

# Connectionism

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In our modern world, there are many visible connections. A cable can be a connection between electricity and light, or between electricity and your phone for charging. A hug is a connection between two bodies. Lighting is a connection from the air to the ground. A chain can be the connection of a lamp that is hanging on the ceiling. These connections are visible and understandable. Often, we can explain why these connections happen or what they do. However, there are many more invisible connections in our world. Some connections are explainable due to technology, like WiFi, Bluetooth, GPS, and phone calls. You can't see them, but they are built on known theories. On the other hand, and this is where it becomes interesting, there are invisible connections that are less explainable. These include, among others, the real love for a specific person. Why do you fall in love with that person and not the other? This raises other questions: do we have a destined person to fall in love with? Or are there more people with whom we could fall in love? There is also the invisible connection of friendship. What does it take to become friends with someone? Is there such a thing as a 'soulmate'? Why do certain people have many friends and some people only have a few? And there is the invisible connection of family. The strong connection that you have with your parents and your siblings. How can an adopted family member feel like family? Many people feel connected to their religion. A common denominator can invisibly connect a group of people. You can catch yourself feeling connected to a certain artwork that you encounter. Why do people feel connected to an artwork, when others don't feel that connection at all? You can be connected to your roots, to places, to nature. Connection to nature such as plants, trees, and flowers.

In this essay I will not answer these questions about invisible connections. However, I will illustrate these invisible connections that are used as a strategy in certain artworks. In the artworks, the strategy is used as an attempt to make the connection visible, and therefore more understandable. Here, it is not the connection between the artwork and the audience that is illustrated, or the connection that evokes in you when you feel connected to an artwork. This strategy is used in the artwork itself.

This strategy is also not a form of representation, although the artworks that I am going to discuss can also include representation. Representational art uses real objects as the main source to create an artwork [1]. It embodies recognizable objects which are very specific and close to reality. In connectionism as strategy, the link can be made to something close to reality, as more in a symbolic manner. Because it represent the invisible connections of the real world. However, most artworks in representation accurately depict real objects. And since invisible connections cannot be defined as objects, but rather as a concept, connectionism can be distinguished from representation.

## The Red Thread - Ann Hood

In this novel *The Red Thread* by Ann Hood, the term "Red Thread" refers to a Chinese belief that in our world, certain people are destined to be together [2]. These individuals are connected from birth by an invisible red thread. This thread can be stretched over distances but cannot break. This serves as an explanation of why certain people are connected to each other (and why others are not). Over a lifetime, the thread shortens until connected individuals meet.

In the story, an adoption agency named "The Red Thread" is run by a single woman who lost a baby herself [2]. This agency is specialized in matching Chinese children with American families. The red thread symbolizes the connection between the children and the key figures in their lives: their birth parents and their adoptive parents. The novel carefully works out the various ends of these threads. The stories of Chinese families who must give up their babies are discussed in depth, as well as the processes of the adoption agency, and the experiences of the families receiving the babies.

The concept of connectionism is mainly expressed through this Chinese myth of the red thread, providing insight into why certain babies end up with specific families. The thread symbolizes the unseen yet powerful connections among the diverse characters, regardless of their backgrounds, roots and experiences. It illustrates a complex web of connections between cultures and individuals, suggesting the encounters in the novel are predestined. Each character engages in this journey for their own unique reasons and beliefs.

## I and the Village - Marc Chagall



Figure 1: *I and the Village* (1911), Marc Chagall

Another approach to connectionism is illustrated by the work "I and the Village" by Marc Chagall (see figure 1). Marc Chagall, a Belarusian and French artist is primarily known for his characteristic visual art [3]. Chagall lived in Russia until 1910, where he studied art, before moving to Paris to advance his artistic techniques and skills. In 1911, he created "I and the Village". The painting serves as a memory of his childhood in Vitebsk, Belarus (formerly part of Russia), where he grew up. [4].

The painting "I and the Village" illustrates the strategy of connectionism in various aspects. The painting itself, a memoir of Chagall's roots, represents the relationship of Chagall to his home. The dream-like quality

of the painting serves as an insight in his view of his hometown. The central figures are catching your attention immediately. These and multiple other floating figures and elements are all interconnected in a surreal way. A notable detail is the thin line connecting the eyes of the painted person and the animal, symbolizing a deep understanding between the animals and humans. Furthermore, the figure is holding the tree of life, suggesting the connection of humans and nature. The presence of the necklace with a cross on the person and the illustration of an orthodox Jewish church indicates the connection to religion. Considering Chagall's roots and family, who were Hasidic Jewish and living in Vitebsk, a city with a Jewish community [3], this detail could also symbolize his connection to his Jewish heritage.

