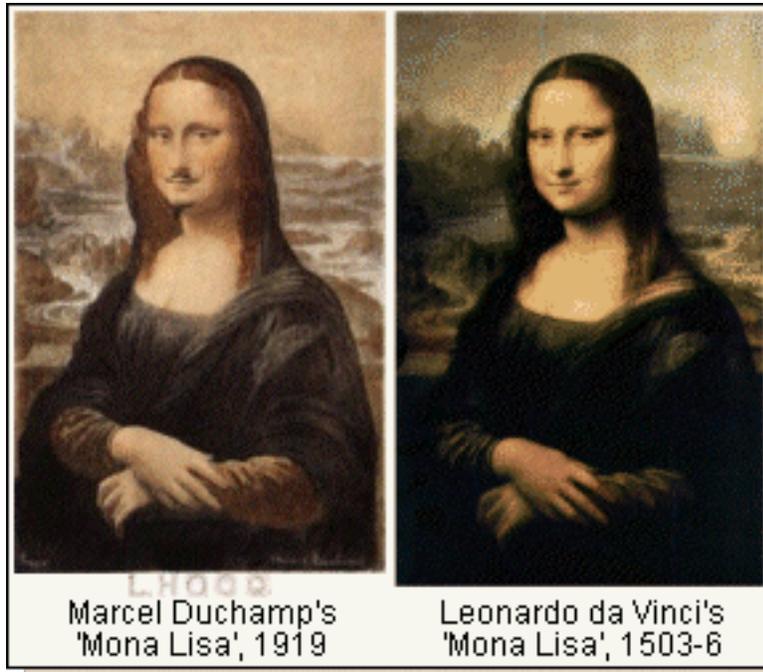


# Intertextuality

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<http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem09.html>



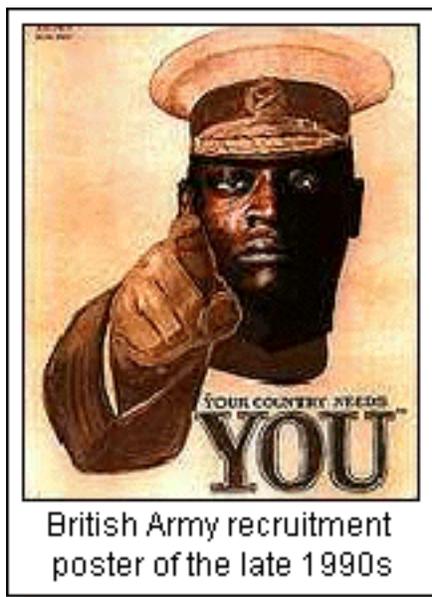
In 1968 Barthes announced 'the death of the author' and 'the birth of the reader', declaring that 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination' ([Barthes 1977, 148](#)). The framing of texts by other texts has implications not only for their *writers* but also for their *readers*. Fredric Jameson argued that 'texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through the sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or - if the text is brand-new - through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions' (cited in

[Rodowick 1994, 286](#), where it was, with delicious irony in this context, cited from Tony Bennett). A famous text has a history of readings. 'All literary works... are "rewritten", if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them' ([Eagleton 1983, 12](#)). No-one today - even for the first time - can read a famous novel or poem, look at a famous painting, drawing or sculpture, listen to a famous piece of music or watch a famous play or film without being conscious of the contexts in which the text had been reproduced, drawn upon, alluded to, parodied and so on. Such contexts constitute a primary frame which the reader cannot avoid drawing upon in interpreting the text.

The concept of intertextuality reminds us that each text exists in relation to others. In fact, texts owe more to other texts than to their own makers. Michel Foucault declared that:

*The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands... Its unity is variable and relative.* ([Foucault 1974, 23](#))

