

# Intertextual relations in the Renoir family: like father like son?

Sandra Regina Ramalho e Oliveira  
Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina

## Abstract

This paper discusses intertextuality, having as an empirical object the relationship between the works of the impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir and his son, the filmmaker of French poetic realism, Jean Renoir. The data were preferably obtained in the exhibition *Renoir Père et Fils*, presented at the Musée D'Orsay, in Paris, from November 6, 2018 to January 27, 2019. After revisiting the biography of each of these exponents of art, eight rooms of D'Orsay's exhibition are briefly analyzed, highlighting the relationship between father and son, as well as extrapolations of these influences, bringing other artists and writers whose works were articulated in the work of Jean Renoir. Finally, some problematizations are presented.

**Keywords:** Intertextuality. Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Jean Renoir. Impressionism. French Poetic Realism. Image Reading.

## The proposal

Juxtaposing the work of two exponents of two different languages, painting and cinema, was the proposal of the Musée D'Orsay, in Paris, showing from November 6, 2018 to January 27, 2019. Both the painter had a production striking for the art of his time, as the filmmaker and actor had for his; or even both for art history and cinema history.

However, in a significant period of his career, the filmmaker was even marginalized, but his work was recognized over time, being considered as a classic of a language that was constituted between entertainment and art.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) was born, lived and died in France, while his son, Jean Renoir (1894-1979), lived between France and the United States, where he died, having finally been recognized there, upon winning an Oscar for the whole of his work, in 1975, at the age of 84.

The curatorial concept of the Orsay exhibition focused on the coincidences between the work of the two producers of visual and audiovisual manifestations – as for the second one.

No innovation, so far, regarding an exhibition proposing a dialogue between two artists, which usually points to intertextualities.

But what is new, and exciting, is the fact that this is about a father and son: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, impressionist painter, and Jean Renoir, filmmaker and actor. And that the great question that haunted Jean Renoir's life and work was exactly his father's influence, to put it another way, his father's work.

Based on this curatorial axis, already highlighted in the title, *Renoir père et fils*, that is, *Renoir Father and Son*, the exhibition was divided into eight rooms, each with a specific theme.

It should not be forgotten, however, that in addition to his father, or exactly provided by him, Jean lived with relevant visual artists and writers, in a time that was lively and fruitful for ideas and different ways of expression, in Paris, in the first half of the 20th century.

In order to reflect on the interrelationships between the work of the father and the son's, before reporting aspects brought up by the exhibition, it is necessary to revisit issues related to each of them.

## **Renoir Father**

Pierre-Auguste Renoir, one of the most relevant French impressionists, was born in Limoges on February 25, 1841, and died in Cagnes-sur-Mer, in the South of France, on December 3rd, 1919.

Impressionism, a movement and a style born in Paris and thoroughly explored, need no introduction; and Renoir, the father, is considered by some to be the creator of this artistic movement, although its name is derived from the title of a Monet's painting, *Impression, soleil levant* (*Impression, sunrise*). However, it is not unappropriated to remember that it is about the modernist movement which inaugurated the detachment from the faithful portrayal of reality, diluting in brushstrokes the effects of light on landscapes and human figures. For that, there was the search for scenarios and outdoor scenes; and the South of France, given the intensity of its light, was the mecca of impressionist painters.

Renoir Father came from a poor family, that moved to Paris in search of opportunities, allowing Pierre-Auguste to start painting, decorating porcelain for a factory that, by mechanizing its processes, dismissed him. He began to study art, even studying at the École de Beaux Arts in Paris; he met the painters Sisley and Monet, introducing himself into the artistic environment, but he didn't even have the money to buy paint; it remained for him to survive on small jobs. Still, he won a prize at the Salon de Paris in 1868; but success was slow to arrive.

