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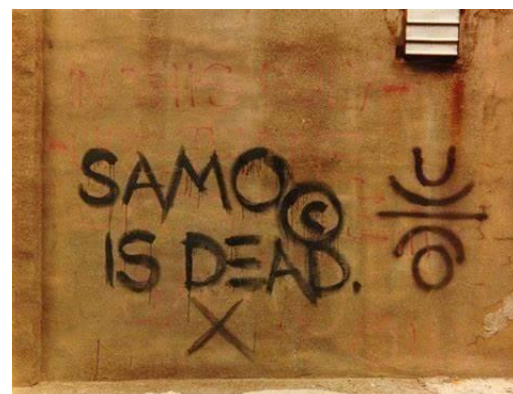
Gwenllian Beynon

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The Symbols of Basquiat

Throughout this essay I aim to explore Jean- Michel Basquiat's short-lived life, 1960-1988 he achieved so much in just 27 years. I will investigate the problems he faced, his growth over the years and discuss the meanings behind the popular symbolism found within his work. John Berger's semiotic theory will aid the analysis of some of his paintings in the hopes of having a clearer interpretation of what Basquiat stood for, as well as the stories he wanted to highlight to his audience. Through research I anticipate exploring the Neo-expressionist movement, studying their beliefs and how Basquiat linked into this group. I will recognize his aspiration to make a name for himself in the art industry, connecting with other artists, collaborating and taking inspiration from his past. It'll be understood that even after death his ongoing success isn't going unnoticed.

From the streets of New York City 1978 grew "SAMO", Basquiat, and his friend Al Diaz started to gain a lot of respect and attraction unlike many graffiti artists in the industry at this time (*Howie, 2022*). This duo went on tagging the streets between 1976-1980 where they marked the end of an era announcing their departure by spraying the words "SAMO IS DEAD" (*The Art Story, 2022*). This appeared across buildings in multiple cities and making a big statement, Basquiat then continued on with his career alone.

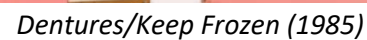


SAMO IS DEAD (1980)

Jean Michel Basquiat describes his art as “royalty, heroism, and the streets” (*MoMA, 2021*). It is apparent the artist was attached strongly to his roots and used his work to portray stories of black culture and social injustices, using not only imagery and symbols, but also words within many of his pieces. Evidently Basquiat’s cultural heritage meant a great deal to him, his father being Haitian American and his mother Puerto Rican, this was a great source of inspiration behind some of his pieces (*Biography, 2021*). Before his rise to fame his interest in art started as a young boy and his parents greatly encouraged his creative talents, later on in life he further continued exploring his artistic side with Graffiti on any surface he could find around New York city, this is essentially where he first started to make a name for himself. His style and use of materials developed, and he experimented later in his career primarily using large canvas’ with acrylic paint and oil sticks. He also created art on many other materials such as wood or silk screen. His connections with childhood and earlier experiences link to his use of crayons as well as his incorporating spray paint, which can be related to his earlier street art graffiti work.

It was the early 1980s where he found his fame, a part of the Neo-expressionism movement he expressed power and spread his word using repetitive icons shown across a range of his work (*MoMA, 2021*). Within *The Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art* the work of the Neo expressionists is described as “usually figurative, often with violent or doom-laden subjects” (*Chilvers and Graves-Smith, 2015*). The Neo-expressionists’ wanted to move away from minimalistic roots and create loud and proud pieces of art which communicated their thoughts in a less structured way. They dominated the 1980’s with bright bold paintings, expressive strokes, and references to history (*MasterClass, 2021*). Basquiat’s work undoubtedly fits all three of these criteria, with his symbolism through reoccurring images representing a deeper meaning, as well as his large-scale pieces with huge brushstrokes and childlike imagery. His work was pushed by his emotions, I can gather he wanted to teach others about the themes he felt strongly about. His strong passion to share his deepest thoughts and feelings can be implied from the tragedy he faced in his early days, struggles such as divorced parents, a car accident, his mother facing serious mental health issues, as well as becoming homeless at such a young age. Even through such hardships Basquiat dreamt of becoming well known, in an interview with McGuigan (1985)

He put his anger into his paintings, had a strong passion and never gave up which is what essentially led him to victory. His dreams of being a part of something big only grew more when he met pop artist Andy Warhol, he would visit his studio known as The Factory in New York in hopes of gaining further recognition. It



Throughout many of Basquiat's pieces he included a range of certain symbols unique to him which had a deeper meaning aside from the playful colourful strokes they first appeared as. Here I will interpret and assess theories of what each image represents. A theorist called John Berger developed the idea of using semiotics to analyse a piece of art, the idea of deconstructing what is within the piece to evaluate a deeper meaning, "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled" (*Berger, 1972*). While Basquiat may have had personal connections to these specific images, it's important to note that as an audience looking in from the outside we may evaluate our own meanings and interpret



the piece differently. His piece '*Back of the Neck*' incorporates two of his popular symbols, imagery of bones as well as his very common crown. It's known that after a being hit by a car while playing in the street at the young

age of eight, he spent his time in hospital recovering reading the famous 'Grey's Anatomy' book his mother gave to him. I believe this was the beginning of his interest in the human anatomy. As previously discovered its understood Basquiat had ambitions of making himself known in the world and he didn't stop until his dream came true, it could be implied that he



Ishtar (1983)

saw himself as a king which could be what the crown represents. Another theory suggests the three points on the crown that “form a W” (Howie, 2022) is in honour of his great friend Andy Warhol. We discover Basquiat’s interest in Egyptian mythology within his piece titled ‘*Ishtar*’, this is the name of an Egyptian goddess. Repeatedly we find her name within this piece, he is known for using words to express further meaning, sometimes found with a line through as if they’re crossed out. He explained “I cross out words so you will see them more: the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them” (MoMA,2021), it was important to direct the audience to these words and crossing them out is what he believed would achieve that.



Flesh and Spirit (1982-1983)

Another relation linking Basquiat’s work to Egyptian practice is simply the way they used Hieroglyphics to communicate, these were symbols representing meanings and words, this is exactly what his work was all about. This could even be an inspiration to him. His piece titled ‘*Flesh and Spirit*’ is laid out in a similar way to an Egyptian Hieroglyphic tablet, as if it should be read in columns telling us a deeper more meaningful story.

In conclusion, after delving deep into Jean- Michel Basquiat’s early life experiences’ we get a feel for the emotions he was expressing through his work and can understand more about the symbols that constantly repeat across many pieces he created over the years. Its visible this man had high hopes for himself and kept an open mind even through the problems he faced as a child, he demonstrated that no matter your background anything is possible. His cause of death was due to an addiction he faced with heroin, it is said that this may have been “a result of the new-found fame and commercial pressure put upon his work” (The Art

Story, 2022). However, after his tragic early death at just 27 years old in 1988, Basquiat's work only grew bigger. He's now an icon to many people all around the world, from children to popular artists, he is an inspiration. His work is being collected and sold for staggering prices and his art can be found in museums all over the globe. The pieces he created in his life are instantly recognisable as his own and what he stood for aided in his positive reputation we acknowledge to this day, a mindset I plan on applying to all my work in the future, Basquiat will be remembered for many years to come.

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