Approaching photographic ekphrasis

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Abstract: My paper analyses the ekphrastic sequences in postmodern writer Tomás Eloy Martínez’s novel, *Santa Evita* (1995), in which the photographic descriptions of Eva Perón are a recurring theme. The photographic ekphrasis in this novel reflects the various meanings and messages the photography has, but it also manifests the appropriation of the photographic tools and mechanisms by the literary practice to create a deceitful sensation of reality in the reader-spectator. The fictive world is created by miming the physical and mechanical resources of the photographic technique. Therefore, I will consider the contribution of photography studies and history of photography to interpretation in an inter-arts discourse, with reference to Brunet’s claim about photography having paradigmatically moved from the *age of the icon* (resemblance to something present) to the *age of the index* (trace of the absent) (2009:150). The referential ambiguity of the photography serves me to discuss further theoretical issues: 1- photography’s relation to history-making, history-writing, art-making and fiction-writing in the post-modern aesthetics; 2-the concepts of *referential* and *notional ekphrasis* (John Hollander in Mitchell, 1994:157) in the light of the traditional claims of truth and documentation made by photographs and the new developments in fictional photography, photographic ekphrasis and other photo-textual productions.

The aim of this presentation is to develop an approach to literary ekphrasis on photography within the postmodern aesthetics, and such an approach is based on an analysis of the novel *Santa Evita*, written by Argentinian writer Tomás Eloy Martínez and published in 1995.

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1The word “photography” comes from the Greek words *phos* (light), and *graphis* (stylus, paintbrush) or *graphê*, together it means *drawing with light* or *representation by means of lines* or *drawing*. Talbot has called photography “the pencil of nature”, and the early designations to the process, “nature’s light writing”, photogenic-drawing, ”writing with light” “sun painting” (Brunet, 2009:143), all linked to the action of nature.
The main point I want to argue for in this talk is that in the novel in question a relationship of symmetry is established between words and images, and such a relationship is framed by the establishing of a verbal collage that merges with an ekphrastic collage. An ekphrastic collage implies the assemblage of several different types of ekphrasis that create a new whole, but which allows multiple-readings of heterogeneous objects. The interaction between these two collages, the verbal and the ekphrastic, conditions the negotiations of meanings in the context of the reconstruction of a cultural or popular icon. Therefore, the word-image relation in the photographic ekphrasis in *Santa Evita* is conditioned firstly, by the ekphrastic collage of which the photographic ekphrasis is a part, secondly, the medium-specificities of photography, and thirdly, by the context in which the photographs are made present in the narrative.

**Photography and literature: *Santa Evita***

Photography arrived in Latin America early in its technological development and was employed as an anthropological tool to document the region\(^2\), identifying and characterizing the exotic “other”, as political tool for resistance and also as an ideological instrument in politics. In Latin American postmodern culture, photography is also exploited as an aesthetic machine, in art photography, photo-books or fulfilling a central role in literary narratives.

*Santa Evita*’s author, TEM\(^3\), employs and exploits photographic motifs in his narratives, and photographic ekphrasis is a fundamental building block in the novel in question, together with the technique named by Linda Hutcheon (2002) as **historiographic metafiction**. Historiographic metafiction is employed in *Santa Evita* to combine real or historical events and personages together with fiction, myth, imagination and self-reflexivity in the reconstruction of this very photographed cultural icon in the Latin American context, Eva Perón. The absent figure and main character Evita is replaced and redefined by an interweaving of ekphrastic sequences and verbal versions in tension that take on the protagonist’s role.

\(^2\) It was first used to document “ the region’s physical spaces an encounters among various cultures” (Schwartz, 2000: 2-3).

\(^3\) TEM will be used from now on for Tomás Eloy Martínez.
Santa Evita begins with the death of Eva Perón in the first chapter and the readers follow her embalmed body’s after-life and journeys together with the ominous destiny of those who follow obsessively the corpse. The main narrator is an alter ego of Martínez, a journalist investigating the trajectory of the embalmed body, kidnapped and hidden for almost sixteen years. Through that journey the readers witness the shaping of a cultural icon, the multiple re-inventions of Evita in the transformation from the living body, to the mediated embalmed body with an explosion of replicas in graphic and textual representations, to its transformation into a mental image in the collective imaginary of the nation and in the individual minds.

