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"Boggy, Soggy, Squitchy Pictures": Adaptations of *Moby-Dick* in the Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat

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Abstract

Throughout the twentieth century, *Moby-Dick* has inspired countless visual artists. Painters, sculptors, illustrators, all tried their hand at reimagining Melville's great whaling epic through their works. From Karl Knaths to Jackson Pollock, from Frank Stella to Matt Kish, a diverse plethora of creators engaged with Melville's *magnus opus*, tackling its everlasting legacy by means of idiosyncratic and experimental art responses. Building upon the theoretical framework of adaptation studies (Elliott, Hutcheon, Rippl), this article investigates Jean-Michel Basquiat's visual adaptations of *Moby-Dick* in *Untitled* (1986) and *Melville* (1987). Basquiat's approach, I argue, transcends conventional adaptive techniques by producing works of art that challenge the (im)possibility of representing the real and respond to Melville's epistemological and ontological concerns in original ways.

This article seeks to explore how visual and verbal representation in Basquiat's paintings can exist as part of an adaptive process that inevitably involves a dialogic reinterpretation of *Moby-Dick*. My contention is that Basquiat's aesthetic endeavor mirrors Ishmael's intellectual quest, and his fascination with Melville's text may stem from the writer's manipulation of narrative conventions and structures. As Ishmael's narration, Basquiat encompasses Ahab's, Queequeg's, and Fleece's character traits, all the while probing the boundary between reality and visual depictions in an existential manner, superseding the limits between diegesis and mimesis. Simultaneously, Basquiat attempts to deconstruct language, echoing Melville's "careful disorderliness".

Keywords: Herman Melville; Moby-Dick; Jean-Michel Basquiat; adaptation; visual art; image-text

"Boggy, Soggy, Squitchy Pictures": Adaptations of *Moby-Dick* in the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851) is internationally known as a classic, a great modern epic, and an open work. As Italo Calvino states, a classic, such as *Moby-Dick*, is somehow crystallized in a perennial contemporaneity. It never stops saying "what it has to say" (2013, p. 17). However, a classic's recognition frequently depends on adaptations such as movies, plays, graphic novels, and comics. It is generally assumed that art conveys the core ideals and problems that face humanity, and this is particularly true for Melville's works. John Bryant considers adaptations *fluid texts* (2002), not only because of Melville's many revisions to improve his texts and comply with his editors' and publishers' requests but also because our reading experience is fluid. Adaptation as a process is also included in the idea of *fluid text* as a cultural revision because "as revising readers, adapters of the originating version of a work are collaborators in the making of the work in its totality" (Bryant, 2013, p. 48). As a result, *Moby-Dick* appears to be a mirror that reflects readers' ideas, thoughts, and concerns, and the innumerable adaptations in a wide range of media directly attest to the reality of such a process. This specific fluidity consists of the dual experience in which, as recipients, by reading the novel, we revise it in all its various forms, translations, transpositions, inter- and transmedial adaptations. In this way, through adaptations, "we can rejoice in [Melville's] legacy, being sure that, after every new reading, 'something further' will always follow" (Simonetti, 2013, p. 128). Among the diverse intermedial transpositions, visual adaptations of *Moby-Dick* can be regarded as "meaningful vessels for transnational, intertextual, and intercultural encounters" (Pfeiler, 2013, p. 89). Thus, creative reinterpretations of the novel effectively capture the *zeitgeist* and the sentiments of the age while keeping *Moby-Dick* culturally afloat.

From Karl Knaths and Frank Stella to the more recent works of Matt Kish, Toni De Los Reyes, Robert Del Tredici, and Claire Illouz, artists have offered their own experimental and idiosyncratic responses to Melville's narrative legacy. In this continuous process of re-signification, they have preserved and paid tribute to the original text while claiming possession of it by giving it a new life. *Moby-Dick*'s visual transpositions affirm the novel's continuous relevance in time and space, and the interplay between text and art asserts their collaborative or complementary nature.

This creative interaction between media and narratives becomes especially evident in the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat, one of the most influential artists of the second half of the twentieth century and "the most important black visual artist of all time" (Gates, 2015, p. 15). Basquiat is considered "the artistic reference point and progenitor of *post-Black*," who was also "interested in the constellations emerging out of the interplay between writing-signs-images" (Stercken, 2014, pp. 129-30). He was the "first black artist to achieve anything close to blue-chip status in the contemporary art market" (Hager *qtd.* in Saggese, 2014, p.17), and in this regard, his collaboration with Andy Warhol and Francesco Clemente was crucial not solely for his artistic recognition but also for the reception and perception of his work.

Basquiat's work transcends conventional adaptation techniques by producing conceptual and impressionistic works of art that challenge the (im)possibility of knowing and representing the *real* and that, in so doing, respond to Melville's epistemological and ontological concerns in original ways. The artist navigates the tormented waves stirred by Ahab's mad quest and depletes and disassembles Melville's prose before setting out on a journey that consists of signs and suggestions, sketches and words, colors and fragments. The

connection between the two art forms eventually results in a broader understanding and an expansion of the novel's meaning. In this regard, this article investigates the adaptations and reinventions of Melville's most famous work in two paintings by Basquiat: *Untitled* (1986) and *Melville* (1987).

I suggest that what Jordana Moore Saggese calls "Basquiat's challenge to hierarchies of the real and the reproduced in the modernist paradigm" (2014, p. 145) potentially conjures Ishmael's quest and skepticism. In his distinctive lists that, according to Dieter Buchhart, "contradict […] the hierarchies of knowledge" (2015, p. 44) and his creative riddles, I contend that Basquiat renders visually and uniquely *Moby-Dick* inquiries into the boundaries of knowledge and the distinction between *reality* and representation, as well as Ishmael's existential quest. Approaching Basquiat's transpositions and reinterpretations of *Moby-Dick* permits us to trace Melville's text's adaptive and transformative process from multiple perspectives. First, as a case of media transposition that alters a literary source text into visual art where the traditional distinctions between diegesis and mimesis collapse, and the boundary between narrative and visual representation blurs. Second, as a type of mixed media that combines images, cultural references, and words into an intermedial work of art rather than displaying them as distinct elements or complementary forms of signification. By looking at Basquiat's adaptations, it is possible to observe how the artist selected and manipulated some passages using text combined with his visual art, not solely motivated by the necessity of fitting into the new combined/mixed/multi-media forms. Far from attempting to establish a hierarchy between literature and visual art, this article aims to demonstrate that in Basquiat's paintings, visual and verbal representation can subsist at the same level through an adaptive process that inevitably involves a reinvention and interpretation of Melville's text.

