Ridley Scott, who directed science fiction classics such as *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982) cites the movie *Things to Come* (1936) as providing some of the visual code he used in making the Apple Macintosh “1984” commercial.
Unwitting references

No text is original and unique in itself. Rather each is a mesh of inevitable and perhaps unwitting references to other texts, sometimes quoting from them. Each text intervenes in a cultural system and alters it.

Every text is informed by other texts you have read, and by your own cultural context.

The simplest example of intertextuality is the footnote that indicates a source of information or an influence on the author.

Paths of meaning

The semiotic idea of intertextuality, according to Julia Kristeva (1980) describes texts being placed along two axes:

- A horizontal axis connects the author and viewer of a text.
- A vertical axis connects the text to other texts
- Shared codes unite the axes.

The texts themselves and how we read the texts depends on codes known to the author and the reader. Every text has the codes shared by the author and other authors of other texts imposed upon it.

According to this thinking, instead of examining just the structure of a text, we should study how the structure came into being in relationship to “previous or synchronic texts,” Kristeva writes, where every text is a “transformation” of previous texts.

Every text is informed by an author’s previous work and by other texts. Apple Computer’s “1984” ad for Macintosh (bottom left) came from the creative mind of Ridley Scott (top left), who had directed the sci-fi classic Blade Runner from 1982 (middle left). The ad itself echoed George Orwell’s dystopian novel 1984 (below right) and borrowed from other sci-fi movies, such as Fritz Lang’s Metropolis from 1927 (below middle).
The subconscious mind
Freud identified two processes at work in the subconscious:
- Displacement
- Condensation

Kristeva added a third process, “the passage from one sign system to another.” In this process, she saw the destruction of an old system and the forming of a new one.

Another way to think of it is as a “redistribution” of several different sign systems.

In intertextuality, a variety of diverse meanings overlap.

One or more sign systems are transposed into another or into a “field” of transpositions of many signifying systems.

Displacement
In displacement, we transfer the meaning of one sign to another. It’s often used when we cannot show what we truly mean because of cultural or moral limits. The phallic symbol is Freud’s classic example of displacement, although Freud is alleged to have said, “Sometimes a cigar is only a cigar.”

Condensation
Through condensation, we combine signs or elements of signs together to form a new composite sign. We often combine signs to make a statement. Communicators rely on the viewer to condense the signs into the intended meaning.

This advertisement uses displacement (the palm tree stands for something) and condensation (you combine the signs: facial expressions, body position, the text).
Intertextuality is another way of looking at a media text on four levels:

- **Literal**: What we see without further interpretation.
- **Textual**: Where the image fits in the text.
- **Intertextual**: Similar images called to mind from other texts.
- **Mythic**: The relationship to myths and legends.

Intertextuality is a good way to study how media texts came into being. This involves locating its place among previous texts, especially those that are similar in type, or genre.

In this graphic, the frame in the center from the movie *Unforgiven* (1992) can be read literally as two men in western-style clothing holding guns. We understand it instantly because of other western movies we have seen.

Its place within the text is chronological (vertical images). The story that comes before any one frame informs the story to follow.

The actor and director Clint Eastwood brings with him intertextual expectations of style and storytelling familiar to us from his earlier movies, such as *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), the frame on the left.

All western films also owe a debt to the mythic nature of the American cowboy, brought to life by painters such as Frederic Remington, far left frame.

These are more than influence; these are codes passed from one text to another.

**Is anything original?**

Intertextuality throws into question the idea of authorship.

The writer of a text or the auteur of a movie is seen as more of an orchestrator of what Roland Barthes refers to as the “already-written” rather than as its originator (Barthes 1974, 21).

“A text is ... a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash,” Barthes writes. “The text is a tissue of quotations.”

The cynic might say that everything is derivative. Advertising expert Tony Schwartz explains it differently. Communicators adopt and adapt the codes of other texts seeking the “responsive chord” in the audience. Intertextuality is related to the idea of audiences negotiating meaning.

