

What is an Author?
An Essay Exploring The Definition
Of The Role Of The Author In Postmodern Culture

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This paper discusses the challenges to the role of the author in postmodernism through a comparative analysis of Roland Barthes' essay *The Death of the Author* and Michel Foucault's essay *What is an Author?* Both critics, Barthes and Foucault, have examined the role and relevance of authorship to the meaning or interpretation of a text.

Roland Barthes (1915 – 1980) was one of the earliest French structuralist or poststructuralist¹ theorists of culture. This paper will explore Barthes philosophy about the death of the author and his opinion that writing destroys every voice and point of origin.² Michel Foucault (1926–1984) was a French historian and philosopher, associated with the structuralist and post-structuralist movements.³ Michel Foucault's *What is an Author?* examines the notion of the "author" in literature, investigating the relationship between the author and the text as both a response to Barthes and a rejection of his thesis of the death of the author.

The paper is divided into 4 parts.

Section 1 begins by analyzing Roland Barthes' essay *The Death of the Author*.

Section 2 then moves on to analyze Michael Foucault's essay *What is an Author?*

Section 3 provides a comparative analysis of both essays. My frame of reference will focus on Barthes' and Foucault's reaction of the critique of the traditional science in France during the 1960s.

Finally Section 4 goes on to discuss the challenges to the role of the author in postmodernism through Foucault's visions and development from 1969.

¹ Emerging in French intellectual life in the late 1960s and early 1970s, post-structuralism embraced Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism and the later work of Roland Barthes, the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, the historical critiques of Michel Foucault, and the writings of Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. It departed from the claims to objectivity and comprehensiveness made by structuralism and emphasized instead plurality and deferral of meaning, rejecting the fixed binary oppositions of structuralism and the validity of authorial authority.

An A to Z of Theory Roland Barthes and Semiotics in Theory, New in Ceasefire –
Posted on Friday, September 23, 2011 by **Andrew Robinson**

<http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-barthes-1/> accessed 14.05.2014

² <http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-barthes-4/> accessed 14.05.2014

³ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/#Bib> accessed 14.05.2014

Roland Barthes: *The Death of the Author*

Barthes' verbal provocation with his essay *The Death of the Author*, written in 1967, is directed against the actions of the traditional literature in France, the "critique classique".⁴ In the beginning he quotes a sentence from Balzac's Novella *Sarrasine*⁵ to question the author behind a text. Barthes doubts that a reader is able to specify an author or rather to find an origin of the author in a text as he mentioned *'It will always be impossible to know, for the good reason that all writing is itself this special voice...'*⁶

Barthes developed in this essay a surreal metaphor to explain why an author is dead after he has written a text. He refers to historical literates like the surrealist and, among other authors, Stéphane Mallarmé⁷, to underpin his argument; *'Mallarmé's entire poetics consists in suppressing the author for the sake of the writing (which is, as we shall see, to restore the status of the reader.)'*⁸ His literary influence clarifies why he chooses the title or rather expresses his essay *The Death of the Author* like he did.

Furthermore Barthes argues that the author's hand draws only signs on paper like letters from the alphabet instead of creating truly original work of art. He says *'The hand, cut off*

⁴ Barthes, R.: La mort de l'auteur. In: Roland Barthes. Oeuvres complètes. Tome II. Hg. v. E. Marty. S. 495

⁵ Balzac, speaking of a castrato disguised as a woman, writes this sentence: "It was Woman, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive fears, her unprovoked bravado, her daring and her delicious delicacy of feeling „Who is speaking in this way? Is it the story's hero, [...] or romantic psychology?"

Barthes, Roland. „The Death of the Author.“ 1967.

⁶ Barthes, Roland. „The Death of the Author.“ 1967.

⁷ **Stéphane Mallarmé**, (1842 - 1898) French poet, an originator (with Paul Verlaine) and a leader of the Symbolist movement in poetry. His early poems, which he began, contributing to magazines in 1862, were influenced by Charles Baudelaire, whose recently published collection *Les Fleurs du mal* ("The Flowers of Evil") was largely concerned with the theme of escape from reality, a theme by which Mallarmé was already becoming obsessed. By 1868 Mallarmé had come to the conclusion that, although nothing lies beyond reality, within this nothingness lie the essences of perfect forms. The poet's task is to perceive and crystallize these essences. In so doing, the poet becomes more than a mere descriptive versifier, transposing into poetic form an already existent reality; he becomes a veritable God, creating something from nothing, conjuring up for the reader, as Mallarmé himself put it, "*l'absente de tous bouquets*"—the ideal flower that is absent from all real bouquets.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/360307/Stephane-Mallarme> accessed 22.05.2014