The inexhaustible debate over the connections and relations between the so-called *sister arts* has expanded over the centuries because they inevitably share "formal technique, audiences, issues, sources, archetypes [and] contexts" (Elliott, 2003, p.7). The essential theoretical tenets range from Horace's famous credo *ut pictura poesis* to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's approach, to postmodernist theories and the re-elaboration of the subsequent synesthetic revolution of early twentieth-century avant-gardes (see also Lessing 1984, Elliott 2003-2020, Mitchell 2005, Pairone 2012, Heffernan 2015, Clüver 2017). The trope *ut pictura poesis* accurately describes the relation between literature and the visual arts. Yet one should also consider another plausible trope, *ut pictura poiesis,* since the artist's creative process involves soliciting the *real* and a sensory experience combined with a visionary ability. Consequently, every artist is involved in the art of creating narrative paintings by selecting compelling scenes and paying attention to detail while also using their talent for penetrating things, which is necessary to reveal essential traits along with the structure that sustains the outer envelope of the representations: "*eidos* in opposition to *eidolon*" (Fedi, 2015, p. 7 *my trans*.). In his works, Melville demonstrates a keen interest in language experimentation, the narrative exploration of the visual environment, and the verbal translation of experience into art, investigating (and at times appearing to exhaust) a variety of forms and issues in a single work. As Elizabeth Schultz claims, "Melville's narrative, language, and vision in *Moby-Dick* provide the impetus for the multitudinous visual interpretations of the novel," where the "dominance of the visual over the verbal and apparently of spatiality and simultaneity over temporality and narrativity" happens to exist (1995, p. 125). Therefore, Melville's texts implicitly offer the possibilities of inter-, multi-, and trans-medial collections of the novel's adaptations.

Adaptation and intermediality

In Basquiat's *Melville* and *Untitled* discussed here, two media are materially present as there are excerpts of the novel combined with visual art, referred to by William John Thomas Mitchell as *image-text* "a site of dialectical tension, slippage, and transformation" (1994, p. 106). Irina Rajewsky (2005) clarifies that all the phenomena generally addressed as *transposition d'art* are "characterized by a quality of intermediality in the broad sense" (p. 50). She also asserts the existence of multiple definitions of intermediality depending on the specific, unique phenomenon it examines, as the subject matter is exceedingly broad and diversified (p. 45-49). According to the scholar, intermediality is "an umbrella term and hypernym for all kinds of phenomena that take place between media" (*qtd.* in Rippl, 2015, p. 23). It represents "a communicative-semiotic concept" (2005, p. 53), while adaptation, as Kamilla Elliott underlines, "focuses more specifically on changes made to suit new environments" (2020, p. 34). As Mark Fortier elucidates, "an open-ended definition of *adaptation*" is possible since adaptation's only certainty is "change" (qtd. in Elliott, 2012, pp. 374-75 *my italics*). According to Corinne Lhermitte, adaptation "has connoted transformation, adjustment, and appropriation" (qtd. Elliott, 2020, p.180). Moreover, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as: "[a]n acknowledged transposition of a recognizable work or works. A creative and interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging. An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (2013, p. 8). In short, to adapt implies arranging something to make it suitable for another system of signs. In the process, the source text assumes a different meaning that follows the interpretation of the artist/adapter, because adaptation is "an act of interpretation" (Bryant, 2013, p. 49) because "adaptors are first interpreters and then creators" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 18). For these reasons, the terms adaptation, remediation, reinvention, and medial transposition[1] will be used in this article. For formal clarity, following Hutcheon's style and linguistic register, the term adaptation will refer to both the creative process of adaptation and the final work of art.

In addition, adaptation represents a theoretical impossibility where "semiotic heresy" represents a risk to the consistency and coherency of the analysis. I endorse Elliott's observation (2003) on the "heretical splits," which represent the impossibility of separating form from content. Visual artists, often in a single image, have enclosed their reading and meaning, generating new sub-texts and interpretations. Thus, their adaptations can be examined by exploring the different ways to tell the story and the changes made to fit into the new environment or, in other words, the new semiotic system of signs. By drawing on Roland Barthes' notion of text as a "multi-dimensional space," Jordana Moore Saggese points out that "because the text is no longer under the exclusive jurisdiction of a single figure, it is without an origin [.] Basquiat's appropriation functions in [Barthes'] 'tissue of quotations,' challenging

[1] Rajewsky's subcategories of intermediality suggests that the term medial transposition should be used for those analysis where "the intermedial quality has to do with the way in which a media product comes into being […] or of its substratum into another medium." The scholar indicates two additional categories: media combination which includes "multimedia, mixed media, and intermedia" and "intermedial references" where a work of art evokes or imitate another medium with the means of this other medium. Transmediality designates phenomena (themes, motifs, genres) that are not specific to any particular medium (2005 pp.46-53). In addition, "'intermedial' designates those configurations which have to do with a crossing of borders between media [and] 'transmedial' phenomena are, for instance, the appearance of a certain motif or style across a variety of different media" (qtd. in Rippl, 2015, p. 23)

the notions of authenticity and originality" (2014, p. 71-2). From an inter-semiotic perspective, dealing with the connection between the source text and visual art as a system of signs consists of assuming an accumulation of sense in the Peircean view, which is only possible through an interpretation of the original text proposed by the artist. In Basquiat's *oeuvre,* it is necessary to scrutinize, for example, the changes and alterations, his choice of chapters, and the passages he used to maximize the potential of the new system of signs in his appropriation. Between the works resides a dialogic relationship[2] that allows the medial transposition of the source text into a new system of signs—images in this case—in which the source text assumes new meanings, and a consideration of the consequent pluralities of meaning allows these adaptations to be also considered as autonomous works.

