

## The Image beneath the Word: Intermedial Study of the Text and Image in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness

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### Abstract

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Graphic adaptations of pieces of literature aim at re-presenting the text they are based on. For this reason, scholars study these intermedial literary works in an attempt to see what aspects of the original text are re-interpreted or adapted to the new social context in which they appear. Each version of a previously written work of literature will carry unique elements that will broaden the meaning and reception of the original piece of literature as they reinterpret that book. Those remediated pieces of literature tend to combine the two main modes of communication: the visual and the linguistic. The latest graphic adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (first published in book form in 1902) sheds contemporary light on the main theme of this book (colonization) by showing a XXI century vision. This graphic version has been published in 2013 in *The Graphic Canon, Vol. 3* and is designed by Matt Kish. The semiotic approach that I will follow in this article will provide a theoretical basis for an intermedial study that will deepen in the multimodal load of this novella through a comparative study with its graphic adaptation.

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**Keywords:** Intermediality, Semiotics, Visual Mode, Linguistic Mode, Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness

### 1. Introduction

*Heart of Darkness*<sup>2</sup> is one of the most celebrated works of literature of the twentieth century in English.

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This *novella* was written by Joseph Conrad and published in book form in the year 1902 for the first time (it had been previously published in serialized form in 1899). This article takes this novella as a basis for the comparison with its last graphic adaptation to the visual format: the one published in paper by *The Graphic Canon, Vol. 3: From Heart of Darkness to Hemingway to Infinite Jest* (2013) and created by the graphic designer Matt Kish.

The issue of the narrator in *Heart of Darkness* has been widely analyzed as a ‘mediator’ between the world of the protagonist –Marlowe– and the reader himself (for a broader discussion about the ambiguous role of this narrator in the story, see Pecora 1985; Lin 2005; Devlin 1994, 2006; among others). This novella is full of visual elements which are, of course, necessarily presented in the linguistic form because they are narrated in the book. This research will investigate the way in which its new adaptation to the comic format has brought a 21<sup>st</sup>-century interpretation of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century novella in which the visual mode is presented together with the textual as the text (in the form of excerpts from the novella) appears as footnotes under every vignette.

This study will follow an intermedial semiotic approach to this work of literature with a special focus on the figure of the embedded narrator both in the novella and in the 2013 comic: Marlowe –as there is another narrator, an anonymous frame narrator, which sets the context for the outer story.<sup>3</sup> For this aim, the article will mainly draw on the study carried out by Marina Grishakova about metarepresentations in various media forms –cinema, photograph, text...– entitled “Intermedial Metarepresentations” (2010). In that article, Grishakova deals with the tension existing between the visual and the linguistic modes as a result of the differences between what the narrator of a story sees and what he tells us, i.e. the difference between narration and observation .

Furthermore, according to Ian Watt in his study *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (1979), “[Conrad’s] most distinctive quality [is] its strong visual sense” (as cited in Devlin, 2006), which supports the comparison with the comic, where the visual mode (static images) forces a graphic representation of what formerly could be evoked only through text.

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<sup>2</sup> From now on and unless specified otherwise, all the quotations from the novella are taken from the English version of the book (i.e. Conrad, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> From now on and unless specified otherwise, narrator in this article will refer to Marlowe, not to the frame-narrator.

Watt's statement also reinforces the idea that Conrad's novella relies heavily on the visual effects that are created as sensations felt by the characters in the story. However, what characterizes Marlowe is his own incapacity to *see* the reality around him, which makes him an unreliable narrator who recalls what he *thought* he saw in his trip to Africa. This literary device also participates in the creation of an atmosphere of mystery and ambiguity in the story.

The tension alluded before between what is being told and what is there in the outer reality is also present in the linguistic mode, due to the limitations of language to apprehend reality –this is one of the main characteristic of Modernist literature, to which this work belongs. This analysis will also investigate if the visual adaptation of Conrad's novella transcends these limits of language. Metaverbal texts present an excess of verbalization of the events narrated as a result of the narrator's impossibility to understand or approach that reality (Grishakova, 2010, p. 323) –or simply to see it, as in the case of Marlowe. Hence, our narrator will substitute the things he cannot understand or see for others which are more familiar to him in order to replace, somehow, the difficulty of interacting with a world that turns out to be neither objective nor static.

