Intertextuality

Graham Allen (University College Cork)

Intertextuality has been a much used term since its first introduction by Julia Kristeva in her work of the late-1960s, notably her essay of 1969, translated as "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (reprinted in Toril Moi, ed. *The Kristeva Reader*), on Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*, his theory of carnival and other aspects of his dialogic account of language and literature. The fundamental concept of intertextuality is that no text, much as it might like to appear so, is original and unique-in-itself; rather it is a tissue of inevitable, and to an extent unwitting, references to and quotations from other texts. These in turn condition its meaning; the text is an intervention in a cultural system. Intertextuality is therefore a very useful concept – indeed some would say essential – for literary study, as it concerns the study of cultural sign systems generally. It is frequently misused by critics and commentators and has migrated away from the original significance it had in the work of Kristeva, Roland Barthes and other theorists associated with French post-structuralist theory of the 1960s and 1970s. Intertextuality is, in a sense, at this stage of its history, impossibly freighted with meanings and uses; the intertextual networks and chains of significance set going by the concept intertextuality are now almost impossible to contain, cover and summarize. It is therefore important to try to clarify what intertextuality is not: intertextuality should not be, but frequently is, used to refer to literary relations of *conscious influence* (between, for example, Samuel Beckett and James Joyce, or P. B. Shelley and William Wordsworth). Intertextuality should not be, but frequently is, used to refer to the *intentional allusion* (overt or covert) to, citation or quotation of previous texts in literary texts. This is a term, it would appear, which possesses within it a potential for misuse; a potential which is still today regularly activated by literary and cultural critics. To understand the concept, therefore, we need to look closely at what it meant for post-structuralist theorists like Kristeva and Barthes and then to survey some of the other, significant ways in which it has been employed in subsequent theoretical and critical work.

Kristeva's invention of the concept intertextuality comes in the context of her work on semiotics and literature, partly collected in English in her *Desire in Language* and *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Part of Kristeva's task here is to introduce to a French-speaking audience the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian linguist and literary critic, who was at this stage little-known. The dialogic understanding of language, and especially the language of the novel, is a major starting point for the post-structuralist concept of intertextuality. Kristeva imports Bakhtin's account of the dialogic in language into the French theoretical context of the late-1960s and in this way assists a more general movement away from a structuralist understanding of literature towards the post-structuralist notion of *the text*. A text for Kristeva, along with Barthes, is to be understood as a linguistic phenomenon which has its origin not in the intention of the author, but in the multiple discursive contexts of the immediate culture of that text and that author. As Barthes explains in his famous essay of 1968 "The Death of the Author", "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation." Intertextuality, as a concept, signals the death of the Romantic notion of what Barthes calls the "Author-God" (the author as origin of all textual meaning) since it recognises that the language an author employs is taken from the vast interconnecting discursive fields of signification and meaning within which both the author and the reader exist and come to consciousness. Barthes, at the beginning of "The Death of the Author", employs one sentence from Balzac's short-story *Sarrasine* to make this point: "This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility." Barthes's question about this sentence is simple: "Who is speaking?" The contexts of the sentence are complicated and involve a castrato disguised as a woman, and an artist (Sarassine) who wishes to believe in the feminine appearance rather than the

disguised (masculine) reality. For our purposes, however, we might simply focus on the word "sensibility". What does it mean to read the word "sensibility" in this sentence? Is Balzac in control of all the potential meanings contained in this one word? The answer is clearly no, since the word "sensibility" is intertextual and has a vast array of potential meanings in the nineteenth century, including literary, ethical, philosophical and even medical (or at least physio-and psycho-logical). The word "sensibility" is employed by Balzac, but there is no hope of him being able to control its potential meaning. This is because the word derives from and has a multiple significance in a number of discourses active in Balzac's and, differently, our own time. Balzac in using this word has introduced multiple threads from already existent discourses; this one word, like all of Balzac's other words, helps to make his short-story *a text*. A text is intertextual; its meaning is not contained within itself but exists between texts, which is to say a text's meaning exists in the text's relation to the numerous other texts which go to make up the multiple discourses of culture. Kristeva and Barthes place a great deal of emphasis on the *between-ness* of the text, the fact that meaning exists between texts rather than inside (as a kind of possession, identity or secret to be discovered). When we read texts intertextually we immediately go outside of them in our search for meaning, since a text considered intertextually has no inside or, to be more specific, a text's *inside* comes from that field of meaning (cultural discourses) which exists on its *outside*.