As John Bryant and Hutcheon argue, an adaptation can be, on the one hand, a tribute to the content and the source text's author when "readers show their love of a work by changing it, remaking it, retelling it, adapting it" (Bryant 2013, p. 50). On the other hand, in the process of remediation and re-signification, the artist appropriates the source text to preserve it and give it a new life in another historical-cultural dimension. Ultimately, behind every adaptation, as "announced retelling of an originating text" (Bryant, 2013, p. 49), there is a desire to retell the story repeatedly. Basquiat's desire emerges precisely in his cultural appropriation of the symbolic motifs and themes of the novel, and the analysis of several small details of the two pieces of art, *Melville* and *Untitled*, will shed light on his process of remaking and retelling *Moby-Dick*.

***Moby-Dick*: Ekphrasis and the impossibility of representation**

While Melville is concerned with the impossibility of representing the whale *in absentia* as an intermedial reference or *ekphrasis*, Basquiat's works combine literature and visual art *in praesentia*. According to Guido Isekenmeier, literary visual studies' attention to "the culturality of vision" questions the interaction between texts and images, focusing on how texts interact with images *in praesentia* (word and image, media combination) or *in absentia* - intermedial reference and its progenitor, *ekphrasis*" (2015, 408). Besides, James Heffernan defines *ekphrasis* as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (2004, p. 56). Mitchell adds that "a verbal representation cannot […] make present its object [and] can never bring its visual presence before us" (1995, p. 152). In the novel, Melville uses the lexeme *picture* (s) thirty-six times, the words *picturesque-picturesqueness-picturesquely* five times, the term *paint* and its derivatives thirty-four times, *color* thirty-five times, and *depict* and its derivatives seven times. Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale", in particular, is devoted to the color white, traditionally considered a symbol of innocence, beauty, simplicity, and purity, "the visible absence of color [and] the concrete of all color" (Melville, 2007, p. 184). Despite the symbolism, the terror and ambiguities of the whale's whiteness dominate the whole narrative and Ishmael's and Ahab's minds.

Taking a cue from Dan Beachy-Quick's idea of an "ekphrastic thread" unraveling throughout "the whole fabric of *Moby-Dick*" (2022, p. 513), it is also possible to observe how in several chapters of the novel, Ishmael questions the nature of representations and their

[2] In a Bakhtinian perspective, it is not only an idea of influence. I am referring to the notion of interdetermination in which texts are in dialogue with other texts and where the dialogic relationship results in the adjustments and negotiations of meaning between the two works of art. See also Stam (1995), and Rippl (2015).

relationship with *reality* while implicitly acknowledging the aesthetic of pleasure, terror, and anxiety that viewing a whale's representation evokes. The narrator describes numerous paintings and images, and Chapter 3, "The Spouter-Inn," represents one of the book's earliest rhetorical transformations of the whale into everything and back again. In this chapter, Ishmael is struck by a "boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly enough to drive a nervous man distracted" (Melville, 2007, p. 30). Even if he considers it ludicrous, the artwork heightens the scene's tension and hints at forthcoming events in the story. As Dale Pesmen noted, Melville "draws on the power of mentioning utter completeness," mystery, indeterminateness, unimaginability, and ambiguity (2000, p. 113). In Chapters 55 to 57, he describes and minutely interprets the possibility of monstrous, erroneous, and *true* representations of the whale "in Paint; in Teeth; in Wood; in Sheet-Iron; in Stone; in Mountains; in Stars" (Melville, 2007, p. 244). In these chapters, Ishmael is focused on the accuracy of representation and questions whether art and, thus, human beings can reproduce reality. He is concerned with visions and visual pictures as potential repositories of knowledge and meaning. Although skeptical about the possibility of finding a definitive meaning and wary of the illusion these representations offer, the narrator continues by highlighting that it is impossible to describe the whale entirely.

Additionally, suggesting that these animals have something that escapes a complete representation, Ishmael concludes that no matter how hard one attempts to give an adequate reading and representation of these animals, he or she will always fail. As highlighted in the "Cetology" chapter, everything is incomplete, nothing is fully systematized, and in this sense, Ishmael *invites* the readers to complete this book. Hunting for a *true* representation of the whale, Ishmael is hunting Moby Dick, the actual whale, and his vision, whether in a star or a mountain, is inevitably connected to fate and evokes a transcendence of the human condition.

Searching for works representing the whale and hunting the whales, Ishmael concludes that the Leviathan is "that creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last" (Melville, 2007, p. 240). Throughout the novel, Ishmael asserts the impossibility of visually representing human beings' real experiences due to the impossibility of representing reality. In his polyvocal aesthetic, akin to Ishmael, Basquiat explores the boundary between the real and its visual representation through his aesthetic experimentations that become something close to an existential investigation.

Jean-Michel Basquiat and his adaptations

Basquiat was obsessed with words and lists, cultural and literary references, and his connections with Mark Twain, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs have been intensely scrutinized (see Marshall 1982, Saggese 2014, Stackhouse 2015). The artist also created two works of art with overt connections to Herman Melville: *Untitled* (1986) and *Melville* (1987), explicitly adapting themes and motifs from *Moby-Dick*. Similar to Ishmael's invitation to complete the narrative, Basquiat's art invites viewers to navigate and unravel the possibilities of representation. Jordana Moore Saggese indicates that Basquiat's precarious interplay between concealment and revelation is like the intricate connection between the authority of language, the nature of existence, and inquiries into truth in Melville's novel. Even though scholars highlight that it is unclear whether *Moby-Dick* "held a special appeal" for the artist (Marshall, *qtd*. in Saggese, 2014 p. 117), it is likely that these interplays and connections help

determine Basquiat's interest in Melville's novel and its epistemological and ontological themes, as this article seeks to demonstrate.

