EKPHRASIS IN HEART OF DARKNESS

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Narrar implica hacer uso de palabras para crear (o re-crear) situaciones, lugares, eventos, una obra de arte, o una historia. Narrar lo visual a través de palabras, representa una pintura verbal que lectores o audiencia decodifican en el proceso de leer/escuchar. Cuando leemos la novela de J. Conrad El corazón de las tinieblas, encontramos un mundo de imágenes que pinta con gran fuerza lugares y personas en el Congo africano. La fuerza de las representaciones gráficas y su realismo enfatizan la habilidad del autor en retratar la magnificencia de África y la fotografía de su gente. Es importante tener en cuenta el término “pictorialismo” que nos permitirá, como observadores, internalizar aspectos sensoriales de una imagen dada. La ecfrásis une la percepción y la concepción por parte del autor/lector. El pictorialismo literario no solo traduce elementos visuales sino que además traduce aspectos intelectuales, invisibles, cognitivos y emocionales. El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar la novela desde la perspectiva de las palabras creadoras de imágenes y pinturas verbales que los lectores decodifican e interpretan. Seguimos las líneas teóricas de R. Barthes y M. Krieger.

Palabras clave: Conrad - écrasis - lo visual - narrativa

Joseph Conrad, born Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski, was a child who dreamt about knowing exotic and distant places. At the age of fifteen he announced his passionate desire to go to the sea. He learned English when travelling on a variety of British ships so that the richness of his narrative is not expressed in his mother tongue. The form Conrad took up to express his art is the novel of adventure and he combined with it the objective spirit of French Naturalism. He is a master of complex narrative techniques such as time-shifting and flashbacks, which prevent the reader from adopting too simplistic interpretation of events. Conrad is an innovative and influential writer close to Modernism. He took command of a steamship in the Belgium Congo in 1890. This experience provided the material for writing Heart of Darkness and it also affected him physically and emotionally. Conrad's Heart of Darkness is a mixture of adventure story and psychological odyssey that stresses its vividness in exotic material and pictorialism. It is a journey into “the darkest Africa”. The aim of this essay is to analyze Conrad's Heart of Darkness from the perspective of words as creators of images and verbal painting which the reader decodes and interprets.

“We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on a earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet” (Conrad:2000:1983). The reader is transported from Europe to Africa in a pictorial and realistic journey. The story is developed in a setting full of images by means of which Conrad highlights the visuality of language. Conrad’s work has ekphrastic descriptions which denote the complex relationship between the visual and the narrated. Ekhrasis refers in some instances as a genre; in other cases as a
Recent critics and theorists have defined ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of visual representation” (Mitchel 1994:152). Ruth Webb has noted that the term despite its classical sounding name is essentially a modern coinage: the word literary means “to speak up” or “to tell in full”. In classical rhetoric ekphrasis could refer to virtually any extended description. In this sense, Conrad was for a long time regarded as a sea writer whose exotic portrayals gave his work a special kind of vividness and splendour. The story begins and ends in London; however, the most part takes place in the Congo. In this paragraph the reader witnesses a visual experience,

The sea-rich of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that run out to sea in vanishing flatness (Conrad, 2000: 1958)

At the sundown, Marlow recalls his experience in the Congo to four men in the deck of the Nellie. The reader can clearly see in this depiction traces of an impressionistic canvas and he can also envision the landscape described as it were in front of it; not only the pictorial aspect emerges from each word but also sensations that emanate from there. Marlow goes to the “whited sepulchre” in order to get the job and be closer to his longed purpose. In doing so, he meets a variety of European people that work for the Belgian company. Eventually, he reaches its long-awaited Africa. This ekphrastic passage provides the reader with an image of an unknown land.

This one was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of a monotonous grimness. The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. The sun was fierce, the land seemed to glisten and drip with steam here and there greyish-whitish specks showed up clustered inside the white surf, with a flag flying above them perhaps-settlements some centuries old, and still no bigger than pin-heads on the untouched expanse of their background. (Conrad, 2000:1966)

This ekphrastically elaborate description enhances the beauty of a mysterious world. Nature appears as a dangerous and overwhelming force. Marlow’s journey leads into the African wilderness, into an archaic world. Africa becomes a place of darkness to Marlow.
Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when the vegetation rioted on the earth and big trees were like kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish…there was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of over shadow distances. (Conrad, 2000: 1982)

Africa was not an empty place so that Conrad combines exquisite descriptions with a particular vision of the native “you could see from far afar the white of the eyeballs glistening”; “they had faces like grotesques masks”. Drawing attention to the ideological values attached to words and images, it shows that ekphrasis functions not merely as a passive literary expression but as a nexus between aesthetic boundaries and figures of social differences. Conrad’s narrative regarding Africans is considered controversial. In a 1975 lecture, the distinguished Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, declared that in Heart of Darkness, Africans are dehumanized and degraded; they are also denied speech. Achebe states that Africa is seen as a setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as a human factor. They are named for instance, as “the prehistoric man” “cannibals”. Moreover, besides portraying African as limbs and rolling eyes certain “savage” is depicted as an “improved specimen” just because he is able to fire up a vertical boiler. It is clearly not part of Conrad’s purpose to confer language on the “rudimentary souls” of Africa. Indeed, in place of speech they are only able to produce “a violent babble of uncouth sounds”. To some extent, as Achebe states, it seems that Conrad has a fixation with blackness which is clearly exposed in his descriptions “a black figure stood up, strode on long black, waving long black arms…”, “insolent black head in the doorway”. One of the most striking passages states:

Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walk erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rage were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like nots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinging.(Conrad: 2000:1968)

Ekphrasis in Conrad’s work is not an innocent activity because it participates in the construction of stereotypes. These lively and realistic images have long shaped the imaginary concerning Africa and its people. In that sense, Conrad develops a strong sense of realism, Barthes definition of ‘realism’ could also serve as a definition of ekphrasis itself: ‘Thus realism consists not in copying the real but in copying a copy of the real. Conrad presents and depicts and unknown world and its people by means of words which eventually become visual images that tell a story .The fascination of ekphrasis derives from the fact that it is an extreme example of what all representation tries to achieve.
CONCLUSIÓN

*Heart of Darkness* is an ambiguous, complex story, full of paradoxes. The visual is present from the title onwards. Narrating the visual means using words so that they are able to transmit from a real and present object as well as what is not present. Conrad exquisitely described an inhospitable and remote place where natural beauty and grandiose overtones provide a framework for that heart of darkness. The reader recreates vivid images and rich visual details about the native and this brings us to the stereotype look long rooted in the popular imagination. Conrad's ekphrastic vision is controversial; nevertheless his undeniable virtuosity reflects his particular vision in his narrative.

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