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"The Death of the *Auteur*"

The concept of 'author' is originally derived from the Latin word for authority. From the theoretician's standpoint, the author carries power over the text only to the extent that the ideas and scenarios within it are originally those of the author. French literary theorist Roland Barthes argues that the function of an author is to provide the semblance of originality and meaning in *The Death of the Author*.

"Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every origin. Writing is the neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing." (Barthes 1466)

The basis for Barthes' argument is the writing of Ferdinand de Saussure, particularly the discourse on signification and authorship in *Course in General Linguistics*. Within the scope of Saussurean theory, a viewpoint can be ascertained that is conceptualized for applicability to *The Death of the Author*. Saussure begins his introduction to this topic by defining language in a way that concurs with Barthes' use of it. Language is the "social side of speech, outside the individual who can never create or modify it by himself." This is concomitant with Barthes' work, particularly in his concept of the author as the subject of a text. Barthes stresses the impersonality of any work, due to the essence of language, that it is the quintessence of the performance and not the author's subjectivity. In one of his most poignant assignments of profound semiological characterization, Saussure posits the nature of the linguistic sign as the unity of a concept and a sound-image.

For this assumption to be relevant, it follows that language must be principally a naming process, which would necessitate the assumption that the entire world of ideas is already in existence, has already been enabled in some Ecclesiastical precondition. (Saussure 972-977)

“Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language there are only differences. Even more important, a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system.” (Saussure 972)

The application of this idea to Barthes' work is in the very essence of the idea of the death of the author: the rejection of the assumption that the ideas we commit to a certain name are the product of solely their own conjecture and its manifestations.

“As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.” (Barthes 1466)

Saussurean logic continues on this theme to the extent that the arbitrary nature of the sign is indicative of the situation of an individual that operates within the linguistic system, and their helplessness and passivity in relation to the signs that compose their writing. In the air of Saussure, Jacques Derrida says famously in *Of Grammatology*, "There is nothing outside of the text." Basically, Barthes asserts that by virtue of the fact that the author is writing within the pre-established semiotic system of language, he is not really 'creating' in any sense, but mimicking and reproducing. (Saussure 960-965)

The 1963 film *Contempt*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, provides an ideal basis for coming to terms with the dominant discourse on authorship and the various other ideological relationships of cinema. Godard, as a writer for the *Cahiers du Cinema*, is considered as one of the founders of the auteur theory, the idea that the director is the supremely responsible author of a film. This is particularly true in the case of *Contempt*, the story of which was written by Godard and is about the creation of a film (writing, directing, producing). The film's subject matter lends itself to the applicability of the aforementioned theories.

The generally antiquated notion of the author contributes to the futility of deciphering a text. In an attempt to produce an efficient summary to this end, an analysis of authorship and its underlying realities will be conducted in deference of the narrative constructs within the film. A structured analysis of the filmmakers, the characters within the screenplay,

and the relation of the characters to the story of the movie within *Contempt* will be conducted. Utilizing the writings of Barthes' and other theorists will show that, while the essence of the author remains, the instance of occupying the author's truly intended function is an impossibility.

In his writing, Barthes refers to the problematization of narrative function in the instance of the author's self-representation in writing.

Proust himself, despite the apparently psychological character of what are called his analyses, was visibly concerned with the task of inexorably blurring, by an extreme subtilization, the relation between the writer and his characters; by making of the narrator not he who has seen and felt nor even he who is writing, but he who is going to write (the young man in the novel—but, in fact, how old is he and who is he? —wants to write but cannot; the novel ends when writing as last become possible), Proust gave modern writing its epic." (Barthes 1467)

This is a model of the *Contempt*-style narrative (*Adaptation* [Spike Jonze, 2002] is a modern example). The story is, in its essence, about the decision to never write a story. This seemingly paradoxical narrative creation is a victory to the theorist, who cites that the writer's decision to write precipitates his entrance into the historically founded dictionary of signs, and thus his death. The film begins by introducing its lingering hermeneutic enigma: Will the author write a screenplay for the production? The entire span of the movie is dedicated to a proposition that

is eventually rejected. By choosing not to enter into the system, the writer (Paul) spares himself from this system.

An example of the overt systematization of writing and thus narrative is the reflection on, and thus reiteration of, Homer's *Odyssey* in the film. An offer to adapt the story for film turns into a conversation about the unspoken motivations of the characters, which in turn becomes Godard's characters' personification of Homer's narrative. Barthes comments on the revisionist adaptation in *The Death of the Author*.

"The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original.... Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely.... Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humors, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred." (Barthes 1468-1469)

Quite literally, these characters are simply imitating a book. In the process of setting off to create original literature, the writer in the film has divested any possible creativity and mirrors the acts of a storybook character. As if this were not pastiche enough, Barthes reminds that even Homer's characters are complex, one-dimensional conglomerates of conceptualized signs. Paul borrows

from a borrower, and Godard borrows from that. The intentionality of Godard's interjection into the realm of signs becomes more apparent with each level of analysis into the narrative. Michel Foucault comments on this circumstance in *What is an Author?*

“The proper name and the name of an author oscillate between the poles of description and designation, and, granting that they are linked to what they name, they are not totally determined either by their descriptive or designative functions. Yet – and it is here that the specific difficulties attending an author's name appear – the link between a proper name and the individual being named and the link between an author's name and that which it names are not isomorphous and do not function in the same way; and these differences require clarification.” (Foucault 1626)

His writing suggests that perhaps even a simple assignment such as the title “Godard's film” requires a rethinking of purpose and ownership. The artist's grasp and claims to original work come into question.