Insistently, he painted his companion and model, Lise, and persisted looking for a concept of beauty, portraying nature and women, some naked, as in his series *Baigneuses* (*Bathers*). *Le Moulin de la Galette* (*The Mill of Galette*) was another remarkable work in his

history, but the official consecration took place in 1898, when the French Government acquired the work *Au Piano (At the Piano)*. He attended the Salon, with ups and downs in terms of awards. He lived in Montmartre, where he found reasons for his paintings, as much as when he previously found them in the forest of Fontainebleau.

In the early eighties, in search of new references, Renoir Father went to Algeria and Italy, where he became fascinated with the works of the Renaissance Raphael. This resulted in changes in his work, as in the outlines, which became more defined, and the introduction of more cool colors and new themes. In this decade, Raphael's influence was added to the admiration that Pierre-Auguste already had concerning the work of Jean-Auguste Ingres, a French neoclassical painter. Another aspect related to the period is that Renoir stopped painting outdoors and started working in a studio.

From the nineties on, however, there was a return to the nudes and portraits, since there was a demand for admirers of this type of work and he had his family to support; by the way, it was in this period, in 1894, that his son Jean Renoir was born, the second of the three children of the couple Jean-Pierre and Aline Charigot: Pierre, Jean and Claude. Aline had been his model since before the wedding and was his companion until his death in 1915.

Renoir acquired rheumatoid arthritis, and this completely changed his life, given the physical limitations that this disease imposes: he moved to Cagnes-sur-Mer, in the South of France, the warmest region; despite having difficulties to paint, he worked until his death in 1919.

## **Renoir Son**

Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Aline Charigot's second son, Jean was born in Paris, on September 15, 1894. Filmmaker, actor, writer and screenwriter, he was born and lived in the environment that had his father as a star-king. Unlike many children of genius personalities, throughout history, Jean did not have an identity crisis, did not follow his father's profession, nor did he turn against him; Jean Renoir managed to sustain himself in another professional activity, both beginner and incipient, as much as that many of his films were still silent, and the vast majority, in black and white. He faced difficulties, but did not abandon the cinema and, on the other hand, he never failed to respect and admire his father. This peculiar relationship, perhaps, trying to be different, without neglecting the baggage of visual perception, cult for certain aesthetic standards and sensitivity, inherited from his family's life, resulted in the cinematographic work that interrelates with the visuality of the painting of his father and his colleagues, taking advantage of it to build his own narrative, but charged with an updated nostalgia.

Renoir Son was born when his father was 53 years old, he spent a peaceful childhood and youth between Paris, where he studied at an elite school, and Cagnes-sur-Mer, where the family spent the summer and where he later moved permanently.

After studying mathematics and philosophy in Aix-en-Provence, Jean went to the front in the First World War, and returned injured in 1915, the same year he lost his mother. In convalescence, he became more interested in cinema, while his older brother, Pierre, an actor in theater and cinema, believed cinema was not a career for French people, given the literary tradition of their country.

But it was when he met and married, in 1920, his father's last model, Andrée Heutschiling, later Catherine Hessling, artistic name that she adopted in her husband's films. Jean Renoir goes into this adventurous profession, although he took it very seriously, having prepared himself by watching countless films and analyzing countless ways of directing them. The marriage lasted ten years, but officially lasted twenty-three, and in 1921 was born Alain, their son. And in the early forties, Jean began a relationship with Dido Freire, the daughter of a Brazilian diplomat, a relationship that turned into a successful marriage until his death separated them in 1979.

Between failures and successes, financial problems and the recovery of assets, including works by his father, Jean Renoir left a vast filmography, which contains about forty films, a set that, in addition to receiving an Oscar and conferring on Jean a commendation from the French Government, allowed him to appear as a classic of creative activity known as seventh art.

Renoir Son maintained a critical stance towards society, manifested in his films, which may have been the reasons for his initial failures, as it was out of step with the spirit in force in Hollywood. His characters are not stereotyped, but close to human nature. Given his sensitivity, transferred to his characters, social issues are treated behind essentially personal problems, and without Manichaeism. He then presented authentic characters, "without makeup", as he himself liked to say, with results of a sensual and poetic naturalism, in fluid and honest narratives.

