

From the Aura of the Artwork to the (Pseudo)Aura of the Author

Andrej Blatnik

University of Primorska
Andrej.blatnik2@guest.arnes.si

Although post structuralism declared the death of the author, it seems that reality shows a completely different picture. In a time when products of the culture industry have lost aura, this disappearance is compensated for by the auratization of the artistic act or of the artist himself. The fascination with the sacred aura of traditional art has been replaced by the more profane glamour of artistic presentation.

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Although poststructural theory (most explicitly through Roland Barthes) declared the death of the author, although there is, for example, in American metafiction a successful deposing of the author as the determining factor of the text, although the theory of reading calls for a shifting of the focal point from the author to the reader, and although authors themselves have started to deal with these thematic standpoints in their literature, it appears that the actual state, at least as pertains to extraliterary and not the intraliterary author (in which the poststructuralist axis was directed), is precisely the opposite. Today the author is a greater factor in the field of literature than perhaps ever before in history. It is worth investigating how much of his grandeur is contributed to by what he established as an author – the very fact of the author's work.

The New World

Every year thousands of new works of fiction are published in the United States. Only a select few authors (among them, Cormac McCarthy and Don DeLillo), who have the option of avoiding the media, allow their books to speak for themselves. Some, most obviously Thomas Pynchon (and before him, J.D. Salinger), have spun an enticing media story out of their very avoidance of the media and public appearances. All others try

to attract attention in the usual manner: through media presence. The author's name personifies a genre or at least his specific sub-genre and ensures an appropriate level of production – the author appears as a trade mark. This effect is especially characteristic for products of popular culture: 63 of the titles from the American list of the 100 best-selling works of fiction between 1986 and 1996 were written by a total of only 6 authors – Tom Clancy, Michael Crichton, John Grisham, Stephen King, Dean Koontz and Danielle Steel (Epstein 33). Homogenization of the canon (and the list of the most-sold books is very evidently a canon of popular literature) is also occurring in “high” culture, where sales are not (yet) as important as is the presence, in terms of cultural currency, that is provided when a work appears on syllabi and in translation. There is a snowball effect when it comes to translation: translations into “big languages” are followed by translations into smaller ones, and already-translated authors have an advantage over those who have not yet been translated, as they have already asserted themselves to a certain extent in the target culture.

In a time when, according to Walter Benjamin, aura in the culture industry's products has been lost, its loss is compensated for by the “aura-tization” of the artistic act (and hand-in-hand with this goes the striking rise in creating writing programs in the United States in the mid 1960s), or of the artist himself. In pop art, artistic production represents only the content of art. The fascination with the sacred aura of traditional art has been replaced by the secular brilliance of artistic presentation, which is a phenomenon that influences other fields of art, and also, in a time of the universal mediatization of all activities and arts – “the media have colonized culture, that they are the primary vehicle for the distribution and dissemination of culture” notes Douglas Kellner (35) – literature to a fair extent, as well as the writer, its main representative. The writer himself acquires Benjamin's “cult status”, which the work of art has lost in an age of mechanical reproduction, provided he is high enough up in the hierarchy and is also protected by means of his inaccessibility, very often in the physical sense as well. This does not pertain solely to backstage passes to the rock star's dressing room. Even finding one's way to writers is not easy. One can find specific on-line directions for getting to J.D. Salinger's isolated house, along with a warning regarding how far it is safe to walk because there will surely be someone waiting there with a loaded rifle. Don DeLillo does not appear in public. Thomas Pynchon does not appear anywhere. By Slovenian standards statements or appearances by Svetlana Makarovič are a thing of prestige.

Mass production, the very thing that robbed the work of art of its aura, clearly bestowed this aura on the artists: because his work (at least theo-

