ head away from the attackers emphasizes the surprise by which he is taken. As Giuliani points out, the depiction of the Cyclops with two eyes may be owed not so much to an Un-Homeric tradition of the saga as to the schema for faces shown frontally.⁷⁵ For my interpretation, it is noteworthy that the gaze of Polyphemus responds to the gaze of the viewer. Our eyes meet the eyes of the Cyclops, one blinded, the other seeing. The parallel between Polyphemus and viewer is highlighted by the kantharos right next to Polyphemus that mirrors the skyphos we are viewing.⁷⁶

A black-figured Pseudo-Chalcidian amphora stresses the topic of eyesight by different means (insert Figure IV about here).⁷⁷ Here, we do not see the eye of Polyphemus, which is covered by the stick the Greeks ram into it. The invisibility of the eye makes Polyphemus’ blinding tangible for the viewers: the Cyclops’ loss of (active) sight is iconographically expressed through the viewers’ loss of (passive) sight of his organ of seeing. At the same time, the neck of the amphora features a Silen’s mask with two large eyes starring frontally at the viewer. As Matthias Steinhart points out, Silen’s masks, to be found predominantly on Chalcidian vases, bring in a Dionysian theme.⁷⁸ I suggest that the Silen’s mask on the vase under discussion has additional significance: the prominent eyes lend emphasis to the sense of seeing and underscore that the organ which Polyphemus is about to lose on the amphora’s body is the one by which we perceive this scene.

The second scene that relates to the story of Odyssey 9 with a significant record in early vase-painting is the escape of the Greeks from the Cyclops’
cavern. A Protoattic oinochoe, for example, shows three rams with men who are clumsily depicted as lying horizontally beside, not under the animals while clinging to their horns. Numerous other vases, including a cup signed by Pamphaeus and a pelike in Boston, feature a single man, in all likelihood Odysseus, under a ram. Words are crucial to the outwitting of Polyphemus, but they do not matter in the act of leaving his cavern. What is more, the act of (not) seeing is essential and resonates dialectically with the viewer's gaze at the painting. Odysseus and the remaining companions manage to escape because Polyphemus, deprived of his eye, cannot see them anymore. This comes to the fore in a group of vases that also show the Cyclops beside the Greeks under the rams. On an Attic stamnos in New York, we see a giant Polyphemus who is pushing aside the rock from the entrance of his cavern, while two Greeks, identified as Odysseus and Idameneus (sic), under the belly of rams, are passing him by. Here as on other vases, the blindness of Polyphemus is visualized by means of an eye without a pupil. The Polyphemus on a lekythos of the Emporion painter does not even have an eye, only an eyebrow that marks its absence. All these paintings let us see a scene to which the Cyclops’ inability to see is crucial. Our gaze at the vases is thrown into relief by the blindness of Polyphemus, while inversely highlighting it.

Various interpretations have been offered for the predominance of the Polyphemus adventure in early representations of Odyssean themes. For Schefold, it is due to the significance of the episode, which provokes the wrath of Poseidon and therefore serves as a central juncture in the plot. Concerning the blinding,
Toucheufeu-Meynier ponders the beauty of the episode in Homer as well as the popularity of the underlying tale.  

Hölscher interprets Odysseus’ encounter with barbarian Polyphemus as a reflection of the experiences with alien people in the course of travels, commerce and colonization, all increasing in the 7th century BCE.  

The crucial role of sight is a further point worth considering. The contrast between the blinding of Polyphemus and the viewer’s gaze is underscored in paintings that have Polyphemus look at the viewer. The escape, which we find on other vases, is made possible only by the blindness of Polyphemus, visually represented through incomplete eyes. In centring on eyes and acts of gazing, both scenes allow the paintings to engage with their own medium. Of course, the self-referential aspect does not suffice to explain single-handedly the popularity of the Polyphemus-motive, but it may have added to its attractiveness.

