

## Is There an Author Behind Truth, It Never Concludes



At the very beginning, I started this project with an almost absolute determination in mind that - *by acknowledging and addressing author and authorship of any work more extensively, we will be able to accelerate the process of understanding the psychology of our own kind.* However, at one point I started to realise, this idea of mine is too soon and too ambitious to come to fruition or to apply to the entirety of humanity, just yet.

A pair of interactions that had taken place slowed down the pace of my absolute devotion towards “humanism”. And since, this pair of interactions started to drive me away from an almost predetermined path for this project - one that I probably had already known the answer to from the beginning. Hence, the following essay would be a little documentation of a journey that I had and still have, no idea where it would be and *is* taking me.

Over the past few months, having gained a little bit of knowledge on the subject of anthropology, *how to properly* address the role of an author has become extremely intriguing to me. As I wanted to extend my research even more for this project, I reached out individually to both a humanities professor who specialises in French philosophy and linguistics, and an art professor who mainly exhibits sculptural works.

I first told them that these thoughts had stemmed from my early explorations into the history of ethnographies from our anthropology class, and I brought up the topic of authorship and the lack of attention to them at least within the context of our education in humanities. Then I asked for *their* opinions on a temporary statement I came up with: “with more attention to the authors - ‘the voice of prefaces’ - of all kinds of works in our society, we could understand our humanity better and maybe eventually relieve some sufferings of it, even for just a little”.

As I was speaking, the humanities professor nodded and smiled, whereas the art professor listened contemplatively (I assumed). And at one point they each recommended an essay to me:

“You should check out an essay by Donna Haraway where she argues that, even behind science, there should be authors.” Said the humanities professor.

“There was this wave in the 60s claiming that ‘the authors are dead’. Do you know about this? There was this essay that was literally called ‘The Death of the Author’ by Roland Barthes. You should check it out.” Said the art professor.

By the end of the day, they both sent me the pdf files of the essays. I printed them out and started with the one written by Donna Haraway.

The title of this essay is “In the Beginning Was the Word: The Genesis of Biological Theory”. I approached this essay without knowing that it has such a strong feminist leaning. Haraway challenges the notion of “objectivity” based upon how the male dominance in science has persisted since the beginning of western civilization; it is as if the “objective truth” that tells the entire humankind to believe in is constructed, or even fabricated, by merely males in power and without any feminine presence. In other words, Haraway believes that the determination of the periphery of “science” has never included any participation of the females, which puts the notions of “science” and “objective truth” at stake:

Should feminists adopt a radical form of epistemology that denies the possibility of access to a real world and an objective standpoint? Would feminist standards of knowledge genuinely end the dilemma of the cleavage between subject and object or between noninvasive knowing and prediction and control? Does feminism offer insight into the connections between science and humanism? Do feminists have anything new to say about the vexed relations of knowledge and power? Would feminist authority and power to name give the world a new identity, a new story?  
(470)

Interestingly, at one point Haraway also inconspicuously makes a feminist criticism against a work of Foucault, who has written an essay “What is an Author” in 1969. Here, Haraway states, “Feminists want some theory of representation to avoid the problem of epistemological anarchism. An epistemology that justifies not taking a stand on the nature of things is of little use to women trying to build a shared politics” (480). And according to the footnote, this is Haraway’s main feminist criticism of Michel Foucault’s work: by highlighting the ubiquitous microcirculations of domination in his analysis of the *capillarity* of power

relations, the constitution of resistance by power in a never-ending dialectic, and the demonstration of the impossibility of acquiring space without reproducing the domination named - he threatens to make the grand circulations of domination invisible (480).

Prior to reading Haraway's essay, gender roles have never occurred to me as a factor to be considered reflecting on the role of authors as well as the role of authorship. It was the moment when I had finished reading Haraway's essay that I realised the condition of my receipt of these two essays bears a coincidence that I could not resist looking into: The essay by Haraway that claims that males have been the authors of history (mostly in the context of sociobiology which to some degree includes anthropology) was shared with me by a female, and the one by Barthes that claims that the authors should have never been the centre of attention in the context of literature was shared with me by a male.

Immediately after finishing Haraway's essay, I started reading "The Death of the Author". In the context of literature, Barthes argues against the method of criticism that relies on aspects of an author's identity to distill meaning from the author's work. And he suggests readers to separate a literary work from its creator in order to liberate the text from interpretive tyranny. At one point he even phrases the interpretive method that has to incorporate the author as "a hypocrisy of humanism":

In this way is revealed the whole being of writing: a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the 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. This is why it is absurd to hear the new writing condemned in the name of a *humanism* which *hypocritically* appoints itself the champion of the reader's rights. (3)

In the end of Barthes's essay, he also states:

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. (4)

Having juxtaposed these two essays, by no means that I am happy with simply landing at an arbitrary conclusion where the nature of femininity calls for addressing the authors whereas that of masculinity has the privilege to conceal it since authorship has already been something that masculinity is born into by default. What really strikes me instead, is the realisation that the dilemma and tension between the *attention* to authors and the *removal* of them exist in numerous disciplines. And it enables a start for me to consider how such a dilemma and tension between ways of addressing authorship are in relation to "truth".

