

Communication and Cultural Studies

Myth and Remediation in Illustration. Case study: Saddo

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Abstract: A rather cross time aspect that is to be addressed by this research is the appropriation of the illustration by classic arts or by what is called *new media*, as they are defined by the work *Remediation* (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). Starting from *new media* and how they are created and function nowadays, analyzing the fascination induced by the new technologies, Bolter and Grusin initiate a theory of *remediation* which is meant to challenge the so called novelty of the creations of the contemporary digital culture. By discussing the *remediation* as one of the most important characteristics of *new media*, Bolter and Grusin prove that this is a sine qua non condition of every work of art. Starting from this theory, we are interested in analyzing the equation encompassing illustrations, myths and their relation with the reality layers that they remediate. We will try to answer the question: how does myths and illustration build layers towards the public and what are the forms they embrace today? We will base our research on a corpus of images (illustrations) where mythical representations are present.

Keywords: drawing; popular culture; immediacy; hypermediacy

1. Introduction

This research envisages illustration (drawing) as one of the most candid of the arts, underneath its constant struggle for self defining as a stand alone practice, unburdened by commercial purposes, lying its big capacity of transmitting messages of a specific emotional and sensitive nature. Furthermore this paper aims to analyse the work of Romanian illustrator Saddo by means of two key concepts: the remediation and the mimetic and conservative style of the works, expressed in the presence of the mythical paradigms. The equation based on remediation, mythical paradigms and the novelty degree of illustrations are the main topic of this research. This analysis is made from the point of view of popular culture.

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The questions aiming for an answer are: how are layers of meaning devised in contemporary illustration? Which is the relation between illustration and mythical paradigms? How does remediation influence the message of the work of art – in this case illustration? Is there a connection between popular culture mechanisms and the creation and popularisation of illustration in the age of new media? Is there a set recipe for the work of art like illustration – which is it and which is the degree of novelty and original in such a work?

2. Illustration at the Crossroads between Classic Graphic Design and New Media: Remediation in Illustration

Certainly, illustration as drawn image is one of the expressions of human creativity and the relation between the two is quite strong. When creativity is the aim, the solution at hand is certainly illustration, as a mean to express certain messages.

If at the beginning of the 19th century America citizens of all social layers attended all sort of artistic events, more educated and usually well to do Americans felt, during the second half of the same century, the need for a differentiation. It is when the distinction between *fine arts* and *popular arts* (Thomson, 1997, pp. 106-8) emerged that the two concepts were subject to intense debates at the time. Design and illustration schools were set up in Great Britain in 1836 and in 1870 in America, as both nations are forefathers of the specialised education in these fields. The debate regarding the two types of art is part of the idea according to which there are two types of cultures, a high and a low culture, a distinction which was also denied by the supporters of applied arts (Thomson, 1997, p. 110). It is obvious however that illustration has lost its position among the “pure” arts precisely as a result of the emergence of commercial arts. Ellen Mazur Thomson identifies four features that led to the differentiation between commercial art and classic art: creation by mechanical means, the importance of the images to the detriment of text, the lack of consistent artistic vision and its relation to the commercial world (Thomson, 1997, p. 116).

A topical aspect in the study of illustration is that related to its affiliation to an area of classic graphic design or, to the contrary, to what is now called *new media*, as they are defined in particular by Bolter and Grusin (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) in their book *Remediation Understanding New Media*. Starting from the *new media*, their creation and functioning in today's world, and analysing the fascination produced by the new technologies, Bolter and Grusin put forward a theory of *remediation* to

challenge the claimed novelty of the contemporary digital culture creations. They are not born in isolation. The two shed light and draw attention to matters that are understood *ad litteram*, without knowing however what they actually are, explaining the bases and mechanism of the creation process of any cultural work.