### **The relationship between father and son**

The *Renoir père et fils* exhibition was divided into eight rooms, each one highlighting a specific aspect. The first room clearly already addressed the relationship between father and son, but not only by presenting excerpts from Jean's films and works by Pierre-Auguste, as well as Alfred Sisley, since this one, also an impressionist, was part of the circle of friends of the Renoir family, and the presented works have visual similarity with the filmography of Renoir Son.

But there was another phenomenon of intertextuality in this first room, evidenced in its title, *Partie de Campagne*, the same name for Jean's 1936 film, translated into Portuguese as *Um dia no Campo (A Day in the Countryside)*: it is an adaptation of the French writer Guy de Maupassant's equally homonymous novel.

As the title tells, in Maupassant's literature and in Jean Renoir's film the plots are set in the French countryside, the campaign, as in previous decades, on the banks of the Loing river where Sisley lived and died and where Jean himself bought a house in 1922. In *Partie de Campagne (A Day in the Countryside)*, similarities with paintings by Renoir Father and Sisley are identified, as well as possible domestic scenes experienced in the region. However, according to the curatorship, nonetheless, "the rhythm, the framings and the sound additions show that Jean invents a language proper to this art, still young at the time, which is the cinema".

In room number two, entitled *La création en héritage (Creation as inheritance)*, another ingredient is added: pottery. The works presented in the exhibition perpetuate this three-dimensional language by showing Jean's ceramics, in a practice also influenced by his father, who started in art painting on porcelain, although the Renoir who stood out as the ceramist was another son of Pierre-Auguste, Claude, who lived between 1901 and 1969 and should not be confused with another Claude Renoir, grandson of Pierre-Auguste, a filmmaker, who lived between 1913 and 1993. Room two also shows that Jean Renoir sold almost all his father's paintings to finance his first films, and later bought them back to the extent of his means.

Room three, called *Modèles et portraits (Models and portraits)* focuses on the connections between father and son in the condition of painter and model. There were several pose sessions, Jean as a boy or teenager, alone or accompanied, and these moments of intimacy with his father and with art, familiarizing him with artistic activity, were in a way reciprocated when Renoir Son writes his father's biography, from many notes and photos exposed in the show. Among the portraits painted by his father, the favorite seems to have been *Jean en chasseur (Jean dressed as a hunter)*, from 1910. This canvas accompanied him throughout his life, appearing in the background of some of his photos.

Next, under the title *Un modèle en commun (A mutual model)*, photographs and posters of Jean's films were presented, among others, images and documents that dealt with an important link between father and son: Andrée Heuschling. Andrée was a model of Renoir Father since 1915, and married Renoir Son in 1920, who wanted, in addition to making her his wife, to make her a great actress. Andrée adopted a more palatable name for Hollywood, Catherine Hessling.

The fifth room, entitled *Lieux et temps partagés : Paris et le XIXe Siècle (Shared places and times: Paris and the 19th century)* presented the nostalgia of a Frenchman who had moved to the United States. In the 50s, Jean sets his films in the time of his father, in Montmartre,

showing public dancing parties and the youth of the place. However, Renoir Father was not the only source of Renoir Son, who used the cancan Toulouse-Lautrec's aesthetic as well.

The next room, the sixth, under the title of *Adapter Flaubert, Zola, Mirabeau (Adapt Flaubert, Zola, Mirabeau)*, showed that even though he never wanted to bring his father's life to the screen, he always evoked Renoir Father's time and his family's atmosphere, adapting to the cinema Flaubert, Zola, Mirabeau, writers friends of his father, and who set their novels in places similar to those painted by Renoir Father. The naturalism of these authors satisfied Jean's intentions to make a realistic cinema and addressing everyday issues.

