

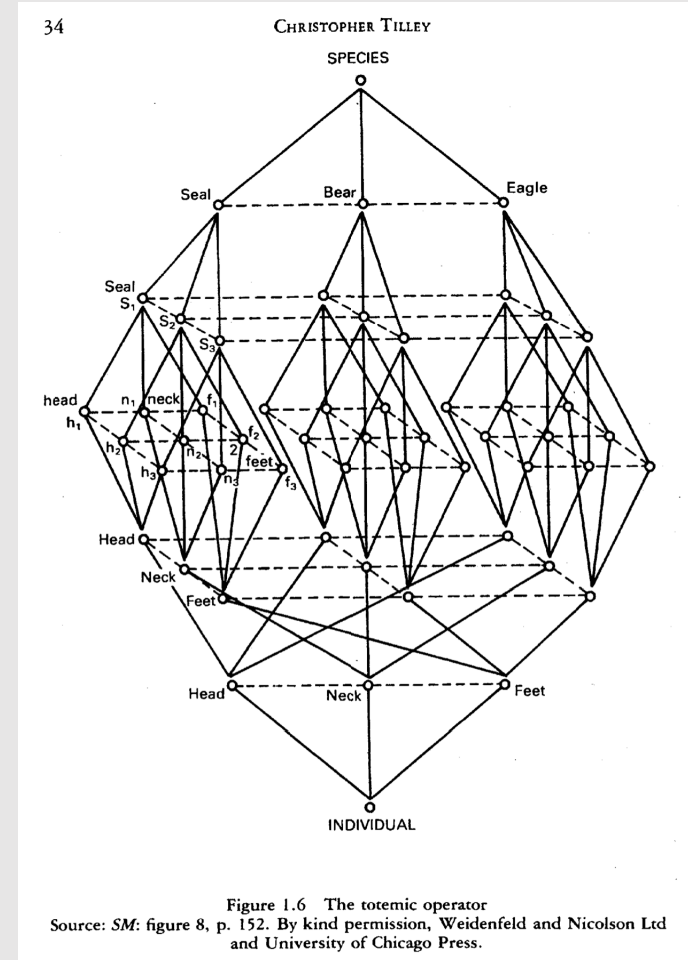
Authorship and Artistic Authority / Roland Barthes

HUMN2001/AHIS3600 – VIDEO LECTURE
M. Curtis Allen

Context of Structuralism & 'Post-Structuralism'

Structuralism

- Structuralism names several approaches to studying the forms and meaning primarily of human activity, but also of non-human phenomena (such as natural systems, mathematics, and metaphysics).
- It is premised on the idea that form and meaning arise from systems of relationships, or 'structures' and that individual terms of a system cannot be understood independently of one another.



Context of Structuralism & 'Post-Structuralism'

