

The Distributed Author: Creativity in the Age of Computer Networks

By Christiane Heibach

No. 13 – 23.08.2000

Abstract

The Death of the Author has first been claimed by poststructuralist philosophy. When language is seen as an open system undergoing constant changes, it loses its power of forming the subject's consciousness. Author and reader become object to the open *différance*-movement of the signs. Hypertext theorists like George Landow and Michael Joyce transferred this core thesis of poststructuralist thinking to the literary application of hypertext. Hyperfiction, seen as a "garden of forking paths," seems to semantically represent the looseness of the signifier-signified-relation as the multiple narrative lines subvert any control by the reader and undermine the author's power to fix all contexts and therefore all meanings of the text sequences. Although Landow sees this hypertextual dimension as a fulfillment of the poststructuralist claim, that meaning is only constituted by the reader and not determined by the author, in hyperfiction this remains an illusion. As the reader has to move within an unknown narrative universe, her freedom is strongly reduced when she tries to figure out the coherence and connections between the *lexias*. It is still the author who determines the text by designing the possible ways the reader can take, and by writing and therefore fixing the text sequences.

Nevertheless we experience a change of the author concept deriving from new writing practices in computer networks. The internet as the most complex networked platform is the sphere where the single creator is substituted by a collective and communicative creativity. Literary internet-projects meanwhile have developed a wide range of different cooperative forms that can be structured in "weak" and "strong" ways of collaboration. Under "weak" cooperation I subsume collaborations of authors and designers (the technical basis of internet literature and the development towards multimedia effects requires a wide range of qualifications that very rarely can be performed by one person) or multiple authors as e.g. realized in the literary project "Aliento" where three authors work together to create a narrative network of stories related to significant places of a fictional city. "Strong" ways of collaboration are those where any internet user can participate, as in cooperative writing projects like "*snowfields**" by Josephine Berry and Micz Flor <<http://www.art-bag.net/snowfields/>>, where - based on the concept of soap operas - different stories related to various topographical parts of Eastern Berlin

shall be developed. Also "frame"-projects represent this way of cooperation - projects where the initiator sets the frame, and the participators are free to realize their interpretation as for example performed in "noon quilt" where people from all parts of the world are asked to describe what they see when they look out of their window at noon. Thus an intercultural network of different views expressing the different individual and cultural conditions is woven.

Apart from these ways of collaboration a second form, basically communicative, appears. It is realized in Virtual Worlds where people meet to interact by text and tell each other their (true or fictional) story. "Conversation with Angels" is such a literary project where avatars talk to visitors, visitors to other real life visitors or avatars and no-one knows who the other is. The avatars have their own biography, and in communication with the visitors they develop narratives that only exist as long as the conversation goes on. These projects are fundamentally ephemeral and only alive as long as there are participants.

These forms of cooperation and communication deeply change the notion of the author - they cause a shift from one creator-personality to multiple creators and thus a shift from the completed work to an ever-changing, never finished procedural project, where the act of communicating with others substitutes the desire to create an eternal and fixed work. The action is more important than the result.

Some historical remarks on the notion of authorship

The concept of the author is anything else than fixed – at least since Foucault we know about the cultural dependence of the author function (Foucault 1988). Poststructuralist theory was more radical in its attempt to eliminate the author and tried instead to ontologize the text, characterizing it as never-fixed, volatile phenomenon. But in the practice of literary criticism the author has never really disappeared. Thus the discussion about the author reappeared in the last years, now mostly under the premises of authorship as literary and cultural construction, but nevertheless existing, and it seems that it is narrowly bound to the concept of the printed book, or at least to scriptographical, "material" manifestations.

Some of the great epical authors in the late 12th century, at the time, when scriptographic storing began, show a consciousness of authorship that can be compared to that of the modern times (Bein 1999, p. 306). They mentioned their names or the names of others – mostly embedded in their literary narration, as Gottfried von Straßburg or Walther von der Vogelweide did. But these evidences are quite rare and rather have the status of exceptions than that of a standard. Medieval authorship was mostly bound to "authority" – only authorities acknowledged by the

church had the right to be mentioned as authors. The development of print technology that allowed to produce many copies of the same work and to distribute it over wide areas changed this authoritarian notion of the author as soon as the print technology was not only seen as a new storing system, but as a communication system that could be used to widely distribute all kinds of information (Giesecke 1998, p. 318). The communication network was significantly changed and extended; the author became necessary for the recipients to locate and structure the available information.