We can now understand why intertextuality is not to be confused with influence, allusion and all the other intentional ways in which one writer refers to or quotes from another. Influence remains within a vision of literary works which believes meaning to stem from the intention of an author. Intertextuality involves a recognition that meaning (or what Barthes and Kristeva often call by the French neologism *signifiance*, which might be translated as "that which is produced by signs") lies between texts in networks which are ultimately only partially recoverable, only partially readable (or traceable). As Barthes puts it, the text is:

> woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?) antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony. The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the "sources," the "influences" of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, un-traceable, and yet *already read;* they are quotations without inverted commas.

Barthes and Kristeva frequently figure the literary text as *infinite* in its potential *signifiance*. We should be careful here, however, not to make an error about this infinity of meaning. Intertextual meaning is not infinite in terms of an uncountable quantity of meanings; it is infinite because there is no stable, no literal origin to the meaning of texts. We cannot simply go back to the first recorded use of the word "sensibility" to find the meaning of that word in Balzac's sentence. Such an act, in fact, would be to strip that word of all its potential significance. The crucial word here is potential, since texts viewed intertextually do not have their meaning until they are read. It is the reader, as Barthes famously asserts, who traces and explores the intertextual and so activates meaning. This is what Barthes and Kristeva mean by the word *signifiance*, a word which recognises that texts are potentially infinite in their meaning since readers activate (and activate differently) the intertextual meaning of the texts they read. In considering the intertextual potential (the *signifiance*) of the word "sensibility" in the Balzac sentence, for example, a scholarly reader who has studied the history of the term in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may be conscious of bringing to bear particular knowledge of the resonances of the word into play when reading but this understanding, by virtue of coming from a different time, will not be exactly the same as any contemporary understanding. In considering the intertextual potential (the "signifiance") of

the word "sensibility" in the Balzac sentence, for example, a scholarly reader with a knowledge of the history of the term in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will bring to a reading of that word resonances which other readers, including in this instance Barthes himself, would not. Intertextuality, in this regard, is a major part of post-structuralism's assertion that meaning is generated in reading rather than in an original act of writing. Barthes ends his famous essay on the author with the statement: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."

Kristeva, in coining the term intertextuality, brings a variety of philosophical and cultural discourses to bear. Returning to her use of Bakhtin, it is important to register the presence of his notion of *double-voiced discourse* within the new term intertextuality. In his work, Bakhtin had recognised that when we make utterances in speech or writing we employ words and phrases which have already been used previously in different contexts. Our utterances, in this sense, are never purely or entirely our own and have within them the traces of other previous utterances by other writers and speakers. This is a crucial contribution to Kristeva's account of intertextuality, since for her Bakhtin's account of double-voiced discourse allows us to move away from the constraints of Western logic, which always emphasises what it takes to be the law of singularity on utterances. Kristeva cites the classic Aristotelian law of non-contradiction, which would argue that a thing (including an utterance and a text) cannot be A and –A. Bakhtin in his own work had critiqued those forces in society which would centralise and generate a normative account of language. He calls this monologicism and contrasts it to the dialogic forces of society, which would include the most vital and innovative forms of literature. Kristeva makes a Bakhtinian point, therefore, when she uses the notion of intertextuality and the text to critique Aristotelian logic with its emphasis on singularity and monologic. Such a monologic, she argues, cannot cope with "poetic language," since: "the minimal unit of poetic language is at least *double*, not in the sense of the signifier/signified dyad, but rather, in terms of *one and other*." Following Bakhtin, Kristeva stresses here that in literary language there is always more than a singular meaning, that the text is always addressed to an Other and always emerges from a previous text, a previous utterance, a previous Other. Intertextuality, in this sense, is a translation of Bakhtin's dialogic account of language into the semiotic discourse of French post-structuralism. Kristeva, aware that her term embodies its own theory, in that in the word intertextuality we hear both Bakhtin's approach to language and literature *and* the approach being developed by post-structuralist theory, renames it *transposition* in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, the word *transposition* capturing the manner in which each word in a text is a translation into a new context of a word already previously used in another, prior context. Intertextuality as transposition, that is to say, retains and extends Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic nature of language and the double-voiced nature of the utterance or, to employ the semiotic terminology of Barthes and Kristeva, the sign.