**Reconstructing an author**

Readers perform a kind of amateur archeology in reconstructing the author from shards of previous readings. Readers tuned into the relevant codes can say about anyone whose work they have seen, “I know her or him.”

Intertextuality reminds us that each text exists in relation to others. Texts owe more to other texts than to their own makers.
Genres as intertextual codes

Formal frames of reference affect how we view and interpret a media text.

A movie could be part of a series, such as James Bond movies, or part of a body of work, such as the movies of Alfred Hitchcock or adaptations from the books of John Le Carré. These also would be part of the genre of spy movies or espionage movies.

Our understanding of any individual text relates to such framings. Texts provide context for another text to be created and interpreted. Texts draw upon codes from the contexts of other texts and from the culture and society.

The assignment of a text to a genre provides the interpreter with a key intertextual framework.

Within semiotics, genres can be seen as sign systems or codes that use conventions of the genre but with changing structures. Each genre uses conventions that link it to other members of that genre.

The diagram shows posters for spy or espionage movies from the past 82 years, their relationships to each other and their place within the genre.

These conventions are at their most obvious in parodies of the genre, such as Austin Powers, International Man of Mystery (1997).

Intertextuality also is seen in the fluidity of genre boundaries in such recent coinages as advertorials, infomercials, edutainment, docudrama and faction (a blend of fact and fiction).
**Intertextuality and communication space**

Intertextuality depends less on the author of the media text than on the viewer, who comes to the text with a set of expectations about how it should look and sound. Film theorist Roger Odin writes that audience and author meet in a **communication space**, a space where they “share the experience of constructing a film.” Odin writes that the viewer is invited to enter, “a world” he or she knows well.

Odin states that a film’s meaning is determined not by the “internal constraints” of film making, but by “external constraints,” values and relationships found in the environment of the viewer. Odin calls these **institutions**, and they represent a contract of sorts between author and audience.

Odin’s **semio-pragmatic** approach uses a semiotics to analyze film while acknowledging the role of the audience. Odin believes that the meaning of a film cannot be fixed in the making of it but is determined by watching.

Through intertextuality, viewers create these institutions in one medium and carry them into another, such as watching a movie adapted from book.

Readers of a favorite book visualize characters and settings in their minds. Often when they watch a movie from the book, they are disappointed because the film isn’t what they pictured in their heads. An examples comes from the Jack Reacher movies. Fans of the books had built up a visual image of Jack Reacher from author Lee Child’s descriptions. Many fans were sorely disappointed when Tom Cruise was cast as Reacher in the movies.

---

**Jack Reacher**

(as described in the Lee Child books)

- 6-feet-5, 220-250 pounds, 50-inch chest
- Dirty-blond hair, ice blue eyes
- Wears a triple-extra-large-and-tall coat
- In the novel *Tripwire* (1999), the character Jody Garber describes Reacher: “His lazy lopsided grin. His tousled hair. His arms, so long they gave him a greyhound’s grace even though he was built like the side of a house. His eyes, cold icy blue like the Arctic. His hands, giant battered mitts that bunched into fists the size of footballs.”

---

**Tom Cruise**

- 5-feet-7, 170 pounds
- Dark brown hair, pale blue eyes

Mark Bray, a fan of the Jack Reacher book series, told the *Los Angeles Times* how he felt about casting Tom Cruise in the lead role: “A movie like this should be made for loyal fans of the book series. To those who don’t know who Jack Reacher is, this is just another action movie, who cares. To fans of Reacher/Child, this is a joke. This movie is a mistake for Cruise and Child, if you can call making tens of millions of dollars a mistake. But playing a role that he is comically unsuited for will only hurt Cruise’s career, and a lot of Lee Child fans feel betrayed for letting this happen.”
Unwanted or unintended intertextuality

Computer makers had shied away from sci-fi themes because in part of the unsavory connotations with the rogue computer HAL9000 from the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

In this scene, the two astronauts suspect that the HAL9000 computer has malfunctioned. They have sought privacy in a space pod to discuss the situation. But the HAL9000, the red dot in the background, has learned to read lips.

HAL eventually kills one astronaut and attempts to strand the other outside the ship.