By all means we as humanity search for our “truth”. Haraway searches the truth spoken by a voice that has been repressed by the gender structure; Barthes searches for truth as he proudly believes that his truth in his works shall be elevated beyond his physical existence; Favret-Saada searches for truth that has been long skewed in the discipline of anthropology which she has succeeded in humanising; Warburg searches for truth that can relieve the burden that he chooses to take on on his own on behalf of humanity, even no one has asked him to. And my search for truth has morphed into a question of: when I make the effort to address authorship, what else am I also trying to address in eager anticipation, along with or behind authorship? My gaze at authorship has been so long and intense that all in a sudden the anxiety dissipates. I have accepted the conflicts.

And this is when I started to build my work.

I wanted to emphasise on the endless oscillation between drastically different approaches that are in search of their own truths. Because to me, truth is a tricky concept, as it implies a homogeneity within the definition of itself, yet paradoxically, there is no reconciliation between the different versions of it perceived through different lenses.

I started with building the “dark room”. It is a 2’ by 5’ by 6’ black box with an opening on one side, made out of foam boards. The dimension was inspired by the size of a confession booth, as confession booths have an intricate relationship with “truth”, and with the “right” and the “wrong”. Then I decided to place two mirrors on the two ends and one two-way mirror in the middle dividing the space into two. Two-way mirrors are interesting in a way that they are either reflective or transparent depending on the lighting conditions on both sides - the brighter side would be reflective while the darker side would be transparent, allowing the viewer on the darker side to see what is beyond the mirror. To me, what the two-way mirror being in the middle creates, mimics the experience of either being consumed by one’s own truth or the experience of acknowledging a perspective that is the opposite of theirs. Therefore, I wanted to create a condition that was dark enough that one had to use a flashlight while inhabiting the space, and if there were two people in the booth at the same time, they would need to negotiate where their flashlights should point to in order to perceive as much information as possible.

And now - the texts on the mirrors - this was the most difficult part for me. I knew from the beginning that I wanted people to be able to perceive any information only through the reflections that are projected onto the two-way mirror that is in the middle. It is as if even though both people in the booth are perceiving two entirely different texts at the same time, they are ultimately gazing at the same plane (truth). And therefore, whatever texts that would end up being inscribed on the mirrors that are on the two opposite sides - they have to be mirrored. And what should the texts be? Because there had to be a significant relationship between the two texts across the space. It took me a very long time to come up with an answer - a riddle that I had loved to ask around when I was little:

There are two identical gates in front of you, in front of each there is a gatekeeper. The gatekeepers look identical and so do the gates. You know that one gate leads to hell, and the other leads to heaven. But you don’t know which gate leads to which. You also know that one gatekeeper tells only the truth, and the other tells only the opposite of truth. But you don’t know which gatekeeper

is which. If you are allowed to ask only *one* question to only *one* of the gatekeepers, what shall your question be in order to find out which gate will lead you to heaven?

The paradoxical nature of this riddle had always fascinated me when I was little. And the notions of “truth” and “the opposite of truth” also seemed appropriate for what I was looking for (and also heaven and hell being associated with a confession booth). Inspired by the two essays by Haraway and Barthes, I decided to make a different version of the same riddle to inscribe on one of the two mirrors, and for the other mirror, I decided to inscribe a solution to this riddle, which interestingly, would be in the form of a question. I replaced “gate” with “mirror”, “gatekeeper” with “a person standing in front of the mirror”. And I also replaced “heaven” and “hell” with “intellectual high ground” and “humanist hypocrisy”, which are probably the worst versions of what Barthes and Haraway can be if you take them to the extreme. In the meantime, this is also a dilemma for me being in the field of architecture where it oscillates between being completely integrated into a power system (intellectual high ground) yet also being a service industry (humanist hypocrisy). And in the end, I typed them up and had them laser cut onto the two mirrors.

The full experience of this booth, ideally, should take a long time. Because it is not easy to try to read a lengthy text through reflection in the dark with a flashlight, while also trying to figure out the relationship between the two texts at the same time - as difficult as searching for truth in any discipline. And one also has to negotiate if there is another person on the other side. Even if the person on the other side decides to shed light on their mirror for you, it is still impossible to read because the text is mirrored - but not if you come out of the booth and go back in from the other side.

## Works Cited

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