Intertextuality and Spatiotemporal Agency in Butor's *La Modification*

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Abstract
Michel Butor's body of work has always defied the classic literary classification, which is the main reason why he is often, against his own accord, associated with the Nouveau Roman movement. His magnum opus, La Modification *(1957) is the epitome of the time-space collateral where the linear time is deconstructed and is led towards being spatial. This paper intends to analyse the spatial and temporal semiotic world that the author creates by mean of intertexts and workings of time and memory, and therefore provides a better understanding of the work. Intertextuality is the main meaning-making mechanism that Butor relies upon and the takeaway from this study, thus, can be summarized in a six-pronged model with regard to the references made to art and architecture in Paris and Rome throughout the novel. Time in the narrative of the work starts with the looming clock in the train station and slowly transforms from linear to a multi-layered form. Butor tamers with the concept of time, which only develops within the central character's mind, throughout the novel with the technique of time-montage. Considering which, the eidetic image of time in the novel is investigated in this study and the eleven strata of time which the narration of the work is constructed on is enumerated.*

Keywords: *intertextuality; spatiotemporality; semiotics of literature; nouveau roman; La Modification*

Introduction

Even though the French writer, Michel Butor, has never been considered a political writer by definition, he has always been regarded as a revolutionary on the frontiers of literature mainly because of his profound confidence in the potential of a work of art, literature in particular, to transform man's standpoint in society or society itself: "All work is committed . . . the more deeply inventive it is, the more it forces a change." (Butor 1975: 20) [1] His collaborative work with other artists, such as Jacques Monory, Jiri Kolar, and Pierre Alechinsky is, to a certain extent, an example of his desire to enter the world of concrete references and rearrange the traditional boundaries that segregate the various modes and forms of artistic expression. Born in 1926, Butor studied philosophy at Sorbonne but failed to pass the French national teaching

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exam on the subject and began his travels, starting 1950, teaching French at universities in Egypt and the UK. Butor's most well-known novel, *La Modification* (1957), has secured a superior rank in the history of literature as a significant contribution to the *The Nouveau Roman* and has marked its author's name next to innovative literary names such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Robert Pinget. In a 1985 interview with *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Butor stated: "To cling to traditional ways was an illusion people had. That is no longer possible. The idea of doing is important. And to write is action par excellence." [2], which is a précis of his literary ambitions.

Michel Leiris, who was the editor of the afterword for Butor's *La Modification*, observed that the methodical construction of Butor's *La Modification* both plays by and violates the rules of French classical tragedy. [3] *La Modification*, Butor's third work after *Passage de Milan* (1954) and *L'Emploi du Temps* (1956), which won the prestigious Prix Renaudot in 1957, on the one hand, enjoys a traditional tried-and-tested structure of a protagonist with a developing storyline of its own denouement, which satisfies the common reader but, on the other hand, provides the more sophisticated reader with a spatial and temporal semiotic world which can be left undiscovered if not mined from between the lines.

The novel, in summary, narrates the life story of Leon Delmon, who is on the horns of a dilemma about his life with two women, adopting a real-unreal narrative style. His trip incorporates his memories with his wife and his lover. Cecile, his lover, embodies Rome, youth and freedom whereas Henriette, his wife, domestic and stiff, represents Paris. On his way to see Cecile, his initial enthusiasm fades away and gives way to doubt. In his accounts, Leon, is transported in time and commutes between the past, present and future, and describes the urban space in both Rome and Paris in different times.

Spatiotemporality

Space is inexplicable without its relation to time. Space for thinkers before the semiotic explosions of modernity, such as Newton and Kant, constituted Euclidean Space in which time is an autonomous entity and is not considered a formative element of space. However, in post-war era, time incorporated a novel demarcation and thinkers thereafter perceived time to be a dimension of spatial phenomena. Einstein's theory of general relativity worked in the same line and delineated how

time and space are contingent upon each other. Space, besides width, length and height, has a fourth dimension: time. The correlation between the space-time essence of the object and the space-time essence of a model hugely regulates both its inherent nature and the cognitive value it bears (Lotman 1992: 144). *La Modification* is the epitome of the time-space collateral where the linear time is deconstructed and is led towards being spatial. Leon's recounting of his trips on the train has the benefit of bonding time and space in an inextricable fashion (Quereel 1973: 50 - 53). That being said, Rome and Paris are the spatial foundation on which, through art-historical representations, the central character constructs his past and future with memory being the indispensable instrument. In fact, the novel portrays the alterations of space under the aegis of time and also how changing of time is tantamount to changing of spaces – the spaces which illustrate the architectural style of a particular period. In the next section, I will discuss the indivisibility of time and space (fabula/sujet in its formalist sense) in *La Modification*.

