

**Author-critic:
A new archetype of a current state
of postmodernity**

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Abstract

The text is devoted to the examination of the new, contemporary concept of “author-critic”. An essentially postmodern idea which presupposes the necessity of an artistic project that is radically self-referential. By referring to the historical and modern examples from the chronicles of proto-postmodern and postmodern thought, it is achievable to understand sociopolitical and cultural contexts that play a huge role in establishing the ideology and aesthetics of “author-critic”.

Keywords

postmodernism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, self-referentiality

**Autor-krytyk:
Nowy archetyp obecnego stanu postmodernizmu**

Abstrakt

Artykuł jest poświęcony zbadaniu nowego, współczesnego konceptu “autora-krytyka”. Jest to esencjonalnie postmodernistyczna idea

zakładająca konieczność artystycznego projektu, który jest radykalnie autoreferencyjny. Poprzez nawiązanie do historycznych oraz współczesnych przykładów proto-postmodernistycznej i postmodernistycznej myśli możliwe jest zrozumienie socjopolitycznych oraz kulturowych kontekstów odgrywających istotną rolę w konstrukcji ideologii i estetyki "autora-krytyka".

Słowa kluczowe

postmodernizm, psychoanaliza, poststrukturalizm, autoreferencyjność

1. Author-critic – a postmodern concept

The essence of the contemporary cultural landscape is clearly defined by a very specific relationship between the author and the critic. What Ronald Barthes was writing about in his famous 1960s *Death of the Author* (Lamarque 1990: 321) is at the same time continued and deconstructed today. It is continued, because the author of the current era is also dead. The author's intentions are subjected to open, free and diverse interpretations. These are even more intensified because they are accelerated by the new media – not only critical perspectives broadcasted by academia, newspapers and TV but also by internet forums, blogs and social media posts. The author's concepts are still regarded merely as introductory remarks for further investigations – discourses that often go in directions not faithfully dependent on the context of the original work.

However, it is also deconstructed in a purely Derridean sense. In a way, this should be considered an accelerated extrapolation of the death that was announced in the 1960s. The death of the author in contemporary times is not exactly atheistic; it is the Nietzschean death of God (Fritzsche 2007: 2). The romantic notion that, after the destruction of a centralised power, previously subjugated subjects regain the right to express their freedom is actually abandoned. Actually, the new idea of death is Freudian.

In *Totem and Taboo* (Hudson 1964: 72) Freud describes the prehistoric sacrifice ritual: the members of the tribe, whose alpha-male sensibilities are threatened by the dominant father figure, decided to overthrow the dictatorship by murdering and cannibalising an archetypical patriarchal despot. However, their rebellious act does not establish a new, communal order. The father, after being metaphorically and literally consumed, does not vanish from the tribal reality. Paradoxically, he becomes an even more forceful presence, i.e., an entity neither alive nor dead that is now permanently existing in the collective consciousness of his murderers. The father becomes a proto-neoliberal force – omnipotent stimulus of self-oppression and self-regulation.

Speaking in Freudian terms, the new author has the position of the undead figure. It is an entity that possesses the value of being uncanny. In that sense, the postmodern author is not exactly the author, but also he is not exactly the representative of the other side of the cultural exchange – the critic.

Present-day authors suffer from the death of logocentrism. They follow the steps of postmodernist constructors of reality, who used their literature, cinema, performance art and music in order to atomize the truth, multiply the logoses, propose never-ending crossroads and infinite conclusions. They pursue the same goals as John Barth in *Lost in the Funhouse* (collection of short metafictional literary stories concerned with deconstructing the art of storytelling, instead of focusing on storytelling itself), Orson Welles in *F for Fake* (cinematic exercise in going beyond the principles of documentary and fiction and dialectically synthesizing both contradictions in “neither... nor...” docudrama narrative), Andy Kaufman in his public performances (stand-up shows that celebrated the philosophy of *anti-comedy* – a peculiar style of comedy which abolishes the idea of punchline-oriented humour) and music producers who represent vaporwave movement (sonic and visual aesthetic that reimagines and twists established meanings of common retro-nostalgic sentiments toward 1980s popular culture).

