

Who is Responsible?

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[CLICK]

Detective

Testing, testing... right [COUGH].

I work as a private detective for The Department of Humanities Investigations. We... don't usually handle murder cases but this one is rather unconventional.

[COUGH] Case #0251104. Charge, murder. Victim's identity unclear. Referred to in all documents simply as The Author. Committed to tape 19th March 2026.

[PAPER RUSTLES] My initial suspect is a man named Roland Barthes. Literary theorist. He has taken my immediate interest as a suspect on the grounds that he has made his... let's call it dismissal of The Author rather palpable over the years.

In particular, Barthes 1967 essay appropriately titled 'The Death of the Author' is responsible for spreading the idea that no text should regard it's author as the ultimate arbiter of meaning, that it was the reader that gave life to a text through their own subjectivity.

This provides us with a clear motive, one where Barthes is clearly trying to offer some sort of liberation to the reader through the removal of the authorial force which might dictate interpretation. In his own words...

[PAPER RUSTLES] **"The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author." Incriminating, is it not?**

However. There is a second suspect that has recently caught my attention for their similar patterning. I am sure that, by now, you will be aware of the growing presence of Generative AI, in fact, I am sure you will have already encountered it firsthand.

When interrogated on the evidence I shall shortly offer you, they pointed me straight back to Barthes, which invites me to conclude that Barthes has taken his theory to its... violent extreme.

If this is the case, however, it makes me wonder... if the role of the author truly doesn't matter... where does AI stand in all this? Can you still take meaning from an author who never existed?

[PAPER RUSTLES] I will bring your attention to some of my comparisons. For one, Barthes refers to a text here as a **“tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture”**, in doing so rejecting the idea of author originality.

According to him, any ‘new’ idea you or I may possess is just a collage of pre-existing ideas we have pieced together in our own unique way. But if this is the case... well, how does it differ from Large Language Models, where a text is generated through the recombination of existing language.

Well, I think it is precisely this presence of subjectivity. These systems don't write in the way we might traditionally understand it. They don't possess intention, or experience, or even understanding.

Instead, they operate by identifying patterns in language, predicting word by word what is most likely to come next based on everything they have been trained on. Breaking the world down into statistical probabilities to be fed into a dataset. A perfect tissue of quotations.

This, to me, does not fit Barthes intentions. We're surrendering the messy physicality of human thought into binary tokens... perhaps this is what Barthes meant by **“the black-and-white where all identity is lost”**.

It puts me in the mind of one Tanya E. Clement, in her book section ‘The Ground Truth of DH Text Mining’ where she raises concerns about this exact logocentric tendency.

The idea that a text, once processed computationally, can be treated as objective evidence, as if words carry fixed meanings that can simply be retrieved through analysis. But meaning doesn't work like that. Interpretation should not be avoided.

This... motive of AI... it surrenders the ‘analog’ complexity of human culture into binary "enclosure." I... am not sure Barthes would still call that liberation.

And then there's the issues surrounding misinformation. When AI hallucinates or spreads bias, who is responsible? If a novel offends you, who wrote it? If a news article lies, who is accountable?

This has brought me to another name. Michel Foucault. Contemporary of Barthes. Different approach. According to him in 'What is an Author', the 'author' is a kind of function. A role we assign to texts so that they can be organised or classified. With AI however, we are witnessing here the collapse of authorial responsibility.

Barthes may have dismantled the authority of the author. But this? This risks dismantling the reader as well. If AI is indeed responsible for killing The Author, there would be no need for creativity, nor originality. No need for critical thinking. No need for human thinking at all. That, I think, is what scares me the most.

End recording.

[CLICK]

SOURCES MENTIONED

Barthes, Roland. 'The Death of the Author.' *Readings in the Theory of Religion: Map, Text, Body*, edited by Scott S. Elliott and Matt Waggoner, 1st ed., Routledge, 2009, pp. 141-45.

Clement, Tanya E. "The Ground Truth of DH Text Mining." *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, edited by Matthew Gold and Lauren Klein, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/ef78ddc7-4087-4bb3-b192-16724631a172>.

Foucault, Michel. 'What is an Author?' *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by Donald F Bouchard, Cornell University Press, 2021, pp. 113-38.