The penultimate room, number seven, had as its theme *Cagnes et Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe (Cagnes and Lunch on the Grass)*, addressed the making of a film in 1959, whose title reproduced that of a classic work by Manet: *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. The filming took place at a Renoir family estate, Collettes, in Cagnes, southern France. In addition to these relationships, while at the time other filming took place in studios, Jean Renoir insisted on filming preferably outdoors, capturing the type of image so dear to impressionists. Perhaps these nostalgic aspects were responsible for the public's lack of understanding at the time.



Image 1 – *Le(s) déjeuner(s) sur l'herbe*, Édouard Manet's canvas (1863); Jean Renoir's film scene (1959). Source of the images: Wikimedia Commons. In: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Édouard\\_Manet\\_-\\_Le\\_Déjeuner\\_sur\\_l'herbe.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Édouard_Manet_-_Le_Déjeuner_sur_l'herbe.jpg); The New Yorker. In: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/watching-sandy-with-jean-renoir>. Access on: Feb. 2019.

The last room, under the title *Le Fleuve (The River)*, is homonymous to the title of a 1951 film, with a plot adapted from a novel by Rumer Godden, shot in India, near Calcutta. His first color film, in which Jean ventures into the field so well dominated by his father, the one of the colors. But in this film, Jean alludes to Matisse and Dufy, not denying it, but discussing their heredity. However, another contemporary filmmaker, Martin Scorsese, declares that in this film the feature of the Impressionists is recovered without hesitation, especially in landscapes; but

as a tribute to Jean's efforts to disconnect from his origins, which is expressed there, in the discourse and in the images, "some universal thing".

### Some considerations

To what extent can previous ideas, recorded in words, sounds or images, serve as a stimulus for their updating, their opposition, or their criticism? To what extent traces or marks of pre-existing manifestations found in later works can cause them to be disqualified or have their value minimized?

The exhibition *Renoir Father and Son* managed to achieve its goal, expressed in the chosen title. It would not be an arduous task, since, among the various forms of expression developed by Jean Renoir, each one shows some intertextual reference to his father's work. Although, in order to develop that narrative, in the exhibition it was necessary to organize, in addition to paintings and films, also manuscripts, costumes of film characters, posters, ceramic pieces and models, all coming from different places, some being for the first time in France.

In addition to so many connections between father and son, among the various books that Renoir Son wrote, one of them is entitled *Pierre-Auguste Renoir, mon père (Pierre-Auguste Renoir, my father)*, from 1962, reissued by the Gallimard publishing house in Paris in 1981, which attests not only to the appreciation and filial love, but the professional admiration of one human being for another. In another of his books, entitled *Ma vie et mes films (My life and my films)*, Jean Renoir states: "I spent my life trying to determine my father's influence on me".

In the exhibition, there are evident quotations, as in his films, where Jean Renoir includes a lengthy scene of two women in 19th century costumes walking smoothly in a canoe on a river, as if giving movement to paintings by Monet, Morisot or Renoir himself.

