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**BEYOND THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR.  
AUTHORIAL REGIMES AND ECOLOGIES IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL  
GLOBALIZATION**

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**Abstract:** In recent times, scholars have been working under the assumption that authorship and authorial studies have both reached a theoretical end point. What is clear, though, is that we are no longer inhabiting the same literary field and cultural climate that gave rise to those notorious ideas put forth about authorship in the late 1960s. This article will try to explain how new research tools can account for the ways in which authorship works in a digitally globalized age, especially in the wake of poststructuralist, postcolonial, and postmodern ideas and practices. The ecology of authorship maps out a network of interacting systems (authorship as function, figure, form, and force) which seem to be in play for any historical regime of authorship, including our most recent one. Consequently, this paper will also try to explain contemporary modes of authoriality and some of the transformations that underpin them.

**Keywords:** author, authorship, regimes of authoriality, the ascension of the author, authorship ecologies, world authorship, digital authorship.

For decades now, scholars have been working under the supposition that authorship followed a path of sturdy decline, partly because Barthes’ thesis on “the death of the author” formalized poststructuralist modes of reading, partly because the academia has been endorsing a similar variety of publications (Hix 131-150, Lamarque 319-331). But I would argue the exact opposite has happened since: not only the literary

field, but academic culture itself have been both developing around the authorial figure, not against it, the studies of critics such as Paul Bénichou, Alexander Nehamas and Alain Viala, to name but a few, being relevant in this respect. This is just one of the reasons why, in recent debates about authorship, a controversial issue has been whether or not we can rightly detect the equally famous “return of the author.”<sup>1</sup> While some researchers still argue that we are currently living through the author’s wake,<sup>2</sup> as it were, others contend that authorship is more or less a ghostly spectacle.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that alternatives do not exist. Among many other, John Frow, for instance, seems perfectly content to suggest, pace Foucault, that the author function has recently stepped into a digital phase (Frow).

To be sure, some might object on the grounds that an evolutionary and/or historical understanding of the authorial function represents a rather idealistic or teleologically naive outlook. I do admit that one could be susceptible to a minor intemperance at the idea. If authorship could be shown to belong to an underlying and unfolding narrative, then one might inadvertently presume the existence of a somewhat metaphysical condition of the notion. What is clear, though, is that we are no longer inhabiting the same literary field and cultural climate that gave rise to those notorious ideas put forth in the late 1960s. In other words, the present context, I believe, requires new cognitive tools. To that end, the remainder of this article will try to explain how my central instruments add to earlier knowledge.

As I have already suggested, most scholars in the field still work under the assumption that ‘the death (and return) of the author’ represent the end point of today’s theoretical investigations. My paper claims this cannot or should not be the case. Nor should we be toing and froing between authorial absence and presence any more (Gallop). The oscillation allegorically relates the story of how literary studies views itself as a discipline. This is a story about how several (sometimes overlapping) research methodologies could have had the power to legitimize the scientific-like nature of critical endeavours. On the one hand, getting rid of the author made the point that one should focus on discourse, language, intertextuality, and the infinite play of signifiers, but, on the other hand, the return-of-the-author shibboleth foreshadowed a pragmatic yet ideological turn of the Humanities. The idea was to

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<sup>1</sup> Insofar the plea for a “return of the author,” several books are key references, such as Burke 1992, Simion 1996, Irwin 2002.

<sup>2</sup> For additional information on this topic, see Nesbit 1987, Page 1992, Power 2020, Sayers 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Authors such as Welch 1988, Couturier 1995, Dubel and Rabau 2001.

show that studying literature is not only interesting and rewarding for its own sake, but that the social and political realms now have something to gain from this up-till-then secluded discipline.

In the last couple of decades, we have been witnessing, however, the slow but steady waning of poststructuralist, postcolonial, and postmodern ideas and practices, driving themselves into a cul-de-sac. This is not to suggest, though, that identity-politics-related types of research are simply no longer in existence. On the contrary, it would seem that new varieties of Cultural Studies have been actually multiplying ever since the 1990s. What it does indicate, nevertheless, is the fact that we should now be thinking about new ways in which we can account for phenomena such as “World Authorship” (Boes et al.) or “Digital Authorship” (Skains). It seems obvious that Barthes’ polemical proclamation of ‘the death of the author’ has caused immeasurable harm in instigating a rather pointless squabble. Contrastingly, however, Foucault’s immediate “rescue of the author” (Foucault) appears to have mapped out, I think, a reasonably distinctive mode of thinking about authorship (and a lucrative one at that), not as a presence or an absence, but as a variable function with particular historical conditions of existence (Jacques-Lefèvre and Regard).

