

# Chris Ofili Intertextuality Essay

An essay on how Chris Ofili uses pop-culture references and religious iconography, to convey his own message about consumer culture and its impact on society as a whole.

In order to examine the significance of intertextuality and the development of character and theme in Chris Ofili's 'The Adoration of Captain Shit' and the legend of the black stars, the term intertextuality needs to be defined. The term was first coined in the 1960's by the post structural theorist Julia Kristeva who said 'intertextuality is a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another' Kristeva (1980). This definition has been clarified by the literary theorist Simandan who explains that the basic discourse of Kristeva's phrase is 'that authors do not create their texts from their own mind but rather compile them from pre-existent texts.' Simandan (2010)

This concept of intertextuality is something which Ofili is very aware of. This awareness allows the artist to make cultural references to put forward a specific argument or to create an effect of irony. For example, as Higgle points out the character of Captain Shit is based on Luke Cage, one of the few African American heroes to appear in Marvel comics 'and perhaps the only super-hero to possess not super-powers but an inexhaustible capacity for rage' Higgle (1998). This, in itself, singles the character out from the rest of superheroes which feature in the comic. I would argue that Ofili's aim in this painting is to deconstruct demeaning white representations of blacks in the media through the use of irony as Higgle says later on in the same article 'destabilising a few endemic assumptions about other cultures... is perhaps his most obvious strategy in his appropriation of racist images'. In Higgle's eyes he does this by making his subjects, on the surface at least, 'appear self consciously trashy'. This is certainly the case with the Captain Shit piece. The colour palette used for the captain's cape, for example, is hyperbolically bright. The use of these clashing yellows and pinks turn Captain Shit into an ironically comic figure as the mustard jacket and dark blue trousers associated with the original Luke Cage are far more neutral. This painting then is not an attack on the character of Luke Cage but rather this reference has been used to attack the damaging western stereotypes of blacks as image obsessed uneducated people, pimps, and junkies. The latter being signified by the Captain's slightly uncentered gaze. In her article on Chris Ofili for the 'arts desk' Sue Steward supports this point by saying this piece

'is a quintessential showcase of the stereotypical funk pimp character. With his gaudy, blingy jacket, leering lips and women's hands reaching out to his cr(o)tch, it established a style which fitted the time, evoking the trippy cosmology created by George Clinton for his Parliament and Funkadelic songs, and their conversion, visually, into his record sleeve art works' Steward (2010). Of course, the fact that Ofili has crudely sexualised his subject in this way again emphasises the fact that his use of intertextuality is by no means a homage but rather a re-appropriation used to try and mock white representations of African Americans. The fact that the cape has magazine cutouts of black hip-hop stars wearing sunglasses and earrings in it emphasises this discourse. In my opinion, the use of this technique as a way of deconstructing racial stereotypes makes Chris Ofili quite unusual as most artists and writers do this by placing their representation of the 'other' in direct opposition to the view point of the west or what Stuart Hall calls a 'retelling of the past' in the Captain Shit series. In particular, Ofili is using what Hall calls 'pigmentation' that is giving the signs and codes of the colonisers a new meaning in order to destabilise them Hall (1993). Evidence for Ofili's use of this specific technique comes from the background of the painting in which the white eyes in the stars are made to seem as if they are viewing Captain Shit through a mask. Here Ofili is giving greater clarification to his aim by connoting the same ideas as Franz Fanon; that minority cultures, blacks

included, are forced to view themselves through a white man's eyes. Okwui Enwezor expands on this idea of pigmentation by explaining how the variations of blackness found in Chris Ofili's paintings 'are both a cipher and a sign for race and identity'. In other words, the light brown pigmentation used for the captain's body and face in the Adoration of Captain Shit piece signifies that he has been internally affected by the white man's culture and ideology.

Art academics then are unified when it comes to determining the aim of Ofili's paintings. Debates arise however when we look into whether or not Ofili achieves his aim or rather inadvertently ends up actually reinforcing these harmful stereotypes as a number of critics would say he does. Catherine Acholonu for example argues that

'African traditional behaviour is distinguished by cleanliness, restraint and a sense of order and propriety... faeces is a substance viewed with distain... Ofili should have a rethink' Consentino (2000). In my opinion, however, the use of shit adds to the irony of the piece symbolising the white man's degrading view of the African American. Some academics such as Judith Nesbitt believe that the elephant dung was used to create an opposition between beauty and vulgarity 'so that the viewer would be torn between its decreative attraction and the repulsion of excreta.' Nesbitt (2010). This is supported by Becker who uses Ofili's painting of the 'Virgin Mary to suggest that the elephant dung is used in Ofili's works mainly for symbolic reasons 'a black virgin spotted with white pornographic cutouts and carefully placed lacquered balls of dung. Perhaps this was a representation of the virgin as both sacred and profane. Capable of manifesting herself as black, white and brown. (Becker 2009) This would make the Virgin Mary piece another example of how Ofili uses intertextuality to question preconceived notions of Black identity. With this painting Becker believes that Ofili is arguing that the Virgin Mary is part of faith so her race should not be clear cut. However, this does not mean that Acholonu is alone in her criticism of Ofili. Oguibe, for example, harshly dismisses this as 'elephant crap... Ofili has no intertextual reason for using the dung, except to make vague bullshit references to mother africa.' Consentino (2000) Oguibe is basing these claims on the fact that the opportunity was not noticed by any other Afro-brit artists. Interestingly, the reasons Chris Ofili himself gives for his use of faeces is very different to that offered by the critics. In an interview with Thelma Golden, conducted for Afrofantazia in 2000, Ofili says he uses the elephant dung so 'you can see a layering going on underneath a top statement that becomes the main motif. All of what comes before is just as important as the statement on top.' In other words, because the elephant dung is three dimensional, all of the layers can be seen individually so viewers can see a build up of the discourses presented through the use of faeces in a way that shows the ideas change and evolve.

