Intertextuality and Relevance Theory
in the Interdisciplinary Approach
to Surrealist Literature and Painting
A Case-Study: Nikos Engonopoulos’ “Bolivar”

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For some few comparatists (who have been called “traditionalists”), intertextuality substitutes for the study of sources and influences, whereas certain structuralists (Laurent Jenny and Gérard Genette, among them) complement or replace it with other terms they devise in order to systematize textual criticism, which normally does not differ essentially from traditional close reading. Other theories (such as those by Michael Riffaterre and Harold Bloom) constitute detailed but closed systems, which usually compete with Julia Kristeva’s analyses. It is for this reason that I do not deal with them here.

Intertextuality “is a difficult concept to use because of the vast and undefined discursive space it designates”, according to Jonathan Culler, who has expressed his doubts about the applicability of Kristeva’s ideas in literary studies. In my view, her definition of intertextuality provides a most enlightening theoretical account about the intersection of textual surfaces (in the broader sense); however, I am inclined to think, it is a serious drawback that it does not include any systematic examination of the relationship that is established between text and writer, and is

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promoted between text and reader. My aim here is to explore how intertextuality can be studied in the interdisciplinary approach to surrealism literature and painting, as a function of the reading process and a property of the text, which pertains to ostensive communication.

Firstly, I will briefly present Kristeva's ideas and how they relate to and are distinguished from Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical principle. Then, I will discuss an example, by drawing on relevance theory, which, I believe, can contribute considerably to the understanding of the intertextual function, as it evolves in the intentional connection between the arts fabricated by the surrealists. The example I have selected from (poet and painter) Nikos Engonopoulos’ surrealist poetry develops intertextual relations with both surrealist writing and painting. Since it belongs to Greek literature, "Bolivar" (1944) is indeed a “Greek poem”, as suggested (cynically, in my view) in the (sub-)title. But it is also a surrealist poem, in which, apart from the European and Latin-american historical, cultural and literary pretexts, pointed out by the poet in the notes accompanying the poem, Louis Aragon’s ideas about the mythifying activity of modern man (as presented in his book Le Paysan de Paris), the technique of frottage, developed by Max Ernst, and the paranoïco-critical method, devised by Salvador Dalí, are also intertextually intertwined. The recovery of logical and pragmatic presuppositions interwoven exposes the “frenzied expression of the poem’s hellenolatry” (also pointed out in the poet’s notes) as a parody of precisely this misleading acclaim of hellenolatry.

Kristevas’ theory

When Kristeva coined the term intertextuality in her 1966 essay on Bakhtin (“Le Mot, le dialogue et le roman”) for Roland Barthes’ seminar, she neither gave the notion a strictly literary frame nor explained it with a view to using it in literary studies. In her actual formulation in this text (which is included in Σημειωτική, Recherches pour une sémanalyse), she maintains that:

what allows a dynamic dimension to structuralism is [Bakhtin's] con-

ception of the “literary word” as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context.4

She considers the intersection of textual surfaces as an absorption and transformation of texts:

each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read; [...] any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double.5

Bakhtin’s theory lies at the core of Kristeva’s conception of intertextuality. According to the Russian theorist, the literary text is a representation of discourses. As with everyday communication, every word “is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction”.6

The intersection of discourses is conceived of as a struggle between centripetal and centrifugal forces, that is, between the norm (the dominant literary system or the canon), and the parodifying and carnivalesque, transformative tendencies of other discourses. This dialogue is conducted on a synchronic level, in the battlefield where the norm and its transformation(s) meet and intersect ceaselessly.7 For Bakhtin, this dialogue is possible in the novel, which can be either a poetic or a prose text. Kristeva, on her part, claims that intertextuality develops in every text.

In The Revolution of Poetic Language (La Révolution du langage poétique, 1974), she emphasizes on the composite parts of the word intertextuality, in order to stress the difference of this notion from the study of

5. Ibid., p. 37.
sources. Intertextuality is a transposition, a distinct process which complements the function of the unconscious processes identified by Freud with condensation and displacement, and of the binary opposition between the metaphoric and metonymic poles, propounded by Roman Jakobson (in his essay “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances”, 1956). Therefore, intertextuality can be defined as a passage from one semiotic system to another, a process which interchanges and permutates these systems.

