

textuality

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TEXTUALITY, a key concept in post-structuralism, signals a new way of understanding writing, reading, and the relations between them. It stands in opposition to the idea of the “work,” its unity, and its humanistic underpinnings, and thus underwrites an attack on the metaphysical presuppositions of the traditional conception of lit. in the West.

The concept of the “work” entails meaning, unity, and the authority of a transcendent source. A work is complete, it exists in space, it is wrought by the creative power of the artist, and its meaning is stable across time and culture. A text, on the other hand, inhabits and is inhabited by language, without a privileged outside – an origin or source – to guarantee or authorize its meaning. The source of each text is always another text, but there is always another text before that. No text lies outside the endless play of language, and no text is complete: each exhibits traces or “sediments” of some other text in an endless repetition of originary lack. To humanistic (“logocentric”) assertions of a transcendent referent (the transcendental signified) that organizes human experience and renders language meaningful, textuality opposes the notion that at the origin there is “always already” language, writing, a trace of some other text. The terms “trace,” “supplement,” and “writing” indicate an absence in the text, its impossibility of self-presence. Each text is haunted by this absence, which opens it up to an entangled web of relations with every other text and which permits the articulation of a “subtext.” The subtext is not what is “meant” or “expressed,” but rather that which tends to “dissimulate or forbid” and which it nonetheless makes evident at certain points of stress or conflict. The subtext functions as a text’s unconscious – what it does not know it knows – and indicates a reading against the grain. . . .

Textuality is thus fraught with dissonance. Each

text is a locus of conflict which cannot be decided without repression. More recently, textuality has become associated with questions of power: not only the power play between text and subtext, but of the competing claims and ideologies which make themselves evident in a text. The major effect of textuality is to problematize the question of knowledge – the relation between what we know and how we know. Textuality assumes the impossibility of thought without language, thus effectively subsuming knowledge within language itself. Disciplinary knowledge, like the work, also lacks a transcendental signified and is not authorized by any epistemological high ground. Each discipline constitutes itself as a discipline by repressing its linguistic, rhetorical nature, but textuality disrupts this movement of repression, highlights it, and focuses on what a field of knowledge tends to “dissimulate” or “forbid.” Textuality assumes the “textuality” of all disciplines and thus the tropological (rhetorical) nature of all knowledge. Texts read and write one another and translate one another without regard for primacy, secondariness, or disciplinary borderlines. Textuality transforms the relations between reading and writing and even the very nature of academic institutions: in the world of the work, knowledge is transmitted; in the world of textuality knowledge is produced, and that production is always open to question. Barthes’ claim that “there is no father-author” and Derrida’s statement that “writing is an orphan” (themselves descriptive of the condition of textuality) open texts and disciplines to an indeterminacy that infects disciplines with a rhetorical self-consciousness and disrupts the borderlines that made possible their self-definition. In affirming that there is no outside to textuality (“il n’y a pas de hors-texte”), textuality generates a problematizing of knowledge and the conditions of power which knowledge authorizes

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