

Lecture 9: The Death of the Author

1) Structuralism

2) Poststructuralism

1) Structuralism

Roman Jakobson:

a) model of language functions

emotive (→ addresser)
referential (→ context)
conative (→ addressee) [cf. Bühler]
poetic (→ message/autoreferentiality) [cf. Mukařovský]
phatic (→ medium)
metalingual (→ code)

b) poetic language vs. everyday/'normal' language

“The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.”

→ poetic texts are marked by their 'density' of additional relations of equivalence and opposition

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- **the structuralist method of reading literary texts** is to trace these relations in the text (cf. Jakobson's and Claude Levi-Strauss's famous reading of Baudelaire's *Les Chats*):
- 1) **analysis** of relations on various linguistically defined levels (graphic, rhythmic, phonological, morphological, syntactical, semantic)
 - 2) **synthesis** of results with regard to the text as a whole
- **Problems:**
- 1) subjective element, hermeneutical circle
 - 2) neglect of social/cultural dimension of reception
- 'objectification' of text as source of its meaning
- reductive reception of structuralism in GB/USA, heavily influenced by the New Criticism dominating literary studies in the English-speaking world at the time vs. the evolution of theory in Europe (esp. F)

Jan Mukařovský and Prague Structuralism

- inspired by the 1928 "Structuralist Manifesto"
- 'structure' replaces 'form' as central concept:
 - the meaning of textual elements results from their function for the dynamic structure of the text in its entirety, society as a 'structure of structures' conditioning each other, no hierarchical order
- 'aesthetic function' as defining characteristic of the structure of literature: reflexivity, detachment from extrinsic goals/reality/everyday life
 - the aesthetic function dominates other linguistic functions (cf. Karl Bühler's '*Organon-Modell*' 1934: expressive/darstellende/appellative Funktionen) and organizes them into an aesthetic structure
- 'aesthetic norms' are social and thus historical facts and should thus be conceived of as processes
- 'aesthetic value' exists only with reference to human beings as social beings
- the artist produces a 'material artefact' which is only transformed into an 'aesthetic object' by acts of reception

reader 1,2,3... → artefact → aesthetic object 1,2,3...
(individual contexts)*(cultural contexts)

- art and literature as social phenomena and part of historical evolution + acknowledgement of specifically aesthetic/literary dimension
- acknowledgement of constitutive role of recipient leads to an aesthetics of reception which combines hermeneutics and structuralism

Jan Mukařovský, “Personality in Art” (1944)

[...] There is no direct connection between an artist and a work; the Romantic thesis about the spontaneity and immediacy with which an artist creates has been overcome in practice and in theory (although it was artistically fruitful at the time of its full validity) [...] There are many things between the artist and his work [...]

First, closest to the work, we shall see what is called the *living artistic tradition*. [...] These traditional artistic devices make it impossible in advance for the work to become an immediate expression. Insofar as the artist's mental state enters the work at all, it has already been objectified by the previous situation in art, been severed from its source and been transformed into a sign. [...] There is therefore no real immediate expression in art, for artistic intention (often even conscious artistic will) always stands between the artist and the work of art.

But there are yet other factors which stand between the artist and the work of art. First, on the part of the artist himself, there are various extra-artistic motives for his creation, whether or not he is aware of them. There are, for example, economic motives, which it has usually been deemed appropriate to overlook [...] These too make it impossible for the artist's work to be related directly to his personality [...]

Finally, there are all the external influences, the point of intersection of which is the artist's personality, whether they come from society or other spheres of culture. If we analyzed them in detail, the illusion to which Taine and his followers succumbed could easily come about. There is nothing but these influences; the artist's personality does not exist. But we would not want to go so far. On the contrary, if we assert that the path from the artist's personality to the work is not direct and immediate, especially not spontaneous, we are far from denying the artist's personality; rather we would prefer to emphasize it. Social, cultural, and artistic influences affect the personality only insofar and in such a manner as the personality itself (whether consciously or subconsciously) allows. Personality is not a sum of influences but their equilibrium – their subordination and superordination to one another, and it is for this reason that the artist's personality proves to be an initiative force just as any other personality.