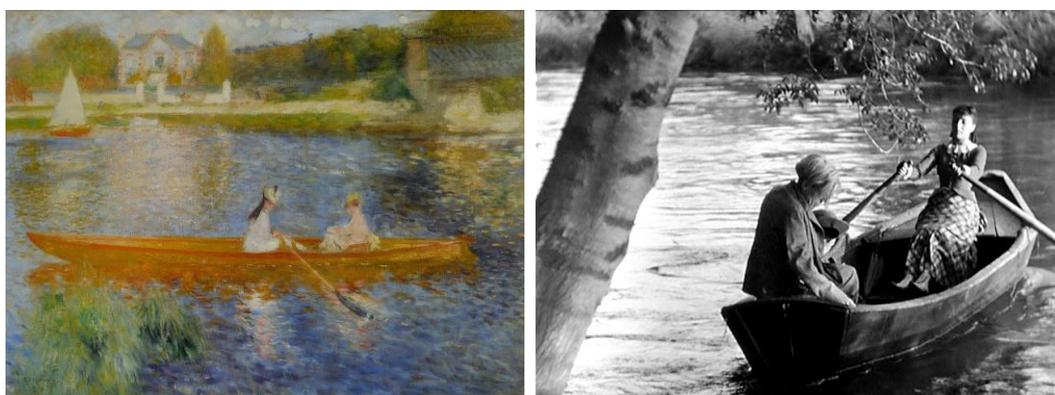


Image 2 – *La Yole* (1875), Pierre-Auguste Renoir's painting; *Partie de campagne* (1936), Jean Renoir film's scene. Source of the images: Wikimedia Commons. In: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pierre-Auguste\\_Renoir\\_-\\_La\\_Yole.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pierre-Auguste_Renoir_-_La_Yole.jpg); Senses of Cinema, In:

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2010/cteq/partie-de-campagne/>. Access on: Feb. 2019.

Another evident quote happens after an internal scene, in a bar, where two men talk at a table by the window and, suddenly, the window opens and in the garden you can see the work of Renoir Father, *La balançoire* (*The swing*), modified, with two women on the swing instead of one, but wearing costumes from the same period; the movement and the sounds give the scene the joy of fun in a Montmartre garden, a feeling that can only be perceived by the scene being brought to life. It's impactful. Would Renoir Son be complementing his father's intentionality, adding to the joy that the statics of a painting make it difficult to express?

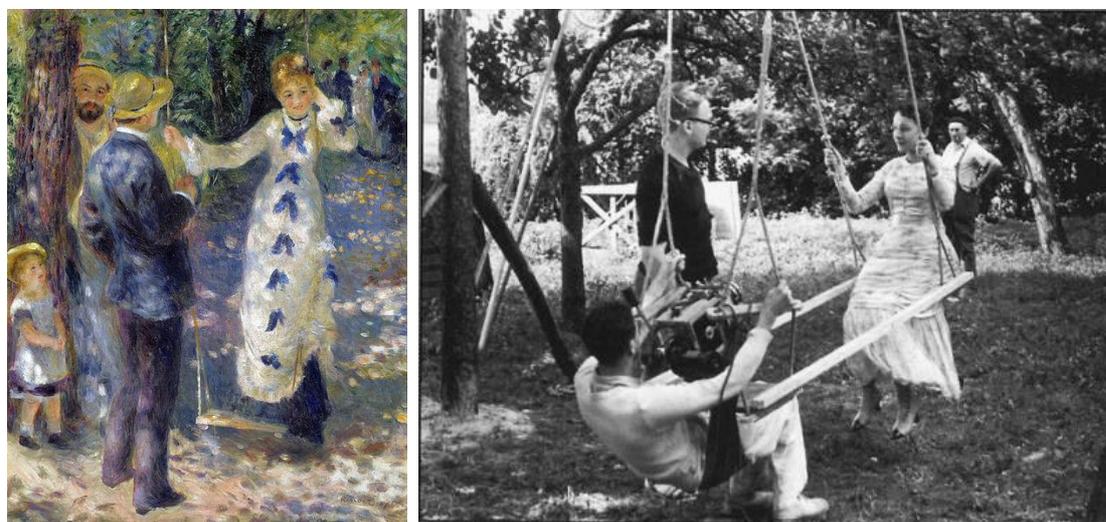


Image 3 – *La balançoire* (1876), Pierre-Auguste Renoir's painting; picture of *Partie de campagne* filming (1936), Jean Renoir's film. Source of the image: Wikimedia Commons. In: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Swing-Renoir.jpeg>.; *Ouvre les yeux*, In: <http://ouvre-les-yeux.fr/unepartiedecampagnejeanrenoir1936labalancoireimpressionniste-1/>. Access on: Feb. 2019.