Structuralism

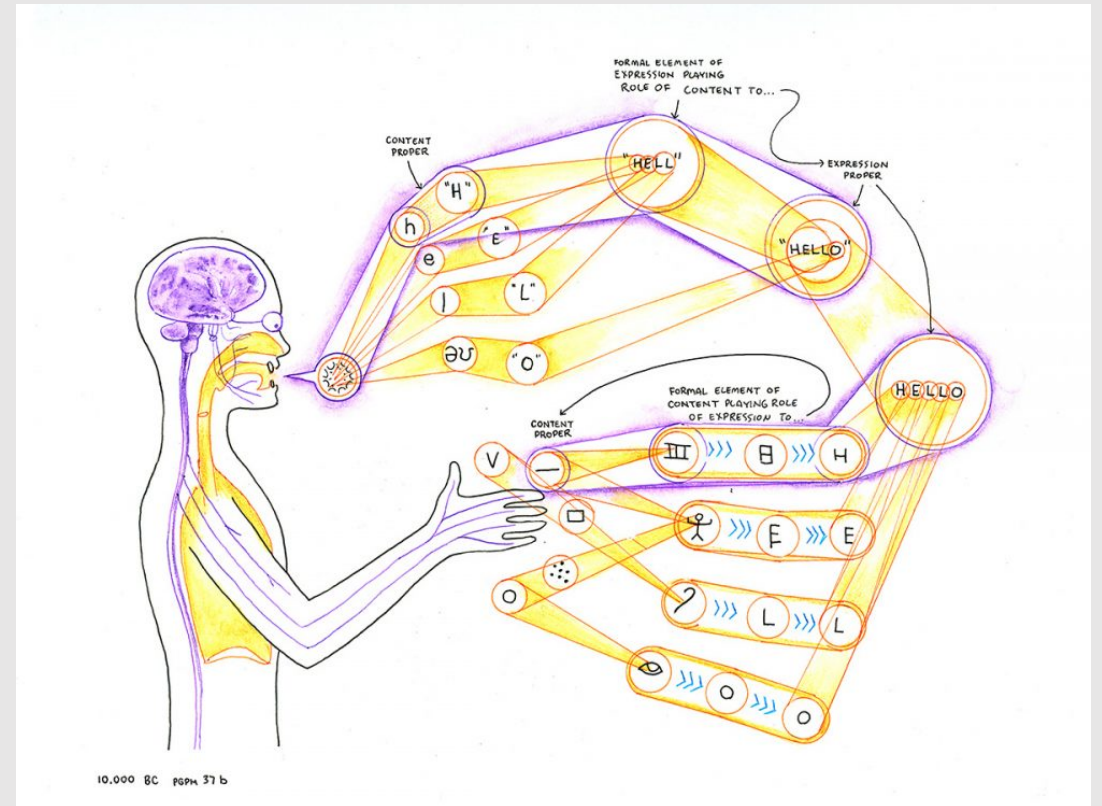
- Structuralism began at the end of the 19th century, but rose to prominence in after WWII.
- The linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, is often credited as beginning structuralism, but his theories and concepts were also adopted in anthropology, psychoanalysis, psychology, philosophy, literary and cultural criticism, and semiotics, among others.



Context of Structuralism & 'Post-Structuralism'

Post-Structuralism

- 'Post-Structuralism' is a name invented by N. American scholars given to a loose group of French philosophers who came to attention in the late 1960s, and those whose work bears the influence of those philosophers.
- There is no overriding theoretical commitment or set of commitments that they all share, rather they share a set of related conceptual themes and theoretical interests and concerns, and many of them both took ideas from structuralism and provided various criticisms of structuralist theories.



Marc Mgui and Magda Wojtyra, "10,000 BC, Paragraph 37B" from *Drawing A Thousand Plateaus*, <https://happysleepy.com/art/drawing-thousand-plateaus/10000-bc/>

Context of Structuralism & 'Post-Structuralism'

Post-Structuralism

- Broadly speaking, they combined elements of phenomenology (or the philosophy of experience) with structuralism. The first type of inquiry began from first-person experience; the second from a hypothetical third-person perspective.
- Both of these came under intense scrutiny in post-structuralist thought.



Photo with (from right): Pierre Boulez (composer), Roland Barthes, unknown, unknown, unknown, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze. Photo credit unknown, taken in ~1978.

Context of Structuralism & 'Post-Structuralism'

Post-Structuralism

- Some of those common themes included:
 - Non-totalizability.
 - Necessary fragmentariness, or disunity.
 - Lack of central meaning or authority.
 - Ungroundedness of meaning and language.
 - Interest in the effect of time, history, and power on social structures and meaning.
 - Relation of presence to absence.
 - Emphasizing difference over identity.
 - Marginality, and limit.
 - Critical of the 'subject'.

arbitrary.and.rejected.memes

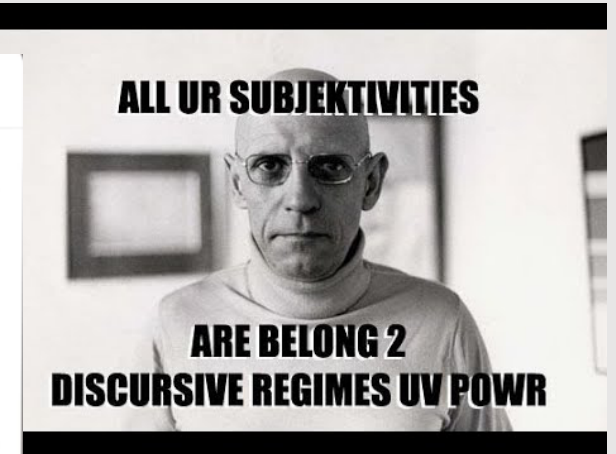


Stage One:
Initially, the sign (image or representation) is a reflection of basic reality.

