

Intertextual References from Michelangelo Buonarroti's *The Creation of Adam* and Walt Disney/Pixar's Computer-Animated film *Luca*

Abstract

This essay discusses the intertextual references in the artwork *The Creation of Adam* and in scenes from the animated film *Luca*. The scene depicting the “touch of the finger-tips” (Walter Pater) between God and man will be discussed in connection with various scenes from the film. The intertextual references will be analyzed with semiotic tools, redefined through their intertextual interaction, and given a new meaning arising from their new environment.

Keywords

intertextuality, semiotics, art, painting, animation

Introduction

According to Julia Kristeva, texts acquire meaning because of their association with other texts, both oral and written, and also because of the “intersubjective knowledge of their interlocutors,” that is, the overall knowledge of some groups and communities of people that helps them develop practices to understand the various meanings presented. This knowledge may come either from other books, from everyday language, from context, or finally from the social conditions prevailing at a given time in a specific region (Wilkie-Stibbs 2005).

Kristeva, wanting to define the transformation of one text into another or, more aptly, the connection of one semiotic logical system with another, uses the term “intertextuality” (Siaflekis 1989).

Intertextuality has always been tied to Kristeva’s name, due to her famous presentation: “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva

1986, 37). The latter functions are applicable to texts outside of literary research, in relation to other texts that converse with one another and share common points in their content. More specifically, their intertextual references can include phrases, images, faces and more (Siafleki 1989).

Thus, although intertextuality was first used as a methodological tool for the analysis of literary texts, its use was later extended to the semiotic study of advertising, television series, animated films, etc. (Cerić 2013).

The texts that converse with each other in this essay come from the field of painting, specifically Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, and the so-called seventh art, cinema, scenes from the Walt Disney/Pixar animated film *Luca*.

According to Teresa Colomer, the phenomenon of intertextuality is part of postmodern trends (Colomer 2010). As she sees it, in recent years there has been a remarkable increase in the number of intertextual allusions in several texts and several cultural systems (cinema, music, painting, etc.) (López González 2018).

Especially since the 1990s, children's films have deployed divergent modes of address, which yet acknowledge the presence of adult spectators. Adults are addressed through irony and reflexivity, using generic intertextual relays. Even more crucially, intertextual references to popular culture, and to cinema history, often ancillary to plot and character development, are meant to appeal to adults' superior cultural knowledge (Cornell 2015).

Intertextual function

According to Karl Popper, one of the communicative functions of language is the textual function. That is, language constitutes a kind of structuring of a text as a situational oral or written realization of itself (Nakas 1995).

The possibility of a parallel connection of this textual function occurring between texts was introduced by Kristeva as intertextuality (Stam 2017).

Kristeva first introduced the term "intertextuality" in the 1960s, through a dialogic relationship to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou 2022). Bakhtin's concept of dialogism implies that every text results from an intersection of textual surfaces.

Through Bakhtin's dialogical theory, Kristeva develops the theory of intertextuality. This theory arose from a combination of Bakhtin and Ferdinand de Saussure, and their ideas about the social content of language and its systematic characteristics, respectively. "The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double," Kristeva says (Kristeva 1986, 66; emphasis in original).

With this theory, Kristeva accepts that texts acquire meaning because of their association with other texts, both oral and written, but also through the "intersubjective knowledge of their interlocutors."

Kristeva observes that there are three types of text that an author may include in his or her own text, giving them a different inflection: (i) someone else's text, appropriated by the author; (ii) a text to which the author has given a new meaning, contradicting the meaning given to it by another author; and (iii) a text that actively influences the author's text. Kristeva argues that every text is intertextual and constitutes a productive process, since it is composed of many different elements taken from other texts, reconstructed, neutralized and traversing each other. For Kristeva, intertextuality is not the imitation or reproduction of an existing text. On the contrary, it is a tissue of texts, which are difficult to isolate (Kristeva 1986).

The intertextual function between different texts

Intertextuality deals with the relationship between texts, but these are not limited to written and verbal messages, but include nonverbal information, such as images and sounds. Intertextuality can be seen as a web of references connecting the textual, visual, and auditory elements of a primary message with the textual, visual, and auditory elements of other messages (Wöller 2001).

Intertextuality creates an exemplary relationship between two texts, and also a correlation of connotation from the recipient text to the source text, operating within a single semiotic system or between different semiotic systems. Intertextuality appears in all semiotic systems, applying to myths, fairy tales, literature, cinema, all offering rich examples (Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou 2022).

Over the past few decades, intertextuality has expanded to fields other than the analysis of literary texts. These include cultural and

artistic productions but also the texts of everyday life, in various modes and media (Allen 2000).

The Creation of Adam

Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* is one of the most famous, best-loved and well-known works in the entire history of art. It is one of those works that have penetrated so deeply into the collective imagination that they are used or imitated, fully or in part, by advertising and cinema. It can even be said that *The Creation of Adam* has achieved the same fame as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*.