Discussing about remediation as one of the most significant characteristics of the *new media*, Bolter and Grusin show that it has actually always been a *sine qua non* condition of any media¹. Starting from the premise that, just as any media since Renaissance², *new media* sways between the need for transparency, the lack of any mediation – *immediacy* – and opacity, mediation overload – *hypermediacy* – they define *remediation* as the practice by which cultural products claim to offer an unmediated experience through the one or several very acts of mediations. The “binary logic” of remediation is placed between *immediacy* and *hypermediacy*: “Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them” (Bolter & Grusin, 2000).

Just like any other cultural products, illustration is now set to establish a relation with the *real*, which assigns and recommends it for a certain type of uses. Any work aims to its own *immediacy* and *liveness*, characteristics which were classically rather assigned to photography than to illustration. In this sense and in line with the idea that the art which does not imitate figuratively, realistically, actually draws attention upon itself, illustration becomes a clear form of hypermediacy (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). Illustration can be seen as the art which cannot copy the real world and which rather speaks about itself.

Defined upon these concepts, illustration is supposed to bear the following characteristics: it is an original work, it often does not promise access to a different reality, but the one specific to the work of art; it provides the presence of a creator of the drawing; employed in digital media, it is remediation, which sets the attention on the media; the viewer experiences an emotion in the act of meeting the work of art which is provoked rather by the unexpected, than by the high fidelity of the reproduction.

¹ In the sense of means of communication.

² They chose Renaissance because it is when the perspective was invented which may be translated in the context of the work by offering a work closer to reality.

3. Mythical Paradigms in Illustration

The mimetic and conservative character of a cultural product is related to what Monica Spiridon defines as its “pronounced dependency on conventions, codes, formulas and matrices, serving at the same time as reusable materials” (Spiridon, 2013). Among the most frequent are the “mythical containers”. Mircea Eliade gives one of the basic definitions of myth. Myth must necessarily present itself as a story having always the power of a model, of an inspirational story for those learning it. The characters of such story come from the sacred world and have the same role of offering models (Spiridon, 2013). Monica Spiridon emphasises the relation between Eliade's definition of myth and the popular culture mechanisms: “As defined and illustrated by examples in Eliade's work, the myth works as a void receptacle which may be repeatedly filled with contemporary material” (Spiridon, 2013).

Another category of definitions of the myth serving to an analysis of the cultural products such as illustration is given by Roland Barthes (Barthes, 2002) who explains how a myth may be represented by any image or word if these bear complex meaning. Contemporary cultural products resort to myths so often precisely because it allows them to bear meaning. Although myth is present in the most diverse theoretical fields, its broad meaning in *popular culture* is clearly delimited, as explained by Monica Spiridon: “Specific to popular culture is however the progressive reduction of the narrativity of the container and its focus on a poignant image which may equal a logo or various marks of the 'media brand'. Once more, within the process of recycling mythical models, the *popular culture* genesis implies that the contemporary common man undertakes the pre-existing symbolic goods and adapts them to the needs of his daily experience and existence” (Spiridon, 2013)

4. Case Study: Saddo. Myth and Remediation in Illustration

Illustrators today develop their own drawing style, as they work for artistic and for commercial purposes. The style may be characteristic to a certain era, as well as to a certain artist. Heller and Chwast pay great attention to “style” in illustration. The process of developing this style was similar in the past and today (Heller & Chwast, 2002). Styles in illustration are not necessarily formed by a certain time. Illustrators find inspiration sources in the past or in close artistic fields, such as painting. Unlike painting however, “illustration styles can never be so radical or

unfamiliar as to be incomprehensible to audiences. Illustration is communication, after all rooted in decipherable visual languages, and must stop short of stepping over the” (Heller & Chwast, 2002). Adopting some disparate graphic elements from various artistic movements is common practice among illustrators. In the 1960's America illustration was “a song composed of various dialects” (Heller & Chwast, 2002). It borrowed retro and, at the same time, futuristic graphic representations, while the style was given precisely by this juxtaposition. Illustration today, as Heller and Chwast claim, may include all these influences or none, as there are no rules anymore and styles are extremely diverse.