retically) entered each household, it was physically impossible for the artist to follow it and be indelibly linked to it – not unlike the “minstrel” in Raymond Williams’ studies. But this “auratization” is seeming or delusive, it is pseudo-auratization, since, according to Benjamin, the “unique phenomenon of [...] distance” and the raising of the artist’s position do not stem from the artist’s personal indigenouslyness, but from the totality of the trade mark which has been created by and asserted through the media, and in which he or she is least involved in the decision-making and is the most replaceable constituent element. What the media giveth, the media can also taketh away, since more important than the author is his or her media representation. This began to grow immensely in the American media in the 1980s, and Europe followed with the usual delay, which lasted about twenty years in Slovenia. The media dedicated more attention to the author than to the work itself. Trendy newspapers published articles about their lifestyles, reported which clubs they belonged to and which parties they frequented, which clothes they wore, the advances they received for their books and so on. The writer most exposed to the media, Tama Janowitz, appeared on a number of prominent television shows, such as *Late Night with David Letterman*, *Good Morning America*, and *The Today Show*. She graced the covers of trendy magazines, advertised consumer goods, had herself photographed lying in bed in silk pajamas for the dust cover of her first book, and had a literary video on MTV. As one who loved advertisements, and who thought about working at an advertising agency (and actually did so for a few months, before she was fired as an assistant artistic director), she was thrilled by such promotion. She pointed out in an interview that, in an era in which even banks advertise their services, and in which people do not even purchase cat food if they have not previously seen an advertisement for it, publishing is a good fifty years behind the times because they refrain from these practices (Schumacher 218).

And so writers acquired the status of celebrities, stars in the manner of the athletes, silver screen and movie idols before them, which was of course wonderfully conducive to book sales. Bret Easton Ellis’s agent stated that he “gets bad reviews, but good publicity”. Not only did he appear on talk shows, he was present in the media even without the use of the writer’s media of words – magazines like *Vanity Fair* and *Interview* used him as photo model, where he did not have to speak or write. Nevertheless the constant media exposure and constant public presence rob one of the possibility of splendid isolation which is, at least for writing, a *conditio sine qua non*, the necessary condition of creation, and most authors of the new lost generation lost their creativity or stopped writing altogether, which was perhaps also due in part to the fact that the media success of this gen-

eration was rather tightly linked to the cult of youth: David Leavitt published his first story in *The New Yorker* at twenty, and his first book *Family Dancing* (1984) appeared two years later, which was unusual in American literary culture, in which having a book published before the age of thirty was the rare exception rather than the rule.

Other authors, such as Bret Easton Ellis, who published his first novel *Less Than Zero* (1985) at the age of twenty one, began at a similarly young age. Although the book did not receive a great many positive reviews, it did receive a few, including comments in those important shapers of public: the newspapers *The Village Voice* and *The New York Times*. Penguin purchased the rights to a paperback edition for \$99 000, and Twentieth Century-Fox obtained the film rights; through the selling of further rights, thus, *Less Than Zero* migrated into the mightiest machine of the American and international culture industry. This business success, however, also presented the writer with other creative difficulties, as Twentieth Century-Fox wanted to prevent him from using Clay, the hero of *Less Than Zero*, also in the subsequent novel *Rules of Attraction*, and Ellis assured ownership over his own literary character only after a law suit which ended just before the publication of the novel.

The publication of this novel was accompanied by a few curiosities that were characteristic for the end of the 20th century, and these influence the existence of the literary work and emerge from the area of popular culture. The first was *serialization*, a phenomenon in which the characters and sometimes even the story are carried over from novel to novel. However, serialization, at least within canonical literature, was usually a marginal phenomenon: in Ellis, Thomas Pynchon, Mark Leyner and others more or less secondary characters are carried over from novel to novel, and not the key structural elements. More significant are the growing links or even *dependence of publishing houses and the film industry* – here we must leave the structure of intraliterary influences aside and focus on social influences. Traditionally the film industry purchased the film rights of successful books and in some cases (perhaps most of all with Puzo and later Coppola's *The Godfather*) the success was repeated or even surpassed in other media, or in the literature it sought at least a suitable narrative basis, whereas today the rights to make a film of a novel, especially with proven successful authors like John Grisham and Michael Crichton, are sold for a greater sum than the book rights – and this usually even before the publication of the book, and frequently on the basis of a few-page synopsis of the book.