## 2. A Linguistic and Visual Protagonist

During the last decades we have witnessed an increasing importance of the image over the word, thus vindicating the potential of signification carried in multimodal artifacts. Those works of art or literature combine different expressing modes where the written word can now be accompanied by images as in comics, digital novels (see Abril Hernández 2014 for an insightful analysis of the combinatory use and effects of the visual and linguistic modes in digital literature), etc. In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad presents a story within a story where Marlowe's account of the story is embedded within the account of an anonymous witness narrator. This anonymous narrator tells us what Marlowe is saying about his own adventures in Congo.

Therefore, the frame-narrator is an extradiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator, because he is outside Marlowe's story, appearing the latter as the center of the novel. In the comic some of the images represent the context of the frame-narrator (as in the case of the first Figure), where we can see the Nellie yawl and all the other characters including the two narrators.

However, the perspective of the viewer of the image is not that of Marlowe (because we can see him there), neither is it the perspective of the frame-narrator, as we can also see him represented in the image.



**Figure 1: Characters on Board the Nellie; Marlowe in the Center**

The character of Marlowe is considerably ambiguous as he is in between the last remnants of the old Victorian hero and the Modern antihero. Marlowe recounts his story in the first person as an intradiegetic and homodiegetic narrator. This type of narrator often appear when the author aims for a more intense feeling of truthfulness about the events narrated. But as the Modernist authors claimed, the individual (the narrator, in the case of literature) has rather restricted knowledge about the context around him as he cannot attain a complete understanding of reality. This disability is highlighted in Conrad's novella through the many occasions when the narrator mistakes reality with his imagination. Seeing means understanding and thus, expressing; nevertheless, there is a reality that is outside the specter of vision of the characters and so they cannot express it.

The same happens with other unreliable narrators as in the case of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, which is analyzed by Grishakova in her study about metarepresentations mentioned above.

James's narrator lacks enough information about the reality around her and she will have to overuse language in an attempt to bridge the gap between what she (doesn't) see and what the reader may interpret (Grishakova, 2010, p. 323).

As Marina Grishakova (2010) puts forward in her research, when the narrator's capacity to see is limited, linguistic expression is also affected (p. 317). That is, the excess of linguistic verbalization of metaverbal texts (like Conrad's) is used to compensate for the lack of vision (or understanding) of the narrator. We can see it in the different versions of the same thing that Marlowe provides until he eventually discovers what he was actually seeing. The result is a succession of descriptions interwoven in a narrative structure that gives them cohesion, so this novella bases its narrative progression almost exclusively on descriptions, as opposed to narration. This way, the story acquires a rather static nature which is also visible in the comic, as the novella is made up of an organized series of very visual images that prevail over the plot itself. For instance, when Marlowe is walking towards the Central Station where he will meet Kurtz, instead of narrating, he only describes what he has in front of him, so the reader has to accept his own conclusions based on the information granted by Marlowe (1971):

Day after day, with the stump and shuffle of sixty pair of bare feet behind me [...] Camp, cook, sleep; strike camp, march. Now and then a carrier dead in harness, at rest in the long grass near the path [...] A great silence around and above. (p. 20)

The statism of the excerpt above is achieved with the use of verbs in the infinite form, which removes all traces of temporality from the story. They show only the static representation of descriptions and create the feeling of reading the description of an image rather than that of a trip, which is dynamic by nature. But in spite of the narrator's unreliability, he claims authorial credibility when he interrupts his story and addresses his audience in the yawl (1971):

He was silent for a while.