A well-defined style with precise features is to be found in the works of the artist named Saddo. Saddo is the artistic pseudonym of Raul Oprea, Romanian illustrator and street artist. He is one of the promoters of Romanian street art. He works with art galleries in Bucharest, Vienna, Berlin, Copenhagen, Stockholm, New York, Los Angeles, Montreal, Glasgow, Salvador and others. He also does commissioned works, usually for advertising agencies, for various brands and advertising campaigns. A major part of his activity is represented by large size mural painting done on buildings outer walls in various cities on the globe. His practice developed in time with influences from various fields. As the artist said on his webpage¹, the major influences on his work come from Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Hieronymus Bosch, Brueghel, Walton Ford, Henri Rousseau, naturalist illustration, pop surrealism, religion, Islamic miniatures, images of animals, birds, costumes and myths from various parts of the world. Other influences are, at the same time, to be drawn back to Magritte, Dali, Fernando Botero, as well as in illustrations of Arabian or Russian tales. Saddo draws illustrations with perfectly accomplished decorative elements, like those in a botanical atlas, as well as illustrations concealing irony and major existential themes. Obviously, the artist benefits from an excellent visual culture that he masters with the artfulness and the ease specific to the great masters of painting. His works comprise many known elements, familiar to the educated audience, and it is fascinating how he blends them in the most original compositions.

For this research, we selected fourteen works of the artist. They largely blend mythological and Christian iconography elements. We made an analysis which we can call a “first level” lecture of the materials. We identified some themes present in the fourteen works, amongst which violence and death are the most obvious. Violence is a recurrent presence in most of Saddo's works. Violence has roots both

¹ <http://www.saddo.ro/CONTACT> (visited on 1st September, 2016).

in the Christian discourse, where it is to be found in various forms, starting from Jesus' much debated affirmation: "I did not come to bring peace, but sword.¹", as well as in the classical Greek mythology where scenes of rare violence are present. Most gods, although representing positive elements, were capable of an exceptional violence should their supremacy or authority be challenged. The personification of death is another recurrent theme in Saddo's works. He borrows approaches on death from various mythologies and includes them in his drawings. As the references in his compositions are mostly casual, they create the impression of visual incidents or of dreams dreamt by the artist. It is as if Saddo dreamt pieces of images from the farthest civilisations in time and space. Details are easily recognisable by the viewer. Such creatures are present in many, many mythologies. Upon a first visual lecture, some mythological characters and scenes are revealed. Most of Saddo's works include a central character with anthropomorphic features.



Figure 1.

Source: <http://www.saddo.ro/filter/painting/PAINTINGS-2013-2014>

The first image makes us think of capturing the golden stag of Artemis, Hercules' third of the twelve labours. Only that in Saddo's work the main character is not Hercules, but an anthropomorphic being with a raven head.

¹ *The Bible. The New Testament. Matthew 10:34.*



Figure 2.

Source: <http://www.saddo.ro/filter/painting/PAINTINGS-2013-2014>

The second image may be regarded as an allegory of the Resurrection or the Salvation by the coming of Jesus, as we see the sign of the cross on the scarf that the character wears. The swallow is as well as symbol of the coming of Jesus and of the Resurrection.



Figure 3. Image from The Golden Hours show

Source: <http://www.saddo.ro/filter/painting/THE-GOLDEN-HOURS-AITCH-SADDO>

The third image illustrates a coffin with a cross drawn on it and with a sparrow resting shortly. The sparrow was present both at Jesus' birth and crucifixion. It is

the one supposed to have uttered the word “He lives” after the birth, as well as after his death. In Greek mythology, the sparrow is a symbol of Aphrodite. The main symbols of representations of Goddess Aphrodite are: a dolphin, a swan, a dove, a sparrow, the myrtle, the rose and the mirror.