So the novel portrays the process of formation of a cultural icon. This concept is understood here as a construct consisting of a complex mediation and remediation of historical verbal-visual texts within a sign system (combining high and popular media productions, intertextual redefinitions as well as visual mass productions). This context almost forces the work into a collaboration between the verbal discourse and the visual discourse.

Collages

Santa Evita establishes a collage of voices and texts in highly polyphonic form. There are several individual and collective voices –such as those of intellectual elite, Evita’s mother, the popular sectors, the hairdresser, the embalmer– and a multiplicity of texts, such as card files, memoirs, letters, notes, fragments of other canonical texts about Evita, among others. Within that verbal collage there is an ekphrastic collage (there are no graphic pictures inside the book, apart from the covers), but a variety of graphic images and sculptural replicas are described in the narrative, and I argue that those descriptions are ekphrastic because they are intended to bring the object into the mind’s eye, although those objects are not conventional ekphrastic objects, as those referred to by Heffernan in his classical definition of the ekphrastic object: “works of representational art” (Heffernan, 1993:3). In Santa Evita there is description of culturally accepted mass media representing still images, such as photographs and billboards; descriptions of moving images mediated in films and TV; body ekphrasis describing an absent

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5 One can also argue that the auditory discourse is also present in the novel in the portrayal of television, theater and political performances, in which the oral discourse and speeches becomes central.
person, and another category are descriptions of replicas in body size, such as wax dolls, mannequins and even the embalmed body is described as a graphic image, a “flat image”. Both collages create the impression of a growing alienation from the natural, i.e. from truth and reality, and purport a movement towards fiction.

Within the ekphrastic collage the interest in studying the photographic ekphrasis lies in the fact that, traditionally, photographs have not been considered art instruments but have been at the service of historical documentation, and therefore, of truth and reality. However, the photographic ekphrasis in the mentioned book contributes to the problematization of the realistic or referential readings of these historical and biographical accounts. The fact that the photographs in Santa Evita are embedded in the fictive work and woven in ekphrastic sequences reinforces the fictional impact of the work (as opposed to the testimonial and reportorial dimensions) and therefore it also highlights the fictional and literary potential of photographs.

Photographic ekphrasis in various contexts

In the diegetic world, we are presented with various uses, functions, and meanings that photographs have in the fictional society presented. Those have been reflected upon by many scholars already such as Sontag (1977), Barthes (2000) and Derrida (2010), among others. There are descriptions of photographs conveying the idea of simulacrum, that is, as substitute for an absent referent, as re-semantization of the referent, murderer of its referent, source of fascination (“there-she-is!”, Barthes, 2000:113) and arousal of emotion, as a mnemonic technique or as documentation and certification (“that-has-been”, idem). However, the latter

6 There are also several descriptions of objects, that is, Evita’s personal objects, which have acquired auratic or religious status after her death.

7 Schröter, argues that “a photograph as a photograph, by virtue of its potential for de- and recontextualization, can transform the photo of an object intended to be non-fictional into the photo of an object which can be read as fictional […] the photograph has genuine fictional competence (2013:5). This is, away from a referential meaning, in a new space, the photograph and the photographed object can acquire a fictional veil and the reference can become questioned.
use is also deconstructed or questioned in the novel. Photography as an art form that eternalizes a life is linked, in this context, both to embalming and biographical writing.

The previously mentioned uses, functions and meanings are suggested and reflected in the large amount of photographs described in the narrative, which are presented in a variety of forms in different contexts. Context, therefore, plays a key role in determining the functions, meanings and interpretations of the ekphrastic object, which in this case is the photograph.

Following, let me illustrate the varieties of contexts in which the photographs are found in the narrative:

1) descriptions of single photographs in a variety of physical places and locations, such as in wallets as amulets, in chapels, homes, altars, walls.

2) descriptions of groups of photographs: “photographs ten feet tall” (Martínez, 1997:12) enlarged in chapels, covering up Buenos Aires “from top to bottom” (79), or more than a hundred in the Coronel’s apartment (286). The large amount of individual and groups of photographs of Evita described suggests a saturation of the medium at national level, in the private reality, and structurally in the fictional space of the novel, which coincides with the mechanical and massive reproduction of the medium.

