
Portraying Conrad in Africa in the graphic novel *Kongo* by Tom Tirabosco and Christian Perrissin

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ABSTRACT. Following the fashion for writers' biopics, *Kongo. Le ténébreux voyage de Józef Konrad Korzeniowski*, by Tom Tirabosco and Christian Perrissin, deals with British author Joseph Conrad's six months in the Congo as an employee of the *Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo* in 1890. *Kongo* is neither the first nor the only biographical piece of fiction dealing with Conrad who is generally referred to as a "novelist of the sea" and whose adventurous life offers material fit for all sorts of rewritings. This paper analyses how Tirabosco and Perrissin turn Conrad into a fictional character while relying on a number of historical sources. It points out that *Kongo* has its own agenda: it has something to tell us about Conrad, but also about the historical situation in which he found himself, i.e. the colonisation of the Congo by King Leopold II at the end of the nineteenth century. Dealing with an episode that contributed to his legend as a writer (our image of Conrad as a novelist would not be the same without *Heart of Darkness*), it underlines the porous boundaries between reality and fiction, therefore forcing us to bear in mind the historical reality behind the fiction. *Kongo* not only answers the contemporary period's taste for writers' biographies, it also enables the general public to discover or rediscover the historical facts hidden behind a fiction which, in the case of *Heart of Darkness*, is often read (at least in France) as a "metaphysical" quest.

KEYWORDS: Graphic Novel, Portrait, Joseph Conrad, Congo, Colonization

Portrait de Joseph Conrad en Afrique dans le roman graphique *Kongo* de Tom Tirabosco and Christian Perrissin

RÉSUMÉ. Comme les adaptations de classiques de la littérature en bande dessinée, les « biopics » connaissent une certaine vogue. *Kongo. Le ténébreux voyage de Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski*, de Tom Tirabosco and Christian Perrissin, raconte les six mois passés par Conrad en Afrique, dont il tira à la fois *Heart of Darkness* et « An Outpost of Progress ». Inspirée par ces fictions mais aussi par les souvenirs personnels de Conrad, ses lettres et son « Journal du Congo », ainsi que par une série de photogra-

phies de l'époque, la bande dessinée nous donne à voir un moment particulièrement important de la vie de Conrad, plus souvent considéré comme « écrivain de la mer ». Le roman graphique permet aussi au grand public de (re-)découvrir la réalité historique cachée derrière un roman réputé difficile et souvent lu en France comme une œuvre « métaphysique ». Ainsi montre-t-il, grâce à une esthétique particulièrement soignée, les étapes de la plongée de Conrad dans l'« horreur », ses conséquences sur sa santé et la suite de son existence. Cet article souligne que *Kongo* ne se contente pas de transformer Conrad en personnage de fiction, de dévoiler un épisode fondateur de sa vocation d'écrivain ou de contribuer à sa légende : il explore également les frontières poreuses entre l'écrivain et son œuvre, nous renvoie au jeu entre fiction et réalité, nous forçant à contextualiser *Heart of Darkness*, à envisager la réalité historique présente derrière la fiction et à prendre la mesure du trauma dont le roman est le reflet. Pour des lecteurs peu familiers des questions postcoloniales, de l'histoire du Congo ou de l'œuvre de Conrad, *Kongo* véhicule l'image d'un homme aux prises avec des questions éthiques et morales difficiles – image qui peut être une clé intéressante pour entrer dans une œuvre qui ne se limite pas au cliché de l'écrivain de la mer.

MOTS-CLÉS : roman graphique, portrait, Joseph Conrad, Congo, colonisation

*C'est comme si les livres que nous
lisons nous étaient plus étrangers
et incompréhensibles lorsque nous
ne pouvons jeter un coup d'œil
aux portraits de ceux qui les ont
écrits [...] comme si les traits des
écrivains, enfin, faisaient corps avec
leur œuvre.*

(Javier Marias, 1996: 131)

Classics of world literature are regularly adapted as graphic narratives.¹ *Heart of Darkness* has for instance recently been turned into a graphic novel by Miquel & Godart or published accompanied with illustrations and commentaries by Sylvain Venayre and Jean-Philippe Stassen (Conrad, 2006b) – a clear sign of the novella's success in France. *Kongo*, by Tom Tirabosco and Christian Perrissin, is different since it deals with Joseph Conrad's experience in Africa. *Kongo* is not the first or only biographical novel dealing with Conrad who is generally referred to as a “novelist of the sea”² and whose adventurous life offers material fit for all sorts of rewritings.³ If *Kongo* confirms the image of Conrad as

1 The beginning of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* was adapted by Stéphane Heuet between 1998 and 2013; various collections adapting “classics” are regularly published and sold with newspapers.

2 Gide says that the sea was to him “like an old mistress” and insists on the adventurer myth: “Nul n'avait plus sauvagement vécu que Conrad [...]” (André Gide, 1924: 18, 20).

3 One could think for instance of James Lansbury's *Korzeniowski* which concentrates on the episode behind “The Secret Sharer”. Similarly, since the 1950s his most famous novels have been adapted into comic books. See O. Knowles & G. Moore for details.

an adventurer, it does not deal with his experiences at sea but concentrates on what he went through “in the centre of a continent” (Conrad, 2006a: 13), during a relatively brief period of his life, that inspired both *Heart of Darkness* and “An Outpost of Progress” to him. Based on Conrad’s letters, his *Congo Diary* and *Up-river Book, A Personal Record*, as well as photographs of the time, the graphic novel concentrates on this very special moment in Conrad’s life.

Associating text and image, *Kongo* is also remarkable because it provides a type of portrait marked by a number of specificities: contrary to a photograph or painting characterized by its instantaneity, a graphic novel can take a longer period of a person’s life into consideration, concentrating on their actions and behaviour, drawing their psychological and physical portrait, underlining their evolution, pointing out how a given experience can influence their destiny. It has a narrative dimension which is more rarely present in other types of portraits.