To survive the death of logos, a modern author becomes a critic. The author might need to create and critique his creation simultaneously.

The artists of the previous eras were always antagonistic towards the critics. In 1919, Raoul Hausmann, Austrian leader of Dada Movement, created an artwork *The Art Critic* – a grotesque collage portraying titular figure that is blindfolded, mute character with folded banknote poking his back. In 1961 conceptual art creator Piero Manzoni presented the world *Artist's Shit* – collection of 90 tin cans supposedly filled with faeces, according to another artist Enrico Baj "an act of defiant mockery of the art world, artists, and art criticism" (Dutton, Denis 2009: 202). In 1995 noise rock band Sonic Youth infamously recorded *I Killed Christgau With My Big Fucking Dick* – provocative musical joke aimed at acclaimed music journalist (and passionate critic of the group's discography) Robert Christgau.

Their energy was libidinal; they were creating in a completely alogical way. They were following their instinctual prowess, generating the creative energy, and then abandoning it seconds after releasing it into the world. The famous quote from Frank Zappa, "Talking about music is like dancing about architecture" is the essential motto of the times, defined by a clear conflict between the Dionysian (sensual) approach of the artist and the Apollonian (logical) approach of the critic (Baeumer 1976: 167).

The relationship between critics and authors used to be heated, often resulting in debates. For example, the famous American feud between critic Gore Vidal and writer Norman Mailer that was transferred from the press to TV. In the 1971 issue of *The New York Review* one of the most famous public intellectuals of that era Gore Vidal wrote *In Another Country*, a scathing critique of Norman Mailer opinions on feminism and sociopolitical liberation of women (especially in the context of Mailer's famous novel *An American Dream*). Later, this polemical work caused real-life discussion between both authors, which

was broadcasted on television in then extremely popular talk-show *The Dick Cavett Show*.

However, despite the intellectual intensity of such disputes, the status of the discourse was stable, even if hidden under the confrontational aesthetics of independent artists struggling with the demands of the critics' pragmatism. Those author-critic "duels" implied clear boundaries, clear suggestions for both parties about what to expect from each other.

On the other hand, the new, post-logocentric times are much more chaotic, and they are challenging for both parties equally. According to the famous words of one of the most significant post-Marxists, Jean-François Lyotard, "postmodernity is characterised by the death of a grand narration" (Brügger, 78). However, this spectacular postmodernist death does not mean the annihilation of the idea of narration. Instead, like in the Freudian example, it suggests the birth of multiplicity, the radical fertilization of micronarrations.

The death of the larger-than-life concept does not leave any space for any ideological emptiness. Instead, it generates the politics of remains. For example, the collapse of the Soviet Union strengthened the neoliberal promise of progressive welfare state. The failure of the USSR abolished the possibility of the real-life alternative to western capitalism, therefore legitimizing anti-revolutionary, anti-transformative policies of neoliberalism.

2. Author-critic – an occult parallel

In that sense, the author is forced to be a critic. The new atomization of meanings and narrations means that the author may consider his work of art as a polymorphic, unstable body – the organism that probably needs to be deconstructed, commented on, and broken into parts by the author's own metacommentary. The author operates in that double author-critic way in order to maintain the relevance of the work. In the time of radical atomization, the only logical defense mechanism

is the accelerationist response – an unapologetic celebration of the atomized discourse.

The new paradigm of the author-critic is very similar to the philosophical contributions of modern western occultism. To be more precise – the movement of postmodern reinterpretation of the esoteric knowledge called “chaos magick” (Otto, 761). This type of spiritual exercise which was introduced by Austin Osman Spare and popularised by Aleister Crowley, was based on the motto, “When nothing is true, everything is permitted” (Collins 2004: 1).

Early proponents of an occult discourse and their contemporaries claim that both reality and the ways in which it is described (through text, speech or image) are equally fictional. Reality is fictional because it does not possess an objective essence, it is sensitive to any perceptual (re)interpretations. Media that wish to describe it are fictional, because they are “copies of a copy”, i.e. they must fabricate the essence to make sense of a non-essential reality.