Moving forward, I would grant, first of all, that my model of an “authorial ecology” (Ciorogar, *The Ecology*) – which will be further developed here – is partly compatible with a Foucauldian understanding and would do similar kinds of work on the institutional, technological, ideological, economic, and social levels that govern different “regimes of authorship”. Secondly, I would add that the ecology of authorship maps out a network of interacting (eco)systems which seem to be in play for any historical regime of authorship, including our most recent one. Last but not least, it should be noted that the concept of “authorial ascension” (Ciorogar, *Înălțarea*) has a definite historical force, seeking to understand contemporary modes of authoriality and, of course, the transformations that underpin them.

The probability of historical change is already enclosed within every concept. I will try to analyze the recent metamorphosis of authorship both from a socio-economic (*i.e.* how our digitally globalized era has influenced authorship) and from a conceptual point of view to show that “the use and semantics of a notion are never in perfect correspondence” (Koselleck 62). Considering the relations between action and language, and also those between history and linguistics, Reinhart Koselleck explained the workings of conceptual discourse through the prism of real-life

relations. Conceptual history, thus, mediates the relationship between the evolution of language and factual history. Complex and controversial, fundamental concepts – such as authorship – contain, denote, and reflect several meanings, formations, dogmas, or socio-economic structures. What is more important, however, is that there always seem to be convergences, mutations, and discrepancies that occur between concepts and reality. To that end, Koselleck demonstrates that there are four possible situations that could describe the relationship between the meaning and reality of a concept: 1) where meaning and reality both remain unchanged, 2) where the meaning of a concept remains unchanged, but its reality changes, 3) where meaning changes, but its reality remains unchanged, and, finally, 4) where both meaning and reality change (Koselleck 82). The “death and return of the author” plot clearly indicates that we are dealing with the second scenario: the meaning of authorship has remained largely unchanged since the late 1960s, but the reality of it has been thoroughly transformed.

Now I want to briefly go back to John Frow as a Segway into my final discussion. Frow begins by stating the obvious: the problem of authorship is, indeed, central to the issues of literary theory. There is no denying the fact. The problem, I think, lies in the plurality of issues involved in the notion of authoriality. Frow does a pretty good job of listing some of them: “the unity and coherence of texts, the interpretive relevance of authorial intention, the relation of oral to literate cultures, the regulation of writing by church and state, the legal underpinnings of literary property, the significance of forgery and plagiarism” (19). Obviously, the list is in no way, shape or form exhaustive. The setback, though, resides in that, while Frow argues that authorship is undeniably about multiplicity, he also seems to be implying that this bewildering diversity of authorial facts and phenomena could simply be reduced to the crude distinction between writer, on the one hand, and author, on the other. Not only is this overly reductive, but it paradoxically opens up an utterly novel list of elements that Frow nevertheless acknowledges: “recognition and attribution, (...) institutional processes of publication, textual stabilization, criticism, education, and appropriate legal, regulatory, and economic conditions” (1). While it does the work of synthesis and summary quite well, it’s likewise fair to say that, in the process of describing contemporary authorship, a state-of-the-art assessment of the matter was to be expected. I furthermore find fault with the assertion that authorship is defined – in “the contemporary world”, as he puts it – as an expression of

individuality, especially since he previously recognized the historical nature of authorial forms. Even if we do need to clarify the workings of literary celebrity, for instance, it is obvious that we have now surpassed the Romantic definition of authorship.

Reconstructing the historical conditions behind one of Brecht's legal controversies, Frow does, however, come up with a definition of authorship. The author, he says, is not a producer, but an entity responsible for transforming an artefact into a consumable product. The construction of authorship, then, lies in the innumerable procedures of attribution that attach a writer to a corpus of texts – *i.e.* “the oeuvre” – that are, conversely, coalesced around his or her name. Authorship, thus, represents a formally established, multifaceted community of actors, practices, and beliefs centred around several principles such as value, unity, and consistency. Briefly put, authorship is ultimately a public role manipulated by various circumstances. It doesn't really matter who the person or the historical figure occupying that particular position is. What does matter, instead, are the collective conditions and the strategies that have been deployed to capture that precise spot.