Fig. 1: Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, 1511. Fresco. Rome, Vatican

The Creation of Adam is a fresco painting forming part of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling, painted by Michelangelo in c. 1508–12. It illustrates the Biblical creation narrative of the Book of Genesis in which God gives life to Adam, the first man. The fresco is part of a complex iconographic scheme, and is chronologically the fourth in the series of panels depicting episodes from Genesis.¹

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Creation_of_Adam (accessed May 12, 2022).



Fig. 2: Michelangelo, ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, c. 1508–12. Fresco, 13 m x 36 m. Rome, Vatican

Art and animation

According to Jan Mukařovský, in art there is a “subject” which seems at first sight to function as the communicative signification of the work (Mukařovský 1934). In reality, every component of a work of art, including the most “formal,” possesses a communicative value, independent of the “subject.” The communicative power of “subjectless” art, one which I describe as diffuse, depends precisely on the potential semiological character of its “formal” components. Strictly speaking, the total artistic structure functions once again as signification, indeed as the communicative signification of the work of art. The subject of the work simply has the role of crystallizing this signification, which would otherwise remain vague. The work of art has a double semiological signification, as autonomous and communicative, the latter occurring primarily in the arts that have a “subject.” A dialectical intertextual communication develops between our two texts, *The Creation of Adam* and the computer-animated film *Luca*.

Paul Klee’s thoughts on modern art reveal the deeper mechanism of painting as a whole to be an autonomous semantic act, allowing us to understand the connections within its creative practice and within the process of reading and decoding a painting (Klee 1975, 49). Reading a painting, from any era, is not a mysterious matter of a person’s natural inclination, but involves the difficult and complex acquisition of hierarchical and articulated codes that, as much as possible, allow the

reproduction of the painter's creative construction (Marin 1969). In this way, the scenes in the animated film *Luca* are represented through codes that are interpreted and translated in accordance with the social, ideological and cultural background of the person interpreting them. Hegel defines art as a particular means of spirit's self-manifestation: art makes an idea accessible to contemplation through images. These images express our freedom (Hegel 1997). The expression of this freedom of the work of art permits anyone to interpret and connect it intertextually with their own experiences and memories.

In his own approach to art, Heidegger defines it as the manifestation of truth, its becoming and advent. Art is thus understood as a language used to express a human being's physical and spiritual reality. This language captures the surroundings that humans interiorize. This "interiorization" emerges transfigured in the artist's free creation. Art proves absolutely crucial for the human being because it is the expression of the human spirit (Heidegger 2008, 160). Through the language of art, the freedom of the artist and of the receiver of the work of art can connect, their associative thinking permitting them to freely connect the work with their personal background.

In the broad sense, intertextual dialogism refers to the infinite and open possibilities generated by all the rhetorical practices of a culture, the whole layer of communicative discourses in which the artistic text lies, which reaches the text not only through recognizable influences but also through a subtle process of dispersion. In this sense, cinema inherits and transforms centuries of artistic tradition (Stam 2017). The art of animation creates moving images by manipulating all kinds of techniques, apart from live action. This independent art – whether appearing in the theater, on television, in educational or children's films, etc. – makes a considerable and important contribution to the world's cultural heritage, while playing a part in the search for new means of artistic expression. It helps promote peace and mutual understanding between all people (ASIFA n.d.).

According to researchers like Emer O'Sullivan and Lourdes Lorenzo García and Ana Maria Pereira, animation presents visual and verbal intertextual references requiring the viewer's ability to see and read between the scenes to receive the full message sent by the director of the film (O'Sullivan 2005). Contemporary children's films reflect Zohar Shavit's notion of sophistication (Shavit 1986).

The computer-animated film *Luca*

Young Luca and his best friend, Alberto, summon up the courage to visit the picturesque fishing village of Portorosso. However, the boys share a great secret: they are not ordinary children but harmless sea monsters, eager to find out what lies above the sea's surface. Before long, following adventure after adventure and experience after experience, the two wide-eyed explorers will discover the true meaning of freedom, the importance of family, and the catalytic power of acceptance.



Fig. 3: *Luca* (2021) by Pixar Animation Studios for Walt Disney Pictures, directed by Enrico Casarosa

Semiotic analysis of the intertextual scenes

The first scene

Through the power of images, Adam's creation expresses simple and profound concepts, as only a true masterpiece can, with disarming naturalness and efficiency.

The hand of the young Adam is visibly weak and uncertain, hardly capable of rising above his own body or from the impulses of matter. Adam's passive attitude to the help offered by the Creator communicates the hope that God will help Adam lift himself from the burden of his earthly existence, something he does not seem able to do



Fig. 4: The intertextual scenes

on his own (Arnheim 2004, 458–60). This perspective, which follows Rudolf Arnheim’s analysis, is connected intertextually to the first scene of the film where Alberto, Luca’s fallen friend, unable to get up and continue, perceives Luca as a *deus ex machina* energetically coming to give him his hand. The scene proceeds in slow motion to heighten the climactic moment when the hands come to touch, the desperate effort to resume the dynamic struggle in which the two friends and protagonists are engaged.