The figure of author-critic, to completely materialise, follows the occult philosophy. Reality is presented as non-essential, so there is no need for a pragmatic voice (a traditional critic) that pursues an essence (understanding a work of art, analysing it in a logical way). Instead, the author-critic comes into being and not only accepts the aforementioned nonessentiality, by being sincerely self-aware about own work, but also celebrates it, by producing and critiquing own work simultaneously and unabashedly.

This purely relativist notion painted the picture of post-modern occultism as radical, ontological revolutionism. Esoteric knowledge is adversarial to scientific fact. It is even more hostile to universalised scientism (supported by the authority of consecrated experts) than thinkers situated in poststructuralist tradition.

Philosophers who follow in Michel Foucault’s footsteps (for example Giorgio Agamben) argue that notions that are perceived as scientifically objective (emphasized by professionally col-

lected and analysed data) should be redefined as entirely subjective narrations masquerading as unbiased.

While post-structuralist ideas can be considered transgressive, they certainly are not as heretic as the occult philosophy of truth. They usually stop their nonconformism at the level of relativist discourse, suggesting that every objective concept may be polluted by the subjective intentions of all parties involved. On the other hand, the spiritual and intellectual successors of Spare and Crowley would go further claiming that every objective concept must be tainted by subjective intention, simply because distinctions between fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, truth and falseness are illusory.

The aforesaid occult truth discourse is very vividly explained in the writings of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) (Balić 2022: 241) – an experimental cultural theorist collective formed in 1995 at Warwick University that was academically and non-academically active until 2003. The assembly of theorists (two most recognizable members are Nick Land and Mark Fisher) coined the term “hyperstition” which helps with understanding “magick” sentiment towards the unreality of reality.

One of the CCRU’s founding fathers, Nick Land, explains the idea behind hyperstition using the example of the holy city of Jerusalem. For the author of *Fanged Noumena*, all religious meanings attached to this area are instances of fiction becoming more real than reality, i.e. an ordinary urban landscape being transformed into focal point of spiritual ecstasy through artificial, but on the other hand, semiotically powerful, narrations.

All prohibitions are abolished. The contemporary author does not have to comply with any archetypal narratives surrounding his or her being. The modern approach to the concept of the author is completely ahistorical. It does not take into consideration the idea of the artist touched by God (logos); it does not take into consideration the idea of the naive artist who

makes art without any intertextual context; it does not take into consideration the cliché of the author unaware of the impact that the art has on the recipients.

However, the idea reiterated by Austin Osman Spare ("When nothing is true, everything is permitted") is not the only one that can help with understanding the condition of the modern author-critic. Another thinker who could potentially provide some insight into the essence of the problem is Slavoj Žižek. The Slovenian philosopher, who is probably one of the most effective popularizers of Hegel and Lacan in modern public discourse, proposes a very interesting thesis. Paradoxical in tone (true to the contradictory nature of both Hegelian and Lacanian philosophies), Žižek's sentence rephrases a famous Fyodor Dostoevsky's line. The original aphorism of the author of *Notes from the Underground* – "If there is no God, everything is "allowed" – transforms into Žižekian reinterpretation – "If there is no God, everything is prohibited" (Gunjevic, Žižek 2012: 28). Both sentences relate to the philosophical intricacies of the author-critic problem, but Žižek's one may be much more counterintuitive, i.e., much more idiosyncratic and challenging.

Even though Dostoevsky's quote originates from his orthodox Catholic background, his perspective reaches a conclusion similar to that of "chaos magick" proponents. In his words, the abolishment of logos produces a new reality. Reality of uncontrollable, anarchic freedom for everyone. While for continuators of Austin Osman Spare's thought, such a paradigm shift is utopian, Dostoevsky's system of values is a tool to understand it as purely dystopian. The death of God concept, an excuse for celebratory ritual among occult circles, is a time of grief for a Catholic believer. Following Dostoevsky's spiritual logic, this emerging godless world would deprive human beings of the moral compass – religious ethical backbone that sets one's values in a correct order. Humans thrown into anti-God realm are condemned to eternity defined by existential confusion. They are forced to live lonely, alienating lives.

