

Artigos

Intertextualidade e Interdiscurso



CONRAD'S CINEMATIC HOMELESS HUMAN SUBJECT

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RESUMO: Este trabalho faz uma leitura comparativista das obras de Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* (1911) e *The Secret Agent* (1907) utilizando o conceito de “não lugar” de Marc Augé.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: literatura; antropologia social; comparativismo.

In his “Preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*” (Conrad J., 1897) Conrad stresses the belief that “all art appeals primarily to the senses” and “the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses” in order to reach the secret spring of the responsive emotions” (p. 12) of his readers. He also says in his writing, the task which he is trying to achieve is, “by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is above all to make you see” (p. 13). The descriptions given throughout Conrad’s work of exotic places, urban settings, seascapes and existential situations experienced by his characters confirm Conrad’s commitment to the power of the written word.**

The French scholar Marc Augé in the essay *Introduction à une anthropologie de la sumodernité* (Augé M., 1992) develops the notion of the “unplace” in describing the contemporary human condition. By “unplace” Augé means the spaces of transition created by circumstances of everyday life. Thus, “unplaces” are best represented by public spaces of fast circula-

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tion such as airports, trains and underground stations and other different means of transportation. They also include hotels and supermarkets.

For Augé the space of the traveller builds up the archetype of the “unplace”. The traveller is not only the individual who goes from one country to another but also anyone who is caught by the proliferation of advertisement linked to travelling and movement within the individual's own country.

The vast stimulation provided by hotels, travel agencies and air companies, announced on private radio stations and billboards creates a wide consumerism space and turns the individual into a “stranger in passing”, a new humanity that can only meet in the anonymity of the motor-ways, petrol stations, department stores or hotel chains (Augé M., 1992: 96-97).

For Augé the topography of the “unplace” produces the condition of supermodernity.

But what do Conrad and Augé have in common? Conrad wrote his fictional works mostly in the first decades of the present century, while Augé's writings portray an ethnology of solitude brought about by the circumstances of the social development of the Western world, now approaching the next millennium. However, a close reading of the novels *Under Western Eyes* (Conrad J., 1911) and *The Secret Agent* (Conrad J., 1907) shows that Conrad's concern to approach the homelessness of the human subject (Kaplan C. M., 1997) predates Augé's view of the “unplace”.

In *Under Western Eyes* the main protagonist's search for an identity makes the notion of the “unplace” pivotal to the understanding of the novel's major narrative concern.

Shown as a foreigner in his own native Russia, Razumov is portrayed as the epitome of loneliness. Razumov is a “young man of no parentage”, immersed in such a lonely existence that he is compared to “a man swimming in the deep sea” (p. 17). Although he tries to compensate his utter loneliness by thinking that “his closest parentage was defined in the statement that

he was a Russian” (p. 17), the interference of the autocratic forces in his life turn him into a stranger in his own country and place him in the dynamics of the “unplace”.

After betraying the revolutionary student Viktor Haldin, by giving him up to the secret police, Razumov believes he would be able to get his silver medal and to isolate himself from the political conditions of his time. He is forced to act as a spy amongst the Russian revolutionaries who have emigrated to Geneva.

His condition of being a man of the “unplace” is shown immediately after the act of betrayal as Razumov walks on the snowy streets of St. Petersburg, when, placed in a condition of “unplacedness”, “Razumov received an almost physical impression of endless space of countless millions” (p. 35).

Conrad's commitment to reaching the reader's secret strings of emotion through the visual power of the written word is emphasized by the rich visual imagery of Razumov's lonely travelling in his own country:

“Razumov stamped his foot – and under the soft carpet of snow felt the hard ground of Russia, inanimate, cold, inert, like a sullen and tragic mother hiding her face under a widening sheet – his native soil – his very own – without a fireside, without a hearth!” (Conrad J., 1911:34-35).

In explaining the constitution of the ephemeral nature of the “unplace”, Augé mentions two distinct complementary realities: spaces formed in relation to certain aims (transportation, traffic, trade, entertainment) and the relationship that the individuals establish with these spaces and that the “unplace” creates a solitary transition (p. 87). Razumov's transitory relation with the topography of his native Russia puts him in an “unplace”, where his loneliness is equated with the vastness of the environment. He says that he is Russia, but in his loneliness he is like the desolation of Russia's vast landscape:

"The snow covered the endless forests, frozen rivers, the plains of an immense country (...) levelling everything under its uniform whiteness, like a monstrous blank page awaiting the record of an inconceivable history" (p. 35).

In depicting the rootlessness of Raumov's life his experiences of loneliness cause a proliferation of "unplaces". Once in Geneva, where he is forced to work for the Russian autocracy he occupies again the temporary space of a traveller. For him Geneva represents "a perfection of puerile neatness", an environment compared to "painted cardboard", where "the most distant stretch of water [was] shining like a piece of tin" (p. 241).

The narrator's visual depiction of Razumov's feeling of homelessness in Geneva is given through scenes that resemble still photographs, as it can be noticed in the recollection of the grotesque revolutionaries he meets in Geneva:

"Later on, much later on, at the time of the newspapers rumors (...) of an abortive military conspiracy in Russia, I remembered the glimpse I had of the motionless group with its central figure" (p. 273).