Figure 4. Image from Coffins show

Source: <http://www.saddo.ro/filter/painting/COFFINS>

The fourth image blends references to a variety of cultures and mainly religious symbols. The closest character is Horus, the Egyptian celestial god, usually represented as an eagle or an eagle headed man. One of Zeus' attributes is also the eagle. For example, he turns into an eagle to abduct Ganymede, the most handsome mortal, and take him to Olympus. The scene is known as The Abduction of Ganymede and is plentifully represented in the history of arts. In Christianity the eagle is, in the Tetramorph, the symbol of John the Evangelist – Matthew is the man, Mark is the lion and Luke is the ox. John is represented by an eagle because, in his Book, he tries to convey everything that is most elating in Jesus' thinking. In Saddo's image, the eagle appears as tattooed with all sorts of references to death: vaults, axes, guns, and skulls on his belt.



Figure 5. Image from rise of the bird people show

Source: <http://www.saddo.ro/filter/painting/RISE-OF-THE-BIRD-PEOPLE>

The fifth image may be a reference to centauromachy, the fight between centaurs, a population of Thessalia, Greece and Lapithae, taking place at the wedding of the Lapith king.

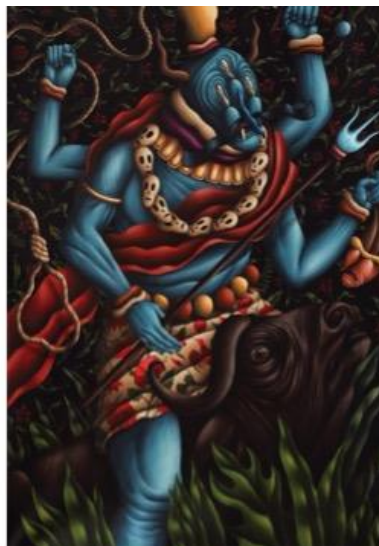


Figure 6. Image from A stranger in the garden show

Source: <http://www.saddo.ro/filter/painting/A-STRANGER-IN-THE-GARDEN>

At first sight, the work makes one think of the Buddhist images of gods with several arms, but from the perspective of the classical mythology, the scene might be a reference to the Minotaur killed by Theseus. According to the author¹, the work is part of the series “A stranger in the Garden” and is a direct reference to Death, the character personified here. It is, at the same time, Yama, the god of death in Indian mythology and Mictlantecuhtli, the Aztec god of death.



Figure 7. Image from A stranger in the garden show

Source: <http://www.saddo.ro/filter/painting/A-STRANGER-IN-THE-GARDEN>

The seventh image makes us think of Nebuchadnezzar who went insane and was painted by Blake as a werewolf symbolising the insane behaviour as being animalistic. The Book of Daniel, the prophet, surprises an unusual event in the life of Nebuchadnezzar, the emperor and founder of the Babylonian Empire in which he becomes an animal and lives as such. According to Saddo, the character is also a personification of death, inspired by Orcus, an ambiguous Roman god master, just as Hades, of the underworld and punishing broken vows.

¹ During a private conversation on the fourteen works.



Figure 8. Pattern design

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/Saddo.ro/photos/a.1062065157165298.1073741841.476460159059137/1062065290498618/?type=3&theater>

The eighth image seems to be a reference to Orpheus getting animals to sleep. At the same time, the repetition of elements is specific to Islamic art and symbolises infinity, Allah the infinite. Islam forbids however the representation of sacred images and all elements needs to be preferably geometrical figures and especially floral ones. The introduction of the human character is what differentiates the work from Islamic art.



Figure 9. Stories of Violence

Source: <http://www.saddo.ro>

The fight of character with evil is represented by monstrous looking animals and has a correspondent in Christianity in the scene between Saint George and the dragon, and in mythology in Hercules's labours. The first labour is the killing of the Nemean lion, a lion present in the third scene of the drawing. The second labour is the killing of the Hydra of Lerna. The sixth labour is the killing of the Stymphalian birds. The three animals are similar to the ones present in Saddo's work.