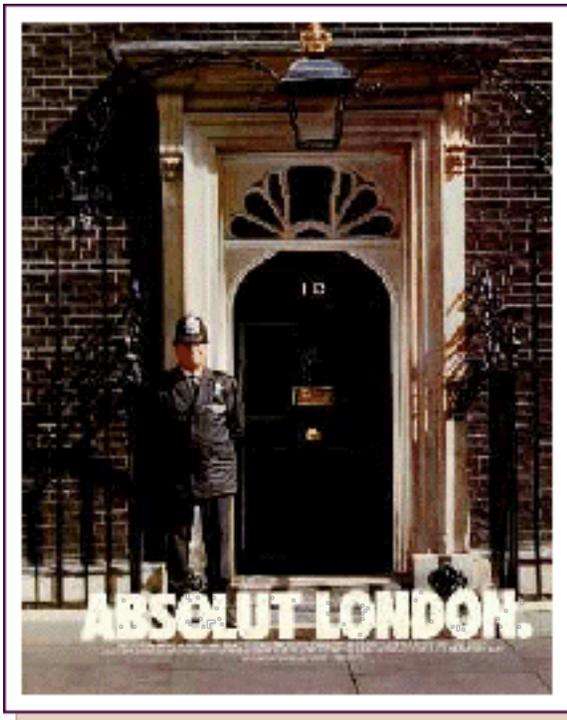
Texts are framed by others in many ways. Most obvious are formal frames: a television programme, for instance, may be part of a series and part of a *genre* (such as *soap* or *sitcom*). Our understanding of any individual text relates to such framings. Texts provide contexts within which other texts may be created and interpreted. The art historian Ernst Gombrich goes further, arguing that all art, however 'naturalistic' is 'a manipulation of vocabulary' rather than a reflection of the world (Gombrich 1982, 70, 78, 100). Texts draw upon multiple codes from wider contexts - both textual and social. The assignment of a text to a genre provides the interpreter of the text with a key intertextual framework. Genre theory is an important field in its own right, and genre theorists do not necessarily embrace semiotics. Within semiotics genres can be seen as sign systems or codes - conventionalized but dynamic structures. Each example of a genre utilises conventions which link it to other members of that genre. Such conventions are at their most obvious in 'spoon' versions of the genre. But intertextuality is also reflected in the fluidity of genre boundaries and in the blurring of genres and their functions which is reflected in such recent coinages as 'advertorials', 'infomercials', 'edutainment', 'docudrama' and 'faction' (a blend of 'fact' and 'fiction').



British Army recruitment poster of the late 1990s

The debts of a text to other texts are seldom acknowledged (other than in the scholarly apparatus of academic writing). This serves to further the mythology of authorial 'originality'. However, some texts allude directly to each other - as in 'remakes' of films, extra-diegetic references to the media in the animated cartoon *The Simpsons*, and many amusing contemporary TV ads (in the UK, perhaps most notably in the ads for Boddington's beer). This is a particularly self-conscious form of intertextuality: it credits its audience with the necessary experience to make sense of such allusions and offers them the pleasure of recognition. By alluding to other texts and other media this practice reminds us that we are in a mediated reality, so it can also be seen as an 'alienatory' mode which runs counter to the dominant 'realist' tradition which focuses on persuading the audience to believe in the on-going reality of the narrative. It appeals to the pleasures of critical detachment rather

than of emotional involvement.



In order to make sense of the Absolut vodka advertisement shown here you need to know what to look for. Such expectations are established by reference to one's previous experience in looking at related advertisements in an extended series. Once we know that we are looking for the shape of the bottle, it is easier to perceive it here. Modern visual advertisements make extensive use of intertextuality in this way. Sometimes there is no direct reference to the product at all. Instant identification of the appropriate interpretative code serves to identify the interpreter of the advertisement as a member of an exclusive club, with each act of interpretation serving to renew one's membership.

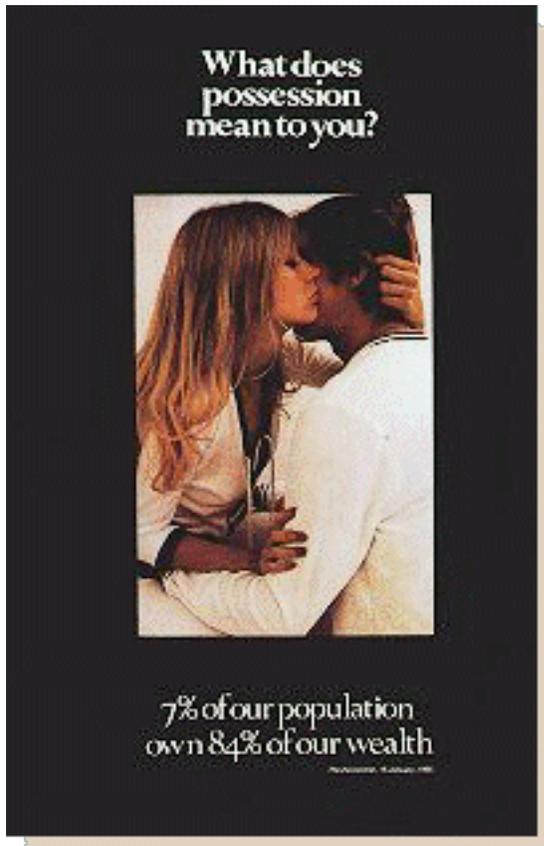
Links also cross the boundaries of formal frames, for instance, in sharing topics with treatments within other genres (the theme of war is found in a range of genres

such action-adventure film, documentary, news, current affairs). Some genres are shared by several media: the genres of *soap*, *game show* and *phone-in* are found on both television and radio; the genre of the *news report* is found on TV, radio and in newspapers; the *advertisement* appears in all mass media forms. Texts in the genre of the *trailer* are directly tied to specific texts within or outside the same medium. The genre of the *programme listing* exists within the medium of print (listings magazines, newspapers) to support the media of TV, radio and film. TV soaps generate substantial coverage in popular newspapers, magazines and books; the 'magazine' format was adopted by TV and radio. And so on.