Žižek's point on the other hand, cannot simply be called an inversion of an occult doctrine (in contrast with Dostoyevsky's original words). It does not celebrate but also does not negate "magickal" stance. Žižek follows classically Marxist tradition of "the third way". The uniqueness of the Slovenian philosopher's thesis lies within radical, dialectical negativity. According to the author of *The Parallax View*, the abolition of logos would not bring ultimate freedom. In other words, he disagrees with Dostoyevsky and Spare who both see the anarchic potential of anti-logocentrism but have different ethical readings of this conclusion.

Žižek's argument is surprisingly similar to the main themes existing in the late works of two significant figures of French post-structuralism: Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. In his late lectures, the author of *Discipline and Punish* introduced the idea of a neoliberal subject (Lorenzini 2020: 1) – a person who does not need external supervision. He or she is capable of self-regulating. It is a subject that follows the doctrine of hyper-individualism. The idea that supports the virtues of abstinence and self-sufficiency for the sake of one's personal development. Such individuals do not require the governing body to be on a diet, to work overtime, or to lead an ecological lifestyle. When one achieves extreme freedom from any spiritual or secular voice of authority, all rules or regulations do not disappear. On the contrary, they become much stronger due to a completely new, more intense level of commitment.

In a very well-known interview for VICE Magazine, Žižek broadens the idea by using the example of so-called postmodern boss – a new kind of employer who uses a non-authoritarian image, paradoxically, in order to enforce even more power over his employees. Žižek envisions a contemporary CEO as a clever character, who is well-versed in manipulative linguistic tactics: small talk, direct (sometimes vulgar) manner of speech, friendly demeanor. These strategies create a pure Žižekian contradiction – the convention of a horizontal discourse implemented to

strengthen strictly vertical hierarchy even more than the standardized, Fordist vertical discourse.

Postmodern zeitgeist negates all kinds of fundamentals. It is a reality which proudly decapitates every head of authority, be it political, social, cultural or metaphysical. However, surface level excitement derived from the experience of the new, godless, meaningless era quickly turns into anxiety. Anxiety about one's own existence and role in a world deprived of an ideological clarity.

3. The politics of self-awareness

The issue with the author-critic concept has been very present in modern art discourse. Another French thinker, Jean Baudrillard, in his work *The Conspiracy of Art*, saw the first fundamental signs of the upcoming, dominating tendency. The author of *Consumer Society* painted a picture of contemporary art that feeds off the mass misunderstanding. The picture, which later would become some kind of self-parodying cliché – an artist whose prestigious position is built upon obscure signifiers and proportionately high market price that exchanges an expected level of impenetrability for absolutely penetrable language of monetary value.

Baudrillard's vision denoted some sort of play involving the interests of an artist and the interests of Capital. From his perspective, contemporary art is defined by the affirmation of "post-meaning". It is an essentially current product of endeavours of major figures of Dadaism, Pop Art and Minimalism – artists whose main agenda was to expose the exhaustion of the social, political and cultural values of their medium. Creators such as Marcel Duchamp or Andy Warhol opted for all kinds of transgressive strategies (aesthetics of minimalism, recycling ready-made material, playing with camp and kitsch) that emphasized their newly discovered role of a self-aware, constantly polemical and intertextual artist who at the same time

is also a critic. Somebody who simultaneously creates and deconstructs the discourse.