Spatiotemporal signification under the auspice of intertextuality

In the so-called postmodern era, 'space' materialized more than any other concept in the literary discourse of Europe. The harrowing spaces of the post WWII lead into literature being the bedrock for convergence of 'real space' and 'text'. Westphal in his *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (12) maintains that it was only the Second World War and not any of the momentous theories of the time, including theory of relativity and the theory of space-time that made far-reaching changes in the relationship of space to time or of time to space. He explains how differently time-space developments occurred as of 1945. Having said that, an inextricable link between time and space was plain to see in literary works of the era. Butor deftly makes use of the space and its constituents, particularly the art and architecture of France and Italy from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, to carry out the wishes of the significations regarding time and memory. Even though the neologism *intertextuality* was coined by Julia Kristeva, the Bulgarian-French semiotician, in 1966, giving birth to a new horizon in literary theory, intertextuality as a phenomenon and practice dates back to the ancient past, when the earliest recorded human history and the discourses about oral and written productions came into existence.

However, the concept of intertextuality has been widely misconstrued. It has very little to do, if anything at all, with examining

the influence of a particular writer on another, or with the original sources of a work of literature; it does, on the other hand, refer to the fashion and quality that the significations of any text – in its semiotic sense – rests on not only on that particular text, but also on the significations present in other texts. A given text acquires its meaning not from its or other authors' works but from its correlation with other texts; therefore, "every text is an intertext" (Leitch 1983: 59). The concept has its fundamental roots in theories of post-structuralism. In this regard, Kristeva famously discussed texts on the basis of two semiotic axes: a horizontal one by means of which the author and the reader are connected and a vertical one by means of which texts are connected to other texts. (Kristeva 1980: 38-40) She explains: "The word's status is thus defined horizontally (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as vertically (the word in the text is oriented towards an anterior or synchronic literary corpus)" (Kristeva 1986: 36-37). In other words, the horizontal axis constitutes the link between the text and the reader, whereas the vertical axis constitutes a multiplicity of elaborate relations between the text and other texts. Into the bargain, any research on intertextuality must pay its dues to Roland Barthes, who is a major figure in intertextual theory. "Woven tissue" is a well-known motif in Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) where he argues that a particular text is not possible to be disengaged from the network in which it is created and is, at every turn, connected with other texts on that particular network similar to a woven tissue. As Nietzsche declares the death of God, Barthes, under the auspices of intertextual theory, does the same about the author and argues that the death of the author gives birth to the reader: "A text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author" (Barthes 1977: 148). In short, intertextuality is a concept of critical theory and a method for textual interpretation, whose origins can be traced in the ideas of Saussure, Bakhtin, Kristeva, and Barthes. The role that *La Modification*'s intertextual roots and the references to the legend of the Le Grand Veneur plays in meaning-making have already been investigated to a certain degree by Mary Lydon in her 1980 paper titled: Study of the Novels and Aesthetics of Michel Butor. However, my argument in this research is that the references to the fine arts in France and Italy in the novel, similar to the novel's different intertexts,

not only mirror the concerns and state of the central character, Leon, and later serve to 'universalize' those concerns and that state but also serve to drive the narration forward by cultivating them on the substructure of time and memory. My analysis is focused on the six main sets of intertexts and references, shown below in Figure 1, made in different parts of the novel with regards to the art in Paris and Rome and on how each of these sets contribute to the 'modification' that the main character submits himself to in the course of his journey in the novel.

The Last Judgment – Pietro Cavallini

The account and development of the romantic entanglement between Léon and Cécile is inseparable from their artistic excursions all over Rome. The reader of the novel can see that the central character, Léon, engages in cultural pursuits whether in Rome or Paris.