The notion of intertextuality problematizes the idea of a text having boundaries and questions the dichotomy of 'inside' and 'outside': where does a text 'begin' and 'end'? What is 'text' and what is 'context'? The medium of television highlights this issue: it is productive to think of television in terms of a concept which Raymond Williams called 'flow' rather than as a series of discrete texts. Much the same applies to the World Wide Web, where hypertext links on a page can link it directly to many others. However, texts in any medium can be thought of in similar terms. The boundaries of texts are permeable. Each text exists within a vast 'society of texts' in various genres and media: no text is an island entire of itself. A useful semiotic technique is comparison and contrast between differing treatments of similar themes (or similar treatments of different themes), *within* or *between* different genres or media.

Whilst the term intertextuality would normally be used to refer to allusions to other texts, a related kind of allusion is what might be called 'intratextuality' - involving internal relations within the text. Within a single code (e.g. a photographic code) these would be simply syntagmatic relationships (e.g. the relationship of the image of one person to another within the same photograph). However, a text may involve several codes: a newspaper photograph, for instance, may have a caption (indeed, such an example serves to remind us that

what we may choose to regard as a discrete 'text' for analysis lacks clearcut boundaries: the notion of intertextuality emphasizes that texts have contexts).



Roland Barthes introduced the concept of *anchorage* ([Barthes 1977, 38ff](#)). Linguistic elements can serve to 'anchor' (or constrain) the preferred readings of an image: 'to fix the floating chain of signifieds' ([ibid., 39](#)). Barthes introduced this concept of textual anchorage primarily in relation to advertisements, but it applies of course to other genres such as captioned photographs, maps, narrated television and film documentaries, and cartoons and comics ('comic books' to North Americans) with their speech and thought 'balloons'. Barthes argued that the principal function of anchorage was ideological ([ibid., 40](#)). This is perhaps most obvious when photographs are used in contexts such as newspapers. Photograph captions typically present themselves as neutral labels for what self-evidently exists in the depicted world whilst actually serving to define the terms of reference and point-of-view from which it is to be seen ([Chaplin 1994, 270](#)). For instance, 'It is a very common practice for the captions to news photographs to tell us, in words, exactly how the subject's expression *ought to be read*' ([Hall 1981, 229](#)). You may check your daily newspaper to verify this claim.

Such textual anchorages can have a more subversive function, however. For instance, in the 1970s, the photographer Victor Burgin exhibited posters in the form of images appropriated from print advertisements together with his own printed text which ran counter to the intended meaning of the original ads.

Barthes used the term *relay* to describe text/image relationships which were 'complementary', instancing cartoons, comic strips and narrative film ([ibid., 41](#)). He did not coin a term for 'the paradoxical case where the image is constructed according to the text' ([ibid., 40](#)). Even if it were true in the 1950s and early 1960s that the verbal text was primary in the relation between texts and images, in contemporary society visual images have acquired far more importance in contexts such as advertising, so that what he called 'relay' is far more common. There are also many instances where the 'illustrative use' of an image provides anchorage for ambiguous text - as in assembly instructions for flat-pack furniture (note that when we talk about 'illustrating' and 'captioning' we logocentrically imply the primacy of verbal text over images). Awareness of the importance of intertextuality should lead us to examine the functions of those images and written or spoken text used in close association within a text not only in terms of their respective codes, but in terms of their overall rhetorical orchestration. Evelyn Goldsmith has produced a useful review of empirical research into the relationship between associated texts and images ([Goldsmith 1984](#)).

In media such as film, television and the worldwide web, multiple codes are involved. As the film theorist Christian Metz put it, codes 'are not... added to one another, or juxtaposed in just any manner; they are organized, articulated in terms of one another in accordance with a certain order, they contract unilateral hierarchies... Thus a veritable *system of intercodical relations* is generated which is itself, in some sort, another code' (Metz 1974, 242). The interaction of film and soundtrack in chart music videos offers a good example of the dynamic nature of their modes of relationship and patterns of relative dominance. The codes involved in such textual systems clearly cannot be considered in isolation: the dynamic patterns of dominance between them contribute to the generation of meaning. Nor need they be assumed to be always in complete accord with each other - indeed, the interplay of codes may be particularly revealing of incoherences, ambiguities, contradictions and omissions which may offer the interpreter scope for deconstructing the text.

The relationships between codes within a genre may shift over time, as William Leiss and his colleagues note:

*The growing preponderance of visuals in ads has enhanced the ambiguity of meaning embedded in message structures. Earlier advertising usually states its message quite explicitly through the medium of written text..., but starting in the mid-1920s visual representation became more common, and the relationship between text and visual image became complementary - that is, the text explained the visual. In the postwar period, and especially since the early 1960s, the function of text moved away from explaining the visual and towards a more cryptic form, in which text appeared as a kind of 'key' to the visual. In all, the effect was to make the commercial message more ambiguous; a 'reading' of it depended on relating elements in the ad's internal structure to each other, as well as drawing in references from the external world.* (Leiss et al. 1990, 199)