A further qualification is in order. The ancient artefacts visible today form only a small part of what was produced and used in antiquity. It is thus important to keep in mind that our record of Archaic painting need not be representative. That being said, it is striking that we have evidence for early representations of the Polyphemus episode from a vast area, spanning Attica, Argos, Etruria and Samos. While we should not press the point that the Polyphemus episode was the first Odyssean subject to be painted, its popularity in early vase-painting can be claimed with some confidence.

The encounter of Polyphemus with Odysseus is not the only subject in early vase-painting that is self-consciously engaged with vision. The fact that one vase, the Eleusis amphora, depicts both the blinding of Polyphemus and the
decapitation of Medusa makes the deeper link between the two motives tangible. Rainer Mack interprets ancient representations of Medusa as an ‘aetiology of the gaze’. In decapitating Medusa, Perseus transforms himself from the object of the gaze into its subject. Paintings that show him gaze at the mirror-image of Medusa in his shield drive home the self-referential aspect: the beholder takes Perseus’ role and re-enacts the decapitation of Medusa. The depiction of Polyphemus and Odysseus works along different lines, but it also capitalizes on the dynamics between seeing on the vase and seeing the vase. I am here not concerned with the context of the symposium in which Greeks would have gazed at the paintings that I discuss, but let me at least mention in passing that the self-referential dimension for which I argue ties in nicely with Richard Neer’s view of ambivalence and self-reference in vase-painting as part of the playful negotiation of identity in the symposium.

While concentrating on the predilection for scenes with an emphasis on vision, my interpretation should not detract from the fact that we also find depictions of scenes that draw heavily on words. A case in point is the Sirens who try to lure Odysseus to their shore with songs. The Homeric narrator underscores the aural nature of the threat emanating from the Sirens by saying nothing about their appearance while granting them direct speech. Scholars have emphasized the metapoetic significance of the episode. The Sirens, who claim to ‘know everything’ (‘ἳδειν γὰρ τοι πάνθ’, 12.189) and ‘enchant by the melody of their singing’ (‘λιγυρῇ θέλγουσιν ἀοίδη’, 12.44), are strongly reminiscent of the Muses into whose fountain the epic poet taps. Segal deems the sirens’ song ‘not
only … a ghastly imitation of epic but even … its own negation."\textsuperscript{91} Pointing out the Iliadic character of the Sirens’ song, Pucci argues that it serves the \textit{Odyssey} to set itself off against the \textit{Iliad}.\textsuperscript{92} The central role of singing and its metapoetic significance notwithstanding, the episode of the Sirens is a popular topic in various visual media that can be traced back to around 600 BCE (the Corinthian \textit{aryballos} in Basel).\textsuperscript{93}

A brief look at paintings of the Sirens and Odysseus from different periods reveals various strategies for how to visualize song.\textsuperscript{94} Many paintings feature three Sirens who are grouped around Odysseus’ ship. A red-figured \textit{stamnos}, for example, shows the ship amidst two rocks, with a Siren standing on each one, while a third Siren seems to plunge onto the ship, head first and with closed eyes (\textit{insert Figure V about here}).\textsuperscript{95} Or take a Pompeian wall-painting with one Siren on a rock far in the back on the left side and a second and third on rocks on the right side (\textit{insert Figure VI about here}).\textsuperscript{96} The distribution of Sirens may follow compositional considerations, but it also mimics the pervasiveness of sound, which itself is presented indexically. Many painters have endowed their Sirens with instruments. The Pompeian wall-painting in the British Museum, for example, features one Siren with \textit{aulos}, one with \textit{kithara} and one who is singing. The Sirens on the London \textit{stamnos} have no instruments, but together with the name Himeropa ascribed to one of them, their open mouths indicate singing.