## M.I.K.E

In nature, there are a lot of things that we as humans still not understand. One example of this might be trees and their power to connect with the environment [5]. They are not just individual organisms but vital components of a larger network, interacting and communicating with this network. This forms a complex web in our natural environment of multiple connections that are invisible for humans. Trees can respond and adapt to changes in the environment, each tree species in its own manner because of its unique characteristics. Trees can grow through generations long, saving memories of their experiences and changes during its lifetime. They mark the passage of time within a forest and form the central characters in the narrative of the forest's life cycle. As for other species, trees are essential for them to survive as they are hosts to various species such as fungi and birds.

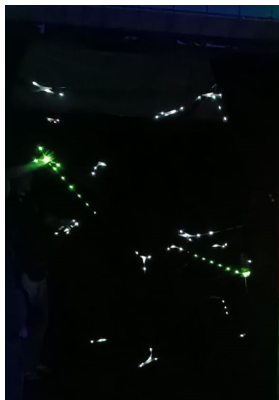


Figure 2: *M.I.K.E* (2023), TU Delft

A group of students from the TU Delft made an interactive installation based on the complex and fascinating network of tree roots (see figure 2). A perfect visible illustration of a normally invisible connection of nature, as explained above. The installation is existing of a multiple illuminated threads and nodes, which together are forming a web. As audience, it is possible to interact with the web. When touching the nodes, it creates a coloured signal to another node, illustrating the communication network that trees form within the environment.

The connectionism strategy is implemented in such a way that the invisible network of tree roots is made visible for the audience. On top of that, viewers can actively engage in the web of nodes to experience the biology behind it and to understand the idea of a communication system that lies in the network of tree roots. The darkened room serves not only the illumination of the network, but also reflects the real ground where the tree roots are located.

## Dance Me to the End of Love - Argentine Tango by Lindsey and Ricardo

From nature, we move on to connections between humans. The Argentine Tango in itself is a perfect illustration of connectionism. I followed a few lessons in learning how to dance the Argentine Tango. While dancing the Argentine Tango you have to be full of trust for your partner as you lean in towards one another. By leaning in, you can sense and feel every little movement from your dance partner, enabling you to move along. As a dance couple, you therefore move as one. The Argentine Tango distinguishes itself from other dance genres because in most genres you have to learn a choreography or dance moves while in Argentine Tango this is not necessary. You have a few building blocks, but for performing or dancing you do not need a choreography. This is seen in the improvised act by Lindsey and Ricardo [6].

In this dance performance, connectionism is illustrated by the improvised way of dancing. The couple is moving together as one, demonstrating the relation between them. If the balance is not right, this will be directly reflected in the dance. As this is not the case, they are full of trust, leaning in, being close enough to feel every movement. They are perfectly synchronized, showing the

affection and alignment. For me, this can be a direct reflection of perfect love. If love is imbalanced, you directly feel that there is something wrong. Love is based on trust, leaning on one another. You do not learn how to love if it is real, it is there or not, equal to the improvised Tango that does not have to be learned.

## HEARTSYNC - Nino Basilashvili

Lastly, I want to discuss the implementation of connectionism between other people in a performance artwork by Nino Basilashvili. As an artist, Nino Basilashvili is always looking to implement connection in her artworks [7]. During her life, she came to the conclusion that to embody a sense of connection, you have to connect with yourself and the environment. She often includes biofeedback in her artworks, as in her installation HEARTSYNC. Here, she uses biofeedback in the form of heart rate data within a group of people. In this performance, heart rate data of individuals is visualized and ultimately synchronized when connection is experienced (see figure 3). The visuals are getting more complex once the group is more synchronized.

Connectionism in this performance is illustrated in the visualization of both your own heart rate and the pattern that represents the heart rate of the group. It shows that a group of people can connect with each other on a deep, normally invisible level. Visualizing this with real data from the group creates a deeper understanding of these connections that are also present in the real world.



Figure 3: *HEARTSYNC* (2022), Nino Basilashvili

## Conclusion

Connectionism in art is a way, an opportunity, to visualize the invisible. To create a deeper understanding in connections in different dimensions. Artworks ranging from visual arts, performance arts and interactive installations illustrate these invisible connections to one another, to heritage or to nature. Artworks in literature give meaning to these connections by illustrating these invisible connections by something meaningful. As for me, Connectionism is an important strategy which can bring insights and meaning to our lives.

## References

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