What the rhetorical chorus mediates, then, are the constitutional, historical, proprietary, and postural relationships between an author's name and his or her work, which I would now like to systematically clarify with the help of the following analytical agenda:

A) authorship represents a textual **FUNCTION**: this simply means that authorship is an attribute of discourses (texts are, consequently, legitimized and unified);

B) authorship is bound, at the same time, to a historical **FIGURE**: the author/writer represents the source and the origins of various texts; these texts are, then, authorized (the author is also the owner of intellectual property rights);

C) authorship is also represented as a **FORM**: *i.e.* – the media images of the author (self-thematization, iconography, posture, biographies, or the author as a literary celebrity, for instance);

D) authorship, finally, is also a **FORCE**: the ideological, political, religious, and commercial powers of an author (authorship as a form of symbolic capital).

The four elements of authorship (function, figure, form, and force) constitute what I would call an “authorial ecology” (Ciorogar, “From Singularity”). The relationship between these authorial ecosystems and the shape of the contemporary

world – which will be further described as both global and digital<sup>4</sup> – is what remains to be discussed. But let us briefly go back to John Frow. It seems to me that digital authorship is here broken down into two component parts. On the one hand, Frow describes 1) the processes of digital publication and, on the other, he analyses 2) the morphology of digital texts. Digital authorship, thus, appears to waver, the Australian critic suggests, between more or less traditional forms of attribution and, at the opposite side of the spectrum, anonymity. It remains, however, more of a mystery why these two characteristics would be particularly well-suited to describe digital authorship since both features have been literally around for ages. The same, regrettably, could be said about “the immediacy, the fragmentation, and the interactivity of online publication” (Frow 18). One just needs to recall the fundamental aspects of the avant-gardes. What’s more, anyone who has ever written a text knows that authorship has always been “transient” and “unstable.”

Where digital authorship differs from traditional authorship, I believe, is not in qualitative terms, but, rather unexpectedly, in quantitative and material expressions: “social media posts, fanzine contributions, messages, emails (...) fake identities of trolls, fantasy identities on social media or in digital games, self-promoting celebrities, and influencers, and bots that present themselves as human authors (...) Twitter threads or online reviews” (Frow 18). It is surprising that Frow, however, does not seem to realize this, since his conclusion addresses the issue of how or whether the new internet protocols have, indeed, damaged the reputation of the authorial institution or not. Not only does Frow sweep under the rug one of the most recent and important handbooks on the topic (*i.e. The Cambridge Handbook of Literary Authorship*), a volume that, I believe, would’ve deserved an extended discussion, but he moreover feels content to genealogically fall back on the props of somewhat antiquated conceptual distinctions. In simultaneously hinting towards Wayne C. Booth’s ‘implied author’, for instance, or referencing Alexander Nehamas’ influential discussion of the topic, the selection feels slightly arbitrary, since Eliot’s or Proust’s admittedly less academic yet analogous distinctions have been both equally influential.

There is no lack of labels to describe contemporaneity. Today, the world is either post-industrial (Daniel Bell), networked (Manuel Castells), postmodern, post-

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<sup>4</sup> Held argues that the following characteristics describe the contemporary: extended social relations, increased international trade, interpenetration, and a transnational infrastructure (2).

Fordist (Maurizio Lazzarato), reflective (Anthony Giddens, Beck & Lasch), or simply posthuman (Rosi Braidotti). On the one hand, the effects that these new socio-economic formations have had on culture and on the authorial subject still need to be mapped out. On the other hand, it should also be noted that, after the importance of deconstruction and poststructuralist theories began to wane, the study of comparative literature had been profoundly influenced by postcolonial thinking. However, we can now say that *World Literature* represents one of the most prominent trends today (David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, Galin Tihanov, Wai Chee Dimock, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, Emily Apter). Debates in the field of comparative literature (and not only: ecological studies, the study of the Anthropocene, translation studies, cultural memory studies, posthumanism, to name just a hefty few) seem to have simply eluded the authorial level. Perhaps for this very reason authorship should not even be contained within the confines of a single discipline. A cross-sectional study of several fields that address or interact, even if indirectly, with the issue of authorship would seem more appropriate at this point.