The artists even use the gaze of the figures to express Odysseus’ perception of the Sirens’ song. A \textit{cameo} from the 1\textsuperscript{st} century BCE presents the ship with Odysseus in the centre and above three Sirens. Odysseus, with a
hunched back bound to the mast, looks to the left like the rowers, thereby indicating that the Sirens are not a visual, but an aural phenomenon (insert Figure VII about here).97 Other representations translate the act of listening into that of seeing: On a black-figured oinochoe, Odysseus, erect on the mast, directly faces three Sirens standing on a rock (insert Figure VIII about here).98 The two rowers and the helmsman in the back, however, while looking into the same direction, are far too low to regard the Sirens. The three arms with which Odysseus is painted, two bound behind his back, a third reaching out to the Sirens, forcefully express his desire for the object of his gaze. The presentation of the act of listening through seeing is particularly striking on a Tunisian mosaic in the maison de Dionysos et d’Ulysse dating from the 3rd century CE (insert Figure IX about here).99 All figures are shown frontally, but while the four companions look to the left, Odysseus directs his eyes to the right where three Sirens stand on the land.100

These examples may suffice to illustrate the capacity of pictures to express sound. The preponderance of scenes foregrounding eye and gaze in early depictions of the Odyssey is not owed to the limitations of the medium. It gives however vase-painting a self-referential note that is not dissimilar from the privileging of narrative over vision in the Odyssey. Both media centre on the sense that is crucial for perceiving them. Two differences, though, blur a too neat symmetry: the blinding or being blind of Polyphemus contrasts with the beholder’s act of seeing. The negated gaze on the vase throws into relief the undisturbed gaze at the vase. There is no comparable dialectic between the
narrative of epic poetry and the narrative superseding of sight in the recognition
scenes. At the same time, the role of narrative in the return of Odysseus is thrown
into relief by the prominence of visual imagery in expressions for Odysseus’
nostos. The pictorial representations of Odysseus and Polyphemus home in on the
act of seeing without juxtaposing it with the sense of hearing. These differences
notwithstanding, the parallel self-referential notion in both media is remarkable.

V. CONCLUSION: IMAGE AND TEXT IN EARLY GREEK
LITERATURE AND ART

The relation between text and image has received much attention in recent
scholarship. Michael Squire, for instance, traces our tendency to separate words
from pictures back to the Reformation and its preference for words. In
antiquity, he argues, the relationship was more complex. Squire presents a wide
array of evidence for the artful entanglement of text and image. Take for example
Simmias’ calligrammatic poems that render the physical shape of the letters a
pictorial representation of their object. Philostratus’ Imagines wittily entwine the
sounds that pictures make the beholders hear with the images that their
description is capable of evoking in the reader. Squire’s arguably most
intriguing case is the tabulae Iliacae, small tablets that use both pictures and
inscriptions to represent the Trojan War. Word and image are multiply
interwoven: On the most famous tablet, stored in the Capitoline Museums today,
the obverse features not only pictures representing the stages of the Trojan War,
but also two stelae giving a verbal synopsis of the Iliad (only the right-hand stele has survived) as well as letters inscribed in the central depiction of the fall of Troy. Additionally, the reverse of some tabulae carries a ‘magic square’, a grid of letters that can be read in various directions, just like a picture. As also the tabulae Iliacae, most of the material discussed by Squire stems from the Imperial Period, with the occasional Hellenistic epigram interspersed.

While postclassical material has received most attention, some scholars have also discussed the dynamics between text and image in earlier periods. In her monograph on statues in Archaic and Classical Greek literature, Deborah Steiner devotes a chapter to how references to monuments help texts to reflect on themselves.\(^{104}\) James A. Francis traces back the beginnings of ekphrasis to the Iliad, which contains a particularly intriguing case with the Shield of Achilles.\(^{105}\) My argument shares with these works the attempt to account for the dynamics of text and image in Archaic literature, but it is accentuated differently. Francis and Steiner elaborate on the intricate entwining of the media. The description of Achilles’ shield, for example, mimics through ring-composition the structure of the shield itself and becomes thereby visual just as some of the scenes on the shield have strongly narrative character. My investigation, though, has focused on two cases in which epic and early vase-painting, instead of blending together the media, privilege at the level of the content the senses that are crucial to their own reception. In the Odyssey, the idea of nostos is couched in visual terms, but in Odysseus’ return to Ithaca the role of sight is considerably downplayed. Instead, narration, the very medium of epic, takes the lead role in the recognition and
reinstallation of Odysseus. Early pictorial representations of Odyssean scenes, on the other hand, prefer motifs that centre on the act of seeing. Paintings of the blinding of Polyphemus and Odysseus’ escape from his cave home in on the very sense with which we perceive the painting. The gaze at the vase is interlocked with the gaze on the vase.