Texts in a genre or by an author both carry baggage from what has come before, and these perceptions can be hard to change.

Apple Computer exploited this with a commercial about the approach of the year 2000, with intertextuality as part of the strategy. In the television commercial, HAL says, “Do you remember the year 2000, when computers began to misbehave? It really wasn’t our fault.”

Apple’s point was that its Macintosh computers were programmed to operate in the year 2000 and beyond, while others suffered from the so-called Y2K bug because their software and firmware did not go beyond 1999. Watch the commercial at:  
https://youtu.be/vey9pRxe0A
Is a person a “text”?

One of Apple Computer’s most famous ad campaigns, “Think Different,” showed images of famous people, many of whom were controversial in various ways.

The people pictured in the ads were also highly original in their thinking and their actions. Apple was seeking a metonymy, hoping to form an association with them.

Steve Jobs’ great incite was that all computers operate about the same way with about the same capabilities, but not all offer the same experience. He was forced out of Apple in 1985 but rejoined the company in 1997, when Apple was nearly bankrupt. His immediate actions were aimed at making the Macintosh “different.” The first iMacs came in bullet-shaped translucent cases in candy colors. Other products followed that changed the culture: iTunes, iPod, iPhone, the Apple store and iPad.

Intertextuality might or might not be in play with these ads. If we think of the life of Jim Henson, for example, as a narrative, then that narrative informs the ads and affects how the viewer decodes the messages in the “think different” campaign.
Some things are not intertextual

A visual metaphor uses something familiar to explain something unfamiliar. The “something familiar” may be an idea or an object in the environment, but not a text.

In the same way, the other tropes are not examples of intertextuality. Metonymy, for example, associates one sign with another, but that sign does not refer to another text.

Remember that the hallmark of intertextuality is “the passage from one sign system to another,” according to Kristeva. An entire code is redistributed from text to text and recombined with other codes to produce a new sign system.

The “Got Milk?” advertisements are good examples. The ads rely on forming an association, a metonymy, between drinking milk and the celebrity. But this ad doesn’t rely on our knowledge of a text to make meaning, only that we have some other knowledge, such as knowing who David Beckham is.
**Transmedia and intertextuality**

We are all familiar with entertainment “franchises,” narratives that play out over time and across media. Henry Jenkins calls this process “transmedia storytelling.” Jenkins writes in his blog, “Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.”

In this sort of intertextuality, the storyteller relies on the viewer to have intimate knowledge of the narrative and of the codes through which the stories are told. Examples come from the comic-book franchises such as Batman, told through movies, comic books, graphic novels, television shows live and animated, video games, toys such as action figures, and fan clubs, including fan fiction.

Transmedia storytelling is closely linked to fan culture. An individual media text might attract a large audience, such as a Spiderman movie, but loyal fans keep the story going between big media projects. Fans also are defenders of the codes used in such franchises. Just let a movie maker get something wrong, and the fans will take up their pitchforks.

Consider the layers of meaning involved in the image above:

- The Star Wars movie franchise is the starting point.
- Lego play sets based on Star Wars themes are themselves intertextual and a form of transmedia storytelling.
- Star Wars fans have used Legos to recreate all or part of the Star Wars movies. An example comes from Lego-Williams on YouTube: [https://youtu.be/zPF2R4pH6jM](https://youtu.be/zPF2R4pH6jM)

**Might be intertextuality**

An *allusion* is a figure of speech that makes a reference to, or representation of, a place, event, literary work, myth or work of art, either directly or by implication.

Some theorists say that an allusion cannot be an example of intertextuality because it is intentional. But most of what we consider to be intertextual — that is, influenced by other texts — involves conscious decisions related to other texts.

Texts often allude directly to each other, as in remakes of films, sequels, serialized television shows or parodies. These texts credit the audience with the necessary experience to make sense of the new text while offering the pleasure of recognition.

*A parody* is a media text that imitates the style of someone or something else in an amusing way. Watching a well-done parody brings home the idea of intertextuality because of the exaggerated way the codes are employed.