In these two works, it is possible to see Queequeg, Ahab, and Black Fleece as crucial connections between Basquiat's art and Melville's fiction. Combining these connections with the recurrence of some keywords, such as Shark, Immortality, and Hyena, *Untitled* allows us to trace a path toward Basquiat's fascination for Melville's epic: a path that can explore the limits of knowledge, the boundary between the real and the representation, and the existential inquiry that also occupy Melville's novel. I will also explore Saggese's suggestion that Basquiat's attraction to *Moby-Dick* depends on Melville's manipulation of traditional narrative canon and structure.

Unfortunately, due to copyright constraints, we are unable to showcase the paintings discussed here. Nevertheless, I encourage you to delve into the intricacies of Basquiat's work by exploring the comprehensive teaching resource of the Special Exhibition available from the Brooklyn Museum website: https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/basquiat_notebooks. This valuable resource provides profound insights into Basquiat's artistry. The teacher packet, which can be found at https://d1lfxha3ugu3d4.cloudfront.net/education/docs/2015_Basquiat_Teacher_Packet_sm.pdf, offers a detailed exploration of Basquiat's work, including the two paintings under discussion. Moving forward, I'll reference the teaching resource page instead of specific figures, allowing for a seamless navigation of Basquiat's artistic narrative.

Melville (1987)

In 1987, Basquiat painted all the chapter titles and incorporated also textual elements from *Moby-Dick* (Brooklyn Museum, 2015, p. 16; Bloom & Buchhart, 2015, pp. 205). This work of art comprises nine small drawings on a white backdrop, arranged in sets of three, in three rows each on a black background. The first six drawings contain *Moby-Dick*'s chapter titles and Basquiat's logo, while the final three pages feature the letter E, the titles *Etymology* and *Extracts,* and the artist's selection of words. Besides, in the sixth drawing, he wrote numbers, which could refer to both pages of his edition and the number of chapters and added here a sequence of symbols. According to Tricia Laughlin Bloom, the artist's decision to "recast this monumental novel to such a small scale is both an homage and an inspired gesture of reinterpretation, inverting the epic to miniature" (2015, p. 204). In addition, it is not only a question of dimension and scale, but Basquiat also inverted the novel's beginning and final part. The artist included the initial part of the novel at the end of this artwork, and, more importantly, in the eighth painting, he juxtaposed a portion of the very first line of *Moby-Dick*: "THREADBARE IN COAT, HEART BODY AND BRAIN," with what is regarded as one the most famous opening line in literary history "Call me Ishmael," including an intentional misspelling in the narrator's name.

Moreover, Basquiat has crossed out, rewritten, and condensed text, "disconnecting Melville's chapter headings even further from their source" (Bloom, 2015, p. 204). The symbols the artist uses in all his works require detailed attention. Both in *Melville* and *Untitled*, it is possible to find the artist's recurring symbols that define his main themes, such as the bat, the hobo signs, and the crown which is the artist's signature (See images: Brooklyn Museum, 2015, p.18-19; Saggese, 2014, pp. 78-79; Bloom & Buchhart, 2015, pp. 47).

The copyright ©, Trademark ™, and registered trademark ® symbols further define his ownership and approval; with an ironic, bitter, and humorous tone, the coin represents his repugnance for the commercialization of art (Emmerling, 2015, pp. 36-38). These symbols, combined with the crossed-out words and phrases, represent Basquiat's stylistic hallmark.

In *Melville*, under "CONTENTS" Basquiat incorporated the symbols ©, Trademark ™, and ® as a form of his artistic expression and commentary. He placed the © symbol adjacent to chapters 57, 83, 88, 109, 115, from 133 to 135, and the Anglo-Saxon word "WHŒL" and the quotation "THREADBARE IN COAT, HEART BODY AND BRAIN." Similarly, the ™ mark is affixed next to phrases like "CALL ME IS(H)MAEL" and the name "HACKLUYT." Furthermore, Basquiat altered chapter 98, originally titled "Stowing Down and Clearing Up," to "STOWING DOWN AND ~~CLEANING~~ CLEARING UP. Correspondingly, ® is placed next to "EXTRACTS." It is essential to draw attention to the copyright symbol beside the reference to the Pale Usher, whose dusting of the old grammar books reminds him of his *mortality*, which can also be connected to one of the keywords in the other work here discussed, *Untitled*. In addition, next to Hackluyt's misspelled name the symbol ™ is juxtaposed. Hakluyt is the author of the first citation in "Etymology," which is essential to trace Basquiat's question and attempt to disrupt the structures of reality. For Hakluyt, the letter h "almost alone maketh up the signification of the word, you deliver that which is not true" (*qtd*. Melville, 2007, p. 8); it is worth highlighting that the word heron, which is *Untitled* focal point, begins with a significant *h*.

In addition, Basquiat altered almost all the novel's chapter titles. For instance, Chapter 36 "The Quarter Deck" is transformed into "QUARTER DECK," and Chapter 121, "Midnight on the Forecastle," transformed into "MIDNIGHT- THE ~~FORCASTLE~~ BULWARKS" (with a retained 'E' above the *misspelled* word). Additionally, he eliminated articles, prepositions such as 'of,' and conjunctions 'and' or '&' which he might have considered superfluous. Although, the definitive articles remain in Chapter 42, "THE WHITENESS OF THE WHALE," and Chapter 133, "THE CHASE. FIRST DAY." The following chapters were abbreviated as: "135. [white space] 2ND DAY" and "[white space] 3RD DAY," as if by removing or abbreviating the unnecessary words, Basquiat would emulate the abrupt increase in tempo that characterizes the novel's final set piece. By posing white spaces and these abbreviations, Basquiat seems to be depicting the passage from the overall stillness of early sections of the novel to the action of the "Chase" chapters, generally more hectic in pace. In the sixth drawing, the artist also incorporates several numbers that presumably refer to the pages of chapters 14-22[3], chapters in which, among other things, the friendship between Ishmael and Queequeg grows, in which Ishmael comes to understand and support his friend, who will become the curator of his will and whose coffin will save him at the end of the novel. Queequeg's connection with Basquiat's adaptation will be explored more deeply in *Untitled* analysis.