In brief, we think that personality is by no means to be dissolved into external influences like salt in water. And this applies also to personality in art. If there is something which has been overcome and something which requires correction, it is simply the view that the glory and significance of the artistic personality consists in the fact that it expresses itself through the work fully and, in fact, passively. If, as we hope, the future development of art and the artist's situation liberates the artist from something, what will disappear may be only the chore of looking after his individuality and individualness in the same way as a gardener looks after a hothouse flower or as a tenor takes care of his voice.

From Structuralism to Poststructuralism

Semiotics:

the systematic interaction of all the factors involved in the production and interpretation of signs or in the process of signification

- largely based on concepts of the sign as introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce
- a widening of the frame beyond literature (cf. Roland Barthes on the *Mythologies* of everyday life, Umberto Eco on film, painting and architecture) → preparing the shift towards cultural studies
- e.g. Iurii M. Lotman's structural semiotics (art and literature as the densest forms of information storage and transmission → deviation from normal activities; Natural language as 'primary modelling system' vs. 'secondary modelling systems' art, music and literature → artistic series
myth, religion and folklore → non-artistic series;
SMS add up to a complex semiotic totality: culture)

Roland Barthes, *Elemente der Semiologie* (1964; Frankfurt/M. 1983)

- combines an aesthetics of deviation (cf. Russian Formalism and Lotman) with Mukařovský's socially embedded aesthetics
- language + secondary systems of signification

Barthes: signifiant (...) / signifié
Saussure: signifiant/signifié

- model is open for addressing larger cultural frameworks
- literature as an autonomous but embedded system which cannot be reduced to normal linguistic codes but does not necessarily break them (deviation is possible, but not obligatory)
- the signifié of the secondary (tertiary ...) level is never fixed

→ **meaning production (semiosis) as a never-ending process**

2) Poststructuralism

- emerged at the end of the 1960s from critical discussions within structuralism
- shared assumptions:
 - 1) language is constitutive for human dealings with reality
 - 2) the world is a world of signs, and signs are arbitrary (de Saussure)
- a new angle appeared with regard to the referential dimension of linguistic signs:

Structuralism

- > the unity of the sign
- > meaning resides in the sign, but the idea of reference persists (as a 'transcendental signified')
- > explanation/understanding (i.e. fixing) as aims

Poststructuralism

- > gap between signifiant and signifié (only the material dimension of the sign is accessible, meaning is problematic)
- > the cultural practice of using signs does not point beyond itself (there is no signified beyond semiosis)
- > openness and instability of meaning as fundamental assumption

→ the structuralist idea of providing a scientific basis for the humanities by describing the laws and constants of the symbolic activity of the human mind had to be abandoned

→ the belief in the possibility of final explanations appears as a logocentric illusion brought about by the ontological self-deception of Western culture (Derrida)

- originally a French movement (Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Francois Lyotard)
- enthusiastic reception in the US where it takes the place of the New Criticism as the dominant paradigm in literary studies (the Yale Deconstructionists: Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, Barbara Johnson)
- reluctance in GB ("frenchified jargon currently fogging the pages of many a literary journal" Terence Hawkes in *TLS* 1994)

Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1967)

[...] Who is speaking in this way [i.e. in Balzac's *Sarrasine*]? Is it the story's hero [...]? Is it the man Balzac, endowed by his personal experience [...]? Is it the author Balzac, professing certain 'literary' ideas [...]? Is it universal wisdom? or romantic psychology? It will always be impossible to know, for the good reason that all writing is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin: literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes.

Probably this has always been the case: once an action is recounted, for intransitive ends, and no longer in order to act directly upon reality – that is, finally external to any function but the very exercise of the symbol – this disjunction occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins. Nevertheless, the feeling about this phenomenon has been variable; in primitive societies, narrative is never undertaken by a person, but by a mediator, shaman or speaker, whose 'performance' may be admired (that is, his mastery of the narrative code), but not his 'genius'. The author is a modern figure, produced no doubt by our society insofar as, at the end of the middle ages, with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, or, to put it more nobly, of the "human person".

Hence it is logical that with regard to literature it should be positivism, resume and the result of capitalist ideology, which has accorded the greatest importance to the author's "person". The author still rules in manuals of literary history, in biographies of writers, in magazine interviews, and even in the awareness of literary men, anxious to unite, by their private journals, their person and their work; the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions [...] 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."

