

A commentary on the extract from Diderot's review of Vernet in the Salon of 1765

The extract from Diderot's 'Salon de 1765' is about Vernet and his works, and is certainly full of praise from author. The use of poetic techniques by Diderot, his style of narrative, approach to the reader, and his choice of language makes this particular extract a very vivid and concise commentary.

Diderot's use of poetic techniques are similar to that of great Classical poets such as Virgil and Horace. A spring ode by Horace is quoted by Diderot, in a previous commentary, which can help us assume that he is well versed in classical poetry. This may help in analysing this commentary as there are certain areas where Diderot's review is reminiscent of the devices used in classical poetry. For example, at the beginning of this commentary he writes, "Vingt-cinq tableaux, mon ami! Vingt-cinq tableaux? Et quels tableaux!", the use of "tableaux" is a triple anaphora used to express his disbelief that Vernet has been able to produce twenty-five paintings of excellent quality. The very next line "C'est comme le créateur, pour la célérité; c'est comme la nature, pour la vérité", there is clearly a steady rhyming structure of A, B, A, B, which is creating a sense of a poem within a prose text, thus contributing to the idea of praise by Diderot. The idea of a poem within a prose text is a good technique used by Diderot to help him express his opinion and generate interest within the reader. The repetitive use of the word "quel" further on in the text supports the idea of incredulity at the amazing work Vernet has produced. In the description of the ship wreck he uses alliteration to describe the escape of a boy, "un enfant échappe", perhaps to give a sense of danger and urgency to escape the wreckage, along with, "la mer mugit" to emphasise the ferociousness of the unforgiving sea. Likewise "les vents sifflent" gives a sense of sibilence possibly done by Diderot to emphasise the whistling of the wind, and the onomatopoeic nature of "le tonnerre gronde", adds to the growling tone of the thunder, thus setting up the scene of a chaotic storm. By using such techniques Diderot is able to convey to the reader, in a more dramatic way, of how the painted was depicting a ship wreck in a storm. He then places himself in the text "J'en vois", using this particular phrase three times which is known as a tricolon crescendo, again a device commonly used by classical poets to add to the idea of urgency, and danger in this case.

Placing himself personally in this text is a common technique he uses in his Salons. By immersing himself he creates the impression that he is there as one of the onlookers, witnessing the incident as it happened. Thereby creating a first person account. "On entend le bruit...d'un vaisseau", clearly you cannot hear the noise of the ship as it is a painting, but it reinforces the notion that he is present

at the wreck. He describes the wreck with quick, short phrases, “ses mâts sont inclinés, ses voiles déchirées...d'autres secourent, d'autres immobiles”, combined with the “J'en vois” phrase it helps contribute to the idea that he is there at the scene and is describing it hurriedly as it is narrated in real time and the ship wreck will end quickly. The idea of a painting is that it captures a single moment in time and therefore will give Diderot a lot of time to focus on it, however the way he describes it places him at the scene adding to the sense of urgency and gives a unique narrative. Another example of him being personally connected is when he talks of a dying woman being revived by sailors and says, “j'espère qu'ils réussiront”, he is so involved emotionally that he even hopes that the fictional woman survives.

When describing the ship wreck, the language used is of despair, “déchirées”, “disparoître dans le gouffre”, whilst describing the calm scene on another painting with words of stillness and peace, “tranquilles”, “aplanies”, “riantes”, “immobiles”. What is interesting to note is that it is now the ships which are motionless, “les vaisseaux sont immobiles”, in the calm piece whilst it was the sailors, in the shipwreck scene that were “immobiles” with fear. When he talks of Vernet's skill claiming that his painting of the sky would be as realistic as the sky in real life, he could have simply written that, but not being the man of few words, Diderot writes a six line sentence praising the artist's skill. At the end of this extract he says “il faut les voir”, he has described this painting with great detail for those who are unable to see it, and the genius that it contains, however he uses the subjunctive to emphasise his point that words alone cannot fully describe and justify the piece.

He does not immediately address the reader but instead talks to Vernet expressing his disbelief at the achievement he has done. He only addresses the reader half way through the text, almost unexpectedly, perhaps to lull the reader into a sense of false security and then change the dynamic and flow of the piece. In classical terms it could be seen that this commentary is similar to an ekphrasis, which is where a dramatic description is given to a visual piece of art. Here Diderot has described this painting in a dramatic narrative to relate to the audience in a more lively manner, which can help encourage others to go see the painting itself, and helps him impress his positive opinion on the reader. It is clear that he admires Vernet's work and has illustrated his appreciation of the artist's skill through an elaborate and favourable review.