



Elect a clown; expect a circus

## Description

â?¡ says the meme. Iâ??ve been reading Julia Kristeva (1941-) lately, not least as she championed a revised understanding of semiotics in the turbulent 1960s, and is a major figure in the history of semiotics. She mentions C.S. Peirce favourably in a few places, though her philosophy emerges from the structuralism of de Saussure. Roland Barthes was amongst her teachers, and she was at the vanguard of the Poststructuralist movement.

Kristeva appears in numerous talks and interviews recorded on Youtube (in English and French), and, as a â??public intellectual,â?• comments frequently on political issues. See her website: [www.kristeva.fr](http://www.kristeva.fr). Recently, she was the subject of some political opprobrium from the government of Bulgaria, her home country.

## A mosaic of quotations

In her early work she championed the notion, derived from Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), of **intertextuality**, the idea that all written texts relate to other texts, and are in effect composites of other writings. In her essay, â??Word, dialogue and novelâ?• she wrote:

â??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*â?• (37).

Such concepts are now a commonplace for any architectural acolyte of Jacques Derrida â?? and in the age of *hypermedia* and *intermedia*. Her topic in that essay is literature, for which she establishes several categories following a Bakhtin model.

There is â??epicâ?• narrative, in which the narrator assumes an â??absolute point of view, which coincides with the wholeness of a god or communityâ?• (48). It relies on a logic that draws on causality, â??that is, it is theological; it is a *belief* in the literal sense of the wordâ?• (48). In common parlance epic narrative is idealistic, heroic and often nationalistic.



## Circus talk

But she gives obvious priority to a kind of narrative that is ambiguous, dialogical (involving open-ended Q&A between discussants), subversive, and *carnavalesque*. This is the kind of narrative that takes intertextuality to its extreme. Its explanation invites a longer quotation:

â??This carnivalesque cosmogony has persisted in the form of an anti-theological (but not anti-mystical) and deeply popular movement. â?! it is most noticeable in folk games as well as in medieval theatre and prose â?! It is a spectacle, but without a stage; a game, but also a daily undertaking; a signifier, but also a signified. That is, two texts meet, contradict and relativize each other. A carnival participant is both actor and spectator; he loses his sense of individuality, passes through a zero point of carnivalesque activity and splits into a subject of the spectacle and an object of the game. Within the carnival, the subject is reduced to nothingness, while the structure of *the author* emerges as anonymity that creates and sees itself created as self and other, as man and mask. The cynicism of this carnivalesque scene, which destroys a god in order to impose its own dialogical laws, calls to mind Nietzscheâ??s Dionysianism. The carnival first exteriorizes the structure of reflective literary productivity, then inevitably brings to light this structureâ??s underlying unconscious: sexuality and death. Out of the dialogue that is established between them, the structural dyads of carnival appear: high and low, birth and agony, food and excrement, praise and curses, laughter and tearsâ?• (48-49).

Others have advanced a Kristevian (psychoanalytic) critique of the current rise in right wing extremist politics. See an article by NoÃ«lle McAfee entitled â??[Trump and the Paranoid-Schizoid Politics of Ideality](#).â?•

For my part, itâ??s interesting to contemplate a simpler account based on the battle between *epic* and *carnavalesque* narrative. It seems as though the low, the base, the foolish, ignorant and overtly promiscuous are, currently and temporarily, in the position of the epic narrator, i.e. those with the power. As attested by fiction and politics, the [trickster](#) becomes the autocratic villain when in charge. See the [New Yorker cover picture](#) from last October. Also see my post: [Marx on nonsense](#).

## Bibliography

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### Category

1. Culture

### Tags

1. Bakhtin
2. intertextuality
3. Kristeva
4. narrative
5. Peirce
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