Though the Author's empire is still very powerful (recent criticism has often merely consolidated it), it is evident that for a long time now certain writers have attempted to topple it. In France, Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and foresee in its full extent the necessity of substituting language itself for the man who hitherto was supposed to own it; for Mallarmé, as for us, it is language which speaks, not the author: to write is to reach, through a preexisting impersonality — never to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realistic novelist — that point where language alone acts, "performs," and not "oneself": 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.) [...]

Finally, outside of literature itself (actually, these distinctions are being superseded), linguistics has just furnished the destruction of the Author with a precious analytic instrument by showing that utterance in its entirety is a void process, which functions perfectly without requiring to be filled by the person of the interlocutors: linguistically, the author is never anything more than the man who writes, just as *I* is no more than the man who says *I*: language knows a "subject," not a "person," end this subject, void outside of the very utterance which defines it, suffices to make language "work," that is, to exhaust it. [...]

The Author, when we believe in him, is always conceived as the past of his own book: the book and the author take their places of their own accord on the same line, cast as a *before* and an *after*: the Author is supposed to feed the book — that is, he pre-exists it, thinks, suffers, lives for it; he maintains with his work the same relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child. Quite the contrary, the modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now. This is because (or: it follows that) to write can no longer designate an operation of recording, of observing, of representing, of "painting" (as the Classic writers put it), but rather what the linguisticians, following the vocabulary of the Oxford school, call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given to the first person and to the present), in which utterance has no other content than the act by which it is uttered. [...]

We know that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture. [...]

Once the Author is gone, the claim to "decipher" a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing. This conception perfectly suits criticism, which can then take as its major task the discovery of the Author (or his hypostases: society, history, the psyche, freedom) beneath the work: once the Author is discovered, the text is "explained:" the critic has conquered; hence it is scarcely surprising not only that, historically, the reign of the Author should also have been that of the Critic, but that criticism (even "new criticism") should be overthrown along with the Author. In a multiple writing, indeed, everything is to be distinguished, but nothing deciphered; structure can be followed, "threaded" (like a stocking that has run) in all its recurrences and all its stages, but there is no underlying ground; the space of the writing is to be traversed, not penetrated: writing ceaselessly posits meaning but always in order to evaporate it: it proceeds to a systematic exemption of meaning. [...]

[T]he unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination; but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted. [...] The reader has never been the concern of classical criticism; for it, there is no other man in literature but the one who writes. We are now beginning to be the dupes no longer of such antiphrases, by which our society proudly champions precisely what it dismisses, ignores, smothers or destroys; we know that to restore to writing its future, we must reverse its myth: the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author.

Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” (1969)

[...] Beckett supplies a direction: “What matter who’s speaking, someone said, what matter who’s speaking.” In an indifference such as this we must recognize one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing [...] The writing of our day has freed itself from the necessity of ‘expression’; it only refers to itself, yet it is not restricted to the confines of interiority. On the contrary, we recognize it in its exterior deployment. This reversal transforms writing into an interplay of signs, regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier [...] Thus, the essential basis of this writing is not the exalted emotions related to the act of composition or the insertion of a subject into language. Rather, it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears. [...]

[A]n author’s name is not simply an element of speech (as a subject, a complement, or an element that could be replaced by a pronoun or other parts of speech). Its presence is functional in that it serves as a means of classification. A name can group together a number of texts and thus differentiate them from others. A name also establishes different forms of relationships among texts [... such as] homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentication or of common utilization [...] Finally, the author’s name characterizes a particular manner of existence of discourse. Discourse that possesses an author’s name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten [...] Rather, its status and its manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates. [...] In this sense, the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation and operation of certain discourses within a society. [...]

The ‘author-function’ is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine and articulate the realm of discourses; it does not operate in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture; it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a text to its creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures; it does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy. [...]

[I]t is obvious that even within the realm of discourse a person can be the author of much more than a book – of a theory, for instance, of a tradition or a discipline within which new books and authors can proliferate. For convenience, we could say that such authors occupy a ‘transdiscursive’ position. [...] Somewhat arbitrarily, we might call them ‘initiators of discursive practices.’

[...]

No longer the tiresome repetitions:

“Who is the real author?”

“Have we proof of his authenticity and originality?”

“What has he revealed of his most profound self in his language?”

New questions will be heard:

“What are the modes of existence of this discourse?”

“Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?”

“What placements are determined for possible subjects?”

“Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?”

Behind all these questions we would hear little more than the murmur of indifference:

“What matter who’s speaking?”

Bibliography Lecture 9:

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