⁸ Barthes, Roland. „The Death of the Author.“ 1967.

from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin.⁹ For Barthes the function of an author is that of a transmitter of already existing words and signs, he reduces the author to a medium between symbols and the reader. What Barthes mentions is that *The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture*¹⁰ and that *His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others*.¹¹ The reader is the receiver. He is the one where all these tissues of signs and symbols come together. He is the one who creates a perception and then meaning with it. Barthes, in his own words, remarks that *There is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author*.¹²

Barthes criticizes what he views as a hypocritical society, making the point that capitalism's relationship with the author is to objectify it as a unique commercial object, thus removing the possibility of multiple interpretations of a text.¹³

In this context Barthes looks to humanism and believes that the focus should not be on the author but on the relationship between the reader and the text. Barthes says *Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature*.¹⁴ Following his critique of ideology his consistent poetic character has only one conclusion. He claims *that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author*.¹⁵

⁹ Barthes, Roland. „The Death of the Author.“ 1967.

¹⁰ Barthes, Roland. „The Death of the Author.“ 1967.

¹¹ Barthes, Roland. „The Death of the Author.“ 1967.

¹² Barthes, Roland. „The Death of the Author.“ 1967.

¹³ *To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained'-victory to the critic.*

Barthes, Roland. „The Death of the Author.“ 1967.

¹⁴ Barthes, Roland. „The Death of the Author.“ 1967.

¹⁵ Barthes, Roland. „The Death of the Author.“ 1967.

Michel Foucault: *What is an Author?*

Foucault begins his essay by quoting from Samuel Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*¹⁶ "What does it matter who is speaking;" someone said; "what does it matter who is speaking." in response to Barthes' essay. Foucault states that a metamorphosis has already happened, that the modern writer is already defined by the death of the author 'The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author's murderer'.¹⁷

Yet Foucault does not completely deny Barthes' critical idea about the death of an author rather he uses it as a starting point for a discourse with Barthes. Foucault uses Barthes essay as a frame of reference for his own text. If the author is really dead, Foucault suggests, we should look between the gaps and the cracks, because there is the place where the lost function of an author should be hidden.¹⁸

Foucault admits that finding the author in a text isn't easy. He argues through a historical context, referring to the ancient Greek and Arabic Storytellers, and explains how they kept these authors alive. The Greeks gave the hero immortality through the heroic text, allowing his voice to speak forever. In '1001 nights' the Arabs used the act of continuous storytelling throughout the night to avoid the end of the story and thus to avoid the death of the author 'Scheherazade's narrative is an effort, renewed each night, to keep death outside the circle of life'.¹⁹

He turns historical facts into arguments for his analytical discourses in this debate. Foucault is aware about the fact that 'criticism and philosophy took note of the disappearance – or the

¹⁶http://www.academia.edu/1654411/_What_Does_It_Matter_Who_Is_Writing_Literary_Studies_in_the_Age_of_Web_2.0_ accessed 31.05.2014

¹⁷ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

¹⁸ 'We must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings this disappearance uncovers'.

Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

¹⁹ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

death of the author some time ago.²⁰ He states that the text itself is a trace that is left, proof that there was an author. Foucault refers to Sades' work, written on paper rolls, and argues with the authenticity of them. *If an individual were not an author, could we say that what he wrote, said, left behind in his papers, or what has been collected of his remarks, could be called a "work"? When Sade was not considered an author, what was the status of his papers?* .²¹

Derrida, who already was mentioned in the introduction of this paper, belongs as well to the quintet of French poststructuralist theorists of culture and has another explanation *Classical philosophers usually avoid author biography. It is because they think it is indecent. It is ...a philosopher should not speak about himself ...and this impoliteness...*²²

However, Foucault's investigation of the author's name points to the problem of the use of this name, *Obviously, one cannot turn a proper name into a pure and simple reference*.²³ He refers as well to the investigations of John Searle²⁴, which looks at how the name can release a chain reaction of associations or rather of impressions between the author and the reader.