By no means though are the *Odyssey* and early representations of its story confined to opposing vision and hearing. I have touched on pictorial representations of the Siren-episode and their strategies of depicting song. Steiner elaborates on how the brooch described in *Od*. 19.226-231 mirrors the dynamics of the *Odyssey* itself. And yet, it is important to see that epic and vase-painting are also capable of playing up their own medium. The self-conscious engagement with medium embraces the juxtaposition of word and image as well as their entwinement. We are still a long way from the shrewd self-referential twists of postclassical literature and art, illustrated by a passage from the *Ethiopica* at the beginning of this paper, but the reflections on medium, based on the interaction of representation with represented, are already multi-faceted and noteworthy in Archaic Greece.

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Of course, reading also involves seeing, but just as Cnemon listens to Calasiris the reception of the *Odyssey*, the subject of this paper, was largely aural, at least in the Archaic and Classical Ages. It is noteworthy that some ancient authors qualify the visualization that is the product of *enargeia*: Aelius Theon, p. 118–19 Spengel, for example, speaks of ‘the faculty of making things described almost visible’ (ἐνάργεια τοῦ σχεδὸν ὅρασθαι τὰ ἀπαγγελλόμενα) and Nicolaus, *Progymnasmata* p. 491 Spengel notes along similar lines that *ekphrasis* ‘tries to turn listeners into spectators’ (πειράται θεατὰς τοὺς ἀκούοντας ἔργαζοσθαι).

Note that my focus on seeing does not map directly onto the theory of the gaze as developed by scholars such as Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16 (1975), 6-18; Michel Foucault, *Survive et punir: la naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) and Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Some of the instances of seeing that I will discuss are indeed charged with the notions of desire and power that loom large in gaze theory, but my argument concerns viewing in a broader sense.


7 Cf. Halliwell (see n. 6), 77-92.


9 Besides Minchin (n. 4), see also the literature listed in n. 4.

10 Bruno Snell, Die Ausdrücke für den Begriff des Wissens in der vorplatonischen Philosophie (Berlin: Weidmann, 1924), 24-7 is still the canonical comment on the visual connotation of εἰδέναι.

11 For the meaning of ‘rumour’ see, for example, Od. 16.461, for the meaning of ‘fame, especially in the medium of poetry’, see e.g. Od. 8.73-4. On the ambivalence of κλέος in Iliad 2.486, see Pietro Pucci, The Song of the Sirens: Essays on Homer (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 38-42. See also Stuart Douglas Olson, Blood and Iron: Stories and Storytelling in Homer’s Odyssey (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1-23.


14 Cf. John Miles Foley, “Fieldwork on Homer,” in New Directions in Oral Theory, ed. Mark C. Amodio (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 15–41: 37, who compares the νόστιμον ἡμαρ to ‘a beacon towards which heroes may struggle either successfully or unsuccessfully.’ See also Anna Bonifazi, “Inquiring into νόστος and its cognates,” AJPh 130 (2009), 481–510: 495.


16 A possible objection to this argument would be the fact that Odysseus has intercourse with Calypso and Circe. Of course, Odysseus sleeps with Calypso and Circe, but the Odyssey does not elaborate on, or even mention, any lust he feels for these immortal women. On the contrary, as I argue below, the Odyssey highlights the absence of desire in Odysseus.