Nothing seems to be left to chance in Basquiat's works; a Melvillean "careful disorderliness" dominates them and seems to be, also in this case, "the true method" (Melville, 2007, p. 324). As the visual artist states, "I cross out words so you will see them more, [this] makes you want to read them" (*qtd.* in Saggese p. 136). Basquiat dismantles and reconstructs the words, and his reinventions reside in the systematic attitude to deconstruct the language that characterizes his works.

[3]The latter can only be a hypothesis, not knowing the edition Basquiat read.

Untitled (1986)

This mural-sized painting, *Untitled* (1986), (Brooklyn Museum, 2015, p. 17; Bloom & Buchhart, 2015, p.193-94) defies any interpretation because of the whirlwind of allusions and references and comprises specific themes and recurring elements that characterize Basquiat's art, such as letters, sentences, words, drawings, graphic signs, symbols, lists, and pictorial techniques. It includes the alteration of eighty-seven chapter titles of *Moby-Dick* and the repetition of three crucial words relevant to the novel's characters and issues, such as Hyena, Shark, and Immortality.

The name "MOBY DICK" is twice painted in large letters, once at the bottom and again as a free-floating title on the half-top right corner of the work. The primary focus is a white, one-legged heron on a blue backdrop in a sketched triangle, alluding to the figure of Captain Ahab. Thus, imagining the tensions and burdens in "this strange mixed affair" (Melville, 2007, p. 209) that occupied Melville's epistemological and ontological meditations, Basquiat has envisioned and produced a puzzle that integrates elements from pop culture, religion, and poems.

Untitled (1986), an "unsolvable puzzle," represents a unique production in Basquiat's art, "both in terms of its imagery and distinctive composition;" it contains various evocations and references and comprises a "flood of images and phrases" (Bloom, 2015, p. 192) that overwhelms the pictorial space. Among Leonardo da Vinci's cardiovascular research evocation, mechanical diagrams, diodes, and electronic symbols, it is possible to discover several bats, a snake in a derby hat, and some hobo code. Additionally, there are other keywords and phrases resembling refrains, such as the exclamation "HEY" and "JOHN THE REVELATOR," which Tricia Laughlin Bloom identifies as allusions to African American musical traditions. I suggest that this refrain could also be interpreted as a biblical allusion to the *Book of Revelation*. As religion is one of Ishmael's primary reference points, and the source text contains numerous biblical references and allegories, the inclusion of a biblical allusion is essential for the adaptive process. In the pictorial space, it is possible to perceive a whole separated from its parts, where the whole provides a feeling of abundance of elements and ideas, and the portions form and delineate the ideas. Though it would be impossible here to scrutinize every single detail of this conundrum, the whole—and some of its parts—can be explicitly related to the source text. Therefore, these parts and details are useful to investigate Basquiat's interpretation and reinvention of *Moby-Dick* and its manipulation process.

In her seminal work *Unpainted to the Last: Moby-Dick and Twentieth-Century American Art*, Elizabeth A. Schultz suggests that Basquiat transformed the titles listing into a sort of "strategic spell that simultaneously protects him from the novel's potency as a cultural icon and speaks of his pleasure in manipulating them" (1995, p. 308). Schultz, among other scholars, has already noticed a direct connection between the chapter listing in *Untitled* and the recurrence of "SHARK," mentioned as "an echo from Chapter 66," and "HYENA," related to the homonymous Chapter 49; the scholar mentions "IMMORTALITY" along with "FLESH/SPIRIT," as abstract terms that "conjure up particular themes in Melville's novel" (1995, pp. 307-9). Since these elements are all potentially intertwined, I contend that the term "IMMORTALITY," combined with these repetitions, the refrains, and the heron, are essential in Basquiat's adaptation and interpretation.

Near the chapter headings lists, the word *HYENA* is repeated "randomly" and obsessively "as if he is laughing hysterically over and over" (Schultz, 1995, p. 307). In the novel, "The Hyena," is an ironic chapter in which Ishmael changes his vision of life after touching death in the previous chapter. The journey of the *Pequod* and Moby Dick are the subjects of a "desperado philosophy," which suggests the possibility of taking the absurdity of life with a laugh and a "wayward mood" (Melville, 2007, p. 209); in short, the chapter could suggest a fresh approach to life. As Schultz asserts, Basquiat may have appreciated this perspective "as a method of perception […] evident in his visual images" (1995, p. 307). Furthermore, in this chapter, Ishmael, in an ironic tone, makes his will and names Queequeg as his curator—something that would have been highly improbable at the time for a "dark complexioned chap" (Melville, 2007, p. 32), not American, and who does not speak English fluently. This enhancement of Queequeg's persona might represent another critical connection between Basquiat's art and his obsession with Melville's fiction.

The second crucial keyword in Basquiat's reinvention of *Moby-Dick* is "SHARK," which functions as an amulet "against the voraciousness of sharks in [Basquiat's] life," a voraciousness familiar to Fleece, the ship's Black cook (Schultz, 1995, p. 308). Considering Schultz's observation, a close reading of Chapter 66, "The Shark Massacre," reveals multiple meanings in the sharks. At one level, sharks are seen as vultures that feed on the carcasses of whales; at a second metaphorical level, sharks are also "maggots" (Melville, 2007, p. 273). Thus, sharks are not only in the sea; this metaphor is connected to modern themes and could also allude to the sharks that have evolved in corporate and governmental spheres. In his biography of Basquiat, Leonhard Emmerling underlines how the American artist, who was born in the U.S. with Haitian and Puerto Rican ethnic heritage, was an outsider in a racist environment that considered him the black mascot of the New York art scene. Therefore, Basquiat's work appears to critique those who want to enrich themselves with his art and, thus, can be viewed as metaphorical sharks. In addition, in this chapter, Queequeg is in danger of losing his hand and affirms that he does not "care what God made him shark" (Melville, 2007, p. 273). Again, Queequeg is central to Basquiat's interpretation.