Stage Two:
The sign masks a basic reality. The image becomes a distortion of reality.

Stage Three:
The sign marks the *absence* of basic reality. The image call into question what the reality is and if it even exists.

Stage Four:
The sign bears no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.



Context of Structuralism & 'Post-Structuralism'

Structuralism

- Some authors included in this label are :
 - Roman Jakobson (literary theory)
 - Claude Levi-Strauss (cultural anthropology)
 - Jacques Lacan (psychoanalysis)
 - Jean Piaget (psychology)
 - René Thom (mathematics)
 - Roland Barthes (literary, cultural, art theory)

Post-Structuralism

- Some authors included in this label are:
 - Jacques Lacan
 - Roland Barthes
 - Louis Althusser (Marxism, Political Philosophy)
 - Michel Foucault (Historian, Philosophy)
 - Jacques Derrida (Philosophy)
 - Gilles Deleuze (Philosophy)
 - Jean-François Lyotard (Philosophy)
 - Hélène Cixous (Feminist Philosophy)
 - Luce Irigaray (Feminist Philosophy)
 - Julia Kristeva (Philosophy, Literary Theory)
 - Felix Guattari (Psychoanalysis, Psychiatry)

Context of Structuralism & 'Post-Structuralism'

Saussure

- Some of these figures followed from, developed, or explicitly critiqued and modified the work of Saussure, others only held indirect associations with the general systematic and relational methodology of Saussure.
- We will focus here solely on Saussure.



Context of Structuralism & 'Post-Structuralism'

Saussure

- F. de Saussure was a Swiss linguist who introduced into the linguistics a general study of linguistic signs, a field called semiology.
- In his view, language was a system of signs, each which gained meaning by their relation to the rest of the other signs.



Context of Structuralism & 'Post-Structuralism'

Saussure

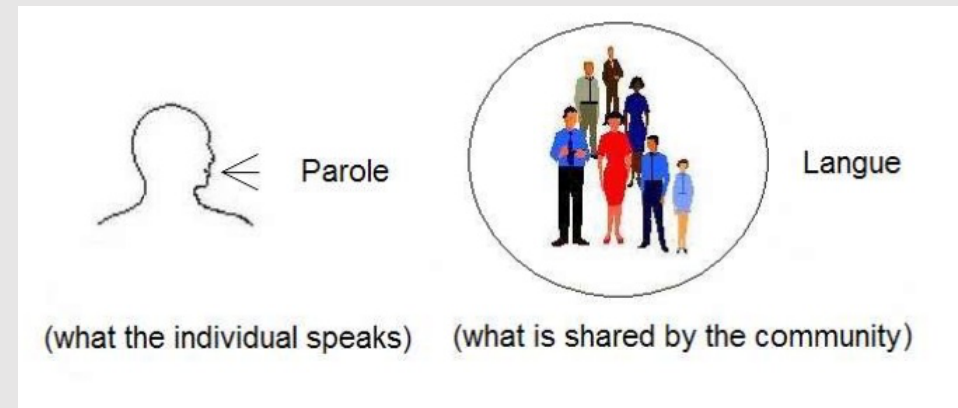
“[I]n language there are only differences with no positive terms.” (Saussure in *Literary Theory*, 70)

“Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with other terms of the system.” (Ibid.)

Context of Structuralism & 'Post-Structuralism'

