

# Interpreting Self and Being Through the Metamorphoses of *Muto*

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**Abstract**— *Muto* is a short animation created by series of street art from around Buenos Aires, Argentina. Employing the techniques known as stop motion, the animation is showcasing ambiguous narrative through the sprouting sequences of bizarre characters and forms. Beginning with a white chalky drawn brick being pushed out from a wall, and a group of hands then escaping through the hole left by the brick, the narrative progresses with more depictions of distorted form of human figure move and metamorphosing persistently. This kind of animation is termed as abstract animation, where the content is usually conceptual and hard to be directly understand by its viewer. The imagery provided by abstract creation usually doesn't call for a precise language of interpretation, but since it is grounded from the creator's expression, certain interpretation may take place for the works to be completely reachable. In this essay, we will look closely into *Muto*, and will conduct an interpretive study on the animation. The outcome is hoped to feed the curiosity, contributing in animation studies, enhancing one appreciation on animation aesthetics and to deliver the meaning behind the film.

**Keywords**— *muto*; abstract animation; street art; metamorphosis

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Muto* is a short-animated film published in 2008 by an Italian urban artist known only by his acronym, Blu. Created in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the film has won multiple awards, including Grand Prix award in Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival 2009, Animated Dreams Award from Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival 2009, and NPS Go Short Award of Go Short International Short Film Festival Nijmegen. *Muto* truly is a work of art, with a proper beginning and closure but the animation is very abstract where one cannot simply understand the whole storyline just from watching it once. Clearly, *Muto* belongs to the realm of abstract animation which is defined by Naeim (2017):

*.. refers to a type of filmic style that experiment with forms, narration and even mode of production. Usually, abstract animation forgoes story plot and character development but focuses instead on gesture, imageries and techniques [1].*

Abstract animation does not own the same grammar as mainstream animation where the plot has a standard archetype and materialized base on real references. Abstract animation occurs mainly as the representation of thought or expression of the artist. Therefore, the imagery provided are usually surreal to match the conceptual state of our mind. Once, Buchan the animation scholar describes her experience after watching an abstract animation called the *Street of Crocodiles* (1986):

*I was immediately enthralled by the beauty of the images, but could not pinpoint what was so striking and emotionally moving about the film. I was smitten by its complexity and poetry, but when I tried to describe what I thought was actually happening in the film's convoluted narrative, I was stumped in my attempts to communicate exactly what it was. [2]*

Perhaps, this is what is dreamed by any abstract animation or imagery – to supply the audience with experiences, the unuttered kind. In her interpretation on abstract imagery, Turner explains “the purpose of this imagery was not to depict but to express. Its subject was experience” [3]. Further in her writings, Turner explains that the use of abstract imagery enables the impossible content or meaning to manifest.

*Animation is the ideal medium through which to explore the dimensions of the inner world, the “internal truth” and to explore the possibilities of pure, kinetic, graphic elements [3].*

Obviously, though not in conventional narrative form, the animation or any represented imagery will always link to certain social constructive meaning. This allow us to interpret. Allow us to meet with the connotation of the *internal truth* through the most mesmerizing way – the animation.

Blu has a very distinctive art style. The style that is well established through his numerous street artworks – where Blu is much devoted and better recognized since 1999. His arts have brought him around the world wherever his artistic values were demanded on the walls including England, Germany, Italy and Spain. Yet, his wall paintings are allegorical. His works are proposing moral value, yet tickling with political sentiments.

One of the best to note is his work in Denmark, depicting a giant hand with a pencil pointed towards soldiers who scatters in fear (refer figure 1). In the persona of his aesthetics value, Blu somehow has himself banned in certain countries for his controversial artworks.



Figure 1: Blu's untitled work in Denmark, 2008

Taking its design mostly after human form in grotesque feature or in indefinite appearance, his murals' characters are generally drawn in white with simple rough outline. This is similarly adapted in *Muto*, however, the details are reduced due to economical reason. Yet, what makes the animation greater, the inert abstract forms from his mural is now seen moving, breathing to perform the life of Blu's imagination, or perhaps the life from the *internal truth*. In filming *Muto*, Blu has captured his murals frame by frame through the technique known as stop motion. The same technique employed for *Missing Link* (2019), *Kubo and the Two Strings* (2016) or *Chicken Run* (2000). Unlike the mentioned, which appear smoother with steady shots, *Muto* is captured without any camera stabilizer. As a result, it breathes more life into his animation but with a minor side effect; motion sickness. Further enhancing the quality of this animation is the music and sound effects composed by Andrea Martignoni.