In this case, the categorizing notions of actual and notional ekphrasis defined by Hollander (in Mitchell, 1994:157) are intentionally blurred since it is not possible to know which photographs are real and which are fictive in this mass production of visual information. The saturation of visual replicas and textual versions with reference to a cultural icon puts authenticity, truthful representation and one-to-one intertextual relation into question.

3) descriptions of photographs in iconotexts, that is different combinations of graphic images and texts, or fusions of image and text of different kinds. For example there are several references to:

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8 This concept is borrowed from Louvel: iconotext conveys the desire to bring together two irreducible objects and form a new object in a fruitful tension in which each object maintains its specificity” (2011:15). This definition coincides partly with the idea of collage by Thomas Brockelman (2001) as assemblage, montage, or composite: the gathering of materials from different worlds into a single composition demanding a double reading of each element, that is the unity of heterogeneous the materials united in a new spacio-temporal dimension (10-11).
3.a) collections of postcards, in fact, one of the opening epigraphs to the whole book is a quote attributed to Evita: “I want to take a look at the world the way a person takes a look at a postcard collection” (Martínez: 1997:vii, my underlining). Here the relevant interrelation between words and images for biographic and historical writing is given prominence, together with the gaze, subjectivity and mediated discourse in iconotexts. The postcard is a medium with often hand-written verbal text (suggesting subjectivity) and standardized graphic illustrations (usually mass-produced, as the images of cultural icons). So from the open epigraphs we are already presented with a word-image sign apprehended by the same sense, the eyes, and from which we make sense of the world and construct realities. Moreover, here there is also the idea of collection, group and collage of different materials assembled together. Besides, the distance subject-object is deconstructed through the subjectivity of the speaker, the “I”, which casts doubts on whether these are Martínez’ words or whether they were Evita’s words. This doubt sets the unstable grounds on which the narrative is going to stand.

3.b) descriptions of photographs embedded in newspapers, such as Newspaper Democracia, and magazine Semanario (Martínez, 106). These two media already suggest a juxtaposition of words and images.

3.c) the message in an envelope (138/139) that one of the characters gets contains a photograph of Evita and a leaflet with a written message.

3.d) the embalming file is also described containing notes and photographs, and as we can observe in the following quote, the effect on the character of the reading of the file and the seeing of the photograph cannot be separated:

He went over and over the reports on the work of preservation…The embalmer’s account was glowing […] The Coronel could not keep his eyes off the photographs that showed an ethereal, ivory-colored creature, possessed of a beauty that made a person forget all the other felicities of the universe […] The transparencies of the body gave off a liquid light […] As he went on reading, the Coronel’s throat grew dry. (Martínez, 17)

The same fascination is reported at both the reading and the seeing. The visual perception of both media complement to make the absent object appear in the character’s imagination, and consequently, in the reader’s imagination, too.
3.e) In the final lines of the book, after the quest for the truth of Evita, the narrator, TEM, recognizes:

I would see her in my dreams: Santa Evita, with a halo of light behind her chignon and a sword in her hands. I began to see her films, to listen to recordings of her speeches […] I accumulated floods of file cards and stories […] If I don’t try to know her by writing her, I’m never going to know myself…

(Martínez, 368-9, my underlining)

The process of becoming an icon is completed when the object, i.e., the outside context of graphic, textual and auditory representations, moves in and transforms into a mental image, inside the mind, since he imagines or “sees” her in his dreams. All that information is poured out again in the book, since the end of the book is the beginning of the writing of the book, reinforcing the circular structure with an absent center and a multiplicity of verbal-visual-auditory re-creations or re-inventions of Evita. The circular structure again dissolves the binary oppositions between subject and object, between “writing her” and “knowing myself”.

Consequently, re-contextualization of a story creates and re-invents a narratives about the absent object; therefore, meaning is not to be found just inside the frame of the photograph, of other graphic images or in the textual versions of the absent person, but also between those media productions, the context of placement of those versions, and in the reader-viewer’s perception and imagination, i.e., the internal mental context or schemata of the reader’s associations, memories and past experiences: “The only thing that’s real is the viewer’s awareness” (Martínez, 99).