As it turns Conrad into a fictional character while relying on a number of historical sources, *Kongo* has its own agenda. It draws a portrait of Conrad, but also of the historical situation in which he found himself: the colonization of the Congo by King Leopold II at the end of the nineteenth century. Dealing with an episode that contributed to his legend as a writer (our image of Conrad as a novelist would not be the same without *Heart of Darkness*), it underlines the porous boundary between reality and fiction, therefore forcing us to bear in mind the historical reality behind the fiction. *Kongo* not only answers our period’s taste for writers’ biographies, it also enables a large readership to discover or rediscover the atrocities hidden behind a novella which, in the case of *Heart of Darkness*, is often read (at least in France) as a “metaphysical” quest. As we will see, such an approach is no longer an object of surprise in a graphic narrative.⁴

An explicitly biographical graphic novel

As the title and subtitle indicate (*Kongo. Le ténébreux voyage de Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski*⁵) the graphic novel concentrates not on the romantic cliché of Conrad as a “sea novelist” but on one episode in his life: the six months he spent in Africa – a period that left its mark on his physical and psychological health and was partly responsible for his change of activity, leaving his work as a merchant seaman behind and starting a career as a writer (Peters, 2006: 4), a period that also inspired two of his works, “An Outpost of Progress” and *Heart of Darkness*. The book’s front cover shows a character who can be identified as Conrad himself (or rather Korzeniowski, since he was not yet Conrad) while the back cover associates a group of unidentified characters who could come straight from *Heart of Darkness*, and a passage from Conrad’s memories,

4 Baetens and Frey insist on graphic narratives’ ability to “introduce fiction with historical meaning.” (Baetens & Frey, 2015: 13)

5 Henceforth, I will only give the page number when I refer to *Kongo*.

A *Personal Record*, signed “Joseph Conrad”: what is suggested is that the reader will accompany him in his transition from Korzeniowski to Conrad, from merchant sailor to literary author.

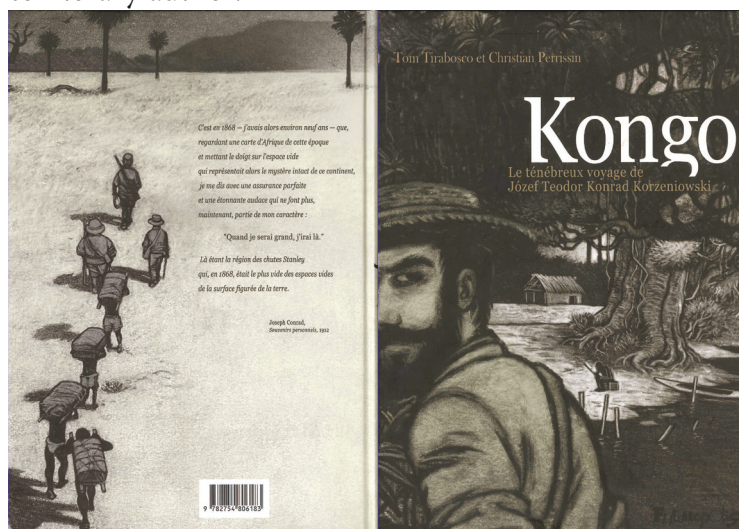


Figure 1: Cover of Tom Tirabosco & Christian Perrissin, *Kongo. Le ténébreux voyage de Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski*, Paris, Futuropolis, 2013.

As a consequence, the Joseph Conrad represented in *Kongo* is not the famous older novelist one can see at the National Portrait Gallery, either sketched by William Rothenstein in pastel (1903) or painted by Percy Anderson (1918) or Walter Tittle (1923-24)⁶ towards the end of his life. As the name in the subtitle makes clear, Tirabosco and Perrissin are interested in the thirty-three-year-old sailor who had only just started writing *Almayer's Folly* and who had applied for a position of command on a steamboat in the Congo with the Société Anonyme pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo. There are few portraits of Conrad at the time he went to Africa and, interestingly, the photograph Perrissin and Tirabosco chose to include at the end of their book was taken later, around 1904 (Stape, 2007: n.p.). Conrad's facial features, however, did not change that much throughout his life and particularly from the moment he started growing the beard which has become a characteristic feature of his. He is therefore easily identified. Besides, Tirabosco took great pains to give the readers a visual image of Conrad which corresponds to what they know of him, insisting for instance on his elegance: on the first page, Conrad is pictured wearing a bowler hat and holding a pair of white gloves – an image which corresponds to numerous later portraits but which is extremely different from the gallant seaman cliché [see figure 6].

Kongo stands out for its aesthetic and formal choices, the most striking being the choice of black and white which, together with Tirabosco's use of the monotype⁷ technique, creates a very oppressive atmosphere – a visual equiva-

6 <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait-list?search=Joseph+Conrad&w-Page=0> (last accessed 23.03.2020). The NPG has 23 portraits of Conrad, including one bronze bust by Jacob Epstein, caricatures, a medal, and photographs.

