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The Death of the Author

The Death of the Author is an essay written by Roland Barthes in the 1960s. A time in history that gave rise to the civil rights movement, the Vietnam war, the women's liberation movement, and the counterculture- the environment was focused on freedom in every sense, breaking away from any kind of cultural confinement; a time of social unrest and consciousness-raising about class, racial, and gender inequalities. The essay is a highly influential one in the field of literature, literary theory, structuralism, and post-structuralism. However, its implications or philosophical application is beyond just the field of literature. It is a culmination of social, cultural, and political events that led the society to contest the modern ideals/values/systems by challenging the notions of meaning, the fallacy of originality, and active authorship and celebrates the newfound multiplicity and emphasis on the reader-response critical theory.

The essay is an influential text in the development of literary theory. It traces a time in our culture when structuralism paved the way for post-structuralism as the basis of critical cultural analysis. In *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes argues not only that we should not just rely on the author's intent when analyzing a cultural text but also questions the implications of active authorship, of putting uncontested trust in the search for a definitive meaning through the author's intention. It elaborates on the distinct roles of the author and the reader in the creation of meaning and its communication.

The author's perspective elaborates on the topic of the formation of meaning by expanding on the author and reader individually as well as their relationship to communicate meaning by highlighting the inherent flaws present in our pre-existing systems of communication, that is language, text, image, sound, etc. He rejects the idea of the possibility to derive a definitive meaning out of any cultural text on the basis of simply believing what the author dictates, for it takes away the very goal of analysis, which is to seek what lies beyond the surface, and a sense of freedom of looking at things. He argues that the meaning we derive from any cultural text is influenced by the wider cultural codes and systems it

exists in and if that is true then is it right to credit the author for the creation of its meaning? And in doing so he questions the notions of originality attached to any cultural text. Rather, he shifts the focus on the imperative role the audience/reader plays in the creation of meaning beyond the author, and this process of signification through which meaning is communicated only reaches its potential when an audience/reader interacts with a cultural text. Since every reader/audience will have a different reading due to the presence of unique cultural codes and pre-existing influences, every cultural text is bound to have multiple meanings.

The creation and communication of meaning

Barthes elaborates on the structuralist perspective of how we understand the world around us and focuses on the analysis of cultural texts in terms of relationships, a system, a hierarchy, and an eco-system that it exists in. It is through the presence of these consistent structures that inform the genesis of these texts as well as the meanings that we derive from them. Similarly, all means of communication in our society, be it film, art, books, sound, image, etc are all made up of a language. Fundamentally arbitrary, a language is a self-contained system that works on the principle of differentiation, and the conceptual value of this language is determined by relationships and differences with other signs. These signs are based on utterance or written word, or phrase or sentence and only come to mean something when we view them as a part of a wider structure. This wider structure denotes the presence of new and pre-existing cultural codes that further aid the meaning of a cultural text by providing what is essential to infer meaning, and that is context. To build on the creation of meaning Barthes emphasizes the imperfect nature of language through the post-structuralist perspective, that is meaning relies on not what is just present but also through what is absent. That the use of any given term/sign always carries within it/signifies the trace of the opposite.

The role of the Author

Barthes highlights the dependency of any cultural text/sign on the presence of cultural codes to convey what it signifies and in doing so questions whether should we really give credit to any individual at all. In a way he points towards the lack of originality of any cultural text and that the author should not be treated as a divine creator of meaning from nothingness but a sort of collage maker, piecing pre-existing ideas in an original way. He uses the term

‘scripter’ in place of an ‘author’ for he sees active authorship as a way of assembling from multiple influences.

Barthes suggests that in the process of analyzing any cultural text we should not be too preoccupied with what the author intended to communicate in the first place.

“The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us.”

Succumbing to such an approach where one is only interested in the author's intent behind a cultural text/sign requires us to rely on two assumptions:

- 1) Is it possible to uncover what were an artist/author's intentions with a cultural text?
- 2) The artist/authors meaning is the objectively correct meaning.

Barthes in his essay seems to refuse both assumptions but does not suggest that trying to decipher an author/artist's intent behind a work is not an interesting pursuit, but he argues strongly that to derive a definitive conclusion is near impossible. He also conveys the possibility of a lack of objective meaning attached to a cultural text since the author/artist's process of creation is not free of the cultural codes/influences either.

The role of the audience/reader

Barthes questions that since the process of creation of a cultural text is not free of any cultural codes/influences then how could the process of decoding it be? For Barthes, every reader participates in the creation of meaning based on a similar number of pre-existing notions. This means that the meaning that any given reader will derive from a cultural text/sign will be different from that of any other.

“a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into” mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.”

Barthes argues that the process of signification through which meaning is communicated, is only truly fulfilled when a text is read, and any given reader is bound to have a unique reading of the text. Thus any text has multiple meanings.

Barthes sees this multiplicity and shift of emphasis in the creation of meaning from the author to the reader as a freeing notion and not as a defeat of literary analysis.

In conclusion, many ideas within *The Death of the Author* function as an extension of ideas rooted in structuralism, but it is in introducing the new-found imperative role of a reader that Barthes lays the foundations for post-structuralism and in doing so the essay turns to not be much about the death of the author but instead the birth of the reader.

Citation

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, Hill and Wang, 1977, pp. 142–48.