'...No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence [...] We live as we dream—alone...' He paused again as if reflecting, then added: 'Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know...' (p. 28)

In another vignette, this statism is more visible because what we find is simply the depiction of a character taken from a passage from the novella. It is a Russian agent that works for the Company where Marlowe also works. He is described as a harlequin. The comic presents this character in a parodic way to keep the feeling of absurdity that Conrad wanted to project in his work (1971):

His aspect reminded me of something I had seen—something funny I had seen somewhere [...] Suddenly I got it. He looked like a harlequin. His clothes had been made of some stuff that was Brown holland probably, but it was covered with patches all over, with bright patches, blue, red and yellow [...] the sunshine made him look extremely gay and wonderfully neat withal. (p. 53)

Figure 6 shows this character from the novel, but there is a relevant difference with the other iconic representations of human figures shown in the comic: this is the only instance where we can find the semiotic device of gaze, as the character is directly looking at the reader-viewer (see López-Varela 2011 for a deeper study about the empathic role of gaze in literature). The graphic representation of this figure in the comic highlights the absurdity of the harlequin when the graphic designer—Matt Kish—creates a character whose features seem grotesquely exaggerated and cadaveric. This visual representation is far from inspiring the humor typically associated to such characters as harlequins, in fact, it leaves the viewer with a feeling closer to absurdity and insanity. The special use of the color in this graphic novel is also a significant aspect of the visual representation used as a cognitive-perceptual semiotic resource that catches the attention of the reader<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> For a study about the semiotic role of colors in visual representations see Kress, 2002; and Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006.



**Figure 6: The ‘Harlequin’**

Figure 6 corresponds to the harlequin and it is one of the very few images where bright color dominates in the image, but –as explained above– not for this reason does the grotesque atmosphere of the novella and the comic diminish at all. In Conrad’s work, the tone of absurdity escalates to the grotesque. In a description by the narrator near the end of the novel, Marlowe describes some ritual dances that the Africans were performing (1971):

They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. (p. 14)

After reading that excerpt we have the feeling of witnessing a grotesque masquerade, following Conrad’s plan to present the Congo inhabitants as people who are more in contact with nature than the Europeans (represented in Marlowe and his peers in the boat).

Little after describing this scenario, the narrator finds something that astonishes him. He sees a ship shooting eagerly at the woods, and he feels as if he was seeing a play rather than an attack carried out by a group of Europeans. Here again, Marlowe makes us see –with a tone of denounce and irony– the absurdity of the event he was watching from his ship when he states (1971):

Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives—he called them enemies!— hidden out of sight somewhere. (p. 14)

There is a tone of ironical condemn of colonialism and tokens of the theatre of the absurd throughout the novel and its graphic adaptation in the nightmare-like guise of the characters and the scenarios. In another excerpt, Marlowe describes what he sees on the floor as it catches his attention, but what calls the reader's attention in this passage is the fact that we seem to see it ourselves thanks to the descriptions that Marlowe provides. This is so because it is mainly made up of Marlowe's sensorial impressions, with no explicit references to the outer reality it is describing (1971): “[...] but when an opportunity offered at last to meet my predecessor, the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones. They were all there. The supernatural being had not been touched after he fell” (p. 9). Those lines represent an instance where Marlowe tells us what he saw and his thought at that moment, without saying directly that it was a dead body.

Equally important is for Conrad not to make direct references to any external element from reality, only to describe what we may perceive mediated by the eyes of that who is telling the story. In the comic, this sense of a close world with delimited borders is achieved with the use of the semiotic-cognitive device of framing (i.e. the frames that surround the images in most vignettes). The grotesque representations of the human figures in the comic and the nightmare-like atmosphere of the graphic novel keep up with the maxim of ambiguity and non-explicitness so that nothing that can be said with an image (either as descriptions or as sensorial perceptions) is said with words. In a letter that Conrad wrote to his friend Richard Curle, the former defends his idea about the misuse of too explicit language in his works:



Did it ever occur to you, my dear Curle, that I knew exactly what I was doing by letting the events of my life and even my stories in the background? Explicitness, my dear friend, is fatal to the charm of every work of art, as it steals all ability to incite, it destroys all illusion. You seem to believe in the literalness and explicitness of the facts and in the expression. Yet nothing is clearer than the complete insignificance of the explicit statements, and its power to divert attention from the things that matter in the field of art. (As cited in Conrad, 2009; my translation)