The stills of the intertextual scenes

From a semiotic perspective, meaning is found in the fingers that do not touch. The short distance separating them has the potential to transmit life as divine grace. In the film, the hands approach but obviously do not unite in the lifting of Alberto, or being carried on Luca’s bike. The semantic gravity lies rather in the gesture of the hands, which rouses the intertextual perception of the touching fingers in *The Creation of Adam* from the viewer’s memory. This perception relies on previous experience and on the viewers/receivers’ cultural level. This scene is deliberately created by the director to illustrate the connection and relationship between the present text and the original text. In this way, attention and memory are stimulated to decipher the message through its connotative interpretation.

From a semiotic perspective, meaning is found in the creation of Adam. The fingers never touch, and this provoked the interpretation that union with the Divine is never fully possible, the dual existence of

man preventing full deification. Thus, the little distance between them evokes the potential of transmitting life as divine grace, but man is doomed to remain a prisoner of the dark world of matter, even though the superior spirit he has been granted allows his will to rise to the level of high ideas.

A second aspect worthy of attention lies in the fact that the Creator is moving toward Adam and not the other way around, reminding us that the creative act is by the will of God. Similarly, in the animated-film scene, Luca demonstrates his determination to extend his hand towards Alberto and lift him up. Also, their gaze is semiotically activated by the intense expression of emotions between them. According to Richard Lazarus, and the theory of the cognitive assessment of emotion, people decide what to feel after interpreting what happened. This is the sequence: an event provokes a thought, which then affects simultaneous arousal and emotion (Lazarus 1991).

From a position of strength, Luca shows his impetuous tendency. Alberto, finding himself in the disadvantageous position of despair, sees his friend's face as his "Savior" from the nets that were thrown over him.

The second scene

In the friends' farewell scene, their hands are joined until the moment the train starts to depart. Little by little their palms become reluctantly part and remain hanging in the air for a few seconds. The two protagonists show the emotional charge of their separation with the expression and movement of their hands.

The figures are separated by empty space, crossed only by the hands that form the connection between the two subjects. The space is of great importance in the compositional structure of the mural as it isolates the hands and attracts the eye of the viewer, at the same time highlighting the absolute separation between the infinite and the finite. The delicate connection between the Creator and his creation helps us understand yet another aspect of this work. The effect of the image denotatively depicts the power relationship between the Divine and the human, between the incorruptible and the perishable. Connotatively, this connection could just symbolize two people gently approaching each other, with a sense of desire and restraint. Their



Fig. 5: The intertextual scenes II

fingers are stretched until they touch each other, but their hands extend into the void. Without the influence of the creation story, this scene becomes a depiction of love and friendship. It ceases to be about God's creation of Adam and instead shows two people who just want to connect. Even if the scene refers to the painting through intertextual reference, a different meaning arises in a different social context.

The photos of the intertextual scenes

The Creation of Adam imparts an aesthetic type of communication and conveys multiple messages that are interpreted differently by each recipient. Despite the lack of definitive certainty, it is very difficult to deny the message of the creation of man that Michelangelo wanted to convey. However, according to Vasari, Michelangelo was always very restrained and ambiguous, "his works almost having two meanings" (Pozzi and Mattioda 2006, 78; my translation). At the same time, in the film, the dream of our little hero begins and passes through the independence he conquers. Having choice and free will, he begins the journey of his own life to the education and knowledge he so wants to acquire. This again recalls the painting, God creating Adam by the untouched spark of life so that, with the gift of free will, man can chart the course of his own life. Thus, between denotation and connotation, the latter interpretation impresses itself in the film scene.

Conclusion

Intertextuality is not limited to a single medium. In this essay, film has been combined with other arts and other media. Intertextual references can connect a text with other semiotic systems by representing the connotations of messages. Intertextuality involves flexibility and adaptation, depending on the textual environments in which it is located, even as its subjective operation depends on the receiver/viewer's social, cultural and educational background. According to Douglas Robinson, "the things we enjoy (or even despise) always stay better in our memories than things we are indifferent to. The strongest memories in our lives are always the ones that have had the strongest emotional impact on us" (Robinson 2006, 52). The issue of intertextuality can be described as a vast field of various approaches (Nemčoková 2012).

Intertextuality becomes a means of communication for the receivers themselves. Essentially, it activates the knowledge and experience that everyone has acquired as self-interaction, combining the network's intertextual signs through a kind of osmosis. In many fields, the study and analysis of intertextuality operates as a prism through which light is refracted, creating a spectrum of colors with various associations and meanings, depending on the environments in which they are presented. Intertextuality opens areas through texts – verbal or visual or aural – where their unbounded connections assume new identities, just as Kristeva was inspired by the mosaic of fragments, creating new meanings, new forms of knowledge, new messages, and new inspirations.

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