The animation illustrates the constant evolution of a creature starting from just a bizarre six-legged creature transforming into a humanoid figure transitioning across the wall, morphing itself into a complex geometric shape, merging itself with another figure as well as altering the figure. The figure later on offered his head to a giant creature. Subsequently, getting accustomed to Blu's outrageous way of animating, the giant tearing his head

apart again and again until it reveals a perfectly constructed house. From one of the house windows another six-legged creature escapes and hiding itself by digging through the ground. The cycle repeats, the creature metamorphosed (assumingly) from a caterpillar back to its humanoid form with butterfly wings on its back. Entering the finale, the creature rips apart its wings and consume them. The creature grows bigger and bigger by this inexplicable act, before later it vomits out insects that advanced and decompose a giant head until all that is left is its skull.

From our retrospection, *Muto* is representing human evolution or *natural selection* in reference to Charles Darwin's expounding theories. And the process is metaphorical, within the abstract of metamorphosis. Human metamorphosis. There are meanings suggested by every transformation and event as performed by Blu's grotesque character. This, will be discussed further through our analysis next.

## II. DECODING THE METAMORPHOSIS IN *MUTO*

Borrowing the methodology employed in film studies, the analysis here is conducted via interpretive approach. "The purpose of interpretation," says Carroll, "is to assist in audience's understanding of a work and to enhance their ability to appreciate it" [4]. Interpretation is helping on film reading. It helps a reader to critically understand on how the presence of elements in narration and art contribute into one meaningful experience of a work. Our aim is to deconstruct the moving abstract imagery provided in *Muto* and decoding it. In reference to Bordwell's justification, interpretation is a way to:

*..ascribe abstract and nonliteral meaning to the film and its world. Its ascribe a broader significance, going beyond the denoted world and any denoted message to posit implicit or symptomatic meaning at work in the text* [5].

What is more important, as Lina suggested it, by the act of interpretation we may bring forward something that is not apparent to the audience and "the eventual analysis create not only to give in-depth knowledge but to provoke thoughts" [6]. The process will flow through the simple steps from watching the film, breaking down the film, and putting the analysis together. The process may seem simple but cognitively demanding, where we review, analyze, argue and interpret.

In figure 2(a) we see a six-handed creature emerging out from a brick wall, assigning the beginning of life shrouded by secrecy. What is intriguing about this very first part is how it occurs, we the innocent creation of god are eager to savor our existence – thus we crash out ourselves from the forbidden exit or may be entrance. The hands, six of them, symbolized searching. The first we do in recognizing our existence is to search. We motion, whether it is only our mind or our physical due to the searching. This is not simple, where the six-handed creature now defines it all. The hands maneuver the street before an eye emerge on its head. Through this new insight now it found one of its kind, and starts to establish relationship. Somehow, the relationship is tangled by their joined arm. Following this complicated bond, the creatures merge to form a brain, then a head (see figure 2(b)). The head representing the main, the principal, while the brain is the masterpiece of creation, are now

hopelessly lying on the street in the paradox of their messy union.