Partly the writer of the new lost generation were more evenly than previous generations formed also by a particular branch of the culture in-

dustry, the industry of the university, through its departments for creative writing, which universities began to establish en masse at since the early 1960s and which became not just an extremely attractive study option, but also a key source of survival for writers who were of any note at that time in the American literary scene. And so the department for creative writing at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, called the Iowa Writers' Workshop, has since its establishment in 1936 played host, as teachers, students and frequently both, to a number of leading writers from the second half of the 20th century. A few names should be mentioned: Flannery O'Connor, Philip Roth, Nelson Algren, Raymond Carver, Andre Dubus, Wallace Stegner, Kurt Vonnegut, John Irving, Robert Penn Warren ... The majority of writers from the new lost generation come from the American east coast and many studied creative writing at Columbia University in New York. The writer and editor Gordon Lish, who taught some of them (including Amy Hempel, Nancy Lemann, Anderson Ferrell, David Leavitt ...), had a real influence on them. Lish was active in a row of different cultural centers, and he was also employed as an editor of textbooks, before he began editing prose for *Esquire*. There he also published Raymond Carver's story "Neighbors", the first story which was published in the all-American magazine, and which turned Carver's career and destiny around – as a cultural mediator Lish thus crucially influenced the form of American and later the world prose scene, since without Carter, that is, without the publication of "Neighbors", this would have been drastically different. From there he went to work at the Knopf publishing house where he published a series of significant works of American prose, including Carver's 1981 book *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

In contrast to writers of this generation, especially the metafictionalists who almost without exception spent (also) their professional life in the comforts of the university, young authors who were born in the 1960s often knew the workings of the culture industry from the inside. Amy Hempel was in charge of media contact at the Putnam publishing house, organized writers' tours and strove to ensure television promotion for the publishing house's authors, and later she had a junior position at the publisher Crown. Jay McInerney worked at one of America's greatest literary institution, *The New Yorker*, which the careers of such writers as Salinger, Thurber, Updike and E.B. White are linked. But he did not work at *The New Yorker* as a writer, not even like the hero of his novel *Bright Lights, Big City*, who sent the fiction editor short stories and received from him impersonal form letters in return. He worked as a "fact checker", verifying whether the information cited in the works accepted for publication was correct. After this (like E.L. Doctorow) he advanced in the hierarchy of

the culture industry, becoming a reader for Random House and evaluating the manuscripts they received. From the “gatekeeper’s assistant” at *The New Yorker* he changed into the “gatekeeper”, and only the entrance through the gates awaited him. Those employed in the world of media, who have replaced employment in the academic world, speak again of the cultural paradigm shift or of the transfer of the *pseudoaura*: if previously the privileged space for passing on the values of cultural elements was at home in the university, now it had moved into the world of the culture industry, especially its most capital-laden and influential field, the advertising industry.

The Old Slovenian Home

A Slovenian author can look for the support of other media (which is why the most-read Slovenian writer according to the number of library loans has, since they began counting, been Desa Muck, which is probably not only a result of readability but also her years of appearing on very much-viewed Sunday evening television programs) or the support of the Slovenian writer archetype, which can lend the individual pseudoaura a certain amount of collective pseudoaura, such as befits a nation that, at least in the conviction of most individual authors, and also in the direction of the school system established through cultural paradigms best encapsulated in Aleš Debeljak’s *bon mot* about the birth of the nation through the spirit of poetry, written in the title of the accompanying text to the anthology *Prisoners of Freedom: Contemporary Slovenian Poetry* (Pedernal Press, Santa Fe, USA: 1994). In Slovenia, too, an author can have a meaning beyond textuality, he can be more than “only” an author and the Slovenian literary tradition, in which literature always performed functions outside literature, assents to this. The most strident literary successes of the 1980s were the novels *Levitan* (1982), by Vitomil Zupan, which demystifies the national war of liberation, *Umiranje na obroke* (Dying by Instalments) (1984) by Igor Torkar, which bears witness to the Dachau trials, and *Noč do jutra* (Night until Tomorrow) (1984) by Branko Hofman, which speaks of the Goli Otok penal colony. The intense interest aroused by these books did not only help to free Slovenian literature of the theme of national oppression, but also continued the conflict between the writer and society, which is a constant (not only of Slovenian) literary history.

