

# Intertextuality essay



What is intertextuality? How does intertextuality challenge E. D. Hirsch's idea that a text has a single meaning created by its author? Explain with reference to examples drawn from any media format.

According to American literary critic, E. D. Hirsch, in order to interpret a body of text, one must ask one's self the only question that can be answered objectively – “ what, in all probability, did the author mean to convey?” He believed that the author's intended meaning equates the meaning of a text and it is in fact, the reader's duty to uncover the the author's intentions.

“ The meaning of a text and its author's intentions are one and the same.”

Hirsch's concept revolves around the assumption that a body of text is original, and is purely a body of the author's sole “ intentions”. The production of text, if one were to adhere to Hirsch's theory, is therefore exclusive to the author's own ideas and concepts and free of external influence. However, the notions of *langue* and *parole* disputes this idea. According to Barthes in 1984, “ It la langue is the social part of language, the individual cannot himself either create or modify it”.

Furthermore, Ferdinand de Saussure's work on structuralism and semiotics demonstrates the subjectivity of language and can be said to have sewn the seeds for modern concepts of intertextuality (such as those developed by Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva). Intertextuality challenges the idea of a text's ability to be truly original and therefore disagrees with Hirsch's theory. In this essay, I will focus on how conscious intertextuality as well as the semiotics involved in unconscious intertextuality both dispute the idea that the meaning of a text belongs exclusively to its author's intentions.

Julia Kristeva, who was the first to use the term “ intertextuality”, proposed the idea that a text should not be interpreted merely by its words at face value, but also studied based on other works it has adapted and was influenced by. The concept can be further expanded upon by Gunther Kress’ notion of “ ceaseless semiosis” which brings to light the social aspect of a text’s creation.

“ From the beginning, I use materials which I have encountered before, which bear the meanings of their social contexts, to weave a new text which, because it is woven from materials of other texts, everywhere and always connects with those other texts.”

-Kress, 2000

Conscious intertextuality thus enables a reader to participate in this “ ceaseless semiosis” by the identification and application of their prior knowledge to a text, along with creating their own version of the text by combining their existing knowledge gleaned from other texts with the works of others a text is based on (e. g. someone watching a satirical television show such as The Simpsons).

The best example of this sort of intertextuality would be the process of a reader (or surfer) browsing the world wide web. Here, an author cannot control the way in which a reader approaches his or her body of text. There is seldom a linear fashion in which a reader consumes information while surfing the internet. It is common for him or her to absorb only small chunks of texts on one page of a website before being led to an entirely different webpage via links. Through surfing and following links of their choice,

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readers effectively thus begin to construct their own text of sorts as they make their way through various sites on the internet.

Unlike newspapers or most other forms of printed media, intertextuality on the internet is often one of a blatant and conscious nature. Here, almost more so than anywhere else, it is clear that content is not entirely original, nor is it based on an author's sole ideas and concepts. It is common for a great many websites to host a multitude of links, and consist of short articles that link to other sources of information that the work was based on, or that provide further elaboration.

Even on the internet, certain etiquettes are often observed, one of them being the courtesy of giving credit where it is due. A graphic or piece of digital art someone uses on his or her website, for example, often requires credit and a link back to the page of the artist that created it. Upon following the link to the artist's page, one might find further credit and a link to the photographer who provided the stock photograph from which the graphic was created. One then clicks on the link that leads us to a page of stock photography, on which, perhaps, yet another link to the homepage of the model in the photograph might be provided. One visits the aforementioned homepage, and might perhaps chance upon the history of the model or a little story about his or her life. The initial graphic no longer stands on its own, and new history and meaning is produced with every link the surfer clicks, tracing a " path" that paints a story beyond the original piece of art.

Hirsch's idea of a text having one sole meaning – that of the author's – no longer applies. The readers construct their own text, and therefore their own

meanings as they navigate through the internet, often with no apparent logical progression. The existing knowledge they possess, along with their ability to identify the other works a text is based on, shapes their interpretation of an idea being presented. Even the authors themselves often acknowledge the lack of complete originality in their content, and through links and credit on their page, make it obvious that their text is a coalition of ideas and texts by other authors, whose texts are a coalition of ideas and texts by yet, other authors etc.

There are also varying degrees of intertextuality on the internet. Some sites, such as The Onion ([www.theonion.com](http://www.theonion.com)) restricts the level of interactivity on their website by limiting links to only those of their advertisers. However, the content of their site is a testament of classic conscious intertextuality. Much like the Simpsons, “The Onion” is a satire. It parodies legitimate news websites and global current affairs. Readers’ prior knowledge of these affects the way in which they view the site and interpret these satirical “issues” of The Onion.