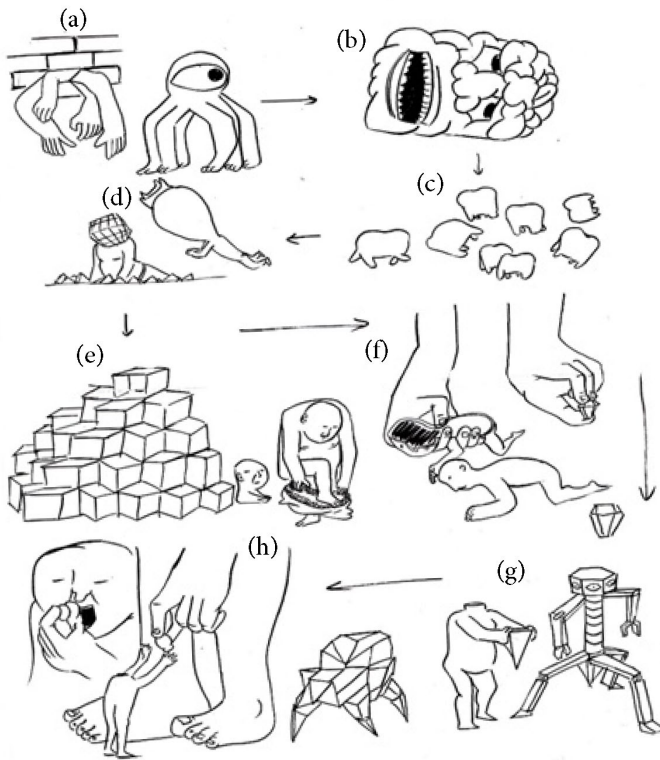


Figure 2: Transformation in Muto. Illustration by Azimuddin

Figure 2(c) illustrates teeth that sprout out of the mouth of the head. Like a wild creature, the teeth run and spreading around. Each taking on different paths. In our interpretation, this symbolizing humans, scattered across planet earth. Each is destined to build their own lives, creating memories and leaving behind history for the next generation to eat, learn and adapt from it. The narrative continues where we see a big headed figure arises from one of the teeth, adorned with what seems to be a crown on his top (see figure 2(d)). Now we start seeing *Muto* in a much smaller scale, narrating the life cycle of an individual. The design of the figure tells plenty about the characteristics of a human baby. The crown however is suggesting the power and authority. Both combination of the crown on a big head is making us see the character as the arrogant and superior being. Unable to walk properly the figure tripped banged its head to the ground, changing the dynamic bulb like shape it used to have into many different forms. The act repeats until he finally ends with a cube head. This signify the evolution of its mind. The process requires repeated deconstruction before the fine ultimate mental state is discovered. The head and the ground, the kneeling and prostrate, are the act of the arrogant, yet in the same time it marks as a self-submission of a creature towards its creator.

The creature continues to morph in figure 2(e) into a small head with a pair of legs jumping across the walls before morphing again into a simple humanoid figure. This reflects us human and our learning process. We learn so much from each step that we take, shaping ourselves from a being without the

capacity of surviving independently (without limbs) into a more autonomous creature. Resuming BLU's oddity, at figure 2(f) a pair of giant arms suddenly holds the humanoid figure and splitting it in half, taking the diamond inside and placing it on a different wall. The diamond later on converts into a robot, moving itself like a machine before shrinking itself back into its former shape. "The soul is placed in the body like a rough diamond", claims Daniel Defoe [7]. Now, like an object of display, the soul (diamond) is extracted from the innocent body of a human by another superior entity. This scene describes how outside factor such as society, schools, institutions, or companies, change us and confine us from the freedom we had. We tend to become inhuman and lost our organic motion that we used to have into a much stiffer and machine-like movement.

In figure 2(g), a headless person then found and attach the diamond core onto its head. The head rapidly mutates into various geometrical forms until finally altering the whole figure into a complete humanoid. Here, we stumble upon two different interpretations: first, the scene is suggesting the passing of an idea, belief, faith or knowledge could stimulate other people. Enabling them to comprehend and lift the weight of being a clueless existence, who wondering around without a goal (in reference to the headless figure). The second translates that at one point in life we might lose our passion or core belief until a miracle happens that helps to guide us back to what our heart desires. The first interpretation gives a more connected narrative compared to the first. The creature then offers its head to a giant as illustrated in figure 2(h). After consuming the head, the giant also experiences the same rapid transformation before melting itself and spitting its heads continuously until a well-constructed house is revealed.

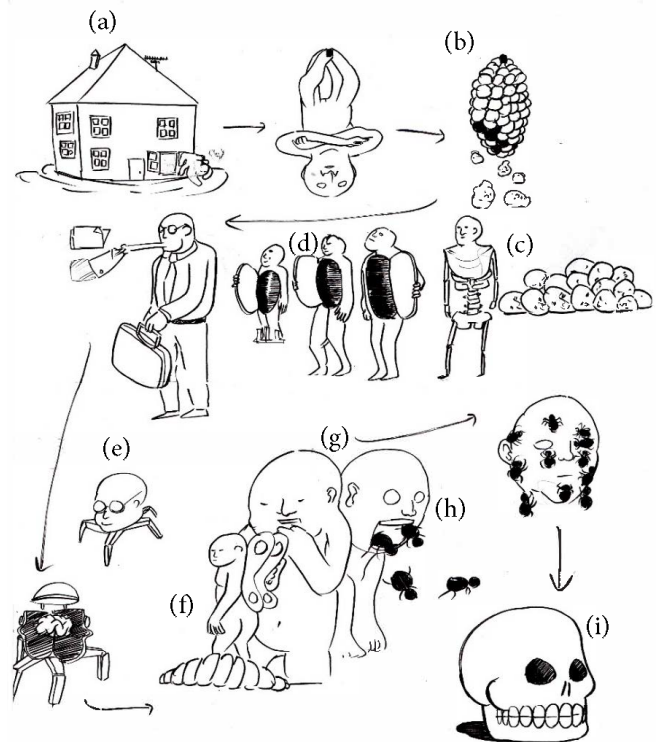


Figure 3: Murals Mutation. Illustration by Azimuddin.