7 “Monotypes are made by drawing on glass or a plate of smooth metal or stone with a greasy substance such as printer's ink or oil paint. Then the drawing is pressed by hand onto a sheet

lent of the stifling descriptions in *Heart of Darkness*. Constant variations in the page composition, from the traditional nine-panel grid (a rather rare case in fact, e.g. 5, 31) to half-page or full-page panels that convey the overpowering effect of nature on man (43, 84-85, 125, 168) or pages in which panels are unframed and images mingle (when Conrad is sick and hallucinates for instance, 160) echo the changes in Conrad's personality visually. Contributing to the narrative progression, they also underline what led to such changes, so that the reader is confronted with someone physically, psychologically and emotionally transformed by his six months in Africa which corresponded to an experience in disillusionment. In the first pages, Conrad is presented as both slightly naive and over-confident, believing he will take part in a "civilizing mission"⁸ (4), a belief encouraged by his so-called aunt, Marguerite Paradowska who was instrumental in getting him the position (8), and intent on fulfilling a childhood's dream (112). But he is also wary that he might be confronted with "trade secrets" (6), filled with misgivings (11) and yet certain that "a Polish nobleman cased in British tar", as he described himself in one of his letters, will not be "among the 60 per cent. of our Company's employees [who] return to Europe before they have completed even six months' service." (see **figure 2**; 14-15; Conrad, 1990: 52)

Before Conrad left for Africa, Perrissin and Tirabosco insist that he had no idea of the extent of the corruption and violence taking place in the Congo: "Three years in Africa can't be more difficult than the six years I spent in the East." (11) Reality proved him wrong and his childhood dream of adventure turned into a nightmare.

As an employee of the Company Conrad holds an ambiguous position, the graphic novel points out. He is clearly an insider in what he later called "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration" (Conrad, 1926: 17); yet he always presented himself as an outsider in the letters he wrote, in his *Congo Diary*,⁹ as well as in his later recollections. Besides, visual choices in *Kongo* also insist on his being an outsider: in a number of scenes, Conrad is only peripheral, placed on the sides rather than in the centre of the panels (e.g. 79, panels 1 and 3); he is willingly staying apart from the Europeans, repeatedly underlining his noble origin (57, 148), taking care to wash or to trim his beard (165) – attitudes which in this case take on a symbolic and ethical dimension (57, 148). Picturing Conrad thus draws the line between him and the other employees of the Company who very rapidly see him as a spy protected by the officials in Brussels (72). The gap only gets wider as the novel unfolds and his attire becomes symbolic of the distance with the other Europeans: as Véronique Bragard underlines, "the grotesque

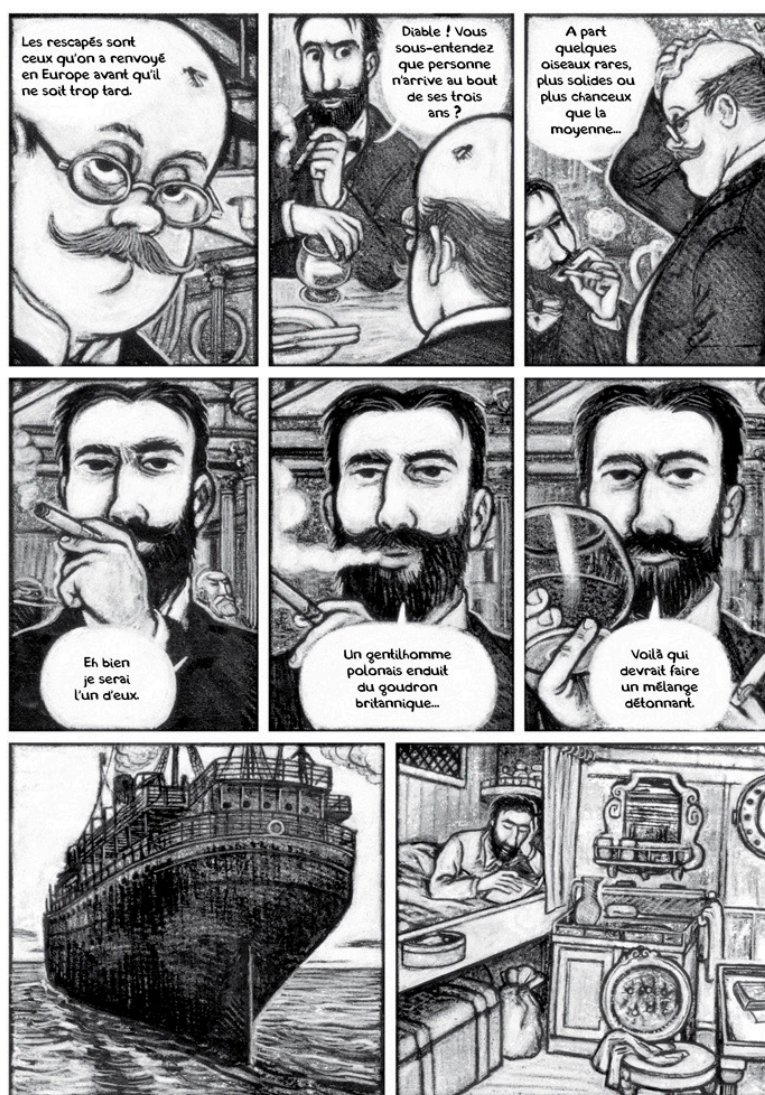
of absorbent paper or is printed on an etching press". <https://www.britannica.com/technology/monotype-printmaking#targetText=Monotype&targetText=Monotype%2C%20in%20printmaking%2C%20a%20technique,printer's%20ink%20or%20oil%20paint.> (last accessed 02.10.2019).

8 Translations from *Kongo* mine throughout.

9 "Feel considerably in doubt about the future. Think just now that my life among the people (white) around here cannot be very comfortable. Intend avoid acquaintances as much as possible" First entry in the *Congo Diary*, 06/13/1890 (Conrad, 2006a: 253).

[...] figures of the colonials [...] contrast with the serious, slim, bearded, clever figure [...] of [...] Conrad.” (Bragard, 2015: 95).

This rapid transformation and rejection of the Company’s methods is all the more striking as *Kongo* makes it clear that Conrad was not initially opposed to colonization. This is illustrated by an episode borrowed from the *Congo Diary* and partly re-imagined, when a native porter dropped him into the river. The panels show a raging Conrad satisfied that the porter is flogged (54): explicit graphic choices (angry facial expressions, sound effects included in the panels) complement factual comments in panels 1 and 5, clearly showing what Conrad’s Diary – very matter-of-fact, though one can feel his exasperation – only suggested: “Today fell into a muddy puddle. Beastly. The fault of the man that carried me. After camp[in]g went to a small stream, bathed and washed clothes. Getting jolly well sick of this fun. (Saturday, 5th July)” (Conrad 2006a: 255-256).