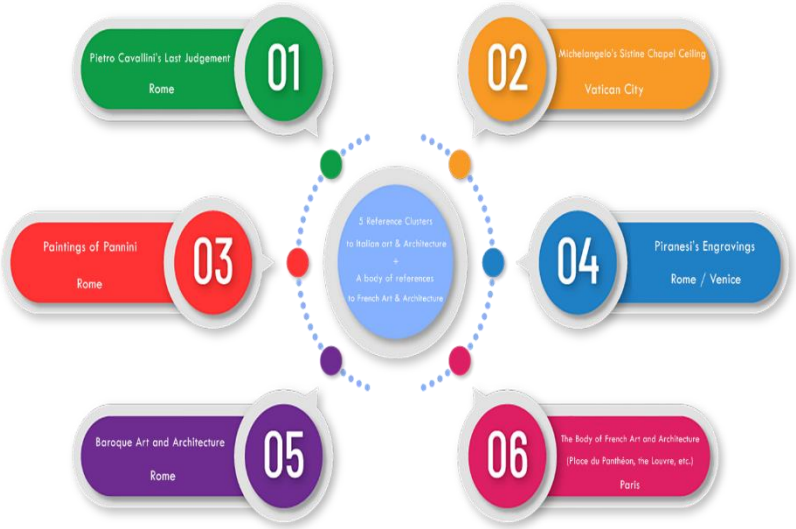

Figure1: Reference Clusters to Art and Architecture in La Modification

The very formation of a romance with Cécile grants him the opportunity to enjoy the company of a companion who is well familiar with the city, an acolyte with whom he can share his exceptional knowledge of Rome's art and history and an excuse for an organized investigation of

Rome's artistic and historical treasures. The Gothic period is signified in *La Modification* by mentions of the work of Pietro Cavallini. Cavallini's fresco of the Last Judgement (c. 1293) in the church of Santa Cecilia was "The first Roman secret" (Butor 1957: 84) that Cécile divulged to Léon. The significance of the appearance of Cavallini's work in the novel is two-fold. On the one hand, it acts as a parallel and set-off to Michelangelo's work with the same name, the priestly postures and traditional delivery of the remaining figures in the upper half of the Gothic fresco being noticeably at odds with the aura and abrupt movements of the personages in the paintings of the renaissance era. On the other hand, according to Jean H. Duffy "Cavallini's work testifies to early artistic links between France and Rome" (2003: 107 – 108). The corroboration of these connections can be found in the apostles who are seated on both sides of the enthroned Son of God. The detail of the representation of these figures reveals signs of inspiration from contemporary Northern French sculpture. According to Hetherington (1979: 52), the representation of the apostles in the fresco is incompatible with ordinary Mediterranean iconography in that they have the symbols of their martyrdom in hand and not the traditional volumes or scrolls.

The most similar models for the aforementioned iconographical innovation were figures from the Gothic cathedrals of the Ile de France. Nevertheless, the mentions of Cavallini's Last Judgement bring about a rather puzzling question about Cécile's motives. Her enthusiasm about sharing this especial 'Roman Secret' with the central character seems to contrast her following denial to accompany Leon to the Sistine chapel to see Michelangelo's version of the Last Judgement. The main reason for the aforementioned inconsistency could be found in the fact that she makes a playful attempt, at the early stages of their affair, to form in Léon's mind a memory of semiotic nature and also a linguistic link between herself and the art-historic treasures of Rome. This is mainly because the Last Judgment is located in the church carrying the name of her sponsor saint, which is used by the author to both drive the story forward and contribute to the implementations of memory and space and the central character's gradual modification.

Michelangelo

If the growth and progress of Léon and Cécile's relationship is spatial and inextricably linked with exploring the city's places of artistic and

historical interest, the shortcomings in the relationship are also unveiled. In one particular instance, the couple's art-historical pilgrimages function properly only until Léon proposes Michelangelo as their next subject of visit to which Cécile dismissively responses that Léon, by this ruse, wants to lure her into setting foot in Vatican – a city that she abhors – and accuses him of being deeply brainwashed by Christianity despite his pretension (Butor 1957: 167–168). This intolerance of Cécile taints Léon's perspective and is one of the assisting factors in his modification.

Butor makes use of Bakhtinian dialogism to contribute to the cause discussed in the previous section as later Cécile proposes some compensation recommending that they go and visit Michelangelo's Moses (1957: 168), which ends up in two disappointing visits. However, the grounds for this disappointment are not only the statue and the atmosphere per se but the consciousness gained and shared by the couple about the gradual gap that is appearing and continuously expanding between them and in a Joycean epiphany they both come to realize the absurdity of turning the city upside down merely for works by Michelangelo if, in the meanwhile, they take the Sistine chapel for granted.