In the graphic novel the vast majority of the vignettes show Marlowe's own perception of things. A clear instance can be seen in Figure 2, which shows the iconic representation of Africa traversed from North to South by a long snake-like black line. This image –a geographical map and clearly static– has no narrative elements in itself without the linguistic mode that accompanies it as a footnote. The text under this representation reinforces the meaning conveyed in the image and at the same time it supports the idea that this novella is largely based on combinatory linguistic-visual flashes. Apart from this, in the comic this quality is stressed because it is impossible to “read” a story from the images alone. Furthermore, Marlowe himself narrates the story that lies under this image of the African continent crossed by the black snake when he establishes a comparison between the Congo River and a snake (Conrad, 1971, p. 10).

Another cause for intermedial tension between the described and the narrated events –that is, between the visual and the verbal, respectively– can be found in the performative and cognitive aspects of a story (in Algirdas Julien Greimas's words). The French linguist Algirdas Julien Greimas suggested passing the actantial categories to semiotic categories. Therefore, Vladimir Propp's “hero” (p. 25) as presented in his *Morphology of the Folktale* (1979), is now for Greimas (1987) a “subject” (p. 107) –in the semiotic sense. Hence, we have the character of Kurtz as the epitome of the madness and evil derived from the ‘civilized’ colonizing Europe. Kurtz, being the representative of the modern ‘villain’ that goes mad when he *sees* reality and immerses himself in it, would be the “opponent” –in Greimas's terms (1987)– (p. 108), becoming an antagonist of Marlowe –at least until the end of the novel, when Marlowe himself is also seduced by Africa when he opens up his senses and accepts to enter the new reality.

The graphic representation of the characters as little more than shadows of death (e.g. Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9) creates an atmosphere closely related to that of Conrad's original work.



Figure 2: Africa crossed by the some snake-like river



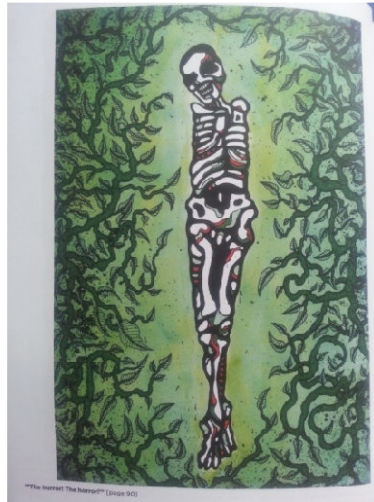
Figure 3: A living tree with Africans at its bottom



Figure 4: The Company's chief of accountant as seen by Marlowe.



Figure 7: Marlowe's conception Kurtz's intelligence.



**Figure 8: Representation of Kurtz's Kurtz's words "The horror! The horror!"**



**Figure 9: Marlowe talking to fiancée about the death of her lover**

The characters are depicted metonymically in the novella by their voices, maintaining the dream-like ambiguous atmosphere intended by Conrad. This way, the author aims to transmit synesthetically through words what characters see and hear. In the novella, what Marlowe wants from Kurtz is not to talk to him but to hear his voice (p. 49). This calls to mind the limitedness of the linguistic mode to capture the complexity of the outer sensorial world (Grishakova, 2010, p. 322). In other excerpts from the novella, Marlowe states that they are all but mere voices: “A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard—him—it—this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices” (p. 49).

In the comic, the dark tone that covers the vignettes is a symbolical substitute for the cognitive blindness of the characters and the abstract and curve shapes (and frames) of the images take the viewer to the realm of the unconscious (see Figure 5 below):



**Figure 5: Marlowe's boat travelling up the Congo River**

In the prologue by Juan Gabriel Vásquez to the 2009 Spanish edition of the novella, Vásquez puts forward one of the key issues of this book, i.e. colonialism (in particular, that in which the Europeans took part in Africa during the last decades of the XIX century):