Saussure

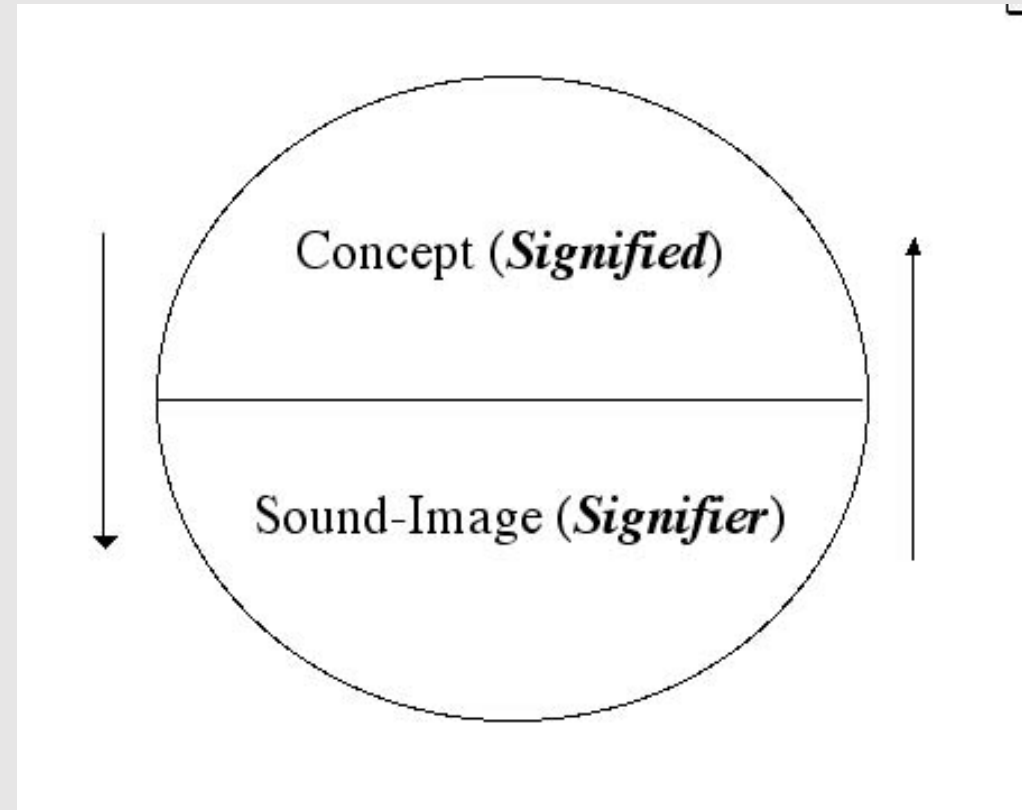
- This relational system of meaning S. calls 'signification' and the system itself taken as all at once or as a totality—as a 'synchronic' snapshot—he calls 'language' (*langue*) which he opposes to any individual use of language, the latter he calls 'speech' (*parole*).
- The former provides the basis of order, rules, and meaning. The latter transforms the former gradually.



Context of Structuralism & 'Post-Structuralism'

Saussure

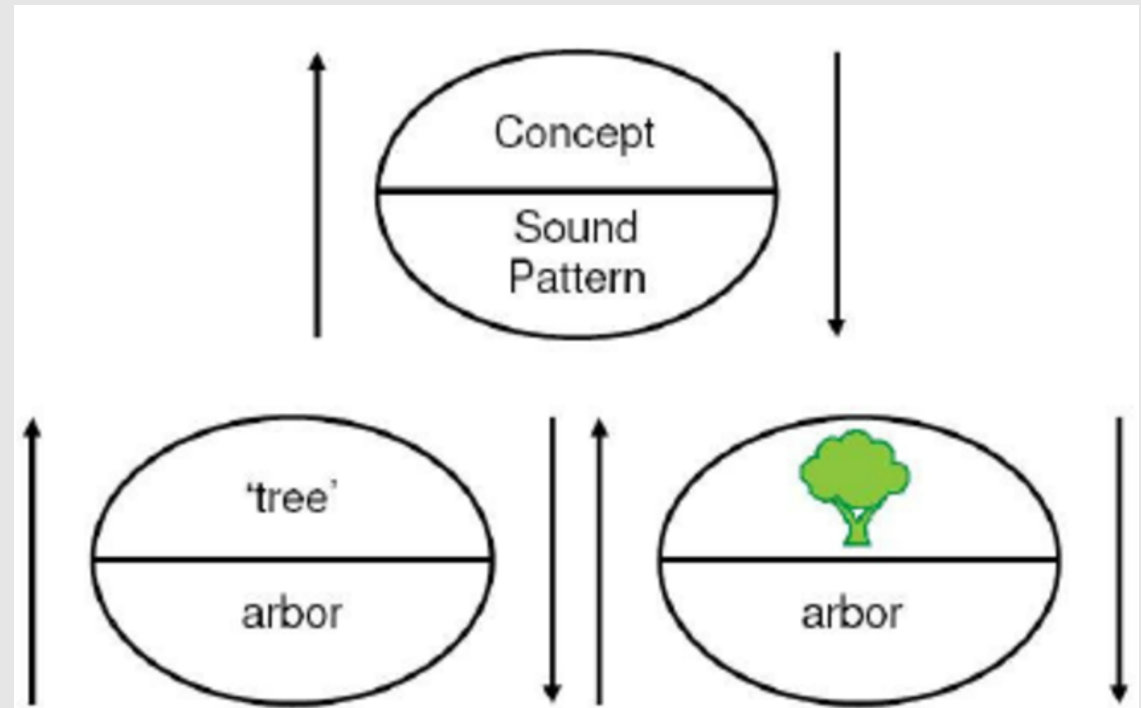
- Signs, have two elements:
 - *Signifier*: that which stands in for something, represents, or 'signifies' something. Ex: The word 'cat'
 - *Signified*: that which is signified, represented, etc. Ex.: the concept of 'cat'