Discussing the state of current social paradigms, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen shows that societal systems are never restricted to national borders. Recent financial, environmental, and military changes can only be comprehended (and resolved), for instance, by displacing nation states with larger cosmopolitan formations (Rosendahl Thomsen 69). In this context, national authors become global authors. Present-day cultural identities are, then, identifiable at the boundary between the local and the global. After having abandoned the idea of hierarchy and the market, the network now seems to represent the most effective means of managing authorial labor. If the process of authorial subjectivation is, indeed, the result of a “machine assembly between different pieces of subjectivity of different people, different machines, and appropriate technical resources” (Rosendahl Thomsen 69), the nature of authorship must be operationalized in relation to these functioning networks that govern the paradigm of current capitalism.

Globalization likewise influences, of course, the structure and role of literary institutions, and it alters the dynamics of copyright or how digital technologies affect the ability of writers to express themselves. The information-network economy is characterized, for example, by decentralized actions: cooperative actions which, without falling under the incidence of market mechanisms, benefit from radical forms of distribution. Perhaps the most important point to make today is that

subjectivity has overcome the poststructuralist moment of human disappearance. Both the socio-economic context (immaterial labor, post-industrial capitalism) and the ideological dimension (neoliberalism) need to be built in a new definition of a networked, distributive, and posthuman authorial subjectivity<sup>5</sup>. Producing not only an artistic object, but the very idea of creative subjectivity (*i.e.* – the owner of intellectual work), authorial work is, thus, passionate, immaterial, and affective work (Wark 164-165).

In this regard, Mark Poster manages to redefine the idea of global culture through the practices associated with the creative industries (“Global” 696). While acknowledging the important role of deterritorialization, global culture is, Poster believes, a machine assembly of actors (human, non-human) and information (“Global” 698). Pushing the debate into an ideological arena, Poster draws on the concepts of migration and diaspora while scolding Arjun Appadurai for not having considered the material dimensions of the media. On close inspection, however, Poster challenges not only the Indian anthropologist’s argumentative errors, but also his use of terms (*Information* 32-35). It is important to remember, however, that, in this scenario, artists would become the model for all entrepreneurs, just as creative businesses would be the template for the new economies.

Furthermore, Ulrich Beck distinguishes, as John Urry points out, between globalism (the world economic market) and globalization (the multidimensional process of institutional change) (*Pioneer* ix). The latter is also called analytical or descriptive and is opposed to the normative one (Fukuyama’s or Huntington’s globalism). By criticizing nationalism, Beck aims to construct a transnational methodology of cosmopolitanism which, unlike the philosophical (historical) one, is intended to be sociological, scientific, and self-reflective (*Pipneer* 9). Taking their cue from thinkers such as David Harvey, Anthony Giddens, or Daniel Bell, Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo similarly argue that globalization should generally be understood as the complex dynamics and mobility of capital, individuals, commodities, images, ideologies, technologies, and information (2-4). Based on interconnectedness and fluidity, the cosmopolitan vision is, most importantly, post-

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<sup>5</sup> From Haraway to Hayles, scholars have been describing the shape of a new, distributed self and its network identity, and the ways in which the human subject has been redefined through new technologies and various political processes.



postmodern<sup>6</sup>. New media and digital communication technologies, together with trends towards globalization, have both brought about certain processes that have transformed the world and culture that postmodernism was trying to describe, leaving it behind.

By realigning the concept's meaning with its reality (via Koselleck), we, thus, get a clearer view of authorship today. The ascension of authorship, then, acknowledges that authorial **functionality** is, first of all, distributive and networked. It also recognizes that, nowadays, there is no clear **figure** behind authorship (some forms of digital writing are collective, collaborative, or even anonymous), and that literary celebrity, for instance, indicates a contradictory, yet relevant **form** of authorial representation, at the same time as the ideological and economic extensions of authoriality start to gauge their new global **forces**.

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<sup>6</sup> It is also known the polymodern condition, writes David Rudrum, and it could be described by the prevalence of new discourses: posthumanism, speculative realism, object-oriented ontologies, Planetarism, and the Post-Anthropocene. See Rudrum and Stavris 17.

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