Nevertheless it took almost 300 years from the invention of the printing press to the modern concept of the author as analyzed by Foucault. According to him this notion of the author developed with the re-birth of literature under the premises of the discovery of language as an independent system with specific rules and structures (Foucault 1990, p. 358). The possibilities of individual formation of language in literary production constructed the author. Foucault's investigation does not include the specific conditions of the literary system that developed out of print technology, but analyzes the construction of the author out of an archeology of knowledge. But Knowledge itself is nevertheless deeply interwoven with the leading technology by which it is stored and distributed, and which influences – as McLuhan has demonstrated – the conditions of the specific epistemologies. So we have two different theoretical approaches parting from which the construction of the author can be analyzed: the materiality of the print medium, including the whole literary system on the one hand; the specific forms of knowledge construction on the other hand. Both approaches cannot be separated from each other, as the one always influences the other, and it is nearly impossible to tell the cause from the effect. Thus both theoretical approaches are important, when we try to summarize the specific characteristics of the modern notion of the author as follows (Jannidis/Lauer/Martinez/Winko 1999, p. 5-8)

- Individuality. This characteristic is maybe the most general one: It implies the author as an individual person producing a unique literary work in a unique individual and elaborated poetic style. The genius appeared after the dissolution of the strict rules under which literary production had to happen until the 18th century, and culminated in the literary production of romanticism. Individuality was bound to the notion of an individual creativity.
- Intentionality: the idea of an authorial intention developed in the course of the discovery of language as a system: the new born philology began to distinguish between grammatical and historical interpretation. The historical interpretation was bound to the author and his/her possible intention. To operate with an authorial intention means to understand literature as communication system.

- The author as juridical person: This is bound to the development of the idea of the right of property and of course the consequence of the construction of individuality. The author is the owner of his ideas and thus can appeal to the copyright of his work.

Poststructuralist theory now concentrates on only one of these characteristics – the stylistic individuality, and even there it does not see the author, but the text as creator of style, mainly of the *différance* between rhetoric and literal meaning of the text. But this concept is bound to the print medium and has to operate with fixed words on paper to deconstruct the predetermination of the signifier and the signified, it still needs the author to demonstrate the “blindness and insight” of literature and its interpretation, that means: even poststructuralist theory operates with intentionality, although hidden behind the ontologized text. Thus I suppose that the notion of the author is still alive, even in the most radical literary theories. This is not only a consequence of theory, but also bound to our cultural and social construction of the literary system. That means, that our practice of literary production is deeply connected to the whole system of print technology which demands material closure, naming (title and author) and identification.


Now, as we witness a change of media as important as that from scriptographic to typographic writing, we have to ask ourselves, which impact this change may have for the notion of the author in theoretical and practical (i.e. concerning the literary system) respect.


Networking and Authorship


New media create new forms of writing and thus should logically have deep influence on the author function. Statements of hypertext theorists like for instance George Landow depart from the text, not from the change of the communication system or the different materiality of the medium when they state that hypertextual writing and reading causes a revolution on the notion of the author who disappears behind the volatile structure of multi-linearity. But the “wreader” (Landow 1994, p.14) the reader who creates the story apart from authorial control in choosing links and compiling his own story out of the offers the author presents to him seems to be a too moderate concept to really appear as a revolution. Reader response theory developed the theory of the construction of the individual story in the reader’s mind on the basis of print literature, and it seems to me rather an increase of confusion than an increase of liberty, when the reader is presented more texts than he/she can cope with. In fiction he/she has no chance to choose intentionally; he/she is forced to follow the links randomly without knowing where he/she is taken to. There is still one identifiable author, the producer of the text, and

thus the reader is still concerned with trying to get a glimpse of the author's intention, trying to reconstruct the intended meaning. Thus, hyperfiction mostly causes more confusion than pleasure.

To grasp possible changes in the notion of the author caused by the new media, we have to transcend the text and at first try to describe the medium we are dealing with. Due to the limited time, I will focus not on the computer as medium which of course has implications on the author's function as we have to deal with the gap between limitation and scope caused by the technical basis of software. Computer generated texts include software as an authorial element, and there the author is no more the creator of individual style but the designer of text transformation rules. But this is a different, although related point which I will not further explore. In the following I will concentrate on the changes caused by networked computers, and there on the most extensive form, the internet.