17 Bryson (see n. 3), 209.

18 Simon Goldhill, “Reading differences: the Odyssey and juxtaposition,” Ramus 17 (1988), 1-31: 11. Odysseus’ failure to identify Ithaca contrasts ironically with the arrival of Agamemnon, who ‘saw his country with delight’ (ἔπει ἰσπάσιος ἥλ γαῖαν.’ 4.523), but is then murdered. On the features of Ithaca seen by Odysseus upon his arrival that evoke his previous adventures, see Segal (see n. 6), 51.

Byre (see n. 19), 10.


Erbse (see n.21), 106–7.

Pucci (see n. 21), 95.


On the appropriateness of Odysseus’ modes of revealing his identity to the addressees, see Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 301–5; Goldhill (see n. 12), 5–24.


Roisman’s idea that Odysseus wants to be recognized by Eurycleia (Hanna M. Roisman, “Eumaeus and Odysseus – covert recognition and self-revelation?,” *ICS* 15 (1990), 215-38: 217) is hard to reconcile with Odysseus’ withdrawal from the fire in order to hide the scar (19.388–91).

I find Roisman’s argument that Eumaeus recognizes Odysseus already at his hut and that Odysseus covertly signals his awareness of this too ingenious (see n. 33, 218–38).

The mutual character of the recognition for which Murnaghan (see n. 21), 20–55 argues is particularly obvious in the expressions for recognition that are used for Odysseus’ test of the two herdsman (‘αὐτὸν ἐπὶ δὴ τῶν γε νόσου νημερτέ’ ἀνέγνω’, 21.205), where ἀνέγνω echoes γνοίης in 21.202, underscoring the irony in Philoetius’ reply: “‘… γνοίης χ’, οἶη ἐμῇ δύναμις καὶ χεῖρες ἐπονταί.’”


40 Zeitlin (see n. 36), especially 24; see also Whitman (see n. 28), 304.


43 Cf. Goldhill (see n. 12), 19. See also Segal (see n. 6), 50 on the trees illustrating the cycle of the natural world.

44 Goldhill (see n. 18), 18.

45 For an intriguing interpretation of the gaze in depictions of the Medusa as self-referential, see Rainer Mack, “Facing down Medusa (an aetiology of the gaze),” *Art History* 25 (2002), 571-604. On the eye and its multi-facetted functions in Greek art, see Steinhart (see n. 15); Karin Moser von


51 Snodgrass (see n. 49).

52 Snodgrass (see n. 49), 67.


54 Snodgrass (see n. 49), 90-100.

55 Cf. Lowenstam (see n. 49), 167-82; (see n. 47), 23; Burgess (see n. 48), 97-101; Giuliani (see n. 53), 429-30; (see n. 50), 110-12.


57 Giuliani (see n. 53), 430; (see n. 50), 110-12.

58 Giuliani (see n. 50), 110-112. Cf. Hansen (see n. 39), 295 on the inebriation of Polyphemus as distinct from the Odyssey.

59 Burgess (see n. 48), 94-114, quotation from 107.

60 Proto-attic black-figured amphora by Polyphemus Painter, ~ 670-660 BCE (Eleusis, Archaeological Museum 2630).

61 Cf. Giuliani (see n. 59), 111.

62 Rome, Musei Capitolini, Inv. Castellani 172.

63 Argos, Archaeological Museum, C 149.

64 J. P. Getty Museum, 96.AE.135.

65 New York GR, 501.

66 Paris, Cabinet de Medailles, 190.

67 Paris, Louvre, F 342.
See also Robin Osborne, *Archaic and Classical Greek Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 60 who notes that the figure of Odysseus is white and suggests: ‘Is this just to make him different, or does it stand for the way Odysseus’ threat was not visible to the Cyclops?’


On the effect of an en-face presentation of eyes, see Frontisi-Ducroux (see n. 69), 90-3; Moser von Filseck (see n. 45), 259; Neer (see n. 69), 79-81. See also Yvonne Korshak, *Frontal Faces in Attic Vase Painting of the Archaic Period* (Chicago: Ares Publishers, 1987) on the en-face in Archaic vase-painting, especially 14-17 on the frontal depiction of the defeated. For some reflections on the ‘Bildblick’ as expression of the agency inherent in images, see Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010): 233-49.