In Baudrillard's perspective, the newly discovered self-awareness of the artist is a purely nihilist gesture. In a way, it is a gesture of defeatism, an act inspired by disillusionment. Baudrillardian author-critic no longer believes in multi-dimensional significance of art. Instead, he or she deems all artistic signifiers as ultimately empty. Following Baudrillard's thought, it is quite evident that the idea of artistic self-awareness completely colonized modern cultural discourse. Moreover, it seems that this concept not only redefined the author's (and, at the same time, the critic's) role but also proposed a new definition of originality. Being self-aware and intertextual became the new substitutes for originality. There is no longer a need for creating new concepts, and there is no longer a need for even recreating old concepts in new ways. The postmodern era aches for observing the deaths of the aforementioned two desires of the past decades and then commenting on them quickly enough – before any voice of external criticism could present itself in an idiosyncratic way. The provocation of modern art relies on longing for freedom but is expressed in a more humble, almost pragmatic sense. Such freedom is no longer (as in the pre-postmodern times) a romantic gesture of a pure, naive creation, untainted by second thoughts. It does not allow the possibility of a radically spontaneous, almost unconscious production of art.

4. Author-critic – a psychoanalytical reading

That radical cultural change is embodied by one of the most significant changes of the twentieth century – the shift from the sociopolitical importance of psychoanalysis to the current hegemony of psychology (Eysenck 2004: 195). When Freudian, Jungian and later Lacanian discourses used to form the domi-

nant narrative about the issues which shape the condition of society, an experience of modernity was clearly defined.

It was built on clear antagonisms between the subject and the despotic forces of external authority. Psychoanalytic readings of the realities of the human condition were always based on the suggestion of the existence of high order. Freudian thought looked at the subject through the lenses of the Oedipal triangle. On the other hand, figures who moved past the teachings of their Austrian master first rejected the maximalist universality of his Oedipal ontology but immediately constructed their own vertical hierarchies. Carl Gustav Jung established the theory of existence ruled by the everlasting power of mythological and religious archetypes (Smith 1990: 68). Jacques Lacan stubbornly suggested that one's consciousness is orchestrated by the power of semiology (Muller 1997: 144).

All those theses had one thing in common – they presupposed the existence of a solid matter which structures our reality. Freudian, Jungian and Lacanian logoses were starkly different, but they univocally assured us that there is a universal meaning to our lives, one which is reinforced by various authoritarian entities whose authority is something everybody had to make peace with. However, eventually, psychoanalytic discourse became obsolete and its main voices became unfashionable among academic circles and sociopolitical media. Firstly, psychoanalysis was undermined by the social activists of the Cultural Revolution of May 1968. Young revolutionaries who were following all sorts of transgressive movements of the time aimed at removing the conservative values of their parents and teachers. By writing “anti-work” slogans on the walls, trying to recreate the collectivism.

Devoted to communal ideals, and celebrating the mottos of sexual revolution, they subconsciously argued with the essence of psychoanalytic discourse. The anxieties of the bourgeois could no longer be the focal point of public discussion because the immanent existential nature of middle- and upper-class

experience (its meanings and values) was unashamedly questioned. The significance of such concepts as successful career or patriarchal family, which used to be the kernel of psychoanalysis, was put into question.

One of the major literary products of the cultural revolution was 1972's *Anti-Oedipus* – philosophical *tour de force* written by two major figures of so-called “French theory” – Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The book that polemically engaged with the sociopolitical impact of psychoanalysis, and to be even more specific with the influence of the last great Freud interpretation Jacques Lacan, in the long run diminished the importance of the traditional psychoanalytic thought even more. Two thinkers not only emphasized the limitations of conservative, bourgeois notations of modern Freudians (for example their universalised, Oedipal approach to problems of the current reality), but also suggested that faithfulness to the ideas of psychoanalysis can dangerously deepen the social status quo. Deleuze and Guattari deemed a highly individualised, psychoanalytic approach anti-revolutionary, as well as portraying Freudian thought as a despotic power that blocks desiring machines of potentially culturally, sexually and politically potent subjects.

Interestingly, Deleuze's and Guattari's philosophical manifesto later met with a very paradoxical reception. On the one hand, both thinkers achieved the aim they pursued. As the years went by, psychoanalysis in its traditional shape, became the marginal entity of public discourse, evident mainly among certain niche academic environments. On the other, the alternative which they proposed, named “schizoanalysis” (a deconstruction of psychoanalysis which aims at collectivism and skepticism for psychiatric institutions and scientifically accepted categorization of the concept of mental illness) did not materialize into something bigger than the idea presented in the duo's paragraphs. Instead, cultural shift welcomed a huge success of modern psychology defined by cognitive-behavioral therapy or psychiatry focused on chemical treatment (Dobson, Dozois, Rnic 2021: 13).