*Heart of Darkness* is the closest that modern literature, or perhaps literature in general has been to creating a nightmare. Its atmosphere is deeply rooted in Conrad's real experiences, based on places and events meticulously observed; however, it is unreal, hallucinated, spooky, ghostly. The story of Kurtz, the white man maddened by his thoughtless economic interests has been read as a denunciation of colonization and its horror for over a century [...]. (Conrad, 2009, p. 7; my translation)

### **3. The Relationship between Marlowe and his Context in the Novella and the Comic**

Every work of literature appears within a specific socio-historical context which creates a spatio-temporal frame from which we can decode its meaning. The novella that this article is analyzing is very dependent on the context where it arose. One of the most cited excerpts from this novella is crucial for understanding the final meaning of this work (Conrad, 1971):

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (p. 5)

Similarly, the meaning of the novella *Heart of Darkness* is not within the book itself but outside the story, highlighting the importance of the context in understanding the novel. Although Marlowe has sometimes been interpreted as an alter ego of the author –Conrad– the narrator has enough roundness as a character to be considered as a character with a life of its own, not merely as a literary extension of Conrad. In spite of this, the author uses this novella to tell a semi-autobiographical trip he made to Congo a few years before this book.

If this novel has its meaning outside itself, we could understand the ambiguity that permeates both Marlowe’s mentality and the context of the world he lives in. Conrad’s thesis connects with Grihsakova’s ideas, as the latter claims that narration is a process of constructing meaning, not just of transmitting a package of information from the author to the reader (Grishakova, 2010, p. 316). But when the meaning of the novel is not within the story itself but in each one of the reader’s interpretations (as in this case) Grishakova’s notions on the active role of the reader come to mind as it would be impossible to transmit a complete message relying on the novel alone. It will be the act of reading and placing the story within a particular socio-historical context that will give us the key to understand the book.

The world that surrounds the characters in *Heart of Darkness* is closer to that of a nightmare: “It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares” (p. 14), where causal relations between the events disappear and time is no longer the element that gives coherence and unity to the pieces of the story as now we have a “form of structuring events in the guise of a dream or dream-like vision” (Bakhtin, 1935, p. 154). Conrad places his characters in a kind of world of fantasy where the only thing that brings them back to reality are those elements that are external because the unreliable narrator cannot trust his senses any more to orientate himself: “Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality” (Conrad, 1971, p. 13).

The characters do not seem to have any empirical knowledge of the reality around them but just intuitional knowledge –despite the imprecise and deceitful nature of their sensorial perceptions. They are receivers of the external stimuli of their world and they are unable to understand reality because they are also unable to *see* it. However, in many occasion it also works the other way around: they cannot see things the way they are because they have not opened their minds to the mentality of the new land. For this reason the characters show a constant need of contact with the material world that may somehow guarantee a rational existence. In the graphic adaptation there are very few objects from the outer world shown, the vast majority of the representations in the comic are the characters of the story. However, the objects and other elements that appear in the graphic version are presented in the comic as animated beings e.g. giving life to a tree (see Fig. 3).

In a world where language is alienated and it can no longer represent truthfully reality, it seems logical that what is narrated lacks sense in itself and so it needs the active role an interpreter to decode it. In fact, Marlowe himself admits he is unable to *see*, that is, to perceive, to understand. In several occasions in the story the narrator tells what he thinks he is seeing just to correct himself little after that to describe what he was actually seeing. Some instances of this are: when he finds a book written in cipher (p. 39) and later discovers that it was Russian (p. 55) or when he saw many little sticks flying and then knew that they were actually arrows (p. 45). Another case where the narrator tells us that he has problems to identify what is in front of his eyes is when he sees a group of Africans moving from one side of a path to another. What the reader perceives are only the sensorial impressions Marlowe has without any causal relationship between the elements or events that are being narrated, until the narrator directly verbalizes what he had been describing: “They were building a railway” (p. 16). We can find the same absence of causal logic in the vignettes of the graphic adaptation, with its characters and elements fully static: they have neither lines of movement nor vectors to indicate any pictorial kinetics.