Berlin, Antikensammlung 3283; ABV 704.

On the self-referential effect of vases depicted on vases, see, for example, Frontisi-Ducroix (see n. 69), 97-9.

London, BM 1866,0805.3.

Steinhart (see n. 15), 62–3. See also Gloria Ferrari, “Eye-cup,” RA 1 (1986), 5-20: 11–20 and Frontisi-Ducroix (see n. 69), 100-103 on masks on vases.

See the collection in Toucheufe-Meynier (see n. 50), 42–60; Odette Toucheufe-Meynier, “Odysseus,” LIMC VI.1 (1992), 943-70: 957–60. Von den Hoff (see n. 59), 53–4 emphasizes the little attention paid to Odysseus as an individual in these and other representations of Odyssean scenes from the Archaic Age.

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Aegina, Archeological Museum 1754.

Rome, Villa Giulia 27250.


New York, Shelby White & Leon Levy Collection, LIMC s.v. Odysseus 121.


Schefold (see n. 59), 163.

Toucheufe-Meynier (see n. 79), 557. Kannicht (see n. 49), 85–6 refers to the technical ability of artists for explaining the choice of motifs in ‘Sagenbildern’ in general. While not offering an explanation for the predominance of the Cyclopeia among Odyssean themes, von den Hoff (see n. 50) emphasizes the interest in collective action in Archaic depictions of Odyssean scenes.

Tonio Hölscher, “Immagini mitologiche e valori sociali nella Grecia arcaica,” in Im Spiegel des Mythos. Bilderwelt und Lebenswelt, eds. Francesco de Angelis and Susanne Muth (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1999), 11-30: 20-4. See also Dougherty’s interpretation of the Aristonothos Krater as a reflection of Greek experiences with Etruscans: the mythical encounter of Odysseus with the cannibalistic Polyphemus mirrors the confrontation of a Greek with an arguably Etruscan boat on

89 Mack (see n. 45). See also Frontisi-Ducroix (see n. 69), 71-4.

90 Neer (see n. 69), especially 9-26.

91 Segal (see n. 6), 103.

92 Pietro Pucci, “The song of the Sirens,” *Arethusa* 12 (1979), 121-32 (see also n. 21, 209–13); see also Goldhill (see n. 12), 64–5 on the metapoetic character of the scene.

93 Cf. the catalogue in Toucheauf-Meynier (see n. 59), 145–75; (see n. 79), 962-4 and on ancient representations of Sirens in general Eva Hofstetter, *Sirenen im archaischen und klassischen Griechenland* (Würzburg: Triltsch, 1990).

94 It may be worth noting in this context the so-called ‘Augensirenen’ on Attic vases, sirens with an eye embedded in their bodies, cf. Steinhart (see n. 15), 22–8. However, as far as I can see, there are no depictions of ‘Augensirenen’ together with Odysseus.

95 London, BM 1843,1103.31; ARV 289.1, 1642. The plunge of the Siren is often interpreted as suicide, cf. Hofstetter (see n. 93), 130, who relates it to the later literary tradition, notably in Lycoph., *Alexandra* 714ff.; von den Hoff (see n. 50), 58.

96 London, BM 1867,0508.1354.

97 Berlin, Antikensammlung FG 6880.


99 Tunis, Musée du Bardo 2884.

100 A different semantics of the gaze comes to the fore on a sarcophagus that depicts not only Odysseus gazing at three Sirens, but also the two rowers turning their head to look at them (Rome, Museum Nazionale 1132727). Instead of expressing the act of listening, the gaze here manifests fear.
Squire (see n. 56). Jocelyn Penny Small, *The Parallel Worlds of Classical Art and Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) takes something like the opposite position by arguing the independent traditions of text and image in antiquity.


Squire (sse n. 5).


Steiner (sse n. 104), 281-2.