The significance of Michelangelo's sculpture for Léon has to do with the fact that it reflects the temporal and spatial relationship between Classical and Christian Rome, which is one of his preoccupations. To wit, the art in Rome was developed by means of the synthesis of Classical form and Christian ideology, whose embodiment is the Sistine Chapel frescos.

Pannini's works

La Modification abounds in artistic and architectural references; however, the passages with regard to Pannini's works are the most exhaustive and thoroughly detailed (64–65, 69–71). Exploring Rome and Roman art is not merely limited to Leon's trips to the city and his visits, he also pays a visit to the Louvre himself and with Cécile as well. However, in the course of these visits, in the second section of the book, his memories, which are spatial in nature, start to disclose complications and cracks in his romance with Cécile and the turn of events during the couple's visit to the Louvre when Cécile arrives in Paris provides a new perspective on how the artistic explorations in different places formed and developed the different stages of their relationship. The visit to the

classical sculpture and paintings of Pannini works well in briefly dispelling the heavy air between the couple. However, the fact that the couple's interaction and verbal exchange can only be revived through works of art that are reminiscent of Rome (spatial signification) is in and of itself an unpromising indication that anticipates Léon's own epiphany that his interest and draw to Cécile and his love of the city where she lives are inextricably intertwined – the sobering realization that outside Rome Cécile comes to be just another woman and that their romance would never survive their potential relocation to Paris. In his second visit to the Louvre, which is recounted in the first section of the novel, he only stands in front of the works that remind him of Rome, that is the two prodigious pendant paintings of ancient and modern Rome (*Galerie de vues de la Rome antique* and *Galerie de vues de la Rome*) by Pannini.

Piranesi's engravings

Limited as Léon is in Paris to carry on his cultural pursuits, he has succeeded in creating a Roman shrine in a corner of his salon where he also keeps the two Piranesi, who is an epitome of the cultural interaction between Rome and Paris, engravings that his Roman lover had bought him for his birthday party. However, the references to the engravings have a semiotic function that transcends the symbolic and ethical implications of Léon's adulterous desire.

Baroque architecture and sculpture

The references made to the Roman architecture, monuments and sculpture are more frequent, yet less exhaustive, in comparison with the references to visual arts in La Modification. The novel reviews, in good detail, most styles and periods of Roman architecture from the Classical to the Fascist. Nevertheless, one particular period is particularly under the limelight: the Baroque. A great number of structures with architectural significance referred to in the text – the Palazzo Doria Pamphili (Butor 1957: 58), The Gesù (44), Sant'Agnese in Agone and the Palazzzo Barberini (184), etc. – are either Baroque or incorporate typical Baroque features and elements. Having said that, Bernini's *Fountain of the Four Rivers* is the most alluded work in the text. As the dialogic exchanges in the text unveil, safeguarding his romance with Cécile hinges upon Leon's ability to extricate himself from the grip that Catholicism has on him, just as the statues in *Fountain of the Four Rivers* who are attempting to shield themselves from the facade that seems to

be coming down on them. Identical to the statues, Léon attempts to ward off the Church. More importantly, Bernini's fountain famously draws a semio-ideological visual of the world that positions Rome at its epicenter. The four figures of the fountain signify the Ganges, the Nile, the Danube and the Plate, which used to metonymically stand for the continents of Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. The aforementioned promotion of Rome to the pivot point of the world is compatible with the central character's view of the city as the center of his personal universe. In addition, when Leon is in Rome, *Fountain of the Four Rivers* is the pivot of his exploring the city. (Butor 1957: 59, 95, 97, 117, 118) The fountain also plays a significant role in the workings of the mechanisms of memory in the narrative such as Leon's most recent memory of Cécile pertaining to their last meal at the Tre Scalini and the sparkling waters of *Fountain of the Four Rivers.* (97)

