

Christof Schöch: *L'écriture descriptive dans le roman français de la seconde moitié du dix-huitième siècle*. Binationale Promotion, Kassel & Paris-IV Sorbonne, defense 10/2008.

Supervisors

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Book publication

Christof Schöch, *La description double dans le roman français des Lumières (1760-1800)*. Paris: Éd. Classiques Garnier, coll. L'Europe des Lumières, 2011.

Additional information

· Prix Germaine de Stael 2010, décerné par l'Association des francoromanistes allemands (FRV) et l'Ambassade de France en Allemagne.

· <http://www.christof-schoech.de/description-double-roman>

Summary

This study is concerned with the theory and practice of description in the French novel of the Enlightenment, more precisely in the time from 1760 to 1800. The aim of the study is to bring into focus this important although somewhat neglected episode in the history of literary description by discussing three central issues: the very notion of description at the time, the status and the techniques of integration of description into the narrative context, and the relations between description and painting as well as the literary techniques producing visual evidence.

The study is based on an in-depth analysis, using a database, of a corpus of thirty novels published between 1760 and 1800 and belonging to the three dominant narrative forms of the times: the epistolary novel, the memoir novel, and the third-person narrative novel. The corpus includes authors of major renown as well as a number of lesser known authors. The study also takes into account relevant aspects of the history of ideas and various writings about description from the eighteenth century, including Bérardier de Bataut's *Essai sur le récit* published in 1776. Moreover, modern theories of descriptions are taken into account; when the context or the literary practice made this appear necessary, they have been adapted or nuanced. In terms of methodology, the study combines an approach based on the history of ideas with a typological and philological approach.

In the first part, the concept of description characteristic of the time is examined, based on poetological and rhetorical writings from the eighteenth century, and is defined using modern theories of description. The main result is that for the period studies, a double notion of description is valid: there is a modern, structurally and referentially defined notion of description that is clearly opposed to narrative, as well as an older, rhetorical notion of description whose characteristics are its high level of detail and its visual evidence. Both of these types of descriptions have their own literary issues, which are analyzed in the remainder of the study.



In the second part of the study, the status of description in the eighteenth century in general and in the novel in particular is examined. This status is characterized by the fact that the important role of description is recognized in a large array of scientific and in some literary genres, in theory as well as in practice. However, due to the ongoing influence of traditions and conventions concerning the novel, this development does not affect the status of description in the novel very much, so that it continues to be problematic. Against this backdrop, the techniques of legitimating and integrating description into the narrative context are analyzed based on a typological approach. The basic distinction made is that between explicit legitimizing by metadiscursive remarks and implicit integration by narrative motivation. The study analyses two novels, Rétif de la Bretonne's *La Découverte australe* and Sade's *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome* to further examine these two techniques.

In the third part of the study, the issue of evidence and pictoriality of description is examined based on poetological and esthetic writings of the time. Also, it is described in theoretical terms. It results from this that description aims at visual evidence and does so by taking painting as a model. Descriptions of paintings and descriptive episodes in the novels are analyzed in this perspective by examining the degree and nature of references to pictoriality that can be found in them. The result is that there is a chiasm of pictorial referents described and pictorial qualities of the description: descriptions of painting are weakly pictorial, while certain types of highly descriptive episodes have strong pictorial qualities. This finding is nuanced by the analysis of Sénac de Meilhan's *L'Émigré*, suggesting that the aforementioned chiasm is getting less pronounced towards the end of the period analyzed in this study.