An additional analysis of the refrain "SHARK" in the painting can be gleaned from Chapter 64, when Stubb, while trying to eat a steak from the whale just caught, is disturbed by the sound of *sharks* trying to eat the head of the whale left in the sea. Consequently, Stubb orders Fleece to go to the sharks and silence them, but Fleece ends up giving a rather comic sermon to the sharks, commanding them to "top dat dam smackin' ob de lip! Massa Stubb say dat you can fill your dam bellies up to de hatchings, but by Gor!" (Melville, 2007, p. 264). The extraordinary nature of this passage also lies in Melville's attempt to "render African American dialect" (Bryant "Revision" in *Moby-Dick,* 2007, p. 265), even though with some flaws. Stubb's racist behavior seems to contrast with, even if a bit stereotypical, the esteem and the prestige that this rendering gives to Fleece's sermon, in which he compares Stubb, a human, to a shark. The artist thus re-envisions Melville's use of language in Fleece's dialect. Sympathizing with Fleece comparing human beings to sharks, Basquiat may have appreciated *Moby-Dick*'s Chapter 64 also because Ishmael meditates on human nature and its cannibalistic tendency and affirms that "sharks are the invariable outriders of all slave ships" (Melville, 2007, p. 264). As Fanning Garbarini highlights, "Melville establishes with the image of feasting sharks a man-shark analogy," and the author's "rage appears to be directed against the cannibalism of the slave system" (2006, p. 213). Significantly, through the juxtaposition of the slave ship with a whaling ship and the sermon that recalls Chapter 9, it is possible to observe an additional occurrence of Ishmael's effort to establish and identify the relation between violence, fate, nature, and human beings. As Giorgio Mariani affirms, Ishmael, in the epilogue,

"strives to read some degree of logic and justice into the whale's 'swift vengeance'" (2006, p. 44), and it needs to be noted that "the unharming sharks" (Melville, 2007, p. 500) not only will not kill Ishmael but also, as the scholar asserts, the narrator "becomes a sort of 'resurrected' Jonah who can tell [this] story" (2006, p. 45). A deeper analysis of the white heron permits us to grasp the themes of resurrection and immortality in Basquiat's *Untitled,* combined with the repetition of these keywords.

Moby-Dick **and the white heron on one leg**

As mentioned, the focal point of this painting is a white heron on one leg placed in an irregularly drawn triangle against a vivacious blue background, contrasting with the scattered, dynamic, fragmentary forms and glyphs (Bloom, 2015, p. 192).[4] As Greg Tate writes, to make sense of Basquiat's language and functioning of words, it is necessary to look at them like a "normal flow of discourse heard in any urban American neighborhood on any given day or night" (*qtd*. in Schulz, 1995, p. 307). It is worth noticing that the spelling of "heron" is close to "heroin" but even closer to its African American Vernacular English (AAVE) pronunciation: /hɛrən/. We must remember that Basquiat's addiction and obsession with heroin started in the early 1980s and led to his death on August 12, 1988, when he was found dead in his loft at 57 Great Jones Street in Manhattan.

Therefore, the heron's image must have appealed to Basquiat on many levels, particularly in its connection with Melville's text. In *Moby-Dick,* herons are cited three times. The first two times are in Chapter 108 when the carpenter, whom Ahab describes as a "manmaker" in charge of making a new leg for him, describes Ahab as a "heron-built captain" and his leg as a "heron's leg" (Melville, 2007, p. 413). In Chapter 106, Ahab breaks his artificial leg right after the gam with the *Samuel Enderby*, and in this chapter, he attempts to trace the genealogy of his suffering. As a consequence, angry and frustrated, Ahab soars on flights of philosophical abandon, trying to project his misery–some sadness originating in the creator–into a larger view of the universe and measuring it against the universal verdict. He appears to find that his misery is consistent with the misery that seems to invest the universe as a whole. Like a new Prometheus, raising a theme related to the Trinity and connecting it to the leg, the carpenter asks, "What was that now about one leg standing in three places, and all three places standing in one hell [?]" (Melville, 2007, p. 413). Bryant, in his Revision Narrative in *Moby-Dick,* emphasizes that in Chapter 108, the carpenter's commentary raises the image of "the resurrection fellow" which "underscores the image [of the Judgement Day] as it prefigures the *Pequod*'s demise" (Melville, 2007, p. 414). In this view, Basquiat's refrain "SHARK" and "IMMORTALITY" can be connected to Moby Dick's being "not only ubiquitous, but immortal (for immortality is but ubiquity in time)" as well as to and to the carpenter persona, who will build the coffin, "an immortality-preserve" (Melville, 2007, p. 462) for Queequeg, a coffin that will save Ishmael.

The other occurrence of the lexeme *heron* is in Chapter 133 when the crew sees the white whale for the first time. At the beginning of the chapter, Daggoo wakes everyone up "with such judgment claps," which can be connected to the following excerpt of the same

[4] It needs to be highlighted that Schultz identifies this bird as an ibis. Tricia Laughlin Bloom indicate that it as a heron; I find that the heron is more consistent with the novel. Whatever bird one sees here, Schultz argues that "Basquiat, like Ishmael, remains conscious of the power whiteness to pervert, even when it appears in the lovely form of a bird" (1995, p. 310)

chapter where a group of white birds, "[i]n long Indian file, as when *herons* take wing, […] were now all flying towards Ahab's boat" (Melville, 2007, p. 480 *my italics*). In addition, a disembodied leg labeled "FAT LEG" outside the triangle catches the eye. As a result, between *Moby-Dick* chapter listing and the drawing of this leg on the left, the repeated words IMMORTALITY, SHARK, and HYENA are all implicitly combined with the concepts of the judgment day and the resurrection image. The connection between the heron, Ahab's leg, and immortality takes form. Schultz asserts that the "FAT LEG" represents "a cruel prosthesis replacement for the bird's (or Ahab's) missing leg" (1995, p. 310). Even though Tricia Laughlin Bloom highlights the leg's proximity to the phrase "SHINING SHOES ST LOUIS" (2015, p. 192), I assert that relating Basquiat's drawing to Ahab's leg is inevitable.