Kristeva does not simply formulate a theory of the subject and of language. More than that, she “qualifies the status of the subject as a function of the deconstructive intertextuality of all discourse”. Intertextuality is a negation or négativité because it destroys texts and creates new texts. It is a semiotic practice which proves that meaning (signification) is not created by the author (a genius or transcendental being). Intertextuality, i.e., the social, cultural and historical (con)text produces this meaning. In the ‘Bounded Text’, which is also included in Σημειωτική, the text is defined as a productive process, which is subjected to cultural discourse. Firstly, it develops a destructive-constructive relationship with language and therefore:

- can be better approached through logical categories rather than linguistic ones; and second[ly], [...] it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralise one another.

12. See Julia Kristeva, Σημειωτική, Recherches pour une sémanalyse, Seuil, Paris
As Hans Peter Mai points out the text is understood as:

a basic ideological weapon which can contribute directly to a revolutionary change in society. This “text” is no longer the object with which textual criticism used to deal. Actually, it is no object at all; it is, as a way of writing (écriture), a productive (and subversive) process.\(^{13}\)

In his essay “From Work to Text” (1971), Barthes rejects the work, a fragment of substance, which is caught up in a process of filiation, unlike the plural Text, which is:

woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages, [...] antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it and through and through in a vast stereophony.\(^{14}\)

According to Barthes, it is necessary to make a distinction between the intertextual element or quality and the origins behind a text:

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, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas.\(^{15}\)

Thus, paraphrasing Jacques Derrida (“Il n’y a rien hors du texte”), Charles Grivel claims that “il n’est de texte que d’intertexte”,\(^{16}\) since every text is connected to a universe of texts, being at the same time an antecedent and a predecessor of other texts.

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15. Ibid.
Relevance Theory and Intertextuality; The case of ‘Bolivar’

Yet, how are we supposed to study the (inter)text as a factor and at the same time the field of a function that exceeds it? Kristeva did not take into consideration the communicative dimension of intertextuality. However, in literary movements such as Surrealism, in which the alternation and permutation of literary and extraliterary surfaces is noticed, it is necessary to study with equal emphasis all of the communicative channels used. Given that intertextuality is a property of both literature and communication, then its study could be based on the intertextual disposition of the text and, at the same time, on the interaction between text and reader.

According to Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, in every act of human communication, the sender and the receiver share a certain degree of mutuality. This means that they have to select a mutual cognitive environment, which they must share in order for any assumption to become mutually manifest. The principle of relevance foresees that “Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own relevance”. The sender is implicit about what he assumes the receiver can easily understand and makes explicitly manifest what he believes he cannot understand otherwise.

In the example I have chosen to present here, Engonopoulos is not explicit about what he has to say; he provides only implicit manifestations of his intention. As Sperber and Wilson explain, in this way:

one can convey a much wider range of information [including information about his attitude, his intentions, etc.] than can be conveyed by producing direct evidence for the basic information itself.

Engonopoulos employs weak implicatures, that is assumptions which are implicitly communicated; weak implicatures demand the greater participation of the reader in the construction of the text-world and, thus, they lead to contextual effects which the two theorists call poetic effects.

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18. Ibid., p. 64.
Contextual effects are changes in the context, which contextualisation brings about, when it adds new information to the context, by cancelling certain assumptions, changing their validity, and so on.20

The poem builds on irony and a variety of relevant tropes, such as hyperbole and adynaton. The most challenging implication is the inherent juxtaposition between the strange foreign name in the title (Bolivar) and the indication in the subtitle that this is “a Greek poem”. The semantic clash is repeated by the comment about the enumeration of the countries of Latin and Central America, which “is used here as a covering for the frenzied expression of the poem’s hellenolatry”. The word “frenzied” (“έξαλλη”) implies a state which is incompatible with the possibility or the ability to use a covering; moreover, the poet’s complaint in the poem itself that no-one can understand what he says further confirms his ironic attitude.

The mottoes also provide weak implicatures. The vision of Theseus, described in the first motto, runs through the poem, since Bolivar is revealed after the poet has called and, subsequently, written his name on the rocks of the mountains of the areas and countries that he invokes—just like Cimon discovered the bones of Theseus on island Skyros, by watching an eagle that was scratching the rocky earth with his claws. The act of poetic writing is connected to the light of the sun and, metonymically, to the life given to Bolivar. From the second motto one may infer that the representative characteristics of Bolivar are kindness and bravery. However, Bolivar’s action in the poem is not what could be characterized national or even heroic. For instance, at the time of the battle, General Bolivar is taken over by his own narcissistic ideas, while holding in his arm “Μια φοβερή ξυλάρα”, a creature of a stick (to paraphrase the utterance, which is difficult to translate), that is, a weapon that is rather inappropriate for the seriousness of the situation.

