

INTERTEXTUALITY AND ART: INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN SELZNICK¹

INTERTEXTUALIDADE E ARTE: ENTREVISTA COM BRIAN SELZNICK

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From: *Hugo* movie DVD extras (SCORSESE, 2011)

Brian Selznick studied at *The Rhode Island School of Design* in the United States, made three toy theater pieces, created the story for a new ballet by Christopher Wheeldon, and drew the 20th anniversary covers for the *Harry Potter series*. He has also written and illustrated many books, especially for children, besides the screenplay for the movie adaptation of his book,

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Wonderstruck. *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* is Brian Selznick's most notorious work. Intertextuality is part of his career.

Intertextuality is an artistic phenomenon that involves dialogue, combination, and inversion between any statement (a novel, a poem, a song, a movie, an event) and another statement, directly or indirectly made. First, the concept was theorized in the beginning of 20th century by Mikhail Bakhtin, and afterwards by Julia Kristeva in the end of 1960th. Several researchers such as Gérard Genette, Roland Barthes e Umberto Eco have discussed this concept.

1 – The Invention of Hugo Cabret, “a novel in words and pictures”, was published in the United States in 2007. It is an example of artistic work that involves the phenomenon of intertextuality. In this literary work, words refer to films, script descriptions and subtitles; illustrations in black and white refer the first films and comics; stills from old films, Georges Méliès’ drawings, a Paris Train accident at *Montparnasse Station*’ photograph in the end of 19th century.

Brian, tell us about the origin of the idea of a dialogue with so many arts forms in the literary work *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* and how you orchestrated them in the narrative.

Brian Selznick: When I was making *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, which I began around 2003, I wanted to make a book that felt cinematic, that used the techniques of film to tell a story that would really only work as a book. I had the idea to tell a story about Georges Melies, the father of film narrative, and while writing the story it made sense to me that the pictures in the book should help tell the story itself, not just illustrate scenes described in the text, as often happens in novels for young people. I thought specifically about the films of Alfred Hitchcock and others who use the camera to help tell their stories by zooming in on clues, by dramatic editing, and by exploiting the visual quality of

cinema. I saw a connection between the way a camera moves and the way pictures progress in books like *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. There's a famous sequence in that book called the "wild rumpus" where there are no words at all, the reader just flips through eight pages of images until we return to text once again.

2 – The film director Martin Scorsese declared the words and images from *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* tapped into his memories and the obsession for illusion of movement that motion pictures create. Then, Scorsese and other professionals adapted Selznick's narrative into images and sounds. The film adaptation was released in 2011, entitled *Hugo*.

Brian, in the film adaptation it is possible to see the echoes of your images and words. Highlight a particular moment in the movie that you felt a significant connection with what you had written in *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*.

Brian Selznick: The turning of the page in a book can mimic certain cinematic techniques and it was fun to try to exploit that connection for Hugo. This is most apparent in the sequences where I zoom in on something important, like the face of the automaton, or when Hugo falls on the tracks and the train, for the next ten pages or so, gets closer and closer until it fills the "screen" of the book. Scorsese actually used the composition for each of these pages in my book when he filmed the movie of Hugo. If you go back and look at the train coming at Hugo in the movie, you'll see he edits the film so the train isn't actually moving, it's the cuts that bring the train closer and closer to us/Hugo. I was referencing the cinema when I made that scene, and Scorsese is referencing my book.

3 - John Logan wrote the screenplay for the film adaptation of the literary work *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. In the screenplay, there is dialogue with several art forms that were in Selznick's work. However, the production team was oriented by script to create them through posters, scenes from old films, and characters experiencing these dramatic moments in the context of Hugo's 1931 narrative. One example of this situation is the scene in which Hugo is hanging in the Train Station's tower clock, as a reference to Fred C. Newmeyer's and Sam Taylor's *Safety Last* (1923).

Brian, discuss the impressions you had when you read John Logan's script and the role intertextuality plays in this work.

Brian Selznick: I had the chance to read all of John Logan's drafts for the film, and from the very earliest one I saw that he was being very faithful to my book, while trying to open up the cinematic references. He also telescoped certain aspects of the story to make it simpler on screen, since books give us much more room to meander and take time to be in a characters thoughts. It really wasn't until I saw Scorsese's first cut of the movie, though, that I realized how closely he was sticking to my illustrations and using them like story-boards for the movie. Throughout *Hugo* there are moments, like the train described previously, that come directly from my pictures. The reflection of the clock in Melies's eye, Hugo looking out from behind the clock and the zoom into Paris at the start of the movie all come directly from the drawings I did in the book. I reference old movies in my book, like Rene Clair's *Under the Roofs of Paris* and Francois Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, but Scorsese recreates scenes from many other films in *Hugo*. When Uncle Claude is pulled from the Seine we see the bottoms of his shoes from a point of view on the ground and this is taken directly from Hitchcock's *The Trouble With Harry*. One of Scorsese's favorite movies when he was a kid was called *The Magic Box*, about the invention of

cinema, and he recreated shots from that movie in Hugo when Melies is remembering going to a carnival and watching a movie for the first time. Even the iconic moment of the audience gasping as they first see the film “The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat” is an exact recreation of the moment as filmed in *The Magic Box*. And then of course Scorsese recreates the filming of Melies’s own movies, inserting himself into the movie (as he often does) playing the photographer who takes a picture of Melies and his wife outside the famous glass studio.



From: Film *The 400 Blows* (TRUFFAUT, 1959)



From: Literary work *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (SELZNICK, 2007, p. 456-457)



From: Film *Hugo* (SCORSESE, 2011)

4 - Brian, throughout your career you have written and illustrated several books. Ideas emerge. Some of them are inspired in other texts and artistic works, and you develop them in a new narrative. During this process, you put your signature, your personality, your worldview in it. You also wrote a screenplay based on your book: *Wonderstruck* (2011). The film adaptation was released in 2017.

Brian, tell us which strategies you used in writing the adaptation script for *Wonderstruck* in order to resonate your narrative in the film adaptation and comment about challenges of making this dialogue with other texts and artistic works in these writings.

Brian Selznick: When I was writing the screenplay for *Wonderstruck*, my challenge was transforming another story I made with words and drawings. But unlike *Hugo* where the words and drawings told the same story, *Wonderstruck* told two stories. The words told a story set in 1977 about a boy who becomes deaf, and the pictures told a story set 50 years earlier about a girl born deaf. The pictures were meant to echo the visual way she experienced her life. My solution was to write a screenplay using two different genres of film. The 70's story was to be filmed like a 70's color film, using techniques and cameras available then, and the story set in the 20's was to be told like a black and white silent movie. Everything in a book is "silent" so you can only write about what things sound like, but in movies you can actually use sound, which

means you can also use silence. The film's score also echoed the type of music you'd have heard during these two eras.