This break in the linearity of time takes the reader to a cyclical conception of it, as we can infer from the close connection between the Africans and nature. For the European colonizers in the African continent, time loses its ‘objectivity’. Hence, the narrator will claim: “I had to wait in the station for ten days—an eternity” (p. 19). Marlowe loses track of time, symbolized in the beginning of the fusion of his soul with the African ‘heart of darkness.’

The narrator himself acknowledges from his perspective back from Congo that the time dominating in Congo is not the same time than in Europe:

I was then rather excited at the prospect of meeting Kurtz very soon. When I say very soon I mean it comparatively. It was just two months from the day we left the creek when we came to the bank below Kurtz's station. (Conrad, 1971, p. 34)

Conrad identifies the time in Congo with the first days of the Earth, endowing the elements of that continent with historical and *quasi* supernatural qualities. When he deepens in the heart of Africa, he feels that there is now another conception of History and thus, of time: "We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign— and no memories" (p. 36). According to the anthropologist and theologian Mircea Eliade in his study of the temporal dimension associated to our conception of History, there are spaces where time seems to have stopped somehow in a moment from the past and they retain the same meaning they had had many centuries ago (Eliade, 1987, p. 68). According to Eliade those spaces belong to the sphere of the sacred time and stand in opposition to the profane or mundane. Therefore, we can deduce that the kind of time that dominates in Africa (as opposed to Europe) is the cyclical time —that of nature— a time that the lineal and occidental conception of the narrator and his peers do not have. This could also account for the lack of narrative in the images of the graphic version of the novella and for the fact that the storyline only appears in the written work, in fact, we could rearrange the images in the comic and the story would not vary its meaning visibly.

We have already seen the narrator's mistakes about what he sees, but there are moments when he simply refers to a character or situation in different ways. In this case, it is not reality that changes but it is language itself that is not enough to apprehend reality. Each character has a different idea about the inhabitants of Congo and depending on their way of referring to them, they will call them in a different way: "Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were rebels" (Conrad, 1971, p. 59). These words said by Marlowe are uttered little after he realizes for the first time that what he had taken as decoration balls on stakes where actually human heads.

In this last case what the reader finds is an alteration of reality because Marlowe had first determinately said that those were decoration elements so that for the reader, that one is his reality of the scene. But when he corrects himself, it is the reader who has to change the imaginary situation that Marlowe had truly encountered.

In this novella there are two opposite isotopies: light and darkness. Both have a very strong symbolic load, for instance the city of Brussels is called in the book the “sepulchral city” (pp. 25, 72) by establishing an implicit comparison with a marble coffin. Both colors are used with negative connotations of death: the face of Kurtz’s fiancée is pale and her clothes are black (as she mourns for him). This is how Marlowe describes her in his visit to her house to bring her news about Kurtz’s death in Africa: “She came forward, all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. She was in mourning” (p. 75). In the images from the comic this woman appears represented –like the vast majority of the human figures in the graphic adaptation– as a ghostly figure whose pale face is made more prominent by her dark clothes (see Fig. 9).

The graphic version that this article is analyzing maintains this atmosphere of darkness, in fact, the colors that abound in the comic are black (death), white (death and emptiness as absence of color) and green (the trees and elements from nature). In the comic adaptation, this resource is wisely used with the aim of highlighting the most meaningful elements. Hence, the colors work here as a linguistic element bringing cohesion to the elements of a work of art in visual terms.

#### **4. A Tale within a Nutshell: Inter-Symbolism**

Both the delayed setting off of the Nellie boat and the trip to the core of Africa told by Marlowe have a symbolic aspect. The trip to Africa can be understood as a rite of passage because we have a protagonist who has to go through some tests while he is building his personality until he gets to know himself more in depth. Marlowe tells us about his own ‘rite of passage’ in this novel. But in this trip towards his goal, he has to lose himself as he realizes that to attain his aim he first has to abandon his European preconceptions about the “other”, the African individual. Only after he achieves this will he get to know himself in every single aspect: “Destiny. My destiny! Droll thing life is— that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose.



The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets” (Conrad, 1971, p.71).