Figure 10. Caring for your pets. Caring for chickens

Source: <http://www.saddo.ro>



Figure 11. Caring for your pets. Caring for pond fish

Source: <http://www.saddo.ro>

The images represent a counterpoint in the artist's work, which is also obvious in the present selection. In order to balance the many works that are centred on a violent event, Saddo chose now to illustrate a gesture of care and tenderness between man and animal. The informed viewer will note here obvious references. The fish is one of the animals chosen by the artist. Its presence represents one of the first symbolic images in paleochristian art – in the Roman catacombs, for example. The fish symbolises purity, wisdom, and resurrection. Saint Augustin associates fish with the depth of the sea and the descent of Jesus to Hell. Furthermore, the representation of the fish next to a basket of bread – the miracle of multiplying the loaves and fish – is a symbol of the Eucharist.



Figure 12. Project sketch

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/Saddo.ro/photos/a.477475588957594.109741.476460159059137/1197658356939310/?type=3&theater>

The twelfth image is a recent sketch, dated 2016, of a future work. It reminds us of Noah's Ark as well as Orpheus taming the wild beasts with his song.



Figure 13. Seven of wands, Playing art Project

Source: <http://www.saddo.ro>

This image is an illustration to one of the classical card game elements made within a collective project, where artists from several countries drew one of the cards in the deck. Saddo participated with a “Seven of Clubs”, a drawing with influences from the Tarot cards and from Indian and Islamic miniatures. The characters looks like a shaman, with his eyes turned inward, inhaling vapours of a magic potion and surrounded by seven blooming rods.



Figure 14. One of the two illustrations for Măscărici game.

Source: <http://www.saddo.ro>

The last image is an illustration from the couple created by Saddo for Jester, an older card game, presently reedited by 26 Romanian illustrators. Saddo's inspiration is the costumes worn during the Indian traditional dramatic dance called Kathakali, taking place during an entire night. The costumes are extremely elaborate, just as are the gestures. They are charged with religious and mythological meanings deriving mainly from the Puranas.

This first level visual reading of Saddo's works reveal how the artist positions his art in respect to myths. They serve to produce meaning, as we already explained citing Monica Spiridon and Roland Barthes. The extent to which the myths are recognised is relative to the viewer's own culture and imagination. A second level or layer of reading these illustrations would refer to the form of mediation that they employ. Saddo's works give access to the reality of the work of art. As many illustrations, these as well do not stand for the real world, but for the imaginary worlds of the artist. The immediacy, as explained by Bolter and Grusin is present in the lack of mechanisms specific to new media. The artist offers to the viewer his work that is drawn directly on paper. Of course, it reaches the audience by means of a computer, since these illustrations are not intended for an exhibition. Therefore, we can conclude that the *reality*, which these works offer, is the inner

world of the artist and the *reading key* for the viewer is the mythic references Saddo employs.

5. Conclusions

Saddo uses in his works biblical and mythical characters and symbols, a practice that was analysed in the field of popular culture by researchers Liebes and Katz. They labelled this reconsideration of fundamental mythologies as a *primordial* feature in the creations of cultural products (Liebes & Katz, 1990, p. 118).

The works analysed include many mythological references but it is nevertheless impossible to interpret them from a classical perspective. The traditional characteristics of the myths (etiologic function, the role model function, the narrative and temporal dimension and others) are not present as such. Myths are only half way borrowed, as mythical paradigms are always possible but not taken on. This is obviously a new and original form of expression for the myths.

As Barthes points out, mythology “can only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things.” It is interesting in this context how Saddo seems to be joining on purpose myth and nature on the very piece of paper. He is obviously attracted to bring together the two aspects – each of his characters that bear mythical loading is places in a jungle like décor. He may be doing *ad litteram*, involuntarily, instinctively what Barthes calls “the very principle of myth” (Barthes, 2002), turning history into nature.

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