Figure 3(a) projects a creature escaping from the house through the window. The question that came into mind is ‘why did it choose the window instead of the front door? Could it be that the creature is trying to sneak out of the house, leaving the only place it could call home?’ Furthermore, the creature that came out of the window is now six-legged; devolve and crippled, instead of the typical humanoid figure. Entering the next phase at figure 3(b), the six-legged creature then dug its way into a rather small, closed and confined area. Hanging itself upside down budding countless of small heads from itself and dropping it to the ground. Hinting self-meditation, shrugging off its past self. Next in figure 3(c), one of the many heads rises from the mountain of heads, squirming like a worm and forming itself back into a perfect humanoid figure. To describe this particular scene, we can conclude that self-meditation (from the previous quick explanatory) can help to unveil the best quality of an individual, a triumph over their other personality. Figure 3(d) then shows that the figure starts to open a door on his body and came out in a shorter version. We assume this as the result to self and spiritual introspection. Man gives birth to own self, and in *Muto*, this repeats five times. The last thing that came out from the final door is a man wearing a pair of glasses, clothed with a fine fitted suit while holding a briefcase. We see this as the particular moment in life where human start going through trials and tribulations that life has to offer, revealing our true form in existence. Hence, our life force decreases as time progresses. The fine suited man then swallows two papers in front of him, indicating the office life. The man later has his head detached from the body and crawling around the room in its spider legs, please refer figure 3(e). Unable to deal with the strain or burden relied upon him, the only way to escape is by leaving the dead weight of the body and freeing the mind from this hectic. The creature then splits its head open exposing his brain. Quickly the brain rushes its way out of the room, breaking free from the captivity of reality. The brain is made to motion like a caterpillar, inching around, racing with time and preparing the audience with another possible modification.

In figure 3(f) the caterpillar expanded larger, underlining the butterfly evolution with the emergence of a winged humanoid figure; illustrating the metaphor for an individual with freedom, liberated from life’s many responsibilities. Continuing the madness in figure 3(g), quickly the humanoid figure devours both of its wings, savoring its own freedom and he expands. He forgot that freedom (the expansion) need space. Now confined within small space, drops its knees and hands to the ground, his freedom is demarcated. It is said that sadly, freedom only lasts for an instant before reality kicks in, our physique becomes weak, memories of the past start fading away, we lose the ability to be independent. Lastly, figure 3(h) exhibits the creature vomits out insects that later on brutally decompose a head until only a hollow human is exposed. Again, one of BLU’s artistic methods of telling the agony, pain and suffering death brings. Figure 3(i) shows a glimpsed of the skull smiling before closing the curtain of this film, satisfied with the experience it went through.

In a nut shell, *Muto* is a story that illustrates the life cycle of an individual, molding oneself through experiences that we pass in life. Evolving our way of thinking and adapting to our surroundings comparable to animals that had survived, thrived

and evolved their physical appearance to better accept living in the modern era. We refer the event in *Muto* to the nature of human as the *survival of the fittest of the natural selection*, by Charles Darwin [8] - suggesting organism may survive and endure best by adjusting themselves with the environment. Up to this stage, Blu has reveal us the formation of extreme survival.

On the other hand, we can claim the event portrayed in *Muto* as a total *projection* of a being in attaining its own understanding or attunement. Says Heidegger, “*projection* is the existential structure of understanding” [9]. He added, understanding which involve cognition should be interpreted “as an existential derivative of the primary understanding which constitutes the being of the *there* in general” [9]. From Heidegger we get to understand, for a human to discover its own potential, several introspections should take place within his own cognition. This is clearly happening in *Muto*. We see the human in the animation transforms within its mission to define its own existence. Transform for him to interpret his own attunement. “Attunement is *one* of the existential structures in which the being [Sein] of the “there” dwells”, as how Heidegger puts it [9]. In the “silent” event as referred to *Muto* in its origin Italian meaning, though the animation ironically took it place on the open canvas of an urban space, within the noisy surrounding, a human metamorphoses following its mental state before finally dwells within its ultimate attunement and existence.

### III. CONCLUSION



Figure 4: The visible trails of paint being left behind

*Muto* touches on a deeper meaning in life, so much has been said in this analysis yet so many to be discovered and redefined. The metamorphosis of the creature throughout the whole film teaches us the progressive consequence that an idea or knowledge can be the catalyst that advance us forward but on the other hand it might also bring a cataclysm to an individual whom are forced to accept the situation surrounding him or her. Secondly, humans are forged by the experience that they went through in life. All the hardships that life had struck down upon us are used as a tool to further strengthen our ability to carry the burden or responsibility that we have been assigned with. Plus, this forces us to reveal our true self, discarding what we considered to be useless in life. Thirdly, freedom is a limited opportunity that liberates individuals from being compelled

continuously by work, responsibility and such. Though it might be short, that particular moment is what can be defined as being alive. Lastly although it is not stated in the discussion before, one small detail that Blu wants to tell the audience is that every movement or path that we take will leave a mark on this very planet. It is hinted by what is leftover of the previous painting or frames on the walls of Buenos and Baden (refer figure 4). The history of all our actions will be recorded, distinguishing between right and wrong.

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