The effect that the trip will have in the narrator is that of finding his own identity but, as he states, he runs the risk of (symbolically) losing himself on the way. Marlowe’s identity is not wholly complete, which can be seen in the veiled criticism of the morality of the colonizing Europe. Little by little this leads him to deconstructing his own values and considering them under the light of a new mentality. This also contributes to making him an unreliable narrator, not only because he cannot trust his own senses but also because he is permanently building his own identity. Marlowe says he hates lies and at the end he falls into this flaw when he visits Kurtz’s intended by telling her that the last word Kurtz pronounced were her name (p. 79) to avoid disappointing her about Kurtz’s love for her:

I would not have gone so far as to fight for Kurtz, but I went for him near enough to a lie. You know I hate, detest, and can’t bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies— which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world— what I want to forget. (Conrad, 1971, p. 27)

In the comic, for a visual representation to be interpreted narratively there must converge the three tenets described by Martín Urdiales Shaw in his semiotic analysis of the graphic novel *Maus*. These principles are: the chronological and causal structure of the visual story, the existence of an agent that gives cohesion to the images and, finally, that the image must represent more than the life or reality that it is depicting (Urdiales Shaw, 2012, p. 169). In the first case, as this article has already presented in the previous sections, the images do not show any narratological visual progression, as it does happen in the novel. The comic has images that occupy a whole page without any visible link between them. The images do not present all of them the narrator, mainly because it is Marlowe’s perspective what we have as viewers of the images in the comic, so we do not see him depicted very often, which relates to the second tenet: there is no visible agent or narrator presented in the images.

The last tenet that Urdiales Shaw identifies is that an image alone must represent more than the context where it belongs to or where it is embedded.

About this, the images of the graphic version represent just a moment frozen in time of the trip to Africa, so the comic does not accomplish this tenet either. However, Conrad's intention for the final meaning of the novel not to be within itself but outside it, makes it unnecessary both for the novella and the comic to condemn colonization explicitly and to use different literary resources instead, such as the constant use of symbols and the pervading presence of ambiguity. For instance, in Marlowe's visit at the end of the novel to Kurtz's fiancée's house the tension existing when they talk about Kurtz's death is symbolized first as silence and later, when Marlowe has to answer her question about Kurtz's last words, he is forced to lie once more. The few words that the two characters exchange in this scene are almost imperceptible and we have the feeling that they are not speaking at all: "‘And I was not with him,’ she murmured. My anger subsided before a feeling of infinite pity. ‘Everything that could be done—’ I mumbled" (Conrad, 1971, p.78).

In the comic this feeling of silence and emptiness is achieved by reducing the number of characters per vignette (remember that this so-called vignettes are whole-page vignettes) and by emptying the vignettes from every image that is not a human iconic representation. In Figure 9 we can see the very moment when Marlowe is telling Kurtz's intended about his lover's death. It is worth noticing the use of the silence made by the graphic creator. This one is also the only vignette containing a speech bubble aimed to combine the textual and visual modes. Nonetheless, this speech bubble is empty, which highlights the sense of silence and emptiness from Conrad's novel that this article has already presented. For all the reasons presented above, the graphic adaptation that I am analyzing in this article gives preference to the visual medium (images) over the linguistic (the excerpts from the novella). The graphic version also maintains the atmosphere of nightmarish, absurdity and the grotesque present in Conrad's work.

## 5. Conclusion

In this analysis of the novella *Heart of Darkness* and its homonymous latest graphic adaptation in the *Graphic Canon* I have studied the mediation existing between the narrator and the reader due to the hindered filter between Marlowe and his reality. The literary device of including stories within stories also obstructs the direct contact between the reader and the world that Conrad is portraying. This device is combined with an unreliable narrator who is constantly mutating the reader's idea about Marlowe's reality with his many utterances about it.

In the graphic version, this gap between what Marlowe narrates and what he observes is shown in the comic as a lack of verbalization and a total reliance on the visual mode for the transmission of the message. In sum, the excess of verbalization of Conrad's book –understood as a multitude of descriptions aimed at substituting the unsaid, but containing very visual imagery– combines perfectly with the more prominent role of visuality in the graphic adaptation of the novella.

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