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Figure 2: Tirabosco & Perrissin, *Kongo*, 15.

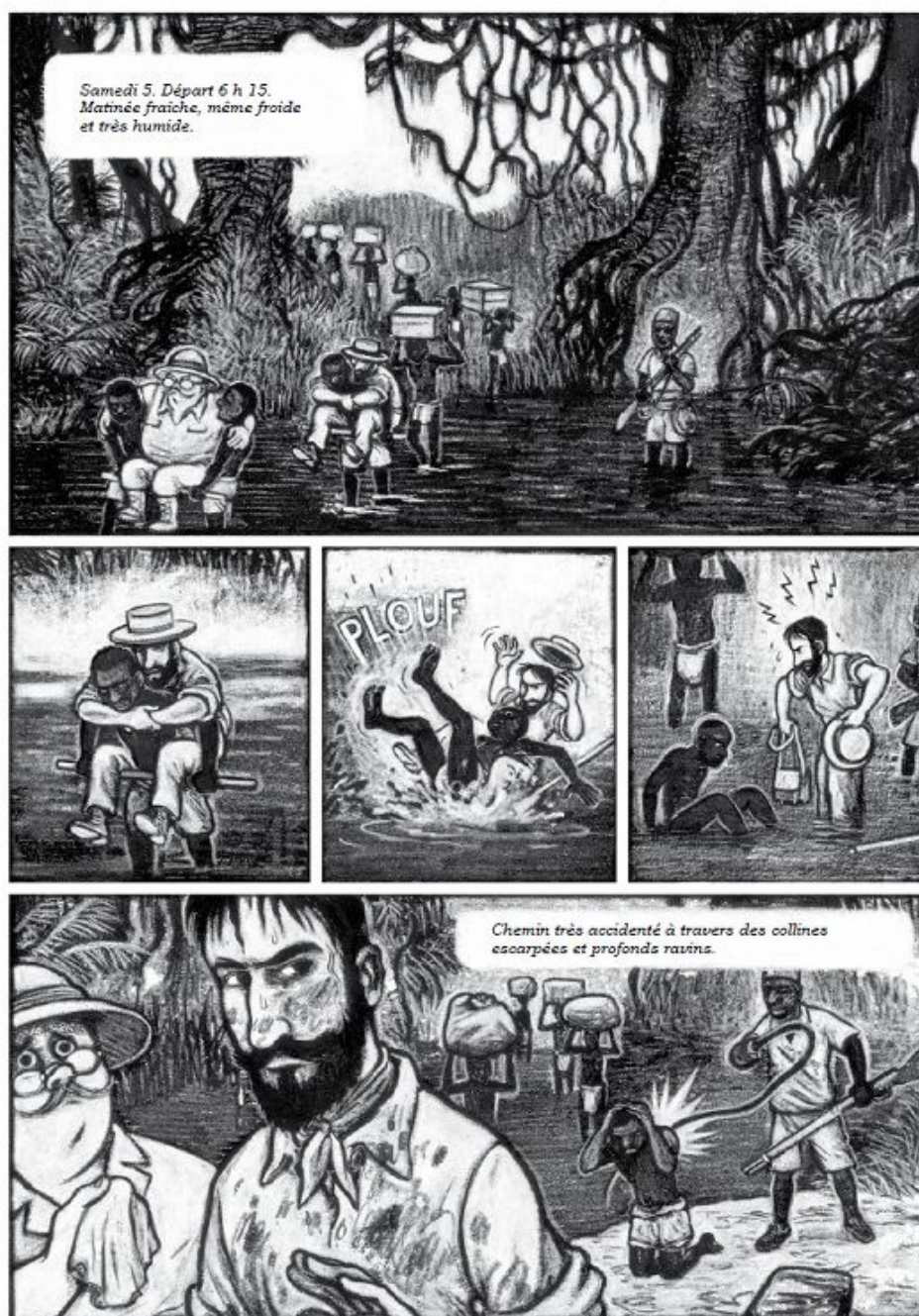


Figure 3: Tom Tirabosco & Christian Perrissin, *Kongo*, 54.

In a way, such an unsentimental picture of Conrad strengthens his rejection of European colonization in the Congo: he was not an idealist but a man with the prejudices of his time¹⁰ and Perrissin and Tirabosco refuse to idealize him. Yet *Kongo* underlines that his moral sense and clear-sightedness prevented him from fooling himself about what was taking place: “[...] I nearly took part in

¹⁰ Roger Casement, the British consul who ten years later was to become a leading figure in the fight against Leopold’s Congo State, is pictured saying “[...] you mustn’t think that they [the natives] are bothered by their chains. Soon, they will start singing, you’ll see [...]” (41). The effect is similar.

this madness” (167), he tells Casement at the end of the novel. As the graphic novel shows, Conrad has come to symbolize the difficult transition from shameless colonialism to anti-colonialism.