Indeed, artists, scholars, and readers of any age generally concentrate on the absence of the leg in Melville's novel; on the contrary, Basquiat seems to focus on the presence of Ahab's natural leg. First, because the center of the attention of this painting is a bird that stands on one leg, more or less like Ahab; second, because the small drawing of the leg lies between the end of the table of contents and one series of the green-colored refrain "HYENA." The interconnectedness of these components renders Basquiat's interpretation visible and tangible. While Basquiat seems to focus on the existence of Ahab's *natural* limb, the connection can be tracked to the themes of heroism and *hybris*, mortality and immortality that permeate the novel, and the enigmatic interrelationship of life and death, as well as the perennial human hope for spiritual immortality. Above all, these issues underlie Ahab's quest for divine justice and his ability to scrutinize the human condition more deeply.

Moby-Dick **chapter's listing, drawings, and the impossibility of representing the real**

Any expert reader of Melville would immediately notice that in Basquiat's artwork the order of the chapters is rearranged, so one is invited to look at the artist's interpretation more accurately. As Hutcheon argues, "knowing audiences have expectations" (2013, p.123); thus, this reader might be disappointed; however, at the same time, such a reader might come to enjoy Basquiat's new interpretation.

As if the observers are looking at this portion through a looking glass, Basquiat creates a mirrored contents table, offering a visuality that transcends the single image and is not exhausted in the vision. Instead, it insinuates itself between the folds of words and shows itself as an effect of reading. Creating two imaginary columns at the right corner of the triangle, Basquiat interposes the first fifty-four titles of the source text with some interventions, such as the crossed-out "Knights and Squires." In the imaginary right column, he lists the first thirty-three chapter titles in perfect order on the right, the remaining thirty-one on the left imaginary column, along with the repetition of the word "Hyena." The chapter headings in *Untitled* are reordered and mixed up, even though there is regularity. Between the framed *Fir-s-t* Lowering (Chapter 48) and Hyena (Chapter 49), it is possible to notice that the title of Chapter 41 "Moby Dick" sketch is similar to the small drawing at the left of the pictorial space.

Moreover, Basquiat's adaptation deals with manipulating the text, using concrete poetry, and questioning our perceptions. A distinct example that illuminates how Basquiat plays with our perception is the third chaotic column to the left of the other two columns–as if to suggest that this piece of art has to be *seen* from right to left but *read* from left to right. In both

painting and writing, in scanning a pictorial space or a page space, our sight, or more accurately, our eyes, proceed from left to right. In *Untitled*, the artist forces us to debunk this common visual hierarchy principle, not in Cy Twombly's or Paul Klee's or other graffiti-like line drawings, but because our visualization and perception, in other words, our standard way of reading a text by using the usual left-to-right orientation, is only an illusion. In addition, *MAD* magazine's reversed and crossed-out logo,[5] which may be perceived and read at first glance as *GAM* due to its proximity to the floating title *Moby-Dick*, may be part of this debunking in the upper right corner. Sight, the sense that should give us a sense of *reality*, demonstrates how the idea of reality can be deceptive.

This third imaginary column is placed above the disembodied leg. Within this column, titles spanning chapters 55 to 65 are presented. It is crucial to observe that the original word "picture" in Chapters 55 and 56 titles is modernized to "photo". On the one hand, the titles are not ordered, and, in this imaginary column, Basquiat commences with the crossed-out title "~~SQUID~~," from Chapter 59, followed by a repetition of "SQUID" accompanied by an invasion of the recurring term "HYENA." Subsequently, there are the altered headings of chapters 55 and 57, which can be read, following our usual left-to-right orientation, as "MONSTERS / SQUID," "MNSTRS (black erasure) / WHALE PHOTOS ©," followed by: "LESS <> WHALE PHOTOS MORE<." Then: "BRIT ©" and: "STUBB KILLS A WHALE ©" along with: "OF WHALES IN PAINT IN TEETH ©." Again, "SQUID" is crossed out, "LINE" boxed in, and "THE WHALE AS A DISH" visually connects and interacts with the elements in this column. Ultimately, "STUBB'S SUPPER" is drawn outside the central triangle's base.

On the other hand, this is a painting, an *image-text*, not a text. Thus, our tendency to read the words–instead of *seeing them*–to make sense could misdirect us and be delusional. Basquiat questions our perceptions and seeks to interrogate ideas and concepts by creating a dynamic interaction between signs, images, objects, words, and body parts. Angela Stercken argues that "the artist conducts a meta-discourse on the theoretical precepts, the cultural traditions, and inscriptions of the image, on the relationship between image and reality, between sign and signified" (2014, p. 130). As Schultz claims, the Melvillian experimentation with genres, style, rhetoric, and tones corresponds to Basquiat's visual riddle. Similar to Melville's epic narrative, this painting contains a plethora of interpretative keys and perspectives.

Basquiat's manipulation aimed to deconstruct these titles' meanings, reinvent *Moby-Dick*, and produce a new work of art with a new signification through new signifiers and signified. Among the elements in this listing, it seems as if Basquiat is fascinated by Melville's *ekphrasis* in Chapters 3, 55, 56, and 57. Basquiat's and Melville's intentions here appear to coincide. In these chapters, as mentioned above, Melville investigates the nature of representation and its relationship with the real. Basquiat, like Melville, suggests that creativity and imagination are necessary to see whales in "mountains" or "stars."