Bolivar’s name is stressed on the last syllable; this French pronunciation foregrounds the phonological similarities between the name and the French word for boulevard, as well as the popular comic theatre which was created in Parisian streets,21 and also for battlements. This last one is

20. Ibid., p. 117.

21. In her reading of ‘Bolivar’, in which she draws on Engonopoulos’ essay on
an implicit reference to the Albanian War, which gave occasion to the writing of the poem. Therefore, Bolivar’s name brings together the epic or dramatic and the comic elements. It is also reminiscent of Bolivar St., mentioned several times by Aragon, in *Le Paysan de Paris*. Especially his reference to the corner of Bolivar and Botsaris Streets, a name which is reminiscent of the hero of the Greek Independence Revolution Markos Botsaris, intersects intertextually with Engonopoulos’ reference to Bolivar and Odysseus Androutsos (another hero of the Greek Revolution).

The relevant passage appears in the third chapter of Aragon’s book, entitled “*Le Sentiment de la nature aux Buttes-Chaumont*”. Here, the French poet claims that modern man is endowed with an immense ability to produce myths. he needs to do is associate the images he perceives in the natural and urban environment with the mythifying activity of his mind. The connection of consciousness (the faculty of perception) with the unconscious (represented by nature) constitutes a mechanism that resembles the function of mythical imagination and is based on the condensation of impressions and their reconstitution:

Therefore, I was walking intoxicated amidst a thousand divine concretions.

I set myself the task to conceive of a mythology in progress.\(^{22}\)

*Le Paysan de Paris* was written in 1926. Two years later, in his essay “*Le Surréalisme et la peinture*”, André Breton defined the basic principle of Surrealist painting, that is the idea of the interior model (*modèle intérieur*).\(^{23}\) Around the same time, Ernst was working on *frottage* and Dalí (who was immersed in the study of freudian psychoanalysis) was developing his paranoïco-critical method. Both of these techniques are based on the idea of the condensation and assimilation of the impressions that result from the crossing of perception (the object of consciousness) and the unconscious.

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As far as I know, the elaboration of the above techniques is not explicitly marked in Engonopoulos' painting. However, they are employed in his poetry. In “Bolivar”, in particular, characteristic is the intersection of persons and places. To achieve the desired result, the poet exploits associations by similarity (through the employment of metaphor) or substitution (building on contiguity in space and time, through metonymy and synecdoche). The notes at the end of the poem provide information about the intertextual transposition, whose field the poem is. But why does Engonopoulos offer this information, since, for instance, it does not help to identify the surrealist pretexts? I believe that the way intertextual relations interweave in the poem and the notes is an example par excellence of the dynamic juxtaposition between the norm and the carnivalesque element, the transformational tendencies of discourse. Moreover, it confirms Kristeva’s conception of the text as a negativity and, simultaneously, a productive process. In “Bolivar”, intertextuality foregrounds the surrealist ideology and aesthetic, which is governed by precisely this attitude toward the creative process.

The notes do not offer a detailed account of the contextual environment the poet wishes to share with his reader; they only point to it. It is then left to the latter to (re)construct the universe of the poem and to (re)trace its intention, that is, the projection of a cynical view of the world. I believe that the critics’ reluctance to acknowledge this intention is related, on the one hand, to the fact that they have paid little attention to the interaction between text and reader and, on the other, to the failure of the classical account of irony (or of its modern equivalent, that is, Grice’s account) to distinguish authentic irony from mere irrationality, as pointed out by Sperber and Wilson.24 As they claim, authentic irony is echoic and its aim is to ridicule the opinion that is echoed. In literary texts the echo is often left implicit; in this way, the writer manages to suggest that he shares with his readers a whole cynical vision of the world.25

Which is the view that is echoed or its echo is left implicit in “Bolivar”? I think, it is the opinion that “For Great, free, brave, strong men, / Deserve words that are great, free, brave, strong”. This view is only misleadingly foregrounded, whereas in reality, it is ridiculed as a patently ludicrous opinion. The poet’s cynical vision is built on the opposition between the classical conception of heroism and its annihilation in modernist literature: instead of the hero who fights for his country, Bolivar emerges as a personality that possesses all of the characteristics that project an individualistic attitude. A series of subordinate oppositions develop in the poem: idealism / romanticism vs. the realism of surreality; bourgeois morality and order vs. individual freedom; and the narrow conception of Greekness vs. the broader notion of internationalism (or, to put it in present-day terms, multi-culturalism). “Bolivar” expresses an ideological position and casts a subversive and parodying view over social institutions and conceptions. In a genuine specimen of dialogism, the poem reconstitutes τον καινό δαιμόνα, the modern anti-hero, who in this sense is “handsome like a Greek” (as Bolivar is hailed in the poem).