French art, architecture and monuments

The reason I have, unlike Roman references, placed all references to French art and architecture in one classification is that not only the references made are less frequent but also they are mostly dismissive, such as Leon's contempt towards the congested Théâtre-Français (38, 63), the contaminated weather and the rain that depresses the visibility of the monuments of Paris (71), the teeming boulevards (76), the ear-piercing screech of brakes on the place du Panthéon in the morning (41), etc. However, as distance and spatial endearment have a direct relationship in the novel, when Leon is in Rome, his being distant from Paris does seem to change, if only marginally, his attitude towards French art and architecture as he suggests that they pay a visit to Santa Maria degli Angeli following the couple's rather unpleasant conversation after their failed trip to visit Michelangelo's *Moses* (172). Leon's apartment oversees the Pantheon and the adjacent streets are also replete with Roman symbols and connotations. On different occasions the reader can sense Léon's affection (35) for the Pantheon, which is, demonstrably, reminiscent of Rome and of Cécile. The pinnacle of Leon's affection towards French art is when he visited the Louvre days prior to his Journey where he saw paintings of Claude and Poussin, which are the embodiment of the artistic interaction between France and Rome. Furthermore, their works also consist of a great number of representations of Roman sites that had become familiar to Leon during his visits to Rome. The constituent images of the paintings

also bring about nostalgia about the last afternoon of his trip to Rome and also triggers retrospective reconstruction of the trip, which is another manifestation of the workings of memory and space in the novel.

Time as an eidetic image in *La Modification*

'Time' in the narrative starts with the looming clock in the train station and slowly transforms from linear to a multi-layered form. Butor toys with the concept of time, which only develops inside the central character's mind, throughout the novel with the technique of time-montage or as Humphrey defines it: "The superimposition of images or ideas from one time on those of another" (1954: 50). The first chapter is where this technique prevails the most as Leon's memories of the past and his projections of his affair with Cécile into the future are fragmentary and are imposed in rapid succession on his current frame of mind and existence as he travels by train. In Bergson's conception, consciousness ordinarily summons only the memory-images that are able to usefully integrate into the present situation. However, this mechanism is not necessarily restricted to the sequential order of events as they transpired in time. Memory can merge episodes in a fashion which can nevertheless disclose new aspects and features of events and of ourselves without being sequential. Having said that, throughout the novel, be it about the future or past, the protagonist frequently passes comments or thoughts that pertain to his present time on the train to Rome or which have to do with the incidents following the particular moment he is recalling. According to Van Rossum-Guyon (1995: 230-231), the novel is constructed on ten strata of time:

1. The protagonist's first trip with Henriette before the war in the spring of 1938.
2. The couple's staycation in the winter three years before the story begins.
3. The return from this staycation.
4. The protagonist's trip with Cecile from Paris to Rome in autumn two years ago.
5. The trip from Rome to Paris with Cecile 1 year ago.
6. The same trip with different purposes.
7. The Paris-Rome trip the week before.
8. Return from this trip.
9. The 'modification' trip in which all the events of the story are narrated.
10. The trip which will take him to Paris on Monday and Tuesday night.

However, an additional stratum can be appended to the model above regarding the future events and his reconciliation with Henriette, which is merely a figment of his imagination. The abovementioned incidents occur in a single day within the limited boundary of a train compartment in different times through the triad of the past, present and future. "Throughout my trip on train, if I know where I am, I will know what the time is." (Butor 1957: 20) The protagonist breaks the boundary between the external reality and real geography via imagination. In the course of his illustration, extricating himself from linear time helps the writer to create a fully developed mental geography. In other words, the linear time gradually disappears and moves towards spatiality. The non-linear frame of time shapes the narration in the sense that the central character returns to the point of departure in terms of his personal affairs and the novel's denouement starts with the act of writing and the starting and finishing point converge. To wit, the adverbs 'here' and 'now' in the beginning and the end of the novel signify Rome.

Conclusion

Michel Butor's *La Modification* (1957) is a substantial contribution to *The Nouveau Roman*, which provides the more sophisticated reader with a spatial and temporal semiotic world through intertexts and workings of time and memory that can be left undiscovered if not mined from between the lines. In line with modern explanations of spatiotemporality, time and space are contingent upon each other (linear time is deconstructed and is led towards being spatial) in *La Modification*. Butor makes use of horizontal and vertical axes of intertextuality through six clusters of references with regard to art and history of Rome and Paris to create its own spatiotemporal significations and drive the narration forward. The novel is constructed on eleven strata of time by means of which space transforms into a dynamic entity under the aegis of time and linear time gradually disappears and moves towards spatiality with memory as its essential tool.

Notes

[1] Michel Butor, *Répertoire III* p. 20. (Quotation translated from French by Erfan Fatehi)

[2] The Review of Contemporary Fiction," Fall 1985, Vol. 5.3

[3] Michel Leiris, "Le Realisme mythologique de Michel Butor", postface to *La Modification*.

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