Furthermore, from Chapters 1 to 88, as in *Melville*, all the titles present several modifications. An arm, with an orange hand, seems to connect the last two parts of the chapter listing that falls outside the triangle. In this portion, Chapter 68, "The Blanket," is omitted, while Chapters 69 to 78 are repeated with several modifications; for instance, Chapter 71, "The Jeroboam's Story" is altered to "Jeroboam" on the top list, and, on the bottom becomes "Jeroboam's Story." In addition, the artist highlights, and underlines "SHARK MASSACRE"

[5] *Mad* magazine is an American satirical magazine that has been a consistent source of satire and political parody. Saggese argues how "appropriated logos from television, comics, and cartoons dominate many of Basquiat's compositions" to highlights "the ambiguous distinction between copying and drawing in his artistic process" (2014, 64). Basquiat loved reading *Mad* magazine, and this pop culture reference could be the result of Andy Warhol's influence.

and "CUTTING IN." After drawing the title of Chapter 88, "Schools & Schoolmasters," and, to their right, he added his famous Bat symbol and, inside it, affixed the term "member" in combination with his copyright symbols. Then, Basquiat, accurately following the order from 69 to 78, crosses out the title of Chapter 75 and circles the 78th. In the source text, in Chapter 78, we find another instance of resurrection when Queequeg saves his fellow harpooner, Tashtego. An empty rectangle follows chapter 78, and after it, the list continues with the red erasure of chapters 79 through 81; all the words are crossed out, except the word *meets* where the copyright symbol is placed. The last chapter of this portion is 82, originally "The Honor and Glory of Whaling," transformed into a circled *Honor* and a partially erased *glo*(~~ry~~).

Proceeding on the left of the pictorial space, a dynamic and disparate assortment of words and images mirrors *Moby-Dick*'s motifs and interacts with Basquiat's view of contemporary American culture. Let me highlight a boxed-in "POLE STAR" above the *third column*, near the leg and among electrical circuits and diodes, a big red eye, and a small sketch entitled "EL SOL." Along with some references to sharks, jaw, teeth, names of planets, and the words "MAN DIES," "POSITION," "DIRECTIONAL," and "RISING SUN," which recall a geographical map that we can interpret as an adaptation of the last part of the carpenter's commentary: "[Ahab]'ll be taking altitudes on it. Halloa! I almost forgot the little oval slate, smoothed ivory, where he figures up the latitude […] chisel, file, and sand-paper" (Melville, 2007, p. 414). Besides, inside the triangle with the heron, there are two coins featuring the inscription "E PLURIBUS UNIM." On the one hand, Schultz relates this to the "set of Isolatoes" and to a "system that both [the authors] recognize as failing unity to occur among the many" (1995, p. 309). On the other hand, looking at this portion of Basquiat's painting, one of these can recall the image of the famous doubloon in Chapter 36 and Chapter 99 of Melville's novel. Basquiat draws one of the incomplete coins below the sketch "THE RISING SUN" and "DIRECTIONAL." Melville's doubloon, as we know, comes from Quito, Ecuador, and is associated with the tropical sun and the center of the world. Basquiat's work of art presents small sun sketches and visualizes the Zodiac and small drawings related to geographical maps and latitudes, which I contend could evoke Chapter 99 "The Doubloon". In this chapter, Ishmael describes the members of the *Pequod*'s different visions of the doubloon and offers an overview of the complexity of each sensory perception, the various perspectives, and the possible and competing interpretations of reality. In other words, the narrator attempts to describe the subjective perspectives on reality. It is possible to affirm that Basquiat's adaptation of *Moby-Dick*, recreates the impossibility of representing the truth and the illusion that even *sight*, as a sense, implies, where the idea of reality can only be a hypothesis of images and pictures supported by a symbolic meaning.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that Basquiat's art responds to *Moby-Dick*'*s* invitation for visual artists to complete and interpret the novel. Melville transposed visual art into literature, and, internationally, numerous visual artists of have provided their response to Melville's literary work. Examining the visual *Moby-Dick*'s transpositions demonstrates the novel's ongoing temporal and spatial importance, giving it new life in other cultural and historical dimensions in this ongoing process of re-signification.

Basquiat not only pays homage to Melvillian fiction but demonstrates how the trope *ut pictura poesis* could define the relationship between literature and the visual arts. As Bryant notes, "a work is the sum of its versions; creativity extends beyond the solitary writer, and writing is a cultural event transcending media" (2013, p. 47). By transposing *Moby-Dick*'s themes and motifs into another system of signs while combining words from the novel with images–a combination that also highlights the intrinsic difficulty of defining where the text ends and the image begins–the artist challenges the "hierarchies of the real" (Saggese, 2014, p. 145), deconstructs and manipulates the text, simultaneously using concrete poetry and questioning our perceptions.

In his reinvention and interpretation, Basquiat concentrates not only on the themes and motifs that permeate *Moby-Dick* but also on several structural and philosophical aspects of the novel. First and foremost is the experimentation of language, style, and innovative circularity offered by Melville's great modern epic. Indeed, the visuality and the accumulation of references in Basquiat's work match Melville's description of his creation process, where a careful disorder "is the true method" (Melville, 2007, p.324). Furthermore, it seems that Basquiat's attention is mainly attracted by Queequeg and Ahab, two characters at the antipodes. Ahab's excessive pride, *hýbris*, and obsessions contrast with Queequeg's authenticity and kindness. However, they appear to go along with the captain's traits of heroic courage at the end of the narrative.

To conclude, while focusing on the modifications and adjustments necessary to suit the new environment, this article, through a close reading–and *seeing*–considers Basquiat's work as an adaptation, a medial transposition, and a reinvention of Melville's novel. Not only because the artist interprets and arranges the text but also because he recreates it through an appropriation of the source text, these works are also intermedial adaptations. Using Rajewky's observations, they cross the borders between media. Therefore, these two "palimpsestuous works" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 6) represent "a complex visual response to Melville's novel" (Schultz, 1995, p. 307). In addition, as I seek to demonstrate, Basquiat offered an original interpretation of some of *Moby-Dick*'s most important themes, such as the limits of knowledge and an exploration of the boundary between the *real* and the representation, the existential investigation, obsessions, and madness. In his originality and uniqueness, Basquiat's works emphasize these epistemological and ontological themes by manipulating the words, legible as images, from Melville's epic novel and incorporating them in his giant riddle and later into small lists.

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