Kongo also dwells on the effect of Conrad’s stay in Africa on his physical and mental health, and for that matter, his physical deterioration, which is shown visually (e.g. 53, 113, 163), metaphorizes his trauma. Not all of it is attributed to what he went through: even before he reaches the coast of Africa, he is shown as suffering from rheumatism in his right hand (18-19, Bock, 2002, 26) and his fits of depression are well documented. But the conditions in the Congo were extremely trying and Conrad filled his letters with descriptions of his ailments, which are also echoed in the caption boxes:

My body feels weak and I am disheartened.
Maybe a new dysentery fit [...] will send me to Europe with Klein
... or to the next world – that would be a solution to all my problems. (143)

In the end, a more serious fit of malaria¹¹ (160) sends him back to Boma and eventually to Europe. *Kongo* shows that such a decision is also motivated by another reason: the colonial brutality he witnessed repeatedly had become unbearable. For that matter, the monotype technique allows Tirabosco to create very dark panels that convey the prevailing moral darkness¹² and create an extremely oppressive atmosphere in keeping with Conrad’s psychological evolution and with his discovery of the horrendous realities of colonialism. In *Kongo* Conrad’s ill health becomes symbolic of what the colonial enterprise in Africa does to Europeans in general, confronting them with their limits and testing their moral principles, often destroying them physically and psychologically. Thus, Conrad’s predicament is similar to that of most Europeans.

But even though he leaves after only six months, Conrad has had time to “see and hear.” (Conrad, 1996: 66) This is probably Korzeniowski’s most striking feature in *Kongo*: eyes and ears wide open, he becomes a witness who notices what is taking place around him (22, 29, 35, 51, 92); he peeps into forbidden places and rapidly discovers what the “trade secrets” consist of: enslaving natives in order to collect as much ivory as possible. He also goes for walks where he should not, which is how he comes across a group of dying natives or rotting corpses (35-36, 47-48, 52), and he listens to conversations between the Company’s executives (92).

It seems that Conrad’s role in *Kongo* is to open the readers’ eyes onto the reality behind his experience and behind *Heart of Darkness*: visually, this is rendered by the focus on his wide open eyes staring at the reader, their size underlined by the use of white gouache in very dark panels (29, 35, 84). But the novel also hints at the distance between what Conrad *saw* (not much) and what twenty-first century post-holocaust readers may *know* of the genocide which

11 “[H]e had had four attacks of fever in two months [.]” (Robert Hampson, 2012: 55).

12 The pressure applied to the paper can be adjusted according to the artist’s intention.

took place in the Congo and for that matter images take pride of place, showing the readers what is never mentioned in Conrad's works: he is forced to retrace his steps before coming across the mass grave hidden in the forest and only smells it (fig. 4, 140) while readers are confronted with a large panel that explicitly shows it to them (Bragard, 2015: 96; Capoferro, 2017-2018: 167-168). It is also worth noting that such gloomy episodes are on several occasions pictured in a very "cartoonish" manner, with linguistic signs inserted within the panels: onomatopoeias, exclamation and questions marks marking surprise clash with what is described, enhancing the readers' shock. Tirabosco uses the language of comics to convey a type of reality usually not dealt with in this way, the "cultural exclusion" of serious subjects from comics or graphic novels being no longer valid since Spiegelman's *Maus* confirmed the medium's legitimacy in handling them. (Baetens & Frey, 2015, 2).



Figure 4: Tirabosco & Perrissin, *Kongo*, 140.

From Conrad's portrait to the post-colonial re-reading of the colonization of the Congo

Not all readers of *Kongo* are familiar with Conrad and his work or with the history of colonialism. *Heart of Darkness*, however, is a title that rings a bell, even if only because of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. But behind *Heart of Darkness* is an experience of reality: "I wanted to tell what Conrad went through, what he discovered there that led him to write such a novel" Christian Perrissin said in an interview (Michel, 2013); his work was motivated by the unveiling of the historical background behind *Heart of Darkness*. The title puts the country forward (*Kongo*) while Conrad himself is a sort of filter through whose experience the "horror" of Belgian colonization can be approached. Fictionalizing Joseph Conrad is a way of reminding the twenty-first century readers of this historical background and of the reality of Belgian colonialism. Such an approach is heavily influenced by twentieth century postcolonial re-readings of our colonial past and by a reevaluation of the media's hierarchy to represent serious historical questions. Another of Perrissin and Tirabosco's aims is to make clear that there is more to Conrad's novel than a spiritual quest and a moral journey. French readers are used to readings of *Heart of Darkness* which emphasize the novella's metaphysical dimension dealing with a "journey within" (Guerard, 1958: 36), an initiatory quest that leads only to a "hollow heart"¹³ (Todorov, 1978: 169). But the "horror" in the Congo (to quote Kurtz) is not an unidentifiable dark spot; the "hollow heart" is surrounded by a "halo" of facts without which the novella loses part of its meaning. It is this historical dimension in *Heart of Darkness* that *Kongo* points out, systematically reinscribing the novella and its author in their context: the Joseph Conrad portrayed in *Kongo* is seen through the lens of twentieth and twenty-first century postcolonial criticism. At the end of *Kongo*, the authors provide a list of their sources, together with a six-page account of the historical background and of Conrad's experience, entitled "Conrad and Mr Kurtz's ghosts" in which the text takes pride of place. Such references give us a good understanding of why they were interested in Conrad and what aspect(s) they wanted to single out: "Conrad had come to the Congo to work and to fulfil his childhood dream. He came back traumatized, having served a greedy and murderous enterprise." (173) It is this "greedy and murderous enterprise" hidden behind the metaphysical quest in *Heart of Darkness* for so long that they wanted to pinpoint.