Foucault concludes that this uniqueness of an author's name that the function of the author in our society is limited to certain discourses and is not to be found anywhere and states *As a result, we could say that in a civilization like our own their area certain number of discourses endowed with the "author function" while others are deprived of it*.²⁵

²⁰ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

²¹ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

²² Derrida (2002) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtcpwJCC6Co> accessed 22.05.2014

²³ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

²⁴ John Searle, (born 1932), American philosopher best known for his work in the philosophy of language—especially speech act theory—and the philosophy of mind. Searle's early work in the philosophy of language was an outgrowth of his study at Oxford under the ordinary-language philosopher J.L. Austin. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/920145/John-Searle> accessed 25.05.2014

²⁵ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

Comparative Analysis

At first glance both authors would appear to have fundamentally different points of view. In fact both are two sides of the same coin. Yes, Barthes references the past whereby Foucault seeks to develop new discourses, but *The Death of the Author* has certainly inspired Foucault, even if he doesn't mention Barthes name.

Despite the polemical title Barthes does not proclaim the death of the author as such, but only of the author understood as an 'Author-God' or rather questioned the particular importance of 'The "message" of the Author-God'.²⁶ He uses it as a metaphor to state his inconvenience towards the role of a postmodern author in 1967. The author continues to exist as a "Modern scripteur"²⁷ the modern writer whose ego is not relevant anymore, after the text has been written or rather is released. Foucault denies this, because for him, the author and his work have several egos. He is convinced that 'All discourses endowed with the author function possess this plurality of self'.²⁸ In addition, certain operations can be explained in the work by the author biographies, he argues and indicate that 'The text always contains a certain number of signs referring to the author. These signs, well known to grammarians, are personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place, and verb conjugation'.²⁹

Foucault's approach is less radical but offers the reader a much more detailed description of what an author was and is not anymore. In addition, Foucault is not satisfied with Barthes reasoning around the 'Death of the Author' and examined, as previously described, the cracks and gaps there between to find the function of the author. He identifies four characteristics of the author-function:

²⁶ Barthes, Roland. „The Death of the Author.“ 1967.

²⁷ Barthes, Roland. „The Death of the Author.“ 1967.

²⁸ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

²⁹ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

*'First, they are objects of appropriation'.*³⁰ This means that the author function is linked to the juridical³¹ and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses.

*'Secondly, the "author-function" is not universal or constant in all discourse'.*³² This means that the author function does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilization.

*'The third point concerning this "author-function" is that it is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual'*³³, rather, by a series of specific and complex operations.

At last Foucault mentions the author function of ego pluralism. It can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects - positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals like the individual text. He says *'Text always contains a certain number of signs referring to the author. These signs, well known to grammarians, are personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place, and verb conjugation'*.³⁴

Still, Roland Barthes is regarded as the author of the provocation that he coined in his essay *The Death of the Author*. In this discourse, which he starts, he refuses the traditional concept of the author as a meaningful suggestion to give priority to the reader. A look at the historical and political science situating the poststructuralist critique (as we indicated in section 2.), by author Barthes and Foucault, explains exceptional explosiveness that this critical discourse,

³⁰ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

³¹ Definition of JURIDICAL 1: **of or relating to the administration of justice** or the office of a judge 2: of or relating to law or jurisprudence : legal
Definition of JUDICIAL 1a : **of or relating to** a judgment, the function of judging, **the administration of justice**, or the judiciary (judicial processes)
<http://english.stackexchange.com/questions/51756/whats-the-difference-between-judicial-and-juridical> accessed 22.05.2014

³² Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

³³ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

³⁴ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

emerged in the context of the '68 movement in France, created. Both essays are against the disciplinary rules of science, as in France with the *'explication de texte'*, which since the beginning of the century had embodied the state sanctioned instruction for schools and universities³⁵ which had comprehensive legal consequences.

On this basis, it can be concluded that the essays of both authors were criticizing the same authorities with a different approach. If it comes to discuss the challenge for the role of the author in postmodernism we might have a closer look to Foucault's progressive analysis. He created an ongoing and radical discourse through his multi layered analysis of the role of the author and the creation of meaning.

Challenge for the Role of the Author in Postmodernism

Foucault's vision of a typology of discourses has been borne out by the continued analysis of his thesis by other theorists. He states *'An analysis in the direction that I have outlined might provide for an approach to a typology of discourse'*.³⁶ He believed³⁷ that this essay has prepared an introduction or a discourse in the historical analysis of discourse at which one should continue to work.³⁸

³⁵ Jannidis, F.: Rede über den Autor. In: Rückkehr des Autors. Hg. v. F. Jannidis, S. 16 / 17 <http://www.iasl.uni-muenchen.de/discuss/lisforen/autor3.html#fnB44> accessed 25.05.2014

³⁶ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

³⁷ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

³⁸ This kind of Foucauldian discourse analysis is related to other forms in the wider interdisciplinary field of discourse analysis. Nonetheless, it can be demonstrated that the Foucauldian form of discourse analysis is the most relevant one for contemporary analysis in the social sciences. It is argued that in the German social sciences the term "discourse analysis" is primarily used for theoretical social research or is used for empirical social research, without disclosing discourse-analytic methodology.