My main thesis concerns the ontology of this medium: I suppose, that it was developed and grew that enormously because it is the answer to one of the basic human desires: the desire to communicate, to meet and talk to people without being limited by time or space-differences. Networking does only make sense, when connections are used, and they are used in two ways. The first way can be formulated as the connection between people by means of the machine (which is the computer and its communication with other computers on the basis of protocols); the second way is the communication between user and the networked machines when he/she browses through the internet by using links, and compiles information from different places. This can also be the core of literary production, as the Project  ["The impermanence agent"](#) by Noah Wardrip-Fruin, A.C. Chapman, Brion Moss, & Duane Whitehurst shows. A software agent accompanies the user on his/her way through the net and creates stories out of the visited websites. Projects like this one are deeply connected to the technical basis of the medium, they resemble the change in authorship caused by using software for text generating. In this contribution I will focus on the first sort I mentioned – the communication between people through the machine that causes different forms of cooperative creativity.

The first and maybe most pragmatic one is the cooperation of technicians, designers and writers. The complexity of the computer demands abilities that can rarely be met by one single person. Thus cooperations become more and more important that make it possible to use and maybe also extend or transgress the possibilities of the medium. The latest work of Mark Amerika,  [PHON:E:ME](#) (see review in *dichtung-digital*), is such an example: Apart from him as the (conceptual and real) author two composers and a designer were involved in the production. But I will not focus on this form of cooperation, as this is nothing really new: All technical based art works like that.

What is really interesting is the development of different forms of "procedural authorship" as Janet Murray calls it (Murray 1997, p. 185 ff.). Procedural authorship is bound to a deep change in the first characteristic I mentioned above as part of the modern notion of the author: It eliminates the individual style and replaces it by combining different authors to a project- or text-network. There are multiple examples of cooperative writing and/or designing, that can be distinguished by the ways they treat the author. Projects that establish a thematical frame for example mostly mention the individual author, as for example the trace project  "noon quilt", where people describe what they see when they look out their window at noon. But even though the texts still have an individual creator, the project itself needs the network of the different views to elaborate its relevance, and it is the indirect communication between different cultures that is interesting there and establishes the individual style of the project as a whole. The individual texts gain a new relevance by being embedded within texts they could not foresee or refer to.

"Assoziations-Blaster", created by the two Germans Alvar Freude and Dragan Espenschied, is more radical in using networked writing (see review in dichtung-digital). The "Assoziations-Blaster" consists of keywords, to which everyone can contribute her/his associations. That means clicking on a keyword will make a – randomly chosen – text appear which is stored under this category, in this text every word that is a keyword is linked, so that the user can click through an associative network of texts. The linking is done automatically according to the keywords, and therefore has no semantical meaning. The user now can contribute his or her own associations to one text, after having done that at least three times he/she is allowed to create his/her own keyword. The "Assoziations-Blaster" is based inherently on the instantaneous communication opportunities, the user communicates directly with the text he/she responds to. This differs from "noon quilt" in the communicative function of writing, that means, that the author becomes involved in a rather immediate communication with other authors. This is emphasized by the existence of a very lively forum, in which the people discuss their thoughts concerning the project or certain texts, so that the communicative character of the project culminates in a real communication network. In this project the focus lies rather on cooperative communication than on the production of individual texts.

While "noon quilt" and the "Assoziations-Blaster" store their entries, other forms of communicative and cooperative writing exist only in the moment of their realization. This is the case in Virtual Worlds, where people meet and communicate through text. Of course one could argue, that this has nothing to do with literature, but what is literature? If you focus on fictionality as one of the main characteristics of literature you are not able to distinguish between literature and non-literature anymore, as computer-mediated communication has a very low empirical verification level. You can never be sure that the one you "talk" or - correctly - "write"

to is the one he/she pretends to be. 🚩 “Conversation with Angels” by meetfactory plays with this blurring between reality and fiction. In this virtual world one is concerned with bots and “real” people, but talking to the bots who all have their individual (fictional) biography stimulates the participants to play with invented biographies and stories. But the narratives that emerge from the communication are not stored, they are highly ephemeral and exist only as long as the communicational act lasts. So here we have a new characteristic of an authorship that is not bound to the desire for eternity. It bears rather the characteristics of a game which is only fascinating as long as it is played. As the stories are developed in communication with other people there is no identification of individual style possible anymore.

These are only three examples, each representing different forms of writing, of course one could find much more manifestations of these three types of cooperative creativity.

The changes of authorship

Now let's turn to the consequences of these networked forms of production for the notion of the author. The three characteristics of “individuality”, “intention” and “owner of ideas” shall now be examined according to the new conditions of networked writing.