What the afterword also reveals is that they relied heavily on historical sources. Two categories of sources are particularly important and should be mentioned. The first one is directly related to Conrad himself: if Perrissin and Tirabosco are able to recreate such a precise and documented portrait of Conrad's stay in the Congo, it is because they used his letters written at the time, especially to Marguerite Poradowska, his *Congo Diary* written while he was trekking from Matadi to Kinshasa, his *Up-river Book* written while he was trav-

13 It is Todorov's analysis of the novella – an analysis that however never takes the historical context into consideration.

elling to Stanley Falls on the *Roi des Belges*, and his memoirs, *A Personal Record*, published in 1912, as well as biographies of Conrad. Such first-hand documents find their way into the graphic novel, very often word for word.¹⁴

The second category focuses on the history of the Belgian colonization of the Congo with essays like Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* or primary sources, like Alexandre Delcommune's memoirs, *Vingt Années de vie africaine*, published in 1922. Delcommune had sailed the Congo River on the *Roi des Belges* just two years before Conrad, as Perrissin reveals in his interview for *Jeune Afrique*: "It gave me a better idea of the geography of the region and of the colonizers' frames of mind" (Michel, 2013, translation mine). Tom Tirabosco, on the other hand, relied on visual documents that were not limited to the period when Conrad was in the Congo only, thus allowing for the free play of his imagination and an approach that can be defined as both historical and subjective since he used photographs dating back to the end of the nineteenth century, but also portraits of natives by Casimir Zagourski, a Belgian photographer from the 1930s, i.e. long after Conrad visited the region. He even used his own memories of a trip he made on the Amazon:

I used documents of the time as starting points, photographs from the late nineteenth century, and portraits taken by Casimir Zagourski, a Belgian photographer from the 1930s. I also used my memories of a trip I had made in Peruvian Amazonia during which I sailed on the river on a flat-bottomed boat. (Michel, 2013)

In fact, the paratext in *Kongo* frames the story, providing a systematic mixture of facts related to Conrad himself and historical elements concerning the colonization of the Congo which are not necessarily related to Conrad. If no date is indicated at the beginning of the graphic novel,¹⁵ the extracts from one of Conrad's letters to Poradowska, dated 14 April 1890, associated with press clippings concerning the Congo Conference of 1885 and its results (freedom for trade and shipping on the Congo river, insistence on the end of the Arab slave trade) are placed just before the narrative's beginning and make it clear from the start that the story is rooted in historical facts (2). And then, once we have turned the last page of the novel itself, "Conrad and Mr Kurtz's ghosts" lists the important consequences of the Congo experience not mentioned in the graphic novel itself: its long-lasting effects on Conrad's health, how he then turned from merchant seaman to writer, how these events were transformed into fiction with "An Outpost of Progress" and *Heart of Darkness*, and how it found an echo with the anti-colonialists of the time.

Perrissin also focuses on the transformation of Conrad's own experience into something more universal in *Heart of Darkness*, pointing out the absence of place names and character names, except for Marlow and Kurtz (and Fresleven)

¹⁴ All the more so since the letters to Poradowska were written in French.

¹⁵ The first date within the story is provided by a letter Conrad sends to Marguerite Poradowska (13).

(172), or the various possible sources for the character of Kurtz, ranging from Klein, the man whom Conrad brought back from Stanley Falls and who died “three days before the ship docked” in Leopoldville (Stape, 2007: 67) to the notorious Leon Rom who had decorated his flowerbeds with dried human heads. Moreover, he points out that little is known about the men Conrad encountered in the Congo (Harou, Koch, Keyaerts or Delcommune),¹⁶ which is a way of acknowledging that his work is an imaginative recreation of reality, Conrad’s portrait thus oscillating between quotations of primary sources and a re-imagining of a number of episodes: pages 47 & 48 [Figure 5] are a good example of the way Perrissin and Tirabosco worked, by giving flesh to their sources, filling gaps in what we know of Conrad’s African experience, re-imagining a number of situations. If we rely on Conrad’s diary, we see that two very brief lines (“Met an off[ic]er of the State inspecting; a few minutes afterwards saw at a camp[in]g place the dead body of a Backongo. Shot?”) are turned into three atmospheric pages filled with close-ups on sinister-looking characters like lieutenant de Roesch who is never mentioned in Conrad’s memories. Finally, at the end of the episode, Conrad is portrayed as a sort of detective, investigating the death of a black man they have found on the road, the succession of events suggesting that he was probably executed by the officer.

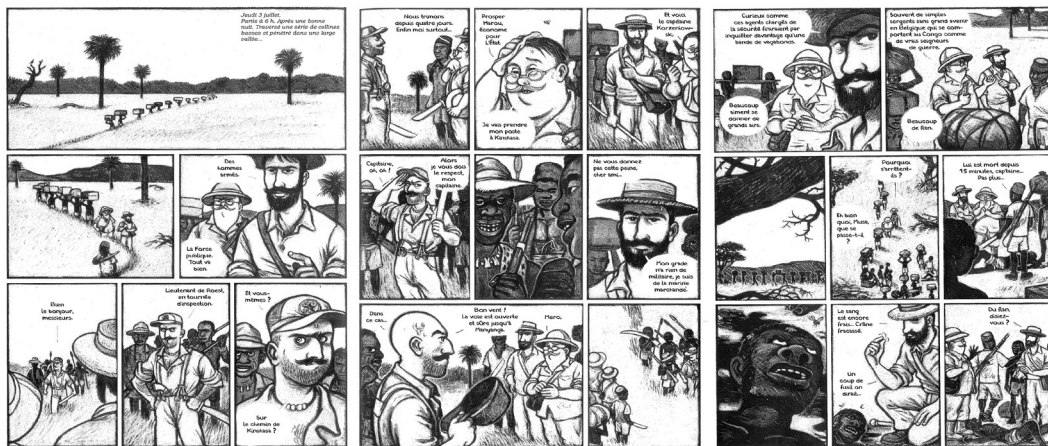


Figure 5: Tirabosco & Perrissin, *Kongo*, 48.

16 In the postscript, Perrissin gives a short presentation of a number of well-known key figures of the time, some of whom appear in the story: one is Roger Casement, whom Conrad met in Matadi. He later became a British consul and an Irish activist and published a Congo report (1903-04) against King Leopold’s Congo Free State which led to the King’s relinquishing his private ownership of the country to the Belgian government. Casement is mentioned in Conrad’s journal in friendly terms (“Thinks, speaks well, most intelligent and very sympathetic” Conrad, 2006: 253; 38) and Casement is shown as instrumental in removing the scales from Conrad’s eyes in the graphic novel (37-42). And there are the two “founding fathers” of the Congo Free State (175), King Leopold II and Stanley, the famous explorer who worked for him and contributed to opening the country to European exploitation. Stanley is mentioned in the novel in his ambiguity since he is worshipped by young Conrad as a heroic figure and called a “megalomaniac tyrant” by Casement (42). King Leopold however plays no role in the story but his historical importance is reasserted in the afterword. Photographs are even provided, alongside Conrad’s own portrait.