Aside from being a story within a story, *Contempt* is also a film within a film. As a film, it is open to filmic analysis as well as an examination of diegetic atmosphere. Alan Spiegel characterizes the importance of camera position in his investigation of film as a visual medium.

“On the one hand, the camera is an objective medium, for it can neither think nor feel, and surely no other art in our time has provided us with more objective information about the surface of

physical reality than the art of the camera. On the other hand, the camera is a subjective medium, for it cannot show us any object without at the time revealing its own physical position- its angle and distance from the object- as part of what is shown.” (Spiegel 32)

The camera, when turned on itself, occupies one of the most ideologically puzzling shots possible in film. One of the preliminary scenes shows a motion picture camera being operated and turning directly facing Godard’s camera, duplicating the famous shot from Dziga Vertov’s 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera*. Vertov wrote about seeing the world through the eyes of a camera.

“The main and essential thing is: the sensory exploration of the world through film. We therefore take as the point of departure the use of the camera as a kino-eye, more perfect than the human eye, for the exploration of the chaos of visual phenomena that fills space. The kino-eye lives and moves in time and space; it gathers and records impressions in a manner wholly different from that of the human eye. The position of our bodies while observing or our perception of a certain number of features of a visual phenomenon in a given instant are by no means obligatory limitations for the camera which, since it is perfected, perceives more and better. We cannot improve the making of our eyes, but we can endlessly perfect the camera.” (Vertov 14-15)

Vertov’s doctrines of cinema truth fit the mold of Godard’s filmic project, the act of turning the camera on himself and his art for an objective viewpoint.

The way that the camera exists in relation to the actors reveals the motivation of attentive viewing. When the camera is not directly motivated by the continuation of the story of filming Homer's *Odyssey*, it carries its attention to the characters onscreen into another bridge of the narrative. Jean-Louis Baudry says in *Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus* that "The ideological mechanism at work in the cinema seems thus to be concentrated in the relationship between the camera and the subject." (p. 354) The camera remains static in psychology, while the subject changes throughout the course of the film. When the action of the film slows down, as it does after visiting the producer's villa, the camera follows Paul home with his wife and captures their personal life. Alan Spiegel draws a distinction between these two conditions.

"When I use the term adventitious to describe something that happens in a visualized narrative, I am referring either to the postures or gestures of a character or an object that neither signify nor connect with anything else in the narrative context beyond their own phenomenal appearances. The adventitious detail usually takes the form of an accident, the causes of which are not readily apparent; an accident that is seemingly without a narrative function and cannot be easily related to any pattern of artistic inevitability. It is, of course, a relative term and depends for its effects primarily on our sense of its opposite, that is, our sense of the necessary and the inevitable as we have experienced them, not only in life, but, even more crucially, in the traditional practices of narrative fiction.

Surely there is no need for this term in Homer's famous scene where Odysseus' nurse suddenly recognizes her master by the scar on his thigh and in her surprise drops her basin. This gesture would indeed be purely circumstantial were not its cause readily transparent to the reader, as is the dramatic significance of the effect itself."(Spiegel 90)

The detail that he mentions, for instance a cold glance that Paul receives from his wife that is often discussed but never pinpointed, can be the catharsis of the entire film without necessitating an explanation. That is the distinct difference between the narrative in literary form and visual form. An on-screen picture, composed of dozens of smaller details, can be motivated to react to one of them without even mentioning the others in the flow of a story. The deft filmmaker will attempt to blur the less significant details so they do not distract the viewer, but intentional distraction is a major advantage to depiction in film and is exercised by Godard.

In a narrative detour as described above, previously extraneous plot elements come into the limelight. Refocusing the unapologetic camera from a story of filmmaking to a bitter personal relationship causes a breakdown of the facades in each character. As Laura Mulvey says in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, "analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article." Coincidentally, this was also Godard's intention in showing Paul's wife part by part in the opening scene. Just as a heavy focus on

the role of author revealed it to be a figment, scrutiny of a character reveals their controversy. (Mulvey 835)

“The voyeuristic-scopophilic look that is a crucial part of traditional filmic pleasure can itself be broken down. There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watched the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate the intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience.” (Mulvey 843)

In character examination, the camera is inferior to the subjects that it captures. The sum of Godard's project is the presentation of a film within a film and its repercussions on a married couple. A further breakdown of this sum yields exploration of authorship, ideology, and film theory, but the overall summation is a successful foray into mainstream filmmaking by an auteurist.

In conclusion, the great showing of authorship acquiesces an empty set of values. Based on the theory of Saussure and Barthes, the author cannot be trusted as such, aside from being associated by name to a certain text. Even the characters in the film that are working creatively are subjected to the same critique. All that is left of *Contempt* is the visual, the human interaction, the humanity of it. Barthes returns to the theory of a text at this point.

“Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. 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.” (Barthes 1469)

The larger context of the filmic project does not lay in the credits, but in the humanity that leaks through the grit of the film. The essence of the Author-God becomes the simple situation, the story and explanation that can be given to a text once all of the bulk is removed. The text remains a signifier with no signified, and it is the job of the critic or viewer to fill in the rest independently of an imposing author. This is the essence of an objective cinema.

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