A webpage that allows for a greater level of interactivity through its onslaught of links is “How To Dress Emo” (<http://www.geocities.com/howtodressemo>). A site that makes fun of a teenage trend in today’s society, the text has potential to be humorous to its reader. However, the degree of appreciation and humour a reader might find in the text depends on the level of the reader’s prior knowledge of the “Emo” trend and sub-culture. Unlike The Onion however, the white text on “How To Dress Emo” is peppered with phrases and words that are grey in colour. Existing knowledge of the internet and html might inform the reader that these grey words and

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phrases are in fact links, and clicking on them will lead them to further sites, games, generators and articles that provide further references and elaborate upon the original article.

The internet has made it possible for authors to quote another piece of work “ wholesale” by simply and conveniently placing a link on their page. The two texts become inevitably intertwined and new meaning is generated as the reader pieces together information gleaned from both works.

Another form of intertextuality is one that is often based on a more subconscious level. Arguing against the idea that a text is an isolated entity, Kristeva once stated, “ any text is the absorption and transformation of another”. The text in question is not limited to only that which is literary in nature, and whatever form it should take is subject to its reader’s or audience’s interpretation based on their knowledge of other existing texts, their cultural literacy and associations they individually produce.

In subconscious intertextuality, interpretation is based on a highly individual level and may even produce meanings that the author had no knowledge of whatsoever, let alone intended.

However, a study of subconscious intertextuality and semiotics is often useful to advertisers who then use these subtle allusions to maximum effect. The reader or audience is often unaware of the subconscious effects an advertisement has on their perception of a product. Nevertheless, through signs in commercials and print advertisements, the meanings an advertiser wishes to convey about a product are presented.

Silk Cut cigarettes in England demonstrates clever advertising in their campaigns. Strict laws and restrictions are imposed on tobacco advertisements in the country, forbidding any association of sports, glamour, success, luxury, masculinity and femininity with tobacco products. Targetting a tobacco advertisement towards a certain market or denomination in society was also banned. Silk cut, however, has managed to get around such stringent laws by the use of semiotics, thus showcasing intertextuality and the ability to generate multiple meanings out of a single text.

In one of their most striking advertisements in the 90's, magazine advertorials often featured a purple silken sheet with a single oval slit in the middle. The connotations were luxurious, sexual and feminine, yet in a way that was subtle and did not violate the advertising code for tobacco. On one hand, one could explain the text as being simply representative of a ruined piece of cloth – no more, no less. Doubtlessly, this would have been Silk Cut's explanation had they been questioned by the law. However, on a more subconscious intertextual level, the colour purple and the expensive silken fabric could have been interpreted as an association with luxury and royalty. The texture of the cloth could also have been seen as an allusion to the smooth nature of a Silk Cut cigarette, therefore making the product appealing to women (despite the fact that targeting a specific gender or market was forbidden). The diagonal slit in the cloth could be easily interpreted as sexual in nature, and representative of a woman's genitalia, thus giving the cigarettes a suggestive appeal.

Through these clever advertisements, Silk Cut became widely known as THE woman's cigarette of choice. They were even featured in the bestselling

novel, “Bridget Jones’s Diary”. In this book by Helen Fielding, the protagonist, Bridget, smokes Silk Cut. The brand is constantly referred to throughout the novel, therefore once again making use of intertextuality. Bridget Jones spends a great deal of the book attempting to quit smoking. However, she is simply unable to curb her craving for the Silk Cut cigarettes. The qualities that have come to be associated with Silk Cut cigarettes through their advertising campaigns, can now be seen as the qualities Bridget desires by smoking Silk Cut.

Once again, Hirsch’s idea of a text bearing only one singular meaning can be easily disputed. The interpretation of the Silk Cut advertisement, as well as the use of Silk Cut cigarettes in Bridget Jones’s Diary, is highly subjective and dependent on the reader’s cultural literacy and existing knowledge.

Intertextuality in the media, both print and otherwise, has become too powerful to ignore, especially in this day and age. The internet, satirical texts, advertisements and books are only some examples that demonstrate the effects other works and a reader’s prior knowledge have on any given text. Intertextuality in its various states, conscious and unconscious, is certainly a valid contention against the theory of E. D. Hirsch.

#### Bibliography, References & Notes

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