Very rapidly, he has no illusions left: he has discovered the ruthlessness of the colonial enterprise in the Congo and its double standards;¹⁷ it has nothing to do with the philanthropic discourse in favour in Brussels and he knows he will have to speak up. (75, 167)

Porous boundaries between the author and his work

But there is another source to Conrad's portrait in *Kongo*, as many passages echo what Marlow says in *Heart of Darkness*: Perrissin and Tirabosco did not hesitate to rely on *Heart of Darkness* in order to fill the gaps in the diary. Besides, passages from Conrad's memoirs and letters are very often nearly identical with well-known passages from *Heart of Darkness*, thus blurring the line between the writer and his work. I have mentioned the passage from Conrad's *A Personal Record* quoted on the back cover which echoes what Marlow declares at the beginning of the novel:

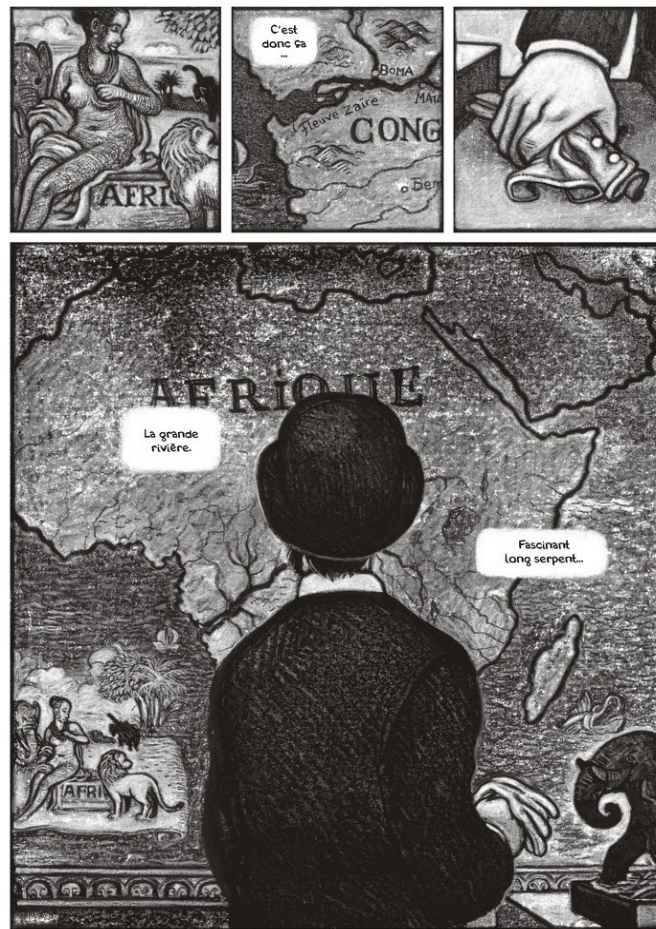
It was in 1868, when nine years old or thereabouts, that while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself, with absolute assurance and an amazing audacity which are no longer in my character now:

“When I grow up I shall go *there*.” (Conrad, 2008: 26)

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say: When I grow up I will go there. (Conrad, 2006a: 8)

The linguistic proximity is associated with a visual reduplication as both passages are also reflected at the very beginning of the novel in the panels where Conrad is shown “looking at a map” of Africa before his interview with Albert Thys, the manager of the Belgian upper Congo company he was going to work for.

17 “From the beginning of this journey, I have been told that the Congo is a horrific place for the whites. What I have seen today suggests that it is much worse for the natives” (38).



3

Figure 6: Tom Tirabosco & Christian Perrissin, *Kongo*, 3.

Like Marlow, he is particularly fascinated by the river; both compare it to “an immense snake uncoiled” (3; Conrad 2006a: 8), so that the line is blurred between Conrad’s own life and his fiction, between Conrad and Marlow, the novella’s narrator.

The trek between Matadi and Kinshasa is another good example of such similarities and echoes, as Perrissin and Tirabosco filled the caption boxes with translations from the *Congo Diary* or *Up-river Book* (28-66), systematically drawing on anecdotes reminiscent of what Marlow says in *Heart of Darkness*, like the meeting with the whites followed by the discovery of the corpse of a black man. Other episodes seem to rely entirely on *Heart of Darkness* rather than on the diary, as is the case in the pages where Harou, Conrad’s companion during the trek, wants to kill the porters who dropped him, and then Conrad himself (62-65). This is more or less what Marlow says in the novella: “I had a white companion [...who was] wrecked in a bush [...] He was very anxious for me to kill somebody [...]” (Conrad, 2006a: 20) It is quite noticeable that, in this case, the diary does not mention any such incident: “Great difficulty in carrying Harou. Too heavy. Bother! Made two long halts to rest the carriers. [...] Harou

very little better.” (Conrad, 2006: 260). In this case, *Kongo* is closer to *Heart of Darkness* than to Conrad’s diary, taking liberties with historical facts in favour of drama. The situation is also similar for instance with the scenes of the sticks/arrows shot onto the steamboat by natives (108-110) and with the drums (105-106): both episodes are highly reminiscent of what happens to Marlow and his companions in the novella (Conrad, 2006: 44-45, 35), not of what Conrad narrates in his Diary. Similarly, what Klein tells Conrad during their conversation (“[The jungle] has whispered to me things about myself which I had no idea of ...”, 149) echoes what Marlow says about Kurtz:

But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude [...] (Conrad, 2006a: 57-58)

Later on, Conrad’s bouts of fever are equated with the realization that he has compromised his moral integrity for the sake of a captainship, as he tells Marguerite Poradowska in a hallucination – a scene that is entirely imaginary (156-158):

And yet ... if only you knew how much I hate lies, not because I am more loyal than the rest of us, but lies appal me. Lies taste like ashes; there is a flavour of death in them. It makes me sick as if I were biting into rotten meat. And yet I lied to myself, I forgot my principles. (157)

Once more, such a declaration is an almost word for word copy of what Marlow tells his listeners in *Heart of Darkness*:

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 appals 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. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do.¹⁸ (Conrad, 2006a: 27)

In some cases, however, Tirabosco and Perrissin opted for silent pages to convey the intensity of Conrad’s experience, as is the case when he meets a

18 Interestingly, this imaginary moment of hallucination is also the moment when Conrad and Marlow part and choose separate paths: at the end of the novella, Marlow lies to the intended in order to “help [her] to stay in that beautiful world of [her] own [...]” (Conrad, 2006: 48), while Marguerite Poradowska, the woman figure in *Kongo*, is not only a romantic figure in Conrad’s life, but a sort of alter ego whose fantasized presence forces him to acknowledge that he nearly “stepped over the edge” himself. From that moment, recovery means taking the path that leads him to becoming a writer of fiction *and* a witness, and, for him, the two cannot be separated as fiction will be his privileged medium to deal with reality.

group of dying natives (34-35), explores the forest (84-85) or has a hallucination (154), as if language failed him or images were more powerful in such moments. As a result, some of the most striking episodes have a very visual dimension in a graphic novel in which language otherwise plays a crucial role.

The consequence for a reader of the graphic novel, even one familiar with *Heart of Darkness* and Conrad's biography, is that what we know of Conrad's biography – what can be considered as historical facts – and the contents of his fiction, tend to merge, so that the two figures of Conrad and Marlow superimpose, underlining the fact that Conrad's image for us depends on *Heart of Darkness* that informs it as much as Conrad's experience initially informed the novella. Can the writer's figure be separated from his texts? The example of *Kongo* tends to suggest that it is not the case.

In "What is an Author?" published in 1968, Michel Foucault showed that the image of the author the readers have in their minds "contributes to making their interpretation of the text possible" as it is "characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society." (Foucault, 1998: 211) This image is not the flesh and blood person but a fantasy recreated from the text(s) they have read. As a fantasy, it is largely influenced by their preoccupations and cultural background. Foucault insists that *author* and *individual* should not be confused. Yet, such a conflation of the two is frequent according to Sophie Rabaud. She explains that the image of the author produced by the fictional text, W. Booth's "implied author", is superimposed by the reader onto what is historically known of him or her: "the author's portrait is implied from his/her work seen as a reflection of the life the reader invents for his author." (Rabaud, 2004: 177) As readers of Conrad, Perrissin and Tirabosco tried to go back to the individual Conrad and what he experienced, but in the process, they were heavily influenced by *Heart of Darkness* and the figure of Marlow, as the numerous passages borrowed from the novella indicate. Perrissin insists that "*Heart of Darkness* has remained a reference because of its extremely lucid outlook on what colonization really meant." (173) As a result, they constantly send us back to the novella and Marlow, whose figure proves indissociable from Conrad's, mediating our understanding of his own story. As a consequence, in a period of constant re-assessment of colonialism's effects and acknowledgment of its influence on our lives, *Heart of Darkness* and its author have become emblematic – almost interchangeable. Placing Joseph Conrad, the "novelist of the sea", in the context of the "scramble for Africa", the graphic novel therefore underlines *Heart of Darkness's* pivotal role in Conrad's (positive or negative) reputation and image as a writer, a role which cannot be overestimated as the novella has had a major impact on twentieth century thought: Hannah Arendt saw *Heart of Darkness* as one of the texts that announced twentieth-century totalitarianism and the mass murders it led to (Arendt, 2002, 369). *Kongo* indirectly reminds us of this impact, as it reminds us of historical events that left their mark on the relationships between Europe and Africa.

Relying both on a multiplicity of historical sources and on Conrad's own fiction, *Kongo's* portrait of Joseph Conrad can be characterized as a subjective but largely faithful recreation of the six months that brought the transition from seaman to English writer whose image has become inseparable from *Heart of Darkness*. As we have seen, *Kongo* borrows extensively from Conrad's texts, which it quotes or paraphrases; it is the visual choices however which create the very oppressive atmosphere and a vivid sense of Conrad's traumatizing experience. Shedding light on the historical background of the novella, *Kongo* also underlines the proximity between Conrad and Marlow, between reality and the fiction it inspired: *Heart of Darkness* was, in his own words, "experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate [...] purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the readers." (Conrad 2006a: 290) For twenty-first century readers who are not necessarily familiar with the history of the Congo or Conrad's personal story, it gives the image of a man who discovered a reality that confronted him with ethical and moral questions that were to become central in his work. Moreover, it foregrounds the role of fiction to "memorialize" historical events and graphic narratives' legitimacy in handling serious themes.

List of figures

Figure 1: Cover of Tom Tirabosco & Christian Perrissin, *Kongo. Le ténébreux voyage de Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski*, Paris, Futuropolis, 2013.

Figure 2: Tirabosco & Perrissin, *Kongo*, 15.

Figure 3: Tom Tirabosco & Christian Perrissin, *Kongo*, 54.

Figure 4: Tirabosco & Perrissin, *Kongo*, 140.

Figure 5: Tirabosco & Perrissin, *Kongo*, 48.

Figure 6: Tom Tirabosco & Christian Perrissin, *Kongo*, 3.

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