As far as “individuality” is concerned, I referred to this time and again during describing the three projects. The focus of all projects lies on communication – more or less immediate – and this subverts any form of artificiality and demonstration of individual literary skills. It emphasizes a notion of literature that is bound to social processes, not to individual psychic dispositions. It is not important anymore to form an individual work out of the language material, but to co-create something in – more or less immediate – communication with others. The process becomes more important than the result. As a consequence, the individual creator steps back behind the project as a communicational phenomenon. This is less the case in projects like “noon quilt”, where networking is not that much emphasized, but becomes more important in works-in-progress like the “Assoziations-Blaster” and represents the core of the playground of virtual worlds. We could say that in these projects two forms of authorship appear: The authorship of the initiators of the project who create the thematic and technical frame, and the communicative authorship where people realize the given scopes and vitalize the project.

Departing from these two forms of authorship it becomes clear, that intentionality is also double-faced: On the one hand there are the initiators who mostly intend for

a certain purpose, on the other hand there are the participants who may not care for this purpose but act on the basis of realizing the intentions of their communication partners. Paradoxically, here the individuality becomes important again, as in reacting to a text (especially concerning the "Assoziations-Blaster" and the case of virtual worlds) one reacts to the author of the text although this may not be perceivable for the readers. The notion of intentionality concerning the initiators still resembles the one of the traditional author – it may play a role for the contributors but it mustn't (as the construction of a print author's possible intention may be interesting for the interpretation or not), but the intentionality of the participants may be at first to communicate and therefore to realize the intentions of their co-creators. This is a social notion of intentionality that is based on the immediate communicative situation, and it is necessary for the success of communication and thus of the project.

The author as owner of ideas disappears completely in these forms of writing. The internet in its decentral and open distribution forms does not yet allow the restrictions of copyright although not everyone supports this freedom. The discussion on copyright questions shows that the individual author still is the dominating one. When the software "Third Voice" was introduced that allows to leave comments on any web site and thus constitutes a sort of metatext, this horrified many home-page-owners, as they saw this as a non-controllable interference to their "territory". But if we do not want the internet to be a big commercial circus we will have to say goodbye to the concept of an original owner – which, as the discussion on intertextuality shows – is as much a fiction as the genius.

In this contribution I focused on the author function, which – as I suppose – due to networked environments will change from the original creator to the co-creative collective. The further consequences of these forms of literature as immediate communication are the procedural, never closed, and – at least partly – ephemeral character of the projects. Quality criteria – as complexity, beauty of language, innovative treatment of plot or language etc. – are not important here, what is important is the creative and active participation within the given rules – rather a game than a work. In literary theory we will not be able to describe these phenomena without a theory of communication – this may become more important than text theories. The core of this author function is communication, and this corresponds to the ontology of the medium, as I stated it above. Thus, we indeed face a revolution: not the disappearance of the author, but the metamorphosis of its notion from the individual originator to the distributed collective author as a result of social dynamics.

This text is a talk given at the Digital Arts & Culture-Conference, Aug. 2-4, 2000, in Bergen.

Bibliography

- Bein, Thomas: Zum 'Autor' im mittelalterlichen Literaturbetrieb. In: Jannidis/Lauer/Martinez/Winko, Die Rückkehr des Autors, p. 303-320.
- Foucault, Michel: Die Ordnung der Dinge. Frankfurt am Main 1990 (Les mots et les choses, Paris 1966).
- Foucault, Michel: Was ist ein Autor? In: Schriften zur Literatur. Frankfurt am Main 1988, p. 7-52 (Qu'est qu'un auteur? In: Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie, July - September 1969).
- Giesecke, Michael: Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit. Eine historische Fallstudie über die Durchsetzung neuer Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien. Frankfurt am Main 1998.
- Jannidis, Fotis/Lauer, Gerhard/Martinez, Matias/Winko, Simone (ed.): Die Rückkehr des Autors. Zur Erneuerung eines umstrittenen Begriffs. Tübingen 1999.
- Jannidis, Fotis/Lauer, Gerhard/Martinez, Matias/Winko, Simone: Rede über den Autor an die Gebildeten unter seinen Verächtern. Historische Modelle und systematische Perspektiven. In: Jannidis/Lauer/Martinez/Winko (ed.): Die Rückkehr des Autors, p. 3-35.
- Landow, George: What's a Critic to Do? Critical Theory in the Age of Hypertext. In: Hyper / Text / Theory. Baltimore/London 1994, p. 1-47.
- Murray, Janet: Hamlet on the Holodeck. The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace. New York 1997.