<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/683> accessed 02.06.2014

Foucault regrets the limited focus of this thesis, that he had not examined the functions of an author in painting or music, so here he refers again to Barthes, who predicts also for the painters and musicians the author's death.³⁹ Foucault further more indicates a position of the author, which can be much more than just the author of a book. He encourages other authors to create a discourse of unlimited possibilities. *'One can be the author of a theory, tradition, or discipline in which other books and authors will in their turn find a place. These authors are in a position that I will call "transdiscursive."* Foucault's discourse still remains relevant as an inspiration for the analysis of the role of the author in a postmodern culture. Foucault says if he looks back to the history of culture regarding the function of the author he can imagine a future culture prevalent with discourses proliferated without the function of the author ever appearing. He thinks that *'As our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear'*.⁴⁰

I believe his predictions have been realized; we can now find traces online in social networks. Discourses can arise anonymously, the author is of no interest, and it is the text that is of interest. The author only gains validity if the text is shared. The masses share the text with a click or ignore it, but the text still exists online and the author fails to appear to the masses.

However... globalization... WWW... poses a serious problem for the postmodern author, everything has become objectified on the web, Facebook sells shares in your text. On the other hand it can be used to distribute critical discourses to the masses. This is the contradiction of the dissemination of information in an age driven by neo liberal ideology.

The critique of ideology, a form of criticism which if generalized threatens to undermine the

³⁹ *The author still rules in manuals of literary history, [...] Van Gogh's work his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice: the explanation of the work is always sought in the man who has produced it, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always finally the voice of one and the same person, the author, which delivered his "confidence."*
Barthes, Roland. „The Death of the Author.“ 1967.

⁴⁰ Foucault, Michel. „What is an author?“ *Essay*, 1969.

critical stance itself as one more ideology.⁴¹ Foucault rejected the notion of ideology⁴² and ideological critique, but Žižek⁴³ expressed it: *'the task of the critique of ideology ... is precisely to discern the hidden necessity in what appears as a mere contingency'*.⁴⁴ Žižek already philosophises *'The extreme violence of liberation... You must be forced to be free... If you trust your spontaneous sense of wellbeing or whatever you will never get free... Freedom hurts'*.⁴⁵

As an author it is our responsibility to be transdiscursive and create discourses of unlimited possibilities. Momentum is building around the world to mobilize the masses via social media and snatch back our freedoms. Whistleblowing is already an essential art.⁴⁶ The postmodern author is able to create his personal hero and can prove that if those in power can do it, we can also do it. We have a new medium, we can create as many authors as we want in order to reanimate Barthes and his dead author to facilitate the needs of the reader. These are our challenges, these are our means of keeping 'public reason'⁴⁷ alive.

⁴¹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/> accessed 02.06.2014

⁴² <http://www.tasa.org.au/conferences/conferencepapers09/papers/Ellis,%20Bob%20&%20Fopp,%20Rodney%20paper%202.pdf> accessed 22.05.2014

⁴³ **Slavoj Žižek**, Ph.D., is a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and a visiting professor at a number of American Universities. His work and presence has gathered him critical acclaim as a superstar in the world of contemporary theory.

<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/biography/> accessed 02.06.2014

⁴⁴ <http://www.tasa.org.au/conferences/conferencepapers09/papers/Ellis,%20Bob%20&%20Fopp,%20Rodney%20paper%202.pdf> accessed 22.05.2014

⁴⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4WAXQJyxCo&feature=kp> accessed 16.05.2014

⁴⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/sep/03/snowden-manning-assange-new-heroes> accessed 02.06.2014

⁴⁷ Public reason requires that the moral or political rules that regulate our common life be, in some sense, justifiable or acceptable to all those persons over whom the rules purport to have authority. It is an idea with roots in the work of Hobbes, Kant, and Rousseau, and has become increasingly influential in contemporary moral and political philosophy as a result of its development in the work of John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Gerald Gaus, among others.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/public-reason/>

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