Context of Structuralism & 'Post-Structuralism'

Saussure

- Importantly for Saussure, because the signification of something was internal to the interrelations of the terms used to signify something, that which is signified within language is not outside of language, but a part of it.
- When we use a sign, how it means something is not by relating to something external to language, according to S.



Barthes' Life and Work

Roland Barthes (1915-1980)

- Roland Barthes was a French structuralist semiotician, philosopher, and literary theorist.
- One of the most influential literary and cultural critiques of the 20th century. Eventually becoming a member of the Collège de France, the highest research position in France.
- His work revolved around reading literary and artistic works, as well as the culture as semiotic texts—signs in many differing forms which signified cultural meanings.
- He was known as a great stylist and writer of essays, and for his idiosyncratic, and often personal approach to the material of culture.



Barthes' Life and Work

Roland Barthes (1915-1980)

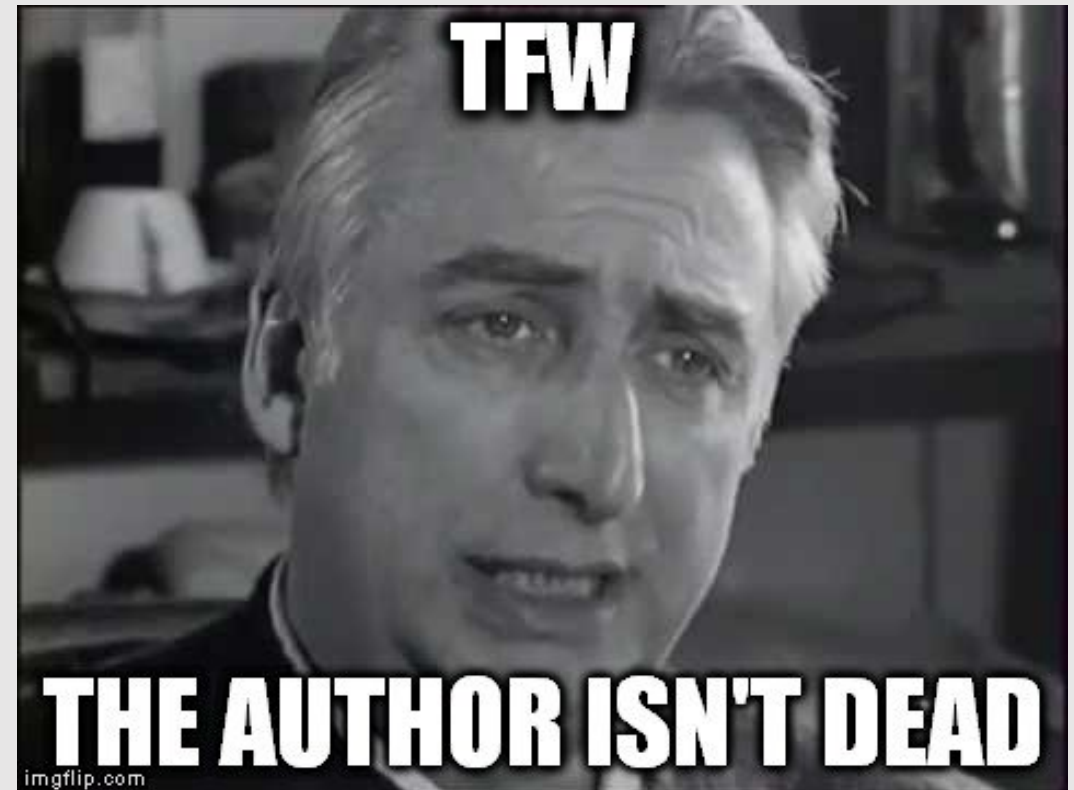
- His work revolved around reading literary and artistic works, as well as culture as semiotic texts
 - I.e. as signs in many differing forms which signify complex cultural meanings.
- He is known as a great stylist and writer of essays, and for his idiosyncratic, often personal approach to the material of culture.