We can see the continuation of this conflict even today. The media and expert response to the decision of the Slovenian court, which dealt with the books by Matjaž Pikalo *Modri E* (The Blue E) (1998) and Breda

Smolnikar's *Ko se tam gori olistajo breže* (When the Birches up there Are Turning Green, 1998) was of course more determinative of the decision for a second edition of these two books than was their literary quality or readers' attraction. Although both authors were the subject of a civil trial, clash (which was also reflected at the comparative literature symposium in Vilenica in 2007) continued a particular role of the Slovenian writer: the writer as victim. As legal victims (Smolnikar, Pikalo), political victims (a long line leading to Jančar), economic victims (Desa Muck, who is asked about the limits of library royalties at every public appearance), clan victims (it is hard to recall a Slovenian writer who in at least one media appearance did not moan of having been manipulated by this or that centre of power). And if Slovenian writers used to console themselves that success would come at a more convenient time (fifty years after death was Bartol's estimation, and he was right), now they can hope for the right place and point to – an imagined or sometimes actual – better reception in another culture à la “no prophet is accepted in his own country” (Luke 4: 24). Thus they become geographic, literally born, victims, even beyond the fact that they are born into the Slovenian language and not, like English authors, already translated.

It is actually worth going a step further and noting: not only can the author in the Slovenian literary space be more than “just” an author, he has to be. Especially in today's supersaturation of media, when for public presence the author's voice (that is, his “autopoetic”) does not suffice, but all the more decisive is the context of the Super-Ego, into which he or she is filed, be it in terms of nation, genre or periodization. For the author's legitimization as an author, it is no longer the signified (that is, the author's work) that is crucial but the signifier (that is, his recognition as an author). Borges' statement, perhaps born of frustration from the increasingly visual and decreasingly literary culture of modernity, “to be means to be photographed,” could be extended somewhat: to be a writer means to be photographed as a writer. A young and cute author is the largest leaser of media space (which, by the way, pays more per year for media space that the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia spends on printing and repurchasing books in the public interest) and her gigantic billboard was graced by the word “writer” already a week after the publication of her first book, which later actually did become a relatively successful work. The largest communication magnate decided to cash in on the symbolic capital of the profession. Perhaps this need for a symbiosis between actual and symbolic capital can restore believe in the writer's profession.

However, that the structural space which the American literary space doles out to the author through media and social prominence, that is, the

role of the “star”, is replaced in Slovenia with the role of the “victim”, is already a fact that calls for renewed thinking about the Slovenian national spirit. At this point, thus, one should, in both national and collegial terms, fall silent.

NOTES

¹ A similar phenomenon exists also in Slovenia. If the number of published books stopped at about 4000 titles last year, the number of novels up for the Kresnik Prize increases with each year: in 1991 there were 17, 45 in 2002, 80 in 2007, and a year later there were approximately 120 novels. For the Fabula prize there were some 80 collections of short stories in one year, making for about 200 original prose books. The symbolic capital of literature, thus, is clearly growing.

² Using the example of Jonathan Franzen in the text *Romani našega življenja ne bodo spremenili našega življenja* (The Novels of our Life will not Change Our Life, Andrej Blatnik: *Neonski pečati*, LUD Literatura: Ljubljana 2005), I have described an interesting variation on the clash between the author and his representation in the media. The invitation to be on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* led Franzen into great independent temptation.

³ Elements of the serial novel, which are materialized especially in popular cultural products (such as Stephen King's series *The Green Mile*), differ from historical models (such as the serial novels by Dickens or Balzac) in that serial novels historically came into being due to the demands of the target media (newspapers), whereas today they come into being autonomously and assert their production ways into the majority of other organized book markets in order to additionally exploit already established novel trademarks.

⁴ The film industry also fuels the creation of film-based books, that is, the reverse process of what has just been described – books that are novel versions of the biggest film successes have become virtually the rule of spin-off exploitation, and the broadening in the cinematic web thus moves the product into other media, which also includes marketing the product through film figures, which are especially popular among the young public, but are by no means limited to them. Such book products achieve rather impressive sales results: the book written after the script of the first *Rambo* sold 800 000 copies (Kellner 71). Such inclusion of authors into the immediate marketing of trademarks may be limited to popular cultural products, but it appears that the new understanding of the writer is that of a creator who is no longer independent from society, closed in the loneliness of his creative exile, but as one ordered into the chain of changing relations as a more or less successful businessman who is in some ways linked to the omnipresence of the film industry. Creative autonomy is no longer a given; rather it becomes a conscious decision.

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