Conrad's depiction of Razumov's being caught by the condition of "unplaceness" suggests that loneliness is a characteristic of the human condition. The visual descriptions of the environment, which, as we have seen, resemble still photographs, can also, at times gain movement, as "Geneva unrolls itself cinematically before our eyes through the pedestrian displacements of the characters" (Kirshner P., 1957: 116). Thus, as the old teacher of languages walks with Miss Haldin on Geneva's streets, the camera-like narrative highlights the view of "the low garden walls of modest villas doomed to demolition (...) boughs of trees and masses of foliage, lighted from below by gas lamps (...) a double line of lamp lights [that] outlined a street as yet without houses (...) a solitary dim light [that] seemed to watch us with a weary stare", and the emptiness of the Boulevard des Philosophes

immersed in “the very desolation of slumbering respectability” (p. 276-277). By building visions of the silent screen, Conrad is once again reaffirming his concern for the visual potentiality of the written word, something that as we have seen, is stated in his “Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*” and also emphasized by Conrad in an address in America in 1923 when he said:

“Fundamentally the creator in letters aims at a moving picture – moving to the eye, to the mind, and to our complex emotions which I will express with one word – heart” (Kirschner P., 1957: 101).

A second example of the “unplace” occurs in *The Secret Agent*. Augé’s view of the topography of the “unplace”, formed by spaces of transition, where the new humanity meets in the anonymity of public places, brings to mind the urban environment described in *The Secret Agent*. Set in Victorian London, a place Conrad defined as “a monstrous town (...) a cruel devourer of the world light (...) [with] darkness enough to bury five millions of lives” (p. 10). Conrad develops the idea of the “unplace” through the lives of the city’s inhabitants, focusing on their loneliness and transitory existences. Although the novel is about secret agents and anarchists circulating in London, the approach given to Winnie’s isolation in domestic life is the element of the narrative that best illustrates the idea of the “unplace”.

In order to survive life’s hardships Winnie adopts the attitude that “life doesn’t stand much looking into” (Conrad J., 1907: 10-11). In so doing she survives a stale marriage, a relationship impoverished by the absence of affection and intimacy. Winnie Verloc’s behaviour puts her under the threat of losing the parameters of restraint and turns her into a foreigner in domestic life.

The effective presence of the sense of the “unplace” in Winnie’s life is emphatically shown in the narrative when Winnie murders her husband Adolf Verloc, the secret agent of the novel’s title, after Stevie’s death in the

Greenwich Park explosion. From that point on there is a proliferation of “unplaces” in the narrative. Winnie Verloc's condition as a foreigner in the world becomes two-fold. Her dwelling and the town she lives in provide her with utter sensations of estrangement: “there was a silence, while the mist fell, and darkness reigned undisturbed over Brett Place. Not a sound, not even the vagabond, lawless and anonymous soul of a cat, came near ...” (p. 226).

As she becomes a murderer Winnie abandons “the prudent reserve (...), which had been the foundation of their [the Verlocs'] respectable home life” (p. 213) to become a free woman “enjoying her complete irresponsibility and endless leisure, almost in the manner of a corpse” (p. 213), and London is reduced to a claustrophobic depiction of the external view of her home place. Thus she is engulfed by “the darkness and solitude of Brett Place, in which all sounds of life seemed lost as if in a triangular well of asphalt and bricks of blind houses and unfeeling stones” (p. 223).

Winnie's despair and utter loneliness are described using cinematic imagery, as in the visual descriptions of Brett Place, like the ones given above, and most specifically in detailed descriptions of the murder scene, as Paul Kirschner's pioneering article, “Conrad and film” (1957), demonstrates. Kirschner analyses the way “Conrad edits” the detailed and unforgettable murder scene in *The Secret Agent* (Kirschner P., 1957: 346) showing, for instance, that when Conrad visualizes “Mrs. Verloc's approaching face changing into the face of the dead brother she is about to avenge” (Kirschner P., 1957: 345), Conrad is actually using an effect ideally suited to the capacity of film superimposition and dissolve (Kirschner P., 1957: 348).

The feeling of the “unplace” is an important feature of Conrad's major fiction and in his two autobiographical books, *The Mirror of the Sea* (Conrad J., 1906) and *A Personal Record* (Conrad J., 1917). It can be noticed in the alienation of the protagonists of his major novels and in the portrayal of Conrad leaving for exile with his mother in his childhood (Karl E., 1979: 57).

The sense of becoming rootless already at the early age of 6 is recalled by Conrad in *A Personal Record*. There he tells us about his feelings at the time he had to leave the home of his uncle Tadeuz Bobrowski, where both he and his mother Ewa were for a short stay before returning to Chernikov where his mother was to die:

“But I remember well the day of our departure back to exile. The elongated bizarre, shabby travelling carriage with four posthorses, standing before the long front of the house with its four columns on each side of the broad flight of stairs. On the steps groups of servants, a few relations, one or two friends from the nearest neigh bourhood, a perfect silence on all the faces an air of sober concentration...” (Karl F., 1979: 57-58).

As for the *Mirror of the Sea* the sense of the “unplace” of Conrad’s life is conveyed by the written record of Conrad’s experiences at sea. In the introduction to this second biographical account Conrad says: “Beyond the line of the sea horizon the world for me did not exist, as assuredly it does not exist for the mystics who take refuge on the top of the high mountains” (Conrad J., 1906: XXXIV).

The condition of being a man who left Poland to join the English merchant navy and his ultimate decision to live in England, where he wrote his fictional works in English, perpetuate the sense of rootlessness in Conrad, providing his own existence with a condition of “unplacedness” which in Augé’s view characterizes the life of contemporary man.

ABSTRACT: *This work makes a comparative reading of Joseph Conrad’s Under Western Eyes (1911) and The Secret Agent (1907) using Marc Augé’s notion of the “unplace”.*

KEYWORDS: *literature; social anthropology; comparativism.*

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