Barthes' Life and Work

Roland Barthes (1915-1980)

- Although beginning his work in the vein of Saussure, he progressively pushed the insights of semiology towards the terrain of so-called 'post-structuralist' authors—who began to criticize the totalizing ambitions and ahistorical standpoint of structural analysis.



Barthes' Life and Work

Roland Barthes (1915-1980)

- Important works of Barthes include:
 - *Writing Degree Zero* (1953)
 - *Mythologies* (1957)
 - *Elements of Semiology* (1964)
 - *S/Z* (1970)
 - *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973)
 - *Image, Music, Text* (1977)
 - *A Lover's Discourse* (1977)
 - *Camera Lucida* (1980)



Reading Barthes' "Death of the Author"

Key Theses

- The 'person', the biography, the ego, of the one making the work—their psychology, their intentions, their life, their idiosyncrasies, etc.—ultimately do not determine, and have no authority over, the meaning of the work they produce.
- The function of the Author as individual, personal, 'genius'—is itself a historical product of modernity—of the history of Christianity, philosophy in Europe, and perhaps more profoundly still, of the historical transition into capitalism.

Reading Barthes' "Death of the Author"

Key Theses

- Writing represents a space of signs and structures made of up traces in language coming from many different directions of no definitive origin. Text does not have a definitive or final, or even single or settled meaning—meaning is always in the process of its unmaking.
- The language (and signs) of modernist literature (and art) are not representational but performative.
- The authority of the text lies not in who writes it (the author) but ultimately in who reads it (the reader).

Reading Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

Objections

The Barthesbrain

- thinks art springs out of nowhere, as if the contents of the art were not deliberately arranged a certain way by an author
- narcissistically projects own personal neuroses onto the work of others, as if they have any say in the decisions of its creator
- thinks authors being wrong about their own work years after they wrote it somehow invalidates the objective meaning of work when it was written



Reading Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

“Who is speaking thus? [...] We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that 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, 142).

Reading Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

“... [F]inally 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, 142).

Reading Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

“The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the ‘human person’. It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the ‘person’ of the author.” (Barthes, 142-3).

Reading Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

“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.” (Barthes, 143).

Reading Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

“For him [Mallarmé], for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’.” (Barthes, 143).

Reading Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

“Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance [of] writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a ‘subject’, not a ‘person’, and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language ‘hold together,’ suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it. ” (Barthes, 145).

- Note: The ‘I’ is in a linguistic function of its own utterance which simply collects the statements it makes into a unity, but that unity is itself nor personal or psychological, but merely formal, ‘indexical’ or ‘deictic’ as they call it in linguistics and philosophy—it points to a unity of action, in this case, of linguistic performances.

Reading Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

“The removal of the Author [...] is not merely an historical fact or an act of writing; it utterly transforms the modern text [...]” (Barthes, 145).

“The temporality is different. The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after [... read passage] writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, 'depiction' (as the Classics would say); rather, it designates exactly what linguists [...] call a performative [...] in which the enunciation has no other content than the act by which it is uttered - something like the *I declare* of kings or the *I sing* of very ancient poets.” (Barthes, 145-6).

- Note: performative of the marriage officiant: ‘I now pronounced you legally wed.’

Reading Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

“We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes, 146).

Reading Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

“[L]ife 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, 147).

“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.” (Barthes, 147).

Reading Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

“Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: 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, 148).

“[W]e know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. ” (Barthes, 148).

Reading Barthes' "Death of the Author"

Objections: Let Us Return

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