Intertextuality since the work of Barthes and Kristeva has had a rich and extremely varied history. [Readers may wish to consult Graham Allen's *Intertextuality*, The New Critical Idiom (Routledge) for a summary of the major detours and transformations it has undergone during the past four decades. Ed.] Important theorists and critics like Michael Riffaterre and Gérard Genette can be said to employ the term in approaches which bear the continuing marks of a structuralist desire for stabilised meaning. Literary critics like John Frow and Laurent Jenny, to name but two, have shown how important issues of literary genre can be for our sense of intertextual meaning in poetry, plays and novels. Certainly, the unavoidable constraints and pressures of generic codes and conventions can be viewed as a very material and pragmatic level on which intertextuality functions. The term has been employed significantly in most of the important branches of literary and cultural theory, including feminist and post-colonial approaches. Certainly, for both feminism and post-colonialism an

attention to the double-voiced quality of the literary voice of authors writing from a marginalised socio-cultural position is crucial and can be immensely enriched by focussing on concepts of intertextuality. Such uses of the term, however, are frequently caught up in discussions about the value of the classical author's demise for women and post-colonial subjects. The question of whether women or post-colonial subjects are served well or ill by attacks on the notion of authorship continues to be a major issue within literary and cultural theory, and intertextuality as a concept plays a crucial role in such discussions.

Perhaps the most obvious and potentially far-reaching application of intertextual theory and practice in recent years, however, has come in the realm of information technology. Many of the original statements about texts and intertextuality, particularly in the work of Barthes, have been read by theorists like George Landow, as looking forward to the new computer technologies which allow us not only to scan huge networks of textual references but also to develop new hypertextual technologies which appear to allow for a material realisation of the post-structuralist account of the intertextual text. Hypertexts can be studied with links on words and phrases which allow us, at the press of a button, to activate the intertextual dimension of texts presented in these new formats. A hypertextual version of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* or Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* seems on one level to be the practical manifestation of Barthes's account of the text. A hypertext materially appears to demonstrate its lack of autonomy with regard to meaning. It dramatically opens itself out to the intertextual, disturbing that chronological, consumerised approach to reading that Kristeva and Barthes were so keen to challenge through their new theories of the text and intertextuality. A hypertext, in theory at least, allows readers to navigate their way through the text's networks of relations in ways which move us far from any traditional notion of an author-centered work with its singular, hidden meaning. One would, of course, have to imagine hypertext systems which would allow each reader to leave their own intertextual mark upon the text (in terms of new networks of hyper-links to other texts, cultural sites and discursive connections) before one could begin to fully square post-structuralist theories of intertexuality with the new, largely designer-limited hypertexts available at present. However, there are already new hypertext literary productions and even new hypertextual literary genres developing in the world of information technology and the world wide web. Increasingly, hypertextual and other computer systems are developing new possibilities for reading and writing texts, and it does seem as if a good deal of the original vitality of the concept of intertextuality has been transposed into these new areas. One word of caution needs to be given here, however. Intertextuality, from its first articulation in the work of Kristeva and Barthes, has been a term which was pitted against cultural and social forces which would understand reading in terms of consumption. Reading is, for post-structuralist theory, not an easy digesting of stable meaning but a difficult and never-ending process in which loss, excess, surplus, waste noise and repetition all spoil the hygienic notion that reading can find a stable and complete meaning. Information technology, for many reasons, tends to offer us the prospect of an ever increased ability to process and somehow cover (scan, process, bank) textual data. The new hypertextuality is not necessarily a simple realisation or manifestation of intertextual theory; in fact, in our contemporary world the tensions explored by post-structuralism, between work and text, authorial intention and readerly freedom, between what Barthes calls the readerly (*lisible*) and the writerly (*scriptable*), have been transposed into a new domain which requires a great deal of fresh theoretical thought.

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