In 'The Adoration of Captain Shit', for example, the elephant dung is smeared thinly on to the canvas in such a way as to make the Captain's body transparent. From my perspective this transparency, in itself, suggests that the white man's negative representation of Afro-Americans is hollow and based on ungrounded assumptions. Therefore, it has no real meaning and can be seen right through. One art writer that agrees with me in seeing the truth in Ofili's statements is the Observer's Laura Cumming who poses that 'Almost every distinguishing characteristic has been pared away – layering, resin, glitter and all – to leave nothing but unadorned paint; and images that have nowhere to hide.' Cumming (2010). This reading of the painting shows how form, composition, character and the theme of racism are all interlinked. Natasha Walker, a painting conservator for the Tate Gallery lists the stages Ofili goes through in order to create this three dimensional effect, explaining that the final layer of Ofili's paintings is 'oil paint which he scratches through so that you can see some of the colours underneath' ArtTalk (2011). This is the technique the artist uses to make the Captain's Cape transparent adding to the hollow representation of

the character.

As pointed out by Sue Steward the Imagery contained in this piece derives from African American Hip-hop music. Captain shit always embodies the perceived characteristics of a nineties black Hip-hop star. What changes however is the races and more importantly the cultural identity of the adorners of the Captain, that is to say the people in stars. This impacts the ideology of the painting as we see Captain Shit's expression change depending upon who is looking at him. In the Naked Captain Shit piece for example the crowd is all black and the Captain's expression is one of depression. The character is sad because the true meaning of his music, which is aimed at this crowd, is not being received as intended. Instead the Hip-Hop star's main market is actually the whites who have attributed their own meanings to the music. As Ofili attributes these two reactions to 'reading interviews with rappers talking about how their lyrics... which were written and recorded in relative solitude and aimed at a mass audience of predominantly black youth, were being eulogised by white youth who made up most of their market. Wild (2009). Viewing the Adoration of Captain Shit piece as part of a series then enriches Ofili's attempts to subvert these harmful cultural assumptions as astute viewers would see that they are being encouraged to empathise with a character struggling to put his one cultural mark on a place which holds preconceived notions about his native culture and the meanings of his work.

This would make the character of Captain Shit similar to Ofili himself as we have seen some critics such as Oguibe and Acholonu who rather than using Stuart Hall's concept of pigmentation would describe the work of Ofili using Bahbha's theories of Mimicry and Hybridity arguing that instead of helping to subvert the negative stereotypes, the irony fails to come through due to the fact that the composition of the painting is primitive and vulgar and instead the gaudy nature of his work simply reinforces them. However, in my opinion, the irony is made plain by the first Captain Shit image in which the lurid sexuality is not present due to the fact he is being viewed by a black crowd. From my point of view what Ofili has employed in this work is Bahbha's secondary theory of mimicry and hybridity; 'double articulation'. Bahbha sees this as something which is rarely achieved as he says

'in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce, its slippage, its excess, its difference...a complex strategy of reform... intensifying surveillance and poses an imm(i)nent threat to both normalised knowledges and disciplinary powers.' Bahbha (1984) From my point of view, this is what Ofili manages to do in his work by re-appropriating black representations and using ironic hyperbolism to change their meaning. Enwezor takes a rare stance on Ofili's way of creating identity arguing that Ofili's criticisms of cultural racism are protected from questioning because Ofili 'creates a division between art and life...painting imaginary figures, like Captain Shit. This seems to be a strategy deployed in order to move the viewer away from any over determined reading of the images.' Enwezor (2010) So in her mind Ofili is able to use intertextual references to make social criticisms while harnessing the viewer's tendency to apply any preconceived notions of identity. This allows him, at least according to Enwezor, to create his own specific version of blackness.

In Conclusion, intertextuality is of great significance to this piece because it holds both the idea of Captain Shit as anti hero used to embody the struggles of the artist to create an independent identity not forgetting as well that the intertextual reference to the music and imagery of George Clinton is key to understanding the irony of the over hyperbolic representation of black hip-hop culture. So, on all sides, intertextuality is essential to the creation of character as well as dealing with themes of racial tension.

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