Photography in an inter-arts discourse

Regarding the exploitation of the potential of photographs in an inter-arts discourse, it is relevant here to comment on a statement made by Brunet in his book *Photography and literature* (2009), who, using Peircean terminology, makes a statement about photography having paradigmatically moved from “an age of the icon (resemblance to an object fantasized as present)” to “an age of the index” (trace of an object observed as absent) in postmodern literature” (150). Of course what he outlines here are trends in the use and interpretation of photographs by literature since the first publications of the photographic process in 1826 (Niépce and Daguerre) until contemporary times. However, based on the varied uses of the
photographic medium I have just illustrated in the postmodern novel in question, I find Brunet’s perspective on photography too restrictive and limiting of the potential of photographs. Rather, what the novel I studied highlights are not only the exploitation of the iconic and indexical content in photographs, but also other symbolic and ambiguous processes going on in photographs, and which language cannot control, guide or classify in their interpretation because that ambiguity is also within language itself. Photography is traditionally seen as an indexical sign, however, Santa Evita problematizes that view drawing attention to the fictionality of the photographic pose, the complex relationships of the photographed object to the referent in the mechanic reproduction of the medium and the intricate interpretations of those relationships. This highlights the symbolic mechanisms moving in and around photographs, which opens up the interpretative possibilities of this medium in an inter-arts discourse. Then, the photographic ekphrasis in Santa Evita exploits photographs as iconic sings (resemblance to the referent that causes fascination in the characters), as indexical signs (trace of the past bearing an existential and causal relationship to the referent, such as the references in the novel to light, or the sun), but also in symbolic terms since it suggests the necessity to learn to read the laws of photographs, its mechanisms and conventions of production for an interpretation of the medium and the various uses and exploitations of photographs in narratives.

Traditionally, the idea of photography as a “technically and socially based standard of (visual) truth” prevailed, as Brunet (10) points out. Photography was then tied to a realistic discourse. However, in the twenty first century, photography espouses literature and literature turns to photography for a renewal of its sources. Thus, the photographic ekphrasis in Santa Evita challenges those realistic conceptions of photographs and emphasizes the fictional potential in them, by bringing them into a literary context.

In Santa Evita the photographic ekphrasis is also to be understood in the context of the deconstruction of the classical opposites history-writing and fiction-writing. History, its truth value, and its instruments are deconstructed as authoritative discourse through the technique

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9 Martin Lefevbre also points out that “Restricting photographs to their indexical status is just as unproductive as restricting verbal language to the status of symbol without considering the various semiotic functions of words in, say, a proposition. Images and language, like most other semiotic systems, are composed of signs that possess iconic, indexical, and symbolic functions ( 2007:1)
of historiographic metafiction. Similarly, photography’s documentary use is undermined to expose the possibility to make fictional readings of this medium.

**Concluding remarks**

From the previous study, we can observe that the functions of photographic ekphrasis in narratives are tied to (1) the specificities of the medium of photography: functions, meanings, technological process and instruments of production and historical or cultural interpretations of the medium, (2) the contextual specificities of the ekphrastic sequence: context and circumstances the photograph is made present in the narrative, and the type of narrative it is, and 3) to the reader-viewer’s internal mental context.

This broader perspective on the interaction between photography and literature permits us to take a new look on the broader context of visual media as presented in the canonical discourse on ekphrasis. This discourse has been constructed as a “paragon” or struggle between images and words by its most cited theorists such as Heffernan in *Museum of words* (1993) and Mitchell in the essay “Ekphrasis and the other” (1994). That state of war between images and language is made evident in the language used, mainly by these two scholars to define the word-image relationships: conflict, mastery, authority of the male gaze, struggle for dominance, strive to overcome the other, anxiety and fear of the other. However, the postmodern doubt and mistrust of referentiality, representationality, truth and verisimilitude in all media erases the idea that one means of representation, discourse or medium has dominion over others. In this case, we have observed that both images and texts can be equally ambiguous, multi-referential, imprecise and deceiving.

Finally, from the case study of postmodern novel *Santa Evita* with its reconstruction of a cultural icon, I want to conclude asserting the shift from a paragonal view –the “contest” relation, where images and language fight for mastery and hierarchy– towards a more interactive and multimedial view, where a symmetrical and dialogical relationship can take place between different discourses and media, such as what we find in the idea of collages.

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10 As Brunet remarks: “since the 1970’s photo-literary experiments shows “the coming of age of a hybrid medium of expression´ (multimedia) where neither photography nor literature is clearly the parent figure” (2009:149).
Bibliography


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