Post-Freudian era in which we are living at the moment brings the experience of extreme self-sufficiency, the post-modern need for rejection of huge narratives, from Marxism to Oedipism. The contemporary subject ignores the Other, it does not acknowledge it and focuses solely on itself, enclosed in the comfort of its own, atomised privacy. Contemporary art sometimes does not recognize or respect any external voice that would like to exercise its privilege of an opinionated attitude, the right to be expressed “*ex cathedra*”. A critic whose essential role is actually being the voice of cultural jurisdiction is then deprived of the discursive power, i.e., symbolically erased, made into an outdated relic of long-forgotten times.

In such a difficult situation, the logical response from the critic could be abandonment of the so-called standard approach. When a traditional critical voice becomes redundant almost universally, its past prowess cannot be restored under any circumstances. In that case, the first step is to realize the defeat. Furthermore, the critic has to make peace with the idea that the dominant anti-logocentric, godless, postmodern frame makes the notion of pragmatic analysis and understanding of the piece of art impossible.

5. The idea of theory-fiction

Once such necessary illumination is reached, the critic has a completely new duty. Contemporary function of art critique is akin to visionary ideas of figures like Reza Negarestani, Nick Land – authors whose bibliographies are labelled under the umbrella theory-fiction (Fisher 2012: 11).

Theory-fiction that draws its inspiration from masters of metanarration like Borges or Ballard, is an example of a radical conceptual shift in the production of cultural critique. Writers associated with this movement fight fire with fire. Due to the ultimate loss of their authority and credibility, they no longer wish to stare at the cultural text from a distanced perspective, which implies an illusory objective cognition. Instead, they

adjust their perception to the current circumstances. New criticism deals with the art form using purely artistic measures. When approaching literature, it morphs into a quasi-literary work. When discussing cinematic narratives, it utilizes the laws of almost filmic storytelling and proposes its own narrative idiom. That is why Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia* deals with the Middle East past and present of the terrifying religious and sociopolitical conflicts, by filtering them through the fictional recount of a Lovecraftian mad scientist. The author "contaminates" the theoretical frame with a spectacular allusion to the mythology of cosmic horror

(Ryle 2021: 170). He simultaneously generates a theoretical argument and gripping narrative, playing two roles – he becomes critic-author, mirroring the idea of author-critic.

Similarly, Nick Land in his famous essay *Meltdown* courageously combines pieces of aphoristic transhumanist theory with the metaphorical imagery borrowed straight from the rich history of the cyberpunk genre (Fisher 1999: 138). Land's strategy is simple yet effective: to sketch out a transgressive concept of the technocratic future in a way that is both too abstract to be captured by the pragmatism of non-fiction and too conceptually heavy to be reduced to the accessibility of genre fiction. Land, as a faithful follower of Georges Bataille, is interested in the unfamiliar, the Freudian uncanny that can only be touched by the third way – the critic-author strategy.

Modern failure of all things canonical – traditional fiction and non-fiction writing requires a radical response from the world of theory. The response would not compete with the newly constructed concept of self-aware artistic utterance, because such rivalry is doomed to fail.

We are living in the era of self-aware artists such as Mark Z. Danielewski, whose book *House of Leaves* is equally effective as a work of literary fiction and piece of media theory fuelled by metanarrative sensibilities (Kilpiö 2018: 57). Analogically (Panko 2011: 1), Steven Halls' *The Raw Shark Texts*, a novel that experimentally combines text with drawings, photography and

an aesthetic of a flip book, is at the same time a standard crime story about one's slowly recovered memory and a theoretical commentary on pop-cultural memories that define collective consciousness of contemporary media consumers. Critics' reaction should probably be much more creative than responsive, aimed at constructing an idiosyncratic brand of self-awareness instead of commenting on the one already established by artists.

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