Relationships between father and son's production are more evident, starting with the surname; but intertextualities are not just due to genetic ties. Rather, the social environment, the spirit of the period, and of course, the environment and family situations, which were open to French intellectuals, both visual artists and writers. This is observed in other intertextual processes carried out by Jean, not only in relation to his father, but also in the adaptation of novels by notable French writers, such as Guy de Maupassant, Émile Zola and Honoré Mirabeau, for scripts of his films, in processes from verbal to audiovisual language translation. As for visibility, his father is not the only source of intertextuality, as there are also evocations of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri Matisse and Raoul Dufy, as well as André Derrain, Man Ray and Georges Braque. In the case of Jean Renoir, it seems that what he wanted to record

in his works, was the spirit of an era in which he partly lived and that eluded him, giving rise to a nostalgia period.

Thus, time and scenery, autumn colors, costumes and habits, such as riding a canoe or playing on swings, all contribute to the visual interrelations between the work of father and son, or the work of the son relating the time in which his father lived. In 1979 Renoir Son declared to the publication *Cahiers du Cinéma (Cinema's Notebooks)* that

if certain passages and certain costumes can resemble my father's paintings, this is for two reasons: first, because it happens in a time and places where my father worked a lot, in his youth; afterwards, it is because I am my father's son and everyone is necessarily influenced by their parents. (apud Musée D'Orsay).

Regarding intertextuality studies, it is interesting to verify not only the similarities, but – and especially – the differences. What are the modifications proposing us? Different ways of life? Diverse ways of seeing? New possibilities of feeling? What changes did Jean Renoir's signature imprint on the raw material he took from his father?

Prior to this, in the last century, intertextual presences called influences, coincidences, or inspirations were not always well seen. So much so that the filmmaker François Truffaut, exponent of the French movement *nouvelle vague*, or “new wave”, publicly acknowledged that the history of cinema owed Jean Renoir, because he believed him to be the precursor of this film aesthetic. Recognizing a debt means admitting, in its own environment, the absence of recognition.

In contemporary times, on the contrary, the memories and evocations of previous works are no longer romanticized as mere inspirations and are ostensibly assumed as appropriation, pastiche, parody. And it is in the folds of differences, in omissions, additions, displacements and changes that the effects of meaning in the work of recreation are nested.

Ribeiro (2008) synthetically states what this new paradigm is, in fact, pointed out by Duchamp in his emblematic *ready-made*, and also is the paradigm appropriated by art producers, mainly from the second half of the 20th century:

Many were the artists who looked for ready images or ready ideas, influenced by Roland Barthes' post-structuralist theories. But it is from the nineties that an increasing number of artists interpret, reproduce or appropriate works, ideas, images, objects, products or cultural elements, as a response to the multiplication of the cultural offer, and more indirectly, to inclusion within of the art world in ways hitherto ignored or depreciated. (pp796-797).

Thus, it is clear that the linguistic phenomenon that is intertextuality, whether in the mode of appropriation, interpretation, quotation or another name that is intended to be given to analogical relations between visual, syncretic or interlinguistic texts, as they are many, increasingly it is present in contemporary art, to desecrate art, or to promote social criticism, or to be the object of art's self-criticism, these being some among so many possibilities.

Furthermore, there is an underlying reflection on the sustainability of the planet, questioning the uncontrollable capitalist production of superfluous. Isn't enough everything that is already in the universe? Is it not possible to better explore what we have, reusing it, in a broad sense? Ribeiro continues to state that

such strategies of appropriation of existing visual forms represent a reaction to the overproduction of images in the world. Overproduction is no longer experienced as a problem, but as a cultural system. (2008, 797).

The relations of analogies between the productions of the impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir and his son, the writer, actor and filmmaker Jean Renoir were taken as an empirical object for the study of a larger theoretical object, intertextuality, from the exhibition *Renoir Père et Fils*, which took place at the Musée D'Orsay in Paris, from late 2018 to early 2019.

What has been observed is that Renoir Son never challenged his father's influence, on the contrary. On the other hand, the fertile and sensitive cultural environment, populated by French writers and painters from the heyday of the local intellectuals, enabled him to establish points of contact not only with his father's work, but with those of other painters and writers.

In the same way, it was known that Jean Renoir's work was not initially understood by the public or even well accepted by critics, and that only the long life and the arduous battle to establish, through publications in which he tried to place himself, made possible his work to be recognized: he received an Oscar in 1975, and in 1976 he received an award from the French Ministry of Culture, three years before his death.

What is perceived, in terms of dialogues between artistic manifestations, is that today all the arts make use of previous artistic works, for different reasons. Therefore, today Jean Renoir would have no problems with his intertextual poetics; or, otherwise, today he can be considered not only a precursor of the French *nouvelle vague*, but also of contemporary art, in terms of appropriations, quotations, in short, creations interspersed with previous works.

On the other hand, there is still a reason for continuing to study intertextualities: more important than identifying the similarities between manifestations is, next, to look for differences, so that one can understand the existence of changes in time and space gaps, and its meaning for its time and for art.

The grandeur of the works of both members of the Renoir family has determined diverse investigations and explorations. Renoir Father, perhaps because more time has passed since his existence, and even given the publication of his biography by his son Jean, is better known. But Renoir Son's diverse production, even though he also wrote about his life and his films, still offers much to be explored, both from the perspective of intertextual relations, but still from

other points of view, such as politics, sociology, psychology, semiotics, and even, specifically, cinematographic language.

The case of the interrelationships between the work of filmmaker Jean Renoir and his father, Pierre-Auguste, deserves more accurate and deeper analysis. It could be the subject of a dissertation or thesis. What was intended here in this synthesis, was to show to a larger audience, especially to the Portuguese-speaking one, this potential discovered and evidenced by Musée D'Orsay.

## References

- BARTHES, Roland. Théorie du texte et intertextualité. In: RABEAU, Sophie. *L'Intertextualité*. Paris: Flammarion, 2002.
- FEIST, Peter H. *Pierre-Auguste Renoir 1841-1919: um sonho de harmonia*. São Paulo: Taschen, 1990.
- FIORIN, José. Luiz. *Introdução ao pensamento de Bakhtin*. São Paulo: Ática, 2008.
- GENETTE, Gérard. La transtextualité ou l'intertextualité redéfinie. In: RABAU, Sophie. *L'Intertextualité*. Paris: Flammarion, 2002.
- HOLZWARTH, Hans Werner (org). *Arte Moderna 1870-2000*. São Paulo: Taschen, 2012.
- KRISTEVA, Julia. L'acte de naissance de l'intertextualité ou l'espace de la signification. In: RABAU, Sophie. *L'Intertextualité*. Paris: Flammarion, 2002.
- MUSÉE D'ORSAY. *Renoir Père et Fils: visite de l'exposition*. Paris: nov. 2018 – jan. 2019.
- OLIVEIRA, Ana Claudia. *Neolítico: Arte Moderna*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1987.
- RENOIR, Jean. *Ma vie et mes films*. Paris: Flammarion, 2005.
- RIBEIRO, Virgínia Cândida. Apropriação na arte contemporânea: colecionismo e memória. In: MAKOWIECKY, Sandra; RAMALHO E OLIVEIRA, Sandra. *Panorama da Pesquisa em Artes Visuais: Anais do 17º Encontro Nacional da Associação Nacional de Pesquisadores em Artes Plásticas /ANPAP*. Florianópolis: UDESC, 2007.
- TARANILLA, Carlos Javier. *Breve Historia del Arte*. Madrid: Ediciones Nowtilus, 2017.
- WEBER, Patrick. *Histoire de l'Art*. Paris: Libro, 2009.