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Scarlett Baron. *The Birth of Intertextuality: The Riddle of Creativity*. Routledge, 2020.

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Abstract

Review of Scarlett Baron. *The Birth of Intertextuality: The Riddle of Creativity*. Routledge, 2020. 381 pp.

Keywords

intertextuality, comparative literature, post-structuralism, science of the text

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Scarlett Baron's long history of the ubiquitous, yet hardly univocally defined, idea of intertextuality wades deep into the genealogy of this foundational concept. Baron's history of intertextuality is useful to all those in the humanities who grapple with specific disciplinary tropes such as the function of the author. This history spotlights the most precious contributions to the theory of intertextuality and revitalizes the problem of the "voice" of the text without imposing the didactic layout of an anthology as in the almost twenty-year-old *The Portable Kristeva*. If a coarse understanding of intertextuality resembles patchwriting, i.e., a text made of uncited sources, Baron invites us to think that attention to this category over 150 years has, in fact, proven the collective nature of language to be inscribed under the skin of the writer.

An exemplary entry point to Baron's work is her commentary on Friedrich Nietzsche's oeuvre, which unfolds according to the philosophies of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. At the end of the book, Barthes is also entrusted to abridge Julia Kristeva's coinage of intertextual theory and to open up a notion of the intertext that invalidates simplistic distinctions between high-brow and low-brow literature (342). Barthes's *Theory of the Text* lemma in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis* concludes that the text is a tissue in which the subject would unmake itself. The metaphor of the tissue stands in between two alternative metaphors, the text as a veil and the text as a spider's web. If modern scholarship emphasized how the finished text acts as a veil behind which truth, the real, the message, or meaning was to be sought, contemporary textual theory endeavors to perceive the text based on the metaphor of the tissue. This unifying concept of text considers all written language to be a texture made of interwoven codes, expressions, and signifiers in which the subject situates itself and unmakes itself, as a spider which would dissolve itself in its own web. If this predicament now sounds a bit like postmodernist common sense, the strength of Baron's book resides exactly in the detailed historicization of jargony or à-la-mode vulgarizations. Baron argues that because references to Nietzsche that would have been clear in 1960s France may not be as legible today, it is necessary to show how post-structuralism reconfigured the role of writing through the transposition of Nietzsche's linguistic, metaphysical, and hermeneutic positions to literature (113). In conversation with Alexander Nehamas and Alan Schrift, among other numerous interlocutors, Baron illuminates how Nietzsche's vitalist understanding of life influences his theory of language. The replacement of God with Life develops in parallel with his critique of the metaphysical roots of intentionality. This inhabits both theories of God as creator ex nihilo and the author as intentional vehicle of a message to the readers. This life-affirming philosophy was the root of the famous French deconstructivist journal *Tel Quel*. When the journal was founded in 1960, it reproduced an epigraph that referenced Nietzsche's eternal recurrence: *Je veux*

le monde et je le veux tel quel (151) ‘I want the world and I want it as it is’—the world is, and must be, a proliferative play of interpretations, in rupture with a workman-like causality that reduces the world to the efficient cause. With the arrival of Nietzsche in France, Baron seems to venture, the world had finally become an endless chain of signs.

Cultural crossings also characterize the reception (or invention) of Mikhail Bakhtin in France and the United States. The postmortem Bakhtin-boom that Baron reconstructs offered an alternative model to Saussure’s reductionist vision of the Speech Circuit that divided active and passive speaker. But Bakhtin’s fortune also resided in his vision of “the immense semantic possibilities” that interpreters can mine from the texts; for every given culture detains hermeneutic possibilities undisclosed and unrecognized (261-274). This, along with her other well-documented takes on intertextuality, exemplifies Baron’s avoidance of the elitist social context of intertextual theories, in comparison to the habits of contiguous disciplines like literary theory and literary history. On the one hand, literary theory has equated even the most creative outcomes of literature with technological production. For instance, as Laurent Dubreil argues in *L’État critique de la littérature* (*The Critical State of Literature*), each school of critique is structured around specific metaphors (from the spider to the telephone) that articulate its ontology. Similar suggestions also inform the methods of Werner Hamacher in philology and Donna Haraway in the history of science. Baron’s corpus of writers, however, still identifies written language with art or literature, and thus, with a very specific use of language that usually pertained to elite identities. On the other hand, historians of literature have read the intertexts against the grain, challenging the claim they embody impersonal and creative logics that are instead the results of further contributions made invisible. Against this tendency, historians who use the concept of intertextuality tend to reawaken missing collaborations, as in Anna Mercer’s *The Collaborative Literary Relationship of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, which appears in the same Routledge interdisciplinary series as Baron’s book. If the myth of creativity today means seeing the world “as a resource to fuel your inner entrepreneur” (12), as Oli Mould contends in *Against Creativity* (2018), understanding intertextuality as a result of tangible events and collaborations discloses a critical point that exceeds the scope of Baron’s book, albeit implicitly resonates in her historical method. Beyond logics of anachronisms, replications, and repetitions, how can we also address questions of plagiarism, the occultation of personal relations that structure the interpretation of the intertext, as well as the mostly top-down dynamics of intellectual appropriation? These contradictions inhabit the intertext too, perhaps more